



Research Note

# Examining domestic and international visits in Australia's Aboriginal tourism

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Tourism Economics

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## Abstract

Using recent nationwide panel data, an analysis considering the factors that influence the choice of Aboriginal tourism was undertaken. Although international visit numbers were larger than domestic, the former and not the latter is found to be on a decline over time. Gender does not influence domestic visits but females among international visitors are more likely to participate in Aboriginal tourism. Evidence also shows that international marketing strategies aimed at first-time visitors and adult couples, while domestic marketing efforts towards the friends and relatives travel group are likely to work. Blending Aboriginal tourism with attractions in the natural environment and wildlife for international tourists, and for domestic visitors, incorporating it in often visited regional areas can raise participation in this tourism form.

## Keywords

aboriginal tourism, binary regression, visit probability

## Introduction

Tourism is a significant industry for Australia, contributing about 3% of its GDP (Productivity Commission, 2015). In response to ongoing challenges brought about by the intense competition in the global tourism market, a key aspect of Australia's *Tourism 2020* strategy<sup>1</sup> is to capitalize on Australia's competitive advantage of Indigenous culture and heritage that differentiates it from other tourist destinations around the world. Thus, the aims of this study on Indigenous/Aboriginal<sup>2</sup> tourism in Australia are as follows. First, it profiles both domestic and international visitors using nationwide data from 2013 to 2015. These are drawn from the International and National Visitor Survey conducted by Tourism Research Australia, which is the Australian government's tourism bureau. The National Visitor Survey samples approximately 120,000 Australian residents aged

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15 years and over, while the International Visitor Survey samples 40,000 departing, short-term international travellers aged 15 years and over (Tourism Research Australia, 2015).

The advantage of the data used is that it covers all four annual quarters to circumvent seasonality issues which can cause biased results, and the use of longitudinal data is far superior to a snapshot examination based on a one-off survey. Previous studies on Australia's Indigenous tourism were all site-specific or case study driven (Ruhanen et al., 2015). More specifically, this study examines the factors that influence domestic and international visitors in Australia to choose Aboriginal tourism over other non-Aboriginal arts, cultural and heritage tourism. The latter is based on the conceptual framework that Indigenous tourism is part of cultural tourism, as is arts, heritage and festivals in the literature (see Abascal et al., 2015, Blundell, 1995). As travel activities are based on the choices available, within the realm of arts, heritage and festivals, a comparative analysis using a probit model is undertaken.

### **Australia's aboriginal tourism**

Aboriginal tourism in Australia has only been promoted as a tourist attraction since the 1990s (Zeppel, 2001). In 2010, Indigenous tourism which was an A\$3.8 billion economy (Tourism Research Australia, 2011), increased to A\$6.4 billion in 2015/16.<sup>3</sup> According to Tourism Research Australia (2011: 1), an Indigenous tourism visitor is one who participates in at least one Indigenous tourism activity during their trip. This includes visiting an Aboriginal site or community or experiencing Aboriginal art/craft or cultural display or attending an Aboriginal performance (ibid).

On the demand side, motivations and intention to participate, and barriers to participation in Aboriginal tourism have been examined by Abascal et al. (2015, 2016) and Jones Donald Strategy Partners (2009) but these only focused on domestic visitors. The survey study of Ruhanen et al. (2015) in four Australian cities covers similar ground on domestic and international tourists to show that there is low awareness, preference and intention to participate in Indigenous tourism experiences in Australia. Other studies focus on the sustainability of Indigenous tourism and Indigenous people involved in Indigenous tourism and the challenges in the industry (Buultjens et al., 2010, Carr et al., 2016, Fletcher et al., 2016). With regard to visitor profile, Tourism Research Australia (2010) pointed out that domestic Indigenous tourism visitors were mainly aged between 45 years and 64 years and are typically female while that of the typical international Indigenous visitor was primarily young (15–24 years) or older and retired at 55 years or more. A good review of various studies in Indigenous tourism is given by Whitford and Ruhanen (2016).

Based on the compiled data from 2013 to 2015, Indigenous tourism visits were much higher for the international visitors compared with domestic visitors as seen in Table 1. Globally too, this is the case (Vermeersch et al., 2016). It has been argued that Australians do not necessarily want to see their own backyard as they have been exposed to Aboriginal culture in school and in the environment around them, so there is less fascination with Indigenous tourism (Abascal et al., 2015; Buultjens et al., 2010). Edelheim (2005) noted that Australians focus on other more romanticized features of their holiday patterns such as the rural outback, the national parks and the beaches. The compiled data also showed that only 1.5% of the international tourists indicated that learning about Aboriginal culture influenced their decision to visit but this low figure is no surprise as participation in Aboriginal tourism is not the main motivation to travel for the majority of tourists in other countries as well (see McIntosh, 2004). Table 1 shows some statistics from the data on participation in Aboriginal tourism.

**Table 1.** Some survey statistics on aboriginal tourism visitors from 2013 to 2015.

	International visitors	Domestic overnight visitors
	14402	3707
Sample size	Percentage of sample	
Females	54.63	54.46
Males	45.37	45.54
Age 15–24	8.22	2.83
Age 20–24	26.78	1.84
Age 25–29	20.09	3.25
Age 30–34	10.49	4.24
Age 35–39	4.74	6.51
Age 40–44	4.22	8.63
Age 45–49	3.56	8.91
Age 50–54	4.40	12.87
Age 55–59	4.74	12.45
Age 60–64	5.16	12.45
Age 65–69	4.69	11.46
Age 70–74	2.15	7.21
Age 75+	0.76	7.35
Work status		
Working full-time	48.10	Not reported due to substantial missing information
Working part-time	6.95	
Retired	11.25	
Others: Unemployed/home duties/studying	33.70	
Annual household income	Not available	
Less than A\$25 000		7.19
A\$25 000–A\$39 999		9.93
A\$40 000–A\$54 999		8.05
A\$50 000–A\$69 999		10.45
A\$70 000–A\$ 84 999		7.53
A\$85 000–A\$99 999		9.59
A\$100 000–A\$129 999		16.27
A\$130 000–A\$174 999		13.87
Above A\$175 000		17.12
Travel party		
Unaccompanied traveller	52.02	16.27
Adult couples	22.39	29.99
Family group (parents and children)	9.52	16.41
Friends, relatives and business	16.07	37.33
First visit to Australia	60.96	Not applicable
	Mean (standard deviation)	
Number of overnight stays	77.22 (96.73)	9.15 (13.11)

## Methodology

Tourism Research Australia categorises Indigenous-related tourism activities under the ‘Arts, heritage or festival’ activities in its visitor survey. Thus, to examine the factors that influence participation in Indigenous-related activities, this group of participants is contrasted with those who participate in non-Indigenous arts, heritage or festival activities using the following binary regression model:

$$y^* = \alpha + \beta_i X_i + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

where the dependent variable  $y^*$  is the unobserved latent index of  $y$  which takes a value of one (zero) for those who are involved in Indigenous tourism (other non-Indigenous activities). Equation (1) allows one to understand what factors (given by the  $X$ s) drive the probability of the participation in Indigenous activities. The estimations were undertaken using the STATA econometric software.

## Results and discussion

The overall significance of the models in Table 2 is given by the likelihood ratio test with a  $p$  value of 0.00. The pseudo- $R^2$  of the estimated models and the associated correct predictions are also found to be acceptable (see Domencich and McFadden, 1975). Apart from socio demographic variables, age was further segmented into generation X (18–24 years), generation Y (25–44 years) and an ‘others’ category comprising baby boomers and beyond who are above 45 years of age.

It can be seen that the impacts of the variables are quite different for international and domestic visitors. For instance, gender is not an influential factor for domestic visitors but being a female foreigner, the likelihood of participating in Aboriginal tourism was higher. With age, in line with the previous studies’ observation in Australia and other countries (see Kutzner and Wright, 2010; Lynch et al., 2010), older tourists are an interested group. With domestic visitors in particular, generation Y in particular was averse to engaging in Aboriginal tourism. This result lends support to the qualitative study of Vermeersch et al. (2016) which explains that generation Y is more interested in self-interest pursuits and international experiences when it came to Aboriginal tourism.

Literature has highlighted the importance of the link between travel party composition and tourist behaviour (Rashidi and Koo, 2016; Wu et al., 2011). For instance, children can influence destination choice through an adult’s consideration of a child’s welfare. For international tourists, adult couples and accompanied travellers or family groups are likely to be involved in Aboriginal tourism. But for domestic visitors, none of these groups are likely to have that interest, indicating that the benchmark group of friends and relatives is the travel party that will consider such participation. Length of stay is another key factor that determines destination choice and tourist activities (Alegre and Pou, 2006; Decrop and Snelders, 2004). Tourists who visit only for short periods of time tend to stay centrally to visit the major tourist attractions while longer-stay tourists, by comparison, visit a greater range of attractions and explore more peripheral regions (Barros and Machado, 2010). Evidence in Table 2 supports this assertion.

Results also show that domestic tourists who travel to regional areas for holidays rather than visiting friends and relatives are likely to opt for Aboriginal tourism and thus, it would be helpful to incorporate Aboriginal-related tourism in various strategic geographical areas around the country which are popular with domestic tourists. These set-ups should be geared to authentic experiences

**Table 2.** Regression results.

Variables	International visitors	Domestic overnight visitors
<b>Socio-demographics</b>		
Age <sup>+</sup>	0.042 (0.007) <sup>***</sup>	0.077 (0.169) <sup>***</sup>
Generation X	<i>insignificant</i>	-0.106 (0.068)
Generation Y	<i>insignificant</i>	-0.267 (0.105) <sup>***</sup>
Female	0.083 (0.011) <sup>***</sup>	0.049 (0.039)
Travel party (friends and relatives are the benchmark)		
Unaccompanied	-0.089 (0.017) <sup>***</sup>	-0.104 (0.045) <sup>***</sup>
Adult couple	0.156 (0.019) <sup>***</sup>	-0.09 (0.036) <sup>***</sup>
Family travelling with children	-0.052 (0.022) <sup>**</sup>	-0.12 (0.054) <sup>***</sup>
Work status (others are the benchmark)		
Full-time	0.041 (0.019) <sup>**</sup>	n.a.
Part-time	0.059 (0.042)	n.a.
Retired	0.217 (0.034) <sup>***</sup>	n.a.
Annual income	n.a.	0.019 (0.008) <sup>**</sup>
<b>Travel information</b>		
Length of stay	0.002 (0.001) <sup>***</sup>	0.016 (0.002) <sup>***</sup>
First visit to Australia	0.319 (0.012) <sup>***</sup>	n.a.
Regional Australia <sup>a</sup>	n.a.	0.277 (0.051) <sup>***</sup>
<b>Travel motivation</b>		
Visiting friends and relatives	0.017 (0.028)	-0.192 (0.059) <sup>***</sup>
Holiday	n.a.	0.259 (0.049) <sup>***</sup>
Coast and beach	0.172 (0.106)	n.a.
Contemporary city lifestyle, food and wine	-0.006 (0.023)	n.a.
Natural environment and wildlife	0.387 (0.167) <sup>***</sup>	n.a.
Discovering people and places	0.223 (0.022) <sup>***</sup>	n.a.
Year (time trend)	-0.048 (0.009) <sup>***</sup>	-0.129 (0.059)
Constant	-1.837 (0.034) <sup>***</sup>	-2.546 (0.108) <sup>***</sup>
Likelihood ratio test statistic	29484.07 <sup>***</sup>	725.81
Percent correctly predicted	92.54	89.13
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.364	0.398

Note: Standard errors are in parenthesis. n.a.: not applicable or not available.

<sup>+</sup>To avoid multicollinearity, when the variable age was included, generation X and generation Y were not included in the model. When generation X and generation Y (those above 45 years were the benchmark) were included in the model, age was excluded.

<sup>a</sup>Regional areas are defined by Tourism Research Australia (2014) as not Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Darwin, Adelaide, Perth, Hobart, Canberra and the Gold Coast.

such as making bush tucker (Aboriginal) food available and preparing it, or learning and seeing Aboriginal medicines and plant wisdom, understanding the bush and land through different eyes, or partaking and learning Aboriginal dancing. As noted by previous studies (Jones Donald Strategy Partners, 2009; Tourism Research Australia, 2010), domestic visitors need to be engaged more than international visitors to go beyond just watching displays of Aboriginal-related history and products in a museum or show.

Table 2 shows that international visitors are likely to engage in Aboriginal tourism in their first rather than later visits. Thus, first-time visitors to Australia should be targeted to increase their

awareness of Aboriginal tourism. As Aboriginal tourism is hardly a motivator for travel, it is important to incorporate it into the mainstream tourism attractions for the international visitors as Tremblay and Pitterle (2008) had suggested that participation in Aboriginal tourism was opportunity driven.

Other travel motivations are also tested in the model to see if they jointly induce participation in Aboriginal tourism. Table 2 shows that the natural environment and wildlife is an activity or area in which that would be effective. For instance, the recent move to increase the number of Aboriginal rangers in various national parks around the country to share their stories and experiences<sup>4</sup> is a good attempt towards this. The other international travel motive that was significant is that of discovering people and places. Hence, the incorporation of Aboriginal guides and dreamtime stories depicting values and beliefs, or explanations on hunting, fishing and survival in the bush by Aboriginal artists, historians and storytellers may entice international visitors. Lastly, the negative coefficient on the time trend shows that, over the last 3 years, there has been a declining tendency among the international visitors to choose Aboriginal tourism, while there is no such effect for the domestic visitors.

## Conclusion

Using nationwide data from 2013 to 2015, empirical modelling showed that the likely domestic tourists were those who travelled with friends and relatives, while international tourists were adult couples. However, domestic tourists who were visiting friends and relatives were not likely to participate in Aboriginal tourism, while international tourists interested in natural environment and wildlife, and discovering people and places were most likely to do so. First-time visitors to Australia are another target group while the emerging markets of China and India may require more direct selling to travel agents and tour companies via travel events and promotion.

With domestic tourists, regional areas which are presently popular for other visits should be targeted to incorporate Aboriginal-related tourism. Visiting one's own backyard, especially for generation Y, needs to offer novelty, fun and a unique experience to truly connect and have a depth of discovery about Aboriginal tourism. It is recommended that social media advertising is likely to resonate with the younger generation. Designing and marketing unique and hands-on educational and fun experiences in Aboriginal tourism capitalizing on the selling point of the differences in various areas and regions in Australia which are currently popular with domestic and international visitors should be considered. Lastly, the findings from this Australian study cannot be generalized to other countries with Aboriginal tourism and it would be interesting to undertake some comparative analysis in this area.

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## Notes

1. See <http://www.austrade.gov.au/Australian/Tourism/Policy-and-Strategy/tourism-2020>
2. Zeppel (2001) explains that both terms are used interchangeably in Australia as does Tourism Research Australia.

3. See <http://www.tourism.australia.com/campaigns/Indigenous-experiences.aspx>
4. See <https://newmatilda.com/2016/10/28/rethinking-national-parks/>

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