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Source: Mountain Research and Development, 22(2) : 118-122

Published By: International Mountain Society

URL: [https://doi.org/10.1659/0276-4741\(2002\)022\[0118:AAEITW\]2.0.CO;2](https://doi.org/10.1659/0276-4741(2002)022[0118:AAEITW]2.0.CO;2)

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Trevor H. B. Sofield

# Australian Aboriginal Ecotourism in the Wet Tropics Rainforest of Queensland, Australia

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The United Nations, which designated 1993 as the International Year for the Indigenous Peoples of the World, identified indigenous peoples as “minorities and tribal populations with special problems related in particular to discrimination and deprivation of basic human rights, and with special needs concerning education, health, economic development, and the environment” (United Nations General Assembly resolution 46/128 of 17 December 1991). The UN noted that foremost among the distinctive characteristics of indigenous peoples is the special relationship which indigenous peoples have with the land and nature, and their long-established practices of sustainable and harmonious development.

Although the United Nations failed to mention the potential role of ecotourism in

addressing indigenous minority poverty and marginalization, it is an area of significant potential because of its sociocultural “fit” with indigenous society’s oneness with the environment. Indigenous ecotourism and the mountainous tropical wet rainforest region of northern Queensland, Australia (Figure 1) may be viewed as “perfect partners” given the interdependency of the biophysical environment and its original Aboriginal inhabitants, which goes back approximately 40,000 years in time. This paper gives a brief introduction to the issues related to Aboriginal rights and tourism in Australia and examines the way in which ecotourism has provided a revitalization of that interdependency and extended the human–biosphere relationship in new directions in northern Queensland.



**FIGURE 1** The Daintree Coast south of Cape Tribulation, in the northern part of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area, northeast Australia. The Daintree Range to the west of this coast is part of the Kuku Yalanji tribal lands. (Photo courtesy of the Wet Tropics Management Authority)

## A living, 40,000-year-old culture

There are more than 430,000 Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia, constituting about 2% of the total population. Whereas southern nations have become acculturated and urbanized to a large extent, many of the northern communities maintain a more traditional lifestyle, often occupying isolated settle-

ments in their traditional homelands in the Outback. Throughout Australia some 40,000 significant Aboriginal sites have been identified and placed in the register of the National Estate and in State Registers. Many of them are sacred sites with highly restricted access for outsiders. As a living culture, there is an indivisibility between Aboriginal society, its culture,

and the biophysical environment, and ecotourism as undertaken by the Aborigines is therefore as much cultural as it is nature based.

### Marketing of exotic “otherness”

The culture and art of the Aborigines have featured prominently in marketing Australia internationally and domestically as a unique asset that provides the continent with a distinct image (Figure 2). Such marketing stereotypes all Aborigines as “primitive” desert nomads (the “noble savage”). It perpetuates only one form of Aboriginal cultural expression and denies the diversity of contemporary Aboriginality, with a majority of Aborigines living in towns and cities. Nostalgia for the past and marketers’ preoccupation with “the exotic other” ignores contemporary expressions of Aboriginal culture, emphasizing a hiatus between the Aboriginal past and present.

There are historical differences and great regional diversity among Aboriginal communities. At the community level many groups differentiate themselves strongly from their neighbors, and as the Aboriginal Tourism Association noted, particular groups have authority over the ownership of knowledge about the activities of ancestral heroes and creator figures related to their own tribal lands. Aboriginal communities are highly critical of promotional and marketing literature and activities that categorize them as “cultural objects.” Increasingly, Aboriginal communities are disparaging of what they perceive as cultural exploitation. When this extends to the use of Aboriginal designs and motifs by nonindigenous Australians (and even by members of their own society who are not tribally approved as presenters of specific “stories” with their accompanying designs and motifs), some Aboriginal groups take exception.

### Commerce versus culture

Until the last decade, very little Aboriginal tourism product was in fact owned by Aborigines, and even government tourism authorities did not consider it necessary to consult Aborigines in utilizing indigenous

images for marketing. A fundamental paradox is that although Aborigines may be advantageously positioned to deliver Aboriginal ecotourism in contrast to non-Aborigines, a range of sociocultural factors allied to the economically disadvantaged milieu and the generally low educational standards of most communities can inhibit the product from being delivered and converted to economic benefit.

Thus, the dilemma of commerce versus culture raises its head. Policies of government and funding agencies are often based on the need to address equity of opportunity for the disadvantaged minority. They, therefore, emphasize commercial viability for economic ends. Frequently, however, Aboriginal participants and cultural bodies (from both the government and the private sector) see ecotourism as serving cultural objectives first. These differences in direction take their toll on the sustainability of Aboriginal tourism ventures:

- A tourist presence might trespass onto sacred sites and impact negatively on religious beliefs.
- Traditional Aboriginal society is one where many elements of traditional beliefs and practices cannot be shared with outsiders; a wide range of information or activity (or both) can be transmitted only to initiated group members. The presentation of very traditional Aboriginal cultures to tourists is thus not possible.
- Increased inflow of tourists might disrupt a community’s willingness, or ability,

*“Look there!*

*You see a mountain.*

*We see the spirits of our ancestors.*

*Look here!*

*You see trees.*

*We see a living spirit for each tree.”*

*(Kuku Yalanji Guide, Mossman Gorge, Australia, January 2002)*

**FIGURE 2** Images of Aboriginal life and culture are used in promotional strategies, eg by the Australian Tourist Commission and the national airline, Qantas, to differentiate Australia from other destinations. Pictured here is Qantas’s newest Aboriginal design aircraft, “Yananyi Dreaming.” The patterns are traditional designs and symbols from the “dreaming” of 29 tribal Aboriginal artists from Uluru (Ayers Rock), whose heritage encompasses a “stone-age” hunter-gatherer society living in remote desert regions. They were assisted by Aboriginal artists from the Balanji Art Gallery in Sydney. While Qantas uses Aboriginality for image creation and marketing, it has also accepted that it must obtain the permission, approval and participation of Aboriginal artists. (Photo courtesy of Qantas Airways)



*It is essential to note that because of the invisibility of society and environment “ecotourism” in Aboriginal terms automatically and integrally encompasses and incorporates culture, and ecotourism will often be referred to by them as “cultural tourism” because it is seen to be more inclusive.*

*A key provision of the 1998 Bill requires the Minister to ‘have regard to the principle that indigenous persons are the primary source of information about the significance of particular areas or objects in terms of indigenous traditions.’*

ty, to undertake traditional pursuits such as hunting or the performance of rituals and ceremonies.

- Involvement with tourism might cause a shift in the traditional structure of authority or changes in gender roles or intergenerational relations.
- Commercial considerations may take second place to extended family obligations, clan duties, and binding community responsibilities.
- Some individuals, clans, or communities may make a conscious decision not to participate in a venture even if the prospects for success are high because of socially imposed, obligatory “contributions.”
- Financial returns for an individual or segments of a community might be so low, because of socially determined distribution networks, that the incentive to participate in an ecotourism venture is undermined.

In short, a range of negative social, cultural, and environmental impacts caused by tourism and tourists could lead to the rejection of an economically viable opportunity with identifiable financial benefits. Cultural, social, and environmental costs might outweigh economic benefits in the eyes of Aborigines.

Moreover, business skills tend to be rudimentary or nonexistent in many Aboriginal communities and are often combined with a scarcity of business capital and a lack of expertise in promotion, marketing, and advertising. This situation should not be surprising given the economic marginalization of most Aboriginal communities, with the resultant high levels of poverty and dependence on welfare. Small-scale ecotourism ventures often need a long time to achieve economic viability, and their smallness and low capital reserves make marketing extremely difficult. There is often little understanding of the need for long-term commitment and management expertise to run a venture successfully. Additionally, because a venture requires complex interactive processes with a range of outside interests (suppliers, travel agents, advertising and media, local government authorities, visitors from overseas countries, and so on),

low levels of education, often imprecise and limited usage of English, and cultural hurdles may make effective communication difficult.

### Recent improvements

Although all these constraints continue in differing degrees, there have been key developments aimed at empowering the disadvantaged Aboriginal communities in the past 10 years. The Royal Commission looking into the Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in 1991 identified indigenous tourism as a major growth area that could assist in alleviating the poor socioeconomic conditions of many Aboriginal communities, and US\$10 million was allocated for investment over a five-year period. In 1993 an Aboriginal Tourism Industry Advisory Committee was established, followed by the Aboriginal Tourism Association (an industry body) in 1995, and in 1997 the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tourism Industry Strategy (NAT-SITIS) was launched, with follow-up forums in 2000. The 1998 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Bill has provided a powerful legislative umbrella to monitor and enforce adequate protection of the indigenous heritage.

In addition to these initiatives at the national and federal level, states and territories have moved in parallel to establish Indigenous Tourism sections within their own tourism commissions. The result is a quantum leap in the number of Aboriginal-owned and -managed tourism operations, many of them in the field of ecotourism in those areas where they have access to their traditional lands and where the culture of the Dreamtime remains vibrant and strong.

An important caveat remains: Gido Mapunda underlines that Aborigines “still experience inequality and are generally politically, socially and economically disadvantaged,” and there are still more nonindigenous interests involved in Aboriginal tourism than the Aborigines themselves. One area where Aborigines have been successful in establishing ecotourism ventures is in the wet tropics rainforest mountains of northern Queensland.



### People of the wet tropics rainforest

In pre-European contact times there were an estimated 5500 rainforest Aborigines comprising 16 language groups. Their traditional tribal boundaries were somewhat larger than the 8000 km<sup>2</sup> encompassed by the boundary of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area (Figure 3), which is based largely on biophysical determinants of the remnant rainforests of the region. Their tropical environment was far removed from the arid open spaces of the stereotypical desert nomad, the cycles of the seasons dominated by the annual monsoon rains, which dumped their moisture on the mountains of the Great Dividing Range and created the almost impenetrable fastnesses of vast tropical rainforests.

This environment generated for the rainforest Aborigines a set of social structures, spiritual beliefs, and hunting and gathering skills very different from those of their desert counterparts. Although most tribal groups were removed from their rainforest habitat and resettled in mission stations and government reserves 100 years ago, the people retained suffi-

**FIGURE 3** Map of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area. Mossman is situated in the northern part of the Area, east of the Continental Divide. (Map courtesy of the Wet Tropics Management Authority)

cient connection with their land to ensure that their contemporary relationship incorporates a significant store of traditional knowledge. Thus, to present-day descendants of the Rainforest Aboriginal people, “the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area is a series of complex ‘living’ cultural landscapes” (see the Web site [www.wettropics.gov.au/rah/people\\_rainforest.htm](http://www.wettropics.gov.au/rah/people_rainforest.htm)).

### Kuku Yalanji Dreamtime Tours

With an award in 2000 for the “Best Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tourism Operation in Queensland” after only 2 years in operation, “Kuku Yalanji Dreamtime Tours” exemplifies the new assertiveness of Aboriginal involvement in ecotourism operations. The Kuku Yalanji are the indigenous inhabitants of the land that stretches from around Cooktown in the north to near Chillagoe in the west and Port Douglas in the south, an area that is 100 km north of Cairns.

Traditional Kuku Yalanji society was territorial, diverse, socially complex, and distinguished by a single language that still exists today. Over the centuries, the people followed seasonal cycles as they camped, hunted, and gathered food, medicines, and other materials for daily use. They traveled along a complex of interconnecting walking tracks that led to campsites, places of cultural significance and social and economic importance, and resource-rich areas. These tracks also defined the boundaries of each clan’s traditional estates and are considered cultur-

*“The rainforest is our place. It is the place of our ancestors.”*

*To understand the forest is to understand the way everything in it works together.*

*The sun, the earth, the water, the plants, the animals, all make the rainforest alive.”*  
(*Song of the Kuku Yalanji of Mossman Gorge; Source: Kuku Yalanji Dreamtime Tours web site*)

We are the true rainforest people, who live in harmony with our environment. We are part of it and it is part of us. Our culture has always involved a deep respect for nature and an intimate knowledge of its cycles. What we know about the plants of the rainforest we learn from our Elders—our Fathers, Grandfathers, Mothers, Uncles and Aunties. What we know belongs to them, to our culture and our traditions. It belongs to our people, the Kuku Yalanji—we are happy to share it with you.

*Bamanga Bubu Ngadimunku Inc.*

For who better to interpret our environment for tourists than indigenous people who have developed an understanding and knowledge of their country which can never be duplicated by nonindigenous tour guides.

*Lowitja O’Donoghue, Aboriginal elder, magistrate, and activist for her people’s rights, 23 October 1996*

**FIGURE 4** Aboriginal guides have shown tourists around the Mossman Gorge for several decades (here in 1989). Only recently have the Kuku Yalanji been able to regain a sense of ownership of their tribal lands and cultural heritage. This process is still continuing, as illustrated by current negotiations between stakeholders regarding a code of conduct. (Photo by Matthis A. Zimmermann)



**FIGURE 5** Young fig tree in the Wet Tropics. The fig tree often reaches a commanding size and imposing shape (eg the huge “Cathedral Tree” near Lake Tinadoo). In traditional Wet Tropics cultures, fig trees were often the “home” to Aboriginal spirits. (Photo courtesy of the Wet Tropics Management Authority)



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Professor Sofield's degrees in social anthropology and environmental science have been combined in pursuit of research related to indigenous peoples and tourism. In the past 10 years he has focused on tourism as a tool for poverty alleviation in the island countries of the South Pacific, Nepal, and China (where there are 55 minorities).

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to thank Doon McColl, Wet Tropics Management Authority, for providing the map and photos of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area.

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al heritage sites. Many of the Kuku Yalanji people now live in Mossman Gorge adjacent to the World Heritage-listed rainforest northeast of Port Douglas, on the site of a former mission station.

The essence of the Kuku Yalanji ecotourism experience centers on a guided tour into the rainforest above the Gorge and around the flanks of Mount Demi, which is a source of many Dreamtime stories encompassing the spirits of the ancestors. Sections of traditional walking tracks are used for the ecotour through pristine rainforest, which includes cave paintings and special sites. Interpretation of the landscape is as much a cultural and spiritual as an environmental experience because the stories and songs related by the guides emphasize their belief that nature and culture cannot be divided or viewed separately (Figures 4 and 5). The stories of the Dreamtime and the spirits of the rainforest are interwoven with information on medicinal plants, fruits, and “bush tucker” (food), how to make a bark *wurun* (shelter), and how to make paint for ceremonial purposes.

In precontact times, language, stories, songs, and dances were used to pass important survival and social knowledge to the younger generations in an ongoing form of apprenticeship to their elders. As traditional ways struggle to survive in the

contemporary, capitalist, European-dominated value system of the 21st century, ecotourism is playing a major role in the cultural revival, preservation, and maintenance of traditional Kuku Yalanji knowledge by providing a *raison d'être* for that knowledge to retain its relevance and be transmitted to younger generations. It is assisting in the adaptation by the Kuku Yalanji to contemporary wider Australian society by creating employment, by the generation of indigenous entrepreneurship and small business development, and by providing an economic base to revive indigenous communities. Through these means, ecotourism is playing a significant role in empowering the Kuku Yalanji and in maintaining and revitalizing their unique cultural identity and connection to the land.