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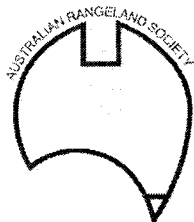
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THE CONTRIBUTION OF PROTECTED AREAS TO QUALITY OF LIFE IN RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project is to understand the contribution that protected areas have to the quality of life of regional and rural communities. The research methodology uses collected and compiled secondary data in order to establish central themes and values that are being represented by the community. Literature shows us that traditionally, management of protected areas has been influenced by the perceptions of managers and planners from outside host communities. Therefore the objective is that, by exploring both the values of a community and the values of protected area managers, there is an opportunity to overlay values and search for emergent themes, commonalities and differences. These may inform policy to more effectively achieve desired conservation outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Conner 1999, Wynhausen 1999, Rothwell 1999 and Jeffrey 2000 among many others highlight issues relating to rapid changes in cultural and economic structures that rural and regional areas are experiencing. These changes present challenges to business, local communities, and to public agencies supplying services, and managing the use of natural resources. The need to develop a method in understanding the changing role of protected areas is vital if such places are to continue providing the benefits of sustained or improved quality of life for communities. Currently, the World Commission for Protected Areas (Sheppard 1999) has identified that managing tourism and park visitation, and partnerships with local communities are among the top ten issues facing protected areas in the coming century.

PROJECT LOCATION

The work is being undertaken within the rangelands of far north western NSW including Sturt, Mutawintji, Kinchega, Paroo-Darling, Gundabooka National Park and Nocoche Nature Reserve, an area extending west from Bourke and north from Menindee and Cobar to the South Australia and Queensland borders respectively. The location has been selected due to the nature of issues in these areas, the researcher's background knowledge of these issues and a long established relationship with the people in the region. The project is being undertaken with an Australian Research Council Linkage grant in collaboration with the NSW NPWS, Department of Environment & Conservation. A broad area analysis has allowed the suite of information being collected to provide in depth perspectives of a wide range of values, rather than providing an opinion about a single protected area.

SIGNIFICANCE

Protected areas have considerable potential for a significant role in the areas of: ecologically sustainable development; economic stability; providing a sense of wellbeing in those communities associated with protected areas; and, providing opportunities for people living in regional, rural and remote areas (Ghimire and Pimbert, 1997, Regional Australia Summit, 1999).

The research used to investigate this potential develops the use of narrative analysis through modified adaptations of Personal Construct Theory and repertory grid technique (Bushell 2004). The process therefore, endeavours to reflect the opinions and perceptions of the community through identifying primary themes. These themes are identified by a careful analysis of secondary data that is repetitive both spatially and historically. This has included, but has not been limited to; board, committee and group minutes, foundations, incorporations, media, local government and private organisations. The values that emerge from the identified themes will form the indicators that will be used in undertaking a comparative analysis between protected area managers and the host community.

The research aims to provide a methodology enabling values to be investigated in a way that respects the differences and accordingly assists to build beneficial relationships and pave the path for the role of protected areas in a changing social environment.

CONCLUSION

The outcomes of the project will provide an understanding of the means and values which local communities find vital in developing a co-operative relationship within nearby protected areas. This will be beneficial in regional development planning with the ability to create direct benefits to local communities; specifically the encouragement of local community 'ownership' and direct involvement in the protection and enhancement of biodiversity.

Further to this, the project will assist in better understanding how the values that shape communities differ between locations in the research area and what implications these values have in the development of locally appropriate relationships.

The research proposes a technique for collecting and assessing community opinions that records values on all levels of the community, not only those which are most vividly or commonly represented.

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