

CHAPTER SEVEN

MANAGING AN ECOTOURISM BUSINESS

Nature-based tour businesses are service businesses which need to very carefully manage quality, customer relations and pricing. Service businesses need to conform to perceived minimum standards of quality or offer distinctively higher quality service (McKercher and Robbins 1998: 187).

The tour guide and tourism-environment literature has provided a limited framework for the analysis of the ecotour guides as managers of tour businesses. The participants in this research did not conform to distinct categories of tour guides, tour operator or tour managers. Rather, the overarching organisation, the Savannah Guides, provided me with a distinct organisation to be examined. The data obtained from the participants showed they managed their own businesses which they had developed from family connections with the land and had carved out an existence in the bush. In Chapter Four, participants indicated that their sense of family values and family considerations were integral to their own ecotour enterprises. But the difficulties of juggling family life and the personal sacrifices indicate that this is a hard business sector to be involved in and, in a sense, is little different from running a company in an urban environment.

Throughout the research project many of the themes included here appeared as issues for the ecotour guides participating in the study. Firstly, I explore reasons why the participants in this study chose to begin an ecotourism business. Secondly, I investigate how the Savannah Guides use a cultivated 'image' to market themselves as a product and how marketing of ecotourism is achieved within the group. Thirdly, I discuss how they deal with restrictions, both governmental and self imposed, as they conduct their tours. Lastly, I examine issues of sustainability and problems with the concept with regard to ecotourism.

Reasons People Become Ecotourism Business Managers

Within the association, many of the guides expressed similar reasons for becoming ecotour managers and operators. Some had inherited sites from relatives, and had then developed their ecotourism businesses. Other guides saw ecotourism as an alternative to 'mainstream' employment. Yet others decided that ecotourism was an alternative to the decline in rural employment. Other managers realised there was a niche for ecotourism and exploited the opportunity.

Some managers had inherited a family business and this appears to be a much easier way to develop and enhance a tourist operation, rather than starting from the beginning.

Well, I guess I had a fascination for the lava tubes from the first time I saw them. I had worked in the family business from 1957

onwards. But, I was brought up on the cattle properties, sort of mustering in the school holidays, getting involved as it should be, in management, the usual thing. I worked at the family property, [names the property], next door (Guide 14, male, Tour Operator, Savannah Guide).

Pride in maintaining family connections with the land were essential reasons why Guide 6 established his family's original business.

Our family settled out there on the fourteenth of August, 1861. So, I'm fifth generation and so, it's a very important part of the family history. There's six generations of our family on the same cattle station. Which, I think, there wouldn't be too many families around, anywhere in Australia, that had that kind of heritage in a place (Guide 6, male, Tour Operator, Savannah Guide).

Inheritance did not necessarily make the transition from grazing to tourism run smoothly. However, it did provide a ready made development site.

Guide 8 saw an opportunity at her family's dilapidated site and used it as an occasion for development of an ecotourism product. It was also an opportunity for her and her partner to create their own employment in a rural setting.

The [names the business] has been in [her partner's] family since the early 1980s, when they were mining for gold. The site is heritage listed, and is recognised by mining historians as being one of the finest and most complete examples of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century gold mining in the world. It boasts several old buildings and a one hundred and twenty-year old quartz crushing machine used to obtain gold. My partner and I got together in 1995 and used to visit the mine on the weekends. By this time they had ceased mining and no one lived on site. We would talk about what we could do with the place. In 1996 we started planning the business and preparing to move onto the site, which we did in April 1997 (Guide 8, female, Site Interpreter).

A creative approach to employment shows motivation in regard to making money and the guides' creative attitude to carving out a living in an area with little employment opportunities.

Comparable to Guide 8, other ecotour guides established their current businesses themselves. Many of them saw a need for employment in country areas and thought they would be able to fulfill the need by establishing a service for something previously unavailable in their region. In some cases, economic survival was the reason many participants began their own self-employment in the tourist sector.

When I take a tour, I take people and tell them how we started on the property. We nearly went broke, how we started off, and we kicked along. We put every effort into it and lots of times we could have just turned around and said, "Bugger this. We're gone". And left it. But, we kept going and we made a success of it. And, as we're driving back past the road house, the tourists might say, "Wonder what made some silly bugger build a road house here? They had no idea!" And then we tell them about it. We had to do something to make a living. We could see money in tourism (Guide 5, male, Tour Operator, Savannah Guide).

This remark from Guide 5 shows that his sheer tenacity and perseverance helped him to build and maintain his own ecotourism business. The quote also illustrates the determination and drive to keep going during times of adversity and the personal strength needed to build up his ecotourism venture. It also indicates that he saw an opportunity to develop an ecotourism product in an area that had little other hope of employment prospects.

For some, the desire to work in the outdoors and to be involved in nature was the driving reason to establish an ecotourism business.

Well, when I got back from a long trip overseas, I decided that I wanted to get into this kind of thing, running safari type tours. Not hunting, but safari as in out in remote areas, interpreting the environment, taking people to ... I guess I chose to do that because, I believe that if someone wants to find their ideal career, they think of something they would do for nothing, and find a way to get paid to do it. That's what I was doing. Then, the question was either Africa or back home. So, I ended up back home and did a couple of years guiding for other companies in order to learn the tourism side, because I already had the interpretive side in place. Then, in 1988, I decided to ... there was an opening in the market for a high level of service and a high level of interpretation and, the private classic type tours, safari tours. So, I took that proposal to my boss at the time. I said, "Do you want to be in this? There's a huge gap in the market". He said, "No". So, I said, "Goodbye". I started [names his business]. It's gone on from there (Guide 33, male, Tour Operator, Savannah Guide).

Managing a family business is different from managing other businesses. Guide 37 told me that he is the owner and operator of an ecotourism business. He started it from nothing. Guide 34 also highlights the fact that this same business has now evolved into a family concern and that this has given the employees there more than just 'a place to work for'. The employed guide believes that there is true rapport between the employees and the owners.

About six years ago, I took some friends down the river fishing. They caught a Barramundi. They said, "You should start this up for a living". That was in about '92, '93. Then it really started to increase. My family was growing a little bit bigger. I needed a bigger boat. So I used to do the cruises every afternoon after work. Every day at four o'clock I'd go home, hook the boat on, go

down to the river and do the cruises for an hour only. Every afternoon it was, for ten dollars per head. Every afternoon I had a packed boat. Then I started to take the boat out for fishing trips and that sort of thing. It's just gone from there. That's what got me into it. These days the family doesn't get on the boat very much, 'cause they just want me at home (Guide 12, male, Site Interpreter).

Guide 12, like many, has indicated that ecotour guiding is more than just a job. He came to tourism by circumstance and it now dominates his life.

Some other guides had already established themselves in more mainstream types of lifestyles and employment. Of these, some needed to engage with other forms of stimulation in the outside world and so began a new business that catered for people wishing to 'discover' nature.

... I needed a change, so I decided to start up the boat [tour]. There was a need for it. Started it as an interest, yeah. I could see a need and other people could see a need too. So, I thought, "Well, I'll get into this on a part time basis". So, I started it part time and did a bit of research on the Norman River and mainly on the history side of things. What I started was a cruise, from five pm 'til six pm. I found most of my cruises were returning like at five thirty, quarter to six. So, these days, I run an hour and a half cruise, so that I can fit in at least a little bit [of history]. I talk about the workings of the boats on the river, the fishing industry, how it started out. What they used to do with the prawn processing on the Norman River, what they do now. The amateur fishing, the bird life, mangroves, reeds, the fish, the crocodiles, the bridge, the wrecks, whatever I can fit in in an hour and a half. It's all in my head. There's a lot of history there, that I haven't even scratched the surface of yet. A lot of things I don't even know. That's one reason I joined with Savannah Guides. Because some of these people, they can just about name every tree. To learn how to check that stuff out, and how to get references (Guide 12, male, Tour Operator, Site Interpreter).

Other guides were already employed in ecotourism but decided to begin their own businesses.

I became a Savannah Guide whilst employed by [names business]. I am now setting up my own enterprise to develop walking safaris (Guide 36, male, Employee, Savannah Guide).

Actually, in the 1985-86 wet season, I went to Karrinda, where I used to have a camp, at a place called Walkheart Reserve, south west of Darwin. I went to Karrinda for the wet season and I was looking around to buy another area, and I bumped into the owners of this area, who I knew from Coburg Peninsula. They asked me what I was doing at Karrinda, and I said I was looking for another area, and they said, "Oh, come and look at our area". So, I did! That's how I came to be here, and that was in 1986, when I started out here (Guide 29, male, Tour Operator, Site Interpreter).

Ecotourism develops niches in interpretation. Specialisation gives some an edge in a competitive market. One tour owner found geological information drew customers to his business.

Well, I own a tourist orientated business out near Lawn Hill National Park [300 kms north of Mount Isa]. We purchased the property here in 1980, for the purposes of tourism. Then, eventually the national park was formed on our doorstep in 1985. So, we virtually had no tourism until then. But we were ready for it when it came. The property that I had bought was once owned by a French botanist and so there were a few trees and different plants here. So, once we got part of the property cleaned up, people would like to walk through it. And then, it came where people were asking questions. "What trees are these?" "What's the history of this place?" So, the tour developed from that, until I broadened the scope to take in the general geology of the area, as well as the flora and fauna and the archaeology. Riversleigh Fossil field is sort of on our doorstep as well. So, I used to do a little bit of work down there with a scientific team in the early years. So, I built stories of that into the story of geology and the on-going geology here, in this area. It is an extremely interesting area (Guide 4, male, Tour Operator, Savannah Guide).

One guide works for a business that is quite unique in the tourism field. He has aligned himself with, and become a member of, the Savannah Guides. This, he feels, gives him and the business credibility within the tourism industry. The uniqueness of his tour is also a vehicle for him to develop an acceptable level of interpretation on his tours.

The job I'm doing in [names business] is very unique. There's no other job in [names business] like it. And, there's probably no other Savannah Guide who does a job like, similar to mine, in that, I run a railway station, I do all the travel enquiries, I do all the bookings, and not just the bookings for our train, but for other features around the place. A lot of hands on with the tourists. I am the Station Master, I run the station. I'm the ticket seller, the accountant, I'm the administrator, I'm everything. I drive the train, which is more than driving a train, because I'm really conducting a tour and I've got to sell the country and make them enjoy their tour. I've got them for five hours. It's a long tour and, as well as driving the train, it's maintaining the train. I do all the repair work as well. I probably think I've got more skills than other people here. Although, there's a lot more I can pick up, that's for sure (Guide 25, male, Employee, Site Interpreter).

This guide has found viable employment in the niche market of ecotourism. His business is not strictly related to nature-based tourism but has a strong historical and cultural component that can be subsumed under the rubric of ecotourism. The particular niche he has cornered fits well with the marketing ideals of the Savannah Guides.

For those who have dreamed of owning a tourism business all their lives, the amount of physical energy and perseverance needed to create a fully functional business is enormous.

It's probably something I wanted to establish since I was a child. And, I thought, maybe bush style huts, like at Einasleigh Gorge. I've worked pretty hard to get where I am, to be able to get in a position to establish it. We slowly developed a workshop, started building a house and carted all the volcanic rocks, because there's a fair bit of rock in there ... We've been going nearly five years (Guide 20, male, Tour Operator, Savannah Guide).

We had one Sunday off. The bird aviary needed fixing. We didn't quite get there, but we put a hell of an effort into getting that done. We shovelled dirt, we did roads. The enthusiasm is there. The effort is never in vain (Guide 13, female, Site Interpreter).

Since moving out here, we have restored the ten head stamping battery [quartz crushing machine] to working order, restored the old office [now their home], the manager's cottage [now the guest house], rebuilt the fifteen metre timber frame over the main shaft [mine head] and established a camp ground. Despite the progress made so far, there is still a lot to be done (Guide 8, female, Tour Operator, Site Interpreter).

Established administrators understood the danger of personal exhaustion and recommend that anyone going into this occupation must be conscious of how inflexible the lifestyle can be. New operators are confronted with long hours and little independence from running a seven-day-a-week company, and have low fiscal compensations. Owner/operators implied that new business people had to be aware of the fact that it is frequently hard to get away even for small respites and that, for many, the possibility of employing personnel to soften the workload is simply not an economic option (McKercher and Robbins 1998: 185).

Marketing an Ecotourism Business

Ecotourism depends on the evolution of distinctive, authentic products and the effective advertising and conveyance of these products to potential tourists but in a context which does not convey commercialism or commodification of experience. As ecotourism is a supposedly new sector of business, little definite marketing information is available. This insufficiency of information is consequently a critical limitation to comprehending ecotourism expansion (Allcock, Jones, Lane, and Grant 1994: 36-37).

The image projected by a given group is paramount to the success of marketing. Well-dressed, neat and orderly presentations of ecotour guides are an obvious drawcard for the tourist in search of the 'ultimate' ecoexperience holiday or tour. Image, in the case of the Savannah Guides, is personified in the epitome of a typical bushman or folkloric hero - a 'saviour' of the uninitiated.

Marketing of ecotourism and individual businesses is an important part of the way in which the Savannah Guides are able to disseminate information both about each individual group of ecotours and about the overall organisation. Marketing also presents to the public a positive representation of the entire group. Indeed, the founder of the Savannah Guides believes it is one of the cornerstones upon which the credibility of the organisation stands. According to him, the Savannah Guides envisage the

overall development of a distinctive, high profile, exceptional group of ecotour guides.

[The original concept of Savannah Guides] was association. [The network and group] was [about] developing them as characters, so that they were involved with people like the Bush Tucker man, or David Bellamy. [This type of marketing concept is] all association. [The Savannah Guides have] got to be good because David Bellamy sits and had [sic] tea with them. You can't buy that sort of publicity (Guide 21, male, Honorary Guide).

Banding together to implement marketing strategies appears to only have benefitted the larger and seemingly wealthier members of the association.

Joint and co-marketing is always important. However, it is just one aspect of the marketing portfolio. The extent of an individual's commitment to Savannah Guide joint marketing is that it is all expensive and the measurement of its success is usually circumstantial (Guide 9, male, Employee, Savannah Guide).

The Savannah Guides are able to sell themselves as a particular blend of outback guide and high-grade interpreter. The image the Savannah Guides have created of themselves is that of a presentable, knowledgeable ecotour guide and scout or ranger who can take charge of tourists and provide them with the superlative guided and interpreted ecotour experience. Bush skills and high levels of knowledge about Australian flora and fauna also add to the marketing image of this group.

Guide 21 believes that the marketing has not succeeded as well as the guides had expected. He states that the larger operators within the group

have benefited from the public exposure, but that the smaller operators have been left behind in the race to attract clients.

In the absence of a million dollars to promote the organisation, they had to use every solitary tool that they could, to sell themselves. That was image, uniform, logo and it's how they go about their business, developing a culture, all those sort of things. I guess, my criticism of it is, I think the marketing fails. I think that although it was an organisation that set out to assist individual operators, I think that some operators may have cornered the market at the expense of others (Guide 21, male, Honorary Guide).

The image that this guide is referring to is that of a clean-cut, neat, regulated, proficient individual who can accompany and decipher for the uninformed ecotourist. For example, Guide 39 joined the group because she has a passion for the concepts and ethos of the Savannah Guide system. She believes in protecting the environment by educating tourists and leading by example. Hers could be considered a somewhat romanticised view and image of the occupation. Idealistic images and views of nature-based tours and guided interpretation do not always provide an exceptional experience because image can easily be shattered by any number of inconsequential mishaps or other errors.

A number of the guides had very positive things to say about the marketing of Savannah Guides. But, perhaps the most succinct comment of all came from a female who pointed out:

[Savannah Guides] is an image thing. [Clients] recognise Undara and Wilderness Challenge and that. [The Savannah Guide Stations and Sites] are all top-notch tourist operations, and

[clients] recognise that. I think that's got a fair bit to do with it. So, in a way, I think the organisation has helped [with the image] (Guide 19, female, Employee, Site Interpreter).

Membership in the organisation provides the attraction of joint marketing. The image of the Savannah Guides is wide spread in certain areas and tourist clients are aware of the 'trademark' uniform which carries with it a certain assumed responsibility of high grade performance and interpretation. The image and the uniform can be seen as seals of approval on both the guides and the association.

Co-operative or reciprocal promotion of one another's guiding ventures has also been a great asset to the group. This, in turn, has led to the Savannah Guide website ¹ and associated links to other web pages, which are essential to the promotion of the organisation's ecotour products both locally and internationally. According to Kleinhardt-FGI ² (1998), 'the principal marketing techniques to be utilised by the network are brochures and a web site' (Appendix H, Kleinhardt-FGI 1998: 41).

In the past it has been one of the greater assets that they have always promoted each other's site. These days, I think, with technology going the way it's going, they are talking about the website being an important part of it (Guide 18, male, Employee, Savannah Guide).

¹ See <http://www.savannah-guides.com.au>

² Kleinhardt-FGI is a corporate advisory firm that specialises in servicing tourism and industry throughout northern Australia. It is an established network of technical specialists that focus on regional analysis, strategy and project development and implementation.

Aaker (1995) has distinguished four main features of an integral approach to marketing. First, it is important to determine the commodity market in which the company is to compete, and the commodity markets that it will elude. Second, it is valuable to gauge the level of resources essential to accomplish different objectives. Third, the practical area procedures of the company (product line procedure, situating procedure, tariff procedure, dispersion procedure etc.) need to be ascertained. Last, perceived benefits from the crucial resources and expertise of the operation should be analysed (McKercher and Robbins 1998: 181).

The marketing potential of each individual business can be realised by a committed approach to publicity, but a sustained effort must also be considered as an integral part of advertising. 'Dedication' is one of the key words Guide 7 uses to describe his attitude to marketing his ecotour enterprise. Guide 14 believes that marketing is critically important because the Savannah Guide Stations, Sites and businesses are so much further away from their competitors on the east coast. Therefore, the organisation has to be determined about their marketing and image and, also, be able to practice it more effectively than their competitors.

Advertising often relies on the operators delivering brochures by hand to commercial sites. I have been witness to some Savannah Guides stopping at every roadhouse, take-away food business and service station throughout

locations in the outback, to deliver brochures about their sites and ecobusinesses. Such deliveries are time-consuming and can only be undertaken if the guides have the time available and are able to leave their businesses, even for a short while. Many guides leave their pamphlets at tourist stopping places, mostly either on their way to or from the bi-annual Savannah Guide Schools. Even though this method of distribution is time consuming it does save on postage and is easily undertaken as the guides are passing by. However, the guides are also dependent on the good will of the business owners to position their brochures so tourists will see them.

I've got ads in the post office, the hotels, the caravan park, the motel, that's in Normanton. Burke and Wills Roadhouse in Longreach. Longreach Visitor Centre, Cloncurry, Mount Isa, Riversleigh Fossil Centre, Ravenshoe, Mount Surprise, wherever I can think of to put them. The only place I haven't really put any is Karumba. I could possibly get a bit more interest if I go up there and put some up there (Guide 12, male, Tour Operator, Site Interpreter).

An inadequate promotion of ecotours was mentioned by Guide 37. He believes that the Savannah Guides have concentrated on the product and not on the promotion. This guide questions the existing marketing approach and the consequent advertising of the product to the public. According to Guide 14, the marketing strategies will increase dramatically during the next two or three years and attract some really good business. In this way, the publicity will show its potential to attract tourists.

[The marketing has] been limited. But what we have done is worthwhile. [The promotion is] more a creation of awareness rather than joint advertising and joint marketing. We've not had the resources, the financial resources to get into joint marketing

programs. Whilst we have, in the past, done brochures in similar formats ³ That's an awareness thing. And, yes, if we talk about creating awareness and lifting the profile, it has been worthwhile (Guide 14, male, Tour Operator, Savannah Guide).

According to Ziffer (1989):

The high percentage of tour operators that use magazines and brochures demonstrates that operators are carefully targeting their customers and also relying heavily on requests for information. This specialised advertising is appropriate (Ziffer 1989: 23).

Guide 10 also believes that marketing the organisation and one another's businesses has a positive outcome for the group and also within the tourism industry.

From a non-financial aspect, I think that joint marketing is important for the region. Obviously, smaller businesses would benefit from piggy backing on the larger operators marketing (Guide 10, male, Employee, Savannah Guide).

Therefore, the marketing of the bigger companies actually helps the smaller businesses involved in the organisation.

Marketing practices need to be flexible and adapt to different companies: small tourism operators have different challenges such as reputation, verification of identity and exposure. A four-wheel drive ecotour operator, for example, testified her marketing assignment was to recognise various markets and 'to approach these markets without spending vast

³ See Appendix I for a selection of Savannah Guides brochures and promotional advertising literature.

amounts of money to obtain greatest results'. Similarly, an ecotour operator from northern New South Wales said the task confronting his operation was to be able to divide the market by being aware of who the market is and what it requires. He was then able to market straight to it (McKercher and Robbins 1998: 180-181).

The past president of the guides believes that their particular form of marketing is still in its embryonic stage. He believes the marketing will attract more interest in the future for both the general public and other, outside parties. At the present, the current marketing arrangements are perceived as a worthwhile means of differentiating ecotourism products.

The Savannah Guides website is managed by a contracted internet technician. There is a main web page with connected links to each Savannah Guides enterprise. Other links to information about the Savannah Guides are also connected to their main web page. But, many of the smaller business associated with the Savannah Guides report that their own web pages have been far more successful and attracted tourists rather than the main Savannah Guides web page. Constructing and posting their own web page is a marketing edge for small business managers. The websites are easy to construct, once the business owners know how, and they are cheap to maintain.

Still, there are other Savannah Guides who believe the marketing and website of the group is not beneficial to either themselves individually, or to their individual ecotour business.

We have received absolutely no marketing benefits from Savannah Guides. There is very little contact or support, and because we are small and isolated, we don't automatically get visited, included or even recommended. We feel a bit as though Savannah Guides is interested in our membership dollars but not our product. The first time we were included in a Savannah Guide's marketing initiative was on their website, but we are only permitted a 'grab' on that and it doesn't really represent what we offer. We have never had a customer from that site, yet our own site works quite well. The second inclusion was having a visit from David Bellamy, but we were warned that we could be cut from the documentary film. We are fairly disillusioned with any perceived marketing benefits with Savannah Guides, and we keep hoping this might improve (Guide 8, female, Tour Operator, Site Interpreter).

Even though this guide, and the associated business, would have joined the Savannah Guides to benefit from the organisational marketing 'hook', being aligned with the Savannah Guides marketing has obviously not had a substantial or beneficial effect on this particular business. Since I interviewed this guide, the guide, the business and the other guide involved have all left the Savannah Guides association.

Many of the business managers welcomed the use of websites as an avenue of product information dissemination. Guide 2 reported that websites do not actually involve a lot of work. But, he believed initial instruction was necessary to understand the building and maintenance of websites. However, he expresses the point that too many people have a lot

to say about marketing via a website and that far more explanation is needed regarding website construction, uploading of information, creating links and web page maintenance. Individual members need continuing instruction in website management and maintenance of their individual business websites.

Common identifiable marketing themes are found to be necessary for product marketing. Guide 30 says that he will link to the Savannah Guides' website and also put the phantom (Savannah Guide badge logo) on his brochures as part of the marketing of his business and of the guides themselves. Nevertheless, he added he will only do this as long as the Savannah Guides retain and maintain their current ethical position on the environment. For the present, he reported, a link to the Savannah Guides website is a marketing advantage.

A similar incident has been noted in Weiler and Davis' (1993) study.

... [O]ne operator's brochure notes that their guides, 'beside being master interpreters with an intimate knowledge of their individual environments, are also protectors of their specific locations' (Weiler and Davis 1993: 95).

The Savannah Guides use very similar wording and concepts to promote themselves as an ecotourism concern. They use the phrases: 'Protectors and Interpreters of the Outback' and, 'Protectors of the Tropical Savannas of Northern Australia' (see <http://www.savannah-guides.com.au>).

Smaller groups desire the umbrella of the Savannah Guides website because they can gain prestige by the well recognised eco-logo. These marketing tools allow the guides to present themselves in a way that is readily understood by clients because of the generic conservation image of the overarching organisation.

Clearly, the marketing of commodities and services as 'environmentally friendly' or 'ethically sound' is a notable characteristic of modern publicity and attracts people away from so-called mainstream tourism which, some allege, ruins the environment (Smith 1998: 57).

However, marketing of information does not always reach the general public.

I think, [the marketing] really is not enough. We need some more saturation [through marketing], because of the fact that a lot of times a lot of people don't know anything about Savannah Guides until they come to Undara. So, in actual fact, our advertising is not really what you call one hundred percent effective. I think, that probably, what's going to happen is, our marketing members of the Joongai, are going to have to take that extra step to saturate, well, not actually saturate, but get across to the travelling public (Guide 24, female, Employee, Savannah Guide).

Marketing can also be prohibited by cost, even though initial advertising is crucial for the company image and for carving a niche in the market.

In particular, operators were astonished to discover how expensive and ineffective most advertising was. These issues are critical especially during those crucial early years when resources are scarce (McKercher and Robbins 1998: 182).

Guide 25 and Guide 12 recounted that they did not actually use the Savannah Guide marketing approach or website as tools for informing the touring public about their ecotour businesses.

The co-operation is very good. But I don't use the organisation, with marketing, as yet. But, I can see how they work with other people who have Savannah Guide Sites and are Savannah Guides (Guide 25, male, Employee, Site Interpreter).

Recently, many operators have realised that achievement in the nature-based tourism industry comes not from urging commodities onto tourists, but from selling products which fulfill the customer's needs and requirements. Accordingly, many operators have had to alter their products considerably throughout the years (McKercher and Robbins 1998: 181). Ecotourism operators have realised that forcing the customer into a tour or trip they do not want is not the way to achieve sales in a competitive tourism sector. Managers and business owners now realise that targeting a selective tourist market and catering for personal needs and idiosyncrasies is the way forward to a viable and competitive business plan. For example, some of the guides talked about how long it took to get the tour components right and how, currently, their tour products are still evolving.

Managers of ecotourism products confront the problem of supplying products that appeal to a diversity of tourist tastes. The challenge of product development is to supply a high quality result that includes a wide range of interpretive skills catering for customer levels without disturbing the

physical environment or the native flora and fauna. Development of the right product involves many issues. Some of these issues include having customers in the 'right place at the right time', such as setting up camp, capturing native fauna in a photographic situation, accommodating and organising meal times, planning the route, development of itinerary, specific content of the tour, tour duration, and quality of the ecoexperience (McKercher and Robbins 1998: 181).

Restrictions on Managing an Ecotourism Business

The managers in this group of ecotourism guides have many diverse rules and regulations to contend with when planning to commence an ecofriendly business. Rules, regulations and restrictions play an important part in the execution and development of ecobusinesses and ecotours.

The restrictions that are placed upon ecotour groups, either static site tours or moving tours, are mainly of two types; bureaucratic restrictions and right of access restrictions; and the restrictions that are self-imposed by the guides. These self-imposed restrictions include the numbers of people permitted to enter a site, any modifications or additions to a site and the environment and natural elements themselves. Consider the explanation of Guide 12, who operates a fishing trip and river tour operation:

I need a tour permit. I've got to have the required licences and registrations. I've got to have Council permission, for a start. As a courtesy, it was not a requirement. Because there's no real restrictions [sic], apart from all the legal obligations, licences,

registrations, all that sort of stuff. Oh, there is one restriction – the tide [laughter] (Guide 12, male, Tour Operator, Site Interpreter).

Guide 25 told me that everything he does has to be approved by Queensland Rail. He considers that a major restriction. He cannot take a tour or run a train without their permission. Guide 37 also explained that there are a multitude of restrictions for businesses everywhere. He believes that the important ones for the Savannah Guides are to adhere to minimal impact practices and to gain the respect of the local people and communities. Indeed, in the example of ecotourism, the exclusion of competitive land use is essential. Agriculture, timber, mining and occasionally hunting are exempt from nearly all protected areas. It is possible that the profits from these occupations could be used for the maintenance of tourist locations (Place 1998: 108).

There is a lot of criticism from ecotour operators about restrictions placed on the operations of their tours. Some of the criticism concerns the bureaucracy, but this is probably necessary to 'protect' and 'sustain' the wilderness or environment. The tour operators appear to condemn these arrangements because firstly, they are a drain on the financial resources of each business, where profit margins can be very slim. And, secondly, they prevent the ecotours from travelling to specific regions of 'environmental worth' and thereby inhibit the ecoexperience. However, the restrictions

dictated by groups such as the National Parks Service, may be because certain areas have been deemed hazardous and dangerous for tourists.

The tour owners also saw restrictions as a hindrance to ecotourism. Some operators recognised the financial costs and problems of time constraints and of having to obey the rules of officials as being one of the leading disappointments of being in the industry. An administrator who concentrates his tours in a national park remarked on the measure of persistence necessary to control the constantly expanding government and semi-government constraints, rules, authorisation, permits and communications; the increasing public liability limitations and constraints on national park movements; and researchers wanting facts and conducting studies. Other tour operators protested about the constant variation in government regulations and of the necessity to be a psychic to be able to prophesy which new rules government agencies would produce (McKercher and Robbins 1998: 179-180).

Guide 32 told me about the restrictions on numbers of people allowed into the Undara Lava Tubes in any one day. The restriction on numbers has been set by the National Parks Service. Two hundred people per day is the maximum allowed on the site. The guide believes that if those numbers were derived from issues of sustainability and not just because two hundred was the chosen number, then, he would be in full agreement with the National

Parks Service. But he is sceptical of the restrictions because he considers the number arrived at was arbitrary.

A key problem in ecotourism management is the bureaucratic tangle which must be negotiated.

One of the biggest restrictions is the number of permits that are made available into national parks. I support this in some ways, because the impact on national parks would be very great. On the other hand, I'm not sure it's being implemented as well as it might. I think that there's probably opportunities for people to go into other areas of national parks without going into the main areas. For instance, I'm not that interested in going into the main parts of Cape Tribulation and the Daintree areas. But there are a lot of other areas there that could be made available to tour companies there, that spread the load. Why have everybody go to one particular area? Yes. There are restrictions and it's regrettable in many ways, it's understandable in others (Guide 22, male, Tour Operator, Roving Interpreter).

One frustrated administrator claimed the necessity to keep up with the additional regulations for every government department is almost impossible for the typical citizen who just wants to get out in the field and do what they want to do. Others are more complacent, and recommend that improving liaison and government association expertise is one of the most significant necessities of ecotourist operators (McKercher and Robbins 1998: 180). An open dialogue between ecotourism managers and governmental agencies will help to promote the cause of the nature-based tourism industry and aid in the mutual development of regulations agreeable to both the industry and the government.

Restrictions also impinge on managerial decision making. 'Safety has also been identified through private surveys as an important factor for visitors when travelling to rural and remote locations' (Appendix H, Kleinhardt-FGI 1998: 40).

There's limitations put on us by National Parks and limitations put on us by personal safety, the customer safety. Once again, it's a situation by situation thing. You've got to constantly be there or [it's] ..., personal risk to the clients. So, there are limitations and it's something that you need to constantly assess as you go along (Guide 38, male, Employee, Savannah Guide).

As a manager, Guide 18 also contributed to this theme of 'restrictions' by adding that most of the restrictions he encounters are connected to time and active travel. He related facts about stopping for breaks during the journey and restrictions related to where he could actually camp with his tour group each night. He reported that, frequently, in order to adhere to the restrictions, the only thing he had to do was fill out a form.

The Native Title Act is also a restriction that many of the guides must try to accommodate.

We've got one big restriction here, at the moment, and it's a land issue. It's tied in a little bit with Native Title. It hasn't been deliberate by the Aborigines but, it has come about through a Native Title claim in the Shire. The restriction hasn't fully developed yet. What we are trying to do is develop a camp site into having its own business lease so that we have some secure tenure over it. But, we can't do that while they have a Native Title claim. We're working away at it and I think we are going to be successful, because we don't want to lose what we have developed and worked hard for. Without doing that, without having security we just cannot keep operating the way we are. If

someone came down and closed us down tomorrow, what could we do? (Guide 35, male, Tour Operator, Savannah Guide).

According to Hynes (1999), Cobbold Gorge Savannah Guide Station has now refined a specific site management plan and is in the process of advancing a commonly satisfactory procedural arrangement with the Queensland government about the long-term sustainable management of the site and the guiding venture. Comparable site plans are being perfected on a collection of equivalent Savannah Guide Sites (Hynes 1999: 12).

Aboriginal areas and sacred sites are a contentious issue for ecotour guides and traditional owners. Guide 29 has a formal contract with the guardians of the area he takes tourists to visit. He has to be vigilant about the tourists he guides into these places and, also, his tour guides.

I'm entrusted to keep the people out [of sacred sites], I give [the traditional owners] a contract, or if anyone who works for me, or is employed by me, is out here on tour, and happens to desecrate a [sacred] site, then it costs me everything I own. But, I know more about the sacred sites than even the land council does. And, I jealously guard those and don't take people to certain places, then they don't even know that they are there. Everyone is guided, no one is allowed out on their own. Yeah. There are restrictions (Guide 29, male, Tour Operator, Site Interpreter).

Guide 30 is allowed to access sacred Aboriginal sites, but he is not permitted to touch anything at all, or to light fires outside certain areas. There appears to be no point to his conducting tours into designated parks, as when he gets there, he is unable to give his clients an ecoexperience because they are not permitted to touch any flora or fauna.

[In] Kakadu I have [restrictions]. Nowhere else. Kakadu, you can't light a fire outside of designated areas. You can't touch wildlife; you can't pick up a flower. You can't do this, which I find restrictive because I think, if you are responsible and pick something up gently, and show it to people, give them a bit of tactile, they tend to ... I think, if you touch an animal, you bond with it a bit better, and you start to think, maybe the dead ones are not such a good thing to see (Guide 30, male, Tour Operator, Roving Interpreter).

Conversely, a number of other ecotour managers reported that there were no restrictions. In general, no restrictions applied in the ecotourism context. When I asked them if they had to contend with any restrictions connected to running their ecotourism businesses many of them replied in the negative.

No. Not really (Guide 19, female, Site Interpreter).

Generally there are no rules in the ecotourism context. Really, there are none (Guide 36, male, Savannah Guide).

Not that I know of (Guide 13, female, Site Interpreter).

The rationale behind this is that if people care for the environment they will follow the (non-existent) rules without question. Further, Guide 13 told me that there are no restrictions placed on her, apart from a code of ethics. However, she did not elaborate on what this code of ethics was or exactly who it related to.

Sustainability is one of the key words used to advertise ecotourism. The word implies that the environment is kept intact so that tourists can return to the same places and enjoy their purity. Sustainability appears to be

something of a misnomer as it is difficult to keep something in pristine condition while tourists keep coming to see the areas and trample all over the sites. MacLaren argues that, 'there are no examples of ecotourism projects that adequately pay for themselves; in other words, ecotourism is simply not sustainable' (MacLaren 1998: 101). However, according to Mananyi (1998), sustainability is implied in the concept of ecotourism. Sustainability can be interpreted in many ways. The Bruntland Commission defines sustainable development as, 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED 1987: 43). Within this definition, sustainability can be viewed as encompassing all notions of optimal resource use (Mananyi 1998: 148).

Nevertheless, although sustainability is not easily defined, most guides are keen to protect the environment and feel this conservation is essential to selling their ecoproduct. During some of the Savannah Guide Schools, the group has been instrumental in conducting 'environmental site assessments', where particular sites being visited are environmentally evaluated by the group and recommendations are drawn up and presented to the owners or occupiers of the particular sites. For instance, recommendations for the on-going viability and preservation of the newly constructed Lake Belmore, outside Croydon, were presented to the Croydon Shire Council after a site assessment. This purpose built lake is the town's

water supply and the Council has plans for recreational water sports to be permitted there. On a property, outside Longreach, the guides engaged in a site assessment of a badly eroded area on a 'jump up'. A jump up is a large, flat, raised piece of land in a surrounding flattened landscape. It has a similar appearance to Uluru, but on a much smaller scale. The guides assessed the area's erosion problems and presented a comprehensive document of advice to the landowner. At Burke and Will's Camp 119, the guides walked around the area, gave valuable verbal assessments of what could happen and how degradation and mismanagement of the historic site could be ameliorated. This comprehensive document was then given to the Normanton Shire Council with the suggestions for improvement. At the Mutton Hole Wetlands, outside Normanton, a site assessment was also undertaken. Recommendations for improvements at the site and serious concerns for the viability of the wildlife were also considerations in the site assessment. These recommendations, too, were presented to the local Shire Council (Fieldnotes 15.04.99 and 28.10.00). This idea of giving something back to the community, in the framework of an informed appraisal of a problem tourist area with suggestions for sustainably appropriate improvements, forms a part of ecological sustainability and ecotourism generally. Community involvement in ecotourism is part of the general ethos of this brand of tourism. In many countries, ecotourism is an integral part of community life. Therefore, those who use the resources are obliged to return something to the places they utilise.

PLATE 7.1**Environmental Site Assessment**

MacLaren (1998) argues that all types of tourism in the west are unsustainable and a threat to the cultural and biological diversity of destination communities worldwide. The way forward to a more sustainable ecotourism is to move beyond specific preservation and environmental guardianship approaches to combine extensive public and geographical growth preferences (MacLaren 1998: 110).

The Savannah Guides utilise sustainable management practices within their guided tours and at the ecotour sites they operate.

I guess we're doing it every day without even knowing it. Sustainability I mean. We've only got one road that goes in there. We use the same road in and out. All our tucker we take in there. For the half day tour, we take in a big Esky [a portable ice box] and everything comes back out again. There's no waste in there, apart from the toilet, but it's a chemical toilet. In the gorge itself, we do allow swimming. The water quality is good. When they

do swim, we only allow them to swim at the bottom end, where we have lunch. So, if they have got sunscreen on, it just flows straight out the bottom of the gorge and into the sand of the river. So, it's not as if it's up the top, where it can pollute the waterway (Guide 35, male, Tour Operator, Savannah Guide).

Minimal impact practices means that these ecotours operate on a small scale, needing only a small amount of specialised infrastructure, and do not contribute to the degradation of the environment upon which they, and all other types of tourism, are so dependent. As Butler suggests, 'if ecotourism damages the natural resource, then it isn't ecotourism' (Butler 1992). Likewise, Bragg (1990) argues that, 'ecotourism has by definition minimal environmental impact, since unspoiled natural environments are the attraction of this type of tourism' (Wearing and Neil 1999: 6).

In many cases, sustainable management practices are followed to keep the aesthetic and environmental values of an area intact. Accommodation is often constructed to take full advantage of the landscape. In fact, Guide 14's ecotour establishment has added to the tree numbers by planting extra native trees in the area.

Sofield and Getz (1997), in their study on rural tourism found that enhancement and improvement of ecotourism sites included maintenance and monitoring as an on-going process.

Ecologically sustainable development principles govern operations in the management of Undara Lava Lodge, and this fact is mentioned in promotional materials as 'Undara's

environmental management plan'. Undara Experience contributes to the conservation of habitat and of sites which may be affected by tourism, and ensures that environmental assessment becomes an integral part of the ongoing operation of the facility. It fosters in both management and staff an awareness of environmental and conservation principles. Undara Experience enhances the appreciation and understanding by tourists of the environment by providing accurate information and appropriate interpretation. It supports the inclusion of professional conservation principles in tourism, education, training and planning (Sofield and Getz 1997: 154).

Management in a sustainable manner means being able to manage the considerable stresses on the environment, such as the behaviour of the ecotourists and their numbers, by introducing techniques that minimise waste disposal and visitor impacts, and promote energy use minimisation (Beeton 1998: 2).

Managers of ecotourism businesses must often make hard decisions about preservation of the environment. Although innovative, environmental measures have been introduced by some operators; new practices and technologies in refuse and energy minimisation are unknown to some sectors of the ecotourism industry. Particularly in the case of recycling, where standards are lacking, many operators find it hard to achieve high levels of environmental performance. As a result, many solo operators cannot establish economically viable alternative schemes. Recycling is limited to schemes that provide little environmental difference (Toplis 1995: 27). As managers, the guides must sometimes compromise their ethical beliefs. For example, Guide 29 mentioned that at his site they bury all their rubbish, as

there is nothing else that can be done with it, given the geographical location of the site. His ecobusiness is so remote there is no access to a Council controlled waste disposal facility.

Recycling costs and processes are added costs to ecotourism management. All cardboard, plastic, glass, aluminium cans and left over foodstuffs are recycled in appropriate compactors and recycling pits on site. In the above Savannah Guides Site Plan, there is provision for recycling, which has been approved by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Recycling can benefit more than the environment. Guide 6 said that when the aluminium cans from his Site are crushed, the money is donated to the Parents and Citizens group at the local State school. This ecobusiness is trying to give something back to the local community, in line with the principles of sustainability of local towns as well as of the community. There are also plans for treating the wastewater generated by this ecotourist site. The site also supplies firewood to the campsites they rent to tourists because this prevents visitors acquiring their own wood from the bush. The guides try and make sure wood is collected from already cleared areas, such as where the power lines or the road came onto the property originally. This is similar to Hitchcock (1997) who suggests, '[t]ourists often have a negative effect on firewood supplies, particularly since, ... they do not know how to

build proper fires and tended to use wood at a prodigious rate' (Hitchcock 1997: 105).

Ecotour managers face many ethical issues such as the appropriate commercial use of protected regions, the manner in which the region is marketed, and appropriate modifications to accommodate the tourists. In some instances, modifications such as designated camp sites, pre-constructed campfire areas and signposted walking tracks could increase the positive features of the location. Other positive features could be significant environmental varieties of indigenous animals, such as distinctive and ecologically sensitive flora and fauna, nesting grounds of rare species of indigenous animals and rare and environmentally sensitive plants and indigenous sacred sites. But conversely, any modification could lessen the 'naturalness' of the ecoexperience. In other situations, noticeable environmental or social degradation, such as loss of habitat or species, may end in a lessening of the operator's permitted activity. In fact, if sites and animals disappear, so do the ecotourists. A lack of planning for any of these environmental eventualities may have a deleterious effect on ecotourism (McKercher 1998: 8).

Access to any of the guides' static business sites can be gained by road, provided the roads are passable and maintained. Dilapidated roads into or out of each site can affect visitor numbers and deter otherwise adventurous

tourists from making the journey. Therefore, good management practices develop strategic management techniques to maintain site accessibility. Guide 29 recounted the problem he has experienced with bad roads around his site. He added that the toilet system they are using needs to be upgraded and that he is thinking about using a bio-degradable system. He also talked generally about how he and his employees look after the site.

It's mainly just looking and watching what's happening in the area. Making sure that if any use overload starts to appear that we rectify it or stop it being heavily used, or stop the erosion or problems of killing the plants. We're very careful with our fire regimes. We mentioned at the Savannah Guide School that, well one of the guys from National Parks said it's the best and healthiest environment he's come across. So, we must be doing something right (Guide 29, male, Tour Operator, Site Interpreter).

Managing tours involves educating people to clean up after themselves.

Guide 38 also spoke about sustainability and looking after the environment.

On our camping tours we leave the site probably in a better condition than what it was in when we turned up. We encourage the people; we sort of try and get them involved. They turn up to a site and you say, "Guys, don't feel embarrassed about picking up someone else's rubbish", and just things like that. Try and get them aware of the environment and just say, "There's someone else's rubbish here, we'd like to leave the camp site better than what we came into it", and just things like that. It's a unique environment; we'd like it to remain there. It's to our benefit, to us, as a business, to keep that going. Because these are the areas we visit, and if we are seen in there, stuffing them all up, it's ... we are the ones who are going to lose out (Guide 38, male, Employee, Savannah Guide).

Guide 18 and Guide 31 related how they are very aware of the need to drive carefully when conducting ecotours. They spoke about the damage four-wheel drive vehicles can exact upon the environment and how they only

utilise the road space available. If the visitors want to see something that is not close to the road, the guides and the tour group will get out of their vehicles and walk to the desired place.

The limit to numbers of tourists is a key managerial concern for ecotourism operators. Guide 8 explains more fully how issues of sustainability could affect her tour site in the future, and she offers suggestions about how she and her partner will try to circumvent these problems.

We are mindful that there may come a time when we need to limit numbers on tour, or on site, although this is more to maintain the serenity that people come for and the personalised service, than for the environment. This is a regenerated mine site, so the environment has made great improvements in the last sixty years since commercial mining ceased. Visitors, to date, are not negatively impacting on that environment. However, our cultural assets do require important consideration. We are aware of their heritage value and the need for conservation and restoration, but the biggest problem is the cost of the works. Visitors are prevented, with physical barriers, from entering areas that are fragile (Guide 8, female, Tour Operator, Site Interpreter).

Many of the locations visited by ecotourists sustain delicate ecosystems that are not able to tolerate intense disturbances. As soon as 'saturation point' is reached, or when a crucial limit is passed, complete degradation appears unavoidable. Different species of flora and fauna disappear because of escalating human presence, noise related disturbances, or other pressures. Roads are constructed to access particular locations and damage their inherent picturesque significance or cause ecological disruption. More

frequently, waste and refuse are dumped by individuals who are not accustomed to act as suits the circumstances (Budowski 1976: 27).

Although all managers try to preserve their campsites, one guide took this idea to the extreme, and will never use the same site twice.

... I never, never stopped in two places. I never made the habit of putting up anywhere and spending a length of time in any one place and doing it repeatedly. I always look for somewhere new, and somewhere pristine. You've just got to make sure; it's only common courtesy, to leave the place as you find it. That's pretty easy to do, if you keep shifting camp. It's when you get into a pattern and use a place all the time, that makes it very hard (Guide 7, male, Freelance Guide, Savannah Guide).

This form of rotational site usage actually allows for the regeneration and rehabilitation of campsites (Weiler 1993: 59). However, within the entire subject group, this was the only guide that mentioned this form of minimum impact practice on natural, pristine settings. From a managerial viewpoint, it is not possible to keep shifting camp places. Managers and administrators deal with the quantity of tourists. To manage a tourism business means to be able to keep to a routine, to know the route the guide and the tour are taking, to know where they will be staying or camping each night and to know which spots of interest they will be visiting during the day. This then, is a rationalised, time management approach to ecotour management.

Conclusion

Many of the managers in this study wanted to begin or change their businesses to be involved in an area with which they had an affinity or an area where they had grown up and of which they knew. They wanted to share these places with the public. Some of the participants started their own small businesses in order to survive in the bush. However, many were unprepared for the intensity of the occupation and the extreme workload of seven days a week full-time work that it involved.

Marketing of the Savannah Guide organisation, and of the individual small businesses that comprise the Savannah Guides, has been undertaken in a haphazard manner. A number of the smaller businesses have suffered from a lack of recognition and a lack of extensive marketing exposure, while the larger, more established enterprises, with more income, have flourished at the expense of the smaller members. The Savannah Guide uniform, and the logo of the Savannah Guides (the Phantom), are also perceived by the members of the organisation as key marketing tools. This haphazard approach indicates that this organisation has not clarified its marketing strategies and the potential for marketing the product to outside sources. In other words, the group have concentrated on their image as the product and not on marketing the diversity of their tours and their guiding accomplishments.

The ecotour restrictions the managers contend with are dictated by local, State and Federal government bureaucracies. In some cases, the restrictions are concerned with issues of 'right of access', such as the numbers of tourists permitted to tour a site. Many of the ecotour managers in this study had their own self-imposed forms of restrictions on the tourists. Land issues and Native Title agreements also added to the problems of site management. Long-term sustainable usage of a number of the Savannah Guide sites was also affected by indigenous land issues. Therefore, restrictions are imposed by bureaucracies to impede access to sites deemed to be 'at risk'. However, in some cases, for a monetary fee, admittance to restricted areas is available.

Generally, sustainability of sites and on tours has been adhered to by the Savannah Guides. It is a matter of common sense usage of the bush, whereby judicious use of the environment and a 'tread lightly' approach (Honey 1999b) are instituted. The managers also contribute to sustainability in other ways, through conducting site assessments. Where possible, the guides present a report about sites they have assessed to the community concerned. Such reports highlight the fact that ecotourism is community, as well as habitat based. The ecotourism and ecobusiness managers in this study must compromise their use of the environment and their perceptions of the notion of sustainability to accommodate both governmental and indigenous issues of access.