SPECIALIST ACCOMMODATION OPERATIONS IN NORTH QUEENSLAND: ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT, ENVIRONMENTAL ATTITUDES AND ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY

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DECLARATION ON ETHICS

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted within the guidelines for research ethics outlines in the National Statement on Ethics Conduct in Research Involving Human (1999), the Joint NHMRC/AVCC Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice (1997), the James Cook University Policy on Experimentation Ethics. Standard Practices and Guidelines (2001), and the James Cook University Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice (2001). The proposed research methodology received clearance from the James Cook University Experimentation Ethics Review Committee (approval number H1704).

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ABSTRACT

Specialist accommodation operations are a rapidly expanding nature-based accommodation sector contributing to the expansion of tourism in regional and rural areas near protected areas in Australia. Specialist accommodation operations are characterised by being owner-operated accommodation styles having a small room capacity, a high host-guest interaction, the location, features or services of the establishment provide a special opportunity for guests, and there are special activities offered to guests. The styles of accommodation included in the study were bed and breakfasts, farm stays, cabins, cottages, houseboats, licensed public hotels, backpacker hostels, ecolodges, retreats and spas, and guest houses.

This thesis examines the implementation of environmental management practices and the environmental attitudes held by the owners of specialist accommodation establishments neighbouring or located within 50 kilometres of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area in North Queensland. The study provides an understanding of how specialist accommodation operators located near protected areas contribute to the ecological sustainability of the natural environment.

A total of 101 specialist accommodation operators located on the Atherton Tablelands (n=50), in the Daintree region (n=32) and the Mission Beach region (n=19), completed a purposely designed postal survey investigating the characteristics of the accommodation business, demographic information about the owner-operators, perceptions of environmental certification and codes-of-conduct, the implementation of 43 environmental management practices for water conservation, energy conservation, liquid and solid waste management, sustainable design and other sustainable practices, and the environmental attitudes of the owner-operators were measured with the New Ecological Paradigm (NEP) (Dunlap, Mertig, O'Leary & Jones, 2000). Semi-structured interviews were held with 30 of the specialist accommodation operators in the sample, seven local Shire Council town planners and the Wet Tropics Management Authority. A brief one-page survey emailed or posted to tourism and accommodation associations asking of environmental policies and codes for members was returned by 14 associations.
All of the specialist accommodation operators surveyed are located within 50 kilometres of a protected area and 30.0% are neighbouring a protected area, mostly the WTWHA. Bed and breakfasts, cabins, cottages and caravan parks made up more than 60.0% of the sample. The mean number of rooms for an establishment is 5.8. Specialist accommodation operators are predominantly husband and wife teams aged over 40 years with tertiary or trade qualifications. More than 70.0% of these people have operated their specialist accommodation for less than eight years. The most dominant reason for operating a specialist accommodation is for a change of lifestyle. Approximately 95.0% of the operators are members of a tourism or accommodation association.

Environmental management practices readily adopted by specialist accommodation operations are dual flush toilets, purchasing local goods and services, bulk purchasing practices, the use of bio-degradable cleaning products, the use of ceiling fans not air conditioning, and the sustainable design techniques of maximizing natural ventilation and natural light, and their landscaping reflecting the natural environment. The implementation of alternative sustainable environmental management practices using wind, solar or water are minimal. Almost all of the operators had a personal concern for the environment with more than 50.0% of operators stating this was their reason for voluntarily adopting an environmental code-of-conduct; others followed a code for better environmental management. The achievement of environmental certification with Ecotourism Australia, Green Globe or AAA Tourism Green STARS is minor with most specialist accommodation operators believing certification is beneficial to their business or will benefit their marketing activities.

The New Ecological Paradigm showed operators are generally pro-environmental holding an ecological worldview to varying degrees. Three factor groups were found to exist – those who co-exist with nature, anthropocentrics and pro-environmentalists. Correlates of environmental concern indicators were found to be either non-existent, statistically insignificant or empirically weak. To understand the correlation between an owner-operator's environmental attitudes and an individual’s intention to behave environmentally,
the Framework of Environmental Behaviour recognises situational, psychological and demographic factors which affect an individual’s environmental behaviour intention. Barriers to implementing environmental management techniques included location, climate, knowledge, cost, time and the style of specialist accommodation.

Regulatory bodies interacting with the specialist accommodation sector in this study were the seven local Shire councils of Atherton, Mareeba, Eacham, Herberton, Douglas, Johnstone and Cardwell, the Wet Tropics Management Authority and 14 tourism and accommodation associations. In essence, research of the regulatory agencies focused on the existence of environmental policies, codes-of-conduct and guidelines for the specialist accommodation operators located near protected areas. Shire council planning schemes have the opportunity to provide advice on environmental best practice to new development applications assessed under recent relevant codes. There is no mechanism to encourage environmental best practice management to existing specialist accommodation operations. The Wet Tropics Management Authority recognises a cooperative approach between stakeholders of the Wet Tropics is imperative for the future sustainability of this world heritage listed bioregion. The benefits of working with the community have been previously recognised by WTMA with the encouragement of a landholders/ neighbours liaison group. WTMA also encourage and promote voluntary conservation agreements with private landowners within the Wet Tropics region particularly where cassowary habitat corridors are located. The most dominant purpose of tourism and accommodation associations is collective marketing. Environmental codes-of-conduct, recommendations for environmental best practice or environmental awards to encourage best practice techniques for their members is minimal.

This discussion of the study findings has provided further support to the proposition that specialist accommodation operations are more conscious of, and compatible with, the principles of ecologically sustainable tourism than traditional accommodation (Morrison et al., 1996). A personal concern for the environment was apparent and widespread. The majority of specialist accommodation operators are aware of the importance of their
environmental actions and the consequences of improper environmental management. There are internal and external factors impeding the implementation of some environmental management practices.

This study has provided an initial understanding of the specialist accommodation sector and their contribution to the future preservation of protected areas. Knowledge transfer is imperative for the future ecological sustainability of tourism operations located near or neighbouring protected areas in North Queensland. The results have proven specialist accommodation owner-operators are contributing to the protection and management of protected areas with ecological significance through a personal concern for the environment, the implementation of sustainable environmental management practices and principles, and guest education initiatives, all to the best of their knowledge and abilities.
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