



5th Western Australian State

COASTAL CONFERENCE 2009

*Whose Coast Is It?
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10A:
Community and
the Coast:
1.25–1.55pm
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Sirius Room

Invaluable Volunteers: Making the Most of Volunteer Contribution to the Environmental and Cultural Wellbeing of Rottnest Island.

PRESENTER:

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Introduction

Rottnest Island is a special place for Western Australians and a popular destination for interstate and international tourists, with over 500 000 people visiting the Island every year. Rottnest Island is an A-Class Reserve which is managed by the Rottnest Island Authority (RIA), and boasts such natural values as 63 beaches, 360 species of fish, 140 species of indigenous flora, many species of reptiles, amphibians and birds and of course the quokka (*Setonix brachyurus*), a threatened marsupial. Many people also visit the island to learn about its history. Rottnest Island is known as Wadjemup to Noongar people, and there are cultural sites on the Island dating back at least 15 000 years. More recently, Rottnest Island has had a chequered history with the Island's previous uses as an Aboriginal prison, boys' reformatory and a military defence and training facility. The Island also supports a rich maritime history with numerous historic shipwrecks and two historic lighthouses, both of which are still operational. Environmental, historical and European / Aboriginal cultural tours are always very popular with visitors and Rottnest Island also hosts major events such as the Rottnest Channel Swim.

With a total land area of only 1859 hectares and marine reserve totalling 3810 hectares, Rottnest Island's marine and terrestrial environment has been modified considerably, and continues to be under immense pressure today. Human activities of the last 200 years have left Rottnest Island with few remnant trees, severe localised erosion, degraded dune and coastal heath ecosystems, prevalent weed species such as sea spurge (*Euphorbia paralis*) and dune onion weed (*Trachyandra divaricata*), species loss, disrupted fire regimes and population imbalance of the quokka. Current visitor impacts mainly include degradation of marine environments and existing vegetation, continued erosion, marine and terrestrial littering and native animals which are now viewed as pests due to human feeding.

The RIA manages the Island to provide for the huge influx of visitors annually, to maintain and repair its ecosystems, and educate visitors.

Background

Rottnest Island's diverse volunteer program

Volunteer groups have been associated with Rottnest Island for many years, the Winnit Club being the oldest, coming to the Island since the summer of 1930–31. Other volunteer organisations regularly associated with Rottnest Island include the Rottnest Society, Rottnest Conservation Foundation, Rottnest Island Bay Hosts, Rottnest Voluntary Guides Association and Scouts Australia. Additional groups come to the Island during the year such as Venture Scouts, Conservation Volunteers Australia (CVA), corporate groups and schools. All of these organisations perform different tasks, ranging from running guided tours to woodland and coastal restoration and litter collection. Groups such as the Rottnest Society undertake most of the tree planting work, and special construction projects such as building access boardwalks and stairs are undertaken by the Winnit Club, Conservation Volunteers Australia and the Australian Army. There are also individuals who perform skilled tasks such as furniture refurbishment, railway maintenance and wildlife surveys. The main volunteering season runs from May to October each year.

Volunteering is an essential part of the social and environmental fabric of the Island, and in order to address this need the RIA employs one full time Volunteer Coordinator. The position involves managing and coordinating the Rottnest Island volunteer program, liaising with volunteer groups and coordinating and promoting the RIA scientific research program. The Volunteer Coordinator is required to plan volunteer activities and logistics, liaise regularly with academic researchers and also supervise groups directly in the field. Additional project work currently includes a research grants program, annual research seminar and a seed collection program. The Volunteer Coordinator is also assisted by many other RIA staff to implement the volunteer program. Colleagues from the Environment team plan restoration programs, provide technical guidance and help out in the field, while support is also necessary from other RIA sections such as Rangers, Education and Tours and Transport.

In 2008 approximately 1700 volunteers contributed 33,000 hours of time at Rottnest Island, for which they are thanked by holding an Annual Volunteer Breakfast. The RIA assists volunteers by providing accommodation, ferry tickets, waiving landing fees and also administration / on-costs to some groups. All volunteers are also covered by an insurance policy paid for by the RIA. Volunteer groups regularly working on the Island are part of the Rottnest Volunteer Network, a group which meets quarterly with the RIA to discuss operational issues such as work tasks, communication and new initiatives.

Volunteer opportunities on Rottnest Island are currently advertised by word of mouth, on websites, Volunteering WA, the RIA website and by volunteer organisations themselves. Many potential volunteers are individuals looking to 'fit in' with whatever is available, which can be difficult as most tasks are oriented to a particular group. There are many enquiries from individuals and groups interested in volunteering, and it is not possible to place everybody. Many volunteering activities are not open to the general public, but there are some organisations working on Rottnest Island which will take on individual volunteers, and the RIA also runs a few public volunteering days annually.

To deal with such large numbers of volunteers, planning ahead is essential. An annual volunteer calendar has been produced, the 2009 version of which was released in December 2008.

Different volunteer roles require different management

Many islands around Australia are much-loved by visitors, but Rottnest Island is unusual in its proximity to Perth (the main population centre of WA), and catering for such a diverse and numerous taskforce of volunteers.

The RVGA for instance is an organisation with a membership of around 300, mainly comprised of retired professionals who conduct guided heritage and environment tours 364 days a year. New Guides undergo extensive training before being deemed qualified to lead tours, and the RVGA has succeeded in one of the hardest tasks faced by any volunteer organisation, that of volunteer retention. They have a high level of interaction with the RIA and the general public, and maintain a high level of professionalism. The RVGA is the only volunteer group operating on Rottnest Island which maintains a constant presence on the Island all year round.

In contrast, the Rottnest Island volunteer program also hosts two annual 'Invasions' by up to 300 members of Scouts Australia at a time, who are mainly engaged in low-skilled tasks such as rubbish cleanup and weeding. Obviously there is little or no retention of these volunteers, and they require an entirely different approach to coordination of their activities.

The Rottnest Society is different again, with its main function as an environmental lobby group. They do however bring over a high quality work crew to the Island three times a year.

The majority of volunteer groups involved with Rottnest Island are independent organisations which use the Island as their workplace, taking on tasks allocated by the RIA. Therefore the role of Volunteer Coordinator on Rottnest Island is one of liaison and organising volunteer visits to the Island, rather than finding volunteers to recruit, volunteer training or program promotion. Given the large numbers of potential volunteers who wish to come and work on the Island it makes sense to work with established organisations, as recruiting and coordinating individuals is extremely resource intensive. Many of the enquiries received regarding volunteering on Rottnest Island can be directed towards one of the organisations already working there.

Current challenges

Planning volunteer projects can be time-consuming, as anyone who has ever managed volunteers will know. Most of the volunteer planning undertaken by the RIA goes into environmental projects, and the diverse range of environmental issues on Rottnest Island means there is always work to be done. All environmental works address identified priority environmental issues on the Island. The main restrictions to coastal rehabilitation work faced by RIA are financial and resource-based rather than a lack of volunteers. It can also be difficult to take a coordinated, longterm approach to largescale projects.

Ferries, seasonal accommodation availability and RIA staff commitments mean that the vast majority of volunteering occurs as 'events' in the winter months, whereby a group of anywhere from 10 to 300 volunteers will come over at one time for a 1–2 day session. This has implications for obtaining materials, setting tasks, staff time etc and can be quite intensive, especially during the main May–October volunteering season.

Working with volunteers is both challenging and rewarding, and being able to work in the field on practical conservation projects alongside volunteer groups is one of those rewarding aspects. There are however significant challenges:

- How to manage the large numbers and diversity of people who wish to volunteer on Rottnest Island—there are approximately 7 groups regularly operating, and around 100 enquiries from individuals and groups are received annually.
- Maximising the volunteer's experience—by assigning appropriate tasks which are meaningful and can be planned effectively by RIA staff.
- Ensuring that the volunteer program is assisting the RIA with its management of the island as an 'A' Class Reserve.
- Future expansion of the program to create more volunteer opportunities.

Methodology

Why volunteer on Rottnest Island?

Good volunteer projects are well-planned and educational, with a high sense of accomplishment. Many people who come to Rottnest Island feel a special attachment to the Island, and enjoy volunteer projects where they can see the results of their work far into the future. The importance of helping others / the environment has been identified as the most important motivation for volunteering in Western Australia, followed by reciprocity, i.e. you will be helped by doing good things for others. The third most important motivation is recognition of volunteers' skills and contribution (Esmond & Dunlop, 2004).

With this in mind, it has been especially beneficial to place volunteers onto projects such as construction and tree planting—most volunteer groups have been associated with the Island for some time, and these ongoing partnerships help to foster ownership and pride in the Island's surroundings. It is fortunate for the Rottnest Island volunteer program that local Perth residents feel very strongly about the Island, and wish to protect it for the future. The majority of volunteer enquiries outline volunteer's specific skills, or wish to really 'make a difference'. The following text is part of an enquiry received in 2009 which describes quite well the motivations and expectations of potential volunteers:

'I am passionate about the environment and nature, and especially believe that it is our responsibility to care for our local flora and fauna by maintaining our delicate ecosystems. I have adored Rottnest ever since I was a child, and am dedicated towards preserving its uniqueness. I have been involved in tree planting programs previously at school as I was a member of the Million Trees Program. I am willing to work hard and enjoy being a part of a team for this great cause.'

The 2009–2014 Rottnest Island Management Plan —new directions for volunteering

One of the challenges for the Rottnest Island volunteer program is to provide for meaningful volunteering into the future—picking litter up from the beach is a very useful volunteer task, but there is plenty of untapped potential to include volunteers in more involved programs connected with ecotourism or scientific monitoring. Successful programs such as Earthwatch demonstrate that members of the public are more than happy to volunteer alongside scientists and land managers if they feel that their contribution is valued and will assist with practical management.

The Rottnest Island volunteer program is at somewhat of a crossroads, in that it is not possible to take on additional large numbers of volunteers, but the volunteering experience could be enriched considerably by offering programs which address management priorities for scientific monitoring, research and development of ecotourism features (e.g. coastal walk trail).

All operations programs on Rottnest Island, including the volunteer program are guided by the Rottnest Island Management Plan (RIMP) which is reviewed every five years with a high level of community consultation, and sets out objectives for all aspects of running the Island. The Rottnest Island Authority gazetted the 2009–2014 RIMP on June 30th, 2009.

The following 2009–2014 RIMP initiatives are of interest for the design of future volunteer programs:

Initiative	Objective
2—Tourism and recreation strategy	i) Work towards the RIA's Vision to be a model of ethical tourism. ii) Renew Visitor's experiences. iii) Expand current markets and develop revenue-generating tourism and recreation products to contribute to Island management.
13—Expand recreational activities	i) Provide opportunities for close encounters with the natural and cultural environment. ii) Generate additional revenue for Island management.
17—Terrestrial management strategy	Sustainable management of the terrestrial environment, sustainable recreation and protection of the natural asset on which RIA bases its tourism / recreation business in moving towards financial sustainability.
18—Implement the Marine Management Strategy	Maintain the condition and integrity and protect the biodiversity of the marine environment in accordance with the RI Marine Management Strategy 2007 and associated management objectives.
19—Education and interpretation for environmental management	Support achievement of the outcomes of the Terrestrial Management Strategy and Marine Management Strategy through community education. ii) Contribute to a sound and scientific basis for management of the terrestrial and marine environments in the Rottnest Island Reserve.
20—Rottnest Island Research Strategy	i) Establish Rottnest Island as a significant centre for scientific and cultural research.
22—Education and interpretation products	Encourage visitors to explore the Island and promote conservation.
25—Support volunteers	Expand volunteer opportunities and benefits to Rottnest Island, to complement the strategic directions in the RIMP, and to enhance enjoyment and satisfaction among volunteers.

The Rottnest Island Authority also released its Aboriginal Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) in February 2009. The history of Rottnest Island as an Aboriginal prison means that the Island is highly significant to all WA Aboriginal people. The RAP is an important document, which provides structure and form for the intent to work collaboratively to bring about healing and spiritual cleansing for the Island. There are also tasks identified in the RAP which are of interest for future volunteer programs:

Action Item 3.2—Encourage and promote the development of Aboriginal tourism products, education, businesses and partnerships on Rottnest Island.

Action Item 3.3—Provide opportunities for Aboriginal people to develop vocational skills and economic opportunities by incorporating Aboriginal assistance in appropriate RIA cultural and natural heritage projects.

The above directives clearly point towards the need for diversification of volunteer experiences on offer. There is a need to collect baseline data and implement monitoring programs across the Marine and Terrestrial Reserve, and the development of ecotourism products / experiences has been identified as a high

priority. A Terrestrial Management Strategy has also been identified in the 2009–2014 RIMP, which will include coordination of weed, fire, quokka and coastal management, and woodland and wetland restoration. This Strategy will have a huge influence on the future direction of volunteer programs on Rottnest Island.

Results

Future programs—the evolution of Rottnest Island volunteering

Ideas for future volunteer programs include the development of an Island plant nursery as a community facility, to grow plants used in dune rehabilitation. Woodland plants for revegetation purposes (Rottnest tea-tree, *Melaleuca lanceolata* and Rottnest Pine, *Callitris preissii*) are currently grown at Bunbury prison from seed collected on the Island, but coastal dune plants are grown on the mainland using local seed sourced there. It is hoped to use the Island's nursery to grow dune plants from seed collected on the Island, and to set up a community nursery program to meet the annual demand for plants needed for rehabilitation programs. Such an initiative has the potential to involve individuals and organisations from many sectors of the community, and could be a longterm, self-sustaining facility. This program is beginning to be implemented, with the current focus on restoring existing facilities and growing a small number of plants, taking on volunteers and a nursery manager as the operation grows.

Woodland and shorebird monitoring is already performed several times annually by Birds Australia WA, and it is hoped to utilise other volunteers for further scientific monitoring work. For example, volunteers could join with a rewarding marine monitoring program, or help a visiting scientist monitor the quokka population. Assisting researchers in this sort of project would have management benefits, actively support scientific research and provide a great educational opportunity. Again, there is potential to work with existing organisations to achieve management objectives, for example ReefLife who have visited the Island several times to survey fish populations. Organisations such as these provide their own training to volunteers, organise much of the trip and also take on some of the safety issues associated with surveying by scuba diving. RIA Environment staff are in regular contact with researchers from all local research institutions, as Rottnest Island is an also a popular location for scientific research. Some researchers use their own volunteers, but with an increased focus by the RIA on initiating and supporting high quality, longterm monitoring programs this opens the door to ongoing partnerships between RIA, volunteers and research organisations.

Marketing the Rottnest Island volunteer experience

Recent research (Holmes, 2008) suggests that Perth volunteers are actively looking for something to do rather than being asked to volunteer by someone else. This might not be the case though for interstate or international volunteers who might be attracted by a scientific monitoring program. The same research also states that although volunteering undoubtedly benefits the organisation in question, the main beneficiary is the volunteer themselves. This would suggest that future programs need to be well planned and executed in order to attract and retain volunteers, and the target market of volunteers would have to be ascertained before promoting the program. It might not be possible to provide a scientific monitoring activity to 50 volunteers at one time, but what will be available to volunteers in the future should hopefully improve in terms of meaningfulness and quality.

The information from future programs could then be forwarded to education providers and organisations such as the RVGA, who are always very interested in recent developments on the Island, and enjoy sharing their knowledge with visitors. Other communication channels include to schools through the education program, the RIA website and publications such as the Rottnest Islander newspaper. Another aspect of the communication plan to occur in the near future includes a one-day seminar towards the end of 2009 which will showcase recent scientific research on Rottnest Island to the general public.

Developing the Rottnest Island volunteer program to incorporate these types of initiatives will require the maintenance of existing partnerships and development of new ones. The RIA already interacts with and assists researchers from most Perth universities, and there is also a 24-bed Research Station with basic facilities on the Island which will be available in October 2009 for scientific researchers and university student groups. The 2009–2014 RIMP also sets out a commitment to improve volunteer accommodation on the Island, which is already underway with the refurbishment of the P-Hut, a 12-bed facility with large kitchen and communal areas which will be opened in November 2009.

A more sophisticated volunteer reward system could also be implemented, and initiatives such as the

community nursery could reward volunteers by giving them a high level of ownership as well as a recognised identity, e.g. with t-shirts and the option to stay on the Island whilst volunteering.

Conclusion

Rottnest Island has a well patronized volunteer program that has been in existence in some form since the 1930's. The popularity of the Island and the volunteering program has seen the requirement for a full time Volunteer Coordinator in recent years.

The ability to provide a concentrated focus on volunteer activity and programs has resulted in a move to a more experiential range of activities and programs attuned to the management directions of the RIA. Further work and refinement is underway to ensure that the volunteer program meets the management needs of the Island and provides quality and meaningful experiences for the many willing participants coming to Rottnest Island.

It will be interesting to see how the demand for volunteering changes on Rottnest Island over the next 20 years or so, given that the WA population is ageing and demand for volunteering is likely to shift to support for adults (Ironmonger, 2009). The accessibility, unique attributes and existing infrastructure all serve to make the Island an attractive location for both volunteers and scientific researchers—the next 5 to 10 years should be an exciting time for volunteering on Rottnest Island.

References

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