

# Health benefits of local tourism for people who have retired

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## **TTRA 2019 Extended Abstract Template: Health benefits of local tourism for people who have retired**

### **Introduction**

We know that travel offers a sense of purpose, social activity, perceived control, and opportunities to build a new identity as a traveller. Equally of value, is the fact that travel takes people out of routine into a novel, often complex, environment - and so demands greater neural activity which is excellent for the brain (Nussbaum, 2015). As such it can be an important resource for maintaining health and well-being, particularly for people who have retired.

Some suggest exotic, epic, or extended travel, e.g Grey Nomads/Snowbirds, (Ryan & Trauer, 2004) as the way to maintain life satisfaction and associated psychological health in retirement. However, the beneficial contribution of multiple tourism events, particularly short term and local, may be just as notable, and potentially more achievable, for many retirees who face restrictions with time as well as finances.

Local, sustainable, travel is also increasingly important as we understand the heavy impact of the tourism footprint on our fragile earth.

How can we work within both agendas, by actively promoting the health benefits of local tourism for retirees?

### **Literature Review**

In our contemporary society people look forward to 20 years or more as a retiree (Patrickson & Ranzijn, 2004). Maintenance of life satisfaction in retirement is therefore critical, not least due to its association with psychological health and healthy ageing (Kendig, 2004). Beyond the individual, healthy ageing is important at the broader societal level, particularly given the current retirement wave of the demographically massive baby boomer cohort which carries the critical mass of numbers to be a key area of policy concern at all levels of government (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

Extended, or epic travel (e.g. grey nomads/snowbirds) is typically regarded as a way to maintain life satisfaction in retirement (Ryan & Trauer, 2004). However it is suggested that the beneficial contribution of local, short-term tourism may be just as notable, and potentially more achievable for many individuals.

There are a number of reasons.

The first step is to understand the actual holiday is only the nucleus of a far longer psychological event. It can be seen as significant life event that extends far beyond the on-site core and absorbs a major investment of time and personal energy, both prior to and post the travel experience . This means that the ability to savour multiple cycles of tourism anticipation and recollection

(Larsen S, 2007) may contribute to life satisfaction via progress towards personally valued goals (Diener et al, 1999).

The second, suggested by findings from my PhD research, indicates that retirees who travel, and anticipate travel, record higher levels of life satisfaction than those who do not travel. A key finding was that even a single tourism experience may contribute to life satisfaction. It was clear also that multiple cycles of local tourism experiences lead to progressively higher levels of life satisfaction for the individual.

There are two important caveats to consider. Firstly, these findings are independent of income and self-reported health. Secondly, the findings indicate no significant difference in life satisfaction irrespective of whether the tourism event occurs at local, national or international level. Certainly tourism satisfaction may be higher for international holidays - but not life satisfaction.

This positive impact of such multiple cycles of travel may be the result of a variety of factors, including progression towards multiple, personally valued goals; the previously mentioned cycles of anticipation and memory; even perhaps development of a personal 'career' as a serious leisure traveller. There is one further unique factor offered by tourism, and that is the opportunity to engage our thinking in novel, and often complex, environments which is so good for cognitive health (Nussbaum, 2015). Additionally, travel offers the opportunity to identify, and break what Proust (1982, vol 1, 361) refers to as the 'invisible ballast' of our routine habitual patterns that chain us to the earth.

It is suggested that all these benefits may be particularly significant for people who have retired - and have 20 years, or more, to live, thrive....or merely survive as a retiree.

It is perhaps serendipitous that the timing of the retirement transition and associated need for new pathways and autobiographies coincides with the period that life span theorists such as Erikson (1989) regard as the seventh, midlife, or penultimate stage of life. Erikson and his colleagues consider that the challenge for the individual at this time pivots on conflicts between engagement with life, or stagnation/resignation (Slater, 2003). The benefits of engaging in travel would seem to be clear.

Similarly, the work of Kelly on his Theory of Personal Constructs (1991), charts individual changes in self-construction as people evolve their understanding of the world, the people around them, and their selves. At key transition points, such as retirement, the individual has the choice to develop some new life channels that were not previously accessible (or known), or 'rattle around' in the 'old slots' (Kelly, 1991, p. 91). Again, the positive benefits of engaging in travel are evident.

The importance of such positive feelings echoes the positive psychology focus which suggests the most satisfied people are those who balance the type of life they pursue between (a) positive

emotion and pleasure (the pleasant life), (b) engagement (the engaged life), and (c) meaning (the meaningful life), (Seligman et al, 2005). It is important to find positive reasons for living at all ages, and, as humans, we have a capacity to anticipate and daydream. Travel offers the opportunities to dream and select options from an array of possible futures, and with the strong likelihood they can come true. As such, drawing from Seligman's work on Positive Psychology, it can be argued that travel allows control over our futures and immunisation of our psychological well-being.

The psychological benefits (and physical) benefits from local travel are evident. They recall the message of the World Tourism Organisation Manila Declaration on World Tourism (1980) which states that tourism has social, health, community and personal returns which are worth far more than simply the economic returns it generates.

Indeed, it can be argued that the benefits of tourism can be reflected in savings in health services for an older population. As Dann (2001, p. 12) observed in an article on senior tourism: *'If vacations really do benefit the physical and mental health of the elderly, the subsidisation of such trips could not only remove one of the most commonly identified barriers to travel, but might also represent significant savings to the provision of health services for seniors in the home society'*.

This strong understanding of the health benefits of tourism appears to be understood in many European countries which offer versions of Social Tourism, or government/agency supported tourism, for people who may otherwise not be able to travel.

The social tourism agenda, developed initially with the aim of providing the benefits of travel for disadvantaged groups (Minneart et al, 2011) is now broadening to include ageing more generally. As such it is gaining interest from policy makers, particularly in Europe and the UK, (though not so much within Australia) who are watching the emerging evidence on the potential of local, supported tourism to deliver health benefits to the targeted populations, as well as economic benefits to local communities. It is clear, however, that there is a real need to foster productive knowledge exchange between research and health/aged care/tourism policy and practice (Diekmann et al, 2018).

## **Methodology**

The gaze of this researcher was directed, in addition to a focus on tourism, by a multidisciplinary background in gerontology (emphasis on positive ageing), public health policy and business management.

The study employed a mixed methods approach which combined the strengths of qualitative and quantitative approaches in a sequential design in which the quantitative data is augmented by the qualitative data.

The study population was Australia baby-boomers born between 1946 to 1965 inclusive. The first wave of this cohort turned 60 in 2006, and the remaining baby boomers will shortly reach this milestone, and accompanying retirement flag. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

The principal objective was to obtain representative samples of two groups: people who were retired, and people who were considering retirement. Two sampling frames were utilised: members of the South Australian Council on the Ageing (COTA) and staff at three universities in Adelaide who were attending Transition to Retirement and Pre-Retirement Seminars organised by a superannuation fund, SA UniSuper.

The sample consisted of a total of 293 respondents. A holiday was defined as time away from home base for a period of at least four night, i.e less than a working week.

The study was approved by the University of South Australia Human Research Ethics Committee.

A short questionnaire sought information on respondents' employment status, demographic details, holiday patterns, tourism satisfaction, life satisfaction, tourism motivations, self-rated health status, income, and future travel plans. Respondents were able to volunteer to participate in subsequent focus groups.

The questionnaire comprised standardised scales, developed and tested by others. Life satisfaction was measured with the 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al, 1985); tourism consumption satisfaction measured using a modified version of the Oliver (1997) 12-item Consumption Satisfaction Scale, and tourism motivation measured on the 14-item Ryan and Glendon, (1998) Holiday Motivation Scale.

Subjective health assessments were used as they are regarded as strong indicators of well-being, as well as quality of life (Molarious & Janson, 2002).

Socio-demographic information included age, gender, marital status and postcode of respondents. Respondents also provided information on their level of education, and annual income. These questions were based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics standard protocols (2006).

The qualitative data sought from the focus groups was augmented with Photo-Voice as well as written comments. Photo-Voice uses photographs to elicit deep comments on tourism constraints such as family commitments, finances, time, as well as psychological constraints, and serves to stimulate spontaneous discussion on how such constraints mould, and shape, a tourism experience (Westwood, 2007).

Limitations include that the study is restricted to a predominantly metropolitan sample. A second limitation is that, while UniSuper includes a diverse range of technical and professional staff as well as academics, nonetheless it is weighted more to white collar groupings than the population in general. A further limitation is that the sample is limited to people who have voluntarily retired. The higher levels of distress and lower life satisfaction known to be associated with unemployment are not encompassed in the study. A final limitation is that the study is restricted

predominantly to a western sample which tends to be characterised by an individualistic culture, and this can impact on the cultural support offered to an individual's goals (Diener, 1999).

## **Results**

As noted, a key finding was that even a single tourism experience may contribute to life satisfaction. It was clear also that multiple cycles of local tourism experiences lead to progressively higher levels of life satisfaction for the individual.

There are two important caveats. Firstly, these findings are independent of income and self-reported health. Secondly, the findings indicate no significant difference in life satisfaction irrespective of whether the tourism event occurs at local, national or international level.

This means that people who travel record overall higher levels of life satisfaction. It also means that tourism does not have to be epic or extended in order to contribute to life satisfaction.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

It is evident that local tourism has much to offer retirees. It is relatively simple to arrange (compared to international travel), and can be more achievable for the many retirees who may be constrained by time and/or money. It also offers great scope for finding ways to reduce the heavy impact of the tourism footprint across our fragile earth.

Travel, even local travel, offers people (particularly retirees) opportunities to 'rejig' their personal lenses, and forge new pathways. This is important at all ages, but particularly so at retirement, as this is a major transition time which requires the negotiation, and construction of a new identity. Travel decisions at this time can be used to construct a new, or subsidiary, identity and additionally set new life trajectories which can fuel (consciously or unconsciously) a choice towards engagement with life at this penultimate stage. And, of course, travel decisions can be used to signal this change to others.

It would be valuable to further explore the opportunities that tourism offers retirees for reflection and assessment of new opportunities in life. This could include a focus on the benefits of tourism education for people who do not travel at all, and thus, unwittingly, deprive themselves of a rich source of psychological benefits.

It is suggested that there may be scope for tourism policy in Australia to focus more comprehensively on the psychological (and physical) benefits of local tourism for people who have retired.

Such a re-organisation would require integration of aspects of the Federal portfolios of health, ageing, tourism, environment, and potentially education.

A whole of government approach to reviewing tourism policy could usefully focus on the real health benefits of tourism to all people, not just on the next round of economic targets. The European Social Tourism models would provide a useful guide and reference points for such a review.

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