

**very keen office cleaner—they have no respect for data.**

Always make sure that completed surveys are safe from the cleaners. Even when they are sealed in labelled boxes with signs attached saying things like, “Please don’t touch, important visitor data to be collected tomorrow”, many cleaners still can’t resist the apparently very strong urge to throw that box away. This urge is especially strong if the building has an incinerator or if the cleaning is done the day before the industrial bins are collected and

compacted. There is a positive and perfect correlation between cleaners putting your surveys in the trash, and it being a day when there is no way to retrieve them from the trash.

**EPILOGUE**

Over twelve years this research team has been made up of 24 fulltime research officers, 10 academic staff and hundreds of casual and voluntary research interviewers. To acknowledge them individually would inevitably mean that someone important would

be missed. But despite the challenges in conducting visitor research, the outcomes have always been worthwhile and all who have participated have made a unique and valuable contribution.

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**Working with Animals and Children: The Challenges of Visitor Research in Wildlife Tourism:**  
*Karen Hughes, Roy Ballantyne & Jan Packer*

Our team at the University of Queensland has been investigating conservation learning at two Queensland ecotourism sites—a three hour whale watching cruise operating from the Gold Coast and turtle viewing at Mon Repos Turtle Rookery, Bargara. We present here a set of five challenges we have faced in this research, as a warning to all who might dare to attempt similar studies. Our experience has demonstrated that the famous adage of show business, “Never work with children or animals” can indeed apply in wildlife tourism research.

**1. Non-captive wildlife does its own thing**

One factor common to all non-captive wildlife tourism is that animal sightings are far from assured. In the big wide world of nature there are no certainties—animals hide from view; appear when and where least expected; “perform” in places that are inaccessible to visitors; and/or simply refuse to “behave” as they should! Marine animals are particularly elusive—for such large animals, whales can be incredibly difficult to find. This can be extremely disappointing for visitors who have paid handsomely to get “up close and personal” yet fail to catch more than a fleeting glimpse of a tail in the distance.

How does this impact on our research? First, if the research aims to measure

the impact of wildlife viewing on visitors’ knowledge, attitudes and behaviour, visitors need to have actually seen some wildlife (other than feral children and unkempt “surfies”!). We did our best to collect data when the chances of viewing wildlife were highest, but there are never any guarantees. We also included a question in our survey to identify what visitors actually saw, so that this could be entered as a variable. Second, visitors may be so disappointed if sightings are poor that they no longer wish to participate in the research. In many cases we found visitors’ expectations were unrealistically high—they had not even considered the possibility of a non-sighting. In response to this, we instituted a procedure whereby, during the recruitment phase, we gave visitors information about the likelihood of

viewing animals. Visitors appreciated this honest approach, and were better prepared to deal with disappointment. We have recommended to service providers that this sort of information be provided to all visitors as a matter of course.

As an aside, the unexpected appearance of animals not on visitors’ “must see” lists is also a very real possibility when working in The Great Outdoors. For instance, one night at Mon Repos a snake joined the queue for tickets, creating considerable alarm and disrupting the data collection process for the remainder of the evening. In cases like these, our only recourse was to abandon the recruitment process and beat a hasty retreat to the safety of the rangers’ office until the threat had removed itself!

### 2. Bad weather is bad news

It became apparent very early in the research that weather conditions would play a key role in determining both the number and state of completed questionnaires. This particularly applied to the whale watching—on days when conditions could be described as “millpond”, visitors happily completed both pre-trip and post-trip questionnaires. Whales don’t always frequent millponds, however—they prefer the open oceans where rolling waves have a tendency to play havoc with weak-stomached humans. Thus, although almost all visitors agreed to complete questionnaires prior to departure, once out on the open green seas approximately 30% turned a matching colour. At this point they were usually far too ill to consider answering questions, and indeed, were much more likely to be asking questions of their own—“why didn’t someone tell me I’d get seasick?”; “what have I done to deserve this?”; and the perennial “are we there yet?” We did attempt to cater for the queasy by telling participants they could complete post-trip questionnaires once they had disembarked—unfortunately, not one respondent took this option. Another strategy would be to provide pre-paid envelopes for respondents to mail back their questionnaires when they had well and truly recovered.

Another unexpected but perhaps not surprising problem is that the legibility and length of responses also varied with the weather—high seas generally resulted in short, very messy responses! In fact, the quality and quantity of post-trip responses was so poor in rough weather we adopted the practice of cancelling data collection if waves over one metre were forecast. We did consider replacing written questionnaires with recorded oral interviews but decided it would

be impossible to hear responses over the noise of the vessel. This could, however, be a compromise in less noisy environments.

Weather conditions can also be a major problem at land-based wildlife attractions because visitors are rarely under cover. Within the first week at Mon Repos Turtle Rookery the researchers were subjected to a stunning demonstration of how quickly heavy rain can destroy paper-based research instruments! Luckily, questionnaires were distributed in plastic folders which went some way towards keeping them dry, though many visitors used the folders as umbrellas without giving much thought to the state of the paper inside. We developed a two-pronged strategy to cope with rain—first, we acquired several spare umbrellas to shelter those trying to complete questionnaires; and second, we collected and processed the questionnaires as quickly as possible to prevent them becoming illegible. If, however, heavy rain or thunderstorms were forecast, data collection was automatically cancelled. As with data collection on the high seas, the value of completing a crash course in meteorology cannot be overstated!

### 3. Humans can’t see in the dark

Turtle viewing at Mon Repos is a nocturnal activity that attracts a large number of families throughout the summer. Because bright artificial light interrupts the nesting and hatching process, lights at the visitor centre are deliberately dimmed and visitors are prohibited from using torches in the main amphitheatre area. This means that once daylight fades, it is difficult to recognise your own family, let alone respondents you only met five minutes ago. We tried distributing the questionnaires in the small interpretive section of the visitor centre where

there was at least a little light, however, after the first night of near suffocation (300 visitors in a very small space in mid-summer) we decided that this was not a viable option. Instead we arrived at dusk, 45 minutes before the centre opened and approached people as they entered from the car park. This recruitment process stopped ten minutes before the centre opened, thus ensuring there was sufficient time and daylight for visitors to complete the questionnaire prior to entry.

Obviously, completing post-visit questionnaires was virtually impossible at this site—by the time visitors came back from the beach, not only was it pitch black and late (sometimes 1–2am), most visitors were simply too tired to even look at a questionnaire. We therefore distributed post-visit questionnaires before visitors went onto the beach, and asked them to complete and return them in pre-paid envelopes which we provided. While this reduced our response rate from 75% (which we obtained at other sites where personal collection was possible) to 31% (where mail-back was the only option), we believe it was a better alternative in the circumstances.

### 4. Surveys are not usually on the visitor’s “top ten things to do” list

One of the main challenges facing non-captive wildlife tourism researchers is that visitors are there to look at animals not surveys. As mentioned, we had initially intended to distribute questionnaires as visitors entered the Mon Repos Visitor Centre. Not only was it too crowded, people were also distracted by the interpretive signage, ranger presentations, videos and retail outlets. Recruiting visitors as they queued to enter proved much more effective, because visitors usually were waiting in line for 30–45 minutes with nothing to read, no competing

activities or entertainment—in essence, they were bored to tears. Filling out questionnaires served as an effective and welcome diversion from the wait. In fact, we were often in the enviable position of visitors asking us to include them in the sample! We also found that the quantity and quality of responses were reasonably good, presumably because visitors had ample time to contemplate each question.

The lesson here is to do your homework well—select recruitment places where there are signs of collective boredom or there are few competing activities. This strategy works particularly well with families with children—simply recruit respondents at places where children are likely to be engrossed such as play areas, children’s theatres and computer corners. If children are occupied, parents, grandparents, and carers are more likely to have the time and inclination to answer questions.

### **5. Not all small packages are good things**

Although our research targeted adults, we were surprised to find that many of our early questionnaires were liberally decorated with scribbling and drawings that were obviously the work of children. In some cases, parents were even observed passing their questionnaires on to adolescents and

children “to keep them amused”. After processing one too many such works of art, it became obvious that we would have to firmly stipulate that children could only draw on the back of the questionnaire. This did help to reduce the number of unusable questionnaires, though in future we intend to include a separate children’s sheet with space for drawings and comments. This should keep children busy and allow carers sufficient time to complete their own questionnaire properly.

Unsupervised children can also create havoc. One night at Mon Repos a young child removed several completed questionnaires from the researchers’ belongings and scribbled on them to the point where they were unreadable. We had no option but to discard them all. Another night we unknowingly recruited a six-year old researcher who “worked the line” behind us collecting completed questionnaires before we had distributed the matching post-visit ones. All we could do in this case was go back along the queue asking visitors to identify their hand writing and reclaim their questionnaires. While this enabled us to avert a data collection crisis, it did put a substantial dent in our professional image! The lesson here is to secure your belongings tightly and keep your eyes on the kids, regardless of how angelic they look.

### **THE MORAL OF THE STORY**

In hindsight, many of the pitfalls in this line of research (as in fact in all research) can be overcome with careful planning and attention to detail. Unfortunately, though, some of the dangers specific to each setting are not immediately obvious, and do not appear until after data collection procedures have been trialled and approved. Each new setting brings its own challenges, and with every turnover of field research staff, the results of valuable “trial and error” learning are often lost. When all else fails, we generally resort to duck impersonations—calm on the surface, but always paddling like the dickens underneath!<sup>1</sup>

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### **ENDNOTE**

1. This quote is usually attributed to actor Michael Caine.

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## **Data Collection in a Modern World (Or When Bad Things Happen To Good People):**

***Kerry Bronnenkant and Cheryl Kessler***

The authors of this article are reporting on the accumulated wealth of knowledge and experiences of their colleagues at the Institute for Learning Innovation and thank them for sharing their stories. The Institute is a not-for-profit learning research and development organization committed to better understanding the nature of free-choice learning and its role in a Learning Society. Its mission is to study, support and advocate for free-choice learning—learning that fulfils the life-long human quest for knowledge, understanding and personal fulfilment. The Institute was established in 1986 in Annapolis, Maryland.