
Benefits and costs of tourism for remote communities

Case study for the Carpentaria Shire in north-west Queensland

Chapter 6

1	LESSONS FOR REMOTE DESTINATIONS	2
2	REFERENCES	5

1 LESSONS FOR REMOTE DESTINATIONS

The research results presented in this report contain important messages that are relevant beyond the case study of Normanton/Karumba. The considerations provided here focus on three areas: the tourist product; foreseeable future trends which will impact on tourism demand and tourism benefits.

Remote destinations – and the people who make decisions about them – need to understand the basic principles governing tourism and tourism development so that they can plan appropriately and take anticipative action, thereby safeguarding the region as a great place to live for the regional community and as a worthwhile place to visit for tourists.

The considerations shared here will help regional and other decision makers to balance the needs and aspirations of tourists and host communities with national interests and the need to safeguard natural resources and ecosystems for future generations.

1.1 Resource use

Tropical savanna destinations, like destinations across Australia's outback regions, offer an essentially nature-based tourist product. In addition to the magnificent scenery, offering drive-through and bushwalking experience, the extensive coastline, rivers and waterholes offer fishing opportunities and wetlands and billabongs harbour extensive birdlife.

In the process of enjoying these resources, tourists also consume them. They take fish, generate rubbish and waste, cause congestion, and by their mere presence detract from the enjoyment of other visitors and local people.

Tourists also consume other types of resources in host regions, such as accommodation and catering, entertainment, infrastructure and services. They further consume intangible aspects of the tourist product such as the local culture and the feeling of place.

The type and extent of resource use differs between destinations depending on visitor numbers, visitor nights, visitor types and resource availability.

All the resources that constitute a destination's tourist product are shared by members of the host community, tourists and other users. It is therefore essential to understand the cumulative impact and extent of resource use/extraction. The use of resources can then be assessed in the context of the contribution tourists make to a destination.

This report provides two important steps towards an integrated analysis of tourism benefits and costs. Firstly, it provides an estimation and assessment of tourist spending (financial contribution) as well as fish catch (resource extraction). Secondly, it shows the extent to which tourists require access to basic infrastructure and resources by converting visitor days into 'resident equivalents'. This reveals the extent to which the true demand for infrastructure and services is underestimated if based only on resident population.

The experiences and challenges of most savanna and outback destinations are similar. As Wood (2003:16) summarises in relation to Coral Bay on the Western Australia Carnarvon-Ningaloo coast: "Many negative impacts of tourism [...] can be attributed to incremental growth and the absence of appropriate plans and management actions. The future of tourism in the region depends on its sustainability and the maintenance of the natural environment, the very attribute that attracts visitors to spend their discretionary dollars in [this region] rather than competing destinations in Australia and abroad."

1.2 Future trends

The tropical savannas are largely a domestic tourist destination. Increasingly, grey nomads are dominating the visitor market right across the north, from Cape York to the Kimberley.

Given the demographic profile of the Australian population, the number of grey nomads is bound to increase significantly over the next decades as the baby boomer generation retires. The ABS estimates that the number of people older than 65 years will increase from 2.4 million (year 2001; 12.1% of population) to 2.94 million within a decade (an increase of 23%) and to 5.05 million by 2031. Many people retire before the age of 65. Consequently, many more grey nomads will travel to and through northern Australia's outback regions, in the pursuit of adventure, solitude and pristine environments.

More demand on outback roads will lead to increased maintenance costs and more roads will be sealed. Towns such as Burketown, which are currently 'protected' from the gravel-road adverse travellers, will become mainstream destinations. The fish stocks in adjacent rivers will be attracting the tourist anglers that are now becoming frustrated with declining catch in the waters accessible from Karumba.

Many visitors consider it their right not only to travel to remote regions, but also to camp and fish wherever they want to, and to do so free of charge. However, increasing visitation and resulting pressure on savanna ecosystems and communities requires a change of public attitude to the effect that it is a privilege to visit remote regions. This in turn means that with the right to visit comes an obligation to firstly minimise ones' impacts through careful resource use and secondly to pay for the services received. An attitude change to the effect that 'free-riding is un-cool' requires a concerted and continued education effort at the national, state and regional levels.

It is more difficult to foresee trends relating to international tourists to the region. International travel is subject to many uncertain factors such as exchange rates, price of aviation fuel, political conditions and security issues. However, some economic forecasters predict that tourism will become the largest export-earning sector in Australia in the near future. Increasing international visitor numbers to savanna regions would exacerbate the urgency of rethink of tourism in remote regions.

1.3 Tourism benefits

Tourism involves many players including tourists, businesses, tourism managers, host communities and society. All players need to derive benefits from tourism for tourism to be truly successful. However, the aspirations of these players are at least partially competing. Tourists seek to maximise 'consumer surplus', ie. get the best experience possible for the least cost, while businesses seek to maximise (short-term) profits and host communities are interested in long-term income and employment as well as net benefits.

Tourism success is predominantly measured in tourist numbers. This measure is useful when assessing tourism at a national scale since economic activity generated can be assumed to be linear to tourist numbers. Thus, from a national – or even state perspective – it is useful to pursue an increase in tourist numbers, both international as well as inter- and intra-state.

Equalling tourist numbers to tourist success is a dangerously floored concept for small host communities such as Normanton/Karumba and others right across the tropical savannas. Here, benefit is not necessarily related to tourist numbers but to yield and net benefit. Yield is about the financial bottom-line of tourism and net benefits assess yield in the context of social, cultural and environmental impacts. As demonstrated in this study, the question of yield is not only linked to the types of visitors and their daily spending, but also to duration of stay. Therefore 'visitor days' is proposed as a superior measure to 'visitor number'.

Tourists who spend more and extract/use fewer resources produce higher net benefit than those who spend little and use resources heavily.

To increase net benefits of host communities from tourism it is absolutely critical to have a fact-based understanding of tourism in the region, including tourist numbers, tourist market, visitor profiles and activities. Perceptions and anecdotal evidence (eg. about assumed tourist numbers and market segments) can be misleading for planning and management. Specifically the quest for more tourists without consideration of yield and net benefit is a hazardous concept.

The visitor market at any specific location across the savannas may differ from other locations. While it is important to understand the visitor market it is equally important to identify what types of visitors are missing. For example, there are only very few international tourists visiting Normanton/Karumba. On the basis of such understanding the host community can develop a vision for tourism for the destination and start to take pro-active and strategic steps to maximise community net benefits.

When evaluating tourism benefits it is further important to consider the distribution of benefits and costs in the host community. For the Karumba/Normanton region it has been demonstrated that indigenous people, despite representing a majority of population, have only a marginal involvement in tourism and therefore receive few benefits from tourism. In addition, they are also the socio-economically weakest group and are affected most by local businesses increasing prices for goods to generate a tourist rent.

1.4 Extent of influence

Savanna regions are 'peripheral' destinations (Hohl and Tisdell 1995), as is the case for Carpentaria Shire. This brings specific challenges in terms of changing product, attracting different tourists to diversify the tourist market, adding secondary benefits from money re-spent locally and combating seasonality of visitation.

Nevertheless, if local government, local businesses and development, tourism and management agencies work together to create a consolidated tool of actions, offers and controls for tourists; use of this tool can go a long way to ensuring that the host community derives comprehensive net benefits, indigenous participation is enabled, and the integrity of the region's natural resources is safeguarded for tourists, locals and others to enjoy into the future.

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