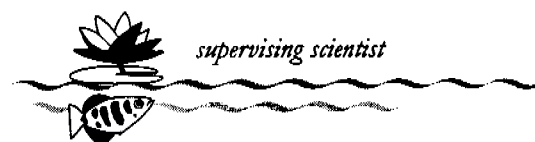




**The value of wetlands  
in ecotourism**

A Spiers & T Reece

November 1999



*supervising scientist*

# **The value of wetlands in ecotourism**

**Abbie Spiers & Terry Reece**

A summary of a presentation given by Abbie Spiers  
on Friday 26 November, 1999  
at the

## **National Wetland Conference**

24–26 November, 1999

Rydges Canberra

London Circuit, Canberra

The National Wetland Conference was organised by Wetland Care Australia and sponsored by the Murray-Darling Basin Commission, Natural Heritage Trust, NSW Fisheries, Environment Australia and Ansett Australia.

The theme for the conference was *Sharing our experiences* and the presentations were based on actual experience as far as possible, the aim being to share wetland information and experience among wetland owners, users and managers in a very 'hands on', practical sense.

# The value of wetlands in ecotourism

Abbie Spiers & Terry Reece

*Abbie Spiers is a wetland ecologist at the Environmental Research Institute of the Supervising Scientist (part of Environment Australia), based in Jabiru, Northern Territory. Abbie has worked in tropical wetland research since 1991, and is keen to foster better communication between scientists and wetland managers, with the common goal of sustainable use of tropical wetlands.*

*Terry Reece manages the Yellow Waters boat cruise in Kakadu National Park, and is a keen birdwatcher and field naturalist. Terry has a long association with tropical wetlands and is becomingly increasingly concerned about the welfare of wetlands and the need to encourage sustainable use of these valuable habitats.*

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The purpose of this presentation is to discuss the value of wetlands in ecotourism. In this presentation the term 'ecotourism' will be used in a general sense, equivalent to the term 'nature-based tourism'. Our focus will be on nature-based tourism in the tropical wetlands of the Northern Territory, but parallels can be drawn with tourism ventures in wetlands throughout Australia.

Wetlands are amazing habitats for tourism – everyone needs water, and most enjoy looking at water, finding it relaxing and intriguing to be in it or on it. The diversity of wildlife and dramatic seasonal changes in wetland landscapes makes them an ideal platform for nature-based tourism.

The value of wetlands to tour operators in the Northern Territory cannot be underestimated. Wetlands are a major drawcard to the Top End. Without waterfalls and crocodiles, for example, the Northern Territory's tourism industry would find it difficult to compete with other locations both within Australia and elsewhere. The visual marketing that attracts visitors to the Northern Territory draws heavily on images of spectacular wetlands and their wildlife, in particular wetland birds and crocodiles. It is vital therefore that the values and benefits, both economic and other, from these landscapes are recognised and their preservation is considered paramount – if only to protect our tourism dollar into the future!

One of the primary methods of ensuring wetlands are protected in the long-term is to educate people about their importance. Yet contrary to the idealised belief of some, who prefer to think that many visitors are already aware of and attracted to the myriad environmental values of wetlands, the majority of tourists to the Northern Territory visit wetlands chiefly to see a crocodile! Many view the environment and wildlife as entertainment. Our challenge, then, in the brief time that tourists experience the wetlands, is to educate them about the other values of tropical wetlands. Nature-based tourism presents the perfect opportunity to encourage large numbers of people to develop greater appreciation of the wetland environment.

There is a range of tourism ventures offering wetland experiences to visitors in the Northern Territory. Seven Spirit Bay, on Cobourg Peninsula, is an ecotourism resort

targeting elite, largely international visitors. At Wildman River Wilderness Lodge in the Mary River region, visitors can participate in guided walks and wetland sightseeing as part of their accommodation package. At East Alligator in Kakadu National Park, Guluyambi boat cruise offers visitors an opportunity to interact with Aboriginal people and learn more about Aboriginal cultural affinity with wetlands. Throughout the Top End, fishing tours in freshwater and coastal wetlands offer specialised tourism, targeting keen anglers. Many other tourism operations in the Northern Territory visit waterfalls, floodplains and other wetlands as part of their tour packages.

At Yellow Waters in Kakadu National Park, tour guides on the Yellow Waters boat cruise became interested in improving the educational value of their tours and the quality of the visitor experience. Yellow Waters is a large freshwater wetland in the South Alligator River system, one of the Ramsar-listed wetlands of Kakadu National Park. The Yellow Waters boat cruise attracts 120 000 people each year, generating annual revenue of over \$2 500 000. The tour guides recognise that it presents an ideal opportunity to educate people about the values of wetlands and their worldwide plight, in particular the importance of Ramsar wetlands such as Yellow Waters.

Scientists at the Environmental Research Institute of the Supervising Scientist, located in nearby Jabiru, collaborated with the tour guides to design a program for monitoring seasonal change at Yellow Waters. Permission was obtained from Kakadu National Park management and traditional owners to proceed with the study. The monitoring program was a joint effort conducted weekly or fortnightly over one year (June 1998–July 1999) to observe seasonal changes in birds and vegetation at five sites. During each visit the sites were photographed, bird species and numbers recorded, and vegetation species and percentage cover estimated. Data was recorded by tour guides and scientists, and has since been entered into a database for analysis.

The final report will provide information that is not only of scientific interest, but has relevance to the tour guides, park rangers and Aboriginal traditional owners. There is great potential to use this information in tour guide spiels to visitors, brochures and information leaflets, posters and signage around the boat pontoons and walkways at Yellow Waters. The next challenge will be to present this opportunity in a positive marketing light to encourage the corporate owners of the Yellow Waters venture to help fund this next stage and thus promote the outcomes of this joint project.

This is just one example of how collaboration between researchers and tour operators can be a positive learning experience for both, and lead to improvement in the quality of the visitor experience. There is great scope to involve training providers also, especially in educating and accrediting tour guides and operators.

Nature-based tourism in the wetlands is a valuable opportunity not only to generate tourism dollars, but also to teach people from all walks of life and all corners of the world about the importance of wetlands and their sustainable use into the next millennium.

# The value of wetlands in ecotourism

Abbie Spiers

Environmental Research Institute  
of the Supervising Scientist (*eriss*)  
Jabiru, NT

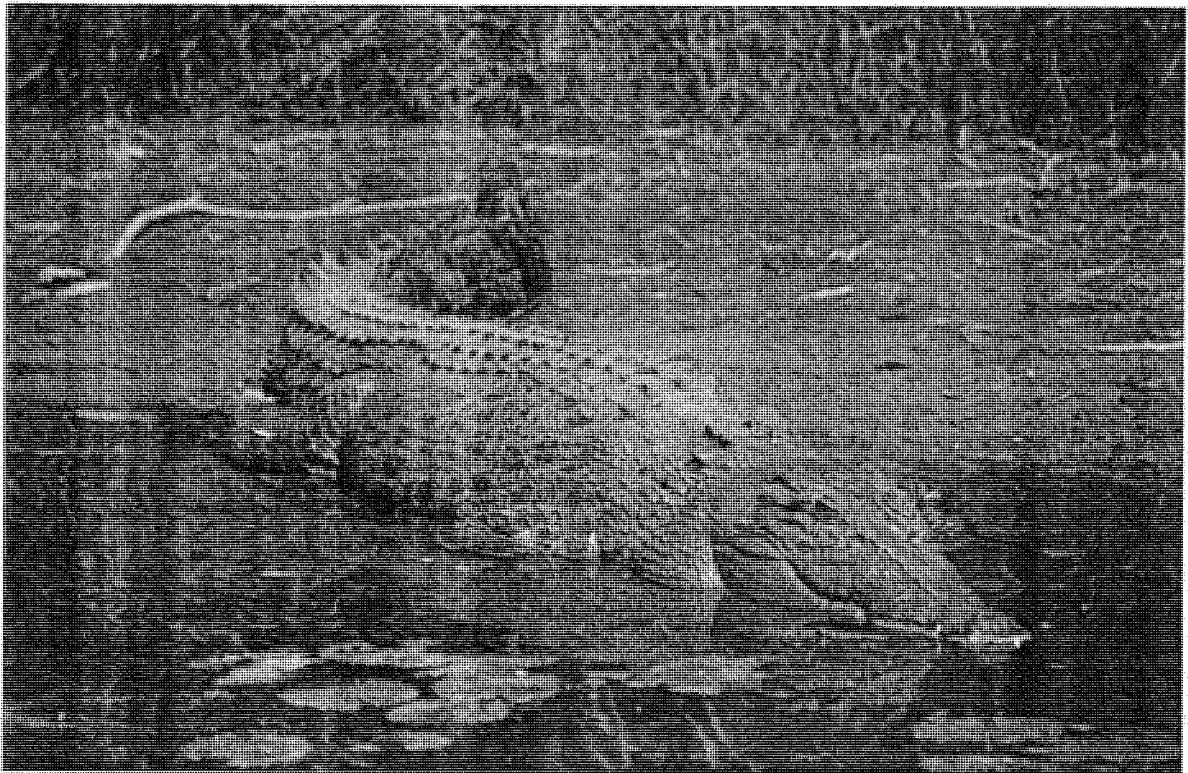


# The value of wetlands in ecotourism

- Nature-based tourism in tropical wetlands
- Tourism in the NT
  - importance of wetlands
  - types of tourism ventures
- Visitor perception / experience
  - educational opportunity
- Yellow Waters case study

# The value of wetlands in ecotourism

- Tropical wetlands and tourism  
in the Northern Territory



# The value of wetlands in ecotourism

- Tourism ventures
  - International resort style
    - Seven Spirit Bay
  - Wilderness Lodges
    - Wildman River
  - Fishing tours
    - specialised tourism
  - 4WD tour packages
    - Litchfield, Kakadu National Parks
  - Boat cruises
    - Guluyambi
    - Yellow Waters



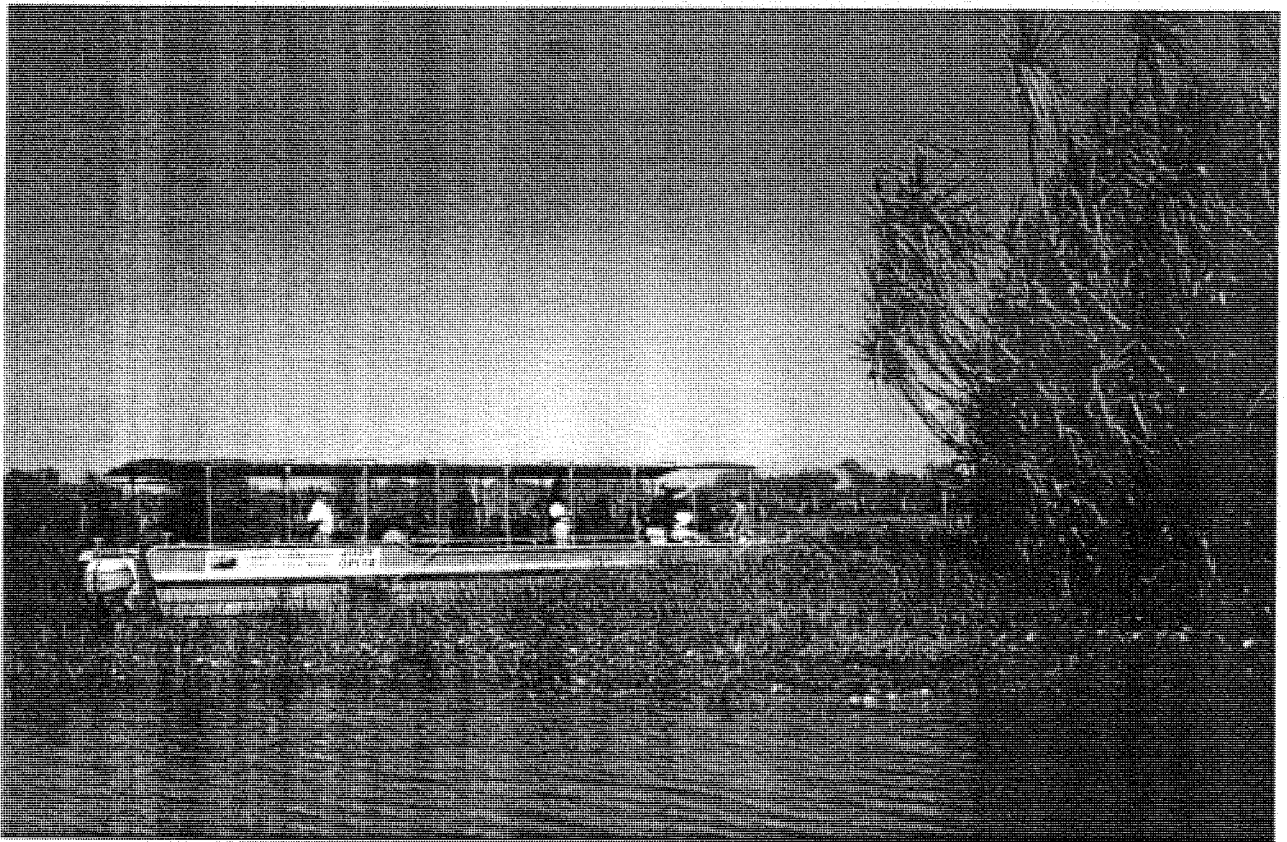
# The value of wetlands in ecotourism

Yellow Waters, Kakadu



# The value of wetlands in ecotourism

- Yellow Waters boat cruise



# The value of wetlands in ecotourism

- Monitoring program
  - *eriss* researchers and Yellow Waters tourguides
  - mid 1998 – mid 1999
  - birds and vegetation at 5 sites
  - seasonal changes recorded



# The value of wetlands in ecotourism

- This study will provide information of relevance to
  - tour guides
  - Kakadu park rangers
  - Aboriginal traditional owners
- Positive learning experience for researchers and tour guides
- Improvement in quality of the visitor experience
- Opportunity to encourage corporate owners to contribute

# The value of wetlands in ecotourism

Nature-based tourism in the wetlands is a valuable opportunity to teach people from all walks of life about the importance of wetlands and their sustainable use into the next millenium.

