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B.Sc. Hon. (Geography)

**An Analysis of the Winter Movement of Grey Nomads to Northern Australia:  
Planning for Increase Senior Visitation**

Doctor of Philosophy

James Cook University  
School of Earth and Environment Science

14<sup>th</sup> February 2008

Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Science,  
Engineering and Information Technology of James Cook University.

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## THE GREY NOMADS

*They have kissed grandchildren fondly and shaken workmates  
hands,  
Put their furniture in storage after months of making plans,  
Farewelled the familiar to obey their hearts commands,  
New Age overlanders in cars and caravans.*

*A siren song has called them, ancient spirit of this land,  
Rainforest, river, mountain, silver saltbush, rocks, red sand,  
Soft voice of distant Dreamtime bids them see and  
understand,  
No winter, always summer in a wandering caravan.*

*They have learned more of each other since this long journey  
began,  
Discussion flowing freely over sink and frying pan,  
Life is meant for living, they'll enjoy it while they can,  
Time no longer rules them - their home a caravan.*

*A postcard from the Alice, photos, smiling tanned,  
They won't be home for Christmas as previously planned,  
The road rises before them, a mesmerising strand,  
Grey nomads follow rainbows in dusty caravans.*

(Anonymous)

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**Statement on the Contribution of Others Including Financial and Editorial Help**

The research received ethical clearance from the James Cook University's Ethics Review Committee (Approval Number: H1903). A copy of this approval is included as Appendix A. 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 Humans, the Joint NHMRC/AVCC Statement and guidelines on Research Practice, the James Cook University Policy on Experimentation Ethics, Standard Practices and Guidelines, and the James Cook University Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice.

### **Abstract**

Australia has an ageing population. The majority of Australia's senior population are healthier and more financially secure than past aged generations. Furthermore, never before in Australia's modern history have so many senior citizens had the opportunity and the ability to move freely across Australia with relative ease. Each year, tens of thousands of retired Australians leave their permanent residence with the onset of winter and relocate to destinations in northern Australia. These mobile retirees are better known as grey nomads, and are a valuable niche group for the Australia's self-drive tourism market.

In the population geography literature, much has been written regarding the mobility of retirees in developed countries. Most of the analysis on Australia's senior mobility has focused on aspects of permanent movement, the so-called 'sea change' phenomenon. Research into the temporary movement of seniors, moving from a cold climate to warmer environment has focused primarily on the North American snowbird population. Recently, however, some attention has been given to researching the seasonal winter movements of retirees in Australia. The majority of studies examined grey nomads from a tourism prospective, generally as a segment within the self-drive and/or grey tourism markets. A few population geography studies have focused on motivation to travel and demographic characteristics, identifying differences between grey nomads and the snowbird population or differences between permanently retired residents, residing at the same destinations visited by grey nomads. No research has been undertaken examining grey nomad mobility, especially in the Northern Territory and Western Australia. Furthermore, most studies have examined grey nomads within a caravan park setting, omitting those grey nomads who camp, and has treated them as a homogenous population. Research by Mings (1997) identified that grey nomads are very individualistic; hence, this high level of individualism would lead to the assumption that grey nomads are not a homogeneous population.

The aim of this project was to identify if grey nomads were a homogenous population and to examine their mobility and factors influencing their movement patterns. Results from this study concluded that grey nomads are not a homogenous population in relation to mobility and destination choice. Factors such as number of past trips undertaken, past visits to a particular place, age, vehicle, economic and health status, activities undertaken whilst travelling, and time in retirement all influenced the level of a grey nomad's mobility and the destinations they choose to visit. Rarely will one factor influence a grey nomad's mobility; generally, numerous factors will contribute. Therefore, grey nomads can be divided into six sub-populations based on varying mobility, socio-economic/demographic characteristics and other factors such as the level of social interaction with other grey nomads. Furthermore, a longitudinal typology also exists identifying a change in a grey nomad's movement and choice of destination throughout their grey nomadic lifespan. In addition, an examination of the highway and road networks grey nomads used provided information on the movement patterns of grey nomads from separate states and territories. Results presented in this thesis will aid planners in their efforts to provide sufficient services and infrastructure at destinations catering to seasonal influxes of grey nomad visitors.

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SC  
14<sup>th</sup> February 2008

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