

The tourism potential of *Acacia*

CHRIS TATE¹

¹ Western Australian Tourism Commission, 16 St Georges Tce, Perth, Western Australia 6000

SUMMARY

In an increasingly competitive national and international marketplace, destinations must promote what is best or unique about their product. Developing a tourism attraction in inland Western Australia has proven difficult, but tourism can succeed with co-operation between local government and the community by providing attractions combined with public amenities that can benefit both ratepayers and visitors. The Dalwallinu community can take advantage of wildflowers, and wattles in particular, to increase visitor numbers to the area. Already it conducts an annual Wattle Festival, has undertaken street plantings of wattles and has built town entry statements that feature the wattle. Other initiatives based on this one group of plants are suggested for increasing tourism to the region.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is the fastest-growing industry in the world and nature-based tourism is the major component. The major factor in the growth of nature-based tourism is an increased awareness of the need to conserve the environment and research has shown that tourists today are more environmentally conscious.

As travellers become more experienced, many are looking for more personalised, interactive experiences. To sit and watch is no longer sufficient. We need to provide for people to learn more about the destination through interaction, rather than through passive viewing. Travelling is commonly seen as enriching life's experience, leading to personal growth rather than simply a relaxing holiday. The desire to seek personal growth through travel is particularly prevalent in more experienced travellers.

In increasingly competitive national and international marketplaces, it is essential to say what is best or unique about a destination. The newness of destinations like Western Australia means that the tourism industry here can capitalise on overseas trends and reinforce those aspects that are being done well. We can find our own niche in an increasingly competitive global marketplace. Overseas there is a trend toward smaller-scale developments to cater for nature-based tourists, rather than appealing to larger groups. The focus is on providing a quality experience in a natural setting. Authenticity is a major factor in creating a strong sense of place in the development of facilities.

Western Australia's positioning is based on the pristine environment, natural attractions, blue skies, warm sunshine and friendly people. For both domestic and international tourists, there is also a growing interest in the uniqueness of heritage. The goal of tourism is business (i.e. economic) development.

Statistics from the Western Australian Tourism Commission indicate that more than 70% of tourists in

the State are from the Perth metropolitan area, and that interstate and international visitors form only a small percentage. Further, most people from Perth are reluctant to travel inland during the summer, preferring to holiday on the coast.

The most popular region in the State is the South West corner, due to its closeness to Perth, the variety of attractions and activities on offer, and the high quality of products and services. Developing a tourism attraction in inland Western Australia has proven difficult. Even reaching Perth is expensive—it's the most remote capital city in the world, closer to Jakarta than to Sydney.

Many rural communities are in decline—currently, 60% of our small towns are dying, losing population (especially young people) and business. Broad-acre farming and improved technology have reduced the labour force in rural Australia. Shire councils and community groups are looking to tourism to create employment and increase economic development. To assist tourism to succeed there must be community support and involvement. Local government will have to provide public facilities and amenities that benefit both ratepayers and visitors.

Regional communities should not believe that a tourist attraction built in isolation, without complementary attractions, will necessarily be successful. Visitors do not usually travel large distances just to see a stand-alone feature. There must be a broader visitor base to contribute to the attractions. Wildflowers are the State's major tourist attraction and provide a window of opportunity for the Dalwallinu region. People expect to see carpets of flowers in a kaleidoscope of colours, but the wildflower season is unpredictable and relatively short due to seasonal, weather conditions. As they are, for most of the year wattles are generally unremarkable and unlikely to attract visitors in their own right. The Shire could consider value-adding and expanding the attractions to hold visitors longer.

BE TOUCHED BY NATURE . . .

Western Australia is developing a series of programs that combine tourism with environmental enhancement. Tourists can be given a unique opportunity to interact with the environment in such a way that they both gain enjoyment and contribute positively towards it. These programs allow travellers to feel extremely positive about their interaction with the environment. They learn about, appreciate and contribute to W.A. at a more than superficial level. This is a tourism initiative to create a competitive advantage by good environmental management of the State's tourism assets. The pristine coastline, vast rugged outback and unique flora and fauna make W.A. a diverse, popular holiday destination. There is enormous potential to develop new destinations and markets that will provide visitors with a travel experience not available anywhere else.

Today's tourists demand a more personal travel experience. They want to be active in the community, to learn about the local culture and heritage, and to be involved in the natural environment that makes the region unique.

The demands of this growing market will be met through a series of new, nature-based tourism products, developed through the Western Australian Tourism Commission in association with other stakeholders. The products encourage visitors to establish an emotional relationship with the State's natural beauty by taking part in projects that help preserve, protect and enhance the environment. Tourism can be a tool for conservation.

The philosophy is simple:

Enjoy Western Australia ... *Be Touched By Nature!*

Examples include :

Lake Monger

Lake Monger lies in the inner Perth suburb of Mount Hawthorn. Due to environmental degradation, reeds and other native plants as well as animals were disappearing from the Lake, and the Black Swan population was dwindling. The Black Swans Nature Based Tourism project gave visitors the opportunity to assist by planting native reeds along the lake shore to encourage the growth of a natural water filtration system and create new nesting areas for the Black Swans.

The Western Australian Tourism Commission developed the project in close co-operation with the Town of Cambridge, with scientific advice from Dr Jenny Davis, Head of the School of Environment Science at Murdoch University, who had been working on the rehabilitation of the Lake Monger wetlands since 1985.

Summer of Turtles

Visitors to Western Australia's North-West are to be given a remarkable opportunity to experience one of nature's most extraordinary events. As part of their annual breeding pattern Green Turtles visit several beaches along the North-West coast to lay eggs. The Summer of Turtles—a joint project between the Western Australian Tourism Commission and the Department of Conservation and Land Management—will give visitors the chance to observe and monitor the egg laying.

On the trail of the Red-Tailed Black Cockatoo

Walkers on the Bibbulmun Track have the opportunity to help protect one of Western Australia's most spectacular native birds by taking part in a research project that monitors the bird's movements.

The Red-Tailed Black Cockatoo nests along many sections of the Bibbulmun Track and is often seen by walkers as it feeds on the seeds of the Marri, Jarrah, Blackbutt, Karri, Sheoak and Snottygobble trees. Timber-felling, clearing and fires threaten its natural habitat, and the European honeybees, possums and even ducks, compete to nest in the hollows of large old trees. Numbers have fallen by 30 per cent in recent years.

The Bibbulmun Track Walking Pack includes a map holder, day-walk itineraries, track map, postcard and a bird sighting report card. Walkers record where they see or hear the bird and its nests, and the card is forwarded to researchers. By monitoring the bird's movements they hope to understand its requirements and take action to prevent a further decline in numbers. A donation from the sale of each kit is used to establish other nature conservation projects.

On the Trail of the Red-Tailed Black Cockatoo is a joint project between the Friends of the Bibbulmun Track, the Department of Conservation and Land Management, the Western Australian Museum and the Western Australian Tourism Commission.

Twin Karri Boardwalk

In the southern forest region near Northcliffe, tourists had the opportunity to help protect an ancient Twin Karri under threat from root damage. Visitors using nature trails in the Northcliffe Forest Park were invited to participate in building a boardwalk around the root system of a 450-year-old tree, located in 245 hectares of old-growth forest. They could select a salvage log or piece of recycled timber and stay to see their plank added to the boardwalk. An early trial, now completed, the project received widespread support from tourists, community members and local tour operators.

Scatter the Silky Pear, recreate Kalgoorlie's bushland

Visitors to Kalgoorlie are invited to assist in the regeneration of a bushland park of 200 hectares by scattering the seeds of one of the town's most significant native plants. Karlkurla [pronounced *gull-gurl-la*] Bushland Park gets its name from the Karlkurla vine or Silky Pear (*Marsdenia australis*). Karlkurla is also the Aboriginal name for Kalgoorlie. The area was cleared for timber etc. 100 years ago but in the 1970s was designated a Dust Abatement Zone and replanting begun to control dust storms. The aim now is to recreate the bush as it was before clearing. The Karlkurla Bushland Park is a unique open space providing enormous opportunities for education and recreation. A brochure containing a small seed pack and explaining the history and significance of the Karlkurla vine and Park is sold for a nominal fee. Tourists scatter the seeds at designated spots through the park and help to recreate Kalgoorlie's bushland. Proceeds will be used by the Kalgoorlie-Boulder Urban Landcare Group to assist with the ongoing conservation, protection and preservation of the bushland.

HOW CAN DALWALLINU INCREASE THE TOURISM POTENTIAL OF ACACIAS?

The Dalwallinu region has a wonderful array of wildflowers and landscapes, and there is great potential for exploiting the intrinsic interest of wattles as well as their commercial potential. Currently one needs an expert to explain this, but tourists generally do not have the luxury of a botanist to accompany them. Selected sites could have quality interpretive shelters and walk trails installed to educate and retain tourists in the region for longer periods.

Already, Dalwallinu has built entry statements featuring the wattle and it has the annual Wattle Festival. Acacias have also been planted as street trees. By providing quality interpretive information the wildflower season could be extended from a couple of weeks a year to an all-year tourist attraction. To meet the visitor's expectations, the wattle theme must be visible and interactive.

To extend the visitors stay the region should provide :

- good access
- a range of interesting activities
- interactive attractions
- amenities
- compatible accommodation options, i.e. bed-and-breakfast, farmstays, motels, camping, caravan parks.

A tourism strategy has been developed to prioritise projects and identify funding and other resources required. General benchmarks for sustainable or low-impact, tourism development include:

Sustainable design: creation of a strong sense of place based on the site itself, through good design, choice of materials, building form and other architectural factors that result in a good feeling for the visitor.

Interpretation: leading to heightened awareness, appreciation and understanding of environmental processes. The more personal the interpretation, the better the customer's experience.

Environmental return: businesses that derive their very living from the physical and cultural environment willingly put something back. Being environmentally responsible makes good business sense.

Quality services: food, beverages and other services require a high degree of quality, presented in a manner that is appropriate to the setting.

Some suggested initiatives to value-add to the wattle theme are:

- Increase activities, e.g. provide an interpretive, educational centre containing photos of various acacias, dried samples, illustrations, a computer identification system, examples of commercial by-products, other flora and fauna dependant on wattles
- set up an interpretive display of Aboriginal uses of wattle seeds and wood
- establish an arboretum containing all local wattle species
- develop wattle recipes or cookbooks
- create walk trails with clear, concise signage and interpretive information
- incorporate a wattle motif into wall tiles, paving slabs, street signs
- adopt the wattle motif in staff uniforms and in window displays of retail outlets
- develop merchandise, souvenirs and wattle-seed foods
- display banners featuring wattles in the main street to provide colour and interest.

To sum up, it may be possible to increase the number of visitors and their length of stay by providing quality products and services that are accessible all year round, based on wattle themes.