

Wetland Tourism: Australia - Kakadu Ramsar Site



*Kakadu is a living cultural landscape, home to Aboriginal people for more than 50,000 years.
(Credit: ©Peter Eve, Tourism NT)*

Kakadu is one of a suite of national parks in the “Top End” of the Northern Territory of Australia. The Park is located within the Alligator Rivers Region, extends from the coast in the north to the southern hills and basins 150km to the south, and covers an area of nearly two million hectares (20,000 km²). Kakadu encompasses a living Aboriginal culture, extraordinary natural landscapes, and a rich variety of plants and animals, as well as rock art and archaeological sites, values were internationally recognised when the Park was first placed on the World Heritage List in 1981 for its natural and cultural values and later extended.

Kakadu contains a wide range of wetland types, from intertidal forested wetlands and mudflats to

seasonal freshwater marshes and permanent freshwater pools, and it is listed as a Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, first designated in 1980 and consolidated and extended in April 2010. Its mangrove communities are highly diverse and include at least 38 mangrove species. It supports substantial populations of waterbirds, freshwater fish, aquatic invertebrates, turtles and crocodiles, including a significant number of endemic species, and provides significant fish nursery and spawning habitats. The Park’s cultural and socio-economic values are equally diverse, and its wetlands are particularly important to the traditional owners and caretakers of Kakadu National Park (the ‘Bininj’) for cultural reasons as well as for their tourism and recreational values.

The main activities that attract tourists to Kakadu National Park include:

- visits to indigenous art sites;
- interpretive walks and talks by rangers;
- boat cruises on wetlands, billabongs and rivers;
- visits to interpretive visitor centers; and
- day walks and overnight bushwalks through the Park's natural landscape

The Park is also a gateway for tourists visiting Arnhem Land and other Top End sites.



Aboriginal rangers use an airboat to look for outbreaks of weeds on the Magela floodplains Kakadu National Park (Credit:©David Hancock, Skyscans)

Tourism in Kakadu generates local income, local employment, local business opportunities, local services, and support for cultural traditions both directly and indirectly. It is also a significant attraction for Australia's international tourism. During 2007-2009, the Park received over 225,000 visitors a year, generating an annual economic impact on the order of AUD 130 million

per annum (around USD 138 million per annum) directly from visitors, though visitor numbers dropped to 176,000 in 2010 as a result of the effects of the global economic downturn on international tourism. Around 55 per cent of visitors to Kakadu National Park are Australian residents and 45 per cent are international visitors.

The Ramsar Secretariat selected 14 case studies for a publication on wetlands and sustainable tourism, to be launched at the 11th Conference of Parties, July 2012. www.ramsar.org/tourism

A key feature of Kakadu is its location on Aboriginal lands, leased from, and jointly managed with, the Aboriginal groups to which the land belongs. In 2004, the Park and Aboriginal groups created a shared tourism vision for Kakadu which forms the foundation of the Park's Tourism Master Plan. Looking after the land and culture is a strong obligation for Aboriginal people, and the overall aim of the Tourism Master Plan is for Kakadu National Park to be recognized internationally as a place where:

- the cultural and natural heritage of the Park is protected and the living culture of Aboriginal peoples is respected;
- Aboriginal peoples guide and are involved in all aspects of managing the Park; and
- knowledge about the country and culture is passed on to younger Aboriginal people.

As part of the lease agreements, the Aboriginal owners and related groups receive an annual rent and a percentage of the visitor fees collected in the Park, as well as a range of employment, enterprise and training opportunities related to the Park. Under the leases, the Park Director is also required to encourage the maintenance of Aboriginal traditions.

The Tourism Master Plan was developed through consultation with the Kakadu National Park Board of Management, the Kakadu's traditional owners, and representatives of the tourism industry, in particular the Kakadu Tourism Consultative Committee. The Park's Board of Management oversees implementation of the Tourism Management Plan, as well as all other aspects of park management: it is composed of 10 members nominated by Aboriginal groups and five other members: the Director of National Parks; the Assistant Secretary, Parks Operations and Tourism Branch; a person representing the tourism industry in the Northern Territory; a person prominent in nature conservation; and a Northern Territory Government nominee. In addition, Bininj

are involved in the management of the marine and coastal areas of the Park including undertaking research as well as survey and monitoring programmes.

The principles that guide practical day-to-day management of Kakadu and its tourism are that culture, country, sacred places and customary law are one, extend beyond the boundaries of Kakadu, and need to be protected and respected; that joint management by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people is kept strong by working together and sharing decision-making; that tourism must be developed at a pace and level determined by Aboriginal people, so strong partnerships are maintained with the tourism industry; and that visitors are provided with opportunities for safe, enriching and memorable experiences.

The Park works closely with Tourism Australia and Tourism NT, which are the national and state government bodies responsible for marketing and promotion of Kakadu; and with Tourism Top End (TTE), a non-profit association with over 550 members drawn from businesses, individuals and organizations committed to the growth of tourism in the Top End. Many of Kakadu's tourism operators are members of TTE.

A key challenge is that the tourism industry is under commercial pressure for sites and activities to be made available for visitors as much as possible. In a site like Kakadu, cultural factors and extreme weather conditions, crocodile management and post wet season road maintenance mean that it is challenging to meet the industry's expectations of access. Kakadu National Park management has sought to educate the tourism industry on the reasons for which sites or activities might not be available as much as the tourism operators would like, through industry newsletters, through face-to-face meetings, and through a compulsory training program for all guides leading tours in Kakadu.

There is a high degree of compliance across the Park. In accordance with the Park's compliance strategy, compliance staff primarily take an educational approach to enforcing regulations,



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including Australia's Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999. Where necessary, however, the compliance response is escalated relative to the severity of the breach.

Tourism provides an opportunity for visitors to develop a deeper appreciation of indigenous culture and of conservation. The Park has an extensive communications and information programme to ensure that tourists understand Kakadu's natural and cultural values and that Kakadu is Aboriginal land that it is jointly managed by Parks Australia and Kakadu's traditional owners.

The programme includes:

- on site interpretive signs and displays;
- face-to-face interpretation by guides and rangers;
- pre-visit information available online;
- the Kakadu National Park Visitor Guide;
- a selection of Park Notes about specific sites and topics;
- Bowali Visitor Centre and Warradjan Aboriginal Cultural Centre;
- guided walks, talks and slideshows; and
- cultural activities, including traditional painting and weaving led by local indigenous people.

Sources:

Information provided by Kakadu National Park and Parks Australia:

<http://www.environment.gov.au/parks/kakadu/index.html>

<http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/wetlands/ramsardetails.pl?refcode=2>

<http://www.australia.com/destinations/icons/kakadu.aspx>

<http://www.environment.gov.au/parks/publications/kakadu/pubs/tourism-brochure-summary.pdf>

'*Economic impact of Australia's World Heritage Areas*', available at

<http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/publications/report/pubs/economic-activity-report.pdf>

'*Kakadu National Park Tourism Master Plan*', available at

<http://www.environment.gov.au/parks/publications/kakadu/pubs/tourismmasterplan.pdf>

'*Kakadu National Park Management Plan 2007-2014*', available at

<http://www.environment.gov.au/parks/publications/kakadu/pubs/management-plan.pdf>

'*A Shared Vision for Tourism in Kakadu National Park*', available at

<http://www.environment.gov.au/parks/publications/kakadu/shared-vision.html>

National Landscapes – Kakadu factsheet, available at http://www.tourism.australia.com/en-au/documents/Corporate%20-%20Marketing/Marketing_NL_Kakadu.pdf

Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act)

<http://www.comlaw.gov.au/Details/C2012C00248> (as amended) and the *EPBC Regulations 2000*

<http://www.comlaw.gov.au/Details/F2011C00848> (as amended)

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