

**Abstract**

*Repeat visitors represent an important aspect of tourism in terms of communication and the ongoing viability of tourist attractions. The Tree Top Walk site (TTW), an elevated forest walkway in the south west of Western Australia, is of particular interest in this context. This site is an example of a high profile tourism destination offering a specific experience with a narrow range of activities available. The TTW experience was designed to challenge the senses. Consequently, a minimal signage philosophy was adopted to reduce distraction from the experience itself. A survey was conducted at the TTW to determine visitor types, expectations and attitudes regarding the site. Repeat visitors, while a minority in themselves, accounted for a significant proportion of tourists at the TTW. It was found that the majority of repeat visitors to the TTW were female and had returned to show the site to friends and/or relatives who were first time visitors. First time visitors were impressed by both the TTW structure itself and the natural forest surroundings. In contrast, repeat visitors, already familiar with the TTW experience focussed more on the natural setting. Repeat visitors were better able to obtain additional information regarding the site relative to first time visitors. The results of this study indicated that explicit communication was an important element in design in terms of sustaining repeat visitation at a site with limited activities available.*

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# Repeat and First Time Visitation in an Experience Specific Context: The Valley of the Giants Tree Top Walk

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**Introduction**

Communication with the public is a primary consideration in the design of natural area tourist attractions (Manfredo & Bright, 1991; Roggenbuck, 1992; Vogt & Stewart, 1998). In a management context, communication is essential in ensuring a relevant and enjoyable experience on the part of the visiting tourists (Magill, 1995). Communication also serves as an important management aid in reminding visitors of appropriate behaviour while ensuring continued visitor interest in the attraction (Moscardo, 1998; Moscardo & Woods, 2001). This paper presents the results of a survey examining motivations and attitudes of repeat and first time visitors to the Tree Top Walk site in the context of the communication strategy used at the site.

In order for communication to be effective, target audiences should be clearly identified (O'Loughlin, 1996; Orams, 1995). For example, Ballantyne, Packer & Beckman (1998) found that first time visitors to Fraser Island were more receptive to interpretative communication than repeat visitors. This was primarily related to a greater motivation for exploration on the part of first time visitors. In contrast, repeat visitors were more interested in other recreational pursuits rather than exploration and learning. Magill's (1995) study of natural area users in southern California focussed on targeted communication in a cultural context. Magill (1995) found that

communication targeted for particular cultural groups improved the effectiveness of the intended messages. These studies highlight that communication with natural area visitors is more effective if particular visitor types are catered for.

Repeat and first time visitors are examples of two distinct groups with differing wants and needs (Fakeye & Crompton, 1992; Meis, Joyal & Trites, 1995). While first time visitors may seek variety through a unique or novel experience, repeat visitors may be more commonly motivated by a want for relaxation (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991). These findings are supported by observations of repeat visitors to Fraser Island. Repeat visitors generally took part in recreational pursuits, such as fishing or snorkelling, while first time visitors concentrated on exploration and information gathering (Ballantyne *et al.*, 1998). Young (1999) reported that repeat visitors also have an improved conceptual knowledge of the environment to which they are returning relative to first time visitors. The familiarity of repeat visitors to a given site plays a role in their perceived lack of need for exploration. Thus, repeat and first time visitors differ in terms of motivation, expectations and the type of experience sought.

Repeat visitors form an important part of visitation to a given site. As well as providing consistent and ongoing revenue, they act as a major conduit for site promotion, ensuring a sustainable tourist attraction (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Meis *et al.*, 1995). Therefore, it is important to ensure repeat visitors are understood as a distinct group targeted by communicative strategies to encourage their continued interest in the site. This, in turn, will contribute to economic sustainability through encouraging increased repeat visitation (Oppermann, 1998).

The fore mentioned studies investigated repeat visitation to areas with a variety of tourism and recreational opportunities catering for a wide variety of activities and interests. Thus the need for knowledge acquisition and exploration observed by Ballantyne *et al.* (1998) is superseded, with repeat visitation, by other activities or pastimes available at the site. Repeat visitation to a site with a restricted scope for alternate activities must therefore be a function of differing motives and expectations. This study explores the relationship between the TTW site and respective repeat and first time visitors. Before presenting the methodology and discussion of survey results, the characteristics of the site are described. The paper concludes with reflections on the relationship between repeat visitation and communication in the context of sustaining a viable tourism destination.

### **The Valley of the Giants Tree Top Walk**

The Tree Top Walk is located in the Valley of the Giants, a small area of Tingle and Karri forest within the Walpole-Nornalup National Park. It is situated

near the south coast of South Western Australia, between the towns of Walpole and Denmark. The giant Tingle Trees are endemic to the southern coastal area of South-Western Australia and are the focus of visitation for local, interstate and international tourists (Winfield, 1996).

Historically, visitation to the Valley of the Giants was largely uncontrolled and tourists to the area were having a significant negative impact on the ecosystem. The main site of visitation comprised of a large uncontrolled gravel car park with numerous 'goat tracks' forming a labyrinth in the surrounding forest. The bark of the Tingle trees was being damaged while the humus layer was being compacted, disturbed or removed (Winfield, 1996). A 1990 management plan emphasised the need for urgent protection from soil compaction and other negative impacts of high volume tourism (Annear & Grant, 1992). Construction of an elevated walkway (Tree Top Walk) and hardened pathways was subsequently proposed.

The Tree Top Walk (TTW) site was constructed in 1996 amongst a stand of relatively undisturbed

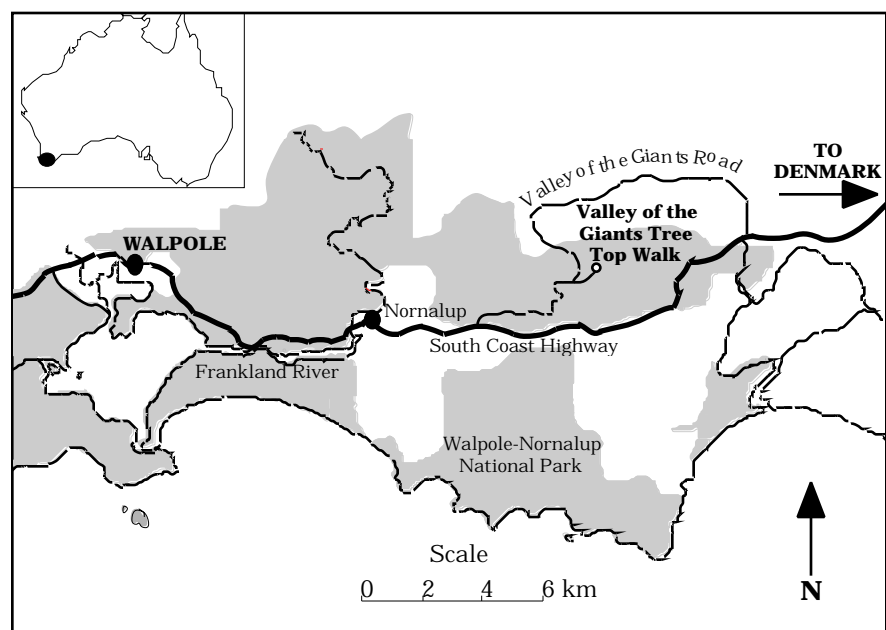


Figure 1: Location map of Valley of the Giants Tree Top Walk

*Table 1: Summary of Tourist Survey Questions Used at the TTW Site.*

- Why did you visit the Valley of the Giants Today?
- Who are you visiting with?
- Have you been here before?
- What aspect of this visit will you remember most?
- Can you suggest any improvements the site may need?
- Please indicate whether you agree/disagree with the following statements: (see Table2).
- You are : Male, Female

Management (CALM), pers. comm. 9/10/99).

The TTW structure was designed to provide a highly confronting experience of the forest and is therefore the central interpretive or communicative tool in itself (Field & Gough, 1998). A minimal approach to signage was adopted, whereby general information is displayed at the visitor centre with few trail side signs. In the words of Field & Gough (1998, p. 40) the site is meant to be *so provocative that it enriches without words*. This study examines the concept of minimal communication in the context of the repeat visitation experience at the site.

**Method**

During October 1999, a period of peak visitation to the TTW, 385 people were randomly surveyed as they exited the site. The survey consisted of both open ended and multiple choice questions. The design and content was based on past CALM visitor surveys, literature (Jurowski, Uysal, Williams & Noe, 1995) and discussion with CALM staff. A summary of the key questions posed in the survey is shown in Table 1.

The survey sought to elicit data

giant Tingle and Karri trees close to the original degraded site. Two walks form separate loops through a stand of trees dominated by Tingle. The centre piece of the site is the TTW, a 600 metre walk through the canopy level of the Tingle forest. The TTW is a free standing cat walk constructed from prefabricated metal bridge spans allowing a view of the forest from the canopy level. At its highest point, the visitor stands 40 metres above ground level (Winfield, 1996). A second trail, known as the Ancient Empire, is a 600 metre ground level walk of hardened pathways, stabilised earth and board walks. The overall design of the site restricts tourists to two walking loops with a small visitor kiosk spread over a few hectares. The TTW is marketed to local, interstate and international visitors alike.

The site design was intended to allow large volumes of tourists with minimal effect on the ecological quality of the site. Attracting increased tourist numbers coupled with a small entrance fee also allows for economic sustainability. Its relative accessibility and promotion as an international tourist attraction has caused a rapid increase in tourism interest and visitor numbers. The estimated number of tourists visiting the Valley of the Giants in 1989 was 100,000. By 1990-1991, tourist numbers had risen to 140,000 due to the previous sealing of the Eyre highway, the main road link between the east and west of Australia. Since the construction of the TTW in 1996, visitor numbers have averaged approximately 200,000 per annum (D. Blight, Department of Conservation and Land

*Table 2: List of Statements Used to Assess Ranked Attitudinal Response to the TTW Site.*

Please indicate whether you agree/disagree with the following statements:	Strongly Agree					Strongly Disagree				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
a) The Tree Top Walk was an exhilarating experience	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
b) I felt nervous walking on the Tree Top Walk	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
c) I enjoyed the close contact with the forest canopy	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
d) The Valley of the Giants provides a wonderful experience of the forest	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
e) I was satisfied with the information available	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
f) I would encourage others to visit the site	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
g) The Valley of the Giants provides an amazing insight into forest life	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
h) I am happy to pay for a natural wonder experience such as the Valley of the Giants	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
i) I was able to obtain the information I required	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5

on tourists' attitudes, motivations and reactions in regard to the site in the context of repeat and first time experiences. Attitudes were assessed utilising a format similar to the New Environmental Paradigm Scale cited by Jurowski *et al.* (1995). Respondents ranked a series of ten statements on a five point scale (Table 2). The positive statements referred to the various aspects of the site seen to be important by the site managers. The total scores provided a scale of the tourists' attitudinal response (strongly positive to strongly negative). Ranking of the individual statements was also analysed to gain an understanding of the response to specific aspects of the site.

The survey forms were transferred verbatim to a computer database. Qualitative data in the spreadsheet was analysed using the Nud\*ist software package. Quantitative data was analysed using Chi Square analysis ( $\chi^2$ ), One Way Anova, and Cramer's V statistic of strength of association.

### Main findings

Before examining the relationship between repeat visitation and on-site communication, the characteristics of repeat and first time visitors need to be understood. Of the total number of visitors surveyed, 17% were repeat visitors. This is in contrast with Ballantyne *et al.* (1998) who found that 75% of visitors to Fraser Island were repeat visitors. This difference is due to the nature of the TTW site with its restricted range of tourism and recreational opportunities, primarily centred on sight seeing. On the other hand, Fraser Island offers a much wider range of activities.

No significant differences were found between first time and repeat visitors in terms of age groupings, income, education or occupation. However, a greater proportion of repeat visitors were

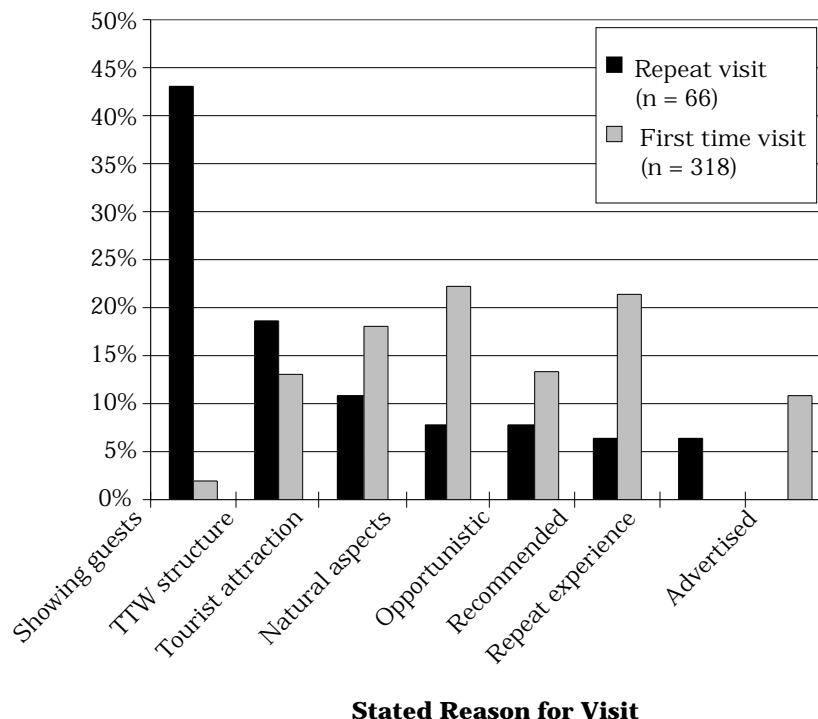


Figure 1: Stated reasons for visitation of TTW of first time and repeat visitors

female (66%) while the gender ratio of first time visitors was even ( $\chi^2 = 5.53$ ,  $p < 0.02$ ).

The stated primary reasons for visiting the TTW are shown in Figure 1. Significant differences in the main reason for visitation were found between the repeat visitor and first time visitor groups ( $\chi^2 = 151.98$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Almost half (43%) of repeat visitors stated that their main reason for visiting the site at the time of the survey was to bring friends or relatives. The next most frequent response was to experience the TTW again (18.5%). First time visitors mainly stated their reason for visiting was to experience the natural aspects of the site (22%), or because the site was recommended to them by friends, relatives or tourism agencies (21%). Of the first time visitors, 13% identified the TTW structure as the main motive for visitation.

The differing reasons for visitation of first time and repeat visitors are consistent with findings in past studies

identifying repeat visitors as a distinct group (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Meis *et al.*, 1995; and Ballantyne *et al.*, 1998). The significantly higher proportion of female repeat visitors may be of interest when considered in conjunction with the primary reason for returning to the site relating to sharing the experience with family and friends. McGhee, Loker-Murphy & Uysal (1996) found that women put a greater priority on kinship and family, in the context of leisure travel planning, than did men. Therefore, with the primary focus of the TTW site being on the experience of the structure and subsequently sharing this experience with others, the tendency of female holiday planners to focus on kinship may encourage the selection of the TTW as a return destination.

Tourist responses to surveys are inherently positive thus, it is the degree of positiveness that gauges the visitor reaction to an attraction. That is, an average rating is equivalent to visitor

disapproval (Pearce, 1991). It follows that a less positive response corresponds with greater disapproval. There was no significant difference in the general response to the TTW site between repeat and first time visitors. Both groups were equally positive about most of the aspects of the site mentioned in the survey. A significant difference did occur relating to the ability to obtain information at the site. While first time visitors were not negative about being able to acquire relevant information, they were significantly less positive than repeat visitors ( $\chi^2 = 18.52, p < 0.05$ ).

This difference in response may be a function of Young's (1999) observations relating to cognitive maps of visitors. He found that repeat visitation was a significant factor in increasing visitor knowledge of a given environment in a spatial context. From this it ensues that repeat visitors to the TTW would be better able to obtain information additional to that on display due to familiarity with site design and function. In contrast, first time visitors may be unaware of the additional information available through lack of experience with the site (Ballantyne *et al.*, 1998; Young, 1999). The tendency of repeat visitors to seek supplementary information suggests a need for enrichment further to that overtly provided by the site.

Repeat and first time visitors were left with significantly different impressions of the site ( $\chi^2 = 11.96, p < 0.05$ ). Repeat visitors indicated mainly natural aspects of the site as being most memorable at the conclusion of the visit (48.5%). The second most frequently mentioned aspect, the TTW structure, was considerably less (21.2%). First time visitors were relatively evenly divided between natural aspects of the site (39%) and the TTW structure (34%) as Figure 2 indicates. This highlights

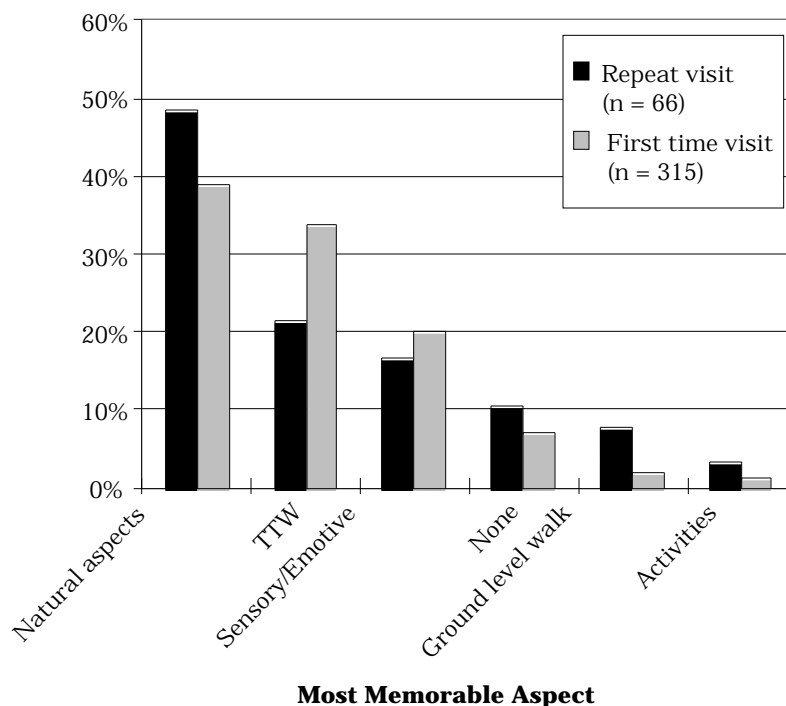


Figure 2: Most remembered aspect of site as indicated by repeat and first time visitors

differences between repeat and first time visitors in terms of their perceptions of the site.

#### Relationship between site communication and repeat visitation

The greater focus of repeat visitors on natural aspects probably relates to familiarity with the structural aspects of the site. Repeat visitors are already accustomed to the TTW structure and thus, are less inclined to explore its physical nuances. The complex variety of the natural forest surroundings enables repeat visitors to further explore and discover in a sensory context. As both the TTW structure and forest were new experiences for first time visitors, their attention seems to have been divided between the novelty of the structure and interest in the surrounding forest.

This finding is of interest in terms of the interpretive role of the TTW site with a minimal sign philosophy. Few signs are required to manage visitor

behaviour owing to the physical design of the site. However, a lack of signs may correlate with a lack of enrichment and sustenance of interest. While the TTW structure serves as the attention grabbing focus for first time visitors, repeat visitors appear to be less interested, returning mainly to expose new visitors to the unique thrill.

While first time visitors are mainly focused on the structural experience, repeat visitors appear to seek other sources of interest. The results of this study suggest that the provision of additional communicative media at the TTW site would encourage greater interest for repeat visitors. This, in turn, may provide alternative motivations for returning to the TTW beyond simply providing the thrill of the experience to others, increasing the likelihood of repeat visitation. Ensuring a significant level of repeat visitation forms an important part of a sustainable tourism attraction (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Meis *et al.*, 1995).

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