

## CHAPTER SIX

### GUIDING ECOTOURS

... [V]isitors are encouraged to look with interest on an enormous diversity of artifacts, cultures and systems of meaning. None are presumed to be superior and the main role of the 'expert' is to interpret them for the visitor. ... At the same time it is presumed that certain kinds of people have the prior knowledge, values or aesthetic insight to benefit from mobility (Urry 1995: 146).

This chapter examines the actions and interactions of the Savannah Guides as they conduct ecotours throughout the Gulf savanna region of northern Australia. The execution and the development of tours are integral to the viability of the guides' ecobusinesses and their claim to superlative standards of tour guiding. Ecotour groups differ enormously and can extend across age, class, nationality, education and capability ranges. The ecotourists connected to my study are older than 'average' tourists. The tactics the guides employ to deal with the enormous diversity within ecotourist cohorts is a combination of learnt skill and intrinsic good nature. At times, the guides must concentrate all their skills and natural prowess to handle and control recalcitrant tourists in a professional manner. This position of leader/interpreter/instructor is also relevant to the guides' perceptions of the tourists, and the tourists' displays of interest and affinity with the

environment and the guided tours. Some tourists simply do not appreciate being given informed knowledge.

The escalating interest in ecotourism by tourists, together with a growing general anxiety about environmental sensitivity, implies that ecotourists do not automatically constitute an alternative specialty market at all, but are frequently found within the ranks of conventional tourists. And, for all their 'so called' independent status, the ecotourists frequently do succumb to the framework of structured tours, perhaps as often as other travellers (Blamey 1995: 12). International tourists, looking for the 'ultimate' nature experience or 'adventure' tour, also form part of the tourist clientele.

Ecotourism attracts people who wish to interact with the environment and, in various ways, improve their perception, fascination and high regard for it. Ecotourism administrators attempt to supply an appropriate level of environmental and cultural explanation, generally by hiring suitably authorised guides and supplying information both before and throughout the tour (Allcock, Jones, Lane and Grant 1994: 17).

### **Ecotours**

The Savannah Guides, as a collective organisation, conduct numerous and varied ecotours throughout the tropical savanna region of northern Australia. These include mobile tours ranging from two or three hours duration up to, and including, tours that last for approximately twenty-one

days. There are also tours that are conducted around static sites. Many of these tours are conducted by single individuals, and others are conducted by groups of two, three or four guides. These tours also comprise various forms of tourist experience brought together under the single rubric of ecotourism. Some of the categories included under this banner are: cultural tourism, heritage tourism, adventure tourism, wilderness tourism, environmental tourism, experiential tourism, nature tourism and historical tourism.

Ecotourism opportunities and activities can be highly specialised and modest or grand scale tourism. The opportunities can include isolated tourism and both cultural and natural components. This variety underscores the fact that ecotourism is not the inverse of mass tourism, but a complimentary attribute of the tourism trade. This diversity assumes that conservation should not be seen as directly connected to ecotourism, but to all frameworks of tourism. Indeed, ecotourism can be an exemplar for tourism generally (Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories 1996).

The many ecotour operations examined in this dissertation are diverse and distinct in various ways. A number of the businesses are established, long-term administrations and others are only fledgling enterprises, just commencing their business operations. All have different reasons for entering the tourist market.

Well, [names tour business] has been operating, has been a company since 1988. In 1989, I started with new ideas. So, it's nearly seventeen years. We've been a tour operation since then. Before that, I worked in hospitality, in a hotel in Cairns and had nothing to do with tour operators. I was brought up in a place called Blackall. Blackall in western Queensland. I got tired of working like that, so I invented tourism in the outback, of the places that I liked. It had a sort of freedom about it. So, I came up with this idea (Guide 2, male, Tour Operator, Roving Interpreter).

Guide 7 relates how he came to be involved in the ecotourism business and, how Undara lava tubes became known as a sort after place for tourists to visit.

We had the Mount Surprise Hotel at the time, and I virtually kicked Undara off. I used to know those tubes upside down. I've been up and down them a thousand times. I used to take a few people through there. One day a bloke walked in and dropped a great photo on the counter of the entrance to Barkly's tube in there and said, "How do you get there?" I said, "You can't get in there, it's on someone's private property". And he said, Oh, I'm going to get there!" That night I rung [sic] Undara lava tubes, and I said, "What are you going to do about this now? You'll never stop them." I thought about for a while and, I thought, I might be in this you know, 'cause there's a fair bit of demand. Anyway, I went and bought myself a troop carrier. I got my licence. I used to con the tourists that were coming through, when they were at the pub. "I'm doing a trip tomorrow. Come with me and I'll show you around". Tell 'em all about it. I had some fantastic photos of the tubes, you know. I used to show 'em these, and away we went from there. I was kicking that along, and I was in the second or third year, or something. I used to take people out there on day trips and they used to love it (Guide 7, male, Freelance Guide, Savannah Guide).

These guides saw a need and developed their own unique tours of places that tourists were interested in going to see. They also developed their tours in and around locations they were familiar with, and which they knew they could successfully show to clients.

According to Collins (1996) the Undara lava tubes are a naturally occurring geological feature of enormous appeal to tourists in the Gulf Savanna area. The growth of a commercial tourist endeavour came from the necessity to regulate the stream of people wanting to visit the lava tubes (part of which was on a privately owned property) merely to regulate and lessen the impact to a significant, fragile, local attraction. The answer simply was to offer commercial tours and to combine them with a management plan (Collins 1996: 66).

Many of the tourist attractions within the framework of the organisation of Savannah Guides have unique natural and cultural heritage value. In some cases, no other comparable attraction exists worldwide. Some of the group became involved in tourism after having begun other business, such as cattle grazing, which led to an awareness and knowledge about the alternative viability of their properties, and many gradually became aware of the need to regulate and control visitor numbers to their sites. Regulatory codes of practice, including flow of tourist numbers and site maintenance, were implemented by concerned guides at their business sites, in an effort to retain pristine conditions, to control tourists and to ensure the preservation of the business enterprise.

All of the participants in this research contribute to, and conduct, differing types of ecotours in outback Australia. The timeframes of their tours and distances travelled vary greatly from business to business. The quality of the experience for tourists varies widely and all levels of comfort and needs are catered for. However, the Savannah Guides believe they exhibit outstanding levels of interpretive experience. This has become one of their marketing tools and their trademark.

The other stuff [shorter tours] ranges from two days to seven. Either camping, which in most part is the case, or accommodated in hotels and lodges. They're small groups, maximum twelve. A high level of interpretation. That's what they're about. Good quality guiding, that's what we focus on these days, because that's one of our market differentiating factors (Guide 33, male, Tour Operator, Savannah Guide).

Guide 12 runs fishing trips and sight seeing tours. He told me that he allows one and half hours for each sight seeing tour, but that he always allows four hours for the fishing trips. This is indicative of the flexibility that owner/operators of small tourism businesses must display in order to accommodate the tourists' wishes for the type of experience they want to undertake.

The guides from one Savannah Guide Site said that they have various short tours that include self-guided walks, a two hour Reserve tour and a guided walk that takes forty-five minutes. 'Short tours (lasting for a single day or less), might generate less involvement and expectation by the participants' (Duke and Persia 1994: 74).

Another group of guides, from a Savannah Guide Station, described various lengths of time for tours of the lava tubes on the property. These range from two hours and four hours respectively, to a full day (eight hours). They also offer a heritage and walking tour lasting three hours, a sunset wildlife tour lasting two hours and a one hour activity program comprising poetry, slides and a night walk.

Jamieson (1992) argues that pre-planned walking tours that supply more than historical milestones, and assist in introducing the guest to the sensitivity and feeling of the district are effective income earners for a particular region that can aid in providing an improved awareness of the 'sense of place' of a location. These tours can be self-guided or may call for the supervision of a guide (Jamieson 1992: 209).

Some of the ecotours have been developed with the idea of giving the tourists an insight into the fundamental workings and operations of a site. On certain tours this would also include historical accounts of the 'life and death' of the foregoing inhabitants.

The Mine tour varies considerably, but we get people to allow two hours. This includes time for morning or afternoon tea. The actual tour is normally one to one and a half hours long. We run the tour at 11am and 2pm daily except Mondays, or by demand, if it's quiet. The cemetery tour takes an hour and although we sometimes do it during the day, we try to encourage people to do it at dusk. It's done on demand (Guide 8, female, Tour Operator, Site Interpreter).

Guide 35 talked about the lengths of his different tours and related that he conducts two separate tours during the course of one day. He has a half day tour which incorporates climbing and walking around an escarpment, a boat cruise and lunch and the shorter tour, which is basically just the boat cruise.

Within the parameters of this research group, tours undertaken by tourists at a static site are more able to be controlled by the guides and are subject to time management restrictions. The enforcement of time controls enables the proprietors to offer various tours of differing time lengths, tour inclusions and prices.

There are certain restrictions that National Parks place upon the ecotour guides when they are leading a tour, according to Guide 6. '[T]he owners [of Undara Experience] had to work very closely with the state and national park service, and this sometimes resulted in strain' (Getz and Page 1997: 199). This means that each tour group is restricted to a maximum of twenty-two people at one time, in a lava tube.

Guiding is an essential part of many rural recreational experiences, either where the activity itself requires it (eg rafting) or as part of a management and conservation plan (eg controlling access and providing interpretation at Undara Lava Lodge) (Getz and Page 1997: 194).

Similarly, Mieczkowski (1995) states that in a study of environmental issues within tourism and recreation, the restriction of tourists to fragile areas is similar to those in a cave tour conducted in New Mexico:



The ecotour operators in the Lechuguilla cave in New Mexico insist tourists wear special sneakers into the cave so the delicate rock formations are not destroyed (Mieczkowski 1995: 480).

These restrictions can be seen as an attempt by governing bodies to preserve and maintain delicate and precious sites of both social and cultural significance. The guides are required to adhere to the restrictions and must do so, or their rights of passage into the area will be terminated.

Generally, the principal duty of the ecotour guide is to conduct the tour in a region strange to tourists, heed their safety, and direct their observation to numerous details, including the significance of the location. Still, the ecotour guide is proficient at doing this. After all, the guide is the one well versed with the area and the routines of the flora and fauna (Almagor 1985: 37).

### **The Dynamics and Diversity of Ecotourist Groups**

Each tour group has its own dynamics and own personality, much like an academic tutorial group or cohort of any level. Ecotourists have diverse reasons for joining guided ecotours. Guides have to respond to the tourists by the use of an intuitive grasp of psychology. Wisdom of a high order is also an inherent trait required by the guides. Ecotour guides must be able to judge each situation as it occurs and to react accordingly as the situation demands.

The Savannah Guides claim they are able to pinpoint differences in each cohort they take on tour. This ability comes from their years of experience in dealing with diverse and differing individuals they have met while undertaking their tour guiding duties.

Each group is quite different. One group that you take out today, are so interested in what you are doing that you fill the time easily, and you're, in fact, cutting out segments of the tour, because you know you're not going to get through everything. The next group you take out, although they are interested, might show so little interest, that you are working flat out all the time. And, you use every little component of the tour, to keep the time there [sic]. It's difficult tourism. It's a difficult facet of tourism, tour guiding (Guide 4, male, Tour Operator, Savannah Guide).

Superior education of tourists can be problematic for guides who do not have particularly academic backgrounds. Guide 18 has experienced difficulties in conducting tours with tourists.

... [T]here was one group. I had a group of young international lawyers. I thought it was going to be horrific. They were all movers and shakers. A couple of Americans were loud and, I thought, "This is going to be a test of a trip". At the end of the trip, after six days, they wrote five pages in my guest book. They called it a declaration. "For your ability to keep five lawyers in hand". I thought that was quite good. I don't know what I did, but obviously they liked it. The bad things, I try and learn from them. Learn the lesson and forget the incident. I've made a lot of good friends from my tours, people I'm still corresponding with (Guide 18, male, Employee, Savannah Guide).

These explanations highlight the fact that tour guiding is a difficult and emotionally draining profession, as noted in Chapter Four. The guides have to deal constantly with tourist's differing opinions, points of view and the

personal baggage they bring to the situation. This is a stressful component of the job, and one that is clearly not addressed in the literature on tour guides.

Geva and Goldman (1991: 183) argue that the guide is the one who resolves the dilemmas throughout the tour and moulds the actual way in which the tour develops. The guide's direction and continual communication with the group puts the interpreter in an important situation. This position is additionally made stronger by the guide's part as head of the travelling party. Cohen elaborates:

The guide is supposed to keep his [sic] party in good humour and in high morale through pleasant demeanour and occasionally jocular behaviour. The latter grows in importance in brief tours where there is little time for the party to integrate (Cohen 1985: 12-13).

Schmidt substantiates this further by stating that the tour guide is a significant medium in crowd cohesion and an inciter of friendliness. One prevailing mechanism at the guide's disposal is the employment of amusement. Even if the guide's attempts at humour do not deserve laughter, the group can consolidate against the guide through collective moans regarding the antics of the guide (Schmidt 1979: 457).

Guiding is not just about imparting knowledge, but involves the care of people involved in the tour. The experience of the tour sometimes depends on dealing with people on a personal level. Guide 31 told me that she enjoys every tour. She recalls one event in particular, when she was

guiding an entire family from Cairns, around the site where she works. An immediate rapport was established between the guide and the family. They were celebrating an elderly Aunt's birthday on the day. The Aunt was old and could hardly walk. The guide felt the love the family had for each other and felt she was included in that affection, on the day. The guide made a real connection with the people in the family and they told her about their lives. She recounts the story with emotion because, she told me, she really likes to listen to people and hear their stories and she felt guiding provided her with this opportunity, which also involved looking after people. She told me how much she enjoyed the tour that day and how she went home with a smile on her face. That particular family had made her feel worthwhile in the occupation of guiding. Her feelings in developing a connection with tourist clients also underlines the emotional response that can be elicited between the clients and the guide during an interpretive session (see Hochschild 1983).

In many instances, guides provide a service much like a confessor. For example, Guide 28 took a couple on a canoeing tour for six days. He said they were a really nice people. The couple had been married for three years and were having relationship difficulties. By day three of the trip, their childlike behaviour had begun to annoy the guide. They were not speaking to one another and were bickering about each other's lack of care and affectionate behaviour. He gave them some advice, which progressed into a

three hour marriage guidance session. Upon departure they wrote in the visitor's book thanking the guide for counselling them and for helping them to see reason. Some tourists feel they can confide in the guides, because they see them as understanding and empathetic individuals. In these cases, the guides present an impartial façade. Wisdom, intuition and knowledge of psychology are important characteristics for the guides to project in these moments of self-revelation by the tourists.

Emotional labour can also involve the discomfort of self-analysis. For instance, some tours are not always successful. Guide 27 has had moments of self-doubt during a tour. He believes it reflects a downfall in his skills as an interpreter.

I did have a negative experience from myself [sic]. Whereas, I sort of ran out of information half way through the tour. We ended up coming back through the northern side of the reserve, pretty much in silence. So, we talked about the people's local areas and stuff like that. Which was OK for them, but it really wasn't what we were there for (Guide 27, male, Employee, Site Interpreter).

Therefore, emotionally charged feelings are present in both the guides and the tourists during and after a guided tour. These can be brought about through the immediate and intense closeness with the location under scrutiny from the tour group.

Emotional labour is essential to the performance of interactive work in the service economy. It is work that involves constant interaction with

clients and customers. In this type of work, employers regularly try to control the emotions of their employees, while the employees endeavour to manage the reactions of their clients. Organisational mechanisms for the direction and monitoring of workers in service industries increases organisational power over a part of workers' identities which is generally considered beyond the sphere of employer control. Managerial power also extends outside the organisation by imposing administrative conditions. While employees and customers gain some advantage from the standardisation of service interactions, employers' influence on human personality and social interaction raises worrying moral questions (Leidner 1999).

According to Hochschild (1983), occupations that include controlled displays of emotion have three characteristics. First, they involve face-to-face and vocal contact with the public. Second, they make the worker produce either emotional feelings or reactions in the client. Third, they offer an opportunity for the employer to maintain power over the emotional actions of their employee. Exhibiting emotions requested by the employing organisation towards clients requires anticipation, exertion, preparation and amendment for circumstantial factors so as to freely exhibit emotions that workers may not necessarily feel in private (Morris and Feldman 1997).

However, emotional labour is certainly rewarding through interpretation for tourists and their reactions, and provides guides with the best source of validation. Guide 35 said that he obtains great satisfaction when his Savannah Guide Station receives a bus load of people, and everyone congratulates him and shakes his hand at the completion of the tour. They are showing their appreciation for the tour and the opportunity to see such an awe-inspiring, naturally occurring phenomenon. He also said that the tourists get a bit carried away with congratulating him, and that it happens a lot. He believes it has to do with the groups being overwhelmed by the site they are touring. Similarly, Ryan, Hughes and Chirgwin (2000) state that 'the experience of ecotourism lies in the intensity of interaction with the site' (Ryan, Hughes and Chirgwin 2000: 158). This reaction by the ecotourists is also highlighted by Howard (1998) who maintains:

... a person's relationship to an environment is both complex and difficult to understand. It has been frequently shown that emotion and feeling shape the way a person relates with the environment (Howard 1998: 67).

On many of the ecotours guides must deal with contrasting groups of tourists. Guide 32 recounts the polar oppositions he has encountered within tour groups he has guided.

Well, a good tourist experience is when you have a very small group, and they are really interested in the environment. Then, it's wonderful because the tour goes like that [snaps fingers]. Sometimes it's a real shame that you have to finish the tour. The bad side of it is, when you wonder why people even bothered to step out of their house. They just stand there like lumps on logs. They are not interested. You wonder why. I've found that both when I was doing

astronomy tours and the tours here, at Undara. There are just people like that (Guide 32, male, Employee, Site Interpreter).

Many interested people undertake tours mostly as an act of consumption; gourmands rather than gourmets. Some of them see tours and locales as places to be ticked off on a list. They can say they have seen this place or that place. They can brag to their friends about the places they have visited. It becomes a system of point scoring and does not involve an actual interest or connection to the site they are visiting. Other tourists seem to be able to travel with no goals, they are 'having a holiday' for its own sake and have no interest in nature or the environment. It is just 'there'.

Conversely, Guide 3 and Guide 8 have experienced the fact that tourists who make the effort to come to their site, because it is in such a remote location, are usually quite genuine in wanting to experience what they have to offer. They spend a lot of time with their visitors, both interpreting and guiding them around the site. This, they report, usually ensures satisfaction and, they add, their face-to-face experiences are good.

One of the good experiences I have had in the tourism industry is seeing the pleasure that people get when they're shown something and then helping them develop the skills necessary for discovering the environment themselves. I guess the opposite is true when people don't get anything out of the environment. Most people are receptive to what you are saying. I used to love listening to people tell me they saw nothing on their travels, usually because they drive at 120 kilometres per hour with the windows up, and then, showing them over a couple of hours what they have missed (Guide 10, male, Employee, Savannah Guide).



Some tourists want to commune with nature. Holloway (1981: 389) argues that, the term 'group emotion' can be employed to illustrate the circumstance in which a guide brings alive certain specific features or characteristics of a site. Occurrences such as these add substantially to the achievement of the guided journey. For example, tourists feel overawed and become very quiet and reflective during a tour to a place such as Cobbold Gorge. Fine and Haskell Speer (1985) believe that 'perhaps truly grand and awe inspiring sights demand less verbal elevation' (1985: 91). Guides must be sensitive to the need for silence at certain points, to allow the full emotional impact on the tourists.

In order to achieve diversity, guides need to expend a large investment in emotional labour. Some people choose tours as a means to escape emotional problems, if only temporarily. Guides must be sensitive to these emotional needs because, if the person is unhappy, they will be unable to receive full value from the tour. Some guides find this aspect of interpretive guided tours particularly fulfilling. For example, Guide 31 experienced this when she led the tour with the family and the elderly aunt.

The effect of emotional labour on customers and clients is significant - the emotional state is profound and intrinsic, rather than just a veneer. This type of service labour requires the guide to generate or curb particular feelings in order to maintain the external façade that brings about the

appropriate state of mind in others. This controlled generation of feelings calls for co-ordination of intellect and emotion, and occasionally it draws on an awareness that is considered as deep and integral to human character (Hochschild 1983).

### **Ecotourist Numbers and Nationalities**

The Savannah Guides take diverse and varied groups of ecotourists on their tours. They responded to questions about the numbers, age groups and nationalities of the tourists that visit them. The demographics of the tourists, based on the guides' perceptions was a salient issue to emerge from the data. Mostly, it appears, the ecotourists are middle-aged or older people (Diamantis 1999; Eagles and Cascagnette 1995; Pearce and Wilson 1995; Weaver and Lawton 2002: 278; Wight 1996). When I went out into the field to complete my fieldwork and undertake some of the ecotours offered by the various members of the organisation, my supervisor and I were the youngest people on the tours by at least fifteen years in each case.

As noted by Urry (1992), the escalation in the number of people with higher educational standards, with managerial and professional vocations, and who are in the later stages of life, are contributing factors to the increases in concern about the environment and in particular types of tourism. In fact, these issues are intensifying the appeal of both going to see and protecting the environment (Urry 1992: 9).

Older Australian people and self-drive Australians constitute large tourist numbers on the Savannah Guides' tours. This category of ecotourists makes up the majority of visitors to this particular region. Most of the tourists are in their sixties, retired and on their own experiential holiday.

The ages are predominantly older. Quite a few grey nomads going around the place. As for, [sic] in season, we've got predominantly Australians, again the grey nomads (Guide 32, male, Employee, Savannah Guide).

Guide 33 reports that the majority of ecotourists he encounters are early retirees and mainly domestic travellers. So, the main demographic group that he takes on tour are Australian, early retirees, empty nesters, grey nomads who do not wish to risk their own vehicle on rough terrain but still wish to experience remote areas. Guide 16 also adds that her tour has a wide range of people coming through the area; 'people in their prime', and older people.

Guide 4 talked about the tourists who are attracted to his business as being retired or semi-retired people travelling in their own vehicle, sometimes with a caravan. He is situated three hundred kilometres north of Mount Isa. Many southern Australians travel to northern Australia to escape from the cold climate in the south during the winter months. The guides perceive many of these tourists as the 'see Australia before you die' set.

We find our biggest percentage come from Queensland, then New South Wales, then Victoria, along the east coast. Mostly Australian

passengers, and they have a good time too (Guide 25, male, Employee, Site Interpreter).

Well, the nationalities are roughly, about one third Australians. Which is fairly high for a lot of these sort of places (Guide 29, male, Tour Operator, Site Interpreter).

The majority of Australian tourists are retirees or people who have taken a redundancy package, according to Guide 12. Guide 32 also reiterated that there are a lot of older Australians travelling, people of retirement age, fifty years of age or older.

Guide 39 remembers that, when she first started guiding, tourists were about ninety percent Australians. These were also elderly people, caravaners and independent travellers. She believes that the younger tourists used always to go to the beach, and places closer to the coast. However, throughout the years, she has witnessed a change in this distribution and although her place of employment still receives its regular quantities of ecotourists, the age range is now much younger and includes people aged mainly between twenty-five and forty. The numbers of Australian tourists who visit the lava tubes have decreased slightly and according to the guide, currently are at about seventy-five percent of the total number.

Empty nesters are a big market for us. We're still predominantly domestic, 'cause a lot of that is people who know the destinations better (Guide 34, male, Employee, Savannah Guide).

The newly introduced system of Australian taxation has seemingly affected the domestic ecotourism industry. Guide 29 was able to discuss a decline in tourist numbers due to higher prices since the introduction of the new taxation system.

This year, since the GST <sup>1</sup> has been introduced, we've had a bit of a lapse, and we're fairly quiet. We've got four people drove in today [sic]. No one for a couple of days, this time of year, is unheard of. Normally, we'd be full. And, I mean full. We'd be turning people away (Guide 29, male, Tour Operator, Site Interpreter).

The majority of Australian people wishing to undertake an interpretive, guided tour are mainly older people, travelling together as a couple. They have no current familial responsibilities, as their children have left home and they are also probably retired, or on long service leave. Many of these tourists want to be shown the outback regions of Australia, where tourists do not normally penetrate. For them, Australia can be seen as an adventure. It is one of the last frontiers to be conquered.

It is apparent that many international tourists come to Australia to undertake a unique ecotourism experience. Many of these international tourists travel to the outback to experience the Australian bush and the distinctiveness of the country. They embark on a journey of this type by choice and because they can be guided by an ecotour guide who represents the pinnacle of the

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<sup>1</sup> The GST (Goods and Services Tax) was introduced on 1 July 2000, in Australia, to replace the Wholesale Sales Tax (WST) and a range of inefficient State Taxes. The GST system is similar to the GST/VAT systems in New Zealand, South Africa and the UK.

interpretive tour guide occupation. Guide 1 informed me that the bulk of tourists her ecobusiness deals with are Europeans of differing age groups. She also said that many tourists are repeat customers who return to experience the location on other occasions. Japanese tourists also are keen to undertake these historic ecotours.

During our off-season [we receive] more international guests, and they are mostly Germans and Dutch. [Their] Age group is, of course, slightly lower [than domestic ecotourists] (Guide 32, male, Employee, Savannah Guide).

Guide 3 and Guide 8 who live 'on site' report more accurate age group figures for the tours.

We are really tiny at this stage. We only get eight hundred and fifty visitors per year. Because we don't have much of a budget for advertising and marketing, we attract mostly locals. The breakdown is as follows: fifty four percent locals (Far North Queensland); twenty-eight percent other parts of Australia; eighteen percent overseas (mostly English, Swiss, German and Italian); and, age groups: four percent less than ten years old; five percent eleven to nineteen years old; five percent in their twenties; eight percent in their thirties; twenty two percent in their forties; twenty one percent in their fifties; twenty three percent in their sixties; and, twelve percent in their seventies or older (Guide 8, female, Tour Operator, Site Interpreter).

Other guides also report that ecotourists from overseas make up much of their tourist traffic. Guide 12 explained that in the 'off season' (summer time in the Australian outback) there is a big influx of Europeans. This group includes travellers from Germany, Holland, Switzerland, Italy, Great Britain, the United States and New Zealand. Further, Guide 39 reports the same levels of ages and nationalities for the tours at the Savannah Guide Station

where she works. Guide 4 also said that some international tourists visit his site but that it is not a very big percentage at all. This, he related, was because his site is well off the normal tourist routes and away from the beaten track.

About one third, might be probably more than a third, Europeans. Our visitors are cut roughly into a third Americans and a third Europeans [the rest are Australians]. The American market is still, well, our whole market's increasing (Guide 29, male, Tour Operator, Site Interpreter).

As Crick (1994) points out, 'guides have a set of general conceptions about tourist motivation and elaborate national stereotypes' (Crick 1994: 164). For example, Guide 33 has taken Italian ecotourists to remote areas in the outback. The guide believes that Italian tourists are not knowledgeable about environmental issues and basic recycling and preservation procedures. This guide recounts a story where one Italian tourist threw a rock at a bird in a tree to make it move, so he could take a better photo. A different story also concerns another Italian tourist who wanted his guide to take him to see the owner of Kakadu so he could complain about the lack of animals there. The tourist wanted the owner to buy more animals.

Guide 33 also added that his ecobusiness gets a lot of Europeans and British travellers. In the case of the British, it is because the British Pound is strong compared to the Australian Dollar. The American tourists, he said, like their creature comforts, so the mobile interpretive tours with camping

included are not really conducive to their needs. The Japanese, he reports, are much the same as the Americans because they like to be comfortable too.

But, certainly some UK, New Zealand, European visitors and, increasingly, as we've introduced accommodated tours, North American visitors as well. The Asian market is really just day touring (Guide 34, male, Employee, Savannah Guide).

Likewise, other ecotour guides from a Savannah Guide Site report similar types of tourist groups who want to experience the bush and the Australian wilderness.

We've had middle-aged Dutch bird watchers here. We've had retired former wardens of nature reserves in England here. We've had Americans, middle aged, again. We've had young Europeans too, business people, professionals. We've actually had, not a lot, a few Japanese (Guide 27, male, Employee, Site Interpreter).

Guide 37 recounted that his tourists were mainly from France, Italy, Germany and Switzerland. His business also attracts tourists from Slovakia, Sweden, Finland and Croatia. Generally, he reported, the age group is in the older range; a lot of them are in the late fifties to early seventies age group. He added that he also interprets for another predominant age group that takes in the thirty-five to fifty year olds. Some of this group have children accompanying them on tour. But mainly, he told me, it is mostly the older end of the age spectrum.

Many of the international tourists who come to Australia searching for an authentic tourism experience are from the United Kingdom. Guide 30 has interpreted for a professor from Oxford, who wanted to travel and



experience something beyond the normal progression of tourist activity. He felt that the guide provided this experience. Guide 25 also talked specifically about the nationalities that frequent his tour operation.

Overseas visitors, a lot of British. The British love their trains and they are very engineering minded. I like having the British on the train, because they really appreciate it. You can see it in their eyes (Guide 25, male, Employee, Site Interpreter).

At the Savannah Guide Station where Guide 39 is employed, twenty-five percent of ecotourists are German, Dutch and Swiss people. There are also a few Americans. These make up the bulk of tourists who show great appreciation for Australia as a destination. There are also small numbers of Americans, Britons and a very few Japanese.

Another category of tourist who visits the outback and who is neglected in the literature on ecotourism is that of the disabled tourist. Guide 12 explains that he has had people on his tours who are almost incapable of walking. He has also had severely disabled tourists. For example, one of his clients wanted to experience the guided fishing tour. The man did not have any legs. He got out of his car and propelled himself onto the boat without the aid of a wheelchair or other device.

Guide 22 particularly enjoys working with disabled people. For example, on a day trip to the Daintree Rainforest he guided seven or eight mentally and physically disabled tourists. One of the ecotourists was in a

wheelchair. By the use of bars and swinging himself, the tourist was able to get into and out of the bus that carried the tourists. The guide has since had positive feedback from the tour company that employed him to take the disabled tourists on the tour. It is apparent that some of the guides do make special provision for disabled tourists. Generally, very few tour operators offer guided tours and accommodation or facilities for disabled tourists. It is difficult for the disabled to find tour operators who are willing to provide them with an experiential encounter.

In some cases illness or physical injuries can be accommodated by the guide to the mutual satisfaction of both participants. Guide 28 spoke about the ages and health status of many of his clients on his canoeing tour, but recounted one particular case of a woman crippled by arthritis. He felt strongly that he needed to give her extra attention to maximise her experience.

... But his wife, [names her], was more of a problem. She was younger, but she had bad arthritis. So, basically, I was towing her for four or five hours per day, swimming her through all the rapids. Yeah, sure it's more of an effort to tow someone down the river, that's not really relevant. What is relevant is that she needs to make the effort to do it herself, but she also needs to have relief when it becomes hard. Her experience is the important one, not mine. It's not my holiday (Guide 28, male, Tour Operator, Roving Interpreter).

Another example of guiding disabled tourists is also from Guide 22 who talks about interpreting the bush for a blind girl. She was able to touch and smell plants and flowers. The guide felt a real sense of achievement in being

able to interpret the flora and fauna for the blind tourist. Given the difficulties that these individuals face just making the journey to the destination, the interaction with the environment has an added amount of interpretive significance for both the ecotourists and the guides.

### **On 'Becoming' an Ecotourist**

There are many factors involved in being an ecotourist and travelling to a particular site. Many of the guides believe that some of the reasons include the idea that ecotourists are looking for particular things when they undertake a tour. Some of these include: easy adventure, remote areas, wilderness experiences, similarities to the brochure they have read, something different, word of mouth, recognition of good quality guiding services, professionalism, media promotion and the challenge and experience, in the beginning, of travelling long distances along dirt roads in the outback.

'Escape' is, in the context of the savanna experience, obviously an important incentive for undertaking a tourism experience. It could be argued that the notion of escape is at its highest among urban dwellers. The need to get away from the constraints of everyday living may be a reflection of personal circumstance and stress or, may be connected to feelings of alienation and disillusionment with western society in general (Blamey 1995: 115; Rojek 1993).

The participants in this research commented on why tourists came to their sites.

Possibly because they've heard about it from other tourists. Which, I believe, is a major telegraph amongst tourism, word of mouth. They've seen the ad, or other business houses in town will let them know I exist (Guide 12, male, Tour Operator, Site Interpreter).

Guide 35 also believes he attracts more tourists to his tours because ecotourism is recognised as part of his tourist product. A tourist train comes to the town in which his business is situated and, he told me that people ask for him and his business by name. He also explained that the ecotourists are looking for something different in a tour and that he will take them where they are unable to travel to by themselves.

Tourists want something that is removed from the norm. They want a unique tourist experience. This is why they come to Guide 10's site.

Tourists come to Undara to experience something different, i.e. the lava tubes, turn of the century railway carriages or just experience the bush, with a bit of comfort (Guide 10, male, Employee, Savannah Guide).

Tourists engage in this guide's tours for soft adventure as well as for a learning experience and because of the good reputation of his ecotourism company. Guide 9 said that tourists come to Kingfisher Bay Resort and Village, where he has been seconded from the savannas region, to experience 'ecotourism' and to visit the internationally acclaimed Fraser Island. As well

as being a well-known nature-based destination, Fraser Island is a World Heritage Site, which adds to its marketability as a destination – especially to the European market (Muhlhauser and Peace 2001).

Similarly, Guide 31 related the reasons that ecotourists come to her particular ecotourist site.

Tourists come to [names site] because they are looking for a different experience than the Reef and the Rainforest. They are looking for a getaway from the main tourism scenes of Cairns, something more original, something real (Guide 31, female, Employee, Savannah Guide).

Guide 19 believes people are attracted to certain destinations by virtue of the naturally occurring landscapes and remote locations.

Basically, [the tourists come here] because it's a natural wonder. It hasn't been changed it's not a sort of big enterprise and many people like that. Like the closeness, there's no big resort, and everybody stays, and all of that. It's just a little organisation. A lot of them hear by word of mouth, by TV shows, whatever. We get a lot of buses that connect with the Savannahlander train. But, apart from that, it's all drive in people (Guide 19, female, Employee, Site Interpreter).

Guide 30 suggests that the tourists come to experience his tour because it is only one of a list of places to see and to be experienced.

It depends on the person. Some of them come to tick off check points. I've been to Kakadu; I've been to Ayers Rock. They don't really care. So, it's as long as a piece of string, why people come (Guide 30, male, Tour Operator, Roving Interpreter).

'Word of mouth' is one of the reasons that tourists want to experience the guide's sites and tours. A lot of the ecotourists drive themselves to Cobbold

Gorge. These tourists make up approximately sixty or seventy percent of the 'drive in' traffic that is received there. Most of the tourists are looking for an out-of-the way, quiet, enjoyable bush holiday. When they arrive at the site, they usually end up spending twice the amount of time there that they had initially planned on. They camp there and have their own fireplace and do a bush trip and some bush walking and really enjoy the experience. Word of mouth thus, works well for this ecoenterprise, as it receives a constant stream of truly interested people.

Many tourists came to out-of-the way places to experience the bush and to see the wildlife. They have a need for an informed explanation of the Australian bush and, clearly believe the best way to achieve this aim is to experience a guided tour.

They come to see wildlife. They come to see the bush, within an hour of Cairns. They like the idea that there will be a couple of site guides on the tour. And, I think, they also get a bonus in the fact that we are a non-profit conservation organisation. Not just making money out of them (Guide 16, female, Tour Operator, Site Interpreter).

There are a few reasons ... It's typically Australian; it's in the bush. It's peaceful and crowd free. They are interested in history or mining, they are looking for a unique, personalised experience, they are interested in gold. Thirty-five percent of our visitors come as a result of word of mouth (Guide 8, female, Tour Operator, Site Interpreter).

Clearly, there are connections within tourists' gratification and enjoyment of the bush surroundings and the freedom of camping and bush walking. Word of mouth is a widespread mechanism for the attraction of ecotourists

to the sites of Savannah Guide businesses. The constant flow of informed tourists equipped with information about the ecosite results in the security of a destination's tourist trade (Blamey 1995: 4; Gurung, Simmons and Devlin 1996: 113).

With the advent of ecotravel, many individuals have acquired the ability to visit the countryside, and to achieve the type of understanding that allows them to know what comprises a pristine location, what air pollution levels should be, what clean water looks like, and how an environment should be aesthetically pleasing. However, although leisure, travel and tourism have contributed to the development of conservation awareness, tourism has also exacerbated the damage to the environment. So many tourists damage sites by pollution, by waste, by 'souveniring' site artifacts and by the impact of too many tourists (Urry 1995: 225).

The loss of biodiversity and habitat are frequently mentioned by the guides.

This is going to be a thing of the future, something like this. Because you are going to have within these confines, this reserve is a sanctuary. Out in the outer perimeter is basically savanna forest, the wetlands, the birdlife, the animals, everything. The way the world's going, to me, maybe your grandchildren will only see an animal or a bird in something like this. I like the bush, the peace and quiet. I like to be out here on my own. Why do people come here? Because it's the closest thing they can get to the bush (Guide 13, female, Employee, Site Interpreter).

Well, people in general, are becoming more aware of the environment, and they are starting to realise that if they don't see it now, they probably never will. As David Bellamy said the other day, "The things that were familiar to us as kids are gone now". Most of it. You go to places where there was bush, and now there's [sic] housing developments. So, they want to see that and they want to get their feet in the mud. Well, most of them do [laughter]. They want to see wild birds and wild animals close up. And, this is the perfect way to do that (Guide 27, male, Employee, Site Interpreter).

Ecotourism involves appreciating and learning about the wilderness in a non-damaging manner. It also involves the escalation of a tourist industry that is competitive internationally and firmly based on supposedly responsible management practices. Ecotourism can be perceived as both an important specialist market and a means for the larger tourist industry to develop on an ecologically sustainable foundation. The principles of ecotourism could help Australia to implement a long-term sustainable tourist industry creating employment and monetary gain while simultaneously protecting the country's environmental assets - its well preserved natural ecosystem (Hall 1991: 288).

However, despite an increased ecoconsciousness in the general population, many guides commented on tourists' poor behaviour in the bush. These behaviours included people's lack of knowledge and concern for the environment which, considering they have entered into a short term association with an ecotour guide to be conducted around an environmentally sensitive site or on a tour, appears to be somewhat at odds with the reasons they would have chosen to undertake such an experience in



the first place. These type of anomalies encountered in the group behaviour of the tourists by the guides, leaves them wondering whether or not to disclose certain information to the tourists and, how the tourists will react to it.

... I've had people on tour and you think that they are sufficiently interested in things like, for example, Aboriginal habitation. When you start to point out the stone chips scattered around, and stuff like that, people want to start souveniring stone chips and so on. Then you feel as if you'd have been better off not mentioning them. Here you are endeavouring to communicate with them, and endeavouring to educate them and then it's difficult to police a situation where they are wanting to souvenir (Guide 14, male, Tour Operator, Savannah Guide).

Guide 33 is also concerned about how ecotourists regard and treat the environment. He believes that many of them just do not understand how valuable and fragile the environment really is.

[There was] a party that was up in a remote gorge in Kakadu, and the purpose of spending that day, out there, on foot, as part of a seven day trip, is to get at one with nature and to experience the peace and tranquility of the place and the pristine nature of it all. We had been doing that most of the day, and it was time to leave. We got up, and threw our packs on, and started to walk away, and the assistant said to this Italian fellow, "Oh, your cigarette packet's over there. You've left it on the rock over there". He said, "No problem. It's empty". That guy had bought a tour of this type. So, he's interested in nature and the environment, but he just didn't have the savvy (Guide 33, male, Tour Operator, Savannah Guide).

In ecotourism, the tour facilitator must also be accountable for preserving the environment, by coercing guests to act in an environmentally accountable manner throughout the tour, and by portraying the environment in such a

way as to encourage long term opinion and performance modification (Weiler and Davis 1993: 97).

### PLATE 6.1

#### Artifacts in One of the Interpretive Ecotour Sessions



Sexism is another facet of tour guiding that guides must deal with. Guide 19 described a case where one of the male ecotourists she guided on a tour was openly rude to her. He did not appreciate the fact that a woman was guiding him on a tour. Apparently, he was quite vocal about it for the entire tour. The guide called it 'gender bias'. She felt quite degraded and felt it was difficult to not retaliate to this person's derogatory comments. However, she was able to restrain herself. She also felt that she did not have to say anything to this man as all the other people on the tour made it obvious that they were upset with him for being so sexist. The guide took consolation in the fact that he would be leaving after the tour was completed. However,

she felt that he made the tour miserable for everyone else. That was the worst part for her.

### PLATE 6.2

#### A Female Savannah Guide



Traditionally females have been identified with conforming roles, moral restraints, and more conservative lifestyles, all of which tend to promote compliance. However, this postulation may be misleading in today's Western societies for the roles of women are constantly changing as more and more of them enter the labour force (Sirakaya 1997: 942).

Guide 22 was also aware of the differences of individuals within the tours he guided. This brought about a feeling of disappointment in him and, he was considering redesigning his entire ecotour program.

In fact, I had two [bad ecotourist experiences] this year. They were just very negative people who should have known better. Unfortunately, in Australia, there's a group of tourists who have been there, done that, they've seen it all. It doesn't matter what you try to present to them; they've always seen something better. [These were] followed by a couple of really good tours. But the interesting part was, that the people on those tours were interested in every little thing. They were more experienced, more travelled than the ones before. So, they had more right to say, "Been there, done that, I'm not interested". But, they didn't, they were interested in every little thing. They went away stoked up by the trip. They really had a ball. Whereas, the other people, it wouldn't matter what you did. It doesn't matter. It's hard work. You tend to lose confidence in your own thing (Guide 22, male, Tour Operator, Roving Interpreter).

Many of the guides participating in this research project expressed feelings about some of the ecotourists who should not be travelling and who probably should not be tourists at all. Many of these incidents relate to tourists not being interested in what they are being shown, or just the fact that many people are ignorant both of the bush and what travelling actually involves.

Guide 7 spoke about the instances of unco-operative tourists. He also explains how he handles the situation.

You always run into the bloody pain in the arse, but you bite your tongue. You've just got to realise that they are a cross section of the public. You can get some nasty customers. I think, if you can handle all different types, you can be very brazen with them. A lot of that comes by just worldly knowledge (Guide 7, male, Freelance Guide, Savannah Guide).

Pampered by city living, tourists have unrealistic expectations of ecotourism experiences when they want to go into the outback and go camping, but they

will not accept the outback as it is and want five star accommodation. A case in point here was a group of tourists from the National Trust who thought that the Croydon Hotel was too old to spend the night there. It is one hundred years old.

There are also a number of external problems faced by guides leading tourists. Some of these involve illness or death which interferes with the trip. Guide 9 frequently put the well being of his tour groups before his own welfare.

My worst experiences include compromising my personal and professional values for the well being of a tour, eg. vehicle breakdowns, unexpected natural events (storms and floods), and unexpected operational events (such as having guests booked on transfers being unloaded for whatever reason). Injury, loss (as in a guest becoming lost), or death of a guest visiting the resort or on tour (Guide 9, male, Employee, Savannah Guide).

Ecotour guides must deal with rude, uninformed or arrogant tourists daily. This is an integral part of their job. Tourists often put themselves and their tour party at risk by ignorance of simple bush protocols or by undertaking dangerous activities. Stupidity and unfamiliarity with safety rules may be excused, but rudeness and placing co-tourists at risk may not. The guides try to curtail ecotourists effervescence at exciting new spectacles but sometimes this is not possible. Tourists do tend to get carried away at times.

## **Conclusion**

Ecotourism has come to be known by various other names connected with the tourism industry. It is also seen in some spheres as a totally separate form of tourism, not allied with the mainstream product at all. Different forms of tourism that fall under the rubric of ecotourism have created a marketing 'hook' for the owners and operators of tourism businesses within this sector of the trade.

Ecotours are not all necessarily 'nature' based. Many of the excursions included in this study and within the researched organisation provide tours that are based on cultural and heritage sites. Cultural and heritage based sites serve to highlight the fact that ecotourism and ecotours can, and do, form part of the 'ordinary' side of the tourist industry. And, like their mainstream counterparts, the businesses we are concerned with here offer varying lengths of tour times and itineraries.

The dynamics of ecotour groups present a challenge to even the most astute of tour guides. Even if their clients are interested in what they have to recount, a high degree of emotional labour is involved. Guiding is exhausting and passionate work. Many of the guides realised they were using emotional labour, but could only appreciate the fact in terms of 'interpreting' for the tourists.

The majority of ecotourists in Australia are older, retired individuals and couples. Many are international; mainly from the USA and Europe. Some are travelling to see parts of Australia they have never experienced before. There are very few Japanese tourists who visit ecotour sites. This is due to lack of time and the vast distances they need to cover. The educational level of ecotourists also appears to be high, in most cases, tertiary level. In other words, ecotourists connected to this study are older, well educated, looking for an experience where they can encounter nature, may be from overseas and, in some cases, may have a disability. These people all have the time and the economic assets to be able to indulge themselves in these pastimes.

The notion of escape is one of the reasons tourists wish to travel in the outback. They need to get away. 'Word of mouth' also has a positive effect for both the ecotourists and the ecoenterprises. Many people return a number of times to the one place, as do their friends and families. Clearly, they believe they are getting an experience worth repeating more than once. Perhaps, they believe, they are communing with nature.

The behaviour of some of the tourists does not always conform to the standards expected by the guides. Even though tourists come to experience an environmentally significant place or tour, they are not always conscious of reasons for adhering to rules to protect the environment. Many are ignorant

of the fragility of many locations and often add to degradation of an area. Tourists health, ignorance and rudeness also contributed to the guides' negative feelings of them. But, as the majority of tourists are more interested in the experiences on offer rather than their own importance, the guides only infrequently have a difficult tour to direct.

Interestingly, even though the guides in this study refer to their businesses and tours as ecotourism, they refer to the tourists as tourists, and **not** as ecotourists.