

Group Discussions:
Tourism and the Reef

Editor's Note:

In this session, delegates, allocated to one of five discussion groups, reviewed the following common set of questions designed by the workshop organisers.

- . Discuss what visitors are seeking in a Barrier Reef holiday.
- . Do you consider visitor expectations are met by their Reef holiday?
- . Is the Reef the central drawcard?
- . If so, why?
- . Are there other drawcards - for example, the mainland?
- . To what extent are visitor expectations being met by these?

Each group included a discussion leader, a market advisor and a minutes secretary.

Group reports are given below.

Group One Report

Group Leader: David Coleman

Market Advisor: Alan Stringfellow

- . Discuss what visitors are seeking in a Barrier Reef holiday.

Comments are divided between the purists who want to see the Reef itself, and those who want the Reef, plus extra activities. They need far more than coral. Perceptions of the Reef are different between promoters and visitors. The promoters seem to know far more than the visitors, who seem to know incredibly little about the geography of the environment they are visiting. International visitors want to visit the Reef proper, and a normal three day package seems to satisfy them, but we need to identify why certain visitors are not being attracted - what segmentation is there in this market?

We believe that the island resort and its ambience can be carried generally by the word Reef, but we have to differentiate between the two. Perceptions of the Reef are confused. The resort islands are badly marketed, promoted and developed. We need to market two packages; the coastal resort holiday and the Reef holiday. People are disappointed in not getting to the Reef, not being told enough about the Reef. Our interpretation is extremely bad both for the domestic market and the international market.

- . Is the Reef the central drawcard, and if so, why?

Yes, we agree it is a great drawcard both internationally and to a lesser extent domestically. For the international visitor, there has to be activity to ensure repeat visits. Game fishing is a big attraction. Overseas visitors are not attracted just by island resorts. The critical component is to provide visitor information services as expectations tend to exceed realities because of the current lack of information. We feel weather conditions are important, the Reef must be seen in the right conditions.

Availability and accessibility to the Reef is important. The market position of the Great Barrier Reef is slipping because promotion exceeds realities, and the realities basically at the moment are not met. We also feel that the constraint of not being able to get to the Reef is pathetic.

Why does the Reef not sell on the overseas market? Very often the Reef is not being promoted enough yet the resort islands are. Highly desirable specifics such as photography, diving, fishing, exploration of the Reef, and coral and aerial viewing should be promoted as an integral part of the Reef experience. For example, tomorrow we will experience a once in a lifetime aerial flight over the Reefs of the Mackay region. Why couldn't the airlines promote this as an integral part of a Reef package?

- . Do you consider visitor expectations are met by their Reef holiday?

Yes, so long as the specific drawcards have been experienced. Their expectations are not met when they go only to the continental resort islands which cannot give the same experiences as an isolated Reef holiday. We feel that continental resort islands are promoted on the domestic market using drawcards other than the Reef proper, this is how Great Keppel Island is promoted. Many domestic resorts are not good enough for the international visitor.

Group Two Report

Group Leader: Nevin Ellis

Market Advisor: Paul Strangleman-Duc

Our group represented a diverse population; travel consultants, resort managers, boat owners, politicians, in-bound tour operators and advertisers.

- . What are visitors seeking in a Barrier Reef holiday?

A holiday - but it was rather difficult to express these expectations.

The major drawcard of course was the Barrier Reef, that brought tourists to the area. The concept of the Reef has an air of mystery about it. Some interpret it as being pretty coral and pretty fishes, others perhaps are a little more uncertain of its origins and its mystery of nature and perhaps wish to seek something more extensive - but generally the main expectation was for a Barrier Reef holiday. In meeting these expectations, the general view was that as a whole, the Barrier Reef was inadequately available to visitors and that its presentation had a lot to be desired. In addition to the Reef and the mystery of the islands which compose part of it, other activities such as diving and fishing loom large in the minds of visitors - yet overall the central drawcard was indeed the Barrier Reef. There were other attractions nearby which were available to visitors - rain forests, the sugar industry, the national parks. Whilst being available, these aspects were not generally known about, so that visitors' expectations with respect to attractions other than the Barrier Reef were inadequately catered for although the facilities generally were available.

Group Three Report

Group Leader: Dr John Pigram

Market Advisor: John Richardson

- . Discuss what visitors are seeking in a Barrier Reef holiday.

It was difficult to achieve consensus amongst a varied range of people, but we agreed that tourists were seeking contact with something vague that we defined as the Reef province; they were seeking a holiday experience which brought them in contact with that Reef environment but not necessarily the Reef itself, although this may have been the central drawcard.

The Reef itself was probably the symbol which attracted visitors and drew them in the first place to undertake the holiday, and at the back of their minds, they were seeking a tropical holiday, palm trees, perhaps girls on the sand and coconuts and a whole range of visions or images of pictures which would make up their Barrier Reef holiday. We drew the contrast between experiences and expectations the same group of people might be looking for in a visit to central Australia or Tasmania. A holiday in Western Europe was also suggested as a contrast to a Barrier Reef holiday. We agreed that there was such an experience as a Barrier Reef holiday but it did not necessarily require constant contact with the Barrier Reef. In fact most of the holidays and most of the visits would have relatively fleeting contact with the Barrier Reef.

. Do you consider visitor expectations are met by their Reef holiday?

Reef holiday expectations are not met because of the lack of visitor information services. The visitors may have all sorts of expectations which may very well have been honestly promoted, but partly because of lack of interpretation when they get here, their expectations are not met and they leave dissatisfied.

. Is the Reef the central drawcard?

I think I have covered the Reef as being the central drawcard, but to reiterate, while it may be the central drawcard, it isn't the central theme of the holiday once they get there.

The other drawcards are the islands obviously and the mainland attractions apart from the rainforests and sugar plantations, the potential of the towns themselves and whether they could be developed as tourist attractions with a relatively small effort.

. To what extent are visitors' expectations being met by these?

There were all sorts of suggestions why visitor expectations weren't being met. The one group of reasons might come under the cosmetics that Paul Strangleman-Duc mentioned earlier, the hygiene part of it, whether the service is right, but interpretation again was important and whether people actually get the fullest satisfaction, the fullest appreciation of the environment which they have been brought in contact with.

We suggest that there were quite marked differences between why domestic and international tourists were attracted to the Reef and we thought this would be a useful area for future research.

Group Four Report

Group Leader: Dr Des Connell

Market Advisor: Doug Nettleship

In common with all other groups, we had a wide selection of people ranging from travel consultants, private operators, travel organisations, regional travel councils, and government departments, to reef scientific researchers.

The first thing we addressed ourselves to, was, what is the Barrier Reef? What are people expecting when they come to see the Barrier Reef? What do people really think the Barrier Reef is? Is it the outer edge of the Reef or is it the inner Reef or is it some other area?

We considered that the Barrier Reef could be found anywhere on the Reef area providing it had coral, fish, and clear water. We weren't so concerned with the biological definition of the Reef. We felt that if people saw coral and fish in inshore areas, there wasn't a need for a long sea voyage to isolated coral islands.

. Discuss what visitors are seeking in a Barrier Reef holiday.

We subdivided people into a number of different groups. The first group were people coming from overseas. We felt that their expectations were different from Australians. People from overseas want to see coral and fish. They want to visit resorts that can provide these. Domestic visitors had less of a tendency to want to see corals and fish and we subdivided the domestic visitors into two categories. One was a group of young visitors who came to the Reef for the social life, the attraction of living on islands, the aesthetic appeal of islands and particularly the climate. The other domestic traveller group were those who travel by private transport to the Reef. We felt that they came for corals, fishing, diving and the attraction of geographical exploration.

. Are visits to the Reef meeting the expectations of these people?

It was felt that for the overseas visitors, the weather was a major problem. Visitors from the northern hemisphere come here for their winter, which is our heavy wind season. The seasonal factors for the Reef should be more widely known. Domestic visitors were easier to satisfy with day trips to the Reef. Weather is not so important with domestic visitors because they are usually here for longer periods of time. It was suggested that domestic interstate visitors do not want to return to the Reef. One trip is enough. Bad roads and high accommodation costs lead to this suggestion.

We had some suggestions on improving the quality of tourism in the Reef and these were pretty down to earth suggestions. There should be good quality sea food served at tourist resorts. Visitors expect to have the opportunity of savouring rock lobster, coral trout and oysters and this is not always so. Neither is tropical fruit readily obtainable.

- . Is the Reef the central drawcard?

We agreed that it is the central drawcard. It is a wonder of the world.

- . Are there any other drawcards?

We looked at the other drawcards in geographical terms and we felt that these were more important in the Cairns area than in the central and southern part of the Reef.

- . To what extent are visitor expectations being met by these?

Visitor expectations are not so high with the mainland attractions.

Group Five Report

Group Leader: Stephen Le Page

Market Advisor: Wally Franklin

We had a very diverse group consisting of educational and institutional representatives, people from various North Queensland resorts as distinct from Reef resorts, government officials and sales operational people.

Most of the groups that have gone before have paralleled our own findings, with one or two differences.

- . Discuss what visitors are seeking in a Barrier Reef holiday.

We had a problem actually in product identification, we couldn't decide what exactly constituted a Barrier Reef holiday. There is so much division, that we moved across to the types of things that people might want to get out of a holiday. For the overseas visitors, we identified that the primary objective was to see and experience the Reef, to get out and about in it, not just to view it from an aeroplane or from a glass-bottom boat but in actual fact to get in amongst it. The secondary objective was to have a tropical and romantic holiday. The third objective needed to be an activity orientated holiday to participate in activities that could not normally be done at home. The primary underlying motivation throughout for the overseas visitor was the need for an educational experience, perhaps something that could be taken home to their folks. As far as domestic visitors go we saw the tropical climate as being very important - the climatic differentiation between here and down south. They did look for educational experience but it wasn't as important as the general carefree Barrier Reef holiday whichever way they defined Barrier Reef. In fact we saw that Barrier Reef was an emotive term which in fact denoted for the domestic tourist a carefree holiday rather than an educational experience.

. Do you consider visitor expectations are met by their Reef holiday?

We concurred throughout on this one - expectations for overseas visitors were not being met. The reasons being that there were a lack of interpretative facilities both on a commercial basis and an official basis. There is questionably an inability to readily experience the outer Reef. You can experience the fringing Reef off the tropical islands quite readily, but you cannot necessarily get to the outer Reef easily and this reflected itself on the fact that there was not enough products available for overseas or domestic tourists. There was a contention when answering this question, that the Barrier Reef is essentially a non-product - I'll deal with this later because it comes through and its a very important one. But the contention was that it was a non-product which has been over-sold overseas. In other words, there is an inability in physical terms to experience the outer Reef, there is a lack of product, there is a lack of special interest tours and operations or activities such as SCUBA diving, reef walking and so on. In other words we are selling something which we cannot provide.

. Is the Reef the central drawcard?

It was felt by the group that this was not necessarily the case. What was felt as important was the total environment, a tropical environment, the Barrier Reef being a most important and integral part of it.

. Are there other drawcards - for example, the mainland?

We had the benefit of various resort operators' experience, and they came to the conclusion in fact that each market differed considerably. They felt that Reef viewing was not all that important, that it was essential and necessary to have a variety of other mainland attractions, such as national parks, and various man-made attractions. There is a need for a general recreational experience.

We didn't get enough time, Mr Chairman, to answer question five, but there was one other point which I would like to bring to notice. It emerged that as a group and as an operational industry here, we do not know where we are. We couldn't identify what the Barrier Reef was, which was really an indictment. We don't have enough products to satisfy demand which we are in fact creating and without demand there is no product. So whatever we actually go out and sell we will in fact create that product. If we are then left high and dry without an ability to provide that product and satisfy expectations of visitors then I think we should have a good look at ourselves.