

MONASH UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS

**NATURE-BASED TOURISM IN THE 1920s
AND 1930s**

Warwick Frost

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Abstract

This paper outlines the massive expansion in nature-based tourism in Australia in the 1920s and the 1930s. It is argued that an understanding of the historical development of nature-based tourism is greatly important for understanding the current situation and future trends. However, previous studies of the history of tourism have tended to neglect nature-based tourism in Australia, particularly in these two critical decades.

The paper focuses on three elements: - bushwalking, accommodation and fauna based attractions. In the 1920s and 1930s these were major areas of development, laying down the foundations of these sectors.

The paper also considers why nature-based tourism expanded in these decades. On the face of it this seems curious, for these were decades of great political unrest and economic hardship, hardly conditions which we would normally associate with increasing tourism or the love of nature.

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NATURE-BASED TOURISM IN THE 1920S AND 1930S

INTRODUCTION

During the 1920s and 1930s nature-based tourism in Australia grew rapidly and strongly. Major features of nature-based tourism in this period included widespread interest in walking and camping, the development of guest-houses in areas of outstanding natural interest, growth in holiday houses and weekenders and the establishment of nature-based attractions, particularly those based on Australian fauna. Indeed, the level of interest and participation in nature-based tourism in the 1920s and 1930s has probably only been equalled in the 1990s.

However, despite the high levels of nature-based tourism in this period, it has hardly been subject to any research or analysis. Nor has the history of Australian nature-based tourism in general attracted much interest. In contrast, there has been much research into the history of nature-based tourism in the northern hemisphere (some examples include the 1985 special issue of the *Annals of tourism* on the 'Evolution of tourism' and Sellars 1997). This paucity of Australian research is an unfortunate situation for a knowledge and understanding of the development of nature-based tourism in Australia in this period is important for four reasons.

First, while nature-based tourism is now viewed as one of, if not the biggest, sectors of the Australian tourism industry, we know little of its historical development. There have been some general studies of the history of Australian tourism which have included a little on nature-based tourism (for example Hall 1998, chapter 2) and some studies of nature-based tourism issues which made fleeting references to historical developments. What we do have are a massive number of biographies of individual attractions and regions and an extensive range of material on nature-based activities such as bushwalking. However, such studies usually have a narrow focus and are rarely put in the wider context of the development of tourism throughout the whole country. What is needed is a broad overview.

Second, the tourism industry tends to only consider historical trends relating to the very very recent past. An example is the interest in visitor numbers for the last ten or so years. Such an approach is perhaps understandable in what is often seen as a very young industry. However, analysis of nature-based tourism in the 1920s and 1930s illustrates longer trends. Nature-based tourism began in the late nineteenth century, grew in the 1900s and 1910s, flourished in the 1920s and 1930s, but then declined significantly in the 1950s and 1960s before growing again since the 1970s. Understanding what caused these changes may help us to plan for future developments.

Third, it seems strange that nature-based tourism grew strongly during a period of great economic and social upheaval. We tend to believe that tourism results from higher disposable incomes and social stability. Yet the experience of the 1920s and 1930s seems to run counter to this. How can we explain this contradiction?

Fourth, can a history of tourism at an attraction or in a region add to its appeal for modern tourists? In the 1980s and early 1990s managers of natural attractions were criticised for downplaying, even destroying, vestiges of past human activity (Griffiths 1996, chapter 12). In the late 1990s this trend appears to have been reversed with some managers mixing natural and heritage themes and promoting the opportunity to relive tourism of past era.

The purpose of this paper is to consider these issues. It is divided into four sections. The first three provide some examples of the growth of nature-based tourism in the 1920s and 1930s, covering walking, tourist

accommodation and fauna attractions respectively. The fourth section considers why nature-based tourism grew in such violent and tumultuous times.

Walking

The term 'bushwalking' was coined in 1927. Prior to that walking in the bush was either known as 'trailing' or 'naturalism' (if it included collecting or observing specific flora or fauna). Organised groups and clubs had been established in the 1890s, but their members were few in numbers and at times they were almost inactive. Trailing typically involved very long walks (sometimes over weeks and hundreds of kilometres) into hardly known country with inadequate maps. This was a serious elite activity and nearly all trailing groups were purely male (Wheeler 1991, 18, 34; see Meredith 1999, 47-56 for walks of 230 and 257 kilometres in 1913 by Myles Dunphy and friends). Naturalism involved less walking but was similarly serious and male dominated. For example, before World War One, Charles Barrett camped for long periods in the Dandenongs and made special journeys to Bass Strait Island, Wilsons Promontory and the rainforests of northern NSW (Barrett 1919, see also Griffiths 1996, chapters 6 to 8, for the naturalist movement).

However, in the 1920s these elite groups were challenged by women who sought to be included in serious long distance walking and men and women who wished to participate in shorter less strenuous adventures. The interest of women stimulated great debate reflecting discussions over the rapid changes in women's position in society in general. The compromise reached was to form women's or mixed groups which would associate with the established male clubs. In 1922 the Melbourne Women's Walking Club was established and in 1927 the mixed Sydney Bushwalkers. As some men could not stand to think of women as 'trailers', the softer term 'bushwalker' was invented, though it quickly came to apply to all recreational walkers in the bush (Meredith 1999, 93-4; Wheeler 1991, 34-5; Hutton & Connors, 68-70).

Then, as now, most bushwalkers did not see themselves as tourists, who they tended to despise (for example see the views of Dunphy in Meredith 1999, 62-3). Despite these prejudices these walkers were certainly tourists by all the generally accepted definitions. To understand them better it is perhaps useful to break them into three groups: the trailers or 'hard' bushwalkers, who numbered perhaps a few hundred; the bushwalkers, numbering a few thousand and the tourist walkers, who tended to spend only a few hours in the bush, but numbered in the tens of thousands (these numbers are only indicative, for there is no hard data from this period).

The trailers were the trend-setters. They opened up new areas, such as the Victorian Alps and the Kanangra region of NSW. Their knowledge and maps eventually filtered down to the bushwalkers. To cater for their increasingly sophisticated requirements, specialised camping gear makers (like Paddy Pallin) developed and this gear filtered down too (Siseman 1998, 35-7). The trailers actively strove to protect scenic areas from development, their successful 1931 battle to save the Blue Gum Forest in the Blue Mountains has become to be seen as a critical point in the history of the conservation movement in Australia (Hutton & Connors 1999, 66-7; Meredith 1999, 121-4).

Following in the footsteps were the new bushwalkers. Throughout the 1920s interest in bushwalking boomed. Small clubs, often based on factories, offices and educational institutions sprang up. Particularly notable were those which specialised in 'mystery walks'. Like today's mystery flights, the participants did not know where they were going until the day. The clubs that specialised in the mystery walks seem to have mainly been connected with the media. These companies saw the walks as excellent self-promotion and giving them the opportunity to reach a mass audience. In Melbourne they included film companies Metro Golden Mayer (MGM) and Fox-Hoyts, radio station 3DB and the *Sun* newspaper. Their walks were highly popular, one included 2,000 walkers and another required two seven carriage trains to reach its mystery destination. The

actual walking was fairly easy, these were very much social occasions and the chief requirements were general fitness and a knowledge of 60 to 70 popular songs which were sung along the walk (Wheeler 1991, 45-9).

Walking was encouraged by the railways, which in this period generally took on the responsibility within government for marketing and promoting tourism. Special walkers' tickets were introduced which allowed one to journey out on one line, walk across country and return by another line. In the 1930s the Victorian Railways went a step further in organising package tours under the name 'Skyline Tours'. On one such tour, 25 participants took the train to Sale, then proceeded by foot or horse across the Alps and returned by train from Wangaratta. The cost was £9 10s for walkers and £12 10s for riders. The package included sleeping bags, all meals, a guide and a cook, packhorses for baggage and the horse and saddle for riders (Wheeler 1991, 64).

The great interest in walking was reflected by a growing number of newspaper columns, magazines (*Walkabout* began in 1934) and guidebooks. A good example of the last was *The open road in Victoria: being the way of many walkers* (1928) by Robert Croll. A senior public servant in the Education Department and a serious nature writer and trailer, Croll also saw the opportunities in encouraging and educating the new bushwalkers. *The open road in Victoria* consisted of instructions for a wide range of walks and was broken up into sections on one day, two to three day and week long walks. Much of the advice was practical, such as how to get there (for Wilsons Promontory he advised taking a train to Bennisons and then hiring a fishing boat to cross Corner Inlet), the availability of shops, pubs and tea-houses and special warnings of difficult walks. Croll's guide was an interesting contrast to earlier nature writing (such as Barrett 1919). Earlier works were essentially armchair reads with no details of how they could be duplicated, Croll's was a guide to be carried and followed. So popular was *The open road in Victoria*, that it sold out immediately and a second edition was published within three weeks (Griffiths 1996, 170).

Tourist Accommodation

The greatly increased numbers of tourists wishing to experience nature required accommodation. Guest houses, hotels and holiday homes proliferated, as did cafes, tea rooms, picnic grounds, dance halls, cinemas and car hire companies. Below are a few examples of the types of developments which occurred across the country.

One of the biggest tourist regions was the Dandenongs. Less than 50 kilometres from Melbourne, these cool densely forested mountains were easily accessible by train (which ran faster than they do today). Large numbers of holiday homes sprang up, Prime Minister Billy Hughes owned one and gangster Squizzy Taylor often rented another (Winzenried 1988, 159). Guest houses provided shelter and a social focus. By 1929-30 there were 42 guesthouses or boarding houses providing 1,048 beds (Winzenried 1988, 168). To put that into perspective, today the area has 169 rooms (RACV 1996-7, 191-3), perhaps 500 beds, about half what it had 70 years ago.

On a similar scale was Healesville to the north. By the 1920s it had over 100 guest-houses and at Christmas and Easter attracted eight to ten thousand visitors. Seven day packages with full board, bush excursions and rail fare cost £5 10s (less than half the price of a Skyline riding tour). This was the mass tourism side of nature-based tourism and it was tremendously popular. At Easter 1927 it was reported that 500 visitors were unable to find accommodation. As well as walking trails in the surrounding bush, the town included a swimming pool (1922), golf course (1919), numerous tennis courts and 32 touring cars for hire. These came with a driver and carried those less interested in strenuous walking to the local scenic attractions (Symonds 1982, 99-101).

The Dandenongs and Healesville were established tourist haunts which experienced massive increases in visitor numbers. Elsewhere tourist accommodation popped up where none had been before. On the

rainforested Lamington Plateau of southern Queensland, the O'Reilly family found that tourist groups were beating a path to their isolated farm seeking supplies, accommodation, guiding and interpretation. Finally in 1926 the O'Reillys decided to open a guest house (O'Reilly 1945, 127, 131-2).

It was a simple story of struggling selectors drawn into tourism by their love and knowledge of the surrounding rainforest. However, the O'Reillys had always been alive to the tourist potential of the area. They had moved in 1912 from the Blue Mountains, which like the Dandenongs was a long established tourist resort. Bernard O'Reilly recalled that the scenery was, 'the most magnificent they had yet seen. This to men familiar from boyhood with the Blue Mountains' (O'Reilly 1945, 70). There had been moves since the 1880s to make Lamington a national park and the commencement of clearing by the O'Reillys was the catalyst for the reservation of a national park adjoining their farms (Hutton & Connors 1999, 33-4; O'Reilly 1945, 87-8). In the drawn out inconclusive negotiations regarding resumption of the land, the O'Reillys argued, 'the few hundred acres of [our] settlement will prove an asset to the National Park in its development as a health and pleasure resort' (O'Reilly brothers to Minister of Lands, 8 April 1919, *O'Reilly papers*). Their opponents characterised them as speculators, hanging on to the land as the National Park was developed, with a view to, 'subdivide and sell as building lots for summer cottages' (Land Agent's memo, 10 April 1919, *O'Reilly papers*). Instead the O'Reillys developed an ecotourism attraction decades before the word was coined (Dowling & Charters 1999, 266).

Further south, there was a strong push to develop the Barrington Tops (an uninhabited plateau 1,500 metres high to the north of the Hunter Valley) into a new Healesville. Following on from increased tourism to a newly opened water storage dam at its base, in 1923 it was visited by a number of parties and photographs began to be distributed by tourist bureaux. A public meeting was held at Maitland for the, 'Opening up of Barrington Tops as a Mountain Sanatorium and Tourist Resort'. Within a short time the area was being promoted as the, 'Katoomba of Newcastle' and a, 'Health and Tourist Resort and Winter Playground' (Hartley 1993, 17-19).

In 1924 the promoters staged their greatest coup, hosting a visit to the Tops of the NSW Deputy Premier and Minister of Lands. The road was improved and the number of visitors increased. By 1925 Young and Green Motor Service of Newcastle were advertising three day camping tours, with horse supplied, for £5 10s. That year a Dungog hotelkeeper purchased land at the Tops, opening the Barrington Guest House in 1930 (Hartley 1993, 20-8).

In the mountains of Victoria the State Government was keen to establish a mountain resort hotel. In 1908 it announced plans for a magnificent stone chalet on Mount Buffalo, but instead built a temporary one storey structure. Harold Clapp, Chair of the Victorian Railways argued forcefully that the railways should own and operate resort hotels, as the Canadians did at Banff, and the Americans at Yellowstone, Glacier and Yosemite National Parks (see Sellars 1997, chapter 1, for the connection between railways and national parks in the USA). In 1924 Clapp succeeded in having the Mount Buffalo Chalet transferred to the Railways. The railways poured in money, effectively rebuilding it and making it the showpiece of their tourism operations (Webb & Adams 1998, 48, 81-4). In the 1930s the Railways began to promote skiing and in the late 1930s Mount Buffalo hosted an average of 10,000 skiers per year (Webb & Adams 1998, 94). Nearby, the declining gold town of Beechworth attempted to reinvent itself as a mountain resort, building scenic drives and flooding its diggings to create a recreational lake (Griffiths 1987, 77-81).

Native Fauna

A major feature of the increased nature-based tourism of the 1920s and 1930s was an interest in native animals. In the 1920s local entrepreneurs on Phillip Island in Victoria began to promote the Fairy Penguin 'Parade' (night-time return to nests from the ocean). They would meet tourists at the ferry, drive them to the

parade and provide accommodation (Scrase 1995, 20). On Kangaroo Island in South Australia the cutting of a road to the previously inaccessible Seal Bay allowed tourists to visit the Sea Lion colony (Anon. 1995, 35) In the mid 1930s Charles Barrett reported of the growing popularity of Lyre-birds in the Dandenongs,

Always he has been noted among naturalists, but only in recent years gained the renown that comes from publicity. Like the koala, the lyre-bird is ever in the news. Each season Melbourne folk go on pilgrimage to Sherbrooke, to see Menura [the Lyre-bird] displaying on a "dancing-mound," and hear his vocal performance. Cars are parked on the edge of the forest, while scores, even hundreds, of eager people go stepping slowly among the trees and ferns (Barrett 1935, 15).

At Healesville, local enthusiasts developed a Sanctuary or Wild Zoo composed entirely of native animals. The Sanctuary started in 1930 on 78 acres which had originally been an Aboriginal Reserve. Initially there was serious consideration of the Victorian Government expanding it to 2,500 acres but this fell through during the Great Depression. One of its greatest supporters was a retired mining engineer Robert Eadie. He had been involved in the establishment of Kruger National Park in South Africa and he argued strongly for the tourist potential of a reserve which showcased Australian animals (Symonds 1999, chapter 1).

At first government regulations prohibited the charging of an entry fee at Healesville. However, in 1934 it was granted the right to charge. By 1936 it received 16,000 visitors a year and by the late 1930s nearly 100,000 visitors a year. Unfortunately numbers fell with World War Two and pre-war levels were not reached again until the mid 1950s (Symonds 1999, 14, 17 & 35).

The rationale behind Healesville's open style was that,

The Wild Zoo is the zoo of the future. Travelling menageries are doomed; and animal lovers the world over are hopeful that the keeping of wild creatures in cages of the type at present in common use, will become an obsolete method of exhibiting them. ... And the public has shown itself strongly in favour of this overdue reform (Barrett 1935, 39).

Healesville Sanctuary was an ambitious attempt to marry tourism and conservation. By the 1920s there was concern that the Thylacine (Tasmanian Tiger) was on the verge of extinction. They had been exhibited at Melbourne Zoo between the 1870s and 1920s and London Zoo between the 1860s and 1930s. In the 1920s Hobart's Beaumaris Zoo had seven thylacines in small pens and it was where the famous film footage of them was taken and the last one in captivity died in 1936 (Guiler & Godard 1999, 167-177). There were attempts to establish a colony at Healesville (Nicholls 1925, 88), and it has been reported that one was exhibited in the 1930s, though it quickly died (the claim was made on Radio 3LO in 1994, but I have been unable to confirm it). In 1945 the Sanctuary mounted an unsuccessful expedition to Tasmania to trap thylacines for display and a breeding programme (Guiler & Godard 1999, 187).

The Sanctuary was more successful with the Platypus. One called Splash (1933-7) became known worldwide. Unfortunately he was difficult to display, so that visitors had to see him at the curator's home. In all 13,000 people visited him, including many international visitors (Symonds 1999, 37-8).

Tourism in Troubled Times

The noted historian Eric Hobsbawm has described the period from 1914 to 1945 as the 'Age of Catastrophe', during which the world, 'stumbled from one calamity to another' (Hobsbawm 1995, 7). In Australia the slaughter of World War One was followed by economic depression, high levels of unemployment, the collapse of farming on marginal lands, political instability, rising fascism and the strong possibility of

democratic government being overthrown (Valentine 1987 and Cathcart 1988 are just representatives of the enormous literature on this period in Australia). Against this background, how can we explain the enormous increase in nature-based tourism?

The answer which comes to mind immediately is escape. Faced with the problems of these decades, many people may have sought respite in the natural world. Escapist activities such as watching movies, horse-racing, football and cricket, all boomed in this period, nature-based tourism was really no different.

Nature-based tourism had the advantage of being cheap. Urban dwellers could reach the bush for a price of a suburban train ticket. Walking and camping cost very little, especially as people wore everyday clothes, used blankets rather than sleeping bags and cooked their food over open fires. Holiday homes could be built of scavenged materials. Even guest houses were cheap for many catered to large numbers of mass tourists.

There were also other less obvious factors at work. Society was changing rapidly. Before 1920 tramping and naturalism had been the preserve of a male middle class elite. Myles Dunphy was an architect and university lecturer, Charles Barrett a journalist and Robert Croll a senior public servant. After 1920 they were joined by a far broader cross section of society including large numbers of men from factories and clerical positions and women (Wheeler 1991, 45).

Part of the attraction of natural settings to this new type of tourist was that it afforded excellent social opportunities. It is clearly obvious from the accounts of the booming tourist resorts and the walking groups (especially the mystery walk clubs) that they were places for young people to meet other people and have fun. Many natural resorts also offered the opportunities to engage in the latest fashions in recreation, such as tennis, golf, horse riding and motoring.

New technology had a part to play in this expansion. The movies popularised certain regions and faunal attractions such as the Sherbrooke Forest Lyre bird and Splash the Platypus. Many were seduced by images of attractive wealthy young people at play in American resorts (a standard background to many Hollywood films). It is noteworthy that the mystery walks were organised by large media corporations, some of which, such as film and radio, were very new. Developments in photographic equipment allowed tourists to permanently capture the sights they had visited. Before the 1920s this was only possible through the literal capture of specimens of animals or plants.

Changes in transport had an impact. The railways were at the forefront of promoting tourism. The rapid spread of the availability of motor vehicles expanded the reach of the tourist. Even those who did not own cars, could rent them and a driver at the popular resort towns.

In many cases interest in nature-based tourism was a reaction to the increasing development of Australia's natural resources. Bushwalkers became conservationists and tourism was often the justification for reserves and National Parks.

CONCLUSION

Nature based tourism had existed in Australia before the 1920s, the Blue Mountains, for instance, was well established by 1900. What occurred in the 1920s and 1930s was a threefold expansion. First, the numbers involved rose rapidly according to the anecdotal evidence we have. Second, the range of tourists broadened, tourism ceased to be the preserve of just the upper middle class. Third, new types of tourist activity developed, in particular bushwalking (in its broad form) and visiting fauna attractions. An understanding of how these

changes occurred and their impacts are very useful as tourism continues to change at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Perhaps the greatest lesson from this period relates to our understanding of the motivations of tourists. It is easy for us to consider tourism as positively related to income and stability. This is how we tend to explain the growth in tourism in the last twenty years. However the case of the 1920s and the 1930s provides an alternative model. The Australian democracy and its economy were unstable, yet tourism boomed. There are a number of possible explanations for this, including the need to escape from reality, changes in society, new technology and reactions to resource exploitations. Such factors seem to be just as capable of affecting tourism today.

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