

# **Heritage as a Motivation for Four Wheel Drive Tourism in Desert Australia**

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## ABSTRACT

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## **Introduction**

Four wheel drive tourism is a growing market for remote Australia, including the desert regions of central Australia (Taylor, Prideaux and Carson, 2007). An increase in visitor numbers, however, may not lead directly to an increase in economic benefit. Several recent studies have questioned the economic value of the four wheel drive market for the destinations they visit (Carson and Taylor, 2006; Taylor and Carson, 2007; Schmallegger, 2007). Concerns exist both because of the patterns of visitor expenditure, and the nature of the products and services supplied to the market. While four wheel drive tourists spend large amounts of money to make their trips possible, much of this is likely to be spent in places of origin on buying and equipping the vehicle. More is spent in larger service centres where travellers provision for essentially 'self-catered' visits to remote areas. There may be parallels with Lee's (2001) study of recreation boating in the United States, where it was observed that the further from home boaters travel, the less likely they were to spend money in the destination, even on essentials such as food and fuel. At the same time, Cartan and Carson (forthcoming) have described patterns of economic development around desert tracks in central Australia. They suggest that very limited development has occurred, with few collaborations between businesses and limited diversity in what is offered to four wheel drive travellers. Businesses with greater income and employment generating potential, such as tour operating and production of maps and guides, tend to be located exclusively outside the destinations, and there are few commercial attractions or different styles of accommodation in desert destinations.

Increasing the direct economic value of four wheel drive tourism to the local communities they visit is important not only for those local businesses and residents, but for all businesses and agencies with an interest in the market. Local support for tourism

development is often dependent on the perceived benefits that it can bring, and a lack of local support has been regularly cited as an inhibitor of destination and market growth (Sirakaya, Teye and Sonmez, 2002). Local antagonism can lead to social and legal strategies to dissuade particular types of tourism, and the implications are felt throughout the distribution chain. In the case of four wheel drive tourism, economic benefits may be particularly important in light of concerns about environmental, economic, social, and cultural negative consequences (Priskin, 2003). Local communities may be unwilling, for example, to play a role in responding to vehicle breakdowns and medical emergencies if they perceive that the costs of these services outweigh the benefits of engagement in the marketplace. The same applies to management of fragile natural and cultural assets, cleaning up of rubbish, provision of water, provision of telecommunication services and so on. Outcomes include more roads being shut off to four wheel drive travellers by pastoralists, Aboriginal communities, local and state government, and protected area managers. Given that access to land is the most important attribute of the travel experience for four wheel drive visitors (Taylor and Prideaux, 2006), denying access may quickly lead to a loss of market.

Taylor and Prideaux (2006) identified three broad market segments which may offer the potential for different types of product development and experiences. One segment seeks to explore remote areas, and to 'conquer' iconic desert tracks or destinations such as the Canning Stock Route, the Tanami Track or the Simpson Desert. Another segment uses the four wheel drive vehicle to facilitate special interests such as fossicking, hunting or bird-watching. The third segment is motivated by a desire to test the capabilities of the vehicle and the skill of the driver in negotiating difficult environments (steep sand dunes, boggy creek beds etc). The 'explorer' segment appears most interested in desert travel, however there also is strong interest from the other segments.

Schmallegger (2007) investigated the travel motivations of the explorer segment. She identified three high level motivations as relating to experiencing the environment and environmental features, experiencing a sense of isolation and something different from the home environment, and learning about the history, environment, cultures and

industries of the desert. The learning or educational motive was identified by international and domestic travellers, and was particularly strong among family travel parties. The main educational activities engaged in were non-commercial (reading interpretative signs and so on), but there was some evidence of a willingness to purchase educational tourism products.

One aspect of the nation's desert regions that has been suggested as having potential for further tourism development is heritage. Desert Australia has a rich heritage comprised of natural heritage, aboriginal heritage and non Aboriginal heritage. Natural heritage includes the desert's rich variety of landscapes and unique geological formations such as Uluru as well as its unique ecosystems and the flora and fauna that are found in these habitats. Also of great interest to visitors and a theme heavily promoted in international destination marketing is the deserts' Aboriginal culture. Being nomadic there are no inspiring ruins of the type found in the Middle East but there is a rich culture based on rock paintings, story telling, dance and more recently art that expresses the story of the desert dwellers and their history of adaptation to the harsh conditions of desert life. Non aboriginal heritage is much more recent and tells the story of settlement in a harsh environment by a diverse range of settlers representative of a mix of cultures ranging from Afghan camel drivers, to German missionaries, miners, pastoralists and more recently to workers in the tourism industry. Within Alice Springs the Old Telegraph Station is one example of early settler heritage that is actively promoted as a visitor attraction. In the marketing collateral of both private and public and private sector groups the desert's heritage and cultural themes predominate collectively building the expectation of an environment that is vastly different from that of the everyday life of the visitor.

The importance of heritage and culture in four wheel drive trips is reinforced in the travel guides, web sites and map books that Schmallegger (2007) identified as key sources of trip information. The Great Desert Tracks Atlas and Guide (Glover and Zell, 2007) features historical information for each of the more than thirty tracks it describes, and

identifies heritage locations. Many of the tracks are named after historical figures or to reflect the heritage of (primarily European) exploration in the region (Basham, 2005). 'Points of interest' identified on four wheel drive tourism web sites such as [www.exploreoz.com.au](http://www.exploreoz.com.au) are either natural landscape features or historical sites.

To date research on four wheel drive travellers has focused on those users who are on tours within the desert and largely ignored the much larger group of four wheel drive travellers who have not visited the desert. It is this group who could potentially supply a much larger group of visitors if their interest in visiting the desert could be stimulated. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there is hesitancy on the part of many four wheel drive owners in this group to try a desert experience because of fears of damage to their vehicle and a lack of facilities such as restrooms in remote desert regions. Further research in the potential of this sector to contribute a new group of visitors to the desert is required.

Converting interest in heritage by current visitors into economic development opportunities for remote communities will require innovative approaches to product development and destination marketing. According to Jacobsen (2005) and Carson, Richards and Rose (2004), innovation in regional and remote tourism destinations requires collaboration between businesses and other stakeholders, entrepreneurship, access to economic, social, and cultural capital, and a well developed knowledge of the markets. Carson, Richards, Lee and McGrath (2006) found that these elements were largely absent from the heritage tourism sector in Alice Springs (the major population centre in central Australia). While there were a wide range of heritage tourism assets covering many themes, there was little evidence of collaboration between individual attractions and asset managers. Few attractions engaged in proactive product distribution to identified markets, with the majority using in-destination techniques such as signage at the attraction and brochures at the local visitor information centre. About one quarter of all leisure visitors to Alice Springs visited one or more heritage attractions, but these visits accounted for just ten percent of total visitor expenditure.

The Carson, et al. (2006) research attributed a major barrier to growing the heritage tourism sector in Alice Springs to the high proportion of visitors to the destination who were on package or organised tours. These visitors have limited flexibility in their itineraries, have concrete arrival and departure dates, and have little opportunity to engage in activities and visit sites that were not scheduled before arriving in the destination (Hyde and Lawson, 2003). It is difficult to develop an immature sector through organised tours, which require commissionable product structures and guarantees of supply, and which limit the direct contact between visitor and supplier and consequently the exchange of new product ideas (Stuart, et al., 2005). The dominance of highly organised forms of tourism stretches across the broader central Australian region, where 41% of visitors are typically on organised or package tours (Northern Territory Tourist Commission, 2004).

Four wheel drive travellers represent a more independent market, with typically high levels of flexibility in their itineraries, including the capacity to change planned travelling routes, stay longer in destinations, and engage in spontaneous decision making in regards to attractions to visit and activities to perform (Schmallegger and Carson, 2007). While the research cited above has explored levels of interest in heritage attractions and activities, there has been no assessment of the actual levels of engagement in heritage tourism, or the economic value of heritage tourism for the four wheel drive market in central Australia. This research uses a similar approach to the Alice Springs heritage research project (Carson, et al., 2006) to estimate the economic contribution of heritage tourism by four wheel drive visitors to central Australia. In addition the research is informed by the findings of research conducted by Prideaux and Coghlan (in press) into the motivations of four wheel drive tourists who belong to four wheel drive clubs. Clubs of this nature regularly organise trips into desert regions for their members. The findings may be important to destination marketing agencies and heritage tourism businesses looking to assess the potential for market growth and to monitor the impacts of product and marketing innovations.

## **Method**

Two data sets were used in this research, findings of the Northern Territory Travel Monitor and the findings on motivations of four wheel drive club owners to visit desert regions (Prideaux and Coghlan (in press). Data was drawn from the 2003 and 2004 Northern Territory Travel Monitor (commercial accommodation survey), which was an annual survey of about 4 500 visitors to the Northern Territory conducted by Tourism NT between 1997 and 2004. This represents the only data set which identified both international and domestic four wheel drive tourists visiting central Australia. The Travel Monitor has been replaced by a series of destination visitor surveys which have commenced in 2007. The Travel Monitor included information about four wheel drive use, motivations to visit the Northern Territory, destinations visited, length of stay in individual destinations, expenditure (sampled for a twenty-four hour period in a specific destinations), and activities undertaken.

The method used was an adaptation of a ‘direct spend’ method becoming widely used in Australia to estimate the economic value of attractions (Carlsen and Wood, 2004; Tremblay and Carson, 2007) and markets within destinations (Carson, et al., 2006; Bureau of Tourism Research, 2004). The method calculates the direct in-destination expenditure of a particular group of visitors (in this case visitors who accessed central Australia by four wheel drive, or who undertook four wheel drive activities during their visit to central Australia), and attributes a proportion of that expenditure to an activity or attraction (in this case consumption of heritage tourism products). The method argues that attributable expenditure may be more than that spent immediately on the activity (entrance fees etc.) if the activity was a major factor in the destination being selected. The general formula is –

**% attributable to activity/ attraction** = *(attribution factor x average daily expenditure x average number of days in the region x number of visitors)/ (total expenditure in the region for the sample)*

Calculation of the attribution factor is a subjective process involving interpretation of visitors' stated motivations for travel (Tremblay and Carson, 2007). This research adopts the attribution factors used by Carson, et al. (2006) in their study of the value of heritage tourism in Alice Springs. Their process was to classify visitors to Alice Springs as 'heritage' or 'non-heritage' visitors. Heritage visitors were those who had visited at least one nominated heritage attraction or undertaken at least one nominated heritage activity. The Carson, et al.' study specifically excluded Aboriginal cultural heritage attractions and activities, but these have been included in this study. Consequently, nominated heritage attractions and activities were 'Aboriginal art/culture', 'Other art/ culture', 'historic sites', and 'heritage trails'. Carson, et al. combined classification as a heritage visitor with the motivations for visits to the Northern Territory, to propose six attribution levels (see Table One).

Table One – Attribution Levels for Heritage Tourism Expenditure in Central Australia

<b>Level</b>	<b>Attribution factor</b>	<b>Conditions</b>
Level 1	100% attribution	Classified as a heritage visitor and the ONLY influence on the trip was to visit historical/ heritage sites.
Level 2	75% attribution	Classified as a heritage visitor and the desire to visit historical/ heritage sites was one of only 3 or fewer influences.
Level 3	50% attribution	Classified as a heritage visitor and the desire to visit historical/ heritage sites was one of 4 or more influences.
Level 4	25% attribution	If the visitor was not classified as a heritage visitor but identified visiting historical/ heritage sites as an influence.
Level 5	10% attribution	If visitor did not identify visiting historical/ heritage sites as an influence, but was classified as a heritage visitor.
Level 6	0% attribution	If the visitor was not a heritage visitor and did not identify visiting historical/ heritage sites as an influence.

(source: Carson, et al., 2006: 5)

Again, the proportions of expenditure attributed at the various levels is arbitrary and have been adopted here largely for consistency with the previous study.



The qualifying sample of respondents were those who travelled by four wheel drive or did four wheel drive activities, visited central Australia and had their expenditure recorded for a twenty four hour period within central Australia. Qualifying expenditure items were accommodation, food and beverage, tours, transport costs, souvenirs (including Aboriginal art and craft), entertainment and other incidental expenditure. For the purposes of this study, these expenditure items were totalled. In the 2003 and 2004 Travel Monitor samples combined, there were 1355 travel parties who met the qualifying criteria.

## **Results**

- Summary of expenditure per person per night on various items (and total) – the total recorded expenditure for four wheel drive market in central australia
- Attributed expenditure table

The 1355 qualifying travel parties represented 3146 visitors, or about 37% of the total number of visitors in the Travel Monitor whose expenditure was recorded in central Australia. This is consistent with Taylor and Prideaux's (2006) estimate that 30-40% of travellers in desert Australia may be four wheel drive tourists. The average travel party size was 2.3 people.

The largest proportion of travel parties (38%) were travelling through the Northern Territory in their own four wheel drive vehicle, with 13% in a rented four wheel drive vehicle and 32% on a four wheel drive tour. The remaining 17% (230 travel parties) did four wheel driving but were not travelling in a four wheel drive vehicle. This would most likely include short four wheel drive tours starting and finishing at the same destination.

Four wheel drive travellers stayed an average of nine nights in central Australia, and visited an average of three destinations (defined as places where the accommodation was different to the previous night). The most popular destination was Alice Springs (67% of

travellers stayed at least one night there) followed by Petermann (where Uluru is located) at 62%.

Nearly three quarters (74.4%) of travel parties had engaged in at least one nominated heritage activity or attraction. The most common was Aboriginal art/ culture (59% of travel parties) followed by historic sites (50%), heritage trails (26%) and other art/ culture (13%). Overall, 24% of four wheel drive travellers identified 'visiting historic/ heritage sites' as a reason for visiting the Northern Territory. There were no respondents who identified 'visiting historic/ heritage sites' as their only reason for visiting the Northern Territory, but there were 13 (1% of all travel parties) who had just one or two other reasons. Table Two shows the percentage of four wheel drive travel parties to central Australia in each of the heritage tourism attribution levels.

Table Two –Percentage of Travel Parties at Each Attribution Level

<b>Level</b>	<b>Attribution factor</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Level 1	100% attribution	0
Level 2	75% attribution	1
Level 3	50% attribution	26
Level 4	25% attribution	2
Level 5	10% attribution	54
Level 6	0% attribution	17

The average expenditure per travel party for the twenty four hour period in central Australia when expenditure was sampled was \$305, equating to an average daily expenditure per person of \$154. This included some large amounts of expenditure on transport (which may have been purchasing a vehicle) and Aboriginal artwork. Apart from these rare cases, the largest expenditure items were accommodation and food and beverage at around \$80 per travel party per night. The total recorded expenditure for four wheel drive visitors to central Australia was \$413,152. Table Three calculates the proportion of this expenditure that could be attributed to heritage tourism given the

assumptions of the method. Number of travel parties do not add up to 1 355 because expenditure data was missing for some respondents.

Table Three: Expenditure Attributable to Heritage Tourism

<b>Level</b>	<b>Attribution factor</b>	<b>Mean Daily Expenditure \$</b>	<b>Number of travel parties</b>	<b>Attributed Expenditure \$</b>
Level 1	100% attribution	-	-	-
Level 2	75% attribution	224	10	1683
Level 3	50% attribution	329	290	47717
Level 4	25% attribution	152	28	1065
Level 5	10% attribution	312	614	19164
Level 6	0% attribution	209	191	-
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>305</b>	<b>1133</b>	<b>\$69 630</b>

The attributed expenditure of \$69 630 amounts to 17% of the total recorded expenditure of four wheel drive visitors to central Australia.

The second data set was drawn from a survey of four wheel drive club members by Prideaux and Coghlan (in press). The survey was informed by several focus groups where four wheel drive club members were asked to outline their motivations for desert travel as well as the activities that they engaged in while on tour. For the purposes of this research the key data set relates to the motivations for desert travel and activities participated in. Based on a sample of 189 respondents to a mail out survey the key motivations for desert travel were found to be freedom from the city, landscapes, remote places, new places and challenging driving. Out of a set of 15 motivations, visiting indigenous communities ranked last. Responses to the question that asked respondents to rate the importance (using a 5 point liket scale) of a sample of 19 activities they engaged in while travelling, indicated that heritage themes ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> (national parks), 9<sup>th</sup> (heritage sites), 17<sup>th</sup> (visit Aboriginal cultural sites), 18<sup>th</sup> (bird watching) and 19<sup>th</sup> (view Aboriginal performances).

It is apparent that collectively, heritage is a motivation for visiting desert areas and is a significant activity participated in while on tour.

## **Discussion**

From the findings discussed above it is apparent that for four wheel drive tourists heritage is an important component of the range of benefits sought when visiting desert areas.

However it is also apparent that the translation of this interest into tangible cash flow has yet to occur in a significant way as illustrated in table 3. It is apparent that while heritage is a key marketing message used to attract visitors to the desert, desert communities have yet to find a way to capitalise on this. It may be that many of the heritage values of the desert are treated as a free good or given away at a very small price. For example, desert landscapes are essentially a free good although the cost of access is high. Further, many of the interpretative signs constructed in viewing areas give sufficient information to the extent that visitors don't feel the need to pay for additional information. From the evidence presented here it is apparent that the desert and its culture is the backdrop to the desert experience much like the beach is to coastal resorts. It generates little revenue in itself but is the attractor that enticed tourists to visit the region and the key to facilitating other forms of business enterprise that can generate cash flow. In another sense, the absence of heritage of the types discussed earlier would result in substantially fewer visitors. As a consequence heritage is an important component of the experience and a key attractor but can not be expected to directly generate revenue. Seen in this light, it is apparent that heritage is an important motivation for travel to desert regions and in spite of its lack of ability to generate significant revenue needs to be placed in the centre of investment strategies designed to encourage increased desert tourism.

The previous discussion has centred on current four wheel drive travellers. As discussed earlier, this group represents only a fraction of the total number of four drive owners in Australia. While this group has yet to be researched it is apparent that there is scope to target this group as a new source of visitors. For this to occur however there will need to be considerable investment in consumer research and based on the findings of that research investment in new facilities and marketing.

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