ONLINE OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR
INDIGENOUS CULTURAL TOURISM IN AUSTRALIA

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Tourism is seen as an industry that has the potential to provide sustainable economic foundations for indigenous communities in Australia. This article identifies online technology as contributing to the capacity for indigenous communities to access the benefits of tourism. Indigenous communities engaged in tourism can utilize the Internet to supply the tourism product as well as deliver much needed cultural support messages around the product in both domestic and international markets. However, limited skills, costs, and physical access barriers have made it difficult for indigenous communities to effectively use online technologies to benefit from the opportunities. This article examines the context of indigenous tourism in Australia as a prelude to a discussion of the issues relating to Australian indigenous tourism going online; it also provides an overview of how the Tourism dotcom initiative has approached the task of developing capacity among indigenous cultural tourism suppliers.

Indigenous tourism Online tourism Cultural tourism Indigenous Australians
Business processes Technology transfer Technology policy Tourism policy

Introduction

It is well documented that online technologies present substantial opportunities for tourism operators to increase business efficiencies and access new distribution channels. Sharma, Carson, and DeLacy (2000) noted that online technologies could increase the capacity for Australian small and medium tourism enterprises (SMTEs), regional and rural businesses, and special interest tourism business to compete in the international marketplace. Technologies such as e-mail, the World Wide Web, and e-commerce have been used successfully by Australian tourism businesses to improve communications, marketing, research, internal management, and product distribution (for some examples see: CRC Sustainable Tourism, 1999; Department of Industry, Science & Resources, 2000). Opportunities are increasing even further through the introduction of
wireless and mobile technology applications in the tourism industry to facilitate product distribution and management practices (reservations, inventory control, personnel management, etc.).

Small and medium-sized tourism businesses (Buhalis, 1999), intermediaries (Van Rekom, Teunissen, & Go, 1999), and local tourism organizations (Vaughan, Jolly, & Mehrer, 1999) have been identified as groups failing to access fully the opportunities presented by online technologies. The Australian Federal Government’s *Tourism dotcom* strategy also clearly identified suppliers of indigenous cultural tourism as an at-risk group (Department of Industry, Science & Resources, 2000). This article examines the opportunities online technologies present for indigenous cultural tourism, and the barriers to accessing those opportunities. A range of indigenous operators is used as illustrations of the techniques currently being used to address barriers and access opportunities.

An examination of these issues as they apply to indigenous tourism in Australia forms the basis of this article. Important issues such as tourism developments in indigenous communities elsewhere, various impacts of tourism, or the fundamental issue as to whether indigenous communities should be involved in tourism are intentionally excluded from consideration. (For a discussion of some of these issues see Butler & Hinch, 1996; Hitchcock, 1999; Pilcher, van Austere, & Palmer, 1998; Polistina, 1999; Ryan & Huyton, 2000.) The focus is primarily on issues relating to indigenous tourism going online and what is being done by the federal government to assist the process in Australia. Finally, this article describes how the *Tourism dotcom* initiative has approached the task of developing capacity among indigenous cultural tourism suppliers.

**Indigenous Cultural Tourism in Australia**

There is a long history of the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (indigenous) culture to attract tourists to Australia. In the early 19th century, it was felt that attracting visitors to New South Wales would increase the likelihood of permanent migration and consequently ensure the future of the colony. Indigenous Australians, because of their uniqueness in the experience of British travelers, were one of the few attractions that the new colonies could market (Craik, 1991). Because the travel industry was built on the new economy introduced by the British settlers, and because indigenous Australians were systematically excluded from that economy, the use of indigenous people and culture as objects of tourism was managed and manipulated by the British. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this management of the indigenous tourism industry by nonindigenous people has remained substantially unchanged—although online technologies offer the promise of change in these long-standing arrangements.

Indigenous Australians won the right to Australian citizenship at a national referendum in 1967. Since that time, there has been a gradual increase in the public sector infrastructure to promote and facilitate indigenous management of key policies and resources. For example, the Land Rights Movement has resulted in direct indigenous ownership of key natural attractions including Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park (handed over to indigenous management in 1985). The landmark Mabo High Court decision in 1992 has had significant resource management impacts on many popular natural and cultural attractions in Australia (Altman, 1995; Monash Information Service, 1993).

Since the late 1980s, there has been increasing focus on accessing the benefits of tourism to address economic, social, and cultural development issues facing indigenous communities. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) developed a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tourism Strategy over 10 years between 1988 and 1998 (ATSIC, 1988, 1994, 1998). The final strategy had as its focus the need to provide a policy and planning environment in which indigenous people could assume greater control of decision-making processes relating to the commodifying of indigenous culture.

Tourism has been promoted as a vehicle for economic development of rural and remote indigenous
communities and as a method for maintaining cultural heritage for indigenous communities across Australia (Commonwealth Department of Tourism, 1994; Mapunda, 2001). A number of public sector initiatives have been developed to stimulate indigenous community involvement in tourism, not only through funding for product development, but through promotion initiatives, infrastructure development, training and skills development, and coordination of public sector resources. As a result, there is now an environment in which indigenous participation in the tourism industry is encouraged and some of the key enablement processes are in place. The justification for this has not only been to promote the benefits of tourism for indigenous communities, but to ensure that the tourism industry generally is able to continue to use indigenous people and their culture as key attractions. It should also be noted that the emphasis in development and marketing has been on the promotion of the indigenous tourism product rather than in the promotion of destinations.

Despite the developments described above, there are still many barriers to indigenous participation in the tourism industry (Mapunda, 2001; Parkin, 2001). There are also substantial risks associated with the use of indigenous culture as a resource for tourism—both for indigenous peoples and for the Australian tourism industry. With recent Australian federal government focus on online technologies and their contribution to sustainable tourism development (CRC Sustainable Tourism, 1999; Department of Industry, Science and Resources, 2000), there is a need to assess what contribution online technologies can make to overcoming risks and barriers and maximizing the potentials of tourism for indigenous people and communities.

Online Tourism in Australia

In 1999, the Office of National Tourism (a division within the Federal Department of Industry, Science and Resources) commissioned a scoping study on the nature and impacts of online tourism in Australia. The resulting report, Meeting the Challenge (CRC Sustainable Tourism, 1999), identified a range of benefits of online tourism. These benefits were expected to be: improving efficiency of information flows between business, government, and consumers; reducing costs of marketing and product distribution; better communication between business and consumers; giving businesses access to networks, partnerships, and services that may not be readily available offline.

Meeting the Challenge noted that many of the “big players” in the industry had embraced online technologies and had made considerable progress in the implementation of various systems. However, it also identified four other groups in the Australian tourism industry that needed to implement initiatives to ensure they could access these benefits:

- small and medium tourism enterprises (SMEs),
- rural and regional enterprises,
- intermediaries (such as travel agents and inbound tour operators),
- indigenous suppliers.

Meeting the Challenge recognized that the public sector had an important role in facilitating online technology uptake in a “market failure” situation particularly with regard to infrastructure—in Australia a population of around 18.2 million is distributed over a geographical area approaching mainland US. In this context the government has a role in ensuring that appropriate infrastructure is in place in terms of:

- telecommunications infrastructure (to enable physical connection to the Internet),
- legislative environment (to protect consumer rights),
- resources for training staff (to counter chronic skilled staff shortages in regional and rural areas),
- encouragement of new players in the industry especially from the information technology sector (to encourage innovation and competition),
- technology demonstration (through provision of relevant government services online).

While the Meeting the Challenge report applied to the Australian tourism industry in general, it drew attention to indigenous tourism by noting that “there is considerable demand from international visitors for authentic Indigenous tourism experiences.” The report noted that the demand had gone largely unfulfilled and that there was considerable interest from indigenous people to harness tourism for community development (CRC Sustainable Tourism, 1999,
The report noted that not enough was known about the business needs of indigenous suppliers, and that more research activity on exploring the opportunities and threats of online tourism for these suppliers was required. [Although this view is generally supported it is not without its critics (e.g., Ryan & Huyton, 2000, p. 18).]

The federal government responded to *Meeting the Challenge* with its *Tourism dotcom: A National Online Tourism Strategy* (Department of Industry, Science and Resources, 2000). The federal government has accepted a role in assisting the tourism industry in the uptake of online technology due to: a low-level of awareness of technology and its implications among key sectors of the industry; the need to provide infrastructure; and the need for increasing information technology skills in the industry. Again, *Tourism dotcom* targeted specific sectors: small and medium tourism enterprises; regional, rural, and remote enterprises; intermediaries; and indigenous suppliers.

One of the strategic actions arising from *Tourism dotcom* was to provide funding for the CRC for Sustainable Tourism to “improve online awareness within the Indigenous tourism sector” (Department of Industry, Science and Resources, 2000, p. 19). The specific outcomes sought from this were: improved speed of communication, better maintenance of business partnerships, and access to business critical information. [The Cooperative Research Centre for Sustainable Tourism (CRC Sustainable Tourism) was established under the Australian Government’s Cooperative Research Centres (CRC) Program as a vehicle for delivering strategic knowledge to the Australian tourism industry. CRC Sustainable Tourism is a partnership of 13 Australian universities, peak industry organisations and all state and territory tourism commissions.]

Both *Meeting the Challenge* and *Tourism dotcom* identified the capacity for online technology to help indigenous suppliers realize the potential benefits of tourism. Both reports also indicated unique challenges faced by indigenous operators in adopting online technologies.

Online Technologies and Indigenous Tourism in Australia

These technologies also present us, as Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders, with enormous opportunities and the potential to effect real change in our lives. Information technology offers us new and exciting ways to conduct business and allows the development of alternate strategies to address many of the inequities which our peoples confront. (John Page and Adrian Miller http://www.soe.jcu.edu.au/learnIT/Topic1.htm 1997)

Online technologies have the capacity to help indigenous suppliers address some of the critical challenges they face in participating in the tourism industry. Adopting these technologies also increases some of the risks indigenous suppliers face. Milne and Nowosielski (1997) noted that information technology in tourism provides an environment in which small operators can increase their voice—by “levelling the playing field.” Traditional distribution channels have been dominated by large mainstream tourism businesses (especially airlines and accommodation chains) and it has been difficult for small operators to participate in these systems. The Internet allows for much more flexible information delivery, and has the potential to reduce domination of the industry by existing GDSs/CRSs. The capacity for individual businesses to choose what information they present and to have that information presented to a global audience is undeniably an enormous opportunity brought about by online technologies. Milne and Nowosielski (1997) further see online technologies as assisting small businesses in identifying, creating, and maintaining the business partnerships required to succeed in tourism. For indigenous suppliers, these partnerships may be with suppliers of transport, marketing, and intermediary services.

Buhalis (1997) claims that destination management systems such as those based on online technologies can “reduce social, cultural and environmental negative impacts by bridging the gap between visitors and locals by assisting them to build realistic expectations from their involvement in tourism activities or enterprises” (p. 71). Online technologies can also lead to:

- economic benefits through increased communication efficiencies,
- capacity to access additional distribution channels,
- opportunities for relatively low cost but innovative marketing,
• improved inventory management,
• better access to business critical information,
• opportunities to educate visitors before they arrive and so reduce pressure on culture,
• opportunities for communities to present information about themselves as information or as a corrective, even though they may not wish to be involved in any tourism-related activity.

In the Australian context, the major destination management systems (DMS) have been developed and administered by government-funded state and national tourism organizations. While the primary function of DMS in Australia has been the promotion of individual product within a destination marketing context, each state tourism organization (STO) and the Australian Tourist Commission (ATC) have developed their own DMS using different technology systems, as well as applying different criteria for product inclusion in those systems (Daniele, Mistilis, & Ward, 2000). The ATC database, for example, accepts product information from any supplier responding to a questionnaire. There is no charge for participation; however, products may be excluded from the DMS due to “quality” issues, which are normally linked to the supply of product information in incorrect formats. As far as STO DMS is concerned, some STOs charge for participation, while others require product suppliers to join a specific destination marketing program (Daniele et al., 2000). The Western Australian DMS is structured so that product suppliers contribute first to a regional database, which then informs the state database.

Significant changes are flagged for online DMS in Australia, with the formation of Partnership Australia as an alliance between the ATC and all STOs. Partnership Australia is developing the parameters for a National Tourism Data Warehouse [now named Australian Tourism Data Warehouse (ATDW)], which will record product information from all states and territories. While decisions have not yet been made about product participation criteria (Daniele et al., 2000), a review of the planning process of the ATDW and examination of trends in DMS development (see, e.g., Borge, 2000; Frew & O’Connor, 1999; Gretzel, Yuan & Fesenmaier, 2000) suggest the following trends:

• The onus to present information in “system ready” formats will be placed on the product supplier.
• Securing a prominent position in the database systems (e.g., through identification of a specific tourism “sector” reflected as a database index) will be enhanced through knowledge of the technical workings of the system and the capacity to participate in systems development.
• The need for DMS to ultimately secure income from their technology investment will lead to the need for “e-commerce ready” product.

The use of online technologies by destination marketers has been one of the significant recent influences on the structure of the tourism industry. Lyons (2000) suggests that products and destinations that have previously lacked the resources to compete in the tourism market space have greater access to this space through the efficient use of online technologies. While this article is primarily concerned with product-level adoption of online technologies, it must be recognized that the capacity to participate in online DMS is vital to product success (Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 1999).

Buhalis (1998) has a very positive view of the impacts of online technologies, suggesting that those technologies will be more and more widely relied upon in maintaining critical relationships within an organization, between a supplier organization and its consumers, and between a supplier organization and its key business partners. To realize this objective, however, indigenous suppliers will need to be able to manage:

• information flows (both content and the timing of information delivery),
• skills and training required to use technologies (both technical and service industry skills),
• the financial cost of accessing technologies (establishment and maintenance),
• the need to ensure that messages delivered online are consistent with offline marketing messages and the reality of the product,
• access to the necessary telecommunications infrastructure.

However, before this can be done there is a need to examine some of the challenges facing the indigenous tourism product—challenges that are likely to impact on the success of any online initiatives.
Indigenous Tourism Product and Tourism Online

A useful framework for identifying and classifying cultural tourism issues generally (and for the study of touristic images in particular) has been provided by Cohen (1993): “WHO represents WHOM for WHOM, HOW, in what MEDIUM, under which SOCIO-HISTORICAL CIRCUMSTANCES of the native people, and under which prevailing SOCIO-POLITICAL RELATIONSHIPS between them and the majority population” (p. 39). Answering these questions (Who represents whom? For whom? How? In what medium?) is central to a discussion of the challenges facing the indigenous tourism industry in Australia and the manner and the extent to which it realizes the benefits of going online. Indigenous tourism may be defined as “a tourism product which is either: Aboriginal owned or operated, employs Aboriginal people, or provides consenting contact with Aboriginal people, culture or land” (South Australian Tourist Commission, 1995).

It can be argued that one critical element in the success of indigenous tourism is the capacity for indigenous suppliers to have ownership and management of information and images about the product. Management of information is critical as tourism is largely promoted as a visual experience (Mackay & Fesenmaier, 1997). Gartner (1993) describes tourism as a process in which suppliers of product sell images of that product to consumers. Consumers are attracted to the product and have the expectation that the “reality” will be consistent with their interpretation of the images. Balaglu and McCleary (1999) further claim that “the initial image formation stage before the trip is the most important phase in tourists’ destination selection processes” (p. 869).

Cohen (1993), in his review of touristic images of indigenous peoples, has shown that the intended impression of image was rarely “neutral.” Zeppel (1998), in a substantial review of the use of images of indigenous culture in marketing Australian tourism, found that marketing material (especially brochures) focused on depicting indigenous culture through images of: dance, cultural centers, arts and crafts, bush tucker, and rock art. Simondson (1995) found that indigenous cultural images were based on representations of Dreamtime myths, tribal living, and “primitiveness”—variations of the “noble savage” theme. There is also the issue of geographic selectivity. The majority of images have clearly been from Central and North Australia—areas for which “exotic” images of “primitives in harsh environments” or “primitives in pristine environments” are easier to generate. Consequently, the experience of most tourists in relation to indigenous culture is not likely to match the expectations brought about by the images. Also, there exists a significant “cultural intellectual property” issue and it applies even if the use and depiction is in culturally appropriate terms. [For an extended discussion of this and related issues see Our People Our Culture: Report on Australian Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights (Janke, 1998).]

There are very few examples of large-scale indigenous tourism enterprises, with the majority being small and microbusinesses operating on small profit margins (Commonwealth Department of Tourism, 1994; Parkin, 2001). Indigenous suppliers of tourism product supply products linked to cultural tourism, ecotourism, environmental tourism, and community-based tourism. Indigenous people and businesses can play a number of roles in the tourism industry as: operators and managers, owners, planners, and policy makers. Indigenous ownership and management may be defined by the roles indigenous people play within an organization (as employers or employees) or the level of accountability operators of attractions have to indigenous custodians (Altman, 1988; Finlayson, 1991). The type of role, levels, and types of control vary greatly by product type and where an enterprise finds itself in the distribution chain. Thus, in case of “manufactured” products such as arts and crafts, the role may be simply a production role in what could be essentially a nonindigenous distribution chain—although “fakes” could be an issue. However, in more “service-oriented” products such as host-stays and visits to sacred sites the level of control becomes a critical issue—situations where direct social contact is part of the tourism product.

Indigenous cultural tourism in Australia faces the common dilemma identified by Barre and Jafari (1997): “How can the cultural and human aspects of tourism be made to counterbalance its too often dominant commercial functions?” (p. 476). Put simply, what is the price a cultural group is prepared to pay to engage in tourism? Barre and Jafari (1997)
have identified some of the issues that cultural tourism operators—including those in Australia—have to address. These include: how to use tourism to increase knowledge and understanding of culture; how to use tourism to help communities maintain artistic production; how to use tourism to help maintain cultural identity; how to minimize the risks of exploiting culture through tourism; and how to manage tourism without disturbing the meaning of cultural activities for the communities who produce them.

Indigenous suppliers in Australia have faced additional challenges in participating in the tourism industry (Altman, 1995; ATSIC, 1993; Robert, 1985): lack of ownership and control of indigenous culture for tourism purposes, lack of agreed protocols for the representation of Indigenous culture; breakdown of traditional long-term approach to relationship building due to short-term nature of host–guest relationships; integrity and ownership of information where nonindigenous people speak as experts on indigenous culture; disrespect of indigenous culture; invasion of personal space and privacy; conflicts on land use; pollution and environmental degradation of sacred sites; issues related to (non) ownership of land; and increase in cost of living in communities that encourage tourism.

Many indigenous cultural attractions are located in rural and remote areas, making access difficult (although this feature adds to its authenticity). It is not only difficult to attract tourists “off the beaten track,” but the remoteness of these attractions means limited access to infrastructure. In some contexts the solution has been to bring the indigenous product to the tourist by locating the product in areas with high visitation rates [e.g., indigenous arts and craft displays in Darling Harbour, Sydney (www.aboriginalart.com.au); the indigenous dance group in Kuranda, Cairns (see www.tjapukai.com.au)]. Unfortunately, where attractions are not remote, they may be perceived by tourists to lack authenticity or may convey an air of “staged authenticity” (Cohen, 1993).

Zeppel (1998) summarized the key issues in the development of a sustainable indigenous tourism industry as being: product development; staff training; access to marketing and product distribution channels; management of community impacts; increasing participation in the industry by indigenous people; and maximizing economic benefits. Initiatives to address these challenges have been proposed (ATSIC, 1998; Craik, 1991; Hall, 1995; Parkin, 2001; Smith, 1989; and others). They include: increasing education and training opportunities (especially in service industry skills); more appropriate use of cultural images in promoting Australian tourism generally; improvement of infrastructure in rural and remote areas; facilitation of partnerships between indigenous suppliers and marketers, tour operators, and transport companies; better education of tourists and the mainstream tourism industry on indigenous cultural practices and beliefs.

Both Meeting the Challenge (CRC Sustainable Tourism, 1999) and Tourism dotcom (Department of Industry, Science and Resources, 2000) identify these issues in relation to the marketing of Australian tourism on the Internet. Thus, while the Internet presents opportunities for indigenous suppliers, lack of control over images could threaten the sustainability of indigenous tourism product (e.g., the relatively low cost of setting up a Web presence means that it is relatively easy for anyone to set up an “authentic” indigenous tourism site). Weber (1997) emphasizes the inability to confirm expectations of visitors as a key reason for low repeat visitation rates to destinations.

Barriers to Indigenous Participation in Online Tourism

Online technologies are a powerful tool for indigenous suppliers in overcoming some of the challenges they face in participating in the tourism industry. Indigenous suppliers need to increase their capacity to influence how their culture is represented to tourists, and to provide authentic cultural tourism experiences. However, as we have seen in the previous section, there is a series of issues for online tourism that stems from the nature of the indigenous product. These can be broadly grouped as “content issues” and “delivery issues.” Content issues revolve around the matter of representation both for indigenous people as suppliers of the product (i.e., whether it is culturally appropriate, intellectual property issues, etc.) and also for the tourist as a consumer (i.e., whether the representations are accurate and will conform to expectations). However, the issue of cultural image management online is just...
one of a number of barriers to indigenous suppliers participating in the online economy—“delivery issues” cover a broader spectrum ranging from inadequacies in physical infrastructure to the broader issue of delivery mechanisms and platforms.

Buhalis (1997, 1998) and others have claimed that the Internet would reduce the domination of the industry by the major global distribution systems (GDSs). While the nature of GDSs (and related CRSs) has changed, it has mainly been to extend the product range and to develop new interfaces (from proprietary character based to graphic Web based) to deal directly with consumers, rather than through intermediaries. Online CRS has been supplemented in the distribution chain by online destination management systems (ODMS) based on national, regional, or sectoral interests. Meeting the Challenge (1999) noted that the barriers to effective participation in ODMS remain similar to traditional barriers to participation in CRS. Establishing or participating in a proven ODMS is expensive, and small operators generally continue to be priced out of these systems. (The operators of these large systems also have data and product quality concerns relating to hosting products from SMEs and indigenous suppliers.) Establishing your own ODMS is even more expensive, and carries the additional risk of “low visibility,” as the number of travel and tourism sites on the Internet grows exponentially. An alternative with better prospects for success is to “combine for strength” in a dedicated portal (e.g., www.aboriginalaustralia.com).

Indigenous Tourism Online: A Progress Report

As the discussion in the previous section suggested, participation in the new suite of ODMSs appearing in Australia may be limited to products that can present information in “system ready” formats and that can demonstrate potential to engage in e-commerce systems. Clearly, indigenous product needs to be included in ODMS to be considered as participating in the Australian tourism industry. ODMS can also benefit from the inclusion of indigenous product because of the high expressed demand for this product by international tourists. Currently, the evidence reported in Meeting the Challenge and Tourism dotcom suggests that suppliers of indigenous product generally lack the skills, training, and access to technologies to facilitate their participation in key ODMS such as the Partnership Australia National Tourism Data Warehouse and STO systems. Maintaining an effective online presence and participating in ODMS is also reliant on essential utilities and telecommunications infrastructure. These services are sporadic at best in many parts of rural and remote Australia.

Skilled staff and careful planning can help businesses overcome some of these barriers, but, in addition to historically poor access to appropriate education and training for tourism, it is our impression that education resources available to indigenous suppliers have not yet begun to include sufficient training in online technologies. This is an issue applicable to the Australian tourism industry in general, but may be exacerbated for indigenous suppliers as, being largely new participants in the industry, they have not developed networks either within the industry or externally to supplement limited in-house skills. The capacity for indigenous suppliers to build the networks they require to access online technologies (e.g., with information technology companies, regional portals, etc.) is limited due to low awareness of technologies and the resources required to develop and implement online applications (Department of Industry, Science and Resources, 2000).

While there are real barriers that limit the potential for indigenous suppliers to use online technologies, many of the barriers discussed here can be overcome through raised awareness and careful planning. For example, infrastructure problems can be tackled by initially placing Web sites in larger population centers (e.g., www.aboriginalart.com.au) and/or making a start in the process of going online by creating a site with limited capabilities (e.g., www.aboriginalart.com.au) or by using hosting services provided by others (e.g., www.ballarat.com/dreamtime.htm). As various rural infrastructure initiatives are implemented and as newer technologies emerge these sites could be relocated and additional capabilities can be implemented. Table 1 presents a selection of Australian indigenous tourism Web sites at various stages of development. Despite continuing difficulties, it is quite apparent from an examination of these sites that considerable progress has been made and a tentative “best practice” model for indigenous tourism Web sites is beginning to emerge from these efforts.
The Australian National Policy Framework for Advancing Indigenous Tourism Online

We have previously noted that there are significant culture-related, infrastructure-related, and business-related barriers to indigenous participation in online tourism. In Australia, as there has been government involvement in the tourism industry for a long time, it is not surprising that a policy towards indigenous tourism has been developed. In this policy, cultural issues have been left for determination by various indigenous groups and agencies (such as ATSIC and Aboriginal Tourism Australia)—there may be need at a later stage for government intervention (e.g., copyright issues relating to indigenous culture). Further, the Australian government has recognized that technology and infrastructure barriers to participation in the online economy can be addressed at an industry-wide level (Department of Industry, Science and Resources, 2000). However, there are additional barriers relating to the capacity to implement and manage the business practices required to successfully exploit online technologies for indigenous cultural tourism.

The government’s strategic response has been to focus on developing this business process capacity. This response is consistent with the recommendations of key literature on online technology implementation in tourism. For example, Beckendorff and Black (2000) identify four key processes in establishing online marketing ventures: planning, design, content, and management. In each phase, technology resources are to be considered only after consideration of the purpose of the marketing initiative. Likewise, Peacock (2000) claims that “a key reason for the lack of success of information systems is an inadequate assessment of the role of information systems and their impact on working practices” (p. 53). MacVicar and Main (2000) demonstrated that successful implementation of technologies on its own was unlikely to meet the technology needs of a tourism enterprise unless accompanied by clear definition of the applications of the technology, and a capacity for the organizational culture to manage the technology.

Evans, Peacock, and Richards (2000) recognized that the immediate need for small tourism enterprises (SMEs) in Europe was to develop an understanding of the impact of online technology on business processes, which would then provide the capacity to evaluate the relative benefits of specific items of technology. Business’ evaluation of their own application of online technologies may include aspects of the effectiveness of the technology (uptime, bugs, etc.) and the effectiveness of the system in meeting business objectives. Tierney (2000), for example, recognized the relatively high cost of the technology investment in Web sites, and identified the need to evaluate visitor response to Web sites to justify continued resource investment. Williams, Bascombe, Brenner, and Green (1996) recognized that the fast pace of technology development would lead to solutions for most technology problems, but that process problems would need to be addressed before technology users would benefit from these solutions.

The Tourism dotcom program is the government initiative to enhance the online capacity of targeted groups, including the indigenous tourism sector (Department of Industry, Science and Resources, 2000). As part of this program the federal government has provided funding to the CRC Sustainable Tourism to raise industry awareness of online technologies and to implement business process-based strategies to help industry make the best use of those technologies. In response, the CRC Sustainable Tourism has developed the Tourism Online—Getting Value (TO-GV) program (see www.crctourism.com.au/gettingvalue). Indigenous suppliers have been identified as a particular focus of the program, along with small and medium tourism enterprises, intermediaries, rural and remote enterprises, and regional tourism organizations. TO-GV commenced in July 2000 with 2-year funding. While it is too early to assess the success of the program, its methodology and philosophy can be analyzed in terms of the capacity to address the challenges facing indigenous suppliers in getting online.

TO-GV has a four-pronged methodology aimed at ensuring that its message is delivered as widely as possible to its focus audience. The program will include a series of intensive workshops aimed at suppliers. The workshops will focus on raising awareness and building the skills required to plan and develop online business ventures. Where possible, workshops will be conducted by local training organizations to ensure that regional conditions are taken into account. The workshop methodology is being modeled on a proven e-commerce training
program developed by the Australian Electronic Business Network (http://www.ause.net.au/). TO-GV will conduct 21 workshops nationally over the 2-year period. Negotiations are currently under way to ensure that indigenous suppliers get access to these workshops. The workshop content is being devel-

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<tr>
<th>Indigenous Web Site</th>
<th>Comment</th>
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<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.aboriginalaustralia.com">www.aboriginalaustralia.com</a></td>
<td>“... brings you access to over 50 Aboriginal enterprises offering a range of authentic Aboriginal products, services and information. You can purchase authentic Aboriginal art delivered direct from the creators, access travel information and learn more about Aboriginal culture.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.ballarat.com/dreamtime.htm">www.ballarat.com/dreamtime.htm</a></td>
<td>“Aboriginal Dreamtime Trails…Creation sites, Rock art sites, Living cultural centres, Archaeological sites, Aboriginal rock well sites.” Indigenous Tourism Operators Association member</td>
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<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.aboriginalart.com.au">www.aboriginalart.com.au</a></td>
<td>“Experience our CULTURE as we celebrate its survival. ... Share our COMMUNITY vision and TOURISM enterprises by booking an Aboriginal Cultural Tour…visit our spectacular ART GALLERY…PURCHASE Art, crafts, books and music.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.ataust.org.au">www.ataust.org.au</a></td>
<td>“Aboriginal Tourism Australia (ATA) is the peak indigenous tourism body...central point of contact for all matters relating to indigenous tourism.” Site organization: Dreamtime, Land, People, Art, Authenticity, Permits, Tours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.tjapukai.com.au">www.tjapukai.com.au</a></td>
<td>“Tjiapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park…dedicated to preserving and presenting authentic Aboriginal culture. …Five theatres, a museum, an art gallery and a traditional Aboriginal camp combine to give our visitors a complete and meaningful glimpse of our rich and ancient culture. …we sell didgeridoos, boomerangs and other Aboriginal artefacts….”</td>
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<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.nativeguidesafaritours.com.au">www.nativeguidesafaritours.com.au</a></td>
<td>“Native Guide Safari Tours operates from Port Douglas to Cape Tribulation focusing on the Aboriginal and contemporary history of the area. …Your guide HAZEL, an Australian Aboriginal of pure racial heritage will present, untold stories to amuse and update your knowledge of the World Heritage listed Daintree Rainforest and Australian Aboriginal customs and culture.”</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.discoverwest.com.au/aborigwa.html">www.discoverwest.com.au/aborigwa.html</a></td>
<td>“…stories of Aboriginal legend and bush skills have been passed down from generation to generation and survive today. With the help of Aboriginal guides, this tour gives an insight into their (Nyoongar) rich culture, ancient heritage and knowledge of local legend, flora and fauna.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.atsic.gov.au">www.atsic.gov.au</a></td>
<td>“The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission is Australia’s main Indigenous agency. ATSIC’s site is an important international resource for information on Indigenous programs, activities and issues.” Indigenous tourism strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.ozemail.com.au/~nyac/">www.ozemail.com.au/~nyac/</a></td>
<td>“The Nyangatjatjara Corporation exists to promote the aims and ideas of the Aboriginal Community of Central Australia residing in the vicinity of Ayers Rock, and to develop the associated commercial infrastructure. The main engine of economic development in the region is tourism, due to the presence of Uluru, Kata Tjuta and the National Parks and Wildlife Commission.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.harrynanyatours.com.au">www.harrynanyatours.com.au</a></td>
<td>“…an Aboriginal owned and operated, accredited tour company which has been running tours to Mungo National Park and district...Qualified Aboriginal Tour Guides will interpret some of Australia’s most beautiful and uniquely spectacular country. …Our Aboriginal guides are ‘Barkindji People.’ Mungo National Park is Barkindji Tribal land dating back many thousands of years.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.sydneyaboriginal.com.au">www.sydneyaboriginal.com.au</a></td>
<td>“Choose an aboriginal tour in Sydney and experience an enlightening &amp; entertaining culture that is one of the oldest in the world! …find out more about the First Australians!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://home.vicnet.net.au/~yalata/whale.html">http://home.vicnet.net.au/~yalata/whale.html</a></td>
<td>“The Head of the Great Australian Bight is one of the best places in the world to observe Southern Right Whales. Yalata Aboriginal Community looks after the Head of the Great Australian Bight through the Yalata Land Management Program.”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
oped in consultation with key industry stakeholders, including representation from indigenous suppliers.

It will be important to ensure that workshop content is adapted for each focus audience as a “one size fits all” solution will not deal with the unique issues facing indigenous suppliers. Appropriate consultation and recognition of the issues will be vital, as will flexibility of delivery mechanisms to ensure that indigenous suppliers get access to workshops and get value out of their participation.

In addition to workshops, TO-GV will be publishing awareness and “how to” material on the Internet (http://www.crctourism.com.au/gettingvalue/), in multimedia CD format, and in a variety of offline formats (brochures, newsletters, etc.). Again, consultation with indigenous suppliers will be needed to ensure that those suppliers can access this material, and that it is presented in culturally appropriate ways.

TO-GV is using case studies of successful online tourism businesses to demonstrate what barriers were encountered, how they were overcome, and what outcomes have resulted. The case study program will include several studies of indigenous suppliers. The methodology for the case study program has been developed in consultation with indigenous tourism experts. Outputs from the case studies will also be reviewed by this group. The case study methodology requires participant permission for any further dissemination of collected information.

As well as increasing awareness of online technology, and proposing methods by which indigenous suppliers can access that technology, TO-GV provides a framework for identifying the best online business model for their businesses, and ensuring that the model is implemented in a sustainable way. The framework has been labeled “online architecture” and is based on an assessment of business functions and key business partnerships.

The online architecture model considers five key business functions: communications, research, marketing, sales (e-commerce), and management. It helps tourism businesses (including indigenous businesses) identify what their current requirements are in relation to these functions and make informed decisions about whether going online would improve the efficiency of performing these functions. It also identifies business partners who may be affected by any change in the way these functions are performed, including new partners that may be required. The model has the flexibility in terms of the functions it covers and the technologies identified to assist in performing those functions, to make online business models available to suppliers in various circumstances.

Assessment of business needs based on online architecture can result in business models that:

- there is ownership of the model chosen,
- can be low cost “start-up” models,
- can range from complete “in-house” systems to effective use of outsourcing and remote hosting,
- provide short-term “get online” options while instigating a long-term plan for developing skills and acquiring resources.

Most significantly, the process businesses go through to develop an online architecture can also be used to evaluate and monitor performance of the online business model over time. The online architecture approach will be of benefit to indigenous suppliers because it will help them assess the specific challenges and opportunities online technologies present for them, and develop business models that deal with the challenges and exploit the opportunities; success is more likely as they have developed the approach taking into account their business needs and capabilities.

State and federal governments in Australia, and indigenous tourism industry organizations such as Aboriginal Tourism Australia, are developing programs aimed at increasing the capacity of suppliers of indigenous product to participate in the industry as a whole. TO-GV provides a framework for addressing issues relating to participation in the online tourism economy. The TO-GV framework, while focusing on the training and online planning activities described above, also recognizes that increased capacity to participate online is dependent upon increased capacity to develop, manage, and market products and destinations generally. The framework relies on four core objectives: research, establishing effective partnerships, developing capacity enhancing tools, and communicating the outcomes to partners. Table 2 summarizes the activities of TO-GV in relation to each of these objectives.
Conclusion

Indigenous tourism is an important sector of the Australian tourism industry. Images of indigenous culture are widely used to sell the Australian product, and indigenous businesses and communities are being strongly encouraged to consider tourism as a method for addressing social, environmental, and economic development issues.

While the “big players” of the Australian tourism industry have been relatively early adopters of online technology, the adoption rate has not been matched by the smaller players in regional and rural areas and in particular by the indigenous sector of the industry. For these players online technologies provide many opportunities for addressing issues such as size, remoteness, and marketing power. This is an issue for indigenous suppliers who may also be threatened by: cultural exploitation, poorly developed products, lack of awareness of online technologies, poor skills and training, and poorly formed networks and business partnerships.

In many respects, the capacity to participate in online tourism is dependent upon increased capacity to participate in the tourism industry generally. However, the recent focus on online systems within the Australian industry through initiatives such as Tourism dotcom and the Partnership Australia National Tourism Data Warehouse give some sense of urgency to facilitating indigenous participation online. The Tourism Online—Getting Value framework proposed a planning process and a program developed out of a recognition of the challenges and opportunities of online technologies for indigenous suppliers. Successful implementation of this program through research, partnerships, planning tools, and communication initiatives will provide a framework for increasing access to online technologies for the indigenous tourism industry.

Biographical Notes

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