



Venturing out in Dreamtime business

Aboriginal communities are embracing the opportunities presented by the new international interest in cultural tourism. But can Aboriginal people maintain a viable tourism product while protecting their cultural independence and the sensitive ecosystems that exist in their homelands?

Mandy Muir is clear that she has found her calling. 'I am doing what I do best – talking about our culture.' The Aboriginal owner-operator of Murdudjurl Tours in the heart of Kakadu National Park, Mandy has been involved with tourism in one way or another for more than a decade. However,

her recent venture into mainstream tourism follows the trend of a growing number of indigenous tourism businesses emerging across the nation.

John Morse, Director of Indigenous Tourism Australia (affiliated with Tourism Australia, Australia's national tourism

marketing authority) and author of the 10-year tourism vision for Kakadu, *Walking into the Future*, says, 'New age tourism is about people making a connection with different cultures. Research tells us that this is what tourists want – it's a desire to experience Aboriginal culture firsthand.'

According to Tourism Australia, 829 000 international and 584 000 domestic travellers participated in Aboriginal tourism activities in 2005. The proportion of international tourists had increased by 33 per cent from 2004.

But an interesting statistic is that while 16 per cent of all international visitors partake in Aboriginal tours, only 1 per cent of domestic tourists do the same.

'Considering that 65–75 per cent of



Left: Mandy Muir, owner and operator of Murdudjurl Tours, invites tourists into her home and takes them to explore the banks of the billabong from which her family hunt for food. Grenville Turner/Wildlight

Above: Aboriginal guide Cliff Coulthard from Iga Warta Resort explains the significance of the Malkai rock art site in the Northern Flinders Ranges. Grenville Turner/Wildlight

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tourism receipts are domestic,' says Morse, 'the sustainability of the Aboriginal product will rest on promoting Aboriginal culture and tourism to Australian people.'

This is not an easy 'sell' while traditional stereotypes remain – concerns about visiting remote communities where alcohol and drug abuse, rates of violence and unemployment are well documented have served to dampen the enthusiasm of the Australian travelling public to explore indigenous cultures.

The issue of stereotyping – along with some failures due to under-capitalisation of past Aboriginal tourism ventures – has created some vulnerability in the marketplace.

However, with the wealth of emerging

indigenous tourism operations, new initiatives are being developed by tourism authorities, communities and concerned individuals who recognise that the sharing of Aboriginal culture is a sound way to preserve a unique cultural heritage that is more than 40 000 years old and pivotal to the identity of this continent.

Aboriginal Tourism Australia (ATA), the main industry organisation for indigenous tourism, has introduced a *Respecting Our Culture* (ROC) accreditation program designed to sustain business and environmental practices as well as observe cultural protocols.

'Our ROC coordinators work with many operators to ensure that they have their operational and marketing plans in

place – indeed all the procedures necessary to running a successful business,' says Lois Peeler, Chair of ATA.

'There is a huge gap in terms of the difference between Western education and Aboriginal education,' says Peeler. 'Sometimes it is difficult to understand the realities of business. A lot of people have great ideas and start up businesses without knowing the fundamentals of operating and staying in business. That's where we try to help with practical assistance.'

The Business Ready Program for Indigenous Tourism, a mentoring program developed by the Department of Tourism, has brought successful tourism business-people on board in an effort to halt ineffective business practices and ensure positive results.

Judy Freeman – who with her husband and local Aboriginal people established the Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park near Cairns 20 years ago – is director of Indigenous Tourism Australia and a mentor to five tourism ventures run by indigenous people in Far North Queensland.

'These are excellent businesses but they need guidance,' says Freeman. 'This partnership [the mentoring program] is aimed at achieving success. I think what indigenous people do best is provide a unique

Progress

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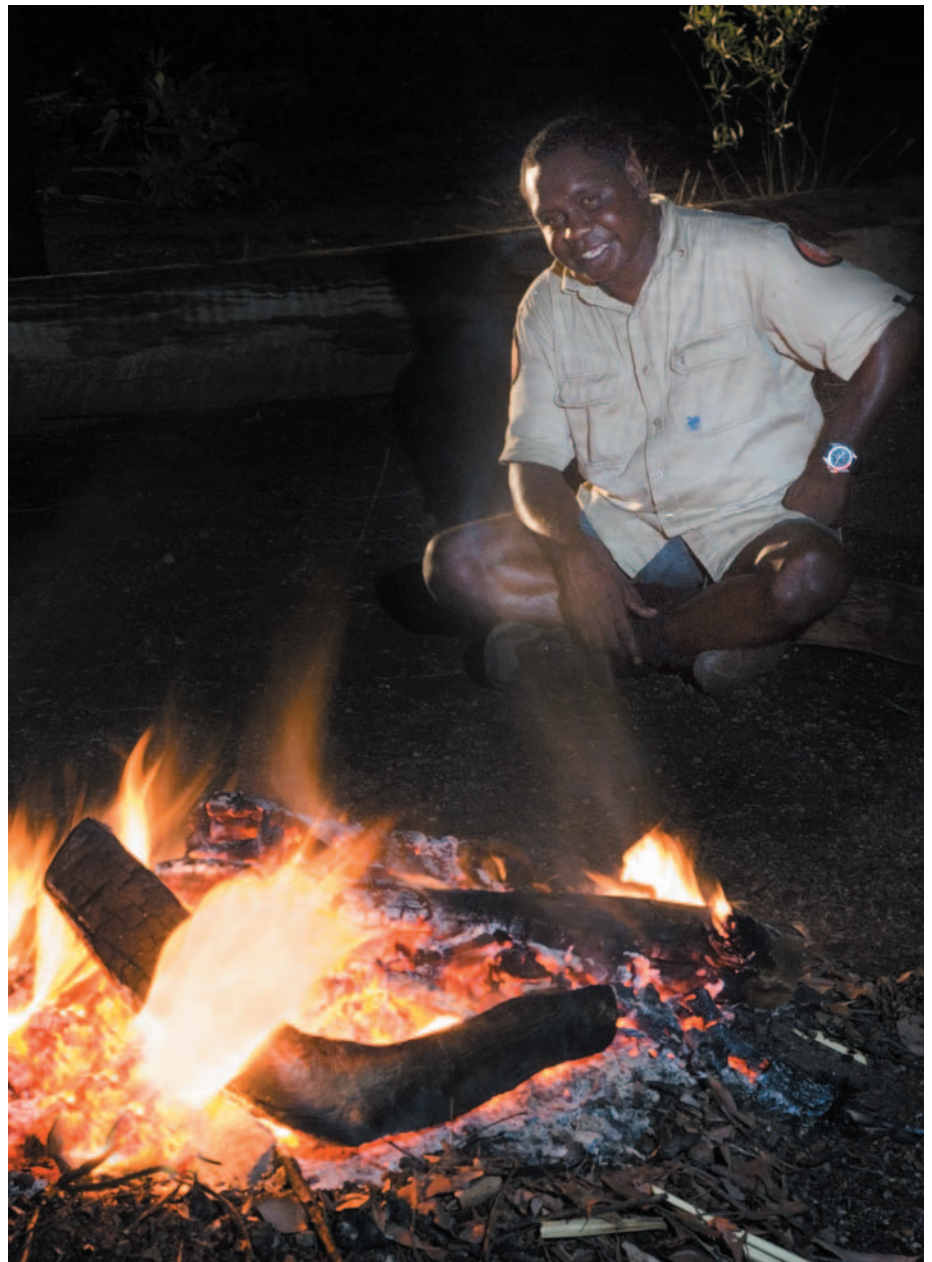
product – the program is empowering these people, who want to get involved in business, to make it work.'

A significant number of Aboriginal people operating tourism ventures are seeking the support of industry organisations and the knowledge of their peers in the tourism industry. This is a new direction and was no more apparent than at the Thematic Interpretation and Cultural Tourism workshop conducted at Ecotourism Australia's 2006 international conference last September at Charters Towers.

During the workshop, three indigenous operators – Mandy Muir of Murdudjurl Tours, Andy Ralph of Kakadu Culture Camp and Hank Horton of Jahadi Tours – raised concerns that have emerged in the marketplace, in particular maintaining Aboriginal lifestyle and ecosystems on homelands at the same time as building a new business.

'Our land is our life. We are active on our country and when people come into our homes we want them to feel what we feel,' said Muir. 'But we know that it is quality not quantity that is important.' For this reason, Murdudjurl Tours only runs three days a week, seven months a year, allowing Muir's family group time to participate in traditional hunting and gathering activities and control interruptions to the balance of nature on her homeland in Central Kakadu.

'We used to cook a mutton bird for each tourist on the tour,' said Hank Horton, owner of Jahadi Indigenous Tours in north-west Tasmania. 'Then we realised that we were interfering with the numbers of birds and that eventually there would be none left for us.' Horton expanded on this dilemma, explaining that with closer observation he became aware of other issues, like collecting bush tucker for tourists, which could present a potential problem in the future. As a result he modified his tour to protect his immediate environment, but



By a campfire on the banks of Djarradjin Billabong in Central Kakadu, Johnny Reid of Kakadu Culture Camp recites the Creation stories of the Bininj Aboriginal people. Grenville Turner/Wildlight

still showcases how Aboriginal people in Tasmania live off the land.

'Bush tucker tours have environmental impacts,' says Rick Murray, Director of ATA, member of the Kakadu Board of Management and Chair of the Kakadu Tourism Consultative Committee. 'If you are going to have "x" number of people through your land, stripping off the trees to show the foods, this will leave nothing for yourself and your kids later on. Stripped-off trees look bad and defeat the endeavour.'

Murray is an advocate of minimal environmental impact. 'The good thing is

that many new Aboriginal businesses are located within national parks and World Heritage areas, so in order to start up they have to have an environmental impact assessment done so they can prove viability. This starts the business off on the right foot.'

Alistair McCracken, Chairman of Ecotourism Australia, agrees. 'The role of this association is to share the best practices, knowledge and work amongst all of our members – to be mutually supportive of cultural and eco-tourism.' The fact that indigenous membership is being actively



Above left: Kakadu Culture Camp owner Jennifer Hunter talks about 'andudimi', or the green plum, whose semi-sweet flesh is a valuable source of Vitamin C for Aboriginal people.

Above right: Frad Hunter of Kakadu Culture Camp displays the skull of a crocodile that measured more than 5 metres, at Djarradjin Billabong, Kakadu National Park, NT.

Left: Willie Gordon of Guurrbi Tours displays the female flower of the Red Beech tree, a bush-tucker treat enjoyed by Aboriginal people. Grenville Turner/Wildlight

sought by the association reinforces the recognition of the significance of ecotourism on Aboriginal lands.

'We have a reciprocal membership with ATA,' says Stephen Pahl, CEO of Ecotourism Australia. 'ATA have their own accreditation process which we formally endorse and cross-promote as part of ecotourism accreditation. We are also very excited that Lois Peeler, Chair of ATA, is now on our board, because we see that as an overall commitment to securing the indigenous segment of our market and supporting ecotourism initiatives in this area.'

The road to success is a bumpy one for any enterprise, whether it is run by

Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal people. Add to this the need to maintain culture and manage sensitive ecosystems while trying to reduce community unemployment and other social problems, and you can see how indigenous tourist operators face almost insurmountable obstacles.

'Focus is important,' says Morse. 'I am very keen on partnership practices. Often there isn't enough capacity in communities nor an understanding of how to subscribe to non-Aboriginal business protocols.'

Inspiring successes have been achieved by Aboriginal-run ventures – Guurrbi Tours in Queensland, Iga Warta and Coorong Wilderness Lodge in South Australia, Brambuk Cultural Centre in Victoria, Anangu Tours and Desert Tracks in Central Australia, Lombadina Aboriginal Adventures in Western Australia, to name a few. Many of these operations have taken the approach of partnering with non-Aboriginal management companies or individuals to ensure positive development.

'To cite a good example of an Aboriginal tour company that is working extremely well, take a look at Nitmiluk Tours,' says Murray. 'Under a non-Aboriginal management team this business has gone from being in debt to being debt-free and 100 per cent Aboriginal-owned. The company makes about \$5 million a year, has positive employment outcomes and maintains ecotourism standards of the highest level.'

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