

EXPLORING RIVERINE ENVIRONMENTS BY CANOE: A GUIDE TO COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

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ABSTRACT:

Canoe touring of rivers is an effective environmental education tool that provides meaningful experiences for community participants. The West Gippsland Waterwatch program has organised and undertaken two popular community canoe tours along the Latrobe and Tarwin Rivers in the last 12 months. Through this experience, the program has learned how to successfully design, plan and facilitate a community canoe tour to achieve maximum impact and satisfaction. This paper will cover key learning's and share tips on how to undertake your own regional canoe trip. Topics include: safe participation, encouraging the 'right' attitude, minimising barriers to participation (distance/time, bad weather, cost, etc.), what topics should be discussed en route (fish species, resource use, human impacts, etc.), involving other agencies/organisations, rewarding participants, providing feedback opportunities, as well as personal, team and leadership development.

INTRODUCTION:

In the past 12months West Gippsland Waterwatch have organised and undertaken two very successful and popular canoe tours for the public, the Latrobe River Canoe Tour and the Tarwin River Canoe Tour, see table one for details of each event.

The focus was to provide a novel opportunity for the community to gain new insights into the social, cultural and environmental values of rivers in a fun and interesting way. Participants were encouraged to express their attitudes towards waterways and to ask questions that would be openly answered by experts from particular fields.

Canoeing was the preferred method of delivery because:

- ◆ of the terrain that most rivers wind themselves through;
- ◆ exploration by paddling is often the most environmentally friendly;
- ◆ geology, flora, human impacts, resource use, river bank ecosystems, fish species, recreational use impacts, and aboriginal history, are most easily studied from the river;
- ◆ the silent nature of paddling allows for good observation of birds etc. and;
- ◆ you can experience the bigger picture of a river, either by paddling its whole length over a period of time or several distinct sections of the same river (Thomas and Thomas 2000).

Table 1 Details for the West Gippsland Waterwatch Latrobe River and Tarwin River Canoe Tours

Latrobe River Canoe Tour	Tarwin River Canoe Tour
1 st and 2 nd May 2004	13 th Nov 2004
95 participants.	70 participants.
2 day event.	1 day event.
4 different sections of the same river.	Single reach of river split into two stages.
Participants could choose to complete one, two, three, or all four of the stages.	Participants could choose to complete one or both stages.
20 canoes per stage. Two people per canoe.	18 canoes per stage. Two people per canoe.
Drinks and snacks provided for each of the 4 stages. Billy tea and damper provided on completion of 4 th stage.	Drinks and snacks provided during lunch break. Billy tea and scones provided on completion of 2 nd stage.
Activity leaders and speakers presented with a T-shirt to wear at the event, and as a gift of appreciation.	Activity leaders and speakers presented with a T-shirt to wear at the event, and as a gift of appreciation.
Due to the 4 stages being separated by large distances, participants were asked to move cars to appropriate meeting places and were then bussed to starting points or back to their cars.	Participants were able to meet and leave their cars at the ending point so that a bus could take them to the beginning of the tour.
People with their own canoes were allowed to participate, but were advised they would not be covered by WGCMA/Canoe operator insurance.	People wishing to use their own canoes were strongly advised to use the canoes provided as they would not be covered by insurance.



Photo 1 Cultural Heritage Officer, Gerry Laughton speaks to participants while they enjoy warm damper and billy tea after a cold day on the Latrobe River



Photo 2 Presenter, Wayne Gilmour from the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority talks about floodplain management along the Tarwin River



Photo 3 Canoeing past Fish Creek Drain on the Tarwin River



Photo 4 Two participants enjoy their tour of the Latrobe River

A GUIDE TO GET YOU STARTED:

The following is a list of helpful suggestions to get you planning your canoe tour.

Know Who You Want To Participate

West Gippsland Waterwatch decided their canoe tours were for the general community. The aim was to attract new people to the Waterwatch program, but not to limit the tour to people with canoeing experience. It was for the general public with an interest in their local environment.

This meant it would need to be easy for the general public to participate. A list of potential barriers was noted and steps were taken to reduce their impact.

Minimise Barriers To Participation

Barrier: Little or no canoeing experience

Provide paddling and safety instruction. Develop enough skill to equip participants with a minimum level of judgement and skill to access the river. While safe participation is necessary, don't allow it to dominate the experience of the tour. West Gippsland Waterwatch hired local professional canoe tour operators to instruct participants before and during the Latrobe River and Tarwin River canoe tours. Be aware that for safety reasons you will need one professional per 6-10 people, depending on the operator's requirements.

Barrier: Lack of appropriate equipment

Provide equipment. West Gippsland Waterwatch hired a local canoe operator who provided all the necessary canoe and safety equipment required.

Barrier: Cost for participation

West Gippsland Waterwatch did not charge a participation fee to cover any costs incurred as a result of the event. Participant feedback showed this was important to their participation.

Barrier: Difficulty in moving cars around to pick-up and drop-off points

Provide a bus. The type of bus you choose will depend on how many you are catering for, whether you can afford to do more than one trip, and what your access roads are like. Provision of bus transport was found to be key to the organisation of the day(s). Decide on an appropriate meeting place, and allow space for the number of cars you expect. Bus participants to the starting point and then back to their cars, if your tour does not finish where cars have been parked. It is advisable to finish at participants cars so they can quickly grab towels, a change of clothes or go home if the weather is bad. Use the travel time on the bus to introduce the event leaders and give some background information. Have people sign in as they get onto the bus, this way you have an accurate account of who is present on the day.

Barrier: The canoe tour is too far away or the time on the water is too long/short

Some people may want to participate but are worried about their capabilities or time commitments. Providing choices for location and duration means people can choose a level of participation without having to miss out altogether. West Gippsland

Waterwatch varied each of the stages in terms of length, technical difficulty and the environmental issues represented.

Where Do You Want To Canoe?

List several ideas and assess which are the most appropriate. You can only do this by canoeing the river yourself. Things to consider:

- ◆ Can canoes easily get in and out of the water at your start and end points?
- ◆ Are there any dangers or sections of the river that are impenetrable or inappropriate?
- ◆ Are roads safe and accessible at the time of the year you are planning to hold your event?
- ◆ Time the trip. Remember it will take longer for the more people you have. Time will also be affected by winds, tides, participant's' level of experience, water heights, new obstacles such as fallen trees and other changes in the river.

How Many People Do You Wish To Participate?

This will be determined by what you can afford (advertising, lunch, drinks, snacks, buses, canoe hire etc.), number of staff/event leaders, technical difficulty of river, and time constraints. West Gippsland Waterwatch catered for a maximum of 20 canoes (40 people) on the tours. Anymore people than this would mean that the group becomes too spread out and they may not be able to hear what the presenter is saying.

What Do You Want People To Learn About?

This is a great opportunity to involve other organisations, but be careful not to lose your influence on the event. Table two shows the types of topics relevant to West Gippsland waterways and the organisations involved in presenting information about their work and impacts on the river, during the canoe tour. Organisations in the West Gippsland region were more than happy to donate their time for Waterwatch tours because it is an opportunity for the community to learn about them and to highlight any misconceptions.

Table 2 Topics and organisations involved in the West Gippsland Waterwatch Canoe Tours

Coastcare Issues	Coastcare
Gunai/Kurnai welcome	Cultural Heritage Officer
Living with floods, floodplain & flood gate management	West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority
Bank stabilisation and prevention of stock access	Landcare
Willow trees and other invasive species	Department of Primary Industries
Bird Research Projects	Birds Australia
Irrigation Issues	Southern Rural Water
Historical river usage and the historical Swing Bridge	Local Historian
Carp Management	K&C Fisheries
Environmental Flows	West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority
Family History, personal connections with the river	Local farmer
Australian Paper Mill river usage	Australian Paper Mill
Water quality monitoring	SGS Environmental Services
Local rehabilitation project on the Moe River	West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority
How does the EPA protect our waterways?	Environment Protection Authority

KEY LEARNING'S

- ◆ Provide an information kit for participants. West Gippsland Waterwatch developed an information kit that contained medical and booking forms, a map of the tour, and a thorough brochure with information about toilet stops, what to bring on the day (suitable clothing, old sneakers, water bottle, hat, sunscreen etc.) and what not to bring with them in the canoes (cameras at own risk). The brochure also clearly identified sections where there were obstacles (over hanging trees, snags, boulders) and areas of risk, for example white water and deep water.
- ◆ There is not much you can do about the weather on the day but some things to keep in mind include:
 - The time of year. What are your chances of wind and rain or very hot days?
 - Water depth. If the water is too low you may find more exposed obstacles such as tree branches, or hit the bottom with the canoes. Banks may also be higher and muddier which could affect access to the river. On the other hand, the river may be subject to flooding or flowing dangerously fast.
- ◆ Weekend rather than week day. Obviously by scheduling your tour on the weekend you will reach a broader audience.
- ◆ Make sure the goals of the tour are clear to participants. Those who understand they are there to learn about the river in an enjoyable way will appreciate your efforts more than those who are there for a free canoe lesson.

- ◆ Children under 14 must be accompanied by an adult and children under 10 should not be allowed to participate. Check with your canoe operator about their requirements.
- ◆ Do not allow school groups to participate unless you are designing the event around their needs. School groups often have different needs and this can upset the experience of other participants.
- ◆ Provide helpful and friendly supervision. Encouraging the 'right' attitude among all involved by being enthusiastic and taking steps to ensure canoe operators, bus drivers, presenters and all other helpers and happy and understand their roles in the event.
- ◆ Find a canoe operator that is happy to take care of all equipment and instruction for the duration of the tour. This will leave you free to concentrate on keeping participants interested and educated.
- ◆ Choose desirable locations and attempt to ensure there is a high likelihood of seeing wildlife.
- ◆ Do not forget to provide access to toilet facilities and be prepared for rubbish collection at lunch stops etc.
- ◆ People do not mind driving for one hour and up to 3 hours to participate.
- ◆ Do not allow participants with their own canoes to join the tour. This complicates liability and insurance claims should an accident occur. It can also compromise the organisation of your event if you are relying on them to provide their own transport.
- ◆ Often people would ask "how much further" on the longer stages. It can be easy for you to forget how far you have gone on the day because your mind is constantly elsewhere, talking to people and ensuring a smooth operation. My suggestion is to place signs along the bank indicating how much further to go e.g. "only 1km to go, keep it up!"
- ◆ Give clear instructions to presenters and give them a timeframe. Let them know what their options are. Some presenters may not want to canoe but could meet the tour at a site of interest. Megaphones are necessary in case the water or wind makes hearing difficult.
- ◆ Promote Waterwatch and get the local media involved! West Gippsland Waterwatch invited journalists to participate and as a result, received excellent local media coverage.
- ◆ Reward participants. Billy tea and warm damper were well received by participants completing the final stages of the canoe tours. This also gives you an opportunity to talk to participants and discover their thoughts about the event and to ask them to respond to a written evaluation form.

- ◆ Have a definitive conclusion and wrap up – sometimes people do not know when to leave! Be clear about who is the final presenter.
- ◆ Allow time for packing up. It can get dark early depending on the time of year.

PROVIDING FEEDBACK OPPORTUNITIES

Use your discussions with participants and the feedback forms to determine if your aims were met. Did participants' knowledge increase and did they have fun? Feedback forms can also be used to:

- ◆ Create further interest in Waterwatch activities by asking if they would they like more information about Waterwatch.
- ◆ Find out where participants are from and who they are. Are they members of Landcare or other conservation groups? This can help you to develop a marketing plan by identifying target groups.
- ◆ How did they hear about the canoe tour? This can indicate areas of your marketing plan that were successful or unsuccessful.
- ◆ Find out what else the community would like to see from Waterwatch. What other topics are they interested in?

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

The activity facilitated personal, team, and leadership development amongst staff. Significant cooperation and organisation was needed to successfully complete this event. You will be exhausted at the end, but it will have been fun and the feedback later makes it worthwhile.

COMMENTS FROM PARTICIPANTS – THE BEST BITS ABOUT THE TOURS:

- ◆ “Learning something new about the local area”
- ◆ “I enjoyed it so much I went out and bought a \$1300 kayak!”
- ◆ “Sense of participation, actually a part of Waterwatch, not just a volunteer”
- ◆ “I enjoyed the whole experience, the canoeing, the talks, the afternoon tea – all put together extremely well”
- ◆ “Seeing the river from the water”
- ◆ “Socialising and networking at lunch”
- ◆ “Provided a unique perspective of the river and different farmer attitudes to stock exclusion”
- ◆ “We learned a lot about our beautiful river and environment and what the local organisations are doing”
- ◆ “It was a great chance to meet people involved and to realise we have the opportunity to also get involved and make a difference”
- ◆ “Speakers were informative and knowledgeable”

References:

Thomas G and Thomas J 2000 “Moving Water Paddling As Critical Outdoor Education” *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education* Vol. 5 No.1