‘PROTECTORS AND INTERPRETERS OF THE OUTBACK’

A STUDY OF THE EMERGING OCCUPATION OF THE SAVANNAH GUIDE

By

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December 2003
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For the undertaking of this thesis I received financial support from the Centre for the Sustainable Development of Tropical Savannas (TS-CRC) in the form of a PhD scholarship. I also received from them a scholarship extension and operational budgetary funding. *Australian Geographic* also provided me with additional monetary support for this project.

Dr Rosemary Dunn, from the Department of English, in the School of Humanities, James Cook University, proof read my entire thesis and offered suggestions for both structural and grammatical changes.

The Graduate Research Office, James Cook University also provided me with a PhD Completion Scholarship.
ETHICS DECLARATION

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted within the guidelines for research ethics outlined in the National Statement on Ethics Conduct in Research Involving Human Subjects (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 H969).

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the emergence of the occupation of the ecotour guide as part of an expanding service economy. Qualitative methods, using participant observation and open ended, in-depth interviewing techniques, were used for the generation of insights and theory from the data.

From a sociological perspective, it is apparent that these tour guides provide an informed, interpretive guided ecotourism experience in the Australian outback. Their interpretive ‘facts’ are acquired from life experience in the bush. They are workers in an industry that, in some instances, offers little reward or return for extreme working conditions.

This study explores salient issues related to the perceived professionalisation of a collective group of tourism business individuals called Savannah Guides. The guides’ philosophy is based on a collective sense of identity and recognition as an exclusive ecotourism organisation. This has been used as a means of positioning themselves in the competitive ecotourism market. Exclusivity and elitism are practiced by the guides to exclude individuals who do not conform to their organisational standards and codes of conduct. The organisation has regimented levels of attainment and can be considered as quasi-militaristic in its orientation. The guides have implemented various forms of assessment and training that serve as a measurement of competency and uniformity.

The guides present themselves to the public mainly through their individual tourism businesses. Emotional labour is one of the ways they interact with the public on their tours. They incorporate the emotional side of their interpretive work into their tourist products and tours, through the ways they impart both education and knowledge to the tourists. Their educative and cultural expertise is also informed by usage of emotional labour.

Concern for, and an extensive knowledge of the environment, are also components of their specialised form of guiding. Many of the guides see work in the ecotourism industry as a form of alternative employment, and as an option to the decline in rural employment. Others perceive a niche for this type of tourism and exploit the opportunity. This thesis details the guides’ way of life as individuals within the Savannah Guides organisation and the ecotourist industry.
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