

Is Sustainable Tourism Really Sustainable?

Protecting the Icon in the Commodity at Sites of Invasion

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Volume 2 | Issue 2 | Mar, 1999 |

¹ [Kangaroo Island](#) has embraced sustainable tourism in the hope that it will maintain its integrity as a close-knit rural community. In the centre of the [front cover](#) of the [Kangaroo Island 1999 Visitor Guide](#) is a photograph of a group of Australian sea lions on a beach. Between the photograph and the garland of native wildflowers which line the border of the cover is a margin of white space. This, along with the absence of humans, conveys a sense of pristine wilderness. The front cover design with its encompassing wreath and purity of white space simulates an iconographic representation which transforms the sea lion picture into a sacred object. The garland of flowers honours the seal in its natural habitat -- the most appealing aspect of the island for the tourist (Warren, personal communication). However, hovering ambiguously among the wildflowers is the possibility that the front cover's frame represents a funeral wreath -- perhaps in memory of those early days when fur traders turned the South Australian island into a slaughterhouse. Or maybe it is as a foreshadowing of the consequences of a tourist "invasion". Despite the sacralising of the seal, the marine mammal remains a commodity to be "consumed" by those who visit. Kangaroo Islanders are aware that tourism has sounded the death knell for many small communities -- in the 1950s the [Gold Coast](#) was a small fishing village, in the 1970s [Cairns](#) was a sugar cane town -- and are attempting to impose management practices which will control the amount and type of tourism consumption in order to prevent destruction of the island's native wildlife, its fragile biological systems and the authenticity of the local community.

² Residents' acceptance of the significance of native fauna and flora in recent years is, to some degree, driven by a pragmatism not dissimilar to that of early fur traders: both view the [seal](#) as a commodity, although behaviour towards these protected mammals contrasts strongly with past behaviour when sealing was an especially lucrative industry. Although seal numbers have increased, their classification as an endangered species is a legacy to those days when "fur seals [and Australian sea lions] made a valuable contribution to the economy of the colony of New South Wales" as the sale of the skins enabled the new colony to buy imports (Newnham 34). By the end of the nineteenth century changing market demands and severely depleted sources meant native animal skins were no longer a major source of income.

³ Problems of land and wildlife management increased when sheep farming was introduced. With the allocation of land to farming for soldier/settler communities in the twentieth century, heavy tree clearing and overgrazing resulted in problems of soil erosion and increasing salinity levels, problems which also confront those in mainland rural communities. Following the decline in rural commodity prices for sheep, wool and beef in the 1990s, the local community has targetted tourism as one of the preferred alternative industries. Despite some opposition, the majority of locals feel that with proper management and monitoring, sustainable tourism will offer salvation rather than destruction of their island community.

⁴ Local views are evident in the high profile given to tourism by the [Kangaroo Island Economic Development Board](#) (KIDB), "whose 1998-1999 Annual Plan has identified a number of opportunities to develop the Island's tourism infrastructure, and encourage visitors to stay longer and provide more value to the Island" (Islander 9 July 1998). From 1991 to 1993-1994, 85,000 visits per annum of at least one night stay were recorded with an estimated 50,000 additional annual visitors from day trips (Kangaroo Island Regional Tourism Profile 1). By 1998 over 160,000 visitors arrive on Kangaroo Island each year. KIDB's year long visitor exit survey shows viewing the island's wildlife is the main reason why international and interstate tourists travel to the island and is one of the main reasons why intrastate visitors come (Islander 9 July 1998: 6).

⁵ However, KIDB is aware of local community concern "to [facilitate] development processes particularly towards sustainable development" ([UNCSD](#), Paper 16 22). Community concerns that tourism must be carefully managed to avoid invasion has led to a number of initiatives including the publication of the Tourism Management and Development on Kangaroo Island Working Party Report in 1984 (KI Tourism Policy 1). The publication in 1991 of the Kangaroo Island Tourism Policy acknowledged a need for the island to "diversify and strengthen its economic base" by aiming to be a "specialised destination that emphasises quality before quantity" (12). Kangaroo Island's increasing importance as an tourism destination is also significant to [South Australia's](#) ailing economy -- a fact which could impede rather than aid the island's goal to maintain control tourism management. To date they have successfully prevented large scale development. However, [Democrats](#) spokesman on Regional Development and Small Business, and local resident of the island, [Ian Gilfillan](#), is reported to be alarmed at the South Australian government's plan to fast-track tourism development. The government's Kangaroo Island Working Group Report talks of "bypassing normal planning procedures" and claims that tourism developments should not have a maximum size imposed upon them but rather should be "determined by commercial factors". Gilfillan fears that the government's "fast-track" development policies "will not only jeopardise Kangaroo Island's unique environment, but will also ensure that profits from tourism will mostly leave the Island and go to the mainland, interstate or overseas" (Islander 22 January 1998: 1).

⁶ In 1998 a residents' survey conducted by the KIDB indicated that 89 per cent of islanders felt that tourism was either "good" or "very good" for the island (Islander 14 May 1998: 2), whereas

the proposed tuna farm at Penneshaw was least supported with only 17 per cent saying it was "good" or "very good" and 60 per cent saying it was "bad" or "very bad". Residents' opposition to the tuna farm is evident in a number of letters to the editor of the *Islander*. Newspaper articles express concern about the impact of the industry upon the local Australian sea lion population, the island's major tourist drawcard. Besides discouraging tourism, the industry might lead to the "attraction of sharks, entanglement of marine mammals and waste disposal" problems. Support from "[CSIRO](#) experts and marine researchers" also lent weight to the local position (*Islander* 9 Apr. 1998: 1&3).

⁷ The Kangaroo Island 1999 Visitor Guide markets the island as "nature's pleasure island" implying that it welcomes low impact tourism for those who want to experience a combination of wilderness and comfort. Words such as "visitor", "guests" and "invited" construct an image of the island as a destination for those who might willingly fit Urry's definition of the Romantic traveller -- those wishing to escape so called mass or intensive tourism (46-7). A number of Letters to the Editor of the *Islander* reinforce the concept of the island as a supportive and hospitable community, as excerpts from the following letter illustrate:

⁸ The island is magic, but it is magic because it is what it is, and the locals are unpretentious, fun loving, good hearted and innovative. Tart up the island too much and impact negatively on the natural environment and laid back style, and visitors will find somewhere else to go.

Kangaroo Island is one of the last places on earth where we can experience what the planet might have been like if we hadn't wrecked it in the pursuit of wealth and power. And the locals remind us stressed out city folk of the joys of a simpler life style. (*Islander* 2 April 1998: 9)

⁹ Trish Edwards has visited the island eight times. She advises the islanders that "visitors want to meet locals and get a feel of what it is like to live in such a magical place" and that tourism "needs the anchor of human interaction to make [a location] memorable". Her enjoyment of the island is based upon the seeming lack of "front stage/backstage" hospitality and tourist performance (MacCannell 92-93). Her letter reinforces the concern some local residents expressed to me in interviews I conducted, namely, that tourism must be contained and kept under the control of the local community so that an "invasion" does not destroy what is at the very heart of the island's appeal: its authenticity as a small rural community in a location of great natural beauty where visitors can view wildlife in its natural habitat with minimum impact to that environment. But is this realistic?

¹⁰ Tourism is a massive global industry based on our consumer society with its insatiable demand for new experiences and new places. Travel and tourism is the world's largest industry, directly and indirectly accounting for 11.7 per cent of world's gross domestic product in 1999 ([WTTC](#) 1). There were 650 million international travellers in 1998, and predictions are that the number will double in the next decade. An estimated 30 to 40 per cent of tourist demand is for nature-based experiences (WTTC 1). This 21st century threat of invasion will be very difficult for Kangaroo Islanders to contain.

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Citation reference for this article

MLA style:

Sandra Brunet. "Is Sustainable Tourism Really Sustainable? Protecting the Icon in the Commodity at Sites of Invasion." *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture* 2.2 (1999). [your date of access] <<http://www.uq.edu.au/mc/9903/tourism.php>>.

Chicago style:

Sandra Brunet, "Is Sustainable Tourism Really Sustainable? Protecting the Icon in the Commodity at Sites of Invasion," *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture* 2, no. 2 (1999), <<http://www.uq.edu.au/mc/9903/tourism.php>> ([your date of access]).

APA style:

Sandra Brunet. (1999) Is sustainable tourism really sustainable? Protecting the icon in the commodity at sites of invasion. *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture* 2(2). <<http://www.uq.edu.au/mc/9903/tourism.php>> ([your date of access]).

