Discussion Paper

Elevating the role of Mungo National Park to meet growing domestic and international tourism expectations

Prepared for

Mildura Tourism

by

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Executive Summary

Mungo National Park (MNP) and the surrounding Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area (WL WHA) is a very significant and internationally recognised attraction with a high level range of values.

To date, because visitor services and supporting infrastructure relative to the MNP have been undertaken in relative isolation from each other, neither the potential of MNP itself, or the contribution it could make to the wider tourism success and visitor economy of the surrounding region has been realised.

This paper has been commissioned by Mildura Tourism, supported by municipalities and other representatives of tourism on both sides of the Murray, in an attempt to crystallise the issues standing in the way of a better outcome.

New initiatives that are being undertaken by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service to improve the visitor experience in MNP are welcome. However Mildura Tourism believes a more holistic consideration of, and attention to, the issues plus a better appreciation of “what might be achieved” on a broader regional basis, provides the foundation for better tourism outcomes.

Key identified issues include:

- Reliable road access
- Stakeholder engagement
- Managing growth
- Visitor services
- Greater Aboriginal focus
- Connecting with wider tourism activity

The purpose of this paper is not to offer definitive solutions, but to identify key tourism issues to be addressed. Nor does this paper claim that these are necessarily the only key issues. The aim is to focus and inform discussion, thus establishing a first step in providing potential solutions and acting on them.

From the broadly based discussion that this paper generates, it is hoped that agreement can be reached on a number of core issues and that a cooperative course of action can be undertaken to address them.
Introduction

Mungo National Park is of significant international and domestic tourism importance as well as being an important tourism asset for the Mildura region and to other areas such as Wentworth, Balranald and other communities in the wider South West NSW.

It is also acknowledged that many layers of complexities are associated with the ability to deliver quality tourism and visitor experiences within MNP.

Just as no single tourism attraction or asset can provide an area’s overall tourism experience on its own, Mungo’s full tourism potential is not, and cannot be, the charter of one single organisation. On-going collaborative and strategic support of many stakeholders is required to facilitate and optimise the fulfilment of MNP’s tourism potential and its economic contribution to surrounding areas.

Whilst NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) has major responsibility for the management of MNP, recent policy initiatives of the NSW State Government indicate an increased need for greater emphasis on the contribution of such areas to the wider visitor economy of surrounding areas than was previously the case.

NSW NPWS has been a keen and key contributor to the consultation process of this paper. It is also acknowledged that NSW NPWS is an active member of the local tourism industry; the organisation has initiated and is overseeing a range of tourism-based projects and programs which demonstrate a long-term commitment to the region’s tourism industry. Stronger linkages with Yanga National Park are proposed along with further improvements and upgrades for the Visitor Centre at MNP.

Currently, NSW NPWS is also developing a new and updated Mungo Plan of Management; a draft of the proposed plan of management will be available for community consideration sometime mid-year.

A concern to tourism operators and businesses, as it is for many international and domestic tourists, is the issue of reliable access to and regular closure of roads leading into MNP following rain. In recent times the Park has been effectively inaccessible for extended periods, sometimes with short notice which, in turn, directly impacts tour operators and their passengers as well as the wider visitor economy of the surrounding area.

NSW NPWS point out that, although Arumpo Road (regarded as the most popular route to MNP) may be closed, this does not mean the Park itself is closed.
Mildura Tourism is keen to lead and facilitate discussions that will assist all relevant stakeholders to understand the many integrated, and in some cases conflicting, issues that relate to Mungo and to develop a more cooperative approach to ensure its increased integration with and contribution to the overall tourism appeal and visitor economy of the surrounding area.

To assist the process, Mildura Tourism engaged Global Tourism & Leisure P/L to develop this discussion paper to provide the basis of an informed discussion of the sorts of changes and initiatives that could be undertaken to increase the value and contribution of MNP to the area’s economy and its regional tourism industry. Of equal importance is the contribution of the tourism industry in enriching the MNP visitor experience and appeal.

This paper identifies issues and concepts that need agreement, along with known as well as perceived barriers to future improvements and/or success. Indicative issues include, but should not be limited to, areas such as access, infrastructure, new product/experience development, cultural and heritage management, visitor management strategies, along with funding and investment.

It is intended that this paper will be widely distributed for consideration and will provide the basis of extensive stakeholder discussions at a dedicated Mungo National Park workshop during June, 2012.

**Acronyms used in this Paper**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>GT&amp;L</td>
<td>Global Tourism &amp; Leisure Pty. Ltd.</td>
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<td>MNP</td>
<td>Mungo National Park</td>
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<td>NPWS</td>
<td>National Parks &amp; Wildlife Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>New South Wales</td>
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<td>WHA</td>
<td>World Heritage Area</td>
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<td>WL</td>
<td>Willandra Lakes</td>
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Consultation Process

This paper was prepared following a visit by GT&L Managing Director, John King OAM, to Mildura in December 2011. The visit included discussions with a number of key stakeholders within the Mildura and Wentworth region, while development of the paper also combined the consultant’s previous extensive knowledge of, along with his experience within, the area over many years.

The consultation was not uniquely extensive nor the issues identified exhaustive. However the consultant identified key issues as the basis of informed discussion that would further define all relevant issues along with a cooperative approach to solving them and establishing the most effective way forward.

Included in the consultation process were representatives of:
- NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service/MNP and Willandra Lakes WHA
- Mildura Tourism (including its Board)
- Wentworth Shire Council (including Councillors)
- Wentworth Regional Tourism Inc.
- Mildura Rural City Council (including Councillors)
- Harry Nanya Tours
- Turlee Station Stays
- Discover Mildura
- Murray Trek Tours
- Sunraysia Discovery Tours
- Mildura Development Corporation

Subsequent discussions have been held with the Chairman and CEO of Indigenous Business Australia, owners of Mungo Lodge.

It is acknowledged that this region holds great significance for the three traditional Aboriginal tribal groups who are closely involved in the management of the World Heritage Area and Mungo National Park. Traditional owner input to the consultation process so far has been via NSW NPWS. Distribution of this discussion paper will accommodate further and direct input from traditional owners.
Discussion Paper Considerations

Key considerations:

The area of Mungo National Park (and that of The Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area) constitutes one of the most significant geographic and anthropological sites in Australia, with widely recognised international and domestic significance. Apart from other features, Mungo National Park provides evidence of more than 40,000 years of human habitation and coexistence with the land.

Mungo National Park is one of those areas of Australia that is probably as well known overseas as it is in Australia; famous for being the site of the discovery of the eponymous Mungo Man and Mungo Woman. Additionally Mungo is blessed with a range of other unique natural, cultural and historic assets such as the Walls of China landscape, significant discoveries of palaeontological remnants of past human, animal and aquatic existence, clear Indigenous historic and contemporary connections to the land, and authentic remnants of European pioneer settlement and early pastoral activities. In addition much of the Mungo National Park boundary lies within the Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area.

In spite of its relative remoteness and a degree of difficulty (and uncertainty) in travelling to Mungo, the park attracts an estimated 38,000* visitors a year, with major seasonal peaks and troughs. (* tour operators suggest this figure provides an underestimation of actual visitor numbers).

A range of wildlife is evident with a number of varieties of kangaroos and emus being most obvious. In all, an estimated 270 species of native flora, and 185 species of native fauna, including 119 birds, 18 mammals and 47 reptiles have been recorded.

Due to the significance, complexity and the stark beauty of its landscape, Mungo creates various levels of interest among visitors – ranging from those interested to see the natural landscape and gain at least a general (if somewhat superficial) understanding of the site's significance to those who in an amateur or professional sense have a particular interest in the Park's deeper spiritual and scientific significance.

Particular areas of scientific interest include anthropology and palaeontology, geomorphology, significant climate change episodes and impacts, archaeology, archeomagnatism (evidence of major magnetic polar changes), palaeoecology and faunal extinction.

Overlaying the whole ecological, scenic and historic significance of the area is the Aboriginal cultural heritage resulting from eons of years’ connection between the land and its people.
Three local Aboriginal tribal groups have a long history and association with the area. The Paakantji and Nguyampaa have signed formal agreements and are actively engaged in co-management of the National Park as well as being represented on the committees overseeing the management of the World Heritage Area. The two groups and the Mutthi Mutthi are employed and are actively involved in its management and visitor servicing.

It is recognised that Mungo National Park and the surrounding Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area is a unique and fragile environment, possessing extremely high natural, anthropologic, geomorphic, historic, cultural and scenic values. It is also widely recognised that these values must not only be protected by any future development or from excessive tourism pressures, but that these values may be enhanced and better understood through appropriate tourism development and planning.

NSW NPWS is either already undertaking or is committed to improvements in areas such as management and planning, experience development, interpretation and visitor servicing, landscape and sensitive site protection as well as traditional owner involvement in management, visitor servicing and experience enhancement.

However, Mungo National Park is not an island. Just as the policies and decisions made by MNP have a significant impact on individual tourism businesses, the tourism industry and the wider economy of the region, so too do the actions of governments, municipalities, tourism bodies, and tourism businesses. External stakeholders also have a great impact on the effectiveness and outcomes of any MNP plans or activities.

As a result of discussions with NSW NPWS, MNP management and external stakeholders, issues of concern related to, or having major implications for the Park and stakeholders, are:

- Lack of a reliable, all weather road access to the Park and inadequate closure notification
- Lack of alternate visitor programs within the park due to weather related closures
- Consequent dissatisfaction, frustration and significant commercial losses when visitors/tour operators are unable to undertake the Mungo experience
- Perceived competition between commercial tour operators and the NPWS Discovery Ranger program
- Inadequacy and inappropriateness of accommodation options adjacent to the Park
- Lack of adequate tourism services and supplies that match today’s consumer expectations, both within and immediately adjacent to the Park
• Current inadequacy of visitor servicing and interpretation within the Park
• Underdevelopment of and inconsistent standards in the provision of an Aboriginal tourism experience or other Park experiences
• Lack of a coordinated and cooperative approach to the operation or the achievement of the potential of MNP or its broader role in the tourism development of the surrounding area.
• Insufficient connection of the MNP experience with other related experiences beyond the Park/WHA

Other Wider Issues for Consideration

• Future Growth: to preserve the Park values there may need, at some stage, to be a cap on visitor numbers. What are the broader implications? How can that be achieved whilst maintaining the important economic role of MNP? What processes, consultation and timeframe would be involved in such decisions?
• Expansion of MNP and further development of Willandra Lakes WHA: What opportunities, new experiences, new regional tours etc does this provide?
• NSW NPWS has developed the Discovery Ranger Program to increase involvement of Aboriginal communities, groups and individuals in the interpretation of Park values and experience development: How can this be best developed in association with existing commercial tour operations and industry?
• Greater Aboriginal involvement in MNP: How do we open opportunities for greater Aboriginal involvement? How can Aboriginal involvement enrich and deepen the MNP experience?
• In conjunction with Government, Mildura Council is progressing its multimillion dollar Mildura Riverfront Master Plan which has potential to include a cultural and ‘first Australian’ centre to provide a gateway to the region’s Aboriginal experience. If such a concept becomes viable, how could it be used to further develop and link to the Aboriginal experience in MNP?
• NPWS/Tourism Industry: How can cooperation and communication be enhanced for the benefit of the Park and Tourism?
• Better understanding of visitation to MNP: How many? Where from? What are their wider travel patterns? What motivates them? How can we better measure, report and share relevant information to assist in planning, marketing and product development?
• Previous research supports better all weather road access, but does not support complete sealing of the key road: What is the solution? How can we ensure widespread support for a preferred option?
- Formation of the Inland NSW Regional Tourism Organisation; the Murray Regional Tourism Board; and the appointment of a NSW Cross Border Commissioner – all embrace the specific aim of forming better cross-border tourism marketing and destination planning capabilities: How can these opportunities be used to break down outdated ‘silo’ approaches that prevent more holistic development and presentation of relevant tourism experiences and values?

- The Murray Regional Tourism Board has commenced a major Gap Analysis project: How can that input and relate to future tourism requirements, opportunities and capabilities of MNP?

- Mildura Tourism and Broken Hill Council are partnering to develop and promote two-way touring between Broken Hill and Mildura, which would further form the basis of a unique Sydney – Melbourne inland touring route: How do we best include MNP and Willandra Lakes as the central and must-experience ‘jewels’?

- Better and more appropriate adjacent and nearby accommodation and basic services and supplies: How do we encourage and support the provision of appropriate commercially based accommodation and services?
Key Issues and Implications

From the discussions and information inputs so far, it is evident that there are a number of key issues that prevent MNP performing to an optimal level and which in turn reduces its contribution to the visitor economy of surrounding areas. These key issues are:

- Reliable road access
- Stakeholder engagement
- Managing growth
- Visitor services
- Greater Aboriginal focus
- Connecting with wider tourism activities

### Key Issues

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<th>Key Issues</th>
<th>Implications &amp; Opportunities</th>
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<td><strong>Reliable Road Access</strong></td>
<td>Major dissatisfaction by visitors and losses for tourism operators and the wider economy.</td>
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<td>Associated Issues</td>
<td>Especially in 2011, road access was unavailable for up to four months.</td>
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<td>- Frequent park closures</td>
<td>Acts as a retardant to the development and reliability of the area’s tourism appeal, and in MNP fulfilling its role as a potential driver of tourism growth and development for the region.</td>
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<td>- Late notification</td>
<td>Reliable access and opening would improve economic return and visitor satisfaction.</td>
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<td>- Lack of alternate access/programs</td>
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<td>- Support for all weather but not sealed road</td>
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<td>- Lack of coordinated/cooperative action</td>
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<p>| <strong>Stakeholder Engagement/Cooperation</strong> | There are a few places in Australia (Uluru, Kakadu, Great Barrier Reef, Sydney Harbour and Opera House) that are either recognisable as uniquely Australian and which evoke a positive interest or appeal. Mungo has wide recognition and interest, but has yet to be elevated to the ‘must do experience’ level of some of Australia’s signature experience locations – but it is eminently possible. |
| Associated Issues | NPWS/MNP cannot achieve it’s optimal potential without engagement with and support of external stakeholders. It needs the involvement and support of surrounding municipalities, the tourism industry and relevant bodies as well as the general and business communities for success outcomes to be achieved. |
| - Perceived competition between NPWS and commercial programs | MNP can provide the hook, upon which the other experiences and activities for which the area is well known are able to hang and together create a unique, comprehensive and overall appealing experience for the region. |
| - Wider engagement between MNP &amp; industry | Murray Regional Tourism Board is undertaking a major Gap Analysis. There is a need to include key input from MNP in this assessment. |
| - Connections with other experiences beyond MNP/WLWHA | |
| - Sharing of research, knowledge &amp; planning | |
| - Development of significant regional experiences | |</p>
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<th>Implications &amp; Opportunities</th>
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<td>Taking this approach, it is then possible to identify the overall infrastructure issues and needs; product gaps and the ways individual experiences or the overall destination experience may be enhanced; along with development and investment opportunities. Planning policies, development priorities, plus the necessary resources and initiatives could be identified to better develop a highly desirable experience destination and further expand an already important visitor economy.</td>
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### Managing Growth

**Associated Issues**
- Achieving balance between growth and enhancing park values
- Expanding opportunities through expanded MNP boundary and WL WHA links
- New Master Plan and joint management framework

NSW NPWS has an absolute responsibility to safeguard and enhance MNP values. That may require limits on visitation and growth. In such a case it is important that MNP's desired tourism ‘future’ is known, communicated to, understood and embraced by all stakeholders.

Such limits would have considerable implications for all stakeholders.

On the one hand, future growth will require increased strategic resourcing, management and development, while a capped capacity would require different strategies to maximise economic value and minimise adverse impacts on surrounding communities and businesses.

Whatever scenario, there are major implications for a wide range of stakeholders and therefore it is important that a mechanism be established to allow stakeholder participation in managing growth and outcomes.

### Visitor Services

**Associated Issues**
- Greater scope for broader accommodation adjacent to MNP
- Provision of amenities and supplies for travellers
- Interpretive and information services
- Product development that will encourage further overnight visitation and therefore greater length-of-stay

The current restricted range of accommodation, amenities and supplies has a direct and adverse impact on length of stay, visitor satisfaction, engagement with surrounding experiences, and on MNP being part of a wider touring experience.

Interpretive and information services are currently rudimentary. A new visitor centre is planned at MNP. The quality of and engagement with the experience of MNP is directly related to the quality, appropriateness and effectiveness of the interpretation provided.

There is an internationally significant, complex and compelling story to be told at MNP that requires the best available interpretive media to do it justice.
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<td><strong>Greater Aboriginal Focus</strong></td>
<td>The story central to the enormous significance of MNP is the continuous evidence of Aboriginal life, heritage and culture throughout a period of at least 40,000 years. The current limited and inconsistent Aboriginal experience neither fulfils the continuation of that story or the expectations of visitors.</td>
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<td><strong>Associated Issues</strong></td>
<td>The lack of resolution of outstanding issues between commercial tour operators and NPWS programs and policy, undermines the opportunity for high quality experiences and Aboriginal economic participation.</td>
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<td>- Underdeveloped and inconsistent Aboriginal tourism experiences</td>
<td>By providing links to a possible ‘Gateway’ (First Australian Centre) in Mildura and with the wider regional Aboriginal story creates the opportunity to expand the participation by Aboriginal people and the appeal for visitors.</td>
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<td>- Issues between commercial operations and NPWS programs</td>
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<td>- Increased Aboriginal involvement in experience development and economic outcomes</td>
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<td>- Establishing links between the First Australian Centre (in Mildura) and MNP</td>
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<td>- Linking with wider Aboriginal regional history and culture</td>
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| Connecting With Wider Tourism Activity | Mungo National Park is not an island. It is part of a much larger region and tourism experience. It was Aristotle who stated ‘The whole is greater than the sum of its parts’. It is the same in tourism. |
| **Associated Issues** | Providing better linkages with other regional and touring experiences provides a win-win for both MNP and the wider region. |
| - Connecting the MNP/ WLWHA experience to other related regional experiences beyond the park. | There are now better frameworks and a greater impetus to enable both a wider regional and a greater cross border engagement with other tourism experiences and participants. |
| - Implications and opportunities from the establishment of the Inland NSW RTO, MRTB, NSW Cross Border Commissioner and NSW Visitor Economy Taskforce |  |
| - Development of Sydney – Melbourne inland touring routes |  |
The Way Forward

Mildura Tourism is currently organising a significant workshop – planned for June 2012; more details will follow – that aims to engage all stakeholders from relevant Government agencies and councils, NSW NPWS, traditional owners, tourism bodies and industry as well as the wider community to consider this discussion paper. The purpose of this workshop is to identify and agree on crucial issues that may stand in the way of MNP achieving its potential and subsequently contributing more strongly to the tourism appeal and the visitor economy of the surrounding regions.

In the first instance there needs to be a willingness by all parties to work cooperatively to achieve important outcomes for Mungo National Park/Willandra Lakes WHA, the wider regional tourism industry and the surrounding communities on either side of the border.

Upon agreement on the key issues related to Mungo National Park’s greater contribution to and its relationship with the wider regional tourism sector and visitor economy, the next obvious step is to establish an appropriate forum or framework to address all known issues. This could include:

- The establishment of a broadly-based working group, including representatives of NPWS, municipalities, surrounding tourism organisations, State tourism offices, regional development offices, Indigenous Business Australia and Aboriginal traditional owner groups.
- A time frame in which to establish and agree on a broad regional (and cross border) way forward.
- Continuing presentations to stakeholder meetings to ensure consistent and cooperative support and commitment.

You are welcome to further distribute this paper to other interested parties as you see fit. All stakeholders will receive an invitation, with adequate notice, to participate in the June workshop. That meeting’s formal agenda will be based around issues contained within this paper. As a result of this discussion paper there may be additional aspects that need to be raised and thoroughly discussed. The June workshop will provide that forum.

Mildura Tourism welcomes your feedback to this paper. Please feel free to contact us by email admin@milduratourism.com.au or by phone (03) 5021 0599.

Ends