

APPENDIX 2

TOURIST VISITATION TO THE HOUTMAN ABROLHOS ISLANDS, 2002-6

1.0 Visitation to the Houtman Abrolhos Islands

Absence of visitation data is described as a ‘significant problem’ by (Webster, Dibden et al. 2002) in a major review of human interactions with the Houtman Abrolhos Island System . The review identified a need for monitoring and surveying of visitor numbers and use of the environment, as well as for increasing the accuracy of visitation data.

While there has been no quantifiable evidence available to date to indicate an increase in tourist numbers and activities at the Abrolhos Islands (Chubb and Nardi 2003), the perception of such an increase is supported anecdotally. Given the largely informal knowledge base used to claim a significant increase in the visitor sector, a clear need is established for a more rigorous basis from which to assess the status and the development of tourism at the Abrolhos Islands.

The Abrolhos Islands visitor sector is composed of following types of visitation:

- private (or self-sufficient) recreational boat-based visitation,
- commercial charter boat-based tourism,
- commercial air charter tourism (since 1999), and
- visiting relatives and friends of rock lobster fishers.

In 2003 The University of Western Australia and the Abrolhos Islands Management Advisory Committee (AIMAC) commenced a collaborative research project examining changes in visitation to the Abrolhos Islands. *The key objective was to establish a baseline of visitation data, from which further sets of annual visitor numbers could be compared to detect changes.* However the total annual numbers of visiting relatives and friends of rock lobster fishers has not been investigated in this project. The rock lobster fisher community has disputed categorisation of this group as ‘visitors’ for management purposes on the grounds of their close association with the ‘resident’ fisher community. Although this group clearly meets the definition of ‘visitor’ used by the Western Australian Tourism Commission (WATC), capturing data on their mechanisms and frequency of visits is difficult. The difficulty is due to use of commercial fishing boats to transport friends and relatives and a lack of records maintained by the air charter operators for ‘non-tourist’ passengers.

At the Abrolhos Islands there appears to be a replication of the global and regional trends in the growth of concern over unmanaged impacts of tourist activities on the ecological values and services of destinations. Visitation to the Abrolhos Islands has been partially managed to the extent of capping the numbers of fishing (or consumptive) charter tour operators licensed to visit the island system.

The Department of Fisheries and the AIMAC have committed to a sustainable tourism platform, which has been defined as “environmentally sensitive tourism, or nature-based tourism, which is compatible with maintaining the Abrolhos system in an

ecologically sound condition” (Abrolhos Islands Management Advisory Committee 2001: 1). One strategy proposed by the AIMAC is the setting of upper limits on visitor numbers to sensitive island sites. It is, however, acknowledged in the plan that collection of visitation data is of immediate priority in order to instigate sustainable visitor management measures.

2.0 Historical profile of visitation

A summary of previous research findings regarding visitation to the Abrolhos Islands is provided below.

2.1 Private recreational boat-based visitation:

- 28 boat trips in 1996, and
- 252 passengers in 1996 (Abrolhos Islands Management Advisory Committee 1998)

2.2 Commercial charter boat tourism:

- 1,000 charter boat passengers in 1989 (Abrolhos Islands Consultative Council 1989)
- 150 trips annually in 2001, and
- 1650 passengers in 2001 (Webster, Dibden et al. 2002)

2.3 Visiting boats (all types):

- 300 trips annually in 2003 (Chubb and Nardi 2003)

2.4 Air charter tourism:

- No data has been collected from air charter tourism operators since they commenced tourist flights to the Abrolhos Islands in 1999.

3.0 Recent visitation: 2002-6

3.1 Research methods:

Broad scale data available from the Department of Fisheries and derived from field surveys was gathered to establish a baseline of annual visitation to the Abrolhos Islands. The field survey methods included a survey of air charter tourism operators, and aerial surveys of visiting boat numbers across the Easter period, which occurs during the peak visitor period at the Abrolhos Islands (otherwise known as the In-season, or rock lobster A-zone fishing season, from 15th March to 30th June).

Annual total numbers of various visitor types were collated to enable comparison, and to detect any significant changes from 2002 to 2006. Two measures of visitation have been deployed; trip or flight numbers, and passenger or visitor numbers. Both measures have differing bearings in the context of planning and managing visitor impacts at protected island sites. Quantifying visitation to the Abrolhos Islands for the period 2002 to 2006 has been undertaken by collating both annual total numbers, and annual peaks and lows in numbers, for each visitor type.

3.2 Private recreational boat-based visitation during the Off-season (15 July to 20 February), 2002-3 to 2005-6:

- Trip and passenger numbers fluctuated markedly over the four Off-season periods, with no indication of a trend towards increasing visitation (Table 1), and
- The average numbers of trips during the Off-season was 63, and the average number of passengers was 305.

Private recreational boat visitation	2002-3	2003-4	2004-5	2005-6
Trips	87	52	66	47
Passengers	351	239	346	285

Table 1 Private recreational boat visitation to the Abrolhos Islands during the Off-season, 2002-3 to 2005-6 (Source: DoF WA Off-season Notification Records)

3.3 Commercial charter boat-based tourism, 2002-2005:

- Annual trip and passenger numbers fluctuated markedly, with no indication of a trend towards increasing visitation (Table 2), and
- The average numbers of annual trips was 391 , and the average number of passengers annually was 4,704.

Commercial charter boat visitation	2002	2003	2004	2005
Trips	303	513	404	342
Passengers	4679	5058	3570	2990

Table 2 Annual commercial charter boat visitation to the Abrolhos Islands, 2002-5 (Source: DoF WA Tour Operator Logbook Records).

3.4 Peak period boat-based visitation, 2004-6:

- Numbers of visiting boats increase from their lowest levels on Good Friday, and reach peak numbers of Easter Sunday, declining on Easter Monday (Table 4),
- From 2004 to 2006, the numbers of visiting boats vary considerably, providing no indication of a trend towards increasing numbers of visiting boats at the peak Easter holiday period, and
- The average peak number of visiting boats counted at the Abrolhos Islands on Easter Sunday is 49.

Easter Aerial Boat Count	2004	2005	2006
Good Friday	23	15	38
Easter Saturday	43	40	44
Easter Sunday	60	42	46
Easter Monday	49	36	39

Table 3 Visiting boats counted daily by aerial survey across the Easter period at the Abrolhos Islands, 2004-6 (Source: UWA Easter Aerial Visiting Boat Survey)

3.5 Air charter tourism, 2003-4 to 2004-5:

- The air charter tourism sector is comprised of Day-Tour trips to East Wallabi Island, and Scenic Tour flights over the Abrolhos Islands,
- Annual trip and passenger numbers have increased from 2003-4 to 2004-5 (Table 3),

- The increase in annual passenger numbers from 2003-4 to 2004-5 is statistically significant.

Air charter tourism	2003-4	2004-5
Trips	178	201
Passengers	561	707

Table 4 Annual air charter tourist visitation to the Abrolhos Islands, 2003-4 to 2004-5 (Source: UWA Air Charter Tourist Operator Survey 2003-5)

3.6 Combined annual visitor numbers:

- The combined number of boats of all types to make the trip to the Abrolhos Islands annually in the years 2002-6 has ranged from 439 to 511 (these figures do not include the number of private recreational boats to visit during the In-season period)
- The combined number of boat *and* air passengers to travel to the Abrolhos Islands annually in the years 2002-6 has ranged from 4,333 to 5,114 (again, these figures do not include the number of passengers on private recreational boats visiting during the In-season period).

3.7 Composition of the visitor sector:

- The commercial charter boat industry accounts for approximately 60% of the total number of trips made to the Abrolhos Islands per year, and for approximately 80% of the total number of passengers who visit. (again, the number of private recreational boats to visit during the In-season period is not included).
- The air charter industry is the next most significant contributor, followed by private recreational boats.

3.8 Spatial distribution of visitation:

- Private recreational boat trips: 48.5% of trips were to the Pelsaert Group, 24% were to the Easter Group, and to the Wallabi Group, and 3.5 % were to North Island,
- Commercial charter boat trips: 52% of trips were to the Easter Group, 32% to the Wallabi Group, 15% to the Pelsaert Group and 1% to North Island, and
- Visiting boats (all types) at the peak period: 37% of boats counted were in the Wallabi Group, 33% in the Pelsaert Group, 29% in the Easter Group, and 1% at North Island.

4.0 Trends in visitation: beyond 2006

4.1 Boat-based tourism and visitation:

- For both passenger numbers and the number of trips, the results across 2002-6 for all measures do not support the assertion of a trend towards increasing boat-based visitation,
- Comparison of annual visitation data from 1989 and 1996 (see Sections 2.1, 2.1 and 2.4) with annual visitation data from 2002-6 indicates an increase in visiting boat numbers across all measures across a longer time frame.

- However, the brevity and irregularity of boat visitation records cast doubt on the significance of this finding. In particular, the representativeness of the Department of Fisheries Off-season Notification records remains in doubt.
- The predominant trend in recent boat-based visitation to the Abrolhos Islands is one of fluctuations in trip numbers.
- Possible explanations for the variability in annual boat-based visitation include: a natural or physical cap to the numbers of boats that can find safe anchorage, or a public mooring, within the island system, has been reached; or, interannual fluctuations in weather conditions during the In-season may contribute to the decision by skippers whether to visit.

4.2 Air charter tourism:

- Air charter tourist flight passenger numbers demonstrated a significant increase from 2003-4 to 2004-5.
- However, given the assertion of an increase is based on figures from only two years, a trend toward an increase in this type of visitation cannot be confirmed as yet.

4.3 Implications for management:

The contribution of such annual visitation data to the future sustainable management of visitors at the Abrolhos Islands lies firstly in the profile of the current visitor sector and its composition by visitor type. Commercial charter boats comprise the largest segment, and mechanisms already exist to measure, regulate and ensure the accountability of operator impacts. The limitations of the methodology and results – that is, the inability to measure the number of visits and passengers carried by private recreational boats during the In-season period – reflect a weakness in the overall visitor management system. This segment of the visitor sector is unregulated, and without any form of future regulation, such as a visitor entry permit or fee, will remain difficult to measure in terms of both numbers and impact.

The information collated in Appendix 2, has been provided by Ph. D Candidate Ms Emily M. Stoddart of the School of Earth and Geographical Sciences, University of Western Australia.

