

Greenish Tasmania

Australia's ecofriendly island is doing fine except for one persistent, cutting problem.

By Jonathan B. Tourtellot

With a score of 77, Tasmania rated very well on our 2004 Destination Scorecard survey, in which a panel of experts on stewardship used six criteria (see box) to evaluate 115 destinations. The full survey is at www.nationalgeographic.com/traveler.

LOOK! AN ECHIDNA!" Gabi Mocatta, my guide, points over the steering wheel at the creature scuttling off the smooth macadam ahead. It's early December in eastern Tasmania. Southern-hemisphere spring infuses an inviting countryside of farm, forest, and the occasional Georgian homestead. And a beaked, egg-laying mammal that looks like a four-legged oversize sea urchin is crossing the road.

That's Tasmania-comfortably normal feeling for a visiting American, until the wildly exotic injects itself.

Most Tasmanians see the value of their unusual flora and fauna. Much of the western side of the West Virginiasize island consists of national parks and reserves, listed as a World Heritage area for its temperate rain forest of myrtle, leatherwood, and Huon pines as much as 2,000 years old. In drier areas, eucalypts can grow 300 feet high, the tallest trees anywhere but California. License plates read "Your Natural State."

Tasmania is an ecotourism paradise -with one big "except." As one Destination Scorecard panelist noted, "All aspects are positive, except for logging."

Parts of the old-growth forest are still slated for clear-cutting. Logging, a traditional industry in Tasmania, became a bone of contention in Australia's last national election. The resulting compromise locked away 300,000 additional old-growth acres, but not the debate. A proposal for a pulp mill on the north coast keeps the controversy hot.

Clearly, Tasmanians care. They have protected 40 percent of the state. They want attractive Hobart, the capital, to keep new houses off the ridgelines. They fret about farmland shrinking as tree plantations expand, yet feel that's still preferable to cutting old growth.

"Anybody who lives here has a feeling for custodianship," says baker Ben Kearney. He should know; in the east coast town of Coles Bay, retailers endorsed his scheme to eliminate plastic shopping bags. Discarded, they can be deadly to marine wildlife. Australia's first "plastic bag free" town has now inspired others to follow.

The lodge in nearby Freycinet National Park similarly touts its lowimpact design and operations. This pervading greenishness makes a real difference; at the Freycinet Marine Farm, Andrea Cole tells me these waters are among the last in the world where raw oysters need no purification and retain "that lovely salt-sea taste." I try one. She's right.

But Tasmania is more than nature. History lives in buildings and houses erected more than a century ago by convicts and transportees from England. Some colonial-era houses now serve as upscale B&Bs. Over on the island's wilder western side, Tasmanians turned an abandoned mining railroad into the West Coast Wilderness Railway, running from the historic village of Strahan inland

through forests and gorges. Beyond lie the old-growth forests. Many are safe; some still face the chain saw.

My recommendation: Visit Tasmania, and help a logger find a job in tourism.

My Take on Tasmania

** Environment The passion of the logging debate bespeaks public concern for protecting nature and the thriving ecotourism industry.*

** Culture High, for a rural state, even in the kitchen, since good produce and seafood hold promise for the culinary arts. Check out "The Taste" festival in Hobart every summer.*

** Historic Structures Lots survive. Look for "Colonial Accommodation" for upscale B&Bs.*

** Aesthetics Few billboards; attractive, uncluttered landscapes. Notable eyesore: the blockhouse-like casino on Hobart's harbor.*

** Tourism Management So far, so good. Future threats: Too many cruise ship daytrippers and spots of overcommercialization.*

** General Outlook Good, provided the state doesn't let tourism get out of hand. -J.B.T.*