



## ECOTOURISM AUSTRALIA CONSERVATION AWARD WINNER 2008

# CASE STUDY

**Ecotourism Australia** is one of the leading national organisations for the country's tourism industry. It was formed in 1991 as a not-for-profit organisation and, to date, has significantly contributed to long-term environmental sustainability at a national level through the promotion and facilitation of environmental best practice, as well as a sustainable approach to tourism development.

As a result, Australia has gained global recognition as a leading sustainable tourism destination. This achievement has been made with the strong support of key industry sectors, mobilised by Ecotourism Australia, including accommodation, tour and attraction operators; tourism planners; protected area managers; academics and students; tourism, environmental, interpretation and training consultants; local and regional tourism associations; and travel consumers.



Ecotourism Australia's vision is "to be leaders in assisting ecotourism and other committed tourism operations to become environmentally sustainable, economically viable, and socially and culturally responsible."

The chief vehicle for achieving this vision is the ECO Certification Program (ECP), combined with an EcoGuide Certification Program (EGCP). The ECP comprises three levels: Nature-based, Ecotourism and Advanced Ecotourism, with the criteria for achieving certification becoming increasingly challenging as candidates aim for higher levels. The ECP was a world-first 'triple bottom-line' programme, providing environmental, economic and social sustainability benchmarks for the tourism industry. The ECP accredits Tours, Attractions and Accommodation products. Thus, it provides industry, protected area managers, local communities, and travellers with the assurance that an eco-certified product is backed by a commitment to best practice ecological sustainability.

The EGCP is an industry-driven certification programme that trains guides on sustainable practices and eco-friendly behaviour. Combined, these programmes create a powerful process by which conservation and preservation of natural heritage are achieved throughout Australia. They have a total of 560 certified members, of whom 316 are Advanced ECO Certified.

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As an industry leader for sustainable tourism, Ecotourism Australia has also developed a best-practice response to Climate Change. The project comprises the development of a specific Climate Change training and education module for use by tourism operators and organisations that service the tourism industry, eg regional tourism organisations, travel agencies, consultancies, tourism retail outlets, etc.

Education and awareness on sustainable tourism principles and practices are also key components of Ecotourism Australia's work. Its annual National Global Eco Conference is held for the general public, government and the private sector. It provides an interactive forum for the discussion of local, national and international sustainable tourism issues, as well as for the sharing of innovations and best practice across the industry.

As part of the annual conference, a full day is organised for park managers and superintendents to meet with private sector tour operators to discuss what is working, what is not, and what modifications are needed in the coming year to help better preserve Australia's national parks. By initiating and continuing to provide this forum for collaboration, Ecotourism Australia has reversed what is, in many countries, an adversarial relationship between the public and private sectors in managing protected areas. Its catalytic role in this collaboration makes it one of the most important influences in the ongoing development of sustainable practices in Australia, propelling the entire nation into a global leader in sustainable tourism.

Its Global Partnership and Memorandum of Understanding with the UNESCO World Heritage Centre is another key initiative that links Australia's leading ECO-certified companies with tourism and protected area managers in developing countries in the Pacific region to share and learn about environmental sustainability and tourism best practices.

Since Ecotourism Australia is sponsored by the private sector (developed by industry for industry), with strong partnerships with non-profits, governments and academia, the relevancy of recommendations for action by the private sector are unmatched in similar organisations around the world. It has helped to create a paradigm whereby operators implementing sustainable travel practices have a pricing advantage over those who do not. This is a tangible example of 'doing good by doing well', demonstrating the positive return on investment for the private sector in adopting sustainable tourism practices.

Ecotourism Australia serves as an inspirational model for other tourism organisations worldwide by advocating for, and setting, practical standards for sustainable tourism, and leveraging that into an industry-altering, paradigm-shifting force in Australia, making sustainable tourism a top industry priority at the national level.

