



Seeking Sanctuary

Jonathan Fisher outlines the challenges facing the Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary

At Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary we face a challenge familiar to many zoos and sanctuaries - to be relevant to changing and increasingly sophisticated customer expectations, while also avoiding over-commercialism and remaining true to our vision. In the case of Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary, our unique origins have allowed it to remain largely undeveloped as one of the Gold Coast's last remaining patches of eucalypt, and melaleuca coastal rainforest. Located 30 minutes south of Surfers Paradise and a 150 metre short walk from Currumbin Beach, the Sanctuary is a 27-hectare green oasis in one of Australia's most intensely developed urban areas.

This has contributed to much of Currumbin's appeal with its wildlife displays, shows and experiences set within these natural surroundings. For many visitors, the ability to hand feed free-ranging kangaroos, or feed the wild flocks of lorikeets are highlights of their visit. The universal appeal of these experiences has led to a reassessment of Currumbin's aims to be South-East Queensland's leading Australian wildlife attraction.

Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary has had a history of more than 60 years, and since 1976 has been a National Trust of Queensland property, held in perpetuity to provide public benefit through wildlife conservation, research and education activities.



However, Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary also needs to operate as a viable and sustainable tourism attraction to be able to achieve this without the benefit of any direct Government funding.

While there are family photos throughout the nation of our visitors feeding the lorikeets, today we are setting our aims in a broader context adopting the view that Currumbin is an attraction of national, not just local, significance. But further to this, we also need to look internationally at international consumer trends to ensure that Currumbin remains relevant into the future.

While Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary has primarily been targeted at the family market, the rise of the 'experience seeker' market has necessitated the further evolution of the Sanctuary. These 'experience seekers' span demographics and geographic origin, representing a category of consumers who are looking for holidays and leisure activities which have a unique, local feel and the ability to interact with the local people.

It is a significant shift away from mass-produced, packaged holiday experiences, with the Experience Seekers researching the internet and word of mouth to ensure they will be getting an authentic and a satisfying experience.

The implications for Currumbin lie primarily in the way we display wildlife and provide interpretation about the animals and their environment.

Rather than providing a generic, broad collection of Australian wildlife, planning is underway to develop a more focused collection which allows visitors to experience and understand the unique environment surrounding the Currumbin area.

Half an hour south of Currumbin is the heart of the Wollumbin Caldera, an ancient volcanic crater in which Mt Warning towers over a landscape of world-heritage rainforests, spectacular escarpments and striking beaches where lava flows have created the scenic headlands of the southern Gold Coast. Displaying the wildlife of the Wollumbin Caldera and providing interpretation about the formation of the local environment dovetails with Tourism Australia's National Landscapes campaign in which the region has been branded Australia's Green Cauldron.

This will allow us to position Currumbin as the Gold Coast's gateway





to the Green Cauldron - a borderless approach to the destination to appeal particularly to the Experience Seekers venturing into these areas.

For both domestic and international visitors, this means that rather than being presented with a generic, Australian wildlife experience, they can experience a unique sanctuary with a strong local character which they cannot get anywhere else.

However, the Experience Seeker segment also spans across the family market - which is still Currumbin's core business - and any new developments need to take families into consideration.

One of the first challenges was to ensure that our pricing was right so that we could ensure the business is sustainable, while also ensuring there is enough surplus for reinvestment into new attractions and facilities as well as funding our new wildlife hospital and conservation research and breeding activities.

Currumbin commissioned detailed research with families in Brisbane, Gold Coast and Northern NSW to assess the

value previous and potential future visitors place on options for new attractions.

Most significantly, the research asked questions about the value the respondents placed on resisting over-development on the site, as well as their willingness to pay an additional portion of the entrance fees to support the Sanctuary's Wildlife Hospital and conservation activities.

The majority of respondents said they would probably or definitely contribute to the Wildlife Hospital and conservation work. But the bottom line showed that this became a compelling proposition for guests when it was integrated with visitor experiences.

In this way, the research highlighted Currumbin's strategic challenges - to update ageing infrastructure, add new, compelling attractions and activities and, at the same time, ensure that this was achieved through sustainable practices.

A Masterplan commissioned in 2006 is in its early stages, with the implementation of the interactive, children's adventure playground in 2007 and planning under way to enter into Stage 2 with additional adventure activities with a broad appeal for guests aged from eight to 80.

Current food and beverage, function and turnstiles facilities will also be refurbished and, at the same time, work will start on the Sanctuary's new \$1.5 million wildlife hospital to ensure a high level of service be provided free of charge for the local community.

Wildlife displays and enclosures throughout the park are also being constantly upgraded. The Sanctuary recently completed a refurbishment of its Wombat enclosures which reflects the Sanctuary's philosophy behind its wildlife displays and exhibits.

The wombat enclosure provides a new home for three Southern Hairy-nosed Wombats, Eddie, Heather and Emily.

The special features of the design allow visitors to 'get closer' to the wombats with a hollow log taking visitors into the enclosure to come face-to-face with the animals.

The enclosure incorporates a cell-grazing concept to enable the lush, grassy pasture within the exhibit to be maintained, adding to the behavioural enrichment for the wombats. Wombats are not regularly bred in captivity and it is hoped that the new enclosure will significantly enhance the opportunities for both research and breeding.

The wombat exhibit upgrade will be followed by a new Rock Wallaby enclosure where endangered species can be successfully bred and displayed with further, innovative viewing features so that visitors can get closer to the animals, while still maintaining a highly natural and enriching environment for the animals.

The development of new product and activities has also involved the expansion of indigenous experiences throughout the park. The Sanctuary recently appointed Graham Blanco as Indigenous Liaison Officer to oversee the content, presentation and development of indigenous experiences throughout the park.





For many years we contracted Aboriginal dancers to perform an afternoon show and this has been expanded to include a morning 'welcome' as well as opportunities during the day for guests to experience didgeridoo performances, boomerang throwing and interpretive walks.

We work directly with Graham, the dancers and the local elders, which ensures that we have consistently high-quality, authentic indigenous experiences - in fact, Currumbin is the only major Gold Coast attraction with daily Aboriginal experiences for international and domestic visitors.

The other area where Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary is striving to set itself apart is in becoming the Gold Coast's leading, eco-friendly tourist attraction.

If we are seen to be preaching to industry and the public about the environment, then it's very important for us to start inside-out and examine our own credentials. Some of the initiatives achieved over a short period of time have included:

reducing the number of vehicles in the fleet and swapping company pool cars from V6 sedans to Honda Civic hybrid vehicles; benchmarking and reporting on energy and water usage as part of monthly business reports; and reviewing purchasing policies.



The Sanctuary also promoted our Wildlife Operations Manager, Jenny Lunney to the position of Environmental Manager, reporting to the Chief Executive, to oversee environmental and sustainable practices and projects throughout the organisation.

One of the priorities will be to complete Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary's Eco Tourism certification, allowing the Sanctuary to be unambiguously positioned as a leading eco-tourism product.

Not only does this assist us in our own position within the market place, it also brings additional depth to the Eco-tourism product of the destination being promoted by Gold Coast Tourism, Tourism Queensland and Tourism Australia. It is consistent with the umbrella organisation that we are proud to be part of, The National Trust - one of the most respected conservation based organisations in the world with 'green heritage' at its very roots.

Increasingly, we are seeing travel wholesalers and retailers from the UK and Europe asking questions about the environmental credentials of the products they are selling. This makes it all the more important that we continue to benchmark ourselves against industry standards and work towards best practice wherever we can.

Jonathan Fisher (pictured above) is Chief Executive of Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary.



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