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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF FIGURES	4
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	5
ABSTRACT	7
1. INTRODUCTION.....	9
1.1. Background to the Study	9
1.2. Problem Statement.....	12
1.3. Research Objectives.....	12
1.4. Significance of the Study	14
1.5. Scope of the Study	14
2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND.....	15
2.1. Desert Tourism.....	15
2.1.1. Defining Outback and Desert Australia	15
2.1.2. Defining Desert Tourism	18
2.1.3. Desert Tourism in Australia.....	19
2.1.4. Current Issues for Desert and Outback Tourism in Australia.....	21
2.1.5. Tourism in Central Australia.....	24
2.1.5.1. Defining Central Australia.....	24
2.1.5.2. Tourism Trends in Central Australia	25
2.1.6. Challenges for Innovation in Tourism in Central Australia.....	27
2.2. 4WD Self-drive Tourism	29
2.2.1. Self-drive Tourism in Australia	29
2.2.1.1. Types of Drive Holidays	29
2.2.1.2. Motivations for Taking Drive Holidays.....	30
2.2.2. Self-Drive Tourism in the Northern Territory	31
2.2.3. Current State of Knowledge about 4WD Tourism.....	32
2.2.3.1. Defining 4WD Tourism	32
2.2.3.2. Segmentation of the 4WD Tourism Market.....	33
2.2.4. Potential Advantages of 4WD Tourism Markets in the Desert	36
2.2.5. Potential 4WD Market Segments for Desert Environments	37
2.2.6. Current Shortcomings in Understanding Desert 4WD Markets	38
2.3. Indigenous Tourism in Australia.....	41
2.3.1. Definitions.....	41
2.3.1.1. Indigenous Peoples	41
2.3.1.2. Indigenous Tourism	41
2.3.1.3. Indigenous Cultural Tourism	44

2.3.1.4. Aboriginal Tourism Product	45
2.3.2. Current Aboriginal Tourism Trends in Australia.....	46
2.3.3. Demand for Aboriginal Tourism.....	47
2.3.4. Aboriginal Tourism in Central Australia	50
2.3.4.1. Types of Available Aboriginal Tourism Products	52
2.3.4.2. Indigenous Tourism Marketing Strategies	54
2.4. Distribution of Tourism Products and the Role of Information.....	56
2.4.1. Distribution Systems in Tourism	56
2.4.2. Distribution of Information in Tourism	59
2.4.3. Travel Planning and Information Search Behaviour.....	61
2.4.3.1. Internal versus External Information Search	62
2.4.3.2. Information Search Strategies	63
2.4.3.3. Information Search Behaviour of Independent Travellers.....	64
2.4.3.4. Information Search of the Self-Drive Market	65
3. METHODOLOGY.....	67
3.1. Introduction.....	67
3.2. Justification of the Qualitative Paradigm.....	67
3.3. Criticism of the Qualitative Paradigm.....	69
3.4. In-depth Interviews.....	69
3.5. Advantages and Disadvantages of Semi-structured Interviews	71
3.6. Research Design and Data Collection Strategies	72
3.6.1. Interview Instrument.....	72
3.6.2. Sampling	73
3.6.3. Data Collection Process	75
3.7. Data Analysis.....	76
3.8. Limitations.....	78
4. RESULTS	80
4.1. Introduction.....	80
4.2. Trip Characteristics and Motivations.....	80
4.2.1. Characteristics of Itineraries in Central Australia.....	81
4.2.2. Main Motivations for Visiting Central Australia.....	82
4.2.2.1. Environment-based Factors.....	82
4.2.2.2. Educational Factors.....	83
4.2.2.3. Psychological Factors	83
4.2.3. Reasons for Choosing 4WD Vehicles.....	84
4.2.4. Desired Experiences and Activities in the Desert.....	85
4.3. Trip Planning Behaviour.....	85
4.3.1. Timing and Extent of Pre-trip Planning.....	86

4.3.1.1.	Domestic 4WD Travellers	86
4.3.1.2.	International 4WD Travellers	87
4.3.2.	Bookings in Advance versus Spontaneous Decisions.....	88
4.3.2.1.	Domestic 4WD Travellers	88
4.3.2.2.	International 4WD Travellers	89
4.3.3.	The Use of Information Sources for Trip Planning	90
4.3.3.1.	Pre-Trip Information Search	91
4.3.3.1.1.	<i>Domestic 4WD Travellers</i>	91
4.3.3.1.2.	<i>International 4WD Travellers</i>	93
4.3.3.2.	En Route and At Destination Information Search	96
4.3.3.2.1.	<i>Domestic 4WD Travellers</i>	96
4.3.3.2.2.	<i>International 4WD Travellers</i>	97
4.4.	The Role of Aboriginal Culture in the Overall Trip Experience.....	99
4.4.1.	Encountered Experiences with Aboriginal Culture	100
4.4.1.1.	Reasons for Participating in Aboriginal Cultural Activities	101
4.4.1.2.	Evaluation of Available Experiences and Activities.....	101
4.4.1.3.	Further Desired Experiences with Aboriginal Culture	103
4.4.2.	General Level of Interest in Aboriginal Culture	106
4.4.3.	Effort to Investigate and Pursue Available Options.....	106
4.4.3.1.	Evaluation of Current Distribution Methods	108
4.4.3.2.	Recommendations for Future Distribution Strategies.....	109
4.4.4.	Barriers for Seeking Aboriginal Cultural Experiences	111
4.4.4.1.	Commercialism and Authenticity	111
4.4.4.2.	Perceived Attitude of Aboriginal People	112
4.4.4.3.	Social and Political Barriers.....	112
5.	DISCUSSION OF RESULTS	114
5.1.	Trip Characteristics and Motivations	114
5.2.	The Use of Information Sources	116
5.3.	Trip Planning Behaviour	120
5.4.	Implications for Product Distribution to the 4WD Market	121
5.5.	The Role of Aboriginal Culture in the Overall Trip Experience.....	122
5.6.	Barriers for Seeking Aboriginal Cultural Experiences	123
5.7.	Opportunities for Product Development	125
5.8.	Opportunities for Enhancing Distribution Strategies	126
6.	CONCLUSIONS	129
7.	RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE OUTLOOK.....	132
8.	BIBLIOGRAPHY	135
APPENDIX	146

TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the study	13
Figure 2 : Outline of main regions comprising Outback Australia.....	16
Figure 3: Location of semi-arid and arid zones in Australia.....	17
Figure 4: Challenges and opportunities facing Outback tourism.....	22
Figure 5: Regions comprising the central Australia area.....	24
Figure 6: Trip party – vehicle typology of 4WD trips	34
Figure 7: The 4 Hs of indigenous tourism	42
Figure 8: Classification of indigenous tourism	43
Figure 9: A spatial perspective of distribution systems in tourism.....	58
Figure 10: The role of information in distribution marketing.....	59
Figure 11: Interface between supply and demand	60
Figure 12: Model of vacation planning process.....	61
Figure 13: Interview locations in central Australia.....	74
Figure 14: Coding tree	77
Figure 15: Classification of information sources used by domestic 4WD travellers.....	118
Figure 16: Classification of information sources used by international 4WD travellers.....	119
Table 1: Key issues for desert tourism innovation systems.....	27
Table 2: Functions and benefits emerging through tourism distribution channels.....	57
Table 3: Advantages and disadvantages of semi-structured in-depth interviews	71
Table 4: Topics in the interview guideline and their relation to research objectives.....	72
Table 5: Origin of interview participants in relation to interview location	74
Table 6: Travel party type in relation to origin of participants.....	75
Table 7: Ranking of information sources used by domestic 4WD travellers	91
Table 8: Ranking of information sources used by international 4WD travellers.....	91
Table 9: Aboriginal cultural experiences made by domestic 4WD travellers	100
Table 10: Aboriginal cultural experiences made by domestic 4WD travellers	100

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

4WD	Four Wheel Drive
ASGC	Australian Standards for Geographical Classification
CAZR	Centre for Arid Zone Research
CRC	Cooperative Research Centre
DK CRC	Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre
DKA	Desert Knowledge Australia
e.g.	exempli gratia, for example
ed./eds.	Editor/Editors
et al.	et alii, and others
F&B	food and beverage
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
i.e.	id est, which means
ibid.	ibidem, in the same place
n.p.a.	no page available
NSW	New South Wales
NT	Northern Territory
NTTC	Northern Territory Tourist Commission
QL	Queensland
SA	South Australia
SME	Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprise
SMTE	Small- and Medium-Sized Tourism Enterprise
VIC	Victoria
VIC	Visitor Information Centre
WA	Western Australia
WTO	World Tourism Organisation

tourism offer, which primarily consists of highly structured commercial tours, and a perceived lack of authenticity constitute major barriers in marketing Aboriginal tourism products to 4WD travellers. Aboriginal experiences that would be desired by 4WD travellers include for example tours and activities, which incorporate educational aspects, personal and informal interaction with Aboriginal people and individual or “off the beaten track” experiences as opposed to experiences offered to tour bus groups and the mass market.

The findings further suggest that 4WD markets generally do not plan their trips in all details. Decisions about products to be consumed and activities to be undertaken are normally made spontaneously on the way to or at the destination. Information sources are often extensively used prior to departure to enhance the knowledge about a certain region but do not necessarily lead to a purchase decision in advance. In addition, 4WD travellers expect information about tourism products to be readily available at places where they normally tend to get information. Even if they notice a lack of information about a certain product they would be interested in, they do not actively pursue and extend their information search to chase a particular experience but rather substitute it by another activity that turns out to be available at the location.

Aboriginal tourism businesses interested in targeting 4WD travellers will have to consider that information about available products needs to reach the market both prior to departure and at the destination itself. The results of this research finally emphasise the need for Aboriginal product suppliers to enter partnerships and alliances with existing businesses that are already catering to the current 4WD market to facilitate a more effective distribution process.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background to the Study

Tourism has been recognised as one of the main economic drivers in desert and Outback regions of Australia. Much of the main organised tourism activity, however, clusters around the major population centres like Alice Springs or a limited number of iconic attractions in the desert such as Uluru (Ayers Rock) or Watarrka (Kings Canyon) (Tremblay, 2006a; Carson & Taylor, 2006b). In addition, tourism in Outback and desert regions has to face a number of challenges. Outback Australia has struggled in recent years to keep level with the tourism performance of the Australian tourism industry as a whole and has experienced a steady decline in visitor numbers from both national and international visitors since the year 2000 (Desert Knowledge Australia, 2005b). Major key markets, such as the backpacker market for example, seem to be declining (Carson & Taylor, 2006b; Tourism NT, 2006b) and other performance indicators like visitor expenditure, average length of stay or repeat visitor rate have also remained flat or continued to decrease (Carson & Taylor, 2006a; Desert Knowledge Australia, 2005b). Similarly, the number of tourism related businesses in Outback Australia has continued to decrease since 1999 (ibid.).

Desert and Outback tourism are also strongly affected by global trends such as rising fuel prices or the trend to shorter and more frequent holidays (Tourism Queensland, 2004). This might have particular consequences for remote desert regions due to their isolated location and the long distances to major source markets as it might divert tourists to other destinations which are easier to access.

Desert tourism stakeholders have an interest in addressing these issues in order to secure a viable tourism industry into the future. The Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (DK-CRC) is committed to creating sustainable livelihoods and viable economic opportunities for remote desert people and settlements through the application of research and training (Desert Knowledge CRC, 2006). It has directed substantial efforts to investigate a number of business activities which are considered to have potential for economic, social and cultural development of Australian desert communities - including tourism (Tremblay, 2006a).

The DK-CRC funded a desert tourism scoping study in 2005, which recognised that supporting desert livelihoods through tourism will most likely require opening up new tourist experiences and

new markets. One of the major recommendations coming from this scoping study was that there is a clear need to develop a comprehensive research project that looks systematically at the developing drive tourism market, which already accounts for over 70% of all overnight leisure trips in Australia (Taylor & Prideaux, 2006; Olsen, 2002). Within this particular market segment the four wheel drive (4WD) self-drive tourism market was considered to present a potential focus for this research (Tremblay, 2006a). This market segment has been identified as a particular group of interest mainly because 4WD allows travellers to access more remote locations and therefore may help to disperse tourism more effectively.

As a result, the DK-CRC has initiated the *On Track* research program, which aims at assessing how a 4WD tourism industry in the desert can contribute to better desert livelihoods by examining the potential economic and social benefits of 4WD tourism and evaluating at the same time potential pressures on the fragile environment, culture and infrastructure of the desert (Desert Knowledge CRC, 2006). *On Track* is supposed to deliver a better understanding of 4WD travel in desert areas by describing the various stakeholders that are involved in this special form of desert travel – 4WD travellers, businesses, organisations and communities. While 4WD markets potentially offer increased dispersal and sustained market growth arising from continuing increases in 4WD vehicle sales, their value to desert destinations is poorly understood. In particular, the capacity for desert communities, many of whom are Aboriginal, to benefit economically from increasing numbers of 4WD travellers is unclear (Carson & Taylor, 2006).

Given the relatively high proportion of Aboriginal population in the Northern Territory – about one third of the Northern Territory population identify as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (NTTC, 2004) – this part of Australia is closely associated with a strong influence of Aboriginal culture. The Northern Territory Tourism Strategic Plan 2003 – 2007 recognises indigenous cultural tourism as a competitive advantage over other Australian regions and defines it as one of the main building blocks of tourism which shall provide the foundation for tourism growth in the Northern Territory in the long run. Tourism NT (formerly known as the Northern Territory Tourist Commission) builds its current Indigenous Tourism Strategy on previous research (Australia Domestic Marketing Research, 2000, quoted in NTTC, 2004, p. 4) which found that the perception of the “ability to explore indigenous culture” is significantly higher amongst visitors to the Northern Territory than in any other region of Australia. In particular, central Australia has been identified a key destination for tourists wanting to experience indigenous culture.

Australian desert regions, such as central Australia, are characterised by a high proportion of indigenous people, who own large parts of desert land. Considerably high proportions of this population live in small communities away from servicing towns (Desert Knowledge CRC, 2006) and are only marginally involved in tourism activity, meaning that benefits received from tourism are rather low. The number of successful indigenous owned tourism ventures (such as Anangu Tours at Uluru for example) is small (Boyle, 2001) and a lack of indigenous involvement in the tourism industry has often been acknowledged in the past (Tremblay, 2006a; Desert Knowledge Australia, 2005a). What adds to the problem is that the Aboriginal tourism sector in central Australia is currently characterised by a lack of product diversity and does not provide a clear marketing strategy that proposes concrete actions and advice for promoting and distributing indigenous tourism products.

To develop additional, more specific marketing strategies Tourism NT has acknowledged the need for further research to get a better understanding of different market segments in order to allow indigenous people to make informed decision about their participation in tourism. Proposed research directions included identifying which markets currently have an interest in indigenous cultural experiences, what they perceive to be an indigenous cultural experience, where they choose to have these experiences, how much they are willing to spend and how they seek information on such experiences (NTTC, 2004).

The research does not only need to understand what products and business types are required by the market, but also how they can best be distributed, making sure that the right quantities of the right product or service are available at the right place, at the right time (Wynne et al., 2001). The role of information in this distribution process is exceptionally important in tourism due to the intangible, perishable, heterogeneous and inseparable nature of tourism products and services (Bieger & Laesser, 2004; French et al., 2000; Dickman, 1999). Information acquisition is necessary for selecting a destination but also for on-site decisions of various trip elements, such as accommodation, transportation or activities (Gursoy & Chen, 2000; Fodness & Murray, 1998; Snepenger et al., 1990). Consequently, tourists must be able to access the information they need to both develop a demand for the product and to identify opportunities to satisfy this demand during various stages of the trip planning process. Understanding travellers' information search behaviour is therefore critical to develop better marketing and distribution strategies and to improve service delivery (Pearce & Schott, 2005; Bieger & Laesser, 2004; Gursoy & McCleary, 2004).

