Australian Aboriginal Ecotourism in the Wet Tropics Rainforest of Queensland, Australia

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A living, 40,000-year-old culture

There are more than 430,000 Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia, constituting about 2% of the total population. Whereas southern nations have become acculturated and urbanized to a large extent, many of the northern communities maintain a more traditional lifestyle, often occupying isolated settlements in their traditional homelands in the Outback. Throughout Australia some 40,000 significant Aboriginal sites have been identified and placed in the register of the National Estate and in State Registers. Many of them are sacred sites with highly restricted access for outsiders. As a living culture, there is an indivisibility between Aboriginal society, its culture,
and the biophysical environment, and ecotourism as undertaken by the Aborigines is therefore as much cultural as it is nature based.

**Marketing of exotic “otherness”**

The culture and art of the Aborigines have featured prominently in marketing Australia internationally and domestically as a unique asset that provides the continent with a distinct image (Figure 2). Such marketing stereotypes all Aborigines as “primitive” desert nomads (the “noble savage”). It perpetuates only one form of Aboriginal cultural expression and denies the diversity of contemporary Aboriginality, with a majority of Aborigines living in towns and cities. Nostalgia for the past and marketeers’ preoccupation with “the exotic other” ignores contemporary expressions of Aboriginal culture, emphasizing a hiatus between the Aboriginal past and present.

There are historical differences and great regional diversity among Aboriginal communities. At the community level many groups differentiate themselves strongly from their neighbors, and as the Aboriginal Tourism Association noted, particular groups have authority over the ownership of knowledge about the activities of ancestral heroes and creator figures related to their own tribal lands. Aboriginal communities are highly critical of promotional and marketing literature and activities that categorize them as “cultural objects.” Increasingly, Aboriginal communities are disparaging of what they perceive as cultural exploitation. When this extends to the use of Aboriginal designs and motifs by nonindigenous Australians (and even by members of their own society who are not tribally approved as presenters of specific “stories” with their accompanying designs and motifs), some Aboriginal groups take exception.

**Commerce versus culture**

Until the last decade, very little Aboriginal tourism product was in fact owned by Aborigines, and even government tourism authorities did not consider it necessary to consult Aborigines in utilizing indigenous images for marketing. A fundamental paradox is that although Aborigines may be advantageously positioned to deliver Aboriginal ecotourism in contrast to non-Aborigines, a range of sociocultural factors allied to the economically disadvantaged milieu and the generally low educational standards of most communities can inhibit the product from being delivered and converted to economic benefit.

Thus, the dilemma of commerce versus culture raises its head. Policies of government and funding agencies are often based on the need to address equity of opportunity for the disadvantaged minority. They, therefore, emphasize commercial viability for economic ends. Frequently, however, Aboriginal participants and cultural bodies (from both the government and the private sector) see ecotourism as serving cultural objectives first. These differences in direction take their toll on the sustainability of Aboriginal tourism ventures:

- A tourist presence might trespass onto sacred sites and impact negatively on religious beliefs.
- Traditional Aboriginal society is one where many elements of traditional beliefs and practices cannot be shared with outsiders; a wide range of information or activity (or both) can be transmitted only to initiated group members. The presentation of very traditional Aboriginal cultures to tourists is thus not possible.
- Increased inflow of tourists might disrupt a community’s willingness, or ability,

“Look there! You see a mountain. We see the spirits of our ancestors.

Look here! You see trees. We see a living spirit for each tree.”

(Kuku Yalanji Guide, Mossman Gorge, Australia, January 2002)
It is essential to note that because of the indivisibility of society and environment “ecotourism” in Aboriginal terms automatically and integrally encompasses and incorporates culture, and ecotourism will often be referred to by them as “cultural tourism” because it is seen to be more inclusive.

A key provision of the 1998 Bill requires the Minister to “have regard to the principle that indigenous persons are the primary source of information about the significance of particular areas or objects in terms of indigenous traditions.”

In short, a range of negative social, cultural, and environmental impacts caused by tourism and tourists could lead to the rejection of an economically viable opportunity with identifiable financial benefits. Cultural, social, and environmental costs might outweigh economic benefits in the eyes of Aboriginals.

Moreover, business skills tend to be rudimentary or nonexistent in many Aboriginal communities and are often combined with a scarcity of business capital and a lack of expertise in promotion, marketing, and advertising. This situation should not be surprising given the economic marginalization of most Aboriginal communities, with the resultant high levels of poverty and dependence on welfare. Small-scale ecotourism ventures often need a long time to achieve economic viability, and their smallness and low capital reserves make marketing extremely difficult. There is often little understanding of the need for long-term commitment and management expertise to run a venture successfully. Additionally, because a venture requires complex interactive processes with a range of outside interests (suppliers, travel agents, advertising and media, local government authorities, visitors from overseas countries, and so on), low levels of education, often imprecise and limited usage of English, and cultural hurdles may make effective communication difficult.

Recent improvements

Although all these constraints continue in differing degrees, there have been key developments aimed at empowering the disadvantaged Aboriginal communities in the past 10 years. The Royal Commission looking into the Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in 1991 identified indigenous tourism as a major growth area that could assist in alleviating the poor socioeconomic conditions of many Aboriginal communities, and US$10 million was allocated for investment over a five-year period. In 1993 an Aboriginal Tourism Industry Advisory Committee was established, followed by the Aboriginal Tourism Association (an industry body) in 1995, and in 1997 the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tourism Industry Strategy (NAT-SITIS) was launched, with follow-up forums in 2000. The 1998 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Bill has provided a powerful legislative umbrella to monitor and enforce adequate protection of the indigenous heritage.

In addition to these initiatives at the national and federal level, states and territories have moved in parallel to establish Indigenous Tourism sections within their own tourism commissions. The result is a quantum leap in the number of Aboriginal-owned and -managed tourism operations, many of them in the field of ecotourism in those areas where they have access to their traditional lands and where the culture of the Dreamtime remains vibrant and strong.

An important caveat remains: Gido Mapunda underlines that Aborigines “still experience inequality and are generally politically, socially and economically disadvantaged,” and there are still more nonindigenous interests involved in Aboriginal tourism than the Aborigines themselves. One area where Aborigines have been successful in establishing ecotourism ventures is in the wet tropics rainforest mountains of northern Queensland.
People of the wet tropics rainforest

In pre-European contact times there were an estimated 5500 rainforest Aborigines comprising 16 language groups. Their traditional tribal boundaries were somewhat larger than the 8000 km² encompassed by the boundary of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area (Figure 3), which is based largely on biophysical determinants of the remnant rainforests of the region. Their tropical environment was far removed from the arid open spaces of the stereotypical desert nomad, the cycles of the seasons dominated by the annual monsoon rains, which dumped their moisture on the mountains of the Great Dividing Range and created the almost impenetrable fastnesses of vast tropical rainforests.

This environment generated for the rainforest Aborigines a set of social structures, spiritual beliefs, and hunting and gathering skills very different from those of their desert counterparts. Although most tribal groups were removed from their rainforest habitat and resettled in mission stations and government reserves 100 years ago, the people retained sufficient connection with their land to ensure that their contemporary relationship incorporates a significant store of traditional knowledge. Thus, to present-day descendants of the Rainforest Aboriginal people, “the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area is a series of complex ‘living’ cultural landscapes” (see the Web site www.wet tropics.gov.au/rah/people_rainforest.htm).

Kuku Yalanji Dreamtime Tours

With an award in 2000 for the “Best Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tourism Operation in Queensland” after only 2 years in operation, “Kuku Yalanji Dreamtime Tours” exemplifies the new assertiveness of Aboriginal involvement in ecotourism operations. The Kuku Yalanji are the indigenous inhabitants of the land that stretches from around Cooktown in the north to near Chillagoe in the west and Port Douglas in the south, an area that is 100 km north of Cairns.

Traditional Kuku Yalanji society was territorial, diverse, socially complex, and distinguished by a single language that still exists today. Over the centuries, the people followed seasonal cycles as they camped, hunted, and gathered food, medicines, and other materials for daily use. They traveled along a complex of interconnected walking tracks that led to campsites, places of cultural significance and social and economic importance, and resource-rich areas. These tracks also defined the boundaries of each clan’s traditional estates and are considered cultur-

We are the true rainforest people, who live in harmony with our environment. We are part of it and it is part of us. Our culture has always involved a deep respect for nature and an intimate knowledge of its cycles. What we know about the plants of the rainforest we learn from our Elders—our Fathers, Grandfathers, Mothers, Uncles and Aunties. What we know belongs to them, to our culture and our traditions. It belongs to our people, the Kuku Yalanji—we are happy to share it with you.

Bamanga Bubu Ngadimunku Inc.

For who better to interpret our environment for tourists than indigenous people who have developed an understanding and knowledge of their country which can never be duplicated by nonindigenous tour guides.

Lowitja O’Donoghue, Aboriginal elder, magistrate, and activist for her people’s rights, 23 October 1996

“The rainforest is our place. It is the place of our ancestors.

To understand the forest is to understand the way everything in it works together.

The sun, the earth, the water, the plants, the animals, all make the rainforest alive.”

(Song of the Kuku Yalanji of Mossman Gorge; Source: Kuku Yalanji Dreamtime Tours web site)
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Professor Sofield’s degrees in social anthropology and environmental science have been combined in pursuit of research related to indigenous peoples and tourism. In the past 10 years he has focused on tourism as a tool for poverty alleviation in the island countries of the South Pacific, Nepal, and China (where there are 55 minorities).

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FURTHER READING


Kuku Yalanji Dreamtime Tours. Web site: www.greatbarrierreef.aus.net/yalanji/.


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