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Indigenising Tourism: A Story of an Aboriginal-led Project in the Northern Territory, Australia

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Title: Indigenising Tourism: A Story of an Aboriginal-led Project in the Northern Territory, Australia

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Abstract:

Storytelling is central to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in Australia. Aboriginal stories are communicated through various mediums; they are spoken in language, performed in dance and music, and communicated through visual arts. For Aboriginal people, the stories passed from generation to generation serve many purposes, including the sharing of spiritual narratives, cultural practices and landscapes, collective histories and life histories. Aboriginal stories are unique to country and nation and, prior to 'the invasion' (Langton 1996), there were between 200 to 500 different language groups around Australia with distinctive and unique cultures, identities, and beliefs. Given that only around 50 Aboriginal languages remain in contemporary Australia, the preservation of oral histories and traditional knowledges is essential to sustaining Aboriginal cultures and teachings. Tourism is one avenue through which Aboriginal stories can be shared. In this presentation, we tell the story of why an Aboriginal community in remote Australia sought to be involved in tourism, and how they engaged academic researchers to guide the development of a locally and culturally appropriate Indigenous tourism product.

The Wagiman people of Pine Creek, a remote town in the Katherine region of the Northern Territory of Australia, possess distinct representations of culture, identity, and knowledge of country. Elders of the Wagiman community asked the researchers to initiate a project that recorded their stories, for the dual purpose of preserving Wagiman knowledges for future generations of Wagiman people, and to provide Wagiman interpretation of country for both non-Aboriginal residents of Pine Creek, and domestic and international visitors to the town. To this end, the Wagiman community worked closely with the researchers to create digital recordings of country, histories, language and culture over a series of extended fieldwork visits (McGinnis, Young and Harvey, 2016). Methodologically, an overarching goal of the Wagiman research project was to engage the Indigenous method of storytelling (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012) in order to provide authentic interpretations of local knowledge. In particular, we engaged the practice of 'yarning' with Wagiman Elders to record their stories 'on country'. Indigenising methodologies allowed for the sharing of stories in ways that can foster community identity, pride and empowerment (Foley 2015; Russell-Mundine 2012; Tuhiwai-Smith 2012).

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We report on the learnings of the researchers in working with Wagiman people, particularly the importance of relationship building and the formation of trust for engaging in culturally-appropriate tourism research that can educate and empower all stakeholders. The Aboriginal-led research resulted in digital options for Indigenous engagement in tourism, including websites, digital maps and mobile apps. The collection of local stories resulting from the research partnership with the community seeks to ensure the continuation of Wagiman teachings for the long-term. The tourism venture provides a case study of community driven research collaboration focused on self-determination for the Wagiman people in the sharing of their stories and the development of Indigenous tourism in Pine Creek.

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