Indigenous tourism in Australia: Time for a reality check

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HIGHLIGHTS
- First national indigenous study with 1357 international and domestic tourists.
- Attrition Curve of Tourist Demand applied to overcome bias in indigenous surveys.
- Low awareness, preference and intentions to participate in indigenous tourism.
- Disconnect between government objectives and the reality of tourist demand.

ABSTRACT

Indigenous tourism is positioned as an integral part of Australia’s tourism product offering. Yet participation in indigenous tourism experiences by both international and domestic markets is in decline. The demand for, and interest in, Australia’s indigenous culture that has been consistently portrayed by Australian government agencies has not translated into sustainable visitor flows for many indigenous tourism businesses. Therefore, the aim of this research was to explore visitor demand for indigenous tourism through interviews with 1357 international and domestic tourists. To overcome some of the limitations of previous indigenous tourism studies, this study used the ‘Attrition Curve of Tourist Demand’ to determine if insights could be gained by analysing the consumer decision making process (awareness, preferences and intentions). The results of the research show that while there has been much progress in the development of this niche tourism sector, there is low awareness, preference and intention to participate in indigenous tourism experiences in Australia.

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1. Introduction

In Australia, indigenous culture has long been thought to have the potential to provide the country’s tourism industry with a key point of differentiation (Buultjens, Waller, Graham, & Carson, 2005). Australia’s amalgamation of tourism and indigenous culture was formalised when the Australian Federal Government released the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tourism Strategy in 1997 and over the ensuing years, Australian states and territories have been working towards “increasing indigenous participation in tourism, particularly through employment, (to) help ‘close the gap’ of indigenous disadvantage and help address labour shortages in the tourism sector, particularly in rural and regional Australia” (Department of Resources Energy & Tourism, 2009, p. 10).

The interest in indigenous culture has led to the supply of a range of activities and experiences which are often owned and/or managed by Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. While indigenous people involved in tourism generally have a positive view of the industry and confidence in their products to exceed consumer expectations (Jones Donald Strategy Partners, 2009), there has been conflicting reports pertaining to the success (or otherwise) of indigenous tourism in Australia (Buultjens & Gale, 2013; Buultjens, Gale, & White, 2010; Buultjens & White, 2008; Fuller, Buultjens, & Cummings, 2005; Higgins-Desbiolles, Schmiechen, & Trevorrow, 2010; Schmiechen & Boyle, 2007; Tremblay & Wegner, 2009). Consecutive Australian governments, at Federal and State levels, have consistently touted optimistic and favourable assessments of the opportunities for Indigenous people due to tourism. For instance, the Australian government claim that

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“tourism offers enormous potential to indigenous communities, both to create sustainable jobs and employment and as a means to protect and nurture cultural and environmental heritage” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009).

Yet this reported demand has not transpired into visitor flows for many Australian indigenous tourism businesses and so the impetus for this study was borne from a clear divergence between the favourable and optimistic assertions of the Australian public agencies and the realities of visitor flows for the indigenous tourism businesses. According to one of the project stakeholders, “real demand for indigenous cultural tourism has not been effectively demonstrated through existing research. In some studies of demand there has been a tendency towards optimistic projections of the value of the indigenous cultural tourism market” (Personal Communication, 2012). Similarly Tremblay and Wegner (2009) noted that a lack of focused research has resulted in public sector strategies that have been developed for growing indigenous tourism in Australia, are not underpinned and developed with explicit empirical evidence but rather with assumptions (i.e., high interest or growing demand in indigenous tourism). For instance, a current indigenous tourism strategy accepted that given “the panel concluded that successful indigenous tourism industries in Rotorua, Hawaii and other parts of the world, indicate there is a growing appetite for indigenous product” (Yugarbbeh Museum, 2013, p. 6). Arguably comments that are indicative of the approach that has been applied to indigenous tourism development in Australia where decisions are not necessarily underpinned by a comprehensive understanding of visitor demand.

It is within this contextual scaffolding and in recognition of these research deficiencies and anomalies, that this empirical research was instigated with the aim of delving into the ‘real’ or actual visitor demand for Australia’s indigenous tourism product through a research design that specifically sought to elicit information not represented in previous studies of the market. The objectives of the study were to: (1) model international and domestic visitor responses to demand against an attrition curve approach (Department of Resources Energy & Tourism, 2008; Macfarlane & Jago, 2009; Morrison, 2005) to explore awareness, preferences and intention for Australia’s indigenous tourism products; and, (2) explore the associated demand driven inhibitors to tourist participation in indigenous tourism in Australia.

Although there has been a range of site-specific or case study driven research undertaken on indigenous tourism in Australia to date (e.g. Altman, 1993a, 1993b; Brereton et al., 2007; Brim, 1993; Buultjens, Brereton, et al., 2010; Buultjens & Fuller, 2007; Buultjens & Gale, 2013; Buultjens, Gale, et al., 2010; Buultjens et al., 2005; Buultjens & White, 2008; Dyer, Aberdeen, & Schuler, 2003; Finlayson & Altman, 2003; Fuller et al., 2005; Fuller & Cummings, 2003; Hall, 2007; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2009; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2010; Higgins-Desbiolles, Trevorrow, & Sparrow, 2014; Jones Donald Strategy Partners, 2009; Mercer, 2005; Nielsen, Buultjens, & Gale, 2008; Pitcher, Van Oosterzee, & Palmer, 1999; Ryan & Huyton, 2000b, 2000a, 2002; Smith, Scherrer, & Dowling, 2009; Tremblay, 2007; Tremblay & Wegner, 2009; Whitford, 2009; Whitford, Bell, & Watkins, 2001; Whitford & Ruhanen, 2010; Zep pel, 2002), this research is significant as it is the first to undertake a national study of indigenous tourism demand in Australia. It is also the first study to apply the attribution curve methodology and visitor choice sets to investigate indigenous tourism. As such, the research provides theoretical outcomes in terms of contributing to the traveller choice literature through the application of the ‘Attrition Curve of Tourist Demand’ model. Additionally, the practical implications of this study are significant for government and industry operators as the methodology attempts to remove the bias limitations of previous research and thus provides a realistic and frank exploration of indigenous tourism demand in Australia.

1.1. Indigenous tourism in Australia

Indigenous tourism can be defined as tourism activity in which indigenous people are directly involved either through control and/or by having their culture serve as the essence of the attraction (Butler & Hinch, 2007). In Australia and for the purpose of ascertaining visitor demand, an indigenous tourism ‘visitor’ is defined as one who participates in at least one indigenous tourism activity during their trip (i.e., experiencing indigenous art/craft or cultural display; attending an indigenous performance). This participation may be a one-off activity or a component of other tourism activities (Tourism Research Australia, 2008). The diverse array of activities available for those visitors seeking an indigenous experience in Australia include bushwalks, safaris, staying in indigenous owned/operated accommodation, going on a tour with an indigenous guide, visiting an indigenous site or community, attending live performances (e.g., dance, drama, music) and appreciating visual arts in State museums and galleries or through commercial art and craft enterprises (Tourism Research Australia, 2011).

Indigenous tourism is considered one of the key Australian experiences which underpin the country’s global marketing activities and therefore, it is considered an important inbound segment: “Australia’s indigenous culture is a key point of differentiation in a highly competitive international tourism market” (Tourism Research Australia, 2011, p. 1). Yet despite its purported significance, the sector has continued to decline; indeed visitors in this segment have declined for five successive years to 2010 (the last statistical data collection for the market). The indigenous tourism segment reportedly comprises 13% of total international visitors (down 3% on 2009), 20% of total international visitor nights and 19% of total international tourism expenditure in 2010 (Tourism Research Australia, 2011). It is also claimed that a significant proportion of domestic travellers are open to indigenous tourism experiences (Tourism Research Australia, 2010), in fact claiming that two-thirds of domestic tourism consumers have previously either considered, or actually taken part in indigenous tourism activities. The domestic overnight indigenous tourism market accounted for 306,000 trips, 2.5 million visitor nights and $490 million in expenditure in the same period. Such figures represent declines of 17%, 19% and 23% respectively on 2009. Indeed, since 2006, domestic overnight indigenous tourism has decreased on average each year by 19% in overnight trips and 23% in visitor nights, while total expenditure has decreased on average each year by 21%. Domestic overnight indigenous tourism has registered a much stronger decline than the total domestic market for the same period (Tourism Research Australia, 2011).

Other empirical studies of indigenous tourism visitors in Australia have concluded that participating in indigenous tourism is generally not a primary motivator to visit Australia (Nielsen et al., 2008). Earlier research by Ryan and Huyton (2000b, 2000a, 2002) also investigated visitor interest in indigenous tourism in the Northern Territory and concluded that both domestic and international tourists consistently ranked attractions based on indigenous culture as being less attractive than other activities. They found that indigenous tourism products are often seen as simply a component within a wider cultural and natural context of the Australian tourism experience and that for approximately a third of the visitors to the Northern Territory, the indigenous tourism experiences were not a major or ‘must see’ attraction. Research focused on domestic demand for indigenous tourism has found low appeal amongst the market, relative to other Australian experiences (Jones Donald Strategy Partners, 2009; Ryan & Huyton,
There are an array of underpinning reasons as to why there is inconsistency between government research results and independent researcher results. We acknowledge the reasons and/or issues behind these inconsistencies beget the need for a comprehensive discussion, however for the purpose of this paper, we suggest the inconsistencies emanate from (among other things) variance in methodological underpinning, research methods and research tools. For instance, in an overview of indigenous tourism research in Australia, Tremblay and Wegner (2009) suggested that the largest proportion of published research falls within the ‘abstract or opinion’ based research; that is, opinion pieces about the opportunities or constraints of indigenous tourism based on existing public knowledge and which involve no new research and limited legitimate theoretical explorations. Moreover, arguably too many studies have simply assumed there is a demand for indigenous tourism (O’Rourke, 2005), accepting the findings of the public sector statistical collections.

Importantly though it is the methodology applied in the national visitor studies which we argue is driving the inconsistencies between the reported optimistic demand levels and actual visitors ‘on the ground’. TRA (2011), for example, defines an indigenous tourism visitor as one who participates in at least one indigenous tourism activity during their trip. This definition also includes those visitors for whom participation may be a one-off activity. In such cases, engagement is often therefore not the focus of a trip and/or not specifically planned for, but rather occurs as an ancillary to a wider set of tourism experiences. As a consequence of using such a broad definition, it promotes the inflation of the visitor spending figures attributed to ‘indigenous tourism visitors’ by including the spending of visitors for whom engagement in an indigenous tourism activity is either not the focus of the trip or which occurs as an incidental activity. The uniqueness and significance of this current study lies in the methods we have employed in our quest to obtain more representative data results pertaining to indigenous tourism demand in Australia.

### 1.1.1. Tourist choice sets and the attrition curve

Choice sets have been applied to tourism destination contexts and have become a common and central component of destination selection models. While there has been significant work undertaken in examining destination choice sets (see Decrop, 2010 for a comprehensive overview and critique of the evolution of destination choice sets) there are relatively limited investigations into tourism experience choice sets and particularly into indigenous tourism experiences as a choice option.

Choice sets were initially introduced by Howard (1963) in the field of consumer behaviour. Choice sets are based on the notion that a consumer’s (i.e., tourists) product awareness, combined with their emotional associations to that product, then influence the development of their preferences for the alternatives from the consideration set (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). Preferences are thus the rankings consumers/tourists assigned to products (i.e., from most liked to least liked). Intention to purchase is a consumer/tourist’s perceived likelihood of purchasing a product within a specific time period.

Destination choice sets aim to explain how individuals select their destination through three key stages: 1) development of an initial awareness set, 2) selection of the preferred options and 3) a final selection that results in intention to visit or actual visitation (Um & Crompton, 1990). Um and Crompton’s model is based on a three stage ‘funnel’ or attrition process where the awareness set is narrowed down to an evoked preference set, from which the final choice is selected. Woodside and Lysonksi (1989) also applied traveller’s consideration sets to a destination level. They aimed to gather top-of-mind responses from their respondents by asking unprompted questions as an indicator of how prominent the destination was in the mind of the consumer.

The destination literature suggests that there are an unlimited number of destination choices, but visitors only actively consider between two to six destinations during the decision-making process (Howard, 1963; Howard & Sheth, 1969; Thompson & Cooper, 1979; Um & Crompton, 1990; Woodside & Sherrell, 1977). This is likely to also be the case for tourist experiences, although the choice set is limited by the chosen host destination.

One tool that has been applied to plot the ‘funnelling’ of choice sets into intention to visit or actual visitation to a destination is the attrition curve model. In other disciplines such as medicine/health, finance, commerce, economics and management, attrition models have also been used to measure the loss of clients, customers or participants over time (Au, Li, & Ma, 2003; Eysenbach, 2005; Smith, 2010; Van den Poel & Lariviére, 2004). Because the concept of attrition refers to the gradual reduction in size of a variable (such as customers), the attrition curve will usually slope downwards from left to right; that is, it has a negative association.

From a tourism perspective, the ‘Attrition Curve of Tourist Demand’ builds on the ‘General Model of Destination Choice’ (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989) and suggests that potential visitors go through a process of awareness, consideration, preference, and intention before they visit. Awareness of a product includes both the unprompted recall of a product from long-term memory and aided recognitions. The unprompted/aided awareness is very important as it is strongly linked with positive attitudes, intentions to purchase and actual purchases (e.g. Axelrod, 1968; Bronner & de Hoog, 1985; Woodside & Carr, 1988). Thus, to encourage a consumer/tourist’s preference for a specific destination, an effective tourism marketing strategy needs to gain a large share of first mentions among consumers who are choosing between competing travel destinations. The shares of first mentions are estimated by using responses to a question such as: “of all the vacation-holiday destinations that would be available for you to visit … what destination first comes to your mind” (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989, p. 9). The destination responses are henceforth referred to as the consideration set.

In practice, the ‘Attrition Curve of Tourist Demand’ is a tool that has been applied by tourism organisations in Australia (Department of Resources Energy & Tourism, 2008; Macfarlane & Jago, 2009), where it has been adopted to depict the relationship between the motivation variables of the model (i.e., awareness, preference and intention) and the behaviour variable (i.e., visitation). The attrition curve has five measurement points (Fig. 1) including: destination awareness (percentage of people who have heard about Australia as a holiday destination); preference (percentage of people considering visiting Australia in the next three to four years); intention (percentage of people seriously considering going to Australia in the next 12 months); booking (percentage of people currently booked to travel to Australia); and, visited (percentage of people who have visited Australia in the past 12 months) (Department of Resources Energy and Tourism, 2008; Morrison, 2005). Mapping visitor preferences thus enables Tourism Australia to monitor the effectiveness of its brand and marketing communications.

Macfarlane and Jago (2009) also applied the attrition curve in creating a methodology for determining and quantifying event induced tourism effects by linking awareness, preference, intention and visit. However, while the attrition curve is a model that can be used to evaluate tourist awareness, preference and intention to...
undertake a tourism experience, it is not a continuous phenomenon that can be used to predict behaviour. Whereas preference and intention are ‘thought’ variables that can be influenced largely by communication (marketing), actual visitation is influenced by external variables such as availability, cost and access. Correlations between preference and arrival are therefore a function not only of messaging and appeal of the tourism product but of externalities which vary both in time and personal context (Macfarlane & Jago, 2009). It is however, a useful tool for monitoring demand behaviour (Department of Resources Energy & Tourism, 2008).

2. Method

To achieve the study aims and objectives, face-to-face surveys were administered to international and domestic visitors in tourist precincts in Sydney, Melbourne, Cairns and Darwin. Sydney and Melbourne are the two major international gateways and most visited cities in Australia and so were selected as survey locations to provide access to both tourists who have participated in indigenous tourism and those who have not. Cairns and Darwin are locations which are generally accepted as relatively ‘popular’ destinations for indigenous tourism and therefore were expected to provide access to higher populations of those visitors who had more exposure or opportunity to participate in an indigenous tourism activity or experience.

Teams of eight trained data collectors spent three to four days in each of the locations over August and September 2012. The data collectors randomly approached people in the tourist precincts and invited them to participate in the study. A sample of 1000 respondents was initially sought: 500 international and 500 domestic respondents across the four locations. At the conclusion of the survey, a total of 1357 useable surveys were collected representing respondents across the four locations. At the conclusion of the survey, a total of 1357 useable surveys were collected representing respondents across the four locations.

Respondents were not explicitly made aware at the commencement of the survey that the study was focused on indigenous tourism. This was a deliberate strategy within the research design to ensure the integrity of the responses by reducing the likelihood of a bias due to respondents’ attitudes and normative beliefs regarding indigenous tourism (Smith, 2007), thus providing the opportunity to ascertain respondents unprompted awareness of indigenous tourism vis-a-vis other tourism offerings in Australia. Instead respondents were approached and invited to participate in a study on tourism products and experiences in Australia.

The respondent’s experience (as opposed to destination) choice sets were elicited by modifying Woodside and Lysonski (1989), Crompton and Ankomah (1993) and the attrition curve work undertaken by Australian government tourism agencies (Department of Resources Energy and Tourism, 2008; Macfarlane & Jago, 2009; Morrison, 2005). Crompton and Ankomah (1993, pg. 461) stated that the choice sets concept “suggests that potential tourists develop an early set of possible destinations, reduce this number to form a late consideration set of probable alternatives, and make a final selection from that set”. As Woodside and Lysonski (1989) claimed, all unprompted options that the visitor is aware of fall into the visitor’s choice set. This is then reduced down into the consideration set which is measured in this study by looking at experience preferences. The final selection from the set is measured in this study as intention to undertake or having already undertaken the experience. This was due to the study being an in-destination study.

This choice sets and demand decision-making data was plotted on an attrition curve. This tool was employed as it has previously been applied within the Australian tourism industry and government sectors to understand destination selection and could be readily and appropriately applied to tourism experience selection. As a result, the survey was designed to collect unprompted awareness, prompted preferences and prompted intentions/visit. The prompted preferences and intentions were scaled down by the unprompted awareness. This is based on the assumption that if the visitor was not aware of the experience, they cannot have a preference or intention to visit (i.e., preferences are a function of awareness and emotional associations) as per the arguments of Woodside and Lysonski (1989). While there are arguably other choice sets, the awareness set was the starting point for this study as it is the most common in the literature (Um & Crompton, 1990) and there were limitations to the survey design given it was an in-destination study.

Fig. 1. Attrition curve of tourist demand.
destination survey. Moreover, there was a need to keep the instrument reasonably short to balance the funding agencies' requirements with respondent fatigue. Additionally, the survey instrument included financial and time scenario questions designed to elicit, without prompting, the relative importance of indigenous tourism against other experiences, followed by more specific questions about awareness, past experience, exposure, interest and motivation to participate in indigenous tourism.

The attrition curve was used in this study to explore the survey respondents’ (i.e., tourists) propensity to undertake key Australian experiences, including an indigenous tourism experience. The attrition curves were developed from three key questions in the visitor survey. Firstly, visitors were asked to identify all the experiences they were aware of, that they could undertake in Australia. This question was unprompted, so respondents listed as many activities as they could that were ‘top-of-mind’ and these were coded as either: Outdoor/nature experiences; Active outdoor/sport experiences; Arts/heritage experiences; indigenous (referred to as Aboriginal in the survey) cultural experiences; Local attractions/tourist experiences; and Social or other experiences. These groupings were based on TRA’s International Visitor Survey (IVS) and National Visitor Survey (NVS) broad activity groupings, which are highly comprehensive groupings that include all experiences reported in Australia by over 160,000 respondents each year for the past 15 years. This provided a measure for unprompted awareness, that is, the percentage of respondents who mentioned a specific tourism experience top-of-mind.

Next the respondents were asked to rate how important it was for them to experience 17 specific experiences and activities while in Australia. Again, this standard list of experiences was derived from the IVS and NVS activity lists and directly corresponded to the broad activity groupings published by TRA and used to code the previously outlined ‘awareness’ question. To provide a measure of prompted preferences for each broad experience category, the experience and activities items were mapped to the broader activity groupings and means were generated and then converted into percentages (i.e., if the mean was 3, then the corresponding percentage was 60%). This prompted preference percentage was then scaled down by unprompted awareness to align with the attrition curve theory (Department of Resources Energy and Tourism, 2008; Macfarlane & Jago, 2009; Morrison, 2005). That is, unprompted awareness of an experience category was 15%, and preference for the experience was 60%, then the scaled down preference percentage would be 9% (i.e., 15% multiplied by 60%).

Finally, the respondents were asked if they already had, or planned to, undertake any of the 17 experiences or activities on the standard list derived from TRA’s IVS/NVS activity lists. Again, these standard experience or activity items were mapped to the broad activity groupings. From this it was possible to generate the percentage of respondents who had an intention or had undertaken a particular type of experience (i.e., % of respondents stated they had or intended to undertake an indigenous [Aboriginal] cultural experience). This was then scaled down by unprompted awareness, so if unprompted awareness of an experience category was 15%, and intention to undertake the experience was 40%, then the scaled down preference percentage would be 6% (i.e., 15% multiplied by 40%). The unprompted awareness, preference and intention percentages could then be plotted along the attrition curve.

There were several limitations and delimitations of this study. First, only visitors in the four collection regions were included in the visitor survey. They were selected via convenience sampling in common and acknowledged ‘tourist’ areas of the cities. Second, the research did not account for change in perceptions/visitor type due to seasonality. Third the survey was conducted in both English and Chinese (to account for the funding partners requirements for a Chinese sample of international visitors) and in post-data analysis small discrepancies were noted in the translation of several of the questions in the Chinese version of the survey which may have influenced how the respondents interpreted those questions. However, as the data was collected via interviews (as opposed to self-completed questionnaires) by bilingual data collectors, interpretation errors should have been negated. The study was delimitated to exploring only the awareness, preferences and intention aspects of the attrition curve. Future research could apply the attrition curve and extend to incorporate the behavioural variable (visitation).

3. Results

3.1. Attrition curve: mapping unprompted awareness, preference and visitation of indigenous tourism experiences

To identify awareness of indigenous tourism products and experiences, tourists were asked, without prompting, “What experiences are you aware of that can be undertaken in Australia?” The open-ended responses to this question were coded into the six IVS/NVS experience/activity options of outdoor/nature experiences, active-outdoor/sport experiences, arts/heritage experiences, local attractions/tourist experiences, social experiences, and indigenous (aboriginal cultural) experiences. A further question, which was a prompted question, provided respondents with a list of 17 common experiences and activities that can be undertaken in Australia, including five specific options for indigenous tourism. For this question, respondents were asked to rate, on a scale of 1–5, the importance of experiencing these activities while holidaying in Australia. These responses were recoded into the six experience categories which allowed for the measurement of preferences. Finally, using the same list of 17 experiences and activities, respondents were asked whether they had, or would be, participating in any of the experiences and activities while in Australia. Again the answers were recoded into the six experience categories which allowed for the measurement of intention.

Plotting unprompted awareness, as well as preferences and intentions scaled down by unprompted awareness to account for the attrition curve theory, we can see that indigenous (Aboriginal cultural) experiences substantially underperformed in respondents’ top-of-mind awareness, preferences and intentions to undertake the experience when compared with the five other broad Australian experience categories (see Fig. 2).

Furthermore, the attrition curve in Fig. 3 shows that for the awareness of indigenous experiences, there is little difference between international and domestic respondents: domestic respondents had slightly higher awareness levels (21%), citing indigenous tourism as an experience option available in Australia only marginally more often than international visitors (18%).

Using the attrition curve theory, preferences and intentions were scaled down by unprompted awareness, which indicates that 12% of domestic visitors and 11% of international visitors have awareness and preference to undertake an indigenous activity and just 2% of domestic and international visitors are aware of and intend to undertake an indigenous tourism activity. Notably, the preferences and intention points were very close for both visitor groups, despite domestic visitors having slightly higher awareness of the available experiences. Each of these are explored in further detail below.

3.2. Awareness set

The respondents were asked, without prompting from the interviewers, what activities and experiences they were aware of that
could be undertaken in Australia. This question was aiming for spontaneous responses that would elicit respondents’ ‘top of mind’ awareness of the types of activities, experiences or attractions available in Australia. Importantly, at this stage of the questionnaire, respondents were not aware, that the study was focused on indigenous tourism.

‘Outdoor/nature experiences’ generally and ‘local attractions/tourist experiences’ (citing particular attractions and experiences in the local vicinity) were the top of mind responses for the majority of visitors. ‘Arts/heritage experiences’ were top of mind for 22% of all respondents, and indigenous (Aboriginal cultural) experiences were for 19% of respondents. Domestic respondents were significantly more aware of the ‘arts/heritage experiences’ (p < 0.001) available than international visitors (Table 1).

3.3. Preferences

To determine the relative importance international and domestic visitors placed on indigenous tourism experiences vis-à-vis other tourism activities, respondents were asked to identify their ‘top’ or ‘must see’ tourist attractions or experiences in Australia. Tourists were asked, “if you had unlimited time and money what are the top five things you would like to do while in Australia?” This was designed to identify the spontaneous or unprompted awareness of, and interest in, indigenous tourism experiences.

The ‘top’ attraction/experience on both the domestic and international visitors ‘wish list’ was general ‘sightseeing/travelling around’ with 37% of domestic and 50% of international respondents citing this as their most desired experience in Australia (Table 2).

Indigenous tourism was ranked 37th for international visitors and 59th for domestic visitors.

3.4. Intention

Respondents were then asked to consider activities and experiences that could be undertaken while visiting Australia from a predetermined list of 17 Australian experiences. The list was a randomised and abridged version of the standardised visitor experience and activities list developed to code activity responses in TRA’s international and national visitor surveys. Here, respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 1–5 (where ‘1’ is not at all important and ‘5’ is extremely important), how important it was to undertake certain experiences while in Australia. The respondents were also asked to state whether they had, or planned to, undertake any of the experiences while on this trip. Table 3 shows that sightseeing was important (mean 4.2) and that the vast majority of both domestic (84%) and international (82%) respondents were undertaking this activity. Other activities such as national parks/state parks/etc., while rated relatively high by respondents in terms of importance as an activity, had fewer respondents intending to participate during this trip (Table 3).

Respondents were still not aware at this point that the survey was focused on indigenous tourism although five of the experience

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<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Awareness of Australian activities and experiences (unprompted).</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Domestic Respondents</td>
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<td>Frequency %</td>
<td>Frequency %</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outdoor/nature experiences</td>
<td>356</td>
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<tr>
<td>Local attractions/tourist experiences</td>
<td>259</td>
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<tr>
<td>Active outdoor/sport experiences</td>
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<td>Social or other experiences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arts/heritage experiences</td>
<td>135</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aboriginal cultural experiences</td>
<td>102</td>
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<td>Total respondents</td>
<td>480</td>
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options in the list related to indigenous tourism. 'Going on a tour with an Aboriginal guide', 'visit and Aboriginal cultural centre/gallery', 'see an Aboriginal performance', and 'visit and Aboriginal site or community' ranked around the midpoint of the scale with means of 3.1 and 3.0 for all visitors. Somewhat further down the importance scale was to 'stay with an Aboriginal host'. The results show that few domestic visitors had intentions to participate in indigenous activities (e.g., 'going on a tour with an Aboriginal guide' 10%; 'visit and Aboriginal cultural centre/gallery' 14%; 'see an Aboriginal performance' 10%; 'visit and Aboriginal site or community' 10%; and, 'stay with an Aboriginal host' 3%). Intentions to participate in indigenous activities were slightly higher among international visitors (e.g., 'visit an Aboriginal cultural centre/gallery' and 'see an Aboriginal performance' were more popular at 20% and 18% respectively (Table 3)).

For each of the indigenous related activities domestic respondents were significantly less likely than international respondents to consider it important to:

- go on a tour with an Aboriginal Guide ($p = 0.013$).
- stay with an Aboriginal host (in Aboriginal owned/run accommodation) ($p = 0.001$).

In contrast, there were no significant differences found between domestic and international respondents in terms of how important it was to them to visit national parks/state parks/world heritage sites/botanical gardens; events, festivals, fairs and markets; shopping; museums, art galleries, history/heritage buildings, sites or monuments; and, visit the Outback (Table 3).

### 3.5. Barriers to participation

To explore the barriers that prevent tourists from undertaking an indigenous experience in Australia, international and domestic visitors who indicated that they would not be participating in indigenous tourism were asked to rate a range of potential barriers on a scale of 1 'not at all' to 5 'to a very great extent'. It was at this point that the survey participants were informed that the remaining questions would focus specifically on indigenous tourism.

International tourists ranked 'limited time available' as the main barrier to participating, with 'budget', 'other activities' and 'access' also ranking above the mid point on the scale. Other items on the scale rated below the neutral response (i.e., 3 on the scale) and therefore were not seen as barriers to participating by the majority of respondents. Similarly, with domestic tourists there were few barriers that rated above the neutral point of 3 on the scale (Table 4); only 'limited time available' and 'engaged in other activities/sightseeing' rated.

Within the visitor survey, there was an option for respondents to list any other factors that they considered to be barriers. The other barriers respondents indicated were: the experience was not deemed authentic ($n = 62$); and they had previously participated in an indigenous activity and did not see a need to do so again (either in Australia or overseas) ($n = 12$). While a low sample, several responses also referred to previous negative interactions with indigenous individuals and/or communities; and having close contact with indigenous peoples and/or communities via friendships, employment or living in indigenous communities. Some respondents had participated in an indigenous experience in another country and did not wish to do so again in Australia.

Given the relatively low levels of preference and intention/visit, discussed previously with regards to the attrition curve, the extent to which these results (i.e., the neutrality of most of the barriers in Table 4) truly reflect the barriers to participating in indigenous tourism should be considered in relation to the following assumption. Respondents may have been hesitant to articulate broader barriers pertaining to otherwise culturally sensitivity issues relating to indigenous peoples and/or communities. In essence, respondents may have felt the need to adhere to political correctness, which may have unduly influenced the results in relation to barriers to participating in indigenous tourism.

### 4. Discussion & conclusions

It was against a multifarious and complex backdrop of research motives, intentions and outcomes, that this study was commissioned by a government agency responsible for, among other things, providing start-up funding for indigenous businesses (including tourism businesses). The agency questioned the extent to which existing visitor statistics pertaining to indigenous tourism were representative of actual demand, given that too many indigenous tourism businesses are failing in a relatively short timeframe as a result of, among other things, unsustainably small visitor flows.
Thus the current study was commissioned in part, to examine visitor demand through a research design that attempted to circumvent some of the apparent limitations of previous studies, particularly around survey bias and socially desirable responses (Smith, 2007). The attrition curve approach adopted in this study has proved effective and valuable in achieving this aim.

The results of this study confirm that claims of high levels of visitor interest and demand for Australia’s indigenous tourism product, which have been made by a range of public sector agencies in Australia (Tourism Research Australia, 2010), are overstated and should be viewed with caution. Overall, the results from this study reveal that participating in an indigenous tourism experience in Australia is not an activity that either domestic or international tourists prioritise on their holiday agendas. Moreover, uptake of what little interest there is (i.e., intention to participate) is also very low.

Such low visitor interest in indigenous tourism in Australia is concerning given that ‘Aboriginal Tourism’ is currently supported by Tourism Australia as one of its three key industry sectors (along with the cruise industry and luxury lodging sector). Moreover, ‘Aboriginal Australia’ continues to be promoted by Tourism Australia as one of the seven ‘uniquely Australian experiences’ (the other six include Aussie Coastal Lifestyle; Australian Journeys; Australia’s Major Cities; Food and Wine, Nature in Australia; and Outback Australia). These current initiatives are indicative of the range of marketing campaigns that have been undertaken by Tourism Australia over the last decade, which have utilised to varying degrees, indigenous imagery and experiences. For example, the most current 2014 international tourism marketing campaign contains indigenous artwork of a kangaroo alongside the words, There’s Nothing Like Australia. Yet despite the efforts of such international marketing campaigns, the international market’s lack of awareness about indigenous tourism suggests these campaigns have been less than effective.

Indeed, Bultjens & White’s (2008) study found that between 60% and 80% of international visitors who were either interested in experiencing, or had experienced an indigenous tourism product believed they had been exposed to very little advertising. Bultjens & White’s (2008) claim is supported by the results from the attrition curve approach conducted in this study. For instance, 53 respondents mentioned ‘lack of promotion’ as a barrier to their participation in indigenous tourism in Australia and according to one respondent, “after being in Australia for a month I have never seen Aboriginal experiences promoted”. Moreover, many of the data collectors reported a number of the respondents asking where they could actually go to participate in scenarios, which were presented in the questionnaire. For example respondents reported that “travel agents in the US did not mention Aboriginal options to us otherwise we might have been very interested in some of these options” while another said “all activities sound great but don’t know how to do them”.

An overall lack of awareness however, is not the only challenge facing the sector. Contributing to the challenges and/or barriers faced by indigenous tourism operators is an apparent tourist indifference towards participating in indigenous tourism experiences. According to one respondent, the opportunity to experience indigenous tourism rates as a “care factor zero probably for a lot of people. Not interested in our Aboriginal people”. Moreover, the results (see Figs. 2 and 3) revealed that those domestic tourists in particular, who are aware of indigenous tourism opportunities, are not

### Table 3
Perceived importance (preference) and intentions to participate in Activities and experiences (prompted).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Domestic and international respondents</th>
<th>Domestic respondents</th>
<th>International respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Std. Dev.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sightseeing/looking around</td>
<td>1253</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National parks/state parks/world heritage sites-botanical gardens</td>
<td>1255</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wildlife parks/zoo/aquariums</td>
<td>1249</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit the outback</td>
<td>1240</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museums, art galleries, history/heritage buildings, sites or monuments</td>
<td>1254</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events, festivals, fairs and markets</td>
<td>1253</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports/Adventure activities</td>
<td>1233</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go on a tour with an Aboriginal Guide</td>
<td>1246</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit an Aboriginal cultural centre/gallery</td>
<td>1246</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See an Aboriginal performance</td>
<td>1233</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit an Aboriginal site or community</td>
<td>1237</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping</td>
<td>1245</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pubs, clubs, discos, casinos and restaurants</td>
<td>1242</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other events/concerts/concerting arts</td>
<td>1258</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay with an Aboriginal host (in Aboriginal owned/run accommodation)</td>
<td>1236</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amusement/theme parks</td>
<td>1257</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health spa or wellbeing centre</td>
<td>1236</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Table 4
Barriers to participating in indigenous tourism.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barriers</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limited time available</td>
<td>744</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity is too expensive/limited budget</td>
<td>710</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other activities/sightseeing</td>
<td>654</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for money</td>
<td>687</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access/transport availability</td>
<td>689</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not a high priority (not recommended by others, not prestigious)</td>
<td>703</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of interest</td>
<td>733</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know where to go/what is available/how to book</td>
<td>706</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer more adventurous or active activities (not fun/exciting enough)</td>
<td>696</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not available in destinations you are visiting</td>
<td>693</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside my comfort zone (Cultural or language barriers)</td>
<td>699</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worried about safety or food</td>
<td>693</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* 5 point scale from 1 “Not at all” to 5 “To a very great extent”.
interested in participating in indigenous tourism experiences. Contributing factors (which were revealed in some of the open-ended statements of surveys) included perceived familiarity, racism and/or negative media attention. Perceived ‘familiarity’ with indigenous peoples (i.e., culture, customs, traditions) or ‘backyard syndrome’ is a key issue with a respondent noting “I’m from Darwin so indigenous stuff is everywhere so (I) never bothered to hunt it down”, while another said “I think maybe sometimes when it’s in your backyard you don’t appreciate it so much”. Such indifference to indigenous tourism product from the domestic market arguably poses a major challenge for the sector as the Australian domestic market comprises some 80% of the country’s tourists.

Given these results, it is not surprising that for many indigenous tourism operators, translating tourists’ interest into actual, on the ground participation is proving problematic. Yet governments continue to promote tourism as a socio-economic cure-all for indigenous peoples. The findings of this study throw open a range of questions and issues regarding the socio-political objectives of Australia’s government agencies involved with tourism. As early as the early 1990s, cautious observers have maintained that “tourism will not provide an instant panacea for Aboriginal economic disadvantage” (Altman, 1993a, p. 12). More recently, Boulton, Breton et al. (2010) commented on the tenuous nature of indigenous tourism and warned that despite enthusiasm about its potential, only a select few businesses are capturing the purported benefits. Yet tourism continues to be promoted to indigenous people as a universal, cure-all economic development opportunity providing, among other things, increased employment and business opportunities. For example, in a 2010 report by TRA which profiles indigenous tourism in Australia, indigenous tourism is recognised by the Australian Government as “a means for economic development for indigenous Australians” (p.1). Such evidence suggests that government is glossing over (or ignoring) the reality of the current market situation and continues to espouse tourism as the magic bullet for a range of socio-economic challenges facing contemporary indigenous Australians.

Our concern is that the full potential of indigenous tourism in Australia remains an unknown quantity and the purported development of the sector continues to be based on assumptions. We strongly advocate the need for further research to better identify and understand the extent to which indigenous tourism can be grown and the pathways for effective development. For instance, we need to investigate further, if low levels of awareness and demand for indigenous tourism in Australia is a result of general indifference to the product or if they are a result of inadequate and/or ineffective marketing and promotion strategies. Moreover, we need to determine if developing targeted marketing and educational campaigns to demonstrate to the broader community, the scope and breadth of indigenous tourism operations in Australia is a suitable and effective option to increase product demand.

In the interim however, several recommendations can be made to increase the awareness of both international and domestic markets. For the international market, promotion of export ready indigenous tourism businesses through international distribution channels and targeted marketing campaigns must be continued and possibly increased. Micro, small and start-up businesses could be better integrated into local tourism distribution channels to increase product awareness at both the international and domestic levels. Given that research has suggested that of the total indigenous tourism visitor market, domestic visitors represent over 70% (Tourism Research Australia, 2010), it is certainly worthwhile investing in strategies to increase the awareness of the domestic market. Awareness/marketing programs targeted at the domestic market that highlight the range of indigenous offerings available in Australia could also be developed. Strategies to overcome the low levels of interest and participation in indigenous tourism and the negative perceptions amongst the domestic market will also be necessary. Moreover, the low levels of demand for the current indigenous tourism product offerings suggest alternative approaches to indigenous tourism development should be considered. For instance, some operators in Australia have recognised the opportunities to package indigenous tourism content into mainstream tourism product offerings such as accommodation, restaurants and retail. This approach is advocated for instance, in Tourism Queensland’s Indigenous Tourism Strategy. Other options include complimenting an existing tourism attraction or experience with an indigenous element in culture, interpretation, history or nature. While others have chosen to engage in the tourism supply chain but not identify their business as indigenous owned and operated.

Thus there is range of pathways to pursue in the development of indigenous tourism in Australia. At this point in time however, this paper is calling ‘time out’ for a reality check. The development of indigenous tourism in Australia has been on the political agenda for nearly twenty years and while the sector has grown significantly during this time, the results from this national demand study (coupled with other challenges), suggest long-term sustainability of the sector is precarious. We suggest reality calls for government agencies to discontinue espousing high levels of demand for indigenous tourism in order to cover inadequacies in government marketing strategies and/or to ensure boxes are ticked for political gain. We suggest reality calls for governments to discontinue presenting tourism carte blanche, as a generic means of realising socio-economic benefits as the current domestic and international visitor markets are not robust enough to cater for so many new businesses entering into the market. Finally, we suggest the reality is that indigenous tourism is an invaluable niche sector of the Australian tourism industry. Arguably, it has the potential to provide socio-economic benefits to, at this stage an unknown (but arguably small) percentage of indigenous tourism businesses whose stakeholders are au fait with the complexities and volatility of the national and global tourism industry.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2014.10.017.

References


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