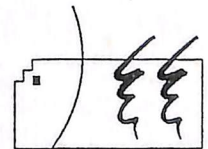


An Investigation into a National

# ECOTOURISM

Ecotourism Accreditation Scheme

October 1994



MANIDIS  
ROBERTS  
CONSULTANTS

# *Summary of the Report*

## **Rationale**

During the development of the Commonwealth Department of Tourism's Ecotourism Strategy, Ecotourism operators, conservationists, tourism marketers, natural resource managers, indigenous Australians and tourists raised awareness of the need for a nationally recognised accreditation scheme. In early 1994 a Steering Committee with representatives from the Ecotourism Association of Australia, the Australian Tourism Industry Association, the Australian Conservation Foundation and the Commonwealth Department of Tourism were set the task of appointing a consultancy group to perform such an investigation. In June 1994 Manidis Roberts Consultants were selected by the Steering Committee.

According to the consultancy brief the purpose of the national ecotourism accreditation scheme would be to:

- Encourage the implementation of ecologically sustainable development principles within the tourism industry.
- Encourage the delivery of high-quality, ecologically sustainable tourism products.
- Incorporate the provision of accurate interpretive services.
- Provide an Australian-wide recognition system for ecotourism operators.
- Enhance the reputation of Australian ecotourism in both domestic and international markets by providing a recognised quality standard.
- Provide a means of identifying ecotourism product.
- Encourage and acknowledge the use of ecologically sustainable practices by ecotourism operators, which will provide a marketing advantage.
- Allow natural resource managers to better monitor Ecotourism operators and better protect their valued natural and cultural assets.

Furthermore, the scheme should aim to:

- Investigate the potential to provide a basis for maximising the extent of industry self-regulation.
- Supply consumers with information upon which to make comparative assessments of different enterprises and activities.

The consultants recognised that to be effective the accreditation system needs to be:

- Desired by the industry.
- Voluntary.
- Comprehensive - ultimately covering all forms of nature-based ecotourism experiences.
- Manageable and controllable.
- Cost effective to the operators who should receive demonstrable benefits from accreditation.
- Consistent with guidelines of equity and fairness.
- Legally supportable.
- Recognisable by the market, including consumers and sellers.
- Capable of practical and effective implementation, with sanctions for non-compliance.
- Flexible to ensure it can be linked with or complementary to international accreditation schemes.
- Self-funding.

During July the consultants distributed an information sheet, briefly describing the study purpose, objectives, participation program, process and key issues to all stakeholders. This information sheet invited stakeholders to participate in a series of national workshops to discuss a national ecotourism accreditation scheme. Questionnaires were distributed at the workshops facilitated by the consultants and responses were incorporated into the development of the initial recommendations stated in this report.

In early September the consultants distributed an update on the scheme which detailed the consultancy's progress, summarised the consultation program to date, described international and domestic parallels and provided information on the next stage in the investigation of the scheme.

## **Background**

Ecotourism is a recent phenomenon which is subject to multiple definitions and wide misapplication. To a large extent discussion and debate about ecotourism has revolved around ethical standards. Many have asked precisely what standards travel providers should be meeting in order to legitimately claim that they are offering a genuine ecotourism experience. The ecotourism label has been misused so frequently that some responsible travel professionals have deleted all reference to the word.

These differing perceptions also have a cultural element, a visitor from North East Asia has a completely different set of expectations than a visitor from Northern Europe. Guidelines, codes of practice and accreditation systems for tourism operators have been developed in Australia and overseas. With respect to ecotourism operators these efforts have largely been fragmented and isolated. This plan represents an approach to resolve this problem by proposing a system of operator/provider accreditation in the ecotourism sector. Towards this attempt, ecotourism operators, conservationists, resource managers, government officers and members of the national community have been consulted and their views collated.

This document provides a view on what standards should be observed by Australian ecotourism operators working in natural areas, who should monitor an accreditation system, what criteria should apply for accreditation and other questions. This plan suggests a route for ecotourism operators in Australia to become among the most credible ecotourism operators in the world.

The development of a functional national ecotourism accreditation scheme is an iterative process involving the participation of a wide range of organisations. The Accreditation Scheme will have to be revised regularly as standards evolve, scope and coverage get more closely defined and customer feedback is obtained.

## The meaning of accreditation

The process of accreditation is part of a continuum of measures to improve professionalism, standards, training and quality in the service sector. The consultation process with industry and an examination of overseas experience showed that different sectors of the industry were at differing positions in the quality continuum.

**Figure 1** seeks to explain the continuum, based on experience in tourism, particularly in relation to environmental protection and standards. This illustration seeks to demonstrate where the tourist sector appears to be at this stage and where it may potentially progress to in future if the industry so desires.

An understanding of this continuum is essential in distinguishing between and recognising the progression followed by the wide range of industry codes of practice in use throughout the world, a number of accreditation systems, including those in use in Australia, in this industry and in related areas and the relatively few quality systems.

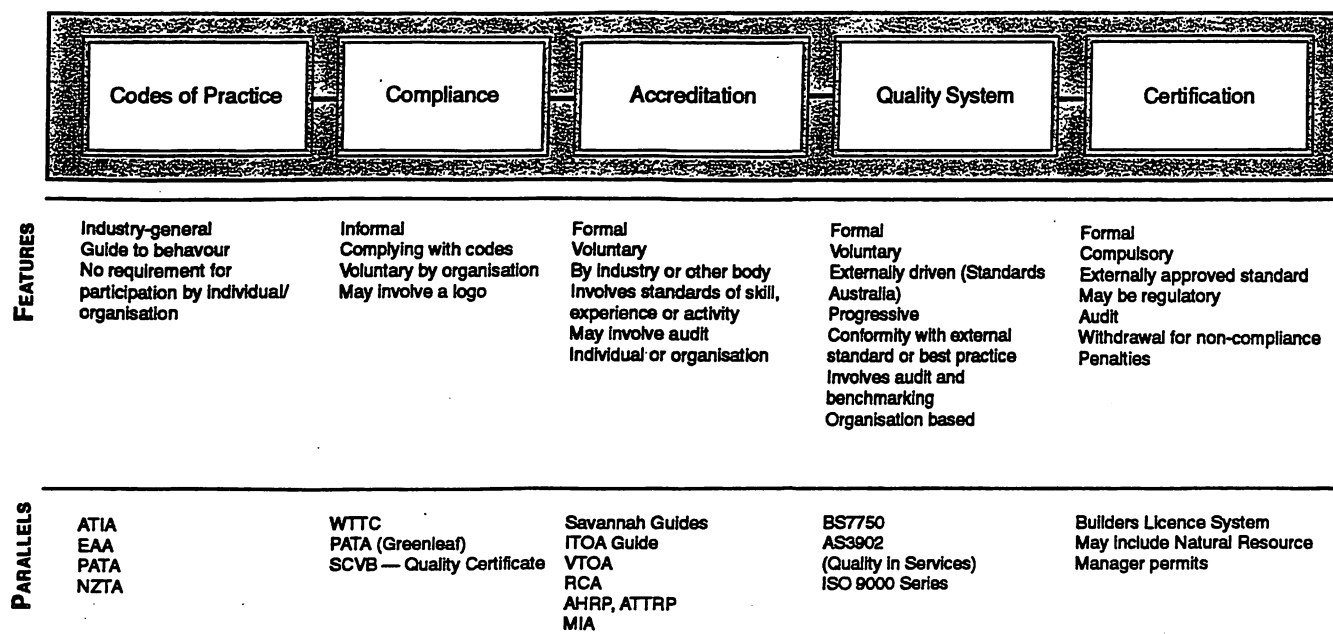


FIGURE 1  
INDUSTRY QUALITY CONTINUUM

## **The definition of Ecotourism**

Ecotourism is a recent phenomenon in the travel and tourism industry and as such its real meaning has been blurred by the wide range of definitions. In March 1994 the Commonwealth Department of Tourism attempted to rectify this problem by defining ecotourism for Australia. This document takes that definitional debate one step further by refining some of the broad terms within the definition.

For the purposes of this report the following definition of ecotourism will be used.

Ecotourism is nature-based tourism that involves education and interpretation of the natural environment and is managed to be ecologically sustainable.

This definition recognises that 'natural environment' includes cultural components and that 'ecologically sustainable' involves an appropriate return to the local community and long-term conservation of the resource.

Commonwealth Department of Tourism National Ecotourism Strategy, March 1994.

This document provides concrete recommendations on who should be eligible for ecotourism accreditation, who should administer the scheme, what criteria and minimum standards should be applied and a host of other related issues. This plan suggests means by which ecotourism operators in Australia can become among the most credible ecotourism operators in the world.

Thus an accreditation scheme is in line with the Commonwealth Department of Tourism's vision that "Australia will have an ecologically and culturally sustainable ecotourism industry that will be internationally competitive and domestically viable. Ecotourism in Australia will set an international example for environmental quality and cultural authenticity while realising an appropriate return to the Australian community and conservation of the resource" (National Ecotourism Strategy, March 1994).

Ecotourism operators, conservationists, tourism marketers, natural resource managers and tourists throughout Australia have recognised the need for a national ecotourism accreditation scheme in order to designate real ecotourism operators, minimise impacts, ensure ecologically sustainable development, enhance the reputation of Australian ecotourism and supply consumers with information upon which they can make accurate comparisons of different enterprises and activities. Thus, ecotourism operators, conservation organisations, government offices, developers, consumers and others will benefit from the development of a National Ecotourism Accreditation Scheme.

**The scheme and the standards proposed should not be seen as threatening or discouraging to operators of any size. This scheme will provide ecotourism operators with basic standards which they can use to continue to strive towards minimal environmental impacts and ecologically sustainable development.**

The development of a functional national ecotourism accreditation scheme is an iterative process and has, and will continue to, involve the participation of a wide range of organisations. The Accreditation Scheme will have to be revised regularly as standards evolve, and as the scope and coverage get more closely defined and customer feedback is obtained.

### **Who or what should be accredited?**

Ecotourism accreditation should be granted to the operating entity (business, natural resource management agency and so on) for products or locations meeting specified criteria. The operating entity will be given the discretion to determine which products or locations should be labelled and marketed as accredited ecotourism products and locations.

The operating entity itself can only be labelled and marketed as ecotourism accredited if all its products and locations would be eligible under the criteria for ecotourism accreditation. The entity cannot be labelled or marketed as an ecotourism accredited entity if it has other products and locations which are not eligible. This avoids the scenario of operators who offer a range of products and locations, some of which might qualify for accreditation, others of which would not qualify, from seeking to promote their entire operation as being ecotourism accredited.

Appropriate determination of nominated products and locations would be reviewed before accreditation was renewed.

The operating entity should be expected to have qualified individuals on their staff. This would require the completion of a recognised ecotourism guide training scheme. It may be necessary to establish such a system in parallel with this scheme.



## Eligibility

Companies and organisations whose activities conform to the definition of ecotourism (from the Commonwealth National Ecotourism Strategy) would be eligible to apply. The company or organisation can be an incorporated business, sole trader, not-for-profit group or a government entity. Where the operating entity is an incorporated company, ownership of a company (Australian or foreign), is not an issue as long as the company is operating a tourism business or service within Australian States or Territories in a manner which maximises benefits for the local community. Ecotourism operations run by National Park services, State Forests, Departments of Conservation and Land Management, Reserve Trusts, Local Councils, not-for-profit organisations and so on should also be encouraged to apply.

Eligible entities should have been operating commercially for a minimum of six months and must fall under one or more of the following categories of environmental and culturally appropriate activities:

- 1) Nature based tour companies that meet high environmental standards and whose principal purpose is to interpret or educate visitors on the natural Australian environment or culture. Where interpretation incorporates indigenous Australian culture, interpretation and education should be done by a qualified guide with the approval of the local land council.
- 2) Accommodation in natural areas that meets high environmental standards and provides interpretation or education on demand to guests (either through its own operations or in conjunction with a natural resource agency or other body) through a qualified guide.
- 3) Natural attractions relating to the regional environment that contain an interpretation and or educational dimension during the majority of the visitors experience and whose presence causes no degradation to the surrounding ecosystem. Interpretation and education must focus on the natural environment and may be facilitated by a qualified guide.

In all cases where the role of the guide involves interpretation of indigenous culture, individuals should either have completed formal guide training under an indigenous guide training program approved by ATSIC or have endorsement/recognition by the local Land Council or an appropriate representative of the indigenous community.



The following people may be considered 'qualified':

- Indigenous Australians accredited with their local land council, or who have completed an appropriate guide training course for indigenous persons.
- Persons with formal or informal training in the areas of environment and communications who would qualify for recognition of prior learning.
- Guides qualified under a recognised ecotourism accreditation program which meets specific competency standards.

At present individuals can only be considered qualified under the first two methods as there is no formal ecotourism guide accreditation program or recognised competencies. Thus, one of the first steps in developing a National Ecotourism Accreditation Scheme is the development of a national ecotourism guide accreditation system that would complement the scheme. At the moment, individuals with varying levels of formal and informal training in the ecotourism industry will need to be considered 'qualified'. Discrepancies caused by this loose category on the basis of prior learning will be minimised with the implementation of a national ecotourism guide accreditation scheme.

### **Administration**

A National Ecotourism Accreditation Scheme should be administered by a National Ecotourism Accreditation Board formed for this purpose. **Figure 2** graphically depicts the recommended structure. The organisation should be a cooperative body representing all the interests involved in the process. No legislative base is required. This supervisory body should include individuals representing the organisations directly concerned with, affected by or interested in ecotourism. The body should contain representatives drawn from organisations such as: The Ecotourism Association of Australia (EAA), The Australian Tourism Industry Association (ATIA), other industry groups, The Commonwealth Department of Tourism (DoT), Australian Tourist Commission (ATC) and the Australian Standing Committee on Tourism (ASCOT), Land and Marine Managers, Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF), Other environmental/conservation groups, indigenous Australians, Tourism Training groups, and the legal profession.

The thirteen member administration board (the Board) should hold the following powers: establish advisory panels to critically review and revise standards, grant/withdraw/withhold/renew/review accreditation, establish policy, endorse proposed standards, review and revise standards, design a logo, set/make decisions on the granting/denial of accreditation for difficult/doubtful cases, participation in the development of competencies for ecotourism guides, initiate and run an awards system, promote accreditation, initiate an awareness campaign.

The Board should be incorporated either under the Associations Act or the Australian Securities Commission to ensure standards of propriety. A five member management committee would exercise delegated powers to accredited applicants but the power to withdraw or withhold would remain with the Board.

An executive officer with support staff would be appointed to manage the Scheme.

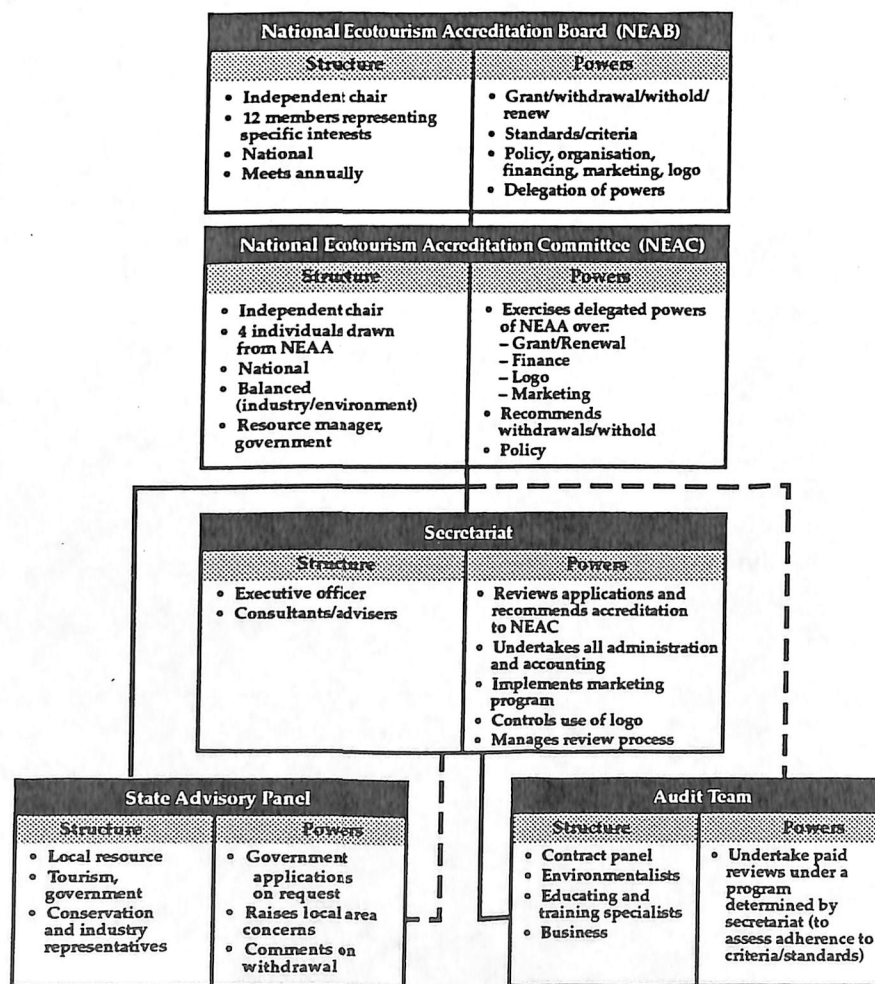


Figure 2  
Administrative Structure

## **How applicants will obtain accreditation**

Accreditation applies to each of the three categories above:

- Tour operation.
- Accommodation.
- Attraction.

Applications will be submitted to the Secretariat which will be responsible for processing.

An entity that runs operations in more than one of these categories needs to apply separately for accreditation in each category.

Accreditation once granted will last for three years, but be subject to an annual fee. Annual renewal would require a statement of significant changes and a selection of past marketing materials.

## **Draft standards**

Draft standards have been developed according to the three distinct categories of accreditation (tour operator, accommodation and attraction). Each category contains company and ecotour standards upon which an application for accreditation will be granted, renewed and assessed. Although standards will have to vary according to the type of business operation, the level of quality demanded across the three categories will not differ. All categories will have to meet minimum standards. It is most important that in developing standards, high quality existing businesses and operations are used as a benchmark.

Draft mandatory standards have been developed in direct relation to the definition of ecotourism, which includes the following components: nature based, interpretation, education, ecologically sustainable, cultural component, return (benefit) to the local community.

Where applicable standards have also been established for operating practices including: energy and water conservation, waste management, methods of transportation, appropriate marketing, building materials and sustainable design.

In addition to a minimum standard, possible performance indicators and description of the desired condition have been developed for each issue. Possible indicators will help the administering body assess if an operator is meeting the minimum standards, while desired conditions will give the industry something to strive for.

Where standards involve some form of training they will ensure consistency with the National Training Reform Agenda in the development of competency standards.

Advisory panels for each sector of the ecotourism industry should be established to critically review and revise these draft standards. Advisory panels should include individuals from all major stakeholder groups and experts on the particular operating practices. Advisory panels should be a permanent part of the scheme in order to update standards as required. Advisory panels should make recommendations on changes and additions to standards to the five member administrative body who will then recommend action to the larger administrative body.

### **Levels of accreditation**

To minimise the complexity of the Scheme, initially accreditation will have only one level. After the first two years additional levels may be added or incorporated into the Scheme. Additionally, standards need to take into consideration existing business and operations. While the need to separate the highly qualified established operators from the newly established is recognised, the administrative complexity at the commencement of the scheme and the possible appeal process would distract from the main initial objectives of the scheme.

### **Logo**

The scheme will be identified by a professionally designed logo which will have conditions of use defined by the Board. It will be used in promoting the scheme and in encouraging visitors to select accredited ecotourism products.

### **Fee structure**

Fees will be used to meet administration costs and to assist with the promotion of the scheme. The fee structure for accreditation would have three elements:

- An application fee to cover the cost of processing.
- An annual fee based on turnover.

The application fee would be nominal and non-refundable.

The accreditation fee would be based on the previous year's turnover as certified by the entity's financial officer or accountant. In the cases where an entity has been operating for less than a year (but at least six months) a calculation of a yearly turnover will be based on the previous months.

A proposed fee structure is:

	Base Case	Best Case
➤ Application fee	\$100	\$175
➤ Annual Accreditation fee		
— Under \$600,000	\$350	500
— \$600 – \$2.5 million	\$600	\$900
— \$2.5 million and over	\$1,100	\$1,650

At the end of each year a renewal notice would be sent to accredited operators. The fee structure is established on an estimated cost to manage the system with the best case designed to provide a surplus towards marketing and promotion once operators are fully established.

## Business Plan

A business plan which identifies the steps involved in implementing the scheme and potential revenue under several scenarios is included in the report. The costs to develop the Scheme include extensive consultation (with industry, conservation interests, national and indigenous communities, resource managers), finalising standards and the initial marketing of the scheme. The total costs to develop the scheme and perform these and other tasks is estimated to be in the vicinity of \$350,000. Annual operating costs of the scheme, as outlined, would be in the vicinity of \$260,000. Under the best case scenario (of high fees and strong market acceptance) the scheme can provide an operating surplus for promotion. Under the more conservative scenarios ongoing support will be required.

The consultation will involve research into acceptance of the scheme and pilot testing. The scheme is sensitive to price, acceptance by the industry and subsequently ensuring the benefits to the industry are realised through effective marketing. The plan envisages a comprehensive review of the scheme in the third year of operation to determine the future scope and operation of the scheme.

## **AN INVITATION TO COMMENT**

The proposed National Ecotourism Accreditation System outlined in this summary report is the first nationally coordinated attempt at translating the industry's desire to formally acknowledge responsible environmental practice into action.

Such a system promises a number of benefits, including a capacity to:

- differentiate and designate bona fide ecotourism operators;
- minimise impacts and improve the ecologically sustainable development of tourism in Australia;
- enhance the reputation of Australian ecotourism in both domestic and international markets;
- allow natural resource managers to better monitor ecotourism operators and better protect valued natural and cultural assets; and
- supply consumers with information upon which they can make accurate comparisons of different enterprises and activities.

By commenting on the proposed system, individuals and organisations involved in the delivery of ecotourism experiences have the opportunity to shape the system to better reflect their business and operational requirements. Comments from ecotourism operators, natural resource managers and tourism marketers are particularly encouraged.

The Commonwealth Department of Tourism will receive comments on behalf of the industry. Comments should be received by 31 January 1994, addressed to:

Director  
Nature Based & Indigenous Tourism  
Commonwealth Department of Tourism  
GPO Box 1545  
CANBERRA ACT 2601