



# Using Rainforest Research

## Understanding Ethnic Tourists - the Tjapukai experience

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### What is ethnic tourism?

Ethnic tourism is when travellers choose to experience first hand the practices of another culture, and may involve performances, presentations and attractions portraying or presented by small, often isolated Indigenous communities. Examples of communities that attract tourists for this reason include the Amish communities of the United States, the First Nation societies of Canada and North America, the Maori of New Zealand, Australia's Aboriginal communities, the Bushmen of South Africa and the Ibo tribes of Indonesia.

### Why is it important to understand ethnic tourism?

Australian tourism - particularly in the 1990s - has promoted images of Aboriginal people and culture to most of its overseas markets, including Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States. However, this promotion has been built upon a very limited base of successful long-standing Aboriginal tourism products.

Aboriginal ethnic tourism developments in Australia (mostly confined to

Queensland and the Northern Territory) are usually small scale and marginal in their profitability. As such, it is important to understand why people visit ethnic attractions and the sorts of things that contribute to a satisfying visit. This understanding will help ethnic tourism operators to make their venture more profitable and successful.

Currently most visitors to ethnic tourism attractions do so as a secondary activity to other attractions in a region, such as visiting natural areas like the Great Barrier Reef or the Wet Tropics Rainforest.

Dr Gianna Moscardo and Professor Philip Pearce looked at the sorts of people who visited a large Aboriginal

tourism attraction near Cairns in north Queensland - the Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park. This was an academic study not commissioned by the Park. This is the first study of its kind in the world; other studies have looked at the experience from the perspective of the ethnic tourism operators - this study looks at it from the perspective of the tourists visiting the ethnic operation.

### Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park

The Tjapukai operation opened in 1996 after the success of a Dance Theatre in the nearby rainforest village of Kuranda. It covers ten acres and includes several performances and activities for visitors. The three main attractions are:

- The Creation theatre which combines live performers and laser technology to present the Aboriginal perspective on the creation of humans
- The History theatre which runs a film on Aboriginal history in the area since European settlement
- The Dance theatre which presents a mixture of traditional Aboriginal dancing with information on culture and music.



*Above: Aboriginal staff conducting a Bush Food session which provides a popular attraction at the park.*

*Left: Tourists participating in Didgeridoo sessions with Aboriginal musicians. Spear and boomerang throwing sessions also give visitors the opportunity for personal interaction.*

*Right: The shop at Tjapukai provides an outlet for authentic Aboriginal products and art (photographs courtesy of Tjapukai)*



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The Rainforest CRC is a research partnership involving the Commonwealth and Queensland State governments, the Wet Tropics Management Authority, the tourism industry, Aboriginal groups, CSIRO, James Cook University, Griffith University and The University of Queensland

Other performances include Bush Food and Didgeridoo shows. Visitors can also try their hand at spear and boomerang throwing. Virtually all park staff visible to the public are Aboriginal and visitors can interact with Aboriginal people during and after Dance theatre performances, at the boomerang and spear throwing areas and at various places throughout the park.

### Surveying visitors to Tjapukai

A survey of visitors to Tjapukai was conducted over a two month period to include peak and off-peak tourist seasons. Researchers were seeking the following information from the survey:

- socio-demographic information plus general information about their visit – type of transport, place of ticket purchase, sources of information, reasons for visit, previous experience with Aboriginal tourism products
- measures of general travel benefits, previous experience with ethnic tourism products in other countries, importance of various aspects of ethnic tourism
- overall satisfaction with Tjapukai experience and the various features of the park

The sample of visitors surveyed (1483 people) was spread evenly across all age groups with couples and organised tour groups dominating. Seventy percent of the sample were international visitors mostly from North America and Europe.

One quarter of the sample had previously seen an Aboriginal dance performance and nearly half had visited an Aboriginal art centre. Many (43%) had experienced ethnic tourism products in other countries.

The survey results were used to group tourists into four main groups as follows:

- Ethnic tourism connection group (36%)
- Passive cultural learning (24%)
- Ethnic products and activities (18%)
- Low ethnic interest (16%)

Factors which were used to determine different levels of interest or reasons for visiting the park and participating in ethnic tourism attractions were:

- Interest in contact with ethnic people
- Interest in learning about ethnic cultures
- Average age
- Reason for travel
- Reasons for visiting Tjapukai
- Participation in activities
- Interest in visiting Aboriginal communities in region
- Overall satisfaction with the Tjapukai experience

### Implications for ethnic tourism

The largest group, the Ethnic Tourism Group, is most interested in having personal contact with ethnic people and are likely participants in tourism products which offer such opportunities. The Passive Cultural Learning Group is interested in ethnic tourism but prefers experiences that focus on cultural learning rather than personal contact. The Ethnic Products and Activities group are more interested in participating in traditional activities (such as spear throwing, bush cooking, etc.) than in learning about ethnic cultures or having a personal contact with them. The Low Ethnic Tourism group are most likely to visit an Aboriginal tourism attraction as part of a tour or because someone else in their party wanted to visit.

However, all four groups showed a high to very high level of satisfaction in their visit to Tjapukai and were also

interested in further ethnic tourism experiences. Even those with little interest in ethnic tourism products and personal contact with Aboriginal people reported having a positive and enjoyable experience.

One reason for most visitors reporting a high level of satisfaction may be due to the very nature of Tjapukai. The park allows visitors to travel at their own pace, to select their own level of contact with Aboriginal people and to follow their own interests. This variety and choice of experience seems to be important in making ethnic tourism products successful.

Two important points can be made from this study. The first is that tourists do differ in terms of the experience they seek in ethnic tourism situations. Secondly, some visitors may see personal ethnic contact as difficult or uncomfortable. This is largely due to people being concerned that they won't understand Aboriginal people, that they may say the wrong thing, or that they don't wish to appear ignorant.

If ethnic groups seek to use tourism to their advantage, it is important that they understand how tourists are likely to respond to the products they develop. The information provided by this study is useful for ethnic tourism groups looking to package their tourism products more appropriately. In particular, ethnic tourism attractions should seek to provide a number of alternative experiences in the one venue where visitors can choose what they do and see and what degree of personal contact they have with their hosts.

### For further information:

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