

SUMMARY

The Nature of the Study

This report describes a detailed study of visitors' experiences to Lady Musgrave Island and Reef which is located in the southern section of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. The project involved extensive cooperation between managers and researchers throughout all stages, and the ultimate design reflected identified concerns of managers, as well as a desire to understand how different visitors experience reef and island environments. A great deal of assistance and support was also provided by the tour operators during data collection.

The research methodology had a very strong qualitative focus with normal scientific design criteria used for sampling and analysis. This was the first attempt to develop a taxonomy of reef experiences. The data collection was based on the recorded interviews of a sequence of open-ended questions most of which probed the respondents on their experiences, perceptions, values and preferences related to being in that location of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. Data interpretation was based primarily on content analysis of transcribed versions of the taped responses, plus some formal observational data. This highly complex process produced a rich set of insights into the nature of the recreational/tourism experience from the perspective of the visitors, with little imposition of meaning from the researchers.

This summary cannot do justice to the data set, and readers are strongly advised to carefully examine the detailed discussions of methodology and results. The fundamental goal of this research was to understand how and what people experience when they visit the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, and to identify possible management-related aspects to these experiences. The authors caution readers against simplistic interpretations of the data. In this type of data set the range of responses is as important as the percentage of people that expressed a certain type of perception. Also, percentages in this report reflect the number of people who spontaneously mention an experience dimension or management issue, rather than a conventional interpretation of percentages (i.e. percentage of people who responded to items presented to them).

The research task was to develop an awareness of the experiences of visitors as well as an inventory and taxonomy of these experiences. Subsequently, addressing the understanding obtained here for management was of primary importance. The data set is based on 208 useable responses which comprised 114 daytripper interviews (visitors that go to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park only for a day), 54 camper interviews and 40 interviews with visitors from private yachts.

Overview of Results

Characteristics of Visitors

There was a high proportion of repeat visitors (generally divided up into three user groups: yachties, campers and daytrippers) and the origins of the visitors were Queensland (38%), other Australian states (40%) and overseas (22%). There was a general heterogeneous mix of demographic, cultural and social characteristics.

The Nature of the Lady Musgrave Recreation Experience: The Overall Experience

Clearly the Lady Musgrave Island and Reef experience is very complex and diverse.

In responding to general open-ended questions on experiences, visitors alluded to all of the experiential dimensions. They not only talked about themselves, their feelings and what the experience represented to them (the *self dimension*), but they also referred to what they've been doing while at Lady Musgrave Island and Reef (the *activity dimension*), their perceptions and interactions with other people (the *social dimension*), their perceptions and interactions with nature and the physical environment in general (the *physical environment dimension*), and made observations on managerial and organisational factors.

Given that these were very general and open-ended questions, it is important to note the wide range of different aspects of the experience mentioned. The responses confirm the notion that outdoor recreation and tourism experiences are multi-dimensional, and that the visitors themselves are aware of all of these dimensions. Not only that, these dimensions all happen almost simultaneously and resource managers should be aware of the potential interactions among them.

When noting the relative salience of the dimensions overall, visitors talked more predominantly about the self dimension. However, coding of references to the physical environment required the largest number of categories. This is both a reflection of salience, but could also be due to the fact that it is easier to separate specific environmental characteristics (e.g. a coral from a fish), and to develop more categories for that domain, than to separate emotional or cognitive characteristics.

Whilst there were many more categories used to code environmental salience than other experiential domains, many categories were also used to code visitors' expressions related to their own self experience. In fact, the actual percentage of references to some of the categories within this dimension were higher than for any other categories in the taxonomy. Visitors also referred to a wide range of water- and land-based activities they undertook while at Lady Musgrave Island and Reef. By comparison, the social environment and managerial/organisation dimensions were less salient to people.

Visitors in general felt very positive about their experiences. There were, however, interesting differences among the three user groups. It is clear that these groups cannot be seen homogeneously in terms of what is salient to them and the experiences they are seeking, and this has implications for management. Campers value tranquillity, peacefulness, relaxed environment, family togetherness and a sense of escape. Day visitors see their experiences much more in terms of mental stimulation and talk about their experiences more commonly as 'activities' when compared to campers and yachties. Although all visitors are attentive to a diverse range of environmental features and the environment is very salient to them, there are differences in the physical environmental emphasis. Day visitors focused more broadly on the marine environment with less emphasis than campers on the terrestrial environment. Campers, by comparison with daytrippers, focus more evenly on both terrestrial and marine environments. Yachties share values with both campers and daytrippers: like campers they value tranquillity, peacefulness and relaxation, but tend to be a bit more marine orientated.

Many daytrippers considered the Lady Musgrave Island and Reef experience to be new and unique. Interestingly, half of the daytrippers who said that the Lady Musgrave Island and Reef experience was unique, had also been to other locations on the Great Barrier Reef. It seems then, that the perception of uniqueness is not only related to not having been to the Marine Park before, but also to the fact that Lady Musgrave is perceived as a unique place within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park itself.

The Activity Dimension of the Experience

There is a diverse range of activities which visitors enjoy and the report identifies the most salient for each of the different groups. Snorkelling is clearly very important both in terms of the amount of people who undertake this activity and also in the strong positive emotion aroused. Contemplating nature was another activity with high participation levels. Some activities are more important for different types of visitors. It is significant that visitors display a great richness in their definitions of activities.

The Physical Environment Dimension of the Experience: Individual Interaction

Visitor perceptions and descriptions of the Lady Musgrave natural environment were very diverse, ranging from general overall perceptions of its naturalness and isolation, to very specific aspects of the fauna and flora (e.g. turtles and corals). The different visitor groups revealed some consistent variation between them. It is clear that for many visitors the natural attributes of Lady Musgrave were perceived as special. This included references to unique characteristics ('like nothing ever seen before') and to natural and 'unspoiled' environments (corals, island, reef and lagoon).

Visitors felt positive about the environment. Campers especially valued the isolation and escape opportunities and the absence of development, daytrippers particularly referred to corals, and yachties (people that visit on private boats) emphasised lagoon features. Naturalness was a key part of daytrippers' and yachties' perceptions of environmental attributes contributing to their enjoyment, as were particular groups of fauna. There was little about the Lady Musgrave natural environment that detracted from visitor enjoyment. Although not part of the question asked, there was a surprisingly high spontaneous reference to concern for the environment and conservation. In the case of daytrippers this was quite high, even more than campers and yachties. This may be an indication of a quite high level of environmental awareness and concern within the overall population. Generally campers perceive and describe the environment in a more focused and detailed way compared with daytrippers, a fact which may have implications for management.

The Social Environment Dimension of the Experience

Generally respondents described other visitors as very friendly and some recognition was given to the diverse and interesting nature of other visitors, especially by campers who perhaps had a greater opportunity to get to know their fellow visitors. Staff of tour boat operations were generally praised by daytrippers.

As well as being more aware of their fellow visitors, campers were also more inclined to identify inappropriate behaviour and were very sensitive to the entire social environment. They spontaneously drew attention to conflict between themselves and daytrippers, and recognised very different purposes and values. There was a high sense of community ('belongingness') amongst campers that was not felt by the daytrippers and yachties. It is clear that campers are much more socially sensitive than the other types of visitors, while daytrippers relate more with staff. On particular issues there were a variety of views, some very strong. The use of generators caused considerable disturbance to campers (46% do not like it), however there is a recognition of a need for compressed air for scuba diving amongst some campers.

The social carrying capacity was a key focus of this section of the study and reactions to the numbers of people varied considerably as might have been expected. Despite the surveys being undertaken at times of only moderate use, 21% said there were too many people on the boat and pontoon, with 46% accepting the perceived level of use. With regard to encounters on the island, campers were once again highly sensitive to crowding compared with daytrippers. One-third of daytrippers went to the camping area and their presence there elicited a range of responses including concern about loss of privacy, security of gear and feelings of being intruded upon. There were also more positive responses including those who felt such visits were acceptable.

With regard to the numbers of campers, there was a clear sense that campers were feeling crowded already. Very few felt a solution might be a larger camping ground. Concern was also expressed about camping group sizes. By using the data to calculate an index of perceived crowdedness it was shown that 87% of visitors overall, and similar proportions of each group, were experiencing perceptions of being crowded.

Perceptions of Facilities and Level of Development

Generally the views of visitors support existing levels with a strong indication that no further expansion should occur. Their comments reveal considerable sensitivity to the need for facilities to be unobtrusive and, consistent with perceptions of crowding, some visitors felt the operations were too developed already.

Information and Interpretation Services/Facilities

Most information received was in written form and gave general information about the environment. There was strong positive evaluation about the information but also a desire for more detailed material. Types of information sought varied between groups, with yachties seeking more management and regulation while daytrippers and campers required more detailed environmental

information. Visitors suggested a variety of ways in which they would like to receive information, also varying between the groups. The clear message is that most visitors desire more detailed interpretive information about Lady Musgrave Island and Reef than is currently available.

Zoning and Regulations

Awareness of zoning and regulation varies and few visitors have any detailed knowledge, though a high proportion expressed concern about environmental impacts and recognised the need for regulation. Yachties and campers were better informed than daytrippers. Visitors expressed concern about potential impacts of boats anchoring in the lagoon and showed awareness of potential damage. There were strong negative views about commercial fishing and its potential impacts, and even some concerns about recreational fishing, especially by campers.

General Observations about Management

Overall perceptions of management were favourable. Visitors revealed a very strong desire for restrictive management leading to an overall impression of support for even more control and limitation of use. It was clear that this was related to both concern for the natural environment and concern for the social setting in order to maintain the highly valued 'character' of the island recreation opportunity.

Recollection of the Experience

Responses when visitors were asked to recollect their experience further highlight one of the key differences between the experiences of campers and other user groups, i.e. the far greater importance to campers of the relaxed, tranquil, peaceful nature of the experience, as compared to the excitement and uniqueness of a 'day on the reef' for daytrippers. Yachties also mentioned relaxing as important, rather than the hype, excitement and 'new experience' of daytrippers. For campers, the experience seems to be primarily one of escape and peacefulness with a strong emphasis on family togetherness in a natural setting.

Motivation for going to Lady Musgrave Island and Reef

The exploration of motivations for visiting Lady Musgrave Island and Reef indicated overall similarities and some important differences among user groups. Generally it was good, positive emotional feelings, and anticipation of rewarding positive experiences that were salient amongst all groups. The activities associated with these expectations were largely contemplating nature, scuba diving and experiencing the Great Barrier Reef and the general reef community.

However, as in previous sections, there were also important user group differences. For the campers the experience was more emotional, involving greater levels of anticipation, particularly in association with scuba diving. Although accessibility and convenience seemed less salient for campers, relatively low cost was important, suggesting Lady Musgrave Island provided such an option for experiencing the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. Despite campers' high expectation of a 'special' experience, there is some indication that these expectations were generally fulfilled.

General Observations about the Study

The study was very well received by the participants with 51% saying it was a good/very good idea, 43% feeling positive about managers seeking visitors' opinions, with 50% spontaneously noting that they felt the study could have a positive contribution to management.

The report also contains management application sections (sections 8 and 9) which summarise the study results in light of management issues. It is particularly important that resource management agency staff read these sections carefully.

Management Application

The single most important result for managers is the identification of the complexity and diversity of the Great Barrier Reef recreation and tourism experience at that location. Also, that the experiences and expectations vary across different groups of visitors. Any management decision will have some impact on some or all of these experiences attained by the different groups—the issue here is to understand exactly where this impact may occur. The detailed understanding of such experiences afforded by this research allows a much better analysis of any impact. Perhaps a not-expected outcome was the identification of strong views about management. Visitors expected and welcomed strict management and seemed prepared for greater restrictions on use. A key value of the experience was naturalness—where options exist, the choice should be to adopt actions that retain and reinforce this value.

There are many similarities among the user groups but also a great diversity in the values they place on their experience. For instance, walking on a track around the island had minimal impact on the overall experience of daytrippers (a result in contrast to claims made by boat skippers of the daytrip operations that island access is crucial to their operation). Many daytrippers also sought a higher quality of environmental interpretation than they received. There is some perception of crowding by the campers and a very high amount of contact between campers and daytrippers.

Since this research from the very beginning took place within a management context, a number of specific management questions were also discussed in light of research results, to help address management issues.

Should there be Another Operator in the Lagoon?

The main issue of concern here is the potential interaction between day visitors and campers who are largely seeking a very different experience. The sense of feeling crowded, expressed by many campers, is not in keeping with the expressed experience values (relaxed, peace, tranquillity, escape). The potential exists to further aggravate this if even more contact occurs between numerous day visitors and campers, and this should be avoided. However, another operator located at a distant part of the lagoon (away from the present operations), with no access to the island, is unlikely to have an appreciable impact on existing visitor experiences.

Should there be Fewer or More Campers than the Present 50?

If the consideration of camper experience is important in setting quotas, then the number of campers should be set at less than the present 50 (i.e. results indicated that nearly all campers experienced being crowded).

Should Generators/Compressors be Banned from Lady Musgrave Island?

This question raises a number of issues beyond the results of this study. It should be addressed by analysis of the regional recreation/tourism opportunities to ensure that existing appropriate experience opportunities are not accidentally lost. Despite many of the respondents being in groups which use the generators/compressors, they do recognise the disturbance that they can cause to other campers. The overall evaluation of campers' responses to this question suggests that the use of motorised equipment on Lady Musgrave Island is inappropriate. By examining regional recreation opportunities (ROS approach) a possible solution is to establish one island as the key large group camping destination for those wishing to use generators and compressors (recalling that such groups normally charter a boat and thus have more access to other places than smaller groups that rely on tour operators).

Should Large Camping Groups be Prevented from Coming to Lady Musgrave Island?

Once again the campers' responses seem to be clearly in the direction of not only fewer campers, but also smaller groups. This is not unrelated to the discussion of the previous question.

Should Commercial Fishing be Permitted at Lady Musgrave?

The poor image of commercial fishing activities in association with a tourism and recreation destination could be addressed by either banning commercial fishing locally or by attempting to inform people about the reasons for permitting it.

Should there be Restrictions on Daytrippers' Use of the Island?

The physical separation of campers and daytrippers clearly enhances the prospects of maintaining the dichotomy between the two very different type of experiences attained by these groups and minimising conflict. This suggests the management option of restricting access by day visitors. This could best be achieved by establishing an intensive use area in the north-east corner of the island (away from the camping area) where interpretation could be provided.

Summary of Management Recommendations

- There should be a physical separation between daytrippers and campers.
- The land-based component of the daytrip experience should be enhanced with an interpretative track.
- There should only be a small group of daytrippers on the island at any one time.
- The perception by campers of being crowded should be alleviated.
- The size of camping groups should be small.
- Generators/compressors should not be allowed.

Since this study provides baseline data which allows for the first time a comprehensive understanding of recreational and tourism experiences in a marine park setting, a number of suggestions were also given on the issue of monitoring experiences.