

LURE OF THE WILD

A new collective envisages a natural advantage in tourists' attraction to Australia

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Australia's natural beauty, rich and rare, remains a major draw-card for overseas visitors. Despite all the recent hype about restaurants and national cuisine as tourism drivers, more visitors would rather see a kangaroo than eat one.

It's worth remembering this wide brown land has the greatest number of endemic birds of any country, as well as the most biodiverse waters. We have the most

John Daw, executive officer of Australian Wildlife Collection. "Things like feral animal tracking, weed eradication (and) citizen science projects where guests are involved with tracking what they're seeing."

This might involve pulling out invasive boneseed weeds and planting trees in their place to encourage the spread of koalas in Victoria's You Yangs Regional



operators, who are also dedicated to the conservation of Australia's natural heritage."

This style of immersive adventure tourism is a booming sub-industry in travel. According to online agency Responsible Travel's 2016 trends and statistics report, it grew by a whopping 65 per cent each year between 2009 and 2012 in Europe and the Americas. Adventure travel continues to be a

reptiles and lizards of any nation and a bizarre menagerie of marsupials and giant birds—hello quokkas, platypuses, and emus—found nowhere else on the planet.

The combination of our unique wildlife and environments attracts almost 70 per cent of visitors—about five million people—to our shores annually, according to Tourism Australia's research.

Almost 40 per cent of incoming tourists claim nature was the most important factor when planning their holiday. A quarter of long-haul passengers who make the

Park—as offered by Echidna Walkabout Nature Tours. Founders Janine Duffy and Roger Smith discovered the marsupials are repelled by boneseed, so it's a simple environmental equation: the fewer weeds, the more koalas (echidnawalkabout.com.au).

At Lady Elliott Island, visitors turn their submarine photos into valuable research tools. They can share their shots with scientific monitoring programs such as Eye on the Reef (gbrmpa.gov.au) and the University of Queensland's Project Manta (ladyelliott.com.



fast-growing market sector as more discerning travellers seek unique experiences and once-in-a-lifetime Instagram posts.

"It's such a competitive marketplace and other destinations are obviously cottoning on that wildlife tourism is growing in popularity. This alliance allows us to compete better with those destinations," Daw says.

"We saw this real drive for a different type of wildlife story to be told for Australia. Especially in Western markets, where there's a strong trend towards seeing wild-

ing done so because they are "passionate about observing wildlife".

All of this is encouraging news for local tourism operators who prioritise nature and creatures in their offerings. A dozen of them have recently banded together as the Australian Wildlife Collection, the latest marketing body formed

under the auspices of Tourism Australia's "Best of Australia" campaign, alongside Luxury Lodges, Great Walks and Ultimate Wineries.

The 12 operators, including Exceptional Kangaroo Island, The Maria Island Walk and Lady Elliott Island on the Great Barrier Reef, came together with shared goals, including sustainability and a commitment to regenerate the environment in which they operate. In most cases, visitors can contribute to these goals.

"It's not voluntourism, but small things guests can do on tour that make a meaningful impact over a longer period," explains

from below to capture their distinctive ventral markings—they're the equivalent of human fingerprints.)

Citizen science is not the only thread uniting AWC members. Each is also independently owned and operated and contributes strongly to its local community through jobs, commercial support and social initiatives.

Their fundamental goal is exposing visitors to animals in the wild, so sanctuaries and zoos are not permitted—"though obviously we appreciate the great work that sanctuaries do with rehabilitation and research," Daw says. "But for us, we saw this real need to compete with Africa, Galapagos, Costa Rica and those destinations that are really focused on wildlife observation in natural habitats."

To that end, quality guiding and interpretation and excellent hospitality are core to their mission. From the AWC website: "Each member of the collection demonstrates a standard of interpretative guiding and hospitality considered as the benchmark in each region."

Members are keen to pursue a nationally recognised educational



A wombat on Tasmania's Maria Island, main; clockwise from top left, a turtle off Queensland's Lady Elliott Island; a tammar wallaby on SA's Kangaroo Island; a Northern Territory crocodile rises to the bait; and a koala in its natural habitat

qualification for wildlife guiding (none exists) though for now it remains just a possibility. "But from an Australian Wildlife Collection standpoint there is a commitment to furthering wildlife guiding standards across the continent," says Daw. "A collective like this does open the possibility of guide exchanges across habitats."

AWC members cover most of the country's beauty spots, from South Australia's Eyre Peninsula—where guests can swim with sea lions and cave-dive with great white sharks (goinoffsafaris.com.au)—to outback legend Sab Lord's pioneering Kakadu and Arnhemland four-wheel-drive safaris (lords-safaris.com). Sab Lord and Dean Hoath are past winners of the Northern Territory's top interpretative guiding award, and the company has special permits from traditional owners to access parts of phenomenal indigenous

lands that are off-limits to other operators. That's the sort of integrity of experience that defines AWC members.

At the 1850s sheep station Arkaba, which occupies a 24,000ha slice of South Australia's magnificent Flinders Ranges, guests can become part of a real-time transformation of a degraded pastoral property into a private wildlife conservancy (arkabastation.com).

Since buying the property in 2009, Charles Carlow and his team at the five-room homestead resort have battled to eradicate pests and return the landscape to its natural state. Today there are kangaroos and emus aplenty, the yellow-footed rock wallabies are back and other endemic wildlife seems to be thriving.

The country and its inhabitants are best explored on foot. Arkaba's four-day hike—with decadent swags and fine catering—sets out

from the Wilpena Pound amphitheatre and returns via a section of the 1200km Heysen Trail, named for the famous South Australian who immortalised these landscapes in his paintings. (For Hans Heysen this land will forever be, "skies hard blue and colours dry and crumbly".) Carlow, who cut his safari teeth in Africa, describes Arkaba as one of Australia's most beautiful outback properties and says the continent's wildlife is in a class of its own.

"Our incredibly specialised and fragile ecosystems host one of the most diverse environments on earth," he says. "Unravelling the stories that lie behind Australia's wildlife requires characters with both passion and knowledge, and the establishment of the Australian Wildlife Collection, for the first time, brings together the diversity of the country's habitat with a group of passionate wildlife

me in the wild and more people want to connect with nature in their travels."

The AWC website, launched in February, groups experiences into location, season and type of wildlife on offer. Collating words and images on a website is a relatively simple undertaking in this day and age but Daw hopes the new web presence will reap rewards in higher awareness and bookings among inbound visitors.

Its early days but the reaction so far has been encouraging. At the recent Australian Tourism Exchange industry fair in Sydney, Daw says foreign buyers, particularly from western Europe, were enthusiastic.

"We had a really positive reaction that this collection is going to make it so much easier to not only sell but identify those products which are key and have the same values and focus and consistent quality," Daw says.

"I think people are appreciating the importance of getting back to nature, from a healthy living standpoint. We now realise the importance of spending time in the outdoors."

australianwildlifecollection.com

