

Managing Visitor Impacts along Australia's Remote Kimberley Coast – The Forgotten Dimension of Balancing Country

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Introduction

The expectations on tourism as a stimulator for economic opportunities can be high for communities with limited economic activities, particularly in areas with attractive natural values such as spectacular scenery, wildlife, flora and tranquillity. Sustainability has become a buzz word in recent years, particularly with the concept of the triple-bottom-line which implies that to build a sustainable industry for the long term, activities need to be balanced not only in terms of their economic impacts, but also on the environmental impacts on the area and the social and cultural impacts on the local community. In a current project looking at the expedition cruise ship industry along the remote Kimberley Coast in Australia's North West, we are encountering an additional dimension that has been largely lost in western culture, the impacts on the spiritual and cultural connection to country by Aboriginal Australians. Country refers to the area to which a particular group of people are born and spiritually connected. Country is multi-dimensional including people and Dreamings and areas of land and/or sea including all living and non-living things, the sub-surface, underground and the sky above.

The Kimberley Coast extends for 3000 km between Broome and Wyndham in Western Australia. It is accessible almost only by sea or air and has gained increasing popularity in recent years because of its spectacular scenery, pristine nature, Aboriginal rock art and remoteness, giving visitors the impression of exploring an 'untouched' world. Over re-

cent years, there has been an exponential increase in expedition cruise operators offering luxury experiences along the Kimberley Coast and visiting natural, cultural and historic on-shore sites along the way. Vessel capacity is also on the increase with vessels operating in 2006 ranging from 8 (+4) to 106 (+68) passengers (+staff). Interest by the new operators and visitors is continuing to grow, as does the size of vessels visiting the area.

Much of the Kimberley Coast is Aboriginal Lands Trust (ALT) land with two areas declared as National Parks/Nature Reserves. Visitation to the area has been largely unmanaged because of its vastness and lack of resources. The rapid increase in the number of operators and some recent incidences have led to increasing concerns about visitor safety, environmental impacts (e.g. trail erosion, littering), economic benefits and social and cultural impacts (e.g. souveniring at cultural and historic sites, inappropriate cultural behaviour). In the absence of an effective management structure and with unclear and limited jurisdiction and responsibilities by government agencies, there is a clear need for a joint approach and strong communication to provide a management framework with a view to making the Kimberley Coastal tourism industry sustainable for the long term.

Methods

This paper presents on a project set up to provide a baseline of current activities, visitation hotspots, environmental impacts and cultural issues and to

provide recommendations on potentially suitable management frameworks for the area. Data was gathered through desktop research, workshops and meetings with Aboriginal custodians and non-Aboriginal stakeholders, field trips to country with Traditional Owners, monitoring of the biophysical environment where expeditions cruise ships land on-shore to conduct excursions and field trips on a number and range of expedition cruise ships to observe activities, impact and visitor behaviour while visiting on-shore sites.

Results

We found that in 2006, 32 operators were offering expedition cruises from between 4 to 18 days. The trip 'experience' was advertised using terms such as 'the trip of a lifetime', 'wild and remote', but also 'special indulgence' and 'unparalleled comfort and luxury'. Their key shore-based attractions advertised were visiting key natural features such as waterfalls and swimming holes; cultural features such as Aboriginal rock art sites; and historic sites. There are a number of key sites between Broome and Wyndham that are visited by most operators. Current environmental impacts such as extensive trail formation and trail erosion or littering appear to be minimal with recovery of damaged vegetation occurring during the wet season from November to March, during which tours are not offered. Cultural impacts are more difficult to measure, but there is anecdotal evidence of vandalism, souveniring, site degradation and culturally inappropriate behaviour.

Conclusions

Appropriate visitor management on-site appears to be crucial for both visitor experience and impact minimisation, requiring a low visitor to guide ratio and a high level of education and interpretation. We also found that one of the key issues for the management of activities in the area is the ignorance of the spiritual connection and significance of country to the Aboriginal custodians of the land by stakeholders such as land managers and operators. Their lack of knowledge and understanding of the spiritual connection to country by the Traditional Owners, often combined with a lack of ap-

propriate consultation has in the past resulted in mistrust, uncertainty and fear between the parties involved. A workable management framework will need to include appropriate protocols for consultation, means for exchange of cultural and historical information as well as measures to ensure environmentally and culturally appropriate visitor management on-site.