

# 'POPULATION STUDIES RESEARCH BRIEF

ISSUE Number 2009045

Population and Tourism Studies Group  
School for Social and Policy Research  
Charles Darwin University  
Northern Territory 0909  
andrew.taylor@cdu.edu.au

© School for Social and Policy Research 2009  
This material has been submitted for peer review and  
should not be cited without the author's permission

## "We'll all go down together" – Marketing responses to tourism decline in the Outback

### KEY FINDINGS

- The Australian outback features heavily in the imagery and content of web sites promoting Australian tourism to the world.
- Tourist numbers and tourism in the outback were in decline from 2002 to 2006 across a range of performance indicators including market share, expenditure share and accommodation sector employment.
- Some regions performed more poorly than others but only Australia's North West experienced a growth in tourism AND in the resident population.
- Four themes are evident in marketing across outback destinations; Spirituality and mysticism; Exploration and discovery; Plentitude; and Exclusiveness.
- Each region markets itself as the 'true outback' and as having the best, biggest and most desirable attractions for visitors.
- The outback is 'sold' as one destination with no regional points of difference. Tourists are left to interpret which places in the outback are suitable for meeting their aspirations.
- Only changes to the political geography (reflected in changes to the marketing messages) are likely to bring about an arrest in the decline.

### RESEARCH AIM

To examine the marketing responses of State and Territory Tourism Organisations to declines in performance

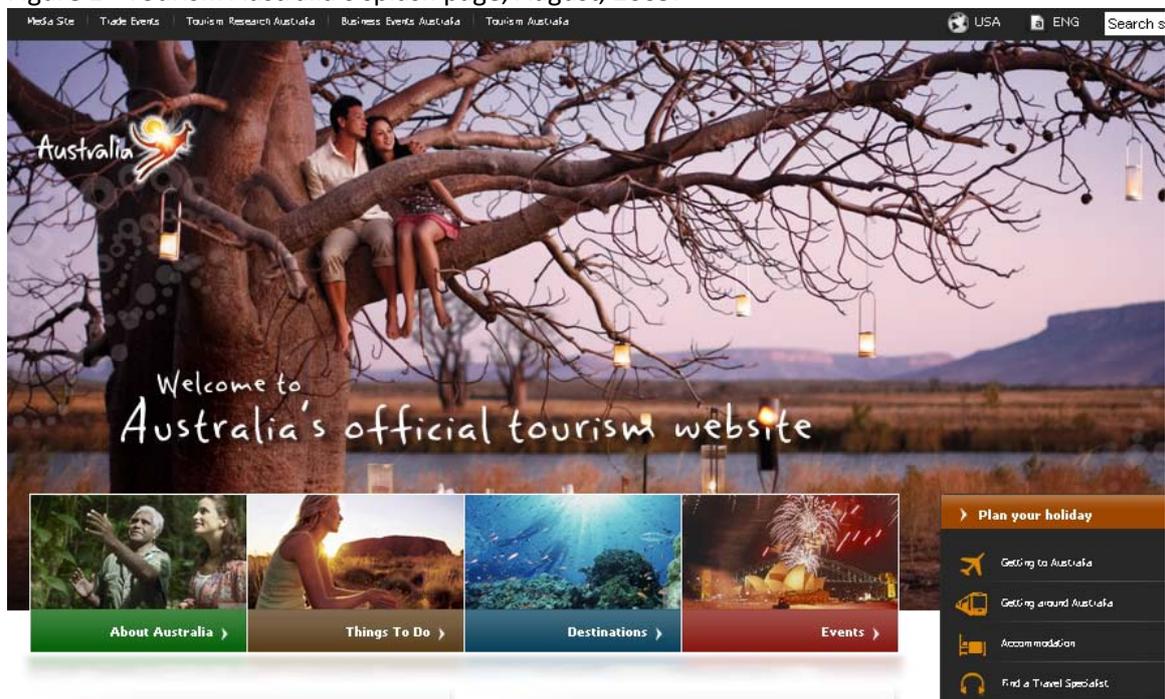
This research brief looks at why, when it is high in the aspirations of holiday makers as a place to visit, is tourism in the Outback in a period of extended decline. We examine the marketing approaches of State and Territory Tourism Organisations for outback destinations. The research offers some clues about the decline and about how marketing might change as a response.

**Andrew Taylor and Dean Carson**

## Tourism and the Outback

Adorning the splash pages of websites marketing Australia to potential tourists around the world are images of and associations with the Australian outback. For Tourism Australia (Figure 1) the feature image is of a young couple up a Boab tree in the remote North of Western Australia (presumably). Below it is an image of the iconic desert destination, Ayers Rock, as well as an image of an Indigenous person (often portrayed in outback scenes) sharing stories with a tourist. The outback has long been synonymous with the aspirations of both international and domestic tourists for holidays within Australia, and for good reason. Conde Nast rates a trip to the outback as one of the Top 32 'trips of a lifetime'. For as long as Australia has been actively marketed as a holiday destination, the outback has featured strongly in the imagery and wording used to entice tourists to visit.

Figure 1 - Tourism Australia's splash page, August, 2009.



Source: Tourism Australia (<http://www.australia.com/index.aspx>)

State tourism bodies too have for a long time integrated outback images within their major promotional campaigns, in similar ways to Tourism Australia. Under most definitions outback destinations exist in five States and Territories with Victoria, the ACT, and Tasmania excluded. Outback destinations have been encouraged by the national marketing agency (Tourism Australia) to both collaborate to ensure a strong outback image, and to compete to establish their unique claim on the image. For example, Western Australia promotes itself as having “the real outback” ([www.outback-australia-travel-secrets.com](http://www.outback-australia-travel-secrets.com)) and the Northern Territory is the “heart of the outback” and also “Australia’s real outback” ([en.travelint.com](http://en.travelint.com)). But there is no need to travel ‘out back’ to experience the outback with a theme park and theatre restaurant located on the Gold Coast ([outbackspectacular.myfun.com.au](http://outbackspectacular.myfun.com.au)) and any number of outback tours available from Sydney and extending no more than 100 kilometres beyond the metropolitan area to such places as the Blue Mountains.

Given the perpetual use of the Outback in marketing campaigns it seems reasonable to assume that its use has yielded positive results both visitation to Australia and for tourism in the Outback. Indeed, the major coup for Tourism Australia in 2008 was the negotiation of a license

for all Australian tourism operators to use images from the movie *Australia*, which almost exclusively featured natural settings in the Outback, in their individual product and destination marketing (Tourism Australia, 2009). But in 2005 Desert Knowledge Australia released a report into the future of 'outback tourism' which noted that outback destinations had suffered more and were slower than other Australian destinations to recover from recent shocks such as the Asian financial crisis of the later 1990s, the terrorist attacks of 2001 and 2002, and the SARS and bird flu health scares. The *Our Outback* report identified the need for outback destinations to collaborate in a range of ways to counteract individual destination's lack of critical mass and economic resources. Marketing collaboration was specifically omitted from the report because each of Australia's mainland States and the Northern Territory wanted to retain control of brand development for their own outback regions. Between 2005 and 2008, Australian tourism experienced four or five years of solid growth in international visitor numbers and held steady in what was previously a declining domestic market. The global financial crisis beginning in 2008 presents a new challenge.

In this brief we review the performance of Australian outback destinations during the 2000's by analysing data from national surveys of tourists who have taken holidays recently in Australia. From this we are able to compare performance across a range of indicators between outback destinations individually and between the outback and tourism in Australia as a whole. We also look at data for the accommodation sector to describe trends in its performance. Following this we describe the results of an analysis of State and Territory Tourism Organisation (STOs) web site content to identify the ways in which the outback is portrayed (or 'sold') to potential visitors. We identify themes and common types of imagery and wording. The findings enable us to comment on how STOs and outback destinations themselves might respond to continuing declines in market share and to overall tourism performance issues, and on how the marketing of outback destinations might need to adjust.

## Methods

The methods for the research were divided into two distinct tasks:

**1. Analysis of Outback destination performance:** Each year, around 40,000 international visitors are interviewed about their Australian trip in the departure lounges of Australia's international airports. The International Visitor Survey (IVS) includes information about where visitors went and how long they spent in each location. The National Visitor Survey (NVS) interviews 40,000 Australian residents by telephone at their homes each year asking about their most recent trip away from home (for at least one night). Regional data includes estimates of international visitor numbers and the proportion of international visitors who visited the region for leisure and business purposes. Regional domestic data is more comprehensive and includes estimates on the number of visitors, number of nights spent in the region, and the amount of expenditure that can be attributed to visits to each region.

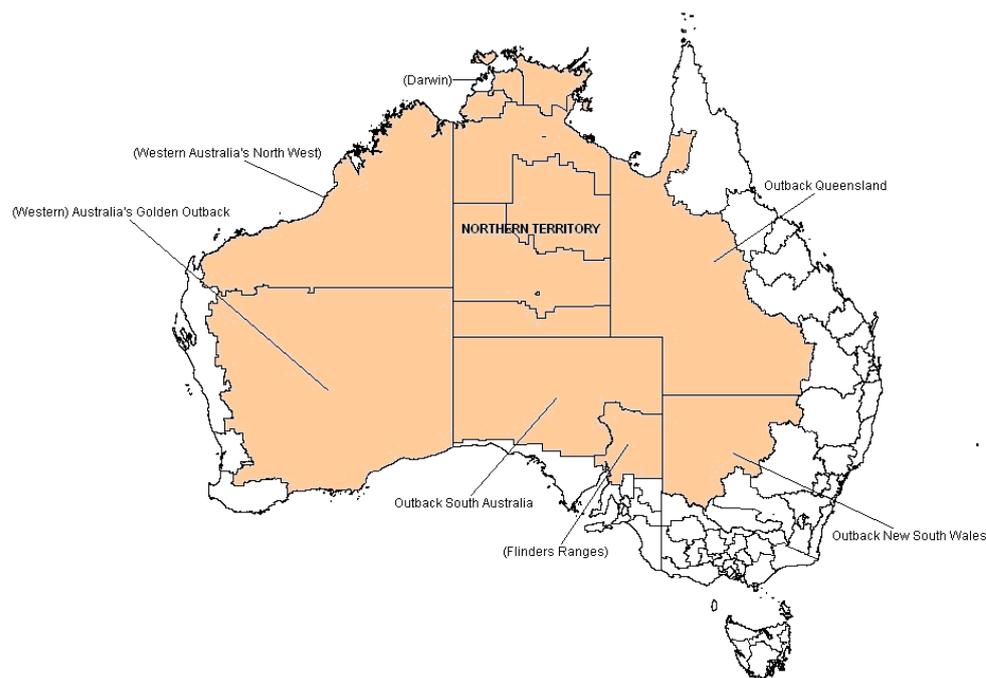
Other data regarding the performance of tourism regions is available from the Survey of Tourist Accommodation (STA) and the Census of Population and Housing both conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The former provides information about employment in the accommodation and food services industry while the Census data on industry of employment was available from the 2001 and 2006 Census. The period of analysis was 2001 to 2006 except for IVS data which was only available for 2002 to 2006 to calculate the following statistics for each of the six outback tourism regions, and for Australia as a whole:

- Estimated domestic visitors, nights and expenditure per year (NVS)
- Estimated international visitors per year (IVS)

- Number of accommodation establishments (hotels and motels with 15 rooms or more) at June 30 each year (STA)
- Number of rooms in accommodation establishments (hotels and motels with 15 rooms or more) at June 30 each year (STA)
- Mean annual occupancy rate (STA)
- Number of people (aged between 15 and 64 years and available for employment) employed in the accommodation and food services industry (Census)

The percentage change in the number and in market share (relative to the total Australian value) between the first and last years in the relevant series was calculated. Changes in resident population were looked at because stronger resident population growth often generates stronger tourism population growth through increased visiting friends and relatives trips (which accounts for 40 percent of the market in Australia). The regional basis for analysis was official tourism regions located in the outback as defined by Tourism Research Australia (Figure 2). Under official definitions of remote areas, the outback accounts for more than 70% of the Australian landmass but contains less than 5% of the population. Regions in the Northern Territory were combined.

Figure 2 – Outback tourism regions



**2. Outback Marketing Analysis:** The images and content of STO managed web sites were examined using a method called semiotics. Semiotics is a qualitative study of the signs and symbols used to construct meaning (see for example, Ehtner, 1999). It is a useful tool for understanding how destinations 'see' and present themselves including whether similarities can be identified between regions. The process broadly involves:

- a. Defining the set of data for analysis (the specific web pages);
- b. Breaking down these to specify themes and elements;
- c. Recording the frequency and combinations of these;
- d. Examining the relationships between the elements and themes through the content that connects them, particularly the structure of paragraphs; and

- e. Comparing across regions to identify common layers of meaning and combinations of elements

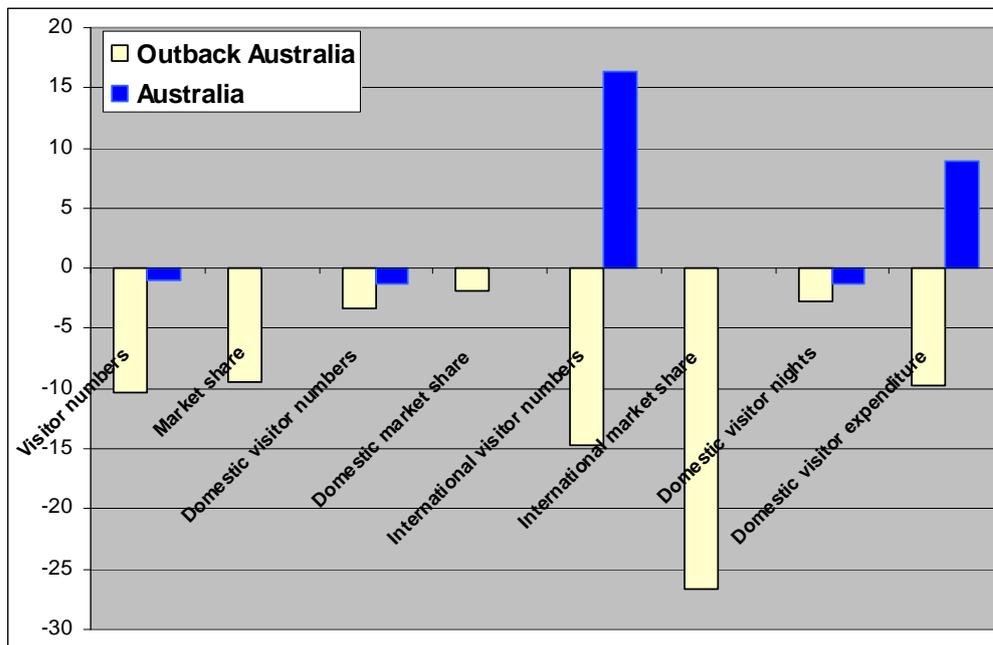
This component of the research is acknowledged as subjective, although convergence or divergence between regions is relatively independent of the labels attached to meaning by the researchers. And while many additional sites with relevant content are produced by private companies and local tourism associations, the intent was to critique the initiatives of the government sponsored marketing agencies.

## Results

### 1. Performance analysis

The overall picture of outback tourism between 2001 and 2006 is one of decline (see Figure 3). Visitor numbers fell by 10 percent, market share by 9 percent, and accommodation industry employment by 5 percent across the outback as a whole. Domestic visitor numbers were down 3 percent and international visitor numbers down nearly 15 percent. On a market share basis, the domestic market was not as weak (down 2 percent) since the total domestic market in Australia declined by 1 percent. However, international market share was down nearly 27 percent as the total Australian international market grew by 16 percent. Domestic visitor nights (-3 percent) and domestic visitor expenditure (-10 percent) were also down, and the market share of expenditure was down over 17 percent.

Figure 3 – Performance indicators for Outback Australia, 2002 to 2006



The worst performing destinations in the domestic market were Outback New South Wales (-25 percent) and the Flinders Ranges Outback South Australia Tourism (FROSTAT) region (-11 percent), while Australia’s North West experienced an increase in the domestic market (21 percent). Domestic nights declined the most in FROSTAT (-22 percent) and the Northern Territory (-18 percent) and domestic expenditure declined by 18 percent or more in four of the six regions – the exceptions being Outback New South Wales (-7 percent) and Australia’s North West (an increase of 39 percent). FROSTAT and the Northern Territory both saw declines in international visitor numbers of 34 percent, but the other four regions had some growth, including a doubling

of visitor numbers in Australia's Golden Outback. These results, and the fact that only 5 percent of all visitors were international visitors, meant that total visitor numbers declined in four of the six regions, with just Outback Queensland (7 percent) and Australia's North West (4 percent) experiencing increases.

In the accommodation sector employment declined by 5 percent (while increasing by 6 percent nationally), and declined in all regions except Australia's North West (where it remained at around 6 percent of all employed people), the number of accommodation establishments, the number of rooms, and the average annual occupancy rate all increased. There was a 20 percent increase in the number of large hotels (15 or more rooms) across the outback, and increases in every region except the Northern Territory, which remained static at 56 establishments. Similarly, there were increases in rooms available (19 percent across the outback) except in the Northern Territory, where there was a marginal decline (-1 percent). Mean annual occupancy percentages were up in all regions except FROSAT (-2 percent).

Western Australia's North West experienced growth in all the indicators described above. Conversely, the Northern Territory and South Australia declined across all visitor indicators and some of the accommodation indicators. Results in other regions were more mixed. The strong performance of Western Australia's North West may owe something to its increase in resident population between 2001 and 2006 (7 percent). It was the only outback destination to experience resident population growth at or above the national average (7 percent). The failure of the Northern Territory to achieve tourism growth despite having resident population growth is an interesting anomaly, and warrants additional research.

## 2. Analysis of online marketing content

Common to destinations was interchangeable phrasing designed to impart that each was "true outback", "epitome of the outback", "heart of the outback", "authentic outback", and "essence of the outback". These were often structured within paragraphs about discussion about the people, communities, or 'characters' of the outback, often borrowed from historical contexts like the gold rush era in Western Australia, and the emergence of QANTAS from outback Queensland:

*"Journey to the 'heart of the Outback' and experience the heritage and cultural history that has shaped the nation."*

(Outback Queensland - <http://www.outbackholidays.info>)



The chief message in terms of positioning Outback regions was that they are, above all, places for ADVENTURE travel. Adventure is heavily 'sold' by all regions and the word appears on average more than five times within each web page or downloadable brochure. Its framing is inconsistent between regions though with some, like Australia's North West, ascertaining that visiting the region (independent of any activities or attractions) is what constitutes the adventure:

*"Australia's North West is..... the place to go for an authentic Aussie outback adventure"*

(Australia's North West - <http://www.australiasnorthwest.com>)

But in most cases regions market the adventure experience as being obtainable through activities, forms of transport (especially four wheel driving), and accommodation (or combinations of these):

*"You don't need a 4WD to have fun exploring the secrets of the region. But if you do, lock those hubs and lock onto some serious adventure!"*

(FROSAT -

<http://www.southaustralia.com/FlindersRangesOutback>)

Tourism WA offers one point of difference insofar as it promotes the "Aboriginal Outback" as an adventure in its own right:

*"For a real outback adventure, let the traditional landowners show you the wonders of this sun-kissed land."*

(Tourism Western Australia - <http://www.westernaustralia.com>)

Four themes emerged as common to the marketing content across all regions in the outback:

### **1. Spirituality and mysticism**

Outback region marketing depicts and emphasises opportunities for engaging and connecting with the 'spiritual-self' along with spiritual and mystic elements denoted as features of the region. Statements are invariably broad and open to interpretation:

*"We invite you to spend 5-6 days with us to truly appreciate the majestic beauty and spirit of Kakadu."* (Tourism NT - <http://en.travelnt.com/explore/kakadu-arnhem.aspx>)

Indigenous people and their cultures were firmly interwoven within the spiritual and mystic narratives and featured, to varying degrees, in the materials of all outback regions. As well as emphasising these elements, around half of all regions also spoke of "strong" Aboriginal culture to promote the authenticity of their Indigenous tourism assets:

*"Aboriginal culture is strong in Tennant Creek."*

(Tourism NT - <http://en.travelnt.com/explore/tennant-creek.aspx>)

*"Wholly aboriginal owned land, Arnhem Land is known for its strong aboriginal culture."*

(Tourism NT - <http://en.travelnt.com/explore/kakadu-arnhem.aspx>)

### **2. Exploration and discovery**

All regions emphasised the opportunity for visitors to 'explore' and 'discover' their destinations:

*"It's all waiting to be discovered by you - today's Outback adventurer!"*

(Tourism Queensland – <http://www.outbackholidays.info>)

*"Explore fascinating European heritage sites via two of Australia's most famous trails"*

(FROSAT -  
<http://www.southaustralia.com/FlindersRangesOutback>)

### 3. Plentitude

Language projecting images of vastness, expansive grandeur, and unbounded spaces filters through in the materials for all regions. This is invariably accompanied by superlative descriptors of landscapes, flora and fauna. From birds to grass, and rocks to stars, regions habitually signal such assets to be so plentiful in supply that they simply cannot be counted:

*“Visitors are invariably awestruck by the profound impact of space, the myriad of stars in the night sky”*  
(Tourism NSW - <http://www.visitoutbacknsw.com.au>)

*“Go camping and see stars which stretch forever...”* (Outback Queensland - <http://www.outbackholidays.info>)

*“The Outback is big on first impressions. You’ll be struck by its vastness and the deafening silence.”*  
(FROSAT -  
<http://www.southaustralia.com/FlindersRangesOutback>)

### 4. Exclusiveness

Each region identifies assets which are bigger, older, one of the most important, or the only one of its kind in Australia or the world. Unlike the more generalised structure of much of the outback discourse, dialogue on exclusive elements was largely within paragraphs on specific natural, cultural, and historical assets or attractions:

*“Visit some of the world’s largest open cut mines and watch in wonder as the world’s longest trains hurtle past.”*  
(Australia’s North West - <http://www.australiasnorthwest.com>)

*“Kakadu National Park, in Australia’s Northern Territory, is one of only a handful of world heritage sites listed for both its natural and cultural values.”*  
(Tourism NT - <http://en.travelnt.com/explore/kakadu-arnhem.aspx>)

Within this theme diversity within exclusive elements (especially landscapes, flora and fauna) was brought forward to enhance the perception of exclusiveness. And interspersed throughout dialogue on exclusive assets we found many references to ‘untouched’ elements, also projected in such a way so as to demonstrate regional exclusiveness:

*“As well as being home to a huge number and wide variety of bird species...”*  
(Australia’s Golden Outback -  
<http://www.australiasgoldenoutback.com>)

*“And on its coast lie some of the world’s most beautiful beaches, untouched coral atolls...”*  
(Australia’s North West - <http://www.australiasnorthwest.com>)

*"This untouched wilderness is part of the arid core of Australia:  
home to ancient and dramatic landscapes."*  
(FROSAT - <http://www.southaustralia.com/FlindersRangesOutback>)

A further observation is the high frequency use of the words 'red' (soils, rocks, skies at sunsets, and so on) and 'rugged' (plains, rocks, islands, and so on). The former was observed to be nested with descriptors of flora or fauna (like the "golden fields" of Outback NSW) while the latter was most often associated with non-specific elements, mainly contained in the same sentence as the word 'adventure', and within paragraphs themed on exploration or discovery.

**Regional Points of Difference:** Points of difference were difficult to identify with the results indicating a consistent and pervasive discourse according to the themes above. The notable exception was Western Australia's North West region, which, although it does not appear to have adopted substantially different marketing strategies, has three distinguishing features. First, it promotes the idea of the 'coast' as part of the outback – a strategy which is not available to Outback Queensland and Outback New South Wales and is not heavily employed by the other destinations. Second, while the term 'outback' is used throughout the marketing material, it is not used in the name of the destination itself. This puts it more in line with other destinations in Australia who are able to call upon the outback mythology which represents the entire country without having to justify a specific labelling. The third key difference between Western Australia's North West and most other outback regions is the growth in its resident population between 2001 and 2006.

## Discussion and Conclusions

There was no region or subset of regions which stood out as actively differentiating themselves from the standard outback images of adventure, spiritualism, exploration, plentitude, and exclusiveness. The lack of diversity in marketing messages is linked, then, to the relative consistency of performance trends in the 2001 to 2006 period. The need to justify the use of the outback label is a key underlying theme of the marketing material. Each outback region aggressively positions itself as the 'true', 'real', 'authentic' outback, distinguishable from other 'outback's' by its grander, space, bigger assets, or better claims to European (and occasionally Indigenous) histories. The message is that it should be a sufficient achievement for visitors to experience this 'true outback'. Exactly how the achievement might play out (apart from the act of seeing things that are bigger or rarer here than elsewhere) is left largely to the individual to decide. Surely, then, some level of confusion about which outback is suited to the needs of specific tourists is likely to emerge, and it is not surprising that the performance trends suggest more and more tourists are settling for an 'accessible outback' found at the Gold Coast theme park, the Blue Mountains, or other near-urban rural settings.

There is very little in the marketing material about what sort of traveller (apart from the 'adventurous') should visit the outback. And there is little attempt by any of the destinations to claim a different market to their outback colleagues, with the possible exception of Tourism Queensland's activities focus. Marketing of Australia's outback destinations has largely failed to move beyond the aspirational. Potential visitors may well fear that there will be 'nothing out there', and this fear leads them to question the value of the time and expense required to access outback destinations. If indeed there is 'nothing out there', then it may make more sense for outback destinations to more specifically target markets for whom this is an attractive asset. That sort of market identification is largely absent with the occasional exception of approaches to the four wheel drive market.

The marketing analysis provided some additional insights into product innovation in outback tourism. Overall, products appear to be very much restricted to immediate exploitation of the visual appeal of natural attractions and limited interaction with Indigenous culture. Even the more active pursuits such as four wheel driving, bicycling, and hiking are essentially about sightseeing. And while they extend the mass coach tourism model into somewhat new markets, there continues to be a lack of variety of such experiences, and the experiences are marketed in much the same way in all destinations.

The current failure by State Tourism Organisations to distinguish outback destinations from one another, while at the same time being unwilling to accept Desert Knowledge Australia's challenge to collaborate on marketing and brand positioning, has not worked. The State and the regional bodies need to either commit to a national outback brand through which all destinations may benefit or lose, or commit to a process of promoting the competitive advantage of individual regions which may position some as winners and some as losers.

It is useful to think about 'the outback' as a collection of destinations which share a fundamental geographic attribute, much in the same way as one might think about Europe's Alps, the Caribbean's beaches, or Africa's savannahs. The simple facts, however, are tourists have to make decisions about where in these large areas they want to go. A universal outback image is a real benefit to raising awareness of the destination type, but it is insufficient to position specific destinations as competitors for the tourism dollar. In Australia, the outback image is so universal that having the outback label in your destination name or slogan is insufficient to establish competitive advantage. The outback regions instead appear as catch-alls for those parts of States that do not otherwise have an identity, while the outback image is successfully used by other destinations (like the Gold Coast and Blue Mountains) to add to their appeal. Outback regions are large regions which are quite diverse internally, and so perhaps are too large to be effectively marketed as single destinations. If Australia and its States really want the outback to be a major drawcard, and if they really want the 'real' outback regions to experience the benefits, then changes need to be made to the political geography of Australian tourism and how it is reflected in destination marketing. If not, outback destinations are likely to become increasingly peripheral AND marginal as Australian tourism struggles to adjust to the global financial crisis and whatever woes emerge next.

## References

Echtner, C. (1999). The semiotic paradigm: implications for tourism research. *Tourism Management*. **20** (1). 47-57.

Tourism Australia. 2009. *Australia the Movie Tool Kit*. Accessed online on 21<sup>st</sup> January, 2009 at <<http://www.tourism.australia.com/Marketing.asp?sub=0451&al=3034>>