

The Vision for the Overland Track



MAY 2004

INTRODUCTION

The Overland Track is Tasmania's premier long-distance walking track, with a national and international reputation that has given it icon status as the most popular bushwalk in the State.

Demand for experiences on the Track is high and increasing, and there is evidence of degradation and overcrowding. While some measures have been implemented to manage this demand such as the upgrading of the Track, the provision of new toilets and water supplies, tent pads and a new hut at Pelion, management of the Track has been essentially reactive to meeting this demand. A comprehensive plan is now required to ensure its environmental, visual and social values are adequately protected and future management does not jeopardise its icon status. It is imperative for the Track to be managed strategically, to ensure its sustainability as a safe, world class wilderness walk.

To address this issue, a Steering Committee was formed to guide the development of a Strategic Management and Implementation Plan for the Overland Track. The committee comprised representatives from the Department of Primary Industries, Water and Environment, the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area Consultative Committee, Tourism Council of Tasmania and Tourism Tasmania.

The brief of the Steering Committee was to:

- identify the optimal visitor experience for the Overland Track;
- develop a vision for the Overland Track; and
- make recommendations as to the future management of the Overland Track.

The Government has accepted the Committee's recommendations as the basis for the Strategic Management and Implementation Plan, the development of which will be vested in the Parks and Wildlife Service, part of the Department of Tourism, Parks, Heritage and the Arts.

The Strategic Management and Implementation Plan will be completed and implemented by November 2004.

Overland Track Steering Committee

Scott Gadd	Secretary, Department Tourism, Parks, Heritage and the Arts
Simon Cubit	Tourism Council of Tasmania
Jane Foley	Tourism Tasmania
Peter Mooney	Parks and Wildlife Service, general manager
Kent McConnell	Parks and Wildlife Service, senior ranger, Overland Track
Ken Latona	Commercial operator
Kim Evans	Secretary, Department Primary Industries, Water and the Environment
Bryce McNair	World Heritage Area Consultative Committee chairperson

1. EXPERIENCES

The Overland Track will offer a range of experiences to visitor groups providing choice in the level of security, comfort and challenge sought. Best practice standards will be met in the management of the environment and the overall journey. The range of experiences will encompass:

- independent walking using public huts and/or camp sites;
- commercial guided walking using public camp sites; and
- commercial guided walking using private huts.

2. VISION

The following vision has been endorsed for the Overland Track:

The Overland Track will be Tasmania's premier bush walking experience.

3. PRINCIPLES

The following guiding principles* will be adopted to achieve the vision for the Overland Track:

1. The Overland Track will be known worldwide for showcasing the values, and engendering an appreciation of, the natural and cultural heritage of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area.
2. The Overland Track will provide a distinct product that can be differentiated from other walking opportunities in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area.
3. A range of experience options will be provided to meet the needs of a range of visitor groups.
4. Each experience option will be sustainable and involve best practice environmental and management standards.
5. The Overland Track experience is a total experience and excellence at all stages will be delivered.
6. The use of the Overland Track for marketing Tasmania will engender an appreciation of the values of the area and of the scarcity of the opportunity offered.

*The principles are listed in no designated order of importance.

4. OBJECTIVES

The following strategic objectives* will be adopted to achieve the key elements of the vision:

1. The Overland Track will provide a quality experience for a range of visitor groups.
2. The Overland Track will be a sustainable experience that utilises best practice environmental standards.
3. The Overland Track will demonstrate best practice management.
4. The Overland Track will showcase the values of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area.

*The strategic objectives are listed in no designated order of importance.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Key Recommendations:

To ensure that the exceptional wilderness qualities of the Overland Track can be enjoyed by succeeding generations of Tasmanians and visitors to Tasmania, the following is recommended:

- a booking system will be introduced for the peak walking period.
- fees will be increased to cover the costs associated with the strategic and sustainable management of the Track.
- as part of this new system, visitor groups will be required to walk the Track from north to south during the peak walking period.

General Planning and Operational Management

A range of experiences will be provided at best-practice standard.

A Strategic Management and Implementation Plan will be developed for the Track as a whole, addressing environmental values, visitor facilities and services, interpretation and education, operating procedures, management and administration, and communication and marketing.

Performance indicators and measures for management of the Overland Track will be developed, and external stakeholders will be involved in assessment of performance.

Service level standards will be developed to provide for facility standards and public safety associated with track signage and public hut facilities.

The risk-management strategy that has been developed by the Parks and Wildlife Service will be applied to the Overland Track.

Implementation of environmental accreditation for all operators on the Overland Track, including commercial operators and the Parks and Wildlife Service, will be investigated.

Operating procedures for all operations on and around the Overland Track will be investigated (e.g. Minimum Impact Bushwalking, Fly Neighbourly policy, track maintenance code and program). Policy and operating procedures will be developed for the management of commercial and operational aircraft flying in the central sections of the Overland Track to minimise the intrusion on Track walkers.

Planning outcomes and implications from Cradle Visitor Zone planning will be reviewed as a key element in master planning and in the development of a strategic approach to the implementation of integrated outcomes.

Bookings

A simple, user-friendly booking system for departures will be introduced to manage visitor safety and visitor impact on World Heritage Area values. This will ensure walker numbers do not exceed the capacity of overnight camp/hut sites and will also provide for commercial camping opportunities. Walkers will be required to walk from North to South. The issue of sidetrack access and shorter trips involving only parts of the Overland Track will be addressed as part of the Strategic Management and Implementation Plan.

This booking system will apply to all visitors and be the main means of providing walkers with pre-trip information. In such a system, the range of recreational opportunities available will be clearly identified for visitors.

The booking system will allow for hut beds and tent sites to be booked in advance, with some capacity maintained by management for emergency use. Access to information on exact numbers of visitors on the Track will enable better management of safety.

The hut warden system will be expanded in the peak period to ensure compliance with the booking system.

The booking system will provide an opportunity to assess the provision of coordinated transport.

Fees

All revenue raised from fees will be directed towards the sustainable management of the Overland Track.

Fees for walking the Overland Track will be increased and the fee structure set with regard to the current cost of maintaining the infrastructure, the quality of the experience and environmental protection. A simple and efficient system for collecting fees will form part of the booking system and will cover the use of camp/hut sites.

Infrastructure

The Department of Tourism, Parks, Heritage and the Arts will prepare site design plans for each hut and camp site. All infrastructure planning will recognise World Heritage Area values and the Reserve Standards Framework will be adopted. Service level and infrastructure standards will be developed and implemented.

Adequate resources will be made available to continue a program of track construction and maintenance works consistent with the strategy. Optimal hut distances will be investigated.

Potential camp sites will be identified and/or established to accommodate groups (including commercial, camping and school groups) adjacent to Parks camp sites and allow pre-booking to a maximum group-size capacity.

Camp sites must have the capacity to provide shelter and have access to water and toilets at the public hut site so as to minimise environmental impacts.

Information, interpretation and education

The guiding principle for the provision of information, interpretation and education will be the concept of journey.

Comprehensive pre-trip information, interpretation, and safety and environmental education strategies for the Overland Track will be developed and be linked to the booking system through the Overland Track Website.

The pre-trip information will incorporate interpretative information, information about transport, a safety strategy for the area, details of a range of commercial operator options, descriptions of facilities and services, and details of other overnight walking opportunities. This pre-trip information will be provided in a timely manner to help visitors identify options and plan.

The interpretation strategy will interpret the natural and cultural values of the track and World Heritage Area environment and a range of values over the length of the Overland Track.

The comprehensive education strategy addressing safety and environmental issues will identify target audiences and the appropriate means of reaching each.

Transport

Improved schedules will be investigated with transport operators and the possibility of an integrated transport service for walkers at either end of the Overland Track with the opportunity to book through the booking system or via a link on the website assessed.

A customer service standard will be developed and an accreditation program for transport operators implemented, with information on services to be made available to walkers through pre-trip information.

Training and accreditation

Steps will be taken to ensure all operators on the Overland Track, including commercial operators, their staff, and Parks and Wildlife staff, have appropriate accreditation.

Marketing

In the context of the Tasmania brand, the Overland Track will be marketed as offering an exceptional combination of magnificent wilderness, wildlife, cultural heritage and quality interpretation, supported by appropriate associated transport, accommodation, and other visitor services.

5. CONCLUSION

Unmanaged growth in use of the Overland Track is not sustainable from an environmental or social perspective in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. Nor can the icon status of the Overland Track be sustained under these circumstances.

Managing numbers is seen as important to the long-term sustainable management of the World Heritage Area and the walking experience. A booking system with an upper limit on daily departures will enable the spread of usage over the peak period, enhance the social experience and better match visitation to infrastructure capacity. The majority of stakeholders support the introduction of a booking system enabling strategic management of numbers. There is also general acceptance of a need for fees to be increased and used for improved facilities and visitor experiences.

The implementation of the Strategic Management and Implementation Plan will ensure the sustainable management of the Overland Track and its maintenance as one of Tasmania's premier attractions.