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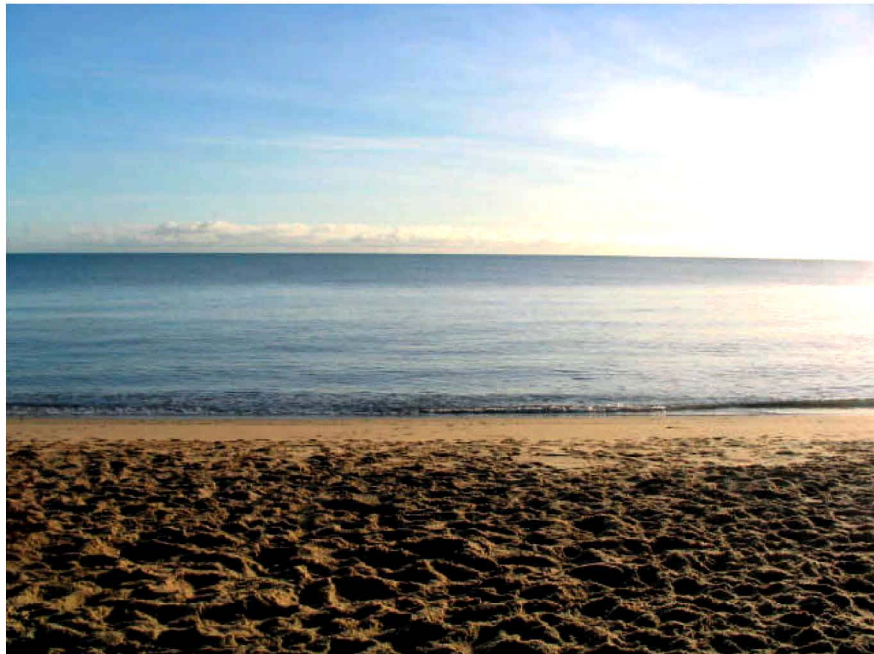


# Beach Images: Meaning, Measurement and Management

Thesis submitted by

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B. Admin (Tourism)



In September 2005

For the degree of  
**Doctor of Philosophy**

In the School of Business  
James Cook University  
Cairns

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## ABSTRACT

The beach is a tourism phenomenon. Images of beaches are prolific in tourism literature, and have existed throughout the ages. The literature review in this thesis documents these historic and contemporary images. Yet, despite their significance, research on beach images is scarce. An opportunity to add to the tourism literature was identified from this research review. Consequently, the theme for this thesis is – the meaning, measurement and management of beach images. Three studies were structured on the basis of these three particular elements of beach images. The first study focused on the physical characteristics of beach images and the meaning derived from these physical elements. International visitors representing four global culture groups – North America (n = 78) , Asia (n = 88), Europe (n = 108) and the United Kingdom (n = 143) – were asked to consider and sketch their favourite beach. The beach sketches obtained were predominantly of coastal, cove-like beaches, dominated by natural attributes. The spatial-geographic features included zones consistent with previous beach research but with emphasis on the shoreland (27.4%), beach (31.3%) and shallow water (30.0%). The culture groups differed in terms of their emphasis on attributes of their images. More specifically, the Asian visitors showed strong preferences for natural attributes such as mountains (n = 28) and all types of trees (n = 51), and two particular culture attributes – boats (n = 20) and umbrellas (n = 16), all of which were emphasised by their artistic rendering that resembled their culture's art and immediate surroundings. The United Kingdom showed preferences for the physical and spatial-geographic elements endemic to their beaches, such as

bay/cove (n = 49), rocks (n = 49), and cliffs (n = 17). The beach sketch maps, while useful for examining the physical elements, were limited in identifying the social, psychological and physiological characteristics of beach images.

Consequently, the second study – working with the same four culture groups – aimed to capture the cognitive, affective and conative characteristics, by using a questionnaire with largely open-ended questions. The level of familiarity that tourists had of their beaches was strong, with 84% of respondents having actually visited their favourite beach, and 44% having spent more than two days there. These results strengthened the forthcoming and more detailed questions in the study, since the characteristics of the beach images being described were of real beaches rather than ‘idealistic’ beaches. The subsequent image characteristics represented largely under-developed beaches (64.3%), with mainly nature attributes dominated by palm trees (17.1%), white sand (32.2%), clean/clear (25.7%) and blue water (20.0%). New dimensions were found – representing landscape-scenery and feelings-emotions. The feelings-emotions dimension represented 73.4% of the total culture attributes of favourite beaches described by respondents. Variations were found in the four culture groups. This implied that not one particular type of beach was prevalent to all culture groups, and, as such not all beach images are the same for these groups. The results pointed to the existence of various sub-groups and idiosyncratic beach images in all culture groups.

The final study examined images held by management and marketing organisations from five popular Australian beach tourism destinations located in the state of Queensland. The results indicated that each organisation selected and valued only the nature and culture attributes existing at their particular beach. Management problems/issues were directed primarily at maintaining the natural attributes of the beach. Socio-cultural management challenges were associated with the more developed beaches. The general level of agreement found between the promotional images, and to some extent, visitors' images, indicates that successful management requires an understanding of images from all of these points of view.

The research has provided new information on the images of beaches. In particular, the research revealed that combining measurement techniques could result in better understanding of images. The unique representations found in the different culture groups' images supports the concept of "imageability" of the beach. In other words, the beach produces a distinct and identifiable image in the minds of tourists. Consequently, the beach has a particular 'meaning' to tourists. It is culture that creates the meaning of the beach, but it is supplemented by the natural, social and psychological factors also found in beach images. The evidence from all three studies idealises the representation of the 'touristic paradise' as an organising framework that has permeated the tourist culture image of the beach. More over, evidence of this representation is presented in the feeling or emotion associated with beach images. Consequently, measurement of beach images requires attention to a combination of natural, physical,



psychological and socio-cultural characteristics and their respective measurement techniques.

It has been suggested that future images are built on past and present images, and that this is a dynamic and continuing process. Consequently, future beach image research is recommended in order to understand the current process of re-engineering and re-inventing the images of beaches. In particular, research using different types of beaches in varied locations, as well as different beach and tourist types can be suggested. The ways in which beaches are presented, images and experiences are important to existing and future tourism globally, and the framework presented in this thesis may be a contribution to these assessments and meanings.

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