

Plenary session 3: Wildlife tourism

Chaired by Paul Willis (ABC and councillor RZS)

Paul Willis: Did anybody else notice that that last slide, one of the things was, “Don’t molest the gorillas”? Who wakes up in the morning and thinks, “I must go and molest a gorilla today”? Those Poms have got a lot to answer for, haven’t they, ladies and gentlemen? Look, I notice that we’ve got 45 minutes for this plenary, so I would ask that if you ask a question please do so very slowly. It’s interesting that the topic for today, the theme of this symposium, Too Close for Comfort.

At 5.30 this morning our resident possum returned to our abode, which it’s claimed as its own, with its characteristic noisy entry, and it has smashed into the roof and then jumped down the chimney, causing my wife to leap out of bed thinking that our nine-month-old son had somehow committed suicide - I don’t know how - and I thought at that moment, “That is too close for comfort. That is wildlife too close for my comfort.” But then whose comfort are we talking about? Is it the comfort of the people, or is it the comfort of the wildlife? Is it the comfort of the animals out there?

I’d actually like to start this plenary with a straw poll concerning Steve Irwin. First of all, how many people here think that Steve Irwin got too close for comfort of the animals that he dealt with?

So about 80 to 90 per cent of the audience.

Anybody here thought that he was close enough that the animals were comfortable in his presence?

Interesting; no-one.

How many people think that Steve Irwin, by his example, was showing good conservation values in respect for animals?

A couple. Okay. About 10 per cent of the audience.

How many people think that he did the opposite; that the way that he treated animals showed disrespect for animals and didn’t teach good conservation values?

Okay, about 30 per cent of the audience.

The reason why I wanted to do that straw poll was because, as we all know, there was a very, very strong reaction to the unexpected death of Steve Irwin, and there was a strong debate that came out. Germaine Greer, for the first time in my life I agreed with her. I had to agree with her opinions. I thought her timing was a little lousy, but it raised a very interesting debate amongst a number of groups that I’m involved with. One in particular is the Australian Science Communicators, and the number of people who came out and said, “Steve did so much to communicate science,” and to me he didn’t, he did the complete opposite.

He’d dumbed the science down to a point where there was no science there. Quite often it was completely irrelevant to any science behind what he was doing. The way that he interacted with animals, in my view he should

have been done by the RSPCA years ago. Interestingly, the Queensland RSPCA came out saying what a great ambassador he was, which I think, really, that whole set of confusing opinions as to what was happening, as to whether he was a good ambassador for conservation or not really has become a lightning rod for exactly the sorts of issues that we’ve been talking with here today.

Let’s start with Simon. I’ll be throwing questions out willy nilly here, ladies and gentlemen. This is a plenary, so if you feel like you’ve got a question that you want to fire at me, or you want to fire at anybody who’s answering a question, or if you just want to take the conversation in a completely different direction, just put your hand up and we’ll go with it. Okay?

But if I can start with Simon. One of the strong things that came through from your talk was the idea that by giving people experiences with animals, rather than just exhibiting them here at the zoo, like, by giving them experiences we were conferring conservation values.

I want to play devil’s advocate here and say that most people who come to the zoo are after a day out with the family. They go home full of popcorn and candy floss, and probably don’t take home much of a conservation message. How much of a conservation message do you really think will come across from good management of experiences at the zoo? I’d be interested in your answer, if there is any follow-up work that’s been done to demonstrate that there is a flow-on effect.

Simon Duffy: I think that people do come here for a great family day out, go home full of popcorn, with tired kids. But I think we have to change that. We, at the zoo, are responsible for having these animals in captivity with the long-term goal of trying to contribute to behaviour change. So we need to take the opportunity of them visiting for a great day out and offering them experiences that motivate them to change their behaviour. We’re not doing it right at the moment. We need to change. We need to make sure that the zoo experience is coupled with information, with skilled interpreters who can tell people what they can do to change their behaviour for sustainability or conservation.

Paul Willis: But in a zoo like this one, where there is a high proportion of animals that aren’t endemic to Australia, aren’t you trying to sell a number of different messages there, because, as you say, you can come and see the Silvery gibbon and maybe you won’t buy teak outdoor furniture. But there’s a different conservation message, surely, there for the kangaroos and koalas and the wombats, because it doesn’t matter how much teak furniture you buy, it’s not going to affect them.

Simon Duffy: No, but the person who’s interpreting that animal or having that experience needs to know what messages they can give to that visitor.

Paul Willis: How comfortable are the animals on that side of the equation from your talk? Are animals comfortable in a zoo setting being experienced by the people?

Actually, it reminds of that rather atrocious slide that you put up in your talk there, David [Newsome]. By the way, did anyone see that when it made it onto Media Watch? *Behind the News* actually put it up there on - you know, the kids news program? They actually put up that photograph, and not realising what the kangaroos were up to. So one wonders just how much biology people learn when they go to the zoo. So, yes, back to the question of how much do the animals enjoy being experienced at the zoo.

Simon Duffy: Well, research needs to go into that as well. I think what we have to do is rely on all those strategies I talked about: training for all the staff that offer the experiences and the encounters. We have to rely on the fact that these animals are zoo animals, they're not animals from the wild, so they are in a captive situation. We have strategies for selecting the animals that we're going to provide those experiences with, and we have expert staff who work here and are able to select those animals, but also monitor them for stress levels. But it is something that's, I guess, subjective.

Paul Willis: As I said, I was playing devil's advocate, and I do mean strength to, because I actually think the program that you outlined sounds really constructive and fun. Let's move on to Matthew.

Matthew, would you mind fielding a question for me on this one. It's something that occurred to me in your talk, or Stephen's talk, was that there were a couple of private operators of zoos of wildlife parks who go bust and the animals get euthanised. Again, being devil's advocate here, it's not necessarily an opinion I hold, which, working for the ABC, I have to say that all the time.

But, surely, in so many situations where private operations become a commodity, they become property of that company, therefore, they're managed as economic units. So, isn't that - I mean, within the world in which we operate where, "It's the economy stupid, that's what's running the whole world." Can we just, in those cases say, "Okay, well that is actually a fair way to be treating your animals"?

My question is that, while it appears abhorrent to us the idea that animals get euthanised in privately owned zoos when they go belly-up - as has happened a couple of times as outlined in the talk - isn't that an acceptable way of managing animals in a private situation, where - if they're just another economic unit?

Matthew Crane (DPI): There are people who argue that, and there are also people who vehemently oppose that, and so we have a cross-section of views in the community. I would say that the sensible commercial operators know that they're not just economic units because, to survive commercially, they need the community to support them. At the moment, a lot of the people who support them are urban-based tourists or city people looking for a day out, and the majority opinion for them would be that animals, especially what they regard as special animals, should not be dealt with in that way. So it would probably be a not very well supported PR campaign to go around euthanising your animals willy nilly.

Paul Willis: But if it was a farm, and the farm goes belly-up, you just knock the animals on the head and send them off to the slaughterhouse. Why should it be any different for a zoo that's privately run?

Matthew Crane: You'll have to ask the community, because they do have a different attitude, yes.

Paul Willis: Okay. Again, don't come looking for me afterwards, ladies and gentlemen, I'm just trying to tease out some ideas there, and don't feel frightened about jumping in with your own questions at any time. We have a question down here, in fact.

Lewis Simpson: I'd like to add to the last two questions of yours, and one of the things that comes out of this is - you're talking about, on the last one, the sensitivity of people seeing or knowing about euthanasia or a rough way of killing zoo animals, as opposed to farm animals. But, most of the people in my experience are quite happy to have a lamb chop, but not many of them would be at my side when I cut a sheep's throat and dressed it out, because that's a long journey through Africa, and people don't want to know about that.

Now, the other thing about the zoos. I think that, in my experience anyhow, every time I've been with a child or adults, and walking through a zoo, there is an inspiration that comes just by seeing the thing in the round rather than the very excellent things we see in wildlife shows on the television. It's that spark that causes the interest, and you can't really evaluate that, because it's after that experience of seeing a tiger, that at home you investigate where does it live, how many there are, all that stuff.

So I think zoos do have a very important role educationally, and that goes also towards an understanding of environment and conservation.

Paul Willis: Fair point. I should extend that point if you don't mind me doing so, in that it was pointed out to me recently that if you went into the butchers and you saw panda sausages or tiger steaks you'd be upset. But most fishmongers you go into you can see endangered species there for sale as steaks and, you know, you can get swordfish, you can get orange roughy, species that really shouldn't be being fished, are served up there alongside more sustainably harvested species. I don't know why I wanted to throw that in.

Ron Strahan (retired): When I was running this show I had a way of saying thank you to very close friends or to people who'd done something nice for me, and I would take them to the back stage of the giraffe exhibit with half a dozen carrots, and a giraffe would come in, lower its head until it was level with mine, and there was the head of the giraffe the size of my body. Great beautiful eyes with long eyelashes, and a blue tongue that came out and delicately picked up the carrot and ate it, meanwhile giving off the sweetest breath I've ever experienced from any animals. That was an experience for those people. Many of them have said to me 10 or 15 years after, "Gosh, I remember that." Question: can you give experiences to all members of the zoo audience, or is it almost necessary to restrict it to a few?

Paul Willis: That's a good question, Ron, because I could see those giraffes getting really full of carrots very quickly if every visitor got to give them half a dozen. Maybe back to Simon? Would you mind fielding this one, Simon? How many people can you expect to give those quality experiences to?

Will Meikle (Taronga Zoo): I guess the level of interaction of visitors with the animals cannot be - for each species or for each group of animals that we're offering - an experience met by all the visitors. We don't do that for any of our shows. We have inadequate seating to allow maximum numbers of visitors to the zoo to see our seal shows or our free-flight bird shows. So the reality is, we have to look at offering a number of experiences, because it isn't possible to have 1.2 million visitors to have the same experience. You would have very ill giraffes.

Paul Willis: After all, that would be 7.2 million carrots. Sorry, how many giraffes do we divide that by? Moving along here. Kasey - I'm just moving a bit forward in the order here. Kasey, you were talking about understandings of human-whale interactions, and what struck me was the number of people that were going away with a positive message from whale watching.

Congratulations, by the way, on the follow-up stuff; that's great, because you were able to show that they actually themselves did follow-up on what they said they were going to do about spreading the message of conservation. Isn't the problem, though, that you kind of already self-selected. Anybody who goes whale watching is going to be interested in conservation first? I suppose what I'm driving at is, are we preaching to the converted when we ask whale watchers about conservation?

Kasey Stamation: Yes, that's a good question. Actually, the questions that were asked, on the general environmentally friendly behaviours, were actually the same questions that were asked in a survey done by the New South Wales government. I compared the results of the whale watchers with the general New South Wales public to see whether they were more environmentally friendly. The land based whale watchers were slightly more environmentally friendly than the rest of New South Wales. But the boat based whale watchers, no, they weren't different.

I think with the boat based whale watchers, they're on the south coast, most of them are holidaying and they're mostly families, and they're going whale watching because it's something to do while they're there. But with the land based whale watchers, yes, that could be the case.

Paul Willis: So it's not as if the loggers from Eden are going whale watching and thinking...

Kasey Stamation: No, the loggers, really they're not, no. There's not a lot of locals going whale watching. A lot of them have got their own boats so they see the whales in their own vessels.

Paul Willis: Did you think to survey, or have you done any kind of informal questioning, around how the locals feel about whale watching and what message they take away from it all? Or do they just see it as a few bob in the holiday season?

Kasey Stamation: I haven't actually surveyed the community. But they are, from what I gather, pretty happy with the whale watching industry, because it does bring in dollars to the local community.

Paul Willis: And Michelle, the same with the dolphins.

Michelle Lemon: Yes, just following up from that. I just came back from Eden just last week, and the local community relies on whale watching and dolphin watching in these local communities. Port Stephens is such a growing area, and that is the main ecotourism event. The main tourism of these areas is often going out to watch the whales and the dolphins.

In areas like Eden, where so many other industries have broken down and stopped running, they are relying now on wildlife tourism for their livelihood. The local people love the whales. I mean, down off Eden I saw over 150 whales in three days and, having worked with them for 16 years, you just get such a buzz still. So, even as researchers, you take that message away and you follow it up by talking to other people about it.

Paul Willis: So the conservation message does spread from the nucleus of an activity such as whale watching and dolphin watching?

Michelle Lemon: Yes, absolutely. You know, more so. It also depends on how you go and see them, as Kasey was saying. If you're on a boat where the people on board are willing to talk and get really excited, and want to ask questions, you're going to take a lot more away from it from a conservation point of view, or learning about the animals themselves, than just being on board and just watching the whales.

As Kasey said, more often than not they don't even know which whales they're actually looking at. So it is about education and conservation in these areas by putting up material for them to see.

Paul Willis: Is there any worth in looking at how deep that knowledge is? What I'm getting at is, in an analogous situation these days you can show that virtually everybody know what global warming is, but no-one or very few people actually understand what causes global warming, the interactions, or the implications. All they understand is, "Oh, the planet is getting hotter." So how deep is the knowledge of conservation they take away from seeing a couple of whales bobbing around, and hearing that they feed down in the antarctic and they come up to Fraser Island each year to breed?

Michelle Lemon: Again, it depends on the experience that you have. But I think quite a lot do to a certain degree. I work on whale watch boats out of Sydney, and so many of the local people didn't even realise you can see the whales just straight outside Sydney Harbour. So you're educating the general public right there, the local communities and the like. But, they often don't even know what species they're looking at.

So if they can walk away just by knowing that, particularly with the whaling issue with Japan. The thing that we really push here is that, if the Japanese start whaling these humpbacks down in Antarctica, they're our humpbacks,

they're the ones that go past the coast. So you're building up that conservation idea for the general public.

Paul Willis: I must confess that I was living in trepidation that Iron Chef was going to have a whale battle. But I can put you all at ease. I've gone through the records. They never had a whale battle, but they did have an ostrich battle. For those who are aficionados of Iron Chef, I bet you can't wait for that one.

Darryl Jones (Griffith University): The point here is the quality and the type of the education message really matters now. We've had a massive increase in this wildlife based tourism, massive, over the last couple of decades, and we've got people in a very stimulated context-specific situation. If we can get the message across in the right way you have the capacity to really change deep attitudes because of the level of stimulation that people are getting. It is an amazing thing to encounter a whale. It's so ridiculously large you can't believe it.

I went on a whale watch at Hervey Bay. The quality of the information given to me was absolutely crap. It was useless, with really bad anecdotes about Japanese whalers. But it's also equally possible to do a bad job of being too esoteric and too intellectual about it. So we've got a really fantastic opportunity as a captive audience in these circumstances. We really need to get those messages straight. There's plenty of opportunities. The whaling one is a good example.

Paul Willis: When it comes to conservation messages, you've been showing people on Fraser Island how to zap dingoes, which sounds like great fun - and I mean that in a very esoteric kind of way. But my question to you is, that looks like a really labour intensive way to train naughty dingoes to become good dingoes. I mean, it looks like it works, and I understand this is work in a preliminary stage. But does this mean that you're going to have to, every time there's a problem dingo, catch it, put a collar on it, have someone follow it around, every time it acts naughty give it a buzz? I mean, how labour intensive is it going to be?

Darryl Jones: It's incredibly labour intensive. But to me - I'm a bit weird. I think a few zaps is better than a dead one, and that's the opportunity. That's the situation. It's very likely, since the fatal accident a few years ago, that in excess of 25 per cent of the population has been shot and, from all the data that we've got on this very issue, for the wrong reasons. Any animal that looks sideways at a person is being shot at the moment, and it's ridiculous. So we're trying to provide an opportunity for management to be far more informed.

Paul Willis: Yes, but the labour intensive nature of what you're proposing with the collars, that means money?

Darryl Jones: Yes.

Paul Willis: Big dollars and, therefore, you can see ministers and heads of departments saying, "Well, will it cost 20 cents?"

Darryl Jones: Yes, that's right. But what's waiting to happen is the public backlash. This is all hidden stuff. It's very likely that we're going to have a mega-population

crash of these iconic animals, then all hell will break loose. I can guarantee you that. When a child was killed, there was nobody arguing that it actually happened.

In the cull that followed straightaway in the next couple of days, 30 animals were killed. The backlash against that, even in that circumstance, a child dying, was absolutely extraordinary. It really surprised me the vehemence of the opposition to it. "That's not the way to do it," people kept saying, and I just don't think it's a sustainable attitudinal approach to this very serious issue.

As a result though, to get back to your original intention of your question, of all this culling, the number of problem animals is very, very low. It's easily do-able in terms of the training process, and I just think it's really worth trying. It's been tried successfully overseas, it's worth trying here.

Paul Willis: Did I hear you right? You said 25 per cent of dingoes on Fraser Island have been shot?

Darryl Jones: Nobody is talking about the numbers. We've got a pretty good idea about that kind of thing.

Des Cooper (University of New South Wales): I'm going to take up your invitation to switch the discussion entirely, and to say that this discussion is really being conducted with a particular set of assumptions, which are assumptions made by rich, well-to-do people who live in cities. If you were to have this sort of discussion in other parts of Australia - for example, on Kangaroo Island - you would discover that most of the Kangaroo Island natives believe that the Kangaroo Island problem with koalas can be solved by shooting the koalas. In fact, they say these koalas aren't even South Australians, they're Victorians, and so they should all be shot, they're not native to the island.

If I can enlarge it even further. If you think about the kind of interactions which occur between humans - people in Africa - take the elephant, for example. The South African government knows that there are far too many elephants in various parts of South Africa, the Botswana government knows the same about their elephants, they are destroying vegetation at a most alarming rate. Yet, because of the influence of tourism they're very reluctant to shoot the elephants.

My point is that any discussion of this kind really has to be set in a particular social context, and the social context in which we have set this one is really one which is very narrow indeed. It is the set of assumptions which people who have been raised on a diet of wildlife shows on televisions make when they talk about this sort of issue.

Paul Willis: It's interesting you should mention Kangaroo Island. I was down there a couple of years ago looking at the sea lions, and we went out on a cray boat with one of the locals, and of course the New Zealand fur seal also breeds on Kangaroo Island, and he said New Zealand fur seals, they've got to be feral, they should be cleaned out. So - thank you.

Peter Menkhorst (Department of Sustainability and Environment): I'd like to ask Narelle about the reintroductions she spoke of.

The definition of reintroduction, I don't think you said, but I got the impression that most or all of those sites were fenced enclosures, and I'm just a bit perplexed about when does a group of animals in an enclosure stop being a zoo exhibit and start being a reintroduced population? It seems to me that if the animals are still enclosed, even if they're large enclosures, that it's not really a successful reintroduction.

Narelle King: Sure. Actually, not all the sites were fenced. Some were in Western Australia. Western Australia is a bit different because of the issue with the 1080. They can fox bait really successfully. So, some of the sites in Western Australia weren't fenced. But, yes, the majority of the sites were fenced. The home ranges of the animals, particularly small Australian animals, often tend to have quite small home ranges. So the size of the enclosures are very large, so I think that the home ranges were much smaller than the size of the enclosure. So, to me, that's not a captive situation in the same way a zoo is captive, because, in a zoo, the animals can't move as much as they would naturally. Whereas in these kind of enclosures, they can.

Peter Stephens (this time with the Wildlife Preservation Society counsellor's hat on): Not all Aboriginal people actually went into the water to experience whales, but through the stories, of course, gained the respect. I guess my question is to David [Newsome], and it's about feeding, because many of the experiences for indigenous people around wildlife are to do with the relationship between feeding one way or another; on each other, perhaps. For Aboriginal people in Manly, feeding on a whale is probably the contact they had. But it didn't diminish the respect, from what we read and learn.

So, extend the analogy a bit. If I called my son a pig, I probably would be paying for my own petrol, whereas when I call him a possum, he puts petrol in my car. So it's the language we use and the way we extend it. We have a Department of Primary Industries managing the exhibition of animals in New South Wales, and then we want to have a conversation about respect for those animals. We're clearly calling it a primary industry. You're quite right saying it's an asset to trade.

You put kangaroo on the dinner table at night in front of your family. Tell them before the meal that it's kangaroo and watch the reaction. Tell them after the meal that it's kangaroo and watch the reaction. Really simple things about the food exchange in nature are to do with reality. So my question, David, is given that story-telling, and the language of story-telling, is inextricably bound up in

our relationship, particularly when there's food involved when we're feeding animals, how do we get back to that rather than using the language of control and protection, and even the language of science.

David Newsome: Yes, an interesting question. I think every species on this earth tells its own story, and our relationship with, through feeding, is just one way of trying to engage a story with that particular species. The Aboriginal people - it's an interesting question, and I'm struggling with it a bit. Our view of wildlife seems to be completely different to an Aboriginal viewpoint, a traditional Aboriginal person, would see it. One of the problems that we have in our modern life is our life in cities. We don't really grow our own food, we don't have to slaughter our own food.

So we've constructed a different relationship altogether with wildlife, and there are many different people in our society with many different views, and all sorts of relationships are a result of that. Ranging from exploiting it, to making money, to religious, music, art and the Aboriginal view is just another view of the wider humanities perspective.

Paul Willis: I want to wind up with one question to Terijo on the sea lions on Kangaroo Island. You pointed out that there's 100,000 tourists a year going through that place, that they're all charged something like 10 bucks a head to get in there. Okay, so we're talking about generating in excess of a million bucks. Do we know how much of that gets put back into research on that population, or is that a question that's best not answered in a forum like this?

Terijo Lovasz: I actually don't have any hard data on that, and I'm not sure that anybody is going to be willing to release hard data on that.

Paul Willis: Do we know an approximate carve up? I mean, you're saying it's a private industry. They must pay something to the government for running themselves.

Terijo Lovasz: No, and it's run by National Parks. There's more put into research now than there was 10 years ago, certainly. As a matter of fact, my project and another PSA project were the first projects that took place there at the park. So it's been recognised now as more of a necessity than it ever has been before.

Paul Willis: Okay. I'm being given the wind-up now. Thank you very much to the speakers for the last session, and I would ask everyone to give a round of applause for those speakers. Thank you very much.