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Indigenous Tourism in Australia: History, trends and future directions

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Introduction

In Australia, Indigenous culture has long been thought to have the potential to provide the country's tourism industry with a key point of differentiation (Buultjens et al., 2005). Thus Indigenous experiences have consistently remained an integral part of Australia's tourism product offering since the early 2000s (Department of Communications Information Technology and the Arts, 2003) and are marketed as one of the seven key experiences that underpin the country's global tourism marketing activities (see Tourism Australia, 2017). Similar to other parts of the world, the tourism industry in Australia has also been portrayed as a sector that can create socio-economic opportunities for Indigenous peoples through the development of tourism- focused businesses and the generation of employment, especially in the regional and remote areas of the country (Buultjens & Gale, 2013; Coria & Calfucura, 2012; Fletcher et al., 2016). As a consequence of these potential benefits, consecutive Australian governments have consistently touted optimistic and favourable assessments of the opportunities tourism provides for Indigenous people (Ruhanen et al., 2015b).

Indeed to varying degrees, all three levels of Australian governments (i.e., federal, state and local) have gradually increased their attention on facilitating the growth and development of this niche sector of Australian tourism. Increased awareness of Indigenous culture has led to a growth in the supply of tourism activities and experiences which are owned and/or managed by Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Ruhanen et al., 2015b); particularly in remote and regional areas where, according to Buultjens et al. (2010), between 50% and 70% of Indigenous tourism businesses are located. The growth in the sector can be attributed to, among other things, the range of socio-cultural and economic benefits that can and do flow from Indigenous tourism activity. Nevertheless, while governments' attention to date have proved beneficial to specific Indigenous tourism businesses across the country, there is still considerable scope for scaling up the growth and development of the sector as a whole (Ruhanen et al., 2015b), including capitalising on the positive approach adopted by Indigenous peoples involved in tourism who are confident their products can exceed consumer expectations (Jones Donald Strategy Partners, 2009). Concomitantly however, plans for growth need to identify any issues raised pertaining to the success (or otherwise) of Indigenous tourism in Australia (Buultjens & Gale, 2013; Buultjens et al., 2010; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2010; Tremblay & Wegner, 2009) and incorporate strategies that address a range of issues including demand and supply side challenges (e.g., access to start-up finance and capital, recruiting and retention of appropriately skilled labour, product development).

To date, it seems fair to suggest that Indigenous tourism in Australia has enjoyed a slow but steady rate of growth from the last quarter of the 20th century. The development of the sector has been punctuated by a range of opportunities and challenges. The purpose of this chapter is to first present an overview of the development of Indigenous tourism in Australia, before identifying and discussing demand and supply issues associated with the tourism sector and finally presenting future pathways for consideration.

The development of Indigenous tourism in Australia

Indigenous tourism has been defined as tourism activity in which Indigenous peoples are directly involved either through control and/or by having their culture serve as the essence of the attraction (Hinch & Butler, 2007). An

Indigenous tourist or Indigenous tourism ‘visitor’ in Australia is defined as a person who participates in at least one Indigenous tourism activity (e.g., experiencing an Indigenous art/craft or cultural display; attending an Indigenous performance) during their tourism experience. This participation may be a one-off activity or a component of other tourism activities (Tourism Research Australia, 2011). In Australia, such activities include: bushwalks, Indigenous food experiences, safaris, staying in Indigenous owned/operated accommodation, touring with an Indigenous guide, visiting an Indigenous site or community, attending live performances (e.g., dance, drama, music) and appreciating visual arts in State museums and galleries, or through commercial and craft enterprises (Tourism Research Australia, 2011).

Indigenous tourism as a distinct sector of the tourism industry had its global beginnings in the early 19th century when a curiosity and interest in ‘exotic’ destinations and their indigenous inhabitants was ignited in wealthy European adventurers (predominantly from former world empires), who travelled to ex-colonies to see, experience and document exotic and unknown cultures (Whitford & Ruhanen, 2016). By the mid-19th century more indigenous peoples around the world were involved in tourism (to varying degrees), and in Australia there was a small increase in the number of visitors being invited to experience Aboriginal cultural ceremonies, which are known as corroborees (Cahir & Clark, 2010). In the second half of the 20th century, the widespread growth of global tourism and increased visitor access to ex-colonies, where ‘exotic’ indigenous peoples lived with intriguing customs, artefacts, arts and crafts, lifestyles, heritage and histories, spurred on the development of indigenous tourism. This was also backed by the universal growth of television documentaries that provided information about Indigenous cultures from around the world, and travel programs that promoted travel to these unknown worlds (Whitford & Ruhanen, 2016).

In Australia from the 1980s onwards, the participation of Indigenous peoples in the tourism industry was increasingly mentioned in a range of government policy documents and reports (Whitford, 2009; Whitford et al., 2001). Reflecting government policies in many other parts of the world, Australian policies were also underpinned by a common objective of utilising tourism as a development tool to provide Indigenous Australians with a pathway to “much needed opportunities for employment, social stability and preservation of culture and traditions” (Department of Communications