

THE NON NATURE-BASED TOURISTS IN THE TROPICAL NORTH

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ABSTRACT

Of the five World Heritage sites in Queensland, two are located in Tropical North Queensland and provide the region with its key iconic experiences. However, not all tourists visit these sites. This paper seeks to identify the reasons why a significant number of tourists do not visit these sites. Based on a survey of departing domestic and international visitors at Cairns domestic airport throughout 2007, this study identifies the visitor segment who do not visit the region's major natural attractions. Findings indicate that 22.4% of respondents did not visit the Wet Tropics rainforest while 29.1% did not visit the Great Barrier Reef. The key reason for not visiting the rainforest was a lack of time (53%), also the key reason for not visiting the reef (33%), followed by having been before (21%). This study highlights the importance of on-going monitoring of trends and patterns, as the tourism industry seeks to diversify its products in a natural environment increasingly threatened from extractive industries and faced with climate change issues.

Keywords: Great Barrier Reef; Tropical North Queensland; nature-based tourism; Wet Tropics rainforest; World Heritage sites

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on research undertaken to investigate why a significant number of visitors to Tropical North Queensland did not visit the region's key natural icons, the Great Barrier Reef and the Wet Tropics rainforest. Both icons are heavily promoted (Tourism Tropical North Queensland, 2007) and in the future are both likely to suffer from the impact of climate change, the reef more so than the rainforest. As the attractiveness of the reef in particular declines in coming decades, the region's tourism industry will need to develop new icons and experiences if it is to retain its tourism industry. The research reported in this paper is one attempt to explore why some visitors are not interested in the region's iconic attractions

suggesting other alternative experiences that can be promoted in the future.

The importance of the natural environment to Tropical North Queensland's tourism industry has been established by industry practice as well as in previous research. Marketed as the region where 'reef meets rainforest', many surveyed visitors indicated that their main travel motivations were to visit the reef and rainforest, enjoy the climate and natural environment and see the wildlife. The significance of the region's natural attractions has been established in a number of previous studies; see Coghlan and Prideaux (2008), McNamara and Prideaux (2008), Prideaux *et al.* (2006), Falco-Mammone *et al.* (2006), Prideaux and Falco-Mammone (2007). There is general agreement that

the Great Barrier Reef, and to a lesser extent the Wet Tropics rainforest are major draw cards for visitors to the region.

There is a growing body of research into reef tourism in the region. This has included work on tourist experiences, photography, young travelers, and reef information and interpretation; see Moscardo *et al.* (2003), Moscardo (2002), Moscardo (1999), Moscardo and Woods (1998), Fenton *et al.* (1997) and Green (1997). While less work has been undertaken into travel motives for the rainforest, research undertaken by Driml and Common (1996) and Prideaux and Falco-Mammone (2007) have identified a range of significant issues related to rainforest tourism. Overall however, past studies have not focused on reasons why visitors have not visited the key natural attractions including the Great Barrier Reef and the Wet Tropics rainforest.

METHOD

The primary method used for this research was self completed surveys collected at the domestic terminal of Cairns airport. This site was selected because it provided a convenient place to collect exit surveys in a period when most persons approached had time to fill in the form. Surveys were distributed twice each month by trained research assistants. During each survey period, visitors were approached and asked if they were local residents or visitors to the region. After identifying their place of residence, only *visitors* were asked if they wished to participate in the survey. In total, 1,451 surveys were completed by tourists at the airport between January 2007 and December 2007. To look for seasonal trends within the data, the surveys have been grouped into quarters with quarter 1 representing data collected between January and March 2007 and so on. With a 75% response rate, many of the respondents (anecdotally) reported that they found completing the survey to be a useful experience that allowed them to reflect on their experiences, and contribute their opinions to the research. As a token of appreciation, respondents were given a complementary postcard to thank them for their time and insights. The survey instrument was developed through a

rigorous consultative phase, and was piloted before the commencement of the annual monitoring program. During the consultation phase, meetings were held with the Wet Tropics Management Authority, Tourism Tropical North Queensland, the University of Queensland and the Alliance of Sustainable Tourism. This ensured that the questions and issues covered in the survey were relevant, useful and timely for stakeholders including government, industry and academia. From these meetings and on-site piloting at Cairns domestic airport, specific content was determined. This included questions on travel party, behaviour and motivations. To randomise results, the survey days were varied between weekdays and weekends. No other methods of randomisation were used. This method ensured that a wide cross-section of visitors were surveyed. The results from the surveys were scanned and coded into SPSS (version 16.0).

The collection method adopted has several limitations. First, only visitors exiting the region from the airport were surveyed. As a consequence, visitors departing by car, bus or train were not surveyed. The logistics of trying to capture people at other exit points from the region were beyond the scope and scale of this study. While future work should attempt to capture these visitors, this study examines only those exiting from the Cairns domestic airport. A second limitation is that visitors who are not proficient in English were not surveyed. The concern here is that Japanese and Chinese visitors, who constitute a significant (and potentially booming) market for the region, are largely not represented in this paper. Because of these limitations, some care will be required when generalising the results.

FINDINGS

The socio-demographic characteristics of respondents are identified in Table 2. The majority of respondents were traveling as a couple (42.1%), alone (18.6%), with friends (12.8%) or as a family with children (11.5%). A large proportion of the sample (67.3%) were on their first visit to the region, and many stayed in a hotel or motel (36.7%), backpackers hostel (16.9%), apartment (16.3%), resort (15.8%) or with friends/relatives (9.4%).

Table 1. Characteristics of surveyed visitors at Cairns domestic airport, 2007

<i>Gender (%)</i>		<i>Origin (%)</i>		<i>Age (%)</i>		<i>Occupation (%)</i>	
Female	57.1	Australia	40.2	20-29 yrs	22.1	Professional	22.0
Male	42.9	UK & Ireland	21.8	30-39 yrs	20.8	Retired	18.6
		North America	15.7	50-59 yrs	16.6	Student	16.5
		Europe	7.6	Over 65 yrs	12.4	Self-employed	9.0
		Germany	6.6	60-65 yrs	11.0	Management	6.8
		Scandinavia	3.3	40-49 yrs	10.5	Office/clerical	6.0
		Asia	2.2	Under 20 yrs	6.7	Other	5.4
		New Zealand	1.5			Public service	4.5

Who stays and who goes?

In general, the results support the importance of nature as the region's key attraction. 77.6% of respondents reported visiting the Wet Tropics World Heritage rainforest as part of their trip, and slightly less, 70.9% visited the reef. Within the Wet Tropics, Kuranda (53%) and Daintree (37.3%) were the most popular spots to visit, whilst the overwhelming majority of visitors chose to depart for the reef from Cairns (46.6%) and to a lesser extent Port Douglas (20.6%).

Whilst tourism in the region is somewhat seasonal, with peak visitation rates in the drier, cooler winter months (i.e. quarter 3 and to some extent, 2 and 4), the results in this survey show slightly alternative trends (but none showed significant differences). Overall visitation to the rainforest remained largely consistent in quarters 1 (74.7%) and 3 (76.8%) and peaked only slightly in quarters 2 (78.3%) and 4 (80.2%). Moreover, there were some slight increases in overall visitation to the reef in quarters 1 (72.5%) and 4 (74.8%), a likely factor of increased visitors from the northern hemisphere winter, whereas numbers declined slightly in quarters 2 (68.9%) and 3 (68.4%).

When comparing domestic and international markets, some distinct and significant differences in travel patterns emerged. In both cases, international visitors were significantly more likely to visit the region's World Heritage Areas (83.4% versus 68.8% in the rainforest, $\chi^2=41.892$, $p<0.05$; and 88.5% versus 44.5% in the reef, $\chi^2=32.222$, $p<0.05$), however, the difference in visitation between domestic visitors and internationals was more prevalent in the case of the reef. The domes-

tic visitors who did not visit the reef were significantly more likely to be travelling as part of a tour group or alone ($\chi^2=34.857$, $p<0.05$), and were on a repeat visit to the region ($\chi^2=43.557$, $p<0.05$). Other slight (but not significant) trends indicated that females (56.2%) and older respondents (60-65 yrs, 57.6% and over 65 yrs, 72.6%) also made up those domestic visitors that did not visit the reef.

A closer analysis of visitors who chose *not to visit the rainforest* highlights the following trends. Domestic visitors tended to be significantly more likely to not visit the rainforest ($\chi^2=41.892$, $p<0.05$), as did younger visitors ($\chi^2=24.213$, $p<0.05$). Those employed in the service industry and tradespersons were significantly least likely to experience the rainforest ($\chi^2=23.620$, $p=0.023$), as were those travelling alone ($\chi^2=56.938$, $p<0.05$), on a repeat visit to the region ($\chi^2=71.086$, $p<0.05$) and staying with friends/relatives ($\chi^2=54.406$, $p<0.05$).

As for those that did *not visit the Great Barrier Reef*, it has already been discussed above that domestic visitors were significantly more likely to not visit the reef. Other trends were that those visitors self-employed and tradespersons were significantly least likely to visit the reef ($\chi^2=25.796$, $p<0.05$), and similarly to non-rainforest tourists, those travelling alone were also significantly most reluctant to visit the reef ($\chi^2=66.697$, $p<0.05$). A clear trend was that those on a repeat trip to the region were significantly less interested in visiting the reef ($\chi^2=27.032$, $p<0.05$), as were those staying with friends/relatives ($\chi^2=16.092$, $p<0.05$). Finally, 46.1% of those that did not visit the rainforest visited the reef while holidaying, whereas a much

larger percentage of visitors, who did not visit the reef, went onto experience the rainforest (58.8%).

So what was the motivation for travel for these non nature-based visitors? Respondents were asked to rank a number of factors that attracted them to Tropical North Queensland using a 5 point Likert scale where 5 was very important. Unlike the reef and rainforest tourists, who were strongly motivated to see the Great Barrier Reef in the former case and Wet Tropics rainforest in the latter; see Coghlan and Prideaux (2008), McNamara and Prideaux (2008); resting and relaxing (4.02), experiencing the natural environment (3.68) and the climate (3.60) were the most important motivations for travel for those who did not visit the Great Barrier Reef. Furthermore, visiting the rainforest (3.54), spending time with family (3.44), visiting the beaches (3.36), seeing Australian wildlife (3.33) and the price (3.32) were all more important motivations for travel to the region than visiting the Great Barrier Reef (3.16). Similarly, those who did not visit the Wet Tropics rainforest on their visit to the region, were also most motivated by resting and relaxing (3.94), visiting the reef (3.82), climate (3.53), experiencing the natural environment (3.49), and snorkeling and diving (3.31), with visiting the rainforest coming in as the tenth motivation (3.02).

The results revealed some stark differences between the motivations for travel to the region for first time and repeat visitors that did not visit either of the World Heritage Areas. For instance, first time visitors who did not visit the reef were motivated by resting and relaxing (4.02), experiencing the natural environment (3.96), visiting the rainforest (3.92), climate (3.82) and seeing Australian wildlife (3.75). In a similar way, first time visitors who did not visit the rainforest considered the key motivations for travel to the region as visiting the reef (4.47), resting and relaxing (4.01), snorkeling and diving (3.92), experiencing the natural environment (3.72) and the climate (3.67). On the other hand, the motivations of repeat visitors who did not visit either the reef or rainforest were similar. Those who did not visit the reef were motivated by resting and relaxing (4.03), spending time with family (3.56), experiencing the natural environment (3.5), climate (3.48) and visiting friends and relatives (VFR, 3.4); mirroring the motivations of those repeat visitors

who did not visit the rainforest – resting and relaxing (3.87), spending time with family (3.44), climate (3.39), VFR (3.31) and experiencing the natural environment (3.27).

The VFR market is a largely neglected area of tourism scholarship, despite its relative size; see Backer (2007) and Jackson (1990). While this is not the focus of this paper, we believe that VFR tourists are an important market segment and as such we will briefly discuss and explore some of the characteristics of these tourists here. The results indicate that those most motivated to visit the region to visit friends and relatives were significantly more likely to be domestic visitors ($t=5.501$, $p<0.05$) and aged either under 20 or over 65 years ($F=39.847$, $p=0.008$). Furthermore, the VFR market is made up significantly by those travelling alone ($F=100.486$, $p<0.05$) and those on repeat visits by far ($t=10.247$, $p<0.05$). The VFR market also quite obviously stays predominately with friends and relatives ($F=553.359$, $p<0.05$) and uses a private vehicle to drive around the region during their stay ($F=143.198$, $p<0.05$). For many VFR tourists, Cairns was also their last holiday destination, which might go some way in explaining why almost half of the VFR tourists did not visit the reef (43.5%) and over a quarter did not visit the rainforest (28.6%) during their stay. Of poignant interest is that VFR visitors were only somewhat likely to visit nearby towns and attractions and only on a day visitor basis preferring to remain overnight in Cairns. These towns included Port Douglas (visited by 39% of VFR visitors), Kuranda (32%), Mareeba (23.2%), Atherton (22.4%), Innisfail (17.3%), Mission Beach (14.6%), Yungaburra (12.4%), Malanda (12%), Millaa Millaa (11.1%) and Ravenshoe (5.4%). This pattern confirms past research that travel patterns of this nature, particularly from the VFR market, add little to local economies; see Lehto *et al.* (2001) and Morrison *et al.* (1995). While this study can make only preliminary judgements here, this finding does indicate that VFR visitors are likely to only contribute marginally to the economies of these local towns through their minimal travel (and time spent in these locales) during their stay.

Reasons for not visiting the World Heritage sites

For those respondents who did not visit either of the two destination icons (reef and rain-

forest), they could choose more than one of nine possible reasons why they decided not to visit the attractions and could also complete an open-ended response ('Other'); see Figure 1. Within Other (25%), respondents noted that they had been before (27%), had visited other rainforests (ie. Fraser Island, Amazon, Venezuela; 14%), or were on a business trip (6%) or family visit (8%). Of overall interest however is the strong emphasis of respondents who didn't visit the rainforest because of a lack of time to do so (53%). Other studies have demonstrated that the Wet Tropics rainforest is easily and quickly accessible across the entire region; see Prideaux and Falco-Mammone (2007).

This finding points to a possible misconception that visiting the rainforest requires a large investment of time – both travelling time and time to 'experience' the rainforest itself. Other studies have illustrated that visitors prefer short rainforest walks for instance, ranging anywhere from half-an-hour to half-a-day (McNamara & Prideaux, 2008; B. Prideaux & Falco-Mammone, 2007). Given the many benefits of experiencing the rainforest (i.e. spiritual, educational, physical), we need to ensure that tourists are aware that the Wet Tropics rainforest can be experienced both briefly and also over longer durations.

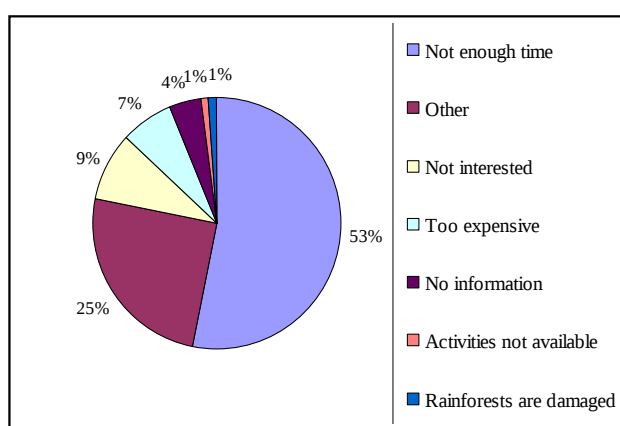


Figure 1. Reasons for not visiting the Wet Tropics rainforest

In terms of the reef, Figure 2 shows the key reasons given by respondents for not visiting the Great Barrier Reef on their holidays. 'Not enough time' (33%) was given as the major reason followed by respondents who had previously visited the reef (21%). This points to how visitors view their reef visits as a 'one-off' and hence, visitors don't consider creating new experiences, learning

opportunities or appreciation of the environment for example with repeat visits. This trend illustrates that tourists may potentially view reef trips as merely 'cookie cutters' of one another, and thus there is no need to see or experience it again. Lastly, respondents heavily offered 'Other' reasons for not visiting the Reef, the most prominent of which was bad weather (53%).

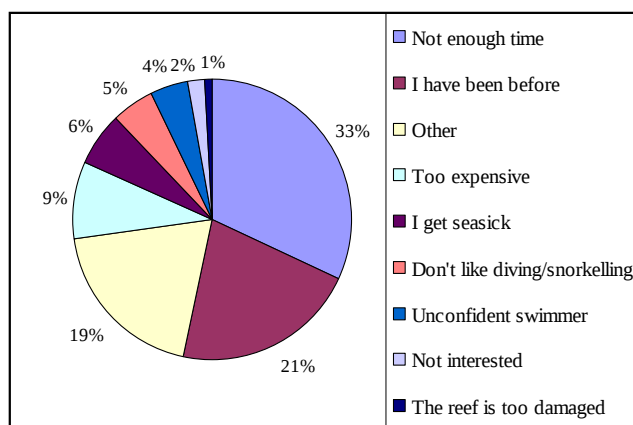


Figure 2. Reasons for not visiting the Great Barrier Reef

Lastly, respondents were asked to rate the level of satisfaction with their overall trip, on a scale of 1 (least satisfactory) to 10 (highly satisfactory). For those that visited both World Heritage sites, their overall mean satisfaction was 8.63, compared with the mean score for those that did not visit either sites of 8.04. Those that had visited the rainforest were significantly more likely to indicate a higher level of overall trip satisfaction than those who did not visit the rainforest ($t=5.036$, $p<0.05$). The same case occurred with reef tourists. Those that visited the Great Barrier Reef while holidaying in the region were significantly more inclined to register an overall higher level of trip satisfaction than their non-visitor counterparts ($t=4.763$, $p<0.05$).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results presented in this study illustrate the *significance* of nature-based activities and attractions in destinations in attaining visitor fulfillment while holidaying in Tropical North Queensland. Whilst up to a quarter of the respondents did not visit one or both of the iconic natural attractions in this research, it would appear that these attractions do influence the visitor experience in the region. These results add another dimension to the current literature that argues that the major strength of the destination – Tropical North Queensland – lies in nature tourism activities and attractions; see Prideaux *et al.* (2006). Furthermore, the local tourism authority, Tourism Tropical North Queensland, argue that the region is a nature-based destination – people come and explore this region because of these natural attributes (Tourism Tropical North Queensland, 2007). While the attraction of the natural environment in the tropics remains a strong pull factor for the majority of visitors annually, the results from this study highlight that climate and relaxation are also key motivations for travel to the region.

These results are significant given the current context of climate change and its possible impacts on the region's major iconic attractions. There is evidence that both natural attractions will be strongly impacted by climate change with significant coral bleaching and species extinctions occurring with temperature rises as low as 1–2 degrees (Garnaut, 2008). A destination that is heavily

reliant on natural attractions for its marketing and branding may need to diversify its product base to include new types of experiences. Currently, Tropical North Queensland offers a range of adventure activities (skydiving, river rafting, bungee jumping, and so forth) as well as spa tourism and food and wine tourism. Research into viewing wildlife and shopping as activities in this region have also highlighted the importance of these activities; see Coghlan and Prideaux (2008) and Prideaux and Coghlan (2006). Tourism Tropical North Queensland have also begun to market cultural and adventure tourism in the region. Whilst Tourism Tropical North Queensland (2007) states that this region is the second most attractive region in Australia (after Sydney), the industries reliance on climate and natural attractions confirms the need for on-going monitoring of visitor travel patterns, motivations, behaviours and levels of satisfaction, as well as studies of destination competitiveness and service quality to ensure the continuing health and resilience of this large employer and source of revenue to the region.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was funded by the Australian Government's Marine and Tropical Sciences Research Facility.