The Coorong Wilderness Lodge: A case study of planning failures in Indigenous tourism

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HIGHLIGHTS

• Case analysis of policy process for infrastructure development of an Indigenous tourism business.
• Rare emic view as a result of having Indigenous Australian tourism entrepreneur as a co-researcher.
• Social construction theory shows dissonant narratives as 1 source of policy failure.
• Need creative and dialogic cross-cultural management approaches.

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a case study of the Coorong Wilderness Lodge (CWL) in order to highlight barriers to success that are in part derived from poor policy and planning supports for Indigenous Australian tourism operators. This analysis assists in filling a research gap on the catalysts to economic success and failure in Indigenous tourism through obtaining rich narratives from public sector facilitators and the Indigenous Australian tourism entrepreneur. Using social construction theory, this paper narrates the story of difficulties in developing the infrastructure between 1995 and 2008. This story highlights diverging views of how such enterprises should be supported which is in part explained by cultural differences, diverging expectations and poor communications across such divides. With the founder of the CWL George Trevorrow as a co-researcher in the project, the paper provides an emic perspective that offers fresh insights into this topic.

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1. Introduction

Too often, the needs of people out there at the coal face take second place to the needs of bureaucracies and policy makers. Aboriginal tourism is highlighted again and again as a growth area, important to both the economic development of Aboriginal people, and to the growth of Australia’s tourism industry as a whole. But every Aboriginal operator has a story to tell of frustrated attempts to get things happening (George Trevorrow speaking as Chairman of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tourism Reference Group, National Aboriginal Tour Operators Forum, 1995, p. 53).

In recent decades there has been considerable effort exerted to encourage Indigenous Australians¹ to enter the tourism industry. There have been a variety catalysts driving this, including tourists’ interests in Indigenous experiences; the tourism industry’s interest in developing diverse niche markets to entice international tourists; the interests of governments in moving Indigenous Australians from “welfare to work”; and an increasing interest by some Indigenous Australians in using tourism to obtain diverse goals. However, the number of successful Indigenous Australian tourism ventures established in this period has remained surprising small. Research into Indigenous Australian tourism enterprises has also been limited. As Ellis stated, “For over 20 years research on

¹ This paper uses the term Indigenous Australians and Indigenous Australian tourism. Some documents and programs referred to use the alternative term, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples/tourism.
Indigenous experiences’ has been a priority but to date comprehensive data has not been forthcoming. Much of the development of Indigenous tourism has occurred in an information vacuum, perhaps contributing to the unacceptably high failure rate among tourism enterprises” (2003). A review of the literature on Indigenous tourism, both in Australia and in other contexts, reveals that the majority of research has focused on the nature of tourist demand, the cultural tourism niche and marketing issues; few studies have undertaken qualitative interviews with public servants supporting Indigenous enterprise development and with Indigenous tourism business leaders. This article is intended to address this gap in knowledge and thereby contribute to ensuring better success in Indigenous tourism enterprise development.

Understanding Indigenous Australian tourism requires an understanding of the historical background and context in which it emerged. It was only as recently as 1967 that a referendum was passed, changing the Australian Constitution and allowing the federal government to legislate for the benefit of Indigenous Australians and thus overrule some discriminatory state legislation that caused Indigenous Australian marginalisation. The referendum led to Indigenous Australians receiving the same citizenship rights as other Australians, including the right to fair wages for their labour, unrestricted movement off missions and a halt to the forced removal of children (known as the Stolen Generations). Coincidentally, it was about this time that Australia began to concentrate on formulating tourism policy and engaging with this potentially lucrative source of economic growth. Altman (1993, 2001) claimed on formulating tourism policy and engaging with this potentially lucrative source of economic growth.

Indigenous tourism is an important phenomenon globally with Indigenous peoples gaining greater capacity to control tourism, shape it to serve their interests and use it for a variety of social, cultural, political, environmental and economic purposes. The context in which this occurred was a time of empowerment of Indigenous peoples resulting from a variety of occurrences, including the movements for decolonisation and self-determination, rights initiatives particularly with the United Nations with its Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the activism of Indigenous communities around the globe. Research into Indigenous tourism has simultaneously strengthened since the 1960s onwards has seen initiatives undertaken for empowerment and independence in economic, social and political terms. Tourism has been turned to as one tool in these efforts to seek economic opportunities that enhance Indigenous communities’ capacities and generate positive futures.

One positive example is that of Native American casinos in the United States. Hing wrote of this as: “a remarkable story of large-scale Indigenous enterprise development which has successfully tapped into international and domestic tourist markets in the United States of America” (2007, p. 471). These opportunities have arisen in specific circumstances where courts determined some tribes could run casinos on their tribal lands according to their legal status and US government acquiesced for the reduced dependency on federal government money that resulted. Spilde concluded this demonstrates that “given the opportunity, the conditions and the investment capital, Indian nations can be incredibly successful capitalists” (cited in Hing, 2007, p. 471).

Another positive example exists in New Zealand where Maori peoples have been able to use the provisions of the Treaty of Waitangi to develop an economic base for their economic development including tourism. As Hall (1996) has demonstrated, the Treaty has allowed Maori to get assets in Crown Lands and other resources and use these for economic and social purposes. Now Maori iwi, or tribes, such as the Ngai Tahu are major economic players not only in tourism but in other economic sectors as well, including fishing and real estate. The provisions of the Treaty have facilitated Maori empowerment in arenas like tourism through the recognition of Maori rights and responsibilities derived from their Indigenous status and cultural responsibilities. Hall provides as good example of the Ngai Tahu of the South Island who have used the Treaty to try to take control of the resource of pounamu or...
greenstone as a traditional resource of sacred importance (1996). In tourism research, such developments towards empowerment have been captured by Weaver’s six-staged model at levels five and six in his scheme analysing the evolutionary trajectory of Indigenous tourism (2010).

Cave provided an analysis of cultural tourism dynamics and New Zealand’s Pasifika communities (2005). Her analysis investigated the cultural interface between hosts, visitors and mediators and she provided useful theoretical insights on engagement with “Otherness” and bridging the divisions between “Self” and “Other”. In particular, Cave employed concepts of heterotopia and hybridity; the former describing “places of Otherness wherein new ways of seeing or experimenting are experienced” and the latter pertaining to third spaces where cultural contact occurs and both of which may offer the promise of creative and dialogic engagement rather than conflict and misunderstanding (Cave, 2005, p. 263). Cave also offered some thoughtful exposition on the “entrepreneurial dimension” of Indigenous cultural tourism and noted the ways in which cultural values might exist in tension with the demands of capitalistic enterprise (2005). In this same volume, Ryan suggested that following on from the historical context of Indigenous tourism, it is a site where issues of public funding remain despite neoliberalism as government agencies try to shape tourism for economic development and social well-being; he states Indigenous tourism is “...perhaps one area of tourism where a social ethic is continuously addressed” (2005, p. 73).

There are few stories of failure in the literature on Indigenous tourism. Schaper, Carlsen and Jennings have described this as a “survivor bias” in the research and have noted a need for studies of failure which are important to “identifying barriers to successful business venture formation, growth and management” (2007, p. 55). Sofield (1996) provided a rare case in his analysis of the development of a resort in the Solomon Islands. In summary he explained how the “host villagers” forced the closure of the resort and lost the income the developers provided through leasing arrangements and other revenues; Sofield noted that while westerners might see that as irrational “…to the islanders, the sociocultural and psychological values associated with control of their ancestral lands was of greater value than material outputs” (Sofield, 1996, p. 200).

Moving to the Australian context, the lead up to the 2000 Olympics saw the zenith of Indigenous Australian tourism with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tourism Industry Strategy (NATSITIS) and many initiatives to enable Indigenous Australians to offer tourism products and experiences (Whitford, 2009). However, despite these numerous initiatives, the outcomes have been mixed if not disappointing. As Schmichien and Boyle stated “Indigenous tourism is an “extremely fragile and tenuous sector of the tourism industry…”” (2007, p. 60). One of the key issues highlighted in recent research is the failure of policy and planning supports for these enterprises.

Former head of the Australian Tourism Commission John Morse stated at the Garma Indigenous Festival in 2005: “There has been too much talking, too much humbug, too many meetings, and too few successful Aboriginal tourism businesses since the NATSITIS report was released in 1997 and little has changed” (Garma, 2005).

As a pragmatic tourism industry expert, Morse outlined key obstacles including:

- Funding and access to finance;
- Skill development;
- Aboriginal people are usually asked to conform to a white system that is alien and often causes confusion and cynicism;
- There are too few people involved, thus forcing the responsibility on to a small group of dedicated people;
- Land tenure and potential to raid capital on native title land [secure bank loans from such assets];
- Channels of distribution [wholesalers etc] are unwilling in the main to become involved (Garma, 2005).

Research supports the view that government efforts have done little to progress Indigenous tourism enterprises. In their study of public-sector initiatives, Buultjens et al. found that there was “generally poor coordination between programs within and across jurisdictions … [and] programs provide little ongoing support for businesses beyond the business planning phase, despite the heightened pressures on Indigenous enterprises to succeed over the long term” (2002, p. 31). Seminal work by Whitford, Bell, and Watkins (2001) particularly pointed out that economic rationalism has been driving government agencies’ engagement with Indigenous Australian tour operators and this is at a disjuncture with Indigenous Australian tour operators’ motivations and values. They argue the narrow economic perspective of economic rationalism “...would appear to be diametrically opposed to stated social and environmental aspirations of ATS1 people” (2001, p. 177). When Indigenous tourism operators have been supported in their tourism enterprises, it has been very much based on an alien market model which they are expected to master in short timeframes.

Studies in Indigenous entrepreneurship have expanded in the last decade and have examined the question of whether there is a contradiction between the economic focus of western business practice and Indigenous cultural values in Indigenous enterprises (e.g. Foley, 2006a, 2006b, 2009; Wood & Davidson, 2011). Foley’s body of work indicates that Indigenous entrepreneurs can adapt to western economic systems and still hold Indigenous cultural values such as respecting cultural norms, serving the needs of family and community, and creating positive role models. While economic pressures may conflict with cultural obligations and cause short-term difficulties, Foley suggested that Maori entrepreneurs “…practice sustainability [by] valuing the cultural level of their business pursuit”, thus modelling a quadruple bottom-line sustainability (adding culture to economy, society and ecology) (2009, p. 611). Wood and Davidson demonstrated that government initiatives may not be attuned to these differences and this presents a significant barrier to Indigenous business success:

There is a different value set to the non-indigenous population; indigenous people value community, consensus and cooperation (Schaper, 2007), and this can be at odds to the individual culture of the dominant population. Indeed, this misunderstanding and clash of cultures (e.g. in terms of what constitutes entrepreneurial “success” for indigenous versus non-indigenous populations, etc.) is another main barrier facing future indigenous entrepreneurial growth (Wood & Davidson, 2011, p. 323).

Recent research in Indigenous tourism has underscored “the importance of an Indigenous-driven approach to planning for tourism” (Nielsen, 2010, p. 36). This is due to a new emphasis on Indigenous self-determination and a recognition of the failure of a

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2 E.g.: The Aboriginal Tourism Strategy of South Australia in 1995; Guidelines for tourism joint ventures between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal partners in 1996; the Indigenous tourism product development principles of New South Wales in 1997; The cultural landscape: A cultural tourism action plan for WA 1996–98 of Western Australia in 1996; the formation of Aboriginal Tourism Australia; among numerous others.
multitude of mainstream and mainstreaming policies. Whittaker (1999) found that tourism organisations have a limited understanding of Indigenous social and cultural issues which hampers good outcomes for planning interactions. Nielsen, Buulfjelten, and Gale’s (2008) study of interactions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous tourism operators in Queensland revealed that there are strong cultural divides between them and racism was identified as a barrier to cooperation. Finally, more than a decade ago, and in the wider domain, Chris Ryan argued we need to be concerned with “…serious issues of patterns of power and how such power to implement policies is to be both determined and practised” (2002, p. 17).

It is also important to contextualise these efforts in terms of the profound economic disadvantage in which Indigenous Australians find themselves in contemporary Australia. This results from:

- the historical legacy of dispossession and exclusion;
- the continuing consequence of poor education, housing, health and income status as economic disadvantage reproduces itself;
- structural factors reflecting Indigenous family formation, demographic transitions, and high population growth;
- locational factors reflecting the distribution of the Indigenous population disproportionately remote from economic opportunities;
- cultural factors reflecting a diversity of Indigenous priorities that in varying degrees diverge from predominant Australian capitalist values; and
- other influences like the preconceptions and prejudices of non-Indigenous Australian society (Altman, 2001).

The interface in Indigenous Australian tourism enterprise development is clearly problematic and this is curtailing the ability of these enterprises to thrive. This paper offers a case study of the CWL to gain more in-depth insight into these issues.

3. Methodology

This project employed a case study approach to study the development of the CWL. A case study is “an empirical enquiry about a contemporary phenomenon (e.g. a ‘case’), set within its real-world context — especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2009, p. 18). This study demonstrates how the development of the CWL was shaped by the policy context under which it was developed and the attitudes of the planners involved; we cannot understand the evolution of the CWL without deep attention to this context. While case studies may be criticised for not being “generalizable”, Stake argued the goal of case study research does not have to be “producing generalizations”, as the “uniqueness” and “particularization” of the case with its rich insights and lessons teach us deep understanding about the case itself and also that from which it differs (1995, pp. 7–8). Specifically in tourism studies, Dreidge and Jenkins edited a volume of case studies they entitled Stories of practice (2011), using a “story-telling approach” and offering discussions of tourism policy and planning that were characterised as “constructivist-interpretative” (2011, p. 7). Such a qualitative approach does not require the external verification of positivist approaches and does not seek to determine the “truth” of any offered interpretation, but rather is open to the insights, the challenges and the new lines of questioning that diverse interpretations offer.

In this project, multiple sources of information were gathered including: 26 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key informants; policy documentation from governments and other agencies; primary documents on the CWL; and participant observations of the development of the enterprise over the life of the enterprise. Five in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with George Trevorrow, founder and manager of the CWL, between 2006 and 2009. This provided an oral history of the development and operations of the enterprise. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were then conducted with the 21 other informants including representatives of the South Australian Tourism Commission (SATC), regional tourism associations, Indigenous Business Australia (IBA), the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSI), private tourism ventures, business consultants and training providers. This research was approved under the ethics approval processes of the University of South Australia and followed the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies’ Guidelines on ethical research on Indigenous Australian issues (2000). Interviewees agreed to be interviewed in the knowledge that their comments and quotations would be attributed to them rather than under conditions of anonymity; however they had the right to preview verbatim citations and correct these as necessary. The researchers used this approach because contributors would be identifiable, at least in the local context, by the roles they served.

An important facet of the research methodology for this project was the inclusion of George Trevorrow as a co-researcher. In our view the analysis of the success or otherwise of Indigenous Australian tourism enterprises must necessarily involve a research methodology including Indigenous Australian tourism entrepreneurs. This provides a missing emic perspective which allows fresh insights into the difficulties of Indigenous Australian tourism enterprise development. While this necessarily complicates the outcomes of the research with possible concerns about biased perspectives, we determined the richness of the unique insights gained outweighs possible drawbacks.

This approach is aligned with the emerging critical, Indigenist research paradigm. For instance, Indigenous Australian academic Rigney’s (1997) conceptualisation of Indigenist research was based on three ‘inter-related principles’:

- resistance as the emancipatory imperative in Indigenist research
- political integrity in Indigenous research

Rigney argued that Indigenist research must be conducted by Indigenous Australians, using Indigenous Australian informants and in support of the liberation and self-determination of Indigenous Australians (1997, p. 120). Rigney was not arguing that there is no role for non-Indigenous researchers in the conduct of Indigenous research, but rather after a long history of denigrating, objectifying and demeaning Indigenous peoples, cultures and knowledges, the time has come for a privileging of Indigenous researchers and perspectives through Indigenist research. Non-Indigenous researchers who work in respectful, reflexive and culturally sensitive ways to Indigenous protocols are welcomed as potential supporters of these endeavours. By respecting an Indigenist research approach in this research project, we have been able to gather in-depth insights that illuminate problems and discontinuities that have been dealt with only cursorily in tourism studies so far.

Another key issue to address here is the relationship of the researchers as some might suggest that Indigenous tourism research done appropriately should be the result of long-standing relationships (Ryan & Aiken, 2005b, p. 281). The first author on this article has worked with the Ngarrindjeri community since 1999 and this research project was possible because she was well known to George Trevorrow and worked on earlier collaborations that showed a commitment to the Ngarrindjeri community and its well-
being. The third author on this paper is a Ngarrindjeri academic who bridges the worlds of academia and community and served to navigate community and family protocols and ensure that the research outcomes were appropriate and effective.

The theoretical approach to the study incorporated the insights gained from social construction theory which suggests that tourism policy, planning and implementation are “dynamic, socially constructed activities that involve a range of agents and organisations characterised by varying degrees of interest and commitment” (Dredge & Jenkins, 2007, p. 14). The information gained from the interviews for this project represented several differing social constructions on the nature, capacities and needs of Indigenous Australian tourism enterprises and provided insights into the dynamics of building the CWL as a business. Key dimensions of a social constructionist analysis include analysis of spatial dimensions, time scales, institutional contexts, issue drivers, actors and the characteristics of policy dialogues and exchanges (Dredge & Jenkins, 2007, pp. 16–20).

4. The Coorong Wilderness Lodge

“I’ve got a place here, I think it’s one of the most beautiful tourism places in the world, and I’ve travelled a lot of the world looking at different places, and this is unique, it’s different (George Trevorrow, pers. comm. 4 April 2007).

The Coorong Wilderness Lodge (CWL) is an Aboriginal tourism facility founded in 1997 (Table 1) and was operated by George and Shirley Trevorrow and their family until George’s passing in 2011. It was a family-run enterprise located on land leased for 25 years (with an option to renew) from the Ngarrindjeri community. The Trevorrow family includes respected community leaders of the Ngarrindjeri nation, with George having served as Rupelle of the Ngarrindjeri Tendi and Chair of the Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority. George Trevorrow also had important tourism leadership experience at the national level; in the early 1990s he initially served as the Chairman of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tourism Reference Group and then became the first elected Chairman of the fledgling Aboriginal Tourism Operators Association (ATOA) (NTIC 1995, p. 56).

The Coorong Wilderness Lodge is located at Hack’s Point approximately 25 km southeast of Meningie, South Australia and approximately 200 km south-east of Adelaide, the capital of South Australia (see Fig. 2). It sits on one of Australia’s major touring routes, the Adelaide to Melbourne Great Ocean Road drive. Additionally the CWL is adjacent to the Coorong National Park which is one of the iconic regions of Australia (See Fig. 2). The vision for the CWL was to create an up-market eco-lodge which would capitalise on the strong niche market demand for high-end ecotourism experiences in uniquely attractive ecological environments. By doing this, the Trevorrows wanted to provide economic opportunities for their extended family and the Ngarrindjeri community which would allow them to continue to live “on country” and continue cultural ways.

George Trevorrow was a well-positioned Indigenous tourism entrepreneur because of his leadership role and experience in Indigenous Australian tourism as head of ATOA. During its existence, the CWL has received significant advice and support from various levels of government, business advisors, training experts and other business development experts. The CWL had also benefited from the strong level of political support for Aboriginal tourism in South Australia. Former Tourism Minister Jane Lomax-Smith (service 2002–2010) was an ardent supporter of Aboriginal tourism and had instructed her staff to facilitate the CWL’s progress. These favourable conditions would suggest this business should have attained commercial success, particularly in the international market that it originally targeted. This is however was not the case despite enduring effort on the part of the Trevorrow family. This research project on the CWL intended to explain this apparent contradiction. Due to space constraints, this article is focused on one facet of the story; the difficulties in developing the accommodation units and affiliated infrastructure.

4.1. The building saga: a story of lost opportunities

The CWL is sited on a peninsula in the Coorong and its remote location incurred significant infrastructural costs in construction, bringing power supply to the site, constructing a roadway and addressing water and sewerage. Mark Lewis Corporate Services (MLCS) developed the first tourism development report for the CWL in 1995 and projected a need for $1.35 million for the initial capital costs of the project; this projection increased to $2.2 million in 1996 (MLCS, 1995, p. 14). Because the CWL, like many Indigenous enterprises, could not raise finance from the private sector it was dependent on public sector sources of funding which forced a staged-approach to development. This has been a key inhibiting factor to the successful development of the business. As the MLCS Report stated:

In a truly commercial environment, the achievement of commercial return on investment may require two to three times the level of accommodation facilities that are proposed. In view of capital funding restrictions, such expansion (and improved financial viability) will occur at a later date (MLCS 1995, p. 14).

Table 1

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilities completed 2010</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Five accommodation units with kitchenettes and ensuites</td>
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<td>• Conference facility</td>
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<tr>
<th>Activities offered</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Guided walks interpreting the environment, animals, bush medicine and plants of the Coorong, as well as aspects of Ngarrindjeri culture</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Kayaking on the Coorong</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Heritage and cultural interpretation of the Coorong</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Campfire storytelling focused on Ngarrindjeri Dreaming stories</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Meals including traditional bush tucker ingredients</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Trekking across the sand dunes of the Coorong National Park to the shores of the Southern Ocean</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Collecting cockles and crabs from the ocean as Ngarrindjeri have done for millennia</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Talking to Ngarrindjeri people about their history, culture and connections to land or —country</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Learning about contemporary Ngarrindjeri living</td>
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<th>Coorong Wilderness Lodge facilities 2000–2008</th>
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<tr>
<td>• An ex-Olympic accommodation unit containing three basic ensuite bedrooms with one bunk bed and two single beds each and one ensuite bedroom with one queen bed and one sofa bed</td>
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<tr>
<td>• A restaurant (built in the shape of a fish) offering light meals</td>
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<tr>
<td>• A small interpretative space and souvenir outlet located in the restaurant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Camping area and powered caravan sites</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Shower and ablution block</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Kayaks for hire</td>
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Table 1

Outlining Coorong Wilderness Lodge facilities and offerings.

3 The Rupelle is the head of the tendi. The tendi is a “unified system of governance” which preceded European invasion of South Australia in the 1830s (Bell, 1996, p. 137). The tendi system was devastated by the European invasion and has only recently been reactivated.

4 A weakness for many Indigenous tourism enterprises is the lack of freehold legal title to land (on lands like Hacks Point which are secured through native title or lands trust processes) which can be used as collateral for securing bank loans and finance.
The original building plans envisioned the initial development of ten accommodation units and a central facility for dining and meetings. Funding was sought from a variety of sources during the establishment phase between 1997 and 2007, including the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and the South Australian Tourism Commission (SATC) (see Table 2). The first step in the building of the infrastructure occurred when the restaurant was built in 1998. At this same time, the builders also laid hexagonal foundations for 10 accommodation units. This occurred simultaneously to a number of Ngarrindjeri receiving training certificates in hospitality and guiding so that they would be ready to fill the jobs available once the infrastructure was developed. However, promised SATC funding to complete the accommodation units did not come through until 2002–2003. This in fact has been the source of one of the most disheartening and frustrating aspects of developing the CWL. It proved a major impediment to attaining the original vision for the CWL as it limited the business to catering to the lower value day-visitor market and curtailed the capacity to develop the envisioned up-market ecolodge.

The key issue was obtaining a design for the accommodation units that met George’s vision and that SATC would support. In the mid-1990s renowned architect Ken Latona drew up architectural design plans in consultation with Trevorrow that reflected Trevorrow’s vision, suited the eco-lodge nature of the proposed development and was in harmony with the Coorong environment. Latona was an environmentally sensitive architect well known for the Friendly Beaches and Bay of Fires Lodges in Tasmania. Latona’s empathy with Trevorrow’s vision is clear from a letter he wrote to MLCS offering a quote for the CWL tourism development:

The proposal for 10 guest units and 20 backpacker beds has been amended after discussion with the client and yourself to provide consistent and quality accommodation which can maximise returns (without incurring too great additional capital expenditure). The motivation for the design concept is the original Aboriginal shelter for the Coorong — the “pulgi” — and follows George Trevorrow’s comment that he would rather live with the “arch” than in square modern rooms. The forms acknowledge the direction and strength of local wind patterns … with all buildings located to take advantage of impressive views to the Coorong and sand dunes of the Younghusband Peninsula (Ken Latona, letter 14 November 1996).

SATC did not implement the Latona architectural plan. Michael Geddes clarified the reason for this: “Those plans came from outside the process that the SATC were involved in and that at the particular stage of the project, with other designs already being discussed, they were just not able to be considered” (pers. comm. 1 May 2009). Trevorrow disputed this interpretation and could not understand how plans from such a renowned eco-architect could be ignored. SATC’s rejection of Latona’s plan necessitated the commissioning of alternative architectural plans.

Thereafter SATC presented Trevorrow with plan after plan it commissioned for the site, but Trevorrow stood his ground steadfastly:

I’ve had many different designs sent to me now over the last few years, which I wouldn’t even have on the property and if it meant I won’t get anything then so be it. Some of them are just quite disgusting. And out of whack with the whole environment. So we revert back to the original plans [Latona’s design] … I keep referring back to those plans now. I think people probably get a bit upset with me sometimes because I’m sticking to what I believe the needs are for this place and they think I’m being difficult. I’m not being difficult. I want something that’s sensible, that fits in the environment, that’s unique, has a Ngarrindjeri flavour and that means something to us. Anyway the square box sitting out here, galvanised iron shelter that they put up in the mid-North in the early ‘70s and all that sort of stuff … I’ve been offered that over the years of putting them up. I don’t need any of that (pers. comm. 4 September 2006).

Here Trevorrow is referring to one design plan commissioned by SATC which he opposed because of the use of corrugated iron cladding that George negatively associated with mission buildings up North. Craig Grocke of SATC acknowledged Trevorrow’s view...
Bill van der Spelt described the problem: and SATC meant that building was delayed for a number of years. (pers. comm. 15 November 2006).

According to Bill van der Spelt, the manager of TPY:

* Aborigional and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC)
  - The objectives of ATSIC, according to Section 3 of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act, were:
    - to ensure maximum participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in government policy formulation and implementation
    - to promote indigenous self-management and self-sufficiency
    - to further indigenous economic, social and cultural development, and
    - to ensure co-ordination of Commonwealth, state, territory and local government policy affecting indigenous people.

In order to achieve these objectives, ATSIC has three key functions or roles:
- it advises governments at all levels on indigenous issues
- it advocates the recognition of indigenous rights on behalf of indigenous peoples regionally, nationally and internationally
- it delivers and monitors some of the Commonwealth government’s indigenous programs and services (Pratt, 2003).

ATSIC was abolished in 2004 and its Indigenous rights advocacy lapsed. ATSIC viewed the creation of IBA and the transfer of ATSIC’s business programs to it as a further attempt to dilute ATSIC’s power and influence (Altman, 2001, p. 17).

By 2001—2002, Trevorrow had secured another design he found appropriate at a price that was affordable tendered by the Ngarrindjeri’s Murray Bridge Community Development and Employment Program (CDEP) called Tangglun Piltengi Yunti (TPY). According to Bill van der Spelt, the manager of TPY:

I drew one of these accommodation units out, which is shaped like a fish. He thought that was a great idea. We then lodged it with the SATC who turned around and took it on board, took it with them and probably three months later came back with a plan that didn’t look anything like that… we ended up with virtually a square box, very European style, had nothing to do with the area, had nothing to do with the restaurant or anything else (pers. comm. 9 May 2007).

Disagreements over the design of the units between Trevorrow and SATC meant that building was delayed for a number of years. Bill van der Spelt described the problem:

... the funding bodies haven’t been listening to what we’ve been saying. Every time we come up with the same design they change it … they come back with a different design. And the last design they come up with was … going to cost $150,000 to $160,000 just for one little unit and of course the money wasn’t there anymore. This had been going over a period of four years where the architects have drawn money out of it and we’ve got nothing, absolutely nothing (pers. comm. 9 May 2007).

This failure to agree on a design saw the steady erosion of funds available to finance development as architectural and consultants’ fees mounted. Importantly, use of SATC commissioned designers and builders would have meant that these building works would provide less benefit to the Ngarrindjeri community than using the Ngarrindjeri TPY CDEP proposal which would have provided construction employment opportunities.

A further complication was that the design of the accommodation units was tied up with the development of other infrastructure at the CWL which created blockages to progress. In the interest of cost effectiveness, SATC bracketed the tender for the accommodation units together with the redesign of the entrance to the CWL and the building of an entrance bay and information area. When disagreements on the design of the units prevented progress, the building of the entrance infrastructure also stalled. This very likely meant loss of business as poor signage meant passing highway traffic travelling on the Adelaide-Melbourne tourist route was not alerted to the CWL and its amenities (See Fig. 3).

Four years of stalemate on the building of the accommodation units finally shifted in 2007 when TPY provided another set of designs based on the fish shape. Advantages of the TPY bid included the fact that their price per unit was reasonable at approximately $85,000 per unit and they would employ Ngarrindjeri labour in the construction of the units. However, it was the McCracken Homes tender using a fish-shaped design that was finally implemented because by this time the CDEP program on which TPY relied for funding was under threat of being dismantled by the Commonwealth government and could no longer be relied on to see the project through to completion (See Fig. 4).

The previous impasse with SATC on building the units was effectively overcome with the input of Paul Case who was appointed as a Business Manager for the project by Indigenous Business Australia (IBA). Case facilitated meetings with all agencies and brokered the funding agreements to make the building work go ahead. In particular, an IBA loan/grant offer...
4.2. Interpretations and social constructions of the building saga

The events described above indicate the delays and frustrations that bureaucratic processes can impose on Indigenous Australian tourism operators and the ways they can inhibit business development. Interviews for this research project indicated a level of misunderstanding of roles in the process of developing the infrastructure for the CWL and the discord that resulted from this misunderstanding. Trevorrow expressed the view that SATC planning people were sometimes a barrier to progress rather than a source of assistance. SATC personnel, on the other hand, saw themselves as hard-working facilitators of the development, helping sort through the complicated planning process. These contradictory views were evident in the clash over planning process requirements. Planner Craig Grocke of SATC argued:

So I guess we are trying to do a lot to try and ease processes which George probably hasn't necessarily been involved in or seen our movements behind the scenes to try and facilitate things. And that's a lot of what we do ... to get things through, get things happening (pers. comm. 15 November 2006).

Conversely, some SATC personnel indicated that a significant impediment to progress was Trevorrow’s perceived frequent change of mind on the design of the accommodation units (Michael Geddes, General Manager, Tourism Development unit, SATC, pers. comm. 16 November 2006). For instance, it was claimed that Trevorrow had supported a previous hexagonal design, before he finally focused on the current fish-shaped units (Michael Geddes, pers. comm. 16 November 2006). Trevorrow argued that he resisted what he considered inappropriate design plans that failed to capture his ongoing vision. From Trevorrow’s perspective, he “wanted the Latona design implemented from the outset” as this design was developed in consultation with him and best represented his vision for the development, but he was then “forced further and further away from this vision over the years as subsequent designs offered escalated in price from $10,000 per unit to over $165,000 per unit” (George Trevorrow, pers. comm. 18 July 2009). In the interviews for this project, Trevorrow emphasised the frustration he encountered in getting agency representatives to listen to him and concluded it shows “how much more difficult it is for an Aboriginal person to go into business than for anybody else” (George Trevorrow, pers. comm. 18 July 2009).

More significantly, Michael Geddes along with some other interviewees argued that a key weakness of the CWL was that the project was not proponent-driven, unlike most non-Indigenous development projects. They stated that non-Indigenous tourism operators are unlikely to be dependent on funding from SATC, instead commissioning their own designs and plans, and working to commercial timelines and pressures. With the CWL, all the funding for the design of the accommodation units came from SATC while SATC personnel such as Craig Grocke drove the process. This meant SATC followed its transparent tender process which was time-consuming and produced design plans which were only then seen by Trevorrow who turned them down because, as Geddes viewed it, Trevorrow was not clear on what he wanted. Geddes stated:

In this particular case, they had no design people of their own, no consultants of their own and they have no funds of their own. The government funds were the only funds which were basically forthcoming. Because the government process needs to be open and fair, rather than just going down the road and asking ... builders to build these things, we needed to create a documented design outcome that would then go to a broad tender process. Because we were driving this process, the level of documentation that we were doing would not be dissimilar to anybody else, but we were driving it, not somebody else. And because of the fact that they didn’t really know what they wanted until they saw the drawings, that's why I think the process was so slow (pers. comm. 16 November 2006).

The unfortunate outcome of all of this was the money provided for building the accommodation units was whittled down on architectural fees and forced Trevorrow to take an IBA loan/grant offer. This placed the CWL in a financially vulnerable position as it then incurred loan repayment obligations. As a result, the CWL languished in a period when other small to medium tourism enterprises would have either achieved viability or closed their doors.

As Paul Case noted:

In the meantime the focus has been for George, to sort through barriers of red tape to try and get his five cabins. He’s been doing that for two or three years and because of that he hasn’t been able to focus on his marketing. He hasn't been able to focus on...
developing his product, developing his connections and getting people down there because he’s been focusing on the next infrastructure, that’s been a problem all along (pers. comm. 11 January 2007).

Poor communication and poor understanding that arises from a lack of cultural understanding has led to poor outcomes and suspicions on both sides of the exchange. This statement from SATC’s General Manager of Tourism Development indicates this disjuncture:

So it’s really a different management style and it’s a management style which Aboriginal people need to sneak up on; it’s not incumbent in their thinking often, in the broad way, looking after money and managing business processes. So you need a much crisper approach to this. Now if there was a very crisp approach to the finances of the Coorong Wilderness Lodge then maybe there might have been some, I don’t know, we don’t know enough about it, we don’t know anything about it in terms of the availability of their own capital, they must be earning income from something (Michael Geddes, pers. comm. 16 November 2006).

In numerous interviews, such criticisms of failure of the CWL to reach mainstream standards led to discussion of the merits of having a non-Indigenous manager in place to look after those aspects of the business that were not being addressed by CWL staff and managers effectively.

There was also evidence of poor communication between the Trevorrow family and government supporting agencies such as the SATC due to a lack of cultural understanding. According to Tom Trevorrow:

And maybe SA Tourism needs a bit of a cross cultural workshop to understand where we come from... we’re from the fringe dwelling camps, and we grew up with nothing and our parents, like my parents when they died they never even had a dollar to leave to me [and] George. So we’ve struggled from nothing to what we’ve got now, from poverty to where we are. I think they need to understand that a bit more and then maybe they might consider things a bit better than what they are now. But the problem is I believe that we’re in the tourism basket totally with all the others ... all the other tourism companies and products in the state. I think [they should take] into account our background of where we come from and give us some credit from what we’re doing over the years and where we are now and give us a helping hand so we can really help with the Indigenous tourism side of things in the state (pers. comm. 4 April 2007).

This failure to understand the history and experience of Aboriginal leaders such as George and Tom Trevorrow has meant that some public servants and consultants failed to grasp the differing requirements of working with Indigenous Australian tourism operators versus non-Indigenous tourism operators. One topic where this was evident was the continued emphasis of the dependence on the CWL on public funding. For instance, Michael Geddes of SATC criticised George Trevorrow for changing his mind on the design of the units:

And while you’ve talked of the broad cultural issues about that design issue, the fish shaped building, I think it would be fair to say that George and his family have changed their opinions on the design a number of times without any consistency and that’s been a little bit frustrating ... Why did the designs which everybody thought they agreed to then suddenly get changed—and look people are capable of changing their minds, I know that but they’re changing their minds at the expense of the public purse, not of their own. These decisions they’re making, whether they’re cultural design or anything else, is not hurting their back pocket because the money is coming from somewhere else. So I think there’s an overlay of a series of things, both of culture and the broad finances and the lack of management skills which perhaps they have, or don’t have (Michael Geddes, pers. comm. 16 November 2006).

Business consultant Paul Case appointed by IBA to support the CWL did recognise that dealing with Indigenous tourism businesses is different and that non-Indigenous yardsticks do not work:

It’s that dimension [the down-to-earth nature] is what makes the Indigenous, that’s what is who they are. So we need to acknowledge it or don’t promote it, and there’s nowhere in between. If we want to have this product we need to take it and understand who the people are, understand its strengths and understand their culture. Some people see the culture as a weakness but their culture is their strength. You’ve just got to take it for what it is and have special mechanisms to support it (pers. comm. 11 January 2007).

5. Discussion

In their assessment of the likelihood Indigenous tourism would result in economic independence, Birdsall Jones, Wood and Jones concluded: “it is equally likely that the failures of Indigenous tourism to this point are due to our insufficient understanding of the interface between Aboriginal culture and the economic and political structures involved in tourism enterprise” (2007, pp. 205–6). We find the outcomes from this research shed some light on this gap in understanding.

The descriptive history above indicates some key points of failure that were detrimental to the original vision for the enterprise. These include: that staged approach to development which the business plan indicated was contrary to financial viability; the failure to provide promised funding at a key moment when Ngarrindjeri were trained and ready to run the accommodation and associated services; and the failure to agree to design plans on the accommodation units. More importantly though this descriptive history records the stories and interpretations of the players.

The interviews revealed a disjuncture in views that can be explained by the different social constructions the stakeholders hold of what is the appropriate nature, level and duration of support that Indigenous Australian enterprises should be able to tap when they are being developed. From George Trevorrow’s perspective of being a long-term leader of his Ngarrindjeri community and the wider Aboriginal community, serving in roles that ranged from local, to regional, to national leadership, his focus was on the government’s responsibility to develop a partnership with Indigenous Australians that would overcome the legacy of abuse and make reparations by helping to build a positive future. George had been a cultural educator which led him to co-found and develop Camp Coorong (see Higgins-Desbiolles, 2003); he became Rupelle or leader of the Ngarrindjeri Tendi, the Ngarrindjeri governing body; he served as Chair of the Ngarrindjeri Lands and Progress Association; he served on the South Australian Aboriginal Heritage Committee; he was a Regional Councillor to ATSIC; and in tourism specifically he was an early leader of national initiatives to
develop Indigenous Australian tourism as recounted earlier. While telling of the failure of the enterprise to achieve the original vision George had for it through this narrative, it is clear that George Trevorrow held leadership credentials that alert us to be attentive to his interpretation of the problems in establishing his enterprise. One of the most important things to understand about George's perspective is what his origins were — he grew up in the fringe camps near Meningie, was raised in traditional ways and excluded by the dominant society through formal and informal mechanisms. George bridged the two worlds through his attainments, his service to his communities and his work as a skilled cultural educator. His narrative of his experiences in trying to establish the CWL speaks of frustration, barriers and a failure of those who should have been supporting his efforts to understand and meet his needs.

In understanding the social constructions of the agents who acted as facilitators of the enterprise's development, it would be few who would see George Trevorrow's life history as relevant. Paul Case, the consultant employed by IBA, was the rare exception who recognised George's values and experiences and how this related to his vision for his business. Some of the interviewees indicated frustration because of George's unwillingness to bend to bureaucratic decisions and frequent mention was made on the CWL's dependence on the "public purse". Read at one level, it could be argued that bureaucratic rules are to be applied evenly and are neutral in their imposition and effect. But this ignores the cultural dispositions of the players and the historical, political and cultural contexts which underpin these interactions. The non-Indigenous public servants voice an assimilating pressure placed on Indigenous proponents in the efforts to get into business. This is a cultural encounter that is not acknowledged and the discomfort and misunderstanding is palpable in this story. The lead researcher was simultaneously conducting research into a controversy surrounding the policy and planning process of developing a six star eco-lodge which saw some of the same bureaucrats involved in helping a non-Indigenous, wealthy entrepreneur navigate the planning approval process and was struck at the difference in engagement. While both developments tapped the public purse, the bureaucrats appeared to see the CWL in culturally alien terms and the six-star development in shared cultural terms (see Cave, 2005).5

Some might claim it is racist and patronising to argue that Indigenous enterprises should be treated differently because they cannot meet the best practice standards of western business models. However, this is a view from a narrow cultural lens on enterprises and our understanding might be better informed drawing from differing understandings from cross-cultural management, development studies and Indigenous studies, which are more likely to recognise cultural facets of development. “Fourth world theory” might be relevant to employ here, which allows us to view the experiences of Indigenous peoples living in the wealthy nations of the developed world in a critical light. As Seton explains:

“In the past and now, many of the problems faced by Indigenous people in Australia are the same as those faced by the colonised and oppressed peoples of the world. Indigenous people have experienced cultural losses and the effects of colonialism that have had profound consequences for their lives and the development of their communities. Indigenous people have struggled to maintain their cultural identity and traditions in the face of assimilation and cultural blindness.”

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6. Conclusion and implications

But I feel strongly that with … a small amount of infrastructure, we could make this viable, viable enough to run…[keep]a few families going. Because there’s no work out there, there’s no-one in this community that’s going to employ my people, so we’ve got to get creative and things so we can create employment for our people (George Trevorrow, pers. comm. 4 April 2007).

This paper has narrated a complex story of the difficulty of developing the infrastructure for the CWL. It is important to not forget the purposes for which such efforts are exerted — overcoming profound disadvantage to create economic opportunities for families such as the Trevorrow’s and positive futures for Indigenous Australians.

This research has some significance in its conduct, methodologies and methods. As Ryan and Aicken have noted, the
requirements of academia with its timelines, outputs, measurements and audits are not easy to reconcile with a research approach such as this where the researcher “adopts the need to immerse themselves slowly, over time, in the communities they research” (2005b, p. 181). It took four years of work together to collect and analyse the data for this project and this was followed by a death of (2005b, p. 181). It took four years of work together to collect and analyse the data for this project and this was followed by a death of. 

The research for this project uncovered some very significant divergence in views on the reason for engaging in tourism business leading to misunderstanding between supporting government agencies, consultants and the CWL. This is related to significant barriers to communication between supporting government agencies and consultants and Indigenous Australian tour operators.

Consequently, subjected to an economic rationalist approach, ATSI tourism development and growth could be viewed as an extraneous hindrance by an economically rational government as ATSI tourism is not simply about dollars and cents. It involves a complex and diverse set of issues including the requirement for social, cultural and environmental benefits... (2001, p. 176).

The study of the CWL suggests that expecting Indigenous Australian tourism enterprises to attain commercial viability in the short-term may not be realistic considering all the barriers that they face as well as the poor levels of understanding of government and industry experts on how to successfully assist such enterprises. More importantly it raises the question: on whose terms will enterprise development be pursued? As tourism leader John Morse has indicated “Aboriginal people are usually asked to conform to a white system that is alien and often causes confusion and cynicism” (Garma, 2005). The economic rationalist approach of current government is clearly “assimilationist” as Indigenous Australians are forced into commercial business models. But as noted by some scholars, Indigenous approaches and values may be incongruous with these ways (Foley, 2006a, 2006b, 2009; Wood & Davidson, 2011). Clearly current practice is not working when one looks at the number of failed Indigenous Australian tourism enterprises and we need to develop new models and ways. These must be derived from an engaged and creative approach if we are to overcome the misunderstandings and failures apparent in this case study of the CWL. It is hoped that the deficiencies and difficulties recounted in this paper will contribute to a better understanding of the issues and will contribute to more positive outcomes for Indigenous tourism enterprises.

Postscript

We completed this research in 2010 with the hope that we would disseminate the findings to the stakeholders in the project with the aim of sharing the results and learning from the findings. But at that time George Trevorrow was gravely ill and our plans were curtailed. A 100 page report was published by the funding body, the Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Centre, and made available online (Higgins-Desbiolles, Schmiechen, & Trevorrow, 2010). When George passed, we entered a period of mourning which resulted in a hiatus in furthering the dissemination strategy we had planned. The business of the CWL went under the management of the Ngarrindjeri Lands and Progress Association (who held the title to the land and had leased it to the CWL) and the enterprise did not fulfil the vision that George had for it of serving as a family business for his family’s future but rather transitioned to community control like the Ngarrindjeri’s Camp Coorong. Our study stops at George’s untimely death and it will be for a future research project to examine and narrate the CWL’s new phase.

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We also acknowledge that George Trevorrow passed away in 2011 and dedicate this paper to his memory and legacy.

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