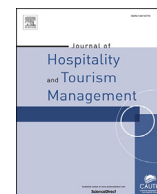




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'Walkabout' tourism: The Indigenous tourism market for Outback Australia

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ABSTRACT

Tourism development for remote Indigenous 'places' is globally expounded for the potential to garner economic benefits for socio-economically disadvantaged Indigenous citizens. In remote 'Outback' areas of Australia, where half the population are First Australians, tourism is an important industry but has been in decline in recent decades. Whilst Indigenous tourism product development has been pursued it has, along with other niche markets, delivered at best limited and isolated successes. But Indigenous people in Outback Australia are themselves highly mobile, making frequent and regular trips away from home communities and towns. In the past these trips were labelled derogatorily as 'walkabout', in spite of trip characteristics positing those 'on the move' firmly within accepted definitions of tourism. Few studies to date have explicitly considered Indigenous citizens as tourists, and there has been no systematic research on the potential size or characteristics of the 'market', an awkward contradiction given the historical focus on generating tourism at places where Indigenous people live. This research analyses Census data for Australia from the perspective of providing baseline information about the potential of the Indigenous tourist market to support Outback tourism, focusing on identifying the size and characteristics of the internal Outback market and the flows and characteristics of people to and from other meta regions. The results clearly demonstrate there is a potential, with the profile of Indigenous visitors to Outback areas being very different to those travelling away. With financial gains being only one of the potential benefits, this should prompt a re-envisioning of the phenomenon of Indigenous mobility as it may relate to tourism and encourage a research agenda examining market development.

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1. Introduction

Indigenous people in Australia number around 600,000, with 120,000 of these living in remote or 'Outback' areas (Van Caenegem, Cleary, & Drahos, 2014). Outback (or, alternatively, 'remote') living Indigenous residents are known to be highly mobile on a short-term basis. Trips between the many small Outback communities (where the large majority of residents are Indigenous), to and from service towns and other larger communities are documented as part of everyday life (Prout & Yap, 2010).

Historically, trips were met with derision from officious bodies whose remit was the assimilation and rectitude of First Australians (Taylor, Johns, Steenkamp, & Williams, 2011) and, exhibiting this lack of understanding and empathy, the term 'walkabout' was widely adopted to denote the seemingly unexplainable and unplanned itineraries associated with trips 'away from home' (Petersen, 2004).

In the contemporary era, governments in nations like Australia and Canada have enacted policies to 'normalise' the socio-economic conditions for remote living Indigenous people (Taylor & Carson, 2009). In this context, short-term Indigenous mobility has continued to be presented as a challenge for service provision and consequently for improving outcomes in health, wellbeing, education, housing and employment (Taylor et al., 2011).

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Contemporary literature on Indigenous mobility in remote areas recognises voluntary motivators like visiting friends or relatives, attending sporting or cultural events, and shopping or recreation as important motivators for trips to, from and within the Outback (Carson, Carson, & Taylor, 2013; Prout, 2008; Taylor & Carson, 2009). Nevertheless, an extensive literature search reveals only two studies have broached Indigenous mobility as constituting tourism; one from a conceptual viewpoint (Peters & Higgins-Desbiolles, 2012) and one examining the issue of Indigenous visitors to the city of Darwin in the Northern Territory of Australia (Carson et al., 2013). The paucity of research on Indigenous people 'on the move' from the tourism perspective reflects complex historical, conceptual and sociological factors; as well as an absence of data architectures for specifically measuring Indigenous tourists.

Tourism in Outback areas, meanwhile, has been in long-term decline since at least the 1990s (Schmallegger, Taylor, & Carson, 2011). The extent of decline for individual regions appears related to the degree of remoteness, with gloomy observations made about regions specifically marketing themselves as part of the 'Australian Outback' (Carson & Taylor, 2009). The development of an Outback Indigenous tourism market (comprising visits to Indigenous cultural sites, activities involving Indigenous people or stays at Indigenous communities) has been prioritised by tourism development and marketing organisations for some decades. But evidence of successes are limited with the problematic supply of Indigenous tourism products, infrastructure and services (Buultjens & Fuller, 2007; Tremblay, 2009; 2010), together with demand side constraints being documented as limiting widespread gains from tourism for Outback Indigenous communities and residents (Schmallegger & Carson, 2007).

Given the deflated environment for Outback tourism, it is anachronistic that tourism involving Indigenous residents, who make frequent short-term trips within, to and from Outback areas, has almost exclusively been discussed from the perspective of Indigenous people as providers. What has been largely ignored, and is the focus of this study, is the notion of Indigenous people as tourists. The logical extension is that there may be untapped potential (or at least unrecognised contributions) from such a market. In this study we examine Indigenous mobility from the paradigm of people on the move as tourists to spotlight the market's characteristics and potential.

2. Background

The Australian landmass is the size of continental United States (excluding Alaska) but has a population of just 23.5 million who are largely concentrated in and around big east coast cities like Sydney (4.8 m), Melbourne (4.4 m) and Brisbane (2.3 m), their hinterlands and in the rapidly growing city of Perth (2 m) in the far west of the country. By 2012 some 80% (and rising) of the nation's population resided in major cities and peri-urban areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014a). Away from the eastern coastal strip, population densities fall dramatically to around 1 person per square kilometre. The Outback, shown in yellow (in the web version) in Fig. 1, is that part Australia inland and north of capital cities. It constitutes more than three quarters of the Australian landmass but is home to less than 5% of residents. There are high proportions of Indigenous Australians (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people) resident in Outback Australia, around half overall, represented by 90% of the population in some areas.

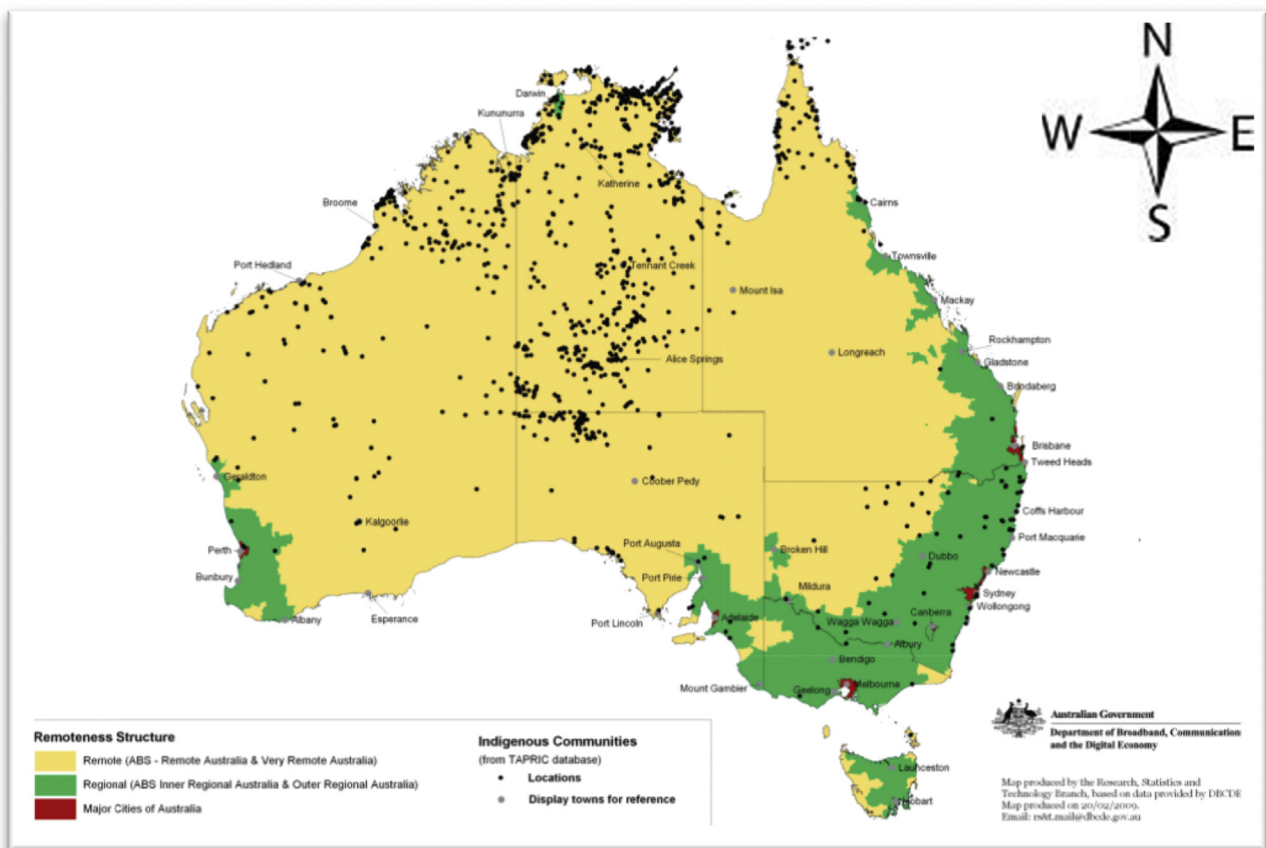


Fig. 1. Australia's remoteness areas and Indigenous communities.
Source: Wordpress, 2012.

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