



~ Chapter 8 ~

Enhancing the role and value of visitor
education as a park management tool

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I am a firm advocate of having an active, robust and ongoing I & E programme. Not only do I believe I & E is an effective tool to assist with professional and contemporary management of natural areas, I also believe our clients expect an I & E service to be delivered by QPWS. [PM 66, ac]

8.0 Introduction

This chapter addresses the final research objective: “To identify ways in which the acceptance and use of visitor education can be enhanced in agencies with a responsibility for protected area management”. It identifies and evaluates the range of strategies including those that interpreters believe would enhance the acceptance and use of visitor education as a park management tool among QPWS park staff. This is done to determine the strategies most likely to contribute to the Queensland Government’s objective of a revitalised QPWS visitor education capacity, and, more generally, for protected area agencies worldwide.

8.1 Strategies to enhance the role, value, acceptance and use of visitor education in the QPWS

Data presented in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 and the critique presented in Chapter 7 clearly suggest that the role, value, acceptance and use of visitor education were not given the priority or emphasis espoused in major policy documents such as the EPA’s Corporate Plan (1999–2001) and the QPWS’s Master Plan at a managerial level, or that espoused in the *I & E Strategy* at an operational level. The nature and level of frustration felt by many interpreters and park managers reported in this thesis provides confirmation of this assumption.

Interpreters had identified adequate resourcing and a shift in organisational culture to one that appreciated the work they did as changes necessary for visitor education to be successful in the new QPWS structure (QPWS 1999b). Features such as reactive unco-ordinated approaches to visitor education programme delivery, repetitive approaches to common issues across regions, and the heavy political focus contained in many interpretive messages were aspects of the previous organisational culture that

they did not want to take forward. However, these negative characteristics had persisted, while desired changes were yet to be realised (QPWS 2001b). Other areas for improvement noted in the data included supportive work unit leadership and team communication (Rafferty & Griffin 2001).

To address these issues, improve organisational effectiveness and contribute to the revitalisation of the QPWS's visitor education capacity, four overlapping courses of action are required:

- **Better promotion of visitor education as a park management tool** – by adopting and implementing strategies that enhance the value and acceptance of visitor education as a park management tool among park managers and operational staff.
- **Clear and adequate internal communication** – to inform and reiterate to all levels of the organisation the role and value of visitor education as a park management tool, and the policies that guide its delivery.
- **The development of an effective *I & E Strategy*** – that provides a clear link between the mandate of the organisation, available resources and the means to implement visitor education activities at an operational level.
- **The sourcing of adequate funding and resources** – by lobbying for, and investigating alternative means to supplement funding and resourcing shortfalls.

Two of these courses of action; 'clear and adequate internal communication' and 'the development of an *I & E Strategy* that ensures objectives are met' show clear room for improvement, while better promotion of visitor education as a park management tool will enhance its value and acceptance among park managers and operational staff and reduce barriers affecting work unit relations and organisational effectiveness. The sourcing of adequate funding and resources, however, remains an issue even though the Parks Master Plan acknowledged that visitor education should be well resourced. This is largely due to the funding of government organisations in general and the distribution of funds within an organisation. Funding to government departments in Queensland and the rest of Australia is provided through annual appropriations from Treasury, with monies being divided into recurrent and capital expenditure components (Worboys, Lockwood & De Lacy 2001). Economic rationalism, rising costs and the priorities of Government mean that annual budget allocations generally do not go far enough. Consequently, many government departments employ systems to generate

additional revenue, for example lease and licence fees, permitting and user-pays. The implementation of a user-pays system for visitor education is raised in Section 8.1.4.

8.1.1 Better promotion of visitor education as a park management tool

Past visitor education success can be directly attributed to the dedication and innovation of key staff (QPWS 2001b). However, continued self-promotion is required. So are strategies that assist interpreters to attract and manage limited resources in an effort to implement visitor education programmes (QPWS 2000). This is necessary to develop a culture that embraces the role and value of visitor education as a park management tool alongside more common park management techniques such as site hardening, regulation and enforcement. As Scott and Harker (2002) note, 'nothing welds a working community together more than a common belief that their work matters – when work is meaningful workers feel significant' (p27).

The five strategies²⁰ identified from this research most favoured by interpreters that may be employed to promote visitor education within the QPWS were:

- working collaboratively with others (90%)
- lobbying for better resources and more funding (86%)
- adopting realistic targets and workloads (83%)
- better promoting role of interpreters and interpretation (83%)
- experimenting with new ideas and practices (83%)(Table 8.1).

20 While most interpreters agree that the strategies listed may improve the outlook of visitor education in the QPWS, some disagreement was evident (Appendix 2: Question 10), the most notable being that regional/district interpreters and BFP were less likely than their field/centre-based counterparts to support the implementation of a more strategic approach.

Table 8.1: Interpreters' support for selected strategies to improve the outlook of visitor education in the QPWS

Strategies	Average for all interpreters (n = 16; no answer provided = 0 - 6%)		
	strongly disagree/ disagree	neither agree nor disagree	agree/ strongly agree
adopt realistic targets and workloads	0	12	83
become more innovative with available resources	2	14	79
better promote role of interpreters and interpretation	2	7	83
experiment with new ideas and practices	0	12	83
identify more tangible outcomes	0	24	69
implement a more strategic approach	7	24	62
increase interpretive staffing levels	7	12	76
lobby for better resources and more funding	2	7	86
provide more regular training opportunities	7	10	79
remain committed to best practice	0	14	81
work collaboratively with others	0	5	90



Strategies most favoured by interpreters

The strategies concerning 'working collaboratively with others', 'lobbying for better resources and more funding' and 'better promoting role of interpreters and interpretation' are mostly addressed later in sections '8.1.2 Clear and adequate internal communication', '8.1.3 Development of an effective I & E Strategy' and '8.1.4 Sourcing adequate funding and resources' respectively. Consequently, I will not address them here. The strategies 'adopting realistic targets and workloads', and 'experimenting with new ideas and practices', are largely concerned with interpreter work programmes and the range of work they perform. As interpreter work programmes have not been

discussed previously in this thesis it is necessary to provide a brief overview here to identify opportunities for implementing these strategies.

Interpreter work programmes are varied, but are primarily based to service the visitor education needs of their park/district/region (Parkin 2003a). While most interpreters (69%) spend more than 51 percent of their work time on visitor education-related duties, 31 percent of interpreters said they spent less than 50 percent of their work time on visitor education-related activity (Figure 8.1). This latter group includes 25 percent of regional/district interpreters, 37 percent of field/centre-based interpreters and 20 percent of BFP interpreters. Additional duties that interpreters undertake include: Administration/Front Office, Park Management duties (including general duties/cleaning, etc.), Patrols/Permits/Enforcement, Wildlife Management duties, HRM/Budgeting/Work programmes, Project Management, Volunteer/Community Group Co-ordination duties, and/or Marketing/PR/Media work duties (Appendix 2, Question 21). Only 17 percent of interpreters said that all of their work time was spent on visitor education related activity.

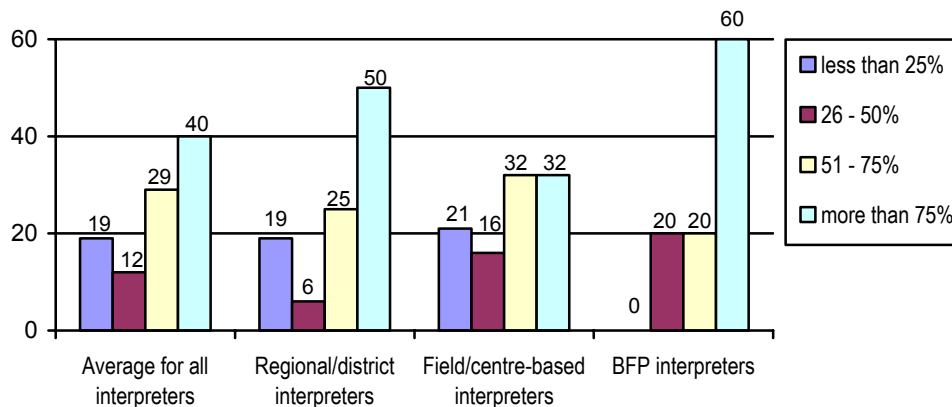


Figure 8.1: Interpreters' work time spent on visitor education related work

In Section 6.1.1, '*high workloads and short project timeframes*' was identified as the second highest factor that formed a barrier to the visitor education work performed by interpreters. Consequently, interpreters view the strategy of '*adopting realistic targets and workloads*' as means of reducing this barrier. While there appears to be a prima facie case to review interpreter work programmes in light of these findings, park manager opinions that interpreters should be involved in park management just as park rangers should be involved in visitor education should also be considered. A balance

needs to be found between duties of an interpreter and their acceptance as part of a larger work unit. There should also be greater encouragement and support for park-based ranger staff to be involved in visitor education. The adoption of realistic targets is also a matter that should be considered when setting performance measures as part of a more effective *I & E Strategy*.

Section 6.2.5 established that most park managers thought that there was a need to extend the role of visitor education (into school curriculum, the media and organisations such as bushcare/landcare), otherwise they were just preaching to the converted. Interpreters and park managers both agreed that planned and unstructured face-to-face activities were considered the most effective way to educate people about the natural environment, on ways to minimise their impact, and about hazards and risks to personal safety (Parkin 2003a; Appendix 2, Question 11; Appendix 4, Question 2). This was despite a decreased emphasis on the use of face-to-face education in preference to more static methods (e.g. brochures, signs, interpretive panels) (QPWS 2001b). In general, park managers believed that visitor education in combination with park management tools such as access restrictions, permits, enforcement, site closures and/or site hardening were required to achieve nature conservation objectives. Visitor education, they believed, was not a panacea in its own right. Consequently, interpreters need to work more closely with park managers to determine the right combination of visitor education and park management methods to resolve negative visitor impacts. This would lead to a more proactive approach to addressing the issues that affect the amenity of the area being protected and the quality of the experiences that visitors seek through recreation in natural areas.

8.1.2 Clear and adequate internal communication

This study has identified low levels of communication between interpreters and between interpreters and park managers. Concerns regarding the level of support interpreters received from their immediate supervisors were also raised. (Refer Chapter 5.2 and 6.1 respectively). A 'Work Effectiveness Survey' conducted by Rafferty and Griffin (2001) during the same period reported similar findings but at a larger scale. Their findings suggested team communication and supportive leadership were at a low level throughout the whole of the EPA/QPWS, thus impacting negatively on organisational effectiveness.

Effective team communication and work unit leadership are key measures that positively influence employee commitment to the work unit and the organisation. They are also important drivers of management effectiveness and any effort to enhance the role, value, acceptance and use of visitor education as a park management tool within the QPWS.

In the first instance, team communication should be addressed as an important strategic initiative to improve QPWS organisational outcomes. Strategies designed to influence team communication are likely to have a positive impact on staff relations, leadership, and commitment to the work unit and to the organisation as a whole (Rafferty & Griffin 2001). They are also likely to create support for the organisation's mission and policy and provide staff with knowledge and motivation (Gomis & Hesselink 1995).

Strategies to improve team communication may simply involve implementing regular team meetings with the express purpose of reviewing the unit's goals and objectives on a regular basis, while initiatives to improve supportive leadership may involve simple measures such as introducing an open door policy by encouraging staff to approach work unit managers when they have an issue or concern (Rafferty & Griffin 2001). In addition, Rafferty and Griffin (2001) suggest that if team communication and/or leadership is viewed as particularly problematic in a given work unit, more complicated strategies, such as bringing in a facilitator to aid group processes may be required. Three actions that could be implemented as a means of improving communication processes between interpreters and interpreters and park managers are:

- Introducing a semi-regular work unit meeting or allocation of time during a work unit meeting to discuss unit goals, targets, processes and the way the group interacts at work.
- The capture of information on an ongoing basis as to how communication processes are operating within work units and between work units. This may involve focus groups within districts, or the introduction of a short survey on a half-yearly or yearly basis.
- A formal discussion designed to develop guidelines regarding communication between work units (in particular, between interpreters and park managers) (adapted from Rafferty & Griffin 2001, p25-26).

Secondly, communication is the link that connects the intent of an *I & E Strategy* and the visitor education activities to be implemented at an operational level. Internal communication is necessary to achieve *I & E Strategy* outcomes and provide staff with knowledge and motivation to support visitor education deliverables. Work colleagues and managers are more likely to support visitor education initiatives if they clearly understand how these will address management issues (Turner 1993). Initially, promotion of an *I & E Strategy* among all interpreters is required, especially among new interpreters and interpreters filling temporary positions. This can be best achieved through more frequent instruction, information sessions, workshops, and better use of direct and indirect communication channels. This will contribute to the preferred State-wide approach to the planning and delivery of visitor education initiatives and promote the dissemination of policy information among field staff.

Well-managed internal communications will also enable interpreters to develop responsibility for the implementation of visitor education activities that support the goals of the organisation. However, communication must be a two way process where the 'top-down' flow of information about policy and procedures is complimented by the 'bottom-upwards' flow of information about the needs and characteristics of particular protected areas, districts and regions. A centrally co-ordinated model that is able to collate, co-ordinate and disseminate information to and from regions, districts and parks may work best. A communication plan specially designed to promote the role and value of visitor education internally will contribute greatly. A suggested framework for a communication plan is provided in Table 8.2.

Table 8.2: Suggested communication framework for promoting visitor education internally in an organisation

Section	Content
Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Purpose of document
Communication Objective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Definitive statement on what the plan aims to achieve
Organisational Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identification and description of organisational environment, including mandate of organisation and the different groups within the organisation
Risks and Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identification of the risks and opportunities to the promotion of visitor education throughout the organisation
Target Audiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ List of stakeholders, both direct contacts and others, for message capture
Messages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ List of key and support messages to be used to promote role and value of visitor education throughout organisation
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ List of current and proposed actions for achieving increased awareness and/or appreciation of role and value of visitor education
Timeframe for Actions and Responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identification of actions, timings and the people responsible for achieving outcomes of the communication plan

As the EPA/QPWS also operates within a public service model (i.e. a Government agency responsible both for policy/strategic direction and service delivery) (Bradley & Parker 2005), the achievement of the Queensland Government's objective to revitalise the visitor education capacity of the QPWS will require successful integration of visitor education with the range of business systems currently operating within the organisation. To achieve this integration, the QPWS's Interpretation and Community Relations will need to continue incorporating the findings of the ANZECC study (DNRE 1999) to determine visitor education best practice (in particular, the model for visitor education best practice developed as part of the study (Figure 8.2)). The best practice model provides a step-by-step structure for the integration of visitor education with an organisation's business systems.

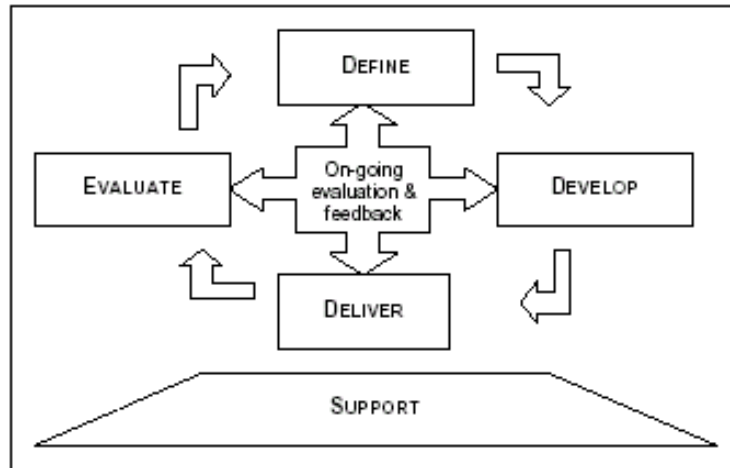


Figure 8.2: Best practice model for visitor education activities and support
(Source: DNRE 1999:12)

(A detailed explanation of the elements of the five stages [i.e. defining, developing, delivering, evaluating and supporting] and the strategies detailed for achieving ‘Best Practice’ is provided at Appendix 8).

8.1.3 Development of an effective I & E Strategy

The social importance of an effective *I & E Strategy* is an imperative that many public land management agencies cannot overlook. Overuse and inappropriate use of our natural areas can cause unacceptable physical and biological impacts and substantially reduce the quality of the visitor experience (Manning et al 1996; Manning 1999).

Visitor education, as part of a protected area agencies suite of management tools, is vital in addressing the human/nature dimension of protected area management: conserving and protecting the natural resource while promoting positive visitor experiences. An effective *I & E Strategy* links the intentions of government and the management directives of a protected area agency with the actions to deliver specified outcomes at an operational level. And, may provide the key to resolving the dilemma between park preservation and use by developing in visitors a deeper regard for protected areas and a desire for a meaningful role in their care and management (Pigram & Jenkins 2006).

Like all planning, strategic visitor education planning involves defining a desired future state and then selecting strategies and actions for moving from the current position to

the planned endpoint (Hockings, Carter & Leverington 1998). In this case, the development of an effective *I & E Strategy* will be the outcome of a planning process that aims to meld the mandate of a protected area organisation, the conservation values of natural areas and the experiences of the visitors who interact with it (Figure 8.3), the starting point of which is the institutional arrangements and culture within an organisation within which strategies are generated (Hall & McArthur 1996). To be successful, an inclusive planning process is recommended. This is necessary for those responsible for implementing the plan (who are then also those who helped formulate it) to have 'ownership' of the plan, and hence for its effective implementation (Heath & Wall 1992). Having park managers involved in the process will allow them to understand the relevance of visitor education to solving park management issues (Turner 1993).

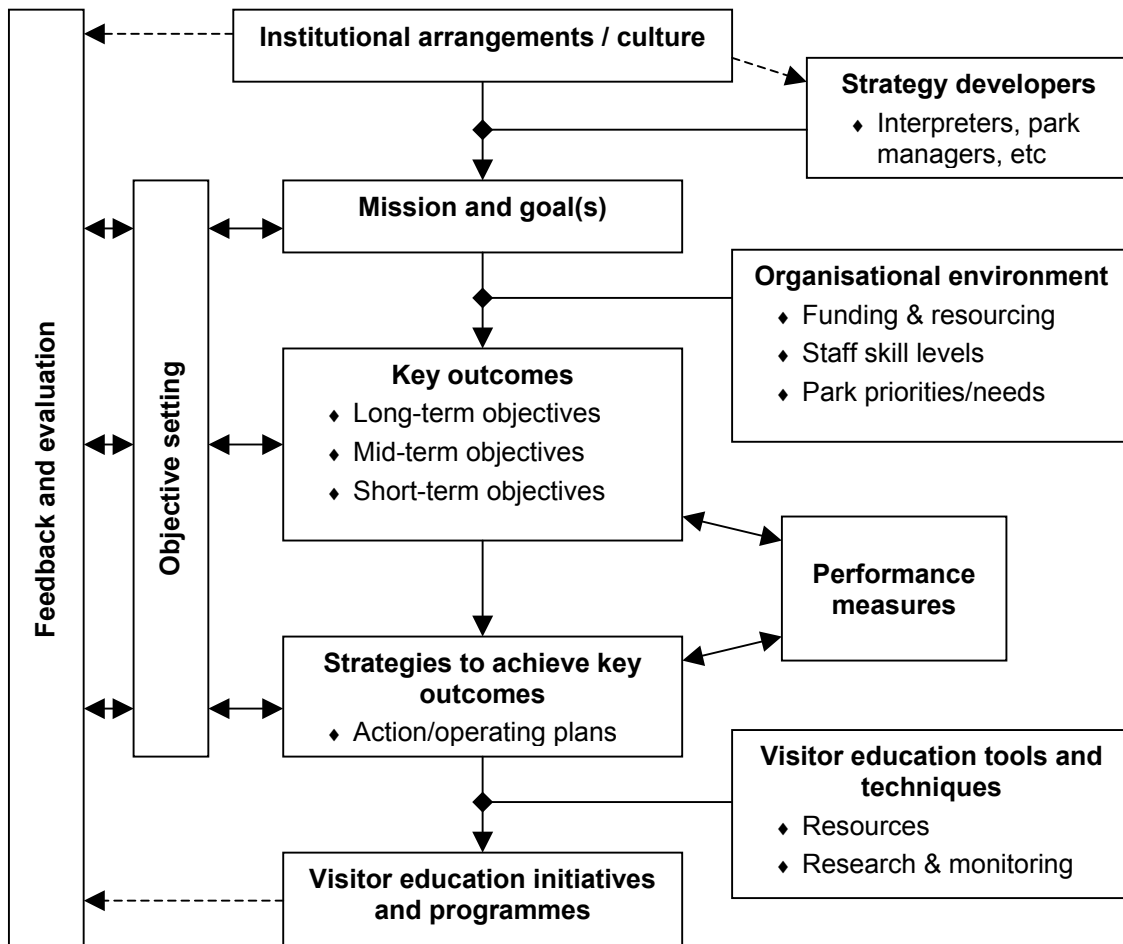


Figure 8.3: The *I & E Strategy* strategic planning process
(adapted from Hall & McArthur 1996, p23 and Colquhoun 2005, p14)

Objective-setting is a critical component for developing an effective *I & E Strategy* as it determines what is to be achieved. Mission, goal, outcomes and actions to implement the intent of the strategy are all highly independent, but at the same time linked to produce a document designed to attain broader organisational goals. Understanding the environment within which the organisation is operating, measurable objectives for the short, mid and long-term life of the strategy and the ability to incorporate feedback and evaluation into the process are all components of an effective *I & E Strategy*.

The *I & E Strategy* evaluated as part of this study has been replaced twice (i.e. 2002 – 2004 and 2004 – 2006) during the term of this study. Each successive Strategy was an improvement on the previous one, but still not at a level that addresses many of the issues discussed here or previously in this thesis. Consequently, in an attempt to contribute to the development of an effective *I & E Strategy*, I offer a suggested structure for future visitor education strategies for consideration here (Table 8.3).

Table 8.3: Suggested structure for an effective *I & E Strategy*

Section	Proposed Content
Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Purpose of document and its relationship with overarching policies
Mission Statement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Statement of the Interpretation and Community Relation unit's vision
Key Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ List of key outcomes and the measures to be achieved
Strategies to achieve Key Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Outline of actions for achieving Key Outcomes with regards to available funding and resourcing (Action/operating plans, etc)
Performance Measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identification and outline of methods to be employed to measure performance/effectiveness
Appendices	
- Organisational structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ An overview of the mandate of the organisation, overarching policies, and the role of visitor education and interpreters in achieving organisational goals
- Key messages for visitor education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ List of key messages and themes for promoting/implementing a State-wide approach
- Best Practice guiding principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Outline of principles/practices for achieving 'Best Practice'
- On-park visitor education guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Instructions and recommendations for on-park delivery of visitor education activities
- Organisational resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A list and brief explanation of the resources available to interpreters and park managers to plan and deliver effective visitor education activities.

8.1.4 Sourcing adequate funding and resources

It is well accepted that protected area agency funding and resourcing of visitor education often does not reflect the importance placed on this function in the mission and vision statements of these organisations (Turner 1993; DNRE 1999). While applications can be made for more funding, the success of any application is dependent upon available funds, organisational priorities and unforeseen events that need to be addressed in response to community pressure (e.g. management of people/wildlife interactions with reference to the management of dingoes on Fraser Island in 2002). Targeting other funding sources (e.g. capital works and special grants) are options that are also pursued. However, these generally require considerable planning and add to the workloads of already busy staff (Parkin 2003a). Consequently, visitor education per se may require its own budget. This would better facilitate community engagement and promote the QPWS as the lead nature conservation agent in this State.

Funding and resourcing are issues generally outside the control of the Interpretation and Community Relations team because of organisational structure. A dedicated visitor education budget would allow interpreters to properly plan, co-ordinate and implement visitor education activities across the State. This is important for continuity and assuring quality outcomes and for meeting the nature conservation objectives of the organisation. However, it is unlikely that QPWS resourcing of visitor education will increase significantly in the foreseeable future (QPWS 2001b) due to a general trend across government agencies to be more efficient and accountable with public monies (Worboys, Lockwood & De Lacy 2001). Charging for interpretive activities (user-pays interpretation) is one strategy that may be employed to offset the cost of providing visitor education services while increasing the level of visitor education activity across the state (QPWS 2001b). It is in line with a strong trend in public sector management to charge users of government facilities and services (DoE 1996).

However, support for user-pays interpretation amongst interpreters is strongly divided (Figure 8.4). For example, 44 percent of regional/district interpreters either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the use of user-pays interpretation to offset shortfalls in funding while all BFP interpreters and 37 percent of field/centre-based interpreters supported this concept. Forty-four percent of regional/district interpreters and 32 percent of field/centre-based interpreters neither agreed nor disagreed with the use of user-pays interpretation as a means to offset funding shortfalls.

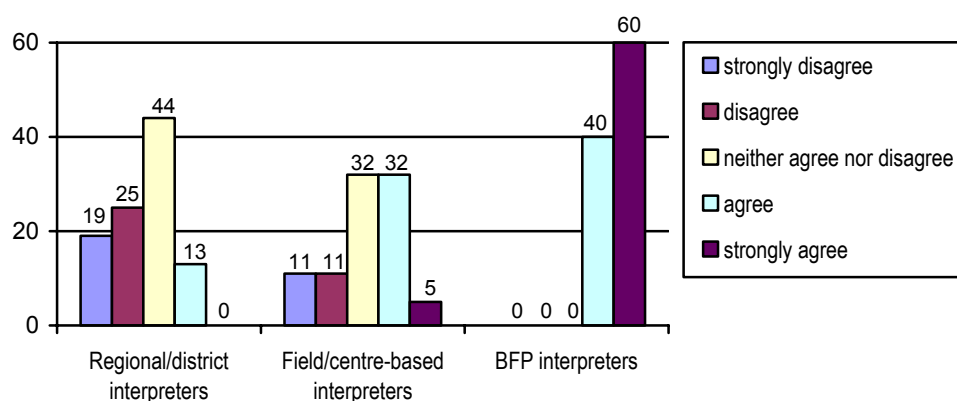


Figure 8.4: Interpreters' response to statement that 'user-pays interpretation is necessary to offset shortfalls in funding'

The support for user-pays interpretation by BFP interpreters reflected their experience with this concept. BFP interpreters regularly used user-pays interpretation as part of the services they provided visitors to Brisbane Forest Park. While it has proven successful in this location, it is not a strategy that is commonly used by other QPWS interpreters, although some field/centre-based interpreters may have had experience with providing user-pays interpretation (Parkin 2003a).

The difference of opinion among interpreters to the use of user-pays interpretation is also reflected in some of the comments provided by interpreters on questionnaires returned for analysis. For example:

(The Strategy) lacks a 'user pays' philosophy which has been proven to work elsewhere. This would overcome some of the other issues (e.g. resourcing, incentive, greater opportunities). [IN 12, ac]

'User pays' interp is not the solution to the woes of the QPWS budget. If we do need to make money we should be aiming much higher than targeting families and groups on parks, at slideshows or [on] guided walks. We should try to: think about the audience; work smart not hard; try to find a balance between making money while still making a difference. [We] need to learn to sell ourselves so we gain more support – priority from supervisors and managers. [IN 28, ac]

The levying of user fees is a vexed alternative. The desired outcomes of user-pay systems are cost effectiveness, improved park management, better visitor facilities, and a positive attitude toward protected areas management (DoE 1996). Opponents of

user-pay systems argue that they can create adverse distributional consequences, and that public resources should allow equal access for all (Cullen 1985; Herath 2000).

It is generally agreed that core activities of conservation and resource management are a community service obligation (DoE 1996). However, protected area agencies are under increasing pressure to adopt user-pays approaches where possible to recover the cost of providing visitor services (Herath 2000; Worboys, Lockwood & De Lacy 2001). Adequate funding is necessary for visitor education to be responsive to the Queensland Government's nature conservation agenda and the educational needs of the community. Otherwise the QPWS's goals of developing positive human/nature relationships will be largely unmet. User-pays interpretation is an option. User-pays has been adopted to a greater or lesser extent by all government protected area agencies in Australia (DoE 1996). However, most interpreters disagree with use user-pays interpretation to supplement funding shortfalls at this point in time. To be successful, user-pays interpretation would require the support of all interpreters for it to be accepted as a means of offsetting visitor education funding shortfalls.

8.2 Summary

This chapter has outlined the actions and strategies that could be employed to enhance the role, value, acceptance and use of visitor education as a park management tool. These strategies include the better promotion of visitor education as a park management tool to all levels of the organisation; the provision of clear and adequate internal communication between interpreters and interpreters and park managers; the development of an *I & E Strategy* that provides a clear link between the mandate of the organisation, available resources and the means to implement visitor education activities at an operational level; and the sourcing of adequate funding and resources primarily through the introduction of a user-pays system for visitor education services.

Adequate funding and resourcing are crucial to meeting the visitor education needs of the State's national and conservation park estate and the Queensland Government's community nature conservation agenda. So is a culture that is supportive of the contribution that visitor education can make on behalf of the QPWS's role in nature conservation and the management of protected areas in this State, while *I & E Strategy* ownership is necessary to promote a State-wide approach to the delivery of visitor

education services. Yet, above all, effective internal communication is required between interpreters and between non-interpreters at management and operational levels in the QPWS, to achieve acceptance and use of visitor education as a park management tool. Communication is the link that connects the intent of Government and the visitor education activities implemented at an operational level. Well-managed internal communications will enable interpreters to develop responsibility for the implementation of visitor education activities that support the goals of the organisation. This may include more frequent instruction, information sessions, workshops, and better use of direct and indirect communication channels. Clearly, these strategies will contribute to and support the Queensland Government's desire to revitalise the visitor education capacity of the QPWS.