# ENHANCING VISITOR EXPERIENCES AT THE HUNTER WETLANDS CENTRE

## Executive Summary

Visitor research was conducted for the Hunter Wetlands Centre during 2017, with the purpose of increasing visitation and making the Centre more sustainable. Insite Mapping® was used to gain detailed knowledge from volunteers and staff about the activities visitors enjoyed and their particular interests. Volunteers’ enthusiastic participation ensured the success of this approach.

The examples revealed 16 main patterns of visitor activity, for example making images or art of bird activity, seeking adventures or having meetings. These visitor groupings gave rise to ideas for new information and activities that would increase pleasure in and use of the Centre. Suggestions are outlined in Table 2.

The draft report was circulated to CEO and Board members and a presentation was given to volunteers. Further examples of visitors’ use of the Centre were raised during this presentation and they have been included in Table 1.

We suggest three broader groupings be borne in mind when developing activities and content for the wetlands area, the Visitor Centre and the website. Each grouping should be explicitly addressed using the words and content that relate to their interests.

1. **Visitors who are seeking adventure and activity.** This includes walkers, canoeists, children in the adventure playground, orienteering, creating art activities. The point is very active interest in and physical use of this place.
2. **Visitors who are making a close, intense study** of birds, animals and plants or immersing themselves in the environment. These are the artists, scientists, photographers, educators, volunteer workers. Some are established communities related to a practice, such as artists or filmmakers. Their work can help transform the site itself or interpret it for others.
3. **Those who visit to enjoy the space with others** for a communal/social activity or purpose such as meetings, friendship groups, special interest groups and societies, weddings, family celebrations.

A common finding was how bird movement drew attention and provoked questions from visitors. It suggests that movement, not static images, should become a focus of interpretation. Movement lends itself to narratives of adaptation. An overarching concept of ‘Move. Adapt’ is therefore suggested as a starting point for design and interpretation.

# Introduction

Following a suggestion by a Board member, initial discussions were held with Dr Patricia Gillard of Coppice Research, Directors of Hunter Wetlands Centre and the CEO. We agreed there were benefits to the Hunter Wetlands Centre in conducting research that tapped into the knowledge of staff and volunteers about current visitors to the site and how they engage with it.

Insite Mapping® is a structured workshop process, designed in 1998 and used in more than 30 projects to share knowledge of clients, visitors and customers. For the Hunter Wetlands Centre this method would reveal descriptive information of the main ways visitors make use of the site and could be used to enhance communication and interpretation work at the Centre.

An Insite Mapping workshop was designed and conducted to :

* Describe examples of visitor engagement on site
* Delineate major visitor groups
* Discuss current issues and outline changes, especially for the Visitor Centre
* Suggest developments of communication or interpretation that would expand visitor numbers and consolidate future success.

Findings have the potential to increase patronage. Designs for a new Visitor Centre and website could also be shaped by these results.

# Method

During August, 2017 the CEO requested staff and volunteers attend a workshop to discuss what they knew about visitors to the Hunter Wetlands Centre. The Insite Mapping workshop was conducted September 2017, 9.30am to 12.20pm. A short morning tea was provided at 11am.

Sixteen individuals participated in the workshop, mostly working in pairs to discuss examples, then presenting them to others. Some of the examples were discussed by the whole group, who added their knowledge and asked questions. A total of 56 examples were provided in the workshop.

This report uses the knowledge from participants’ observations and shared experience to describe many ways that visitors engage with the birds, animals and natural places of the site, its interpretation and leisure activities, its rich research possibilities and its services providing food, drink, hospitable places to sit or talk and its sense of peacefulness and retreat.

An additional visit was made to the site in October. Further visitor activities were observed and these are listed in Appendix 1. This visit provided a test of developing ideas and the opportunity to take photographs of visitors (with permission) in different parts of the site.

The draft report was circulated to the CEO and Board members and a presentation was given to volunteers, in December. Additional visitors and their uses of the Centre were described during the discussion and these have been included in Table 1. This final report describes the workshop findings and delineates the main visitor groups at the Hunter Wetlands Centre, leading to suggestions for interpretation and communication.

# Findings from Insite Mapping®

The analysis was conducted by Patricia Gillard, who also acted as moderator during the discussion. Fifty-six examples were provided on paper or through discussion. The workshop was taped and Patricia noted examples in detail as well as comments and discussion.

A sample of these follows.

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| Grandparents and grandchildren using their nets near the jetty, hear the birds on the island start to make noise in response to feeding time. A grandparent asks, ‘what’s the big back and white bird?’ |
| A child comes on a walking tour with a camera that has a flat battery. Out on the guided tour with the group of children, she keeps asking about getting a new battery, ‘when are you going to get me a battery?’ She keeps asking and seems to take no interest in where she is. |
| A volunteer puts his hand into the workshop cupboard, looking for some oil. He touches a large possum sleeping. He’s usually there, gains access through the ceiling. I joke, ‘he’s a visitor too’ but two participants say, ‘he lives here’ and ‘he’s a resident’. |
| 4 or 5 mums with toddlers are noticed together as a staff member walks down the ramp. A toddler climbs over the middle handrail and falls flat on his back on the torpedo grass. He doesn’t get wet. He screams and his mum jumps over the top handrail. So does the staff member, who apologises. The mother says, ‘He’s a boy. He’s tough’. |
| A group of primary school children on an excursion are dip-netting and adding more and more contents from nets into the bowls. They don’t stop to observe what they have caught, as requested by the teachers. The teacher provides a larger container and encourages them to go slower. |
| Two men, paramedics recently retired, ask where they can go to photograph specific birds they are interested in. The Water Ribbon Pond is suggested, where they will find baby swans to photograph. |
| At reception, a volunteer tells a mother with two children about the playground. On her way out she says, ‘I loved it and I will return’. She also becomes a member. |
| A school teacher has just completed a class activity near the bush tucker garden. She comments to a volunteer on the usefulness of the plant ID signs, ‘the signs helped me to identify the plants’. |
| The Hunter Bird Observers Club have their monthly meeting in the conference room. They use that time to talk about birds, hear talks and share their passion for observing birds, with each other. |
| At reception the volunteer says, ‘Welcome, can I help you?’ to a man with a child. He says, ‘No I’m right’. They look around the tanks then head off into the wetlands without paying. The volunteer has to chase after him and ask him to pay. He expresses surprise that there is a charge. |
| A wedding reception is in progress at the grassed area behind the Chapel, complete with finger food and music. A red bellied black snake pays a visit and the guests are very interested, making a circle around it. A volunteer asks them to leave a pathway for the snake to escape. |
| As part of a school holiday activity, children are looking at bird nests to identify their features. Then, in groups, they use materials on site to create their own bird’s nests. |
| A volunteer attends a seminar about the new orienteering course that has been designed by the Hunter Orienteering group. It is presented in the Visitor Centre and on the grounds and a new brochure has been developed. Other volunteers attend this presentation by the club. |

This research was very productive in the number and scope of examples, reflecting the diversity of the site and the willingness of participants to share their experiences. The examples were categorised using the following labels. One example could belong in a number of categories. Further details are provided for four categories.

1. About animals
2. Taking place in the Visitor Centre
3. Example where natural environment needed to be ‘managed’
4. Photography/filming
5. Special places
6. Part of an interpreted activity
7. Research activity
8. Educational activity
9. Seeking information
10. **About animals**

In 21 examples, visitors, volunteers and others mentioned the following animals.

* Spiders, possum,
* Native birds, Australian birds, Freckled duck, Black cockatoos
* Pond birds (Egret)
* Snakes (diamond python, red belly black snake, brown snakes, snake skin)
* Lizard, reptiles (crocodile)
* Pond insects
* Taxidermied animals.

It’s good to be reminded that these are ‘centre stage’ in the wetlands, for visitors. People were not passive. There was delight, surprise, questioning, fascination, drawing.

Four examples concerned encounters with animals where visitors needed help or information. Questions about snakes by visitors from Asia, the sudden appearance of a spider or diamond python and the possum who took up residence in the workshop cupboard were all mentioned.

Those working at the Hunter Wetlands Centre well understand that this is a natural environment where, like the possum, animals ‘are residents here’. However, communicating this clearly to visitors can be difficult sometimes, especially when the animals behave in ways they don’t anticipate or know how to respond to appropriately.

1. **Activity in the Visitor Centre**

The complexity and importance of the Visitor Centre came through in the 15 examples of activities located there. It was an entry point where people were asked to pay if going out into the site, and for canoe hire. The reception was a source of information, a place of greeting, comment by visitors (‘I haven’t been here since primary school’) and one of the places that animals suddenly appeared (in this case, a spider). It was also a recreation site in itself (a ‘peaceful’ place where a woman visits every Friday) or a good meeting space (for three business men).

The Visitor Centre café provides food and drink adjacent to interpretation spaces about animals, including fascinating reptiles that move and taxidermied animals - and where questions are asked and answered minute to minute. It is clear that visitors are closely observed by people on reception who anticipate needs, seek feedback and talk about interests (for example, the father and son whose photos and cameras were discussed with an office manager). Sometimes volunteers at reception spring into action to seek payment as people march past and they also keep an eye on the café. This was especially important on a day when the cafe was closed but visitors still wanted food and took it without paying. It is remarkable how well the Visitor Centre operates, with the active support of volunteers there. There are also issues (see section below) that could be resolved more effectively with a different layout.

1. **Photography/filming**

Seven examples described people with cameras, taking photos or films. Most of these were of birds: some for aesthetic or tourist reasons, others for more scientific purposes (for example, the time lapse video ten years ago of bird strikes on the overhead power lines). One exception was a volunteer who regularly took pleasure in walking and appreciating the landscape and features of the wetlands. The photos enhanced this experience of being in nature, with an emphasis on the plants, sky, water and general features. Photography was also an element of tours for school groups or school holiday activities. It is clear that interest in photography, whether of birds, wetlands animals or landscapes, creates a distinctive set of visitors. Many come regularly and are known to staff and volunteers.

1. **Special places**

Participants were asked to give examples of visitor activities in particular places. Apart from the Visitor Centre and the Chapel five other places were mentioned. At the Ironbark Creek, children delighted in running along the boardwalk. It was safe for them to move, make noise and be met at the end by parents. It was also a beautiful natural environment with birds and water sounds.

Positive comments were received at reception about the children’s playground. A group of mothers and pre-schoolers met there regularly. One participant commented that the playground was itself an

interpretation space, through sculptures, ceramics and information that relates to other parts of the wetlands. Through their enjoyment and the safety and amenity they find there, young children and adults make special use of this space.

# Defining the main visitor groups

Comparing all 56 examples, the next step in this report is to form more general categories for the ways visitors interacted with the Hunter Wetlands Centre. These ways of interacting on site define the visitor groups.

The following section recasts the knowledge provided by participants to show how particular visitor interests are related to the Centre’s places/activities/contents. Turned around, this also reveals how places/activities/contents **bring visitors to the site**. This thinking in reverse can be used to reveal what amenities or interpretation may attract new visitors.

Keeping the main visitors in focus can help with most of the current work at the Centre. It helps in deciding what more could be done to increase visitors like those who come now. Once you see patterns, not just individuals, it’s easier to see how the Centre provides for them and improve interpretation.

Thinking from the perspective of a few different kinds of visitors sidesteps everyday administrative labels and creates new ways to ‘see’ that are still firmly based on what really happens at the site.

Table 1. Main visitor groups

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| **Visitor activity (How/what)** | **Usual Visitors (Who, who with?)** |
| 1. **Seeking out particular places** with special features, privacy or focussed activity. | Young children with mothers, small family groups, couples. |
| 1. **Holding meetings** at the café or in conference rooms. | Business proprietors, friends, clubs eg bridge players. |
| 1. **Relaxing, soaking In the atmosphere** on the deck or walking to quiet, peaceful areas. | Individuals and small groups.  Women. |
| 1. **Excited by animals**; their sudden or dramatic movement and curious about why. | Children and adults together, school children. |
| 1. **Celebrating with others** in the natural setting. | Friends at the café, birthday parties, weddings, extended families. |
| 1. **Filming, photographing or making art** with birds/animals/ physical environment. The image and their experience are both important. | Amateur/professional photographers, filmmakers, artists, broadcasters, students, researchers. |
| 1. **Creating new objects and images** in a group using found objects at the site. | School age children, special interest groups. |
| 1. **Having fun doing educational activities**. Not quite as designed by adults. | School age children, working closely with adult(s), teachers, helpers in workshop or out in the field. |
| 1. **Having an adventure**. Canoe trip, orienteering. | Parent/child or adult/adult |
| 1. **Intense interest in birds** and their behaviour on site. Researching or observing seasonal migration, studying climate change, making connections local to international. | Individuals or pairs of scientists, students, wilderness and wetlands organisations. Bird experts, followers. Repeat or regular visitors, international tourists. |
| 1. **Work to conserve** the environment/birds/animals. | Volunteers, staff, board members, sponsors, interns. |
| 1. **Making use of the accessible features,** for example the lift between the Visitor Centre/café and wetlands grounds, viewing platform and boardwalks, mobility buggy. | People with disabilities including carers and those in wheelchairs. Includes many volunteers and those on Centrelink or other disability supports. |
| 1. **Releasing native animals** found or those wounded and restored to health. | Groups like the Native Trust Fund, known individuals such as the ‘possum lady’ and those who release animals in secret. |
| 1. **Festivals, cultural and musical performances.** | Busker’s Festival, Maitland Rep Club, ‘Wind in the Willows’ staged during school holidays. |
| 1. **Staging events for fundraising.** | Community organisations, for example Seniors week, HWC fundraising with members. |
| 1. **Breaking the fence or entering the site illegally.** | Children, local people and neighbours, poachers. |

# Issues

When co-workers share their knowledge, common issues are likely to arise. There were four during this workshop.

1. **Money**

A few jokes were made about charging people extra for surprise events like finding a snake-skin or a toddler who climbed through a handrail. One participant joked that they should have insisted, ‘You **pay** to jump over the handrails here’. Each time, people laughed at the absurdity of it. These jokes showed their awareness of the need to ‘leverage’ visitor experiences to fund the Centre’s work.

1. **The complexities of the Visitor Centre**

From the workshop examples, volunteers at the entrance to the Visitor Centre had a demanding task. Examples showed they were observant and responsive, using previous knowledge of visitors to suggest places to visit or activities of likely interest. They also had the job of charging visitors in a physical setup where who pays for admission and activities (and how much) were not clearly demarcated. Appropriate payment relies on the interaction between receptionists and visitors. When visitors did not know what they wanted to do this was more difficult. There were two examples of volunteers having to chase payment; one when a father and son walked down into the wetlands and did not remain in the Visitor Centre and the other when visitors should have made an additional payment before using canoes. Other tasks in the Visitor Centre included introducing and being well informed about new activities, for example the new orienteering course and brochure.

Volunteers at reception are often the first ones to be informed or to give information when ‘nature’ in the form of spiders, snakes and other animals come across visitor’s paths unexpectedly. Volunteers in the Visitor Centre hold much of the knowledge of what ‘goes on’ day to day there and across the site. They seek feedback about new services such as the café. They are also interpreters, matching visitor interests to the site’s possibilities. These different roles conflict on some occasions. On the one hand they encourage people to participate; on the other they insist on payment that visitors may not have expected.

1. **Children ‘negotiating’ the learning activity**

Involvement of children in structured learning activities was described as a regular occurrence on site. However there is a consistent ‘negotiation’ that seems to happen between the ways teachers or guides expect the activities to proceed and the play that happens when children are actively involved.

In one example, children competed with each other by dip-netting quantities of creatures rather than closely observing a few specimens. It was hard to slow them down and teach them to look. In another example a teacher reacted badly to a child who walked off with a net. Children were very active: demanding a new camera battery, reacting to the movement of reptiles, asking questions about stuffed animals and making an association between the sound of the live bird and stuffed objects they saw, for example a Kookaburra. Children’s powers of observation were impressive in the making of journey sticks after closely observing bird footprints on their walk. In the wetlands environment, both their learning and their responses couldn’t be governed as effectively as in a classroom. However, this was part of the energy and enjoyment of discovery.

1. **Debating the ‘real’ mission of the Centre**

There was an important discussion during the workshop where some participants were critical of visitors who stayed in the coffee shop and did not set foot in the wetlands and take an interest in the animals. One person remarked, ‘Half our visitors don’t *want* the animals’. This was disappointing to volunteers who contrasted it with a woman photographer who was offered a tour of the whole wetlands when she was watching black cockatoos and insisted, ‘Why would I leave…I’m not leaving these birds!’. Others sit on the deck and are not as passionate, ‘Oh yeah – birds out there’. One volunteer wanted everyone who comes, ‘to be amazed … that’s our job’. He was reminded that some visitors, and some volunteers, are focused not so much on the animals but ‘trees, bush, ambience’.

# Activities and interpretation for visitors

The visitor groupings from the 56 examples suggest new interpretation that will increase visitors’ involvement. With the main groupings of visitors/interests as a base, it is possible to systematically expand community interests and move the Centre to being sustained by its visitors and members.

A regular social occasion that was held monthly for volunteers may also attract others to come to the event as paying guests. Other communities of interest can be developed from visitors with intense interest in birds (scientists, birdwatchers) or who make films, photographs or art. Over time, they could become audiences for each other’s work as well as contributing material for a cultural and research archive.

Table 2 considers visitor groupings from the workshop and suggests interpretation or communication for them. The aim is to increase engagement and encourage others like them to visit. Over time, this systematic approach would increase the numbers of visitors and enhance the quality of their experiences on site.

Table 2 Suggested interpretation activities

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| **Visitor group** | **Information/Interpretation** |
| **Seeking out particular places** *and* **Celebrating with others** | Brochure with information for family groupings. Picture and list playground, Chapel, BBQ, deck etc. Give info’ about fees, food, safety, membership.  Refer to ranger talks, group activities for children. |
| **Holding meetings** | List of formal and informal spaces, booking, fees.  Describe food services available, give contact info. |
| **Relaxing, soaking In the atmosphere** ***and*** **Intense interest in birds** | ‘Best and beautiful places’ brochure. Combine a schematic diagram/map and inspiration with lovely images. Focus on the best vistas, seats, viewing places for birds, quiet natural nooks. Doubles as promotion of Hunter Wetlands Centre alongside practical information eg booking events. |
| **Excited by animals** | Use larger blackboard or whiteboard about 6 metres inside the Visitor Centre on the wall to list current bird *activity* and location, ‘Come to…’ (eg the ranger talk). Use volunteer knowledge to change this every day. *Make it active.* |
| **Filming, photographing or making art** *and* **Intense interest in birds** | Provide ‘Best and Beautiful Places’ brochure.  Ask briefly about their work, request they fill in log book when leaving. Give wetlands card and ask them to send in images/info, possibly for Centre to show. This builds on tradition and creates a community of interest. |
| **Creating new objects and images** **in a group** *and* **Having fun doing educational activities** | Build on the current activities list and art/craft displays on site to create a space in the Visitor Centre for recent objects/photos/ images and children’s own words about them. These could be alongside particular animals if they are relevant.  Ask children/parents to take their own photos/drawings and email/text them, with word description.  With art and with education, focus on animal movement/behaviour, not just the object. |
| **Having an adventure** | Pull together information on canoe trips, orienteering, expeditions and night tours into a brochure especially for parents with older children (usually attending in twos and threes).  Use active, discovery-oriented language. Say what to bring.  Provide extra resources when requested by these kinds of visitors or offer it to them when they ask for active things to do, Don’t leave these resources eg, orienteering map, for general visitors. |
| **Intense interest in birds** | When people with special equipment/activity on site are noticed, seek Hunter Wetlands Centre person to discuss their research.  Ask visitor(s) to write about work in log book. Invite them to send publications and work to Hunter Wetlands Centre. If Interested in Hunter Wetlands Centre art/ photography/ special events, request their email to include them with news to members/supporters. |
| **Work to conserve the Centre’s environment** | Foster a community based on members, volunteers, supporters, through a monthly social event. Give a brief update, name special volunteers. Charge non-volunteers. Name the event and aim to build a community of Friends to assist Hunter Wetlands Centre’s sustainability. Ask Friends to inform their own networks. |

# Providing for visitor groups in the Visitor Centre

The Insite Mapping provided detailed information about activities in the Visitor Centre and raised the issues discussed above. The entry to the Centre contains many different signs and objects and these have originally been placed there for a purpose not known to the researcher.

While acknowledging that one workshop and one observation visit is not a comprehensive base for redesigning the whole Visitor Centre, there are some changes that could be made, for it to serve the main visitors more effectively. Every object, sign and space at the entrance and inside the building needs to be considered for what it contributes to the purpose of the Centre and which visitor group(s) it is addressing. This is what is suggested:

Simplify and open the space at the entrance to make areas that are more visible and related to particular interests. This assumes experienced volunteers can move within this larger space to answer questions, direct visitors, take fees and sell goods. This is what they are often doing at present.

Move the information desk to be near the ramp into the wetlands and take away the metal ‘gates’. This improves the ‘flow’ and places the desk at a point where entry fees are expected. The ‘shop; that contains objects for children and vending machines should be nearby (where it is currently) and some wall and display space relevant to the education and group activities for children. Maps and brochures about creative/educational activities belong here and a few beanbags for reading/browsing closer to the wall might delineate this area. The wall space that is most visible is about 6 metres into the Centre on the right hand wall. This is best used for a screen of information about current activities and a board with big lettering about entry fees.

The corner that is the current location for the reception desk could focus on specific information and images about bird, animals, wetlands etc. This includes gifts for adults and the brochures about ‘Best and beautiful places’. If there is room, a small table and chairs could encourage adult visitors likely to be researchers or photographers to fill in the log book and take a closer look at any displays of recent work by others on shelving, or informal information left there about relevant exhibitions and events in Newcastle and the Hunter. The screen showing donated images under the large wall sign could also be viewed from this corner. On the lowest shelves, the tourism information that the Centre provides would be available.

This scheme allows some changes to the area left of the entrance door currently housing reptiles, which could be opened up by placing the showcases in a large arc. It would have the advantage of

providing more space for the educational sessions. A screen in this area could show the more dramatic images of animal behavior and summary information, for example brochures about adventurous activities at the Centre, including canoeing, orienteering etc. This space attracts those wanting experience of the animals as well as their own adventures. The volunteers can see clearly what visitors are looking at and assist them, as they do now. The end of the arc, where visitors turn left to the deck and café, may be a good place to locate a payment box.

Additional kinds of information needed by volunteers to answer queries should be available at the reception desk but not necessarily on display. Examples are the orienteering map, list of prices for hire of rooms, information about the café and catering and special events hire, for example the chapel. Removing this information from view focuses visitors on the material that is designed for them, in the areas most likely to attract them.

If you adopt the perspective of each of the visitor groupings in turn, some signs or objects at the entrance or within the Centre jump out as being inappropriate or even discouraging. These should be repositioned to a relevant place in the Centre. For example, a family group excited to be coming for a canoe trip may be puzzled at a sign that suggests they become still and focus on the senses. Yet this sign may be very fitting on a path that leads to one of the beautiful, quiet places or in making visitors aware of the sensory garden around them. Signs and objects that are out of date should be removed.

# Payment

In most cultural and environmental sites payment is an issue. Volunteers were very aware of this at the Hunter Wetlands Centre. It is important to be very clear about this when communicating to visitors, especially at the entrance, so people can make choices and not be anxious or embarrassed.

One suggestion is to define three kinds of payment:

* a contribution of $1 from those over 16 who come to the Visitor Centre building and café.
* A fee of $5 for those over 16 who visit the grounds of the Wetlands
* A hiring fee for those who use canoes (or other special equipment/tours)

The different costs should be made clear on the outside wall at the entrance, at the reception desk near the ramp to the wetlands and at the shed where canoes are hired.

It will require:

* A payment box and sign for those remaining in the Visitor Centre/café, for example *Visitor Centre and café $1 (children under 16 years free)*
* A separate sign at the rampway/reception desk for example *Entry to grounds $5 (children under 16 years free) Groups $20*
* A list at the outside doorway to the Visitor Centre that gives details such as,

*Fees:*

*Visitor Centre building $1 (Members and children under16 years free)*

*Entry to grounds for wetlands, boardwalk, playground*

*$5 (Members and children under 16 years free)*

*$20 groups*

*Hire of canoes, motor transport etc see reception desk*

* A sign at the shed where canoes are hired, which details the extra costs.

# Overall, shift the focus in communication to bird and animal *movements*

Communicating the purpose of the Centre is important to those who work there and they prefer visitors to be actively engaged in understanding the animals and birds. Some expressed disappointment at people who just sit on the deck and treat the wetlands as a backdrop. This contrasts with a view that gives the birds a central place where, as one volunteer expressed it, the birds ‘are the residents. We are the visitors’.

It was an important finding, then, to establish that the adults and children who did engage with animals and birds, did so in response to their movements or activity. For example the sudden movement of a number of birds at feeding time that prompted a question from grandparents.

Children seemed to resist the idea of just observing. THEY wanted to be in the act too. In one educational activity they kept catching and counting specimens instead of observing them more closely to answer questions. They turned the catching into a competition with each other.

When close engagement with creatures was a central activity, this seemed more successful. The making and decorating of ‘journey sticks’ made use of children’s observation of bird footprints. In another example the invitation to touch the skins of reptiles in the ranger talk (as well as the participative question and answer format) drew children and adults to more knowledge of the creatures.

With children and their carers, the *activities* of birds and other animals should be the focus of interpretation. They will be interested in what birds DO and why. Action, activities and lively language are preferred to a focus on names and appearance. Such a shift in language to describing animal movement will also confirm to visitors that the Centre is a place where a lot happens.

The focus on motion fits well with the use of screens to communicate visual images about the Centre. The presence of volunteers throughout the site also makes it possible to make and use short video clips to give examples and highlight bird activity as it happens each day.

This general approach does not necessarily apply to the visitor groups who are already knowledgeable about birds through researching them, capturing images or representing them in various media. Observation of birds at rest might be more desirable for aesthetic purposes. It would be illuminating to discuss the significance of movement or stillness with the visitors who are engaged in artistic or research work.

Overall a deliberate and systematic shift in communication to more active language and reporting of bird activity is likely to appeal more to the human visitors. Such a focus goes to answering the ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions that lead to a deeper knowledge and understanding.

Dr Patricia Gillard

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April, 2018

# Appendix 1

**Further visitor examples observed at the Hunter Wetlands Centre,**

**October, 2017**

A bridge club based in Newcastle use part of the education facilities Sunday morning and this includes a buffet lunch at the area near the main pond. They play bridge with great concentration.

A party of ten people visits the chapel Sunday morning for a rehearsal of their wedding, along with the Celebrant. The bride and groom, their baby and extended family all come and a very experienced volunteer shows them all of the facilities, including a motorised buggy for relatives with mobility issues and where the wedding cars can be parked and the bride will enter.

A group of volunteers from the Lions Club work in the barbeque area and speak to the researcher, showing photos from almost thirty years ago when they commenced their reclamation work. There were no trees when they began. They enjoy a lunch break at the same location.

Parents and children using the playground return to the Visitor Centre at 12.30 for a talk about lizards and snakes. The ranger and a trained volunteer discuss lizards, snakes and turtles and the animals are shown and held for them to touch.

A group of adults comes to the Centre for breakfast on the deck. It is a family celebration and they are there for over two hours.

A meeting is held on the deck to introduce new volunteers to the Centre and conduct an induction interview. The meeting is held regularly at this time and place.

Two boys kneel to look at the lizards in an enclosure and one boy points to where the lizards are sitting. When the lizards move, they also move their bodies and speak with delight.

An artist from the USA who paints birds is thrilled with her experience and the photographs taken at the Centre. She has the novel experience of watching the bird from underneath, as it takes off overhead and begins its flight.