PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE:
A Profile of Australian Tourist Attractions

Ph.D. Thesis submitted by

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in the School of Business
James Cook University
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It is sometimes difficult to anticipate the challenges that life throws at us. When I embarked on my thesis journey I was single and effectively unemployed. I now have a lovely wife who has supported me through the many hours spent in front of the computer. Thank you Kym for your patience and understanding – I hope you can forgive the strains that this work has placed on much of our time together.

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ABSTRACT

Tourist attractions are frequently described as the key components of a destination’s tourism industry, yet they are under-researched and poorly understood. This thesis was designed to assist tourism researchers, and potentially tourism operators, to think about the future of tourist attractions in Australia, with particular reference to planning and management. The thesis considered three areas of literature. Chapter 1 began with an overview of the definitions, classifications and current knowledge about tourist ‘attractions. The review continued with a broad appraisal of trends that had the potential to influence tourist attractions in the next 20 to 50 years. In chapter 2, a third source of inquiry explored the strategic planning literature in an effort to examine relevant issues and common approaches to studying planning in organisations.

The review of literature resulted in nine key aims being proposed for this thesis. These aims were linked by a primary aim, which was: ‘to evaluate and understand how Australian tourist attraction operators plan for the future’. To achieve the aims of this thesis a mixed method approach was used to deliver the results in three interrelated studies. In broad terms, this thesis examined (1) where Australian attractions are now; (2) how attraction operators plan for the future; and (3) what that future might entail.

Study one employed a quantitative methodology consisting of mail questionnaires to evaluate the organisational and planning characteristics of the tourist attraction sector. The results, reported in Chapters 3 and 4, provided a detailed summary of the business characteristics of attractions and confirmed anecdotal observations that the attraction sector consisted of many small operators and a small number of large well-recognised commercial attractions. The research identified four levels of planning based on the short term and long term planning focus of attractions. A key finding was that planning, whether short term or long-term, was positively associated with a number of desirable attraction characteristics. It was concluded that planners outperformed non-planners in terms of visitor numbers, visitor growth, paid employee numbers, asset value, gross
revenue, and total profit. Higher levels of planning were also associated with higher admission prices, a longer length of stay and a greater number of open days. Managers who plan also appeared to be substantially more confident about their attraction, but were also likely to have lower management tenure.

Study 2 summarised the results of a qualitative study based on twelve semi-structured interviews with attraction managers from three states along Australia's east coast. The qualitative approach, reported in Chapter 5, reinforced some of the patterns observed in the quantitative study, while adding additional detail and explanatory insight. In particular, the findings reported that there were important differences in planning between small attractions and large attractions. Large attractions tended to have more formal, systematic approaches to planning, while smaller attractions tended to adopt more casual, operational planning approach. It was found that tourist attraction planning systems contained elements of the Rational Strategic Model (RSM) of strategic planning reported in the literature, but were less formal and more operational in nature. There was a tendency for managers to continually monitor the environment rather than employing defined environment analysis tasks during the planning cycle. Monitoring of the external environment was typically focussed on the task environment (microenvironment), rather than broader environmental influences. Identity also appeared to be much more prominent in attraction planning than was suggested in the broader planning literature.

The third and final study presented in Chapter 6 used a novel futures wheel methodology to consider how trends in the medium-term future may impact on tourist attractions. The research distilled 62 trends from the futures literature and presented these to three think tanks, who were asked to rate the importance and certainty of these trends in the context of the future of Australian attractions. The most important, but least certain trends were then selected for further analysis by the think tanks. The results compared favourably with other research by confirming important attraction
trends in the areas attraction alliances, people and capacity management, enlivening attractions, increased professionalism, and balancing technology and human interaction. The findings also provided an evaluation of the strengths and limitations of the futures wheel method and suggested that, when coupled with a grounded theory approach, the technique may be suitable for investigating the future of a range of tourism contexts.

The final chapter of the thesis provided a synthesis of the results and presented and integrative model of the planning process in tourist attractions. Aspects of chapter 4 of this thesis have been published in the *Journal of Travel Research* (Benckendorff and Pearce, 2003). Highlights of the results presented in Chapters 3 and 4 were also reported to participants of the research. It is hoped that this broad overview from one continent will stimulate the further study of tourist attractions.
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