

Sustainable Tourism or Maintainable Tourism: Managing Resources for More Than Average Outcomes

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This article explores the concept of sustainable tourism and in particular the nexus between maintainable tourism and sustainable tourism. It argues that the nexus involves an understanding of stakeholder perceptions, and applies this to the Daintree region of Far North Queensland, Australia, to determine whether tourism in the region is operating in a sustainable or maintainable manner. In order to do this, an iterative approach was taken and local people, operators, regulators and tourists were interviewed, and content analysis applied to management and strategic documents for the region. The results illustrate the importance of understanding stakeholder perceptions in facilitating sustainable tourism.

Maintainable versus Sustainable Tourism: Defining the Nexus

In recent years sustainable tourism has been promoted in policy documents, strategic plans and the academic literature related to tourism (Bramwell & Lane, 1993; Muller, 1994; Office of National Tourism, 1998; Hunter, 1997). There have been numerous attempts to define the term (Butler, 1993; Muller, 1994; Cater, 1995; Hunter, 1997), yet few have explored stakeholder perceptions of sustainable tourism. Arguably, without a full understanding of how tourism is perceived by stakeholders who live in, use and manage the resource to which management is to be applied, there is a risk that sustainable tourism will not occur. This is because sustainable tourism, as we apply it, is able to deal with impacts in the short and long term by involving the needs and requirements of all stakeholders: it is both proactive and holistic. In addition to this, it is tourism in which stakeholders have a sense of ownership and a desire for it to be of high quality. Conversely, 'maintainable tourism' – when the status quo is being managed to keep up with short-term trends and impacts – is tourism in which stakeholder interests are presumed rather than thoroughly researched. As a result, it can also be identified as a tourism where the sense of community ownership is low as is confidence in the quality of the product and management. Whilst not causing the immediate failure of tourism in the short term, these factors increase the risk of significant environmental, social and cultural impacts through inappropriate management in the long term. This paper argues that part

of the nexus between maintainable and sustainable tourism is an understanding of what stakeholders perceive sustainable tourism to be. This will inevitably make the term more operable, as divisions inherently exist within communities (Nelson, 1993; Muller, 1994; Butcher, 1997; Tisdell & Wien, 1997). Moreover, an understanding of stakeholder perceptions allows current management strategies to be assessed for their effectiveness and relevance to the stakeholders in the region and new management strategies which are relevant to stakeholders' needs to be developed.

This paper focuses on a study carried out in the Daintree region of Far North Queensland. It aims to clarify stakeholder perceptions of tourism and, in particular, perceptions of the tourism experience. By doing this, it seeks to determine whether tourism in the region is being managed in a maintainable or sustainable manner. This involves interviews with locals, operators and regulators; content analysis of management strategies; and focus group interviews of tourists.

Evolution of the Term 'Sustainable Tourism'

The concept of sustainable tourism evolved from its predecessor, sustainable development. Arguably, sustainable development originated through the convergence of economic development theory and environmentalism, resulting in the concept of sustainable development. Environmentalism had its early beginnings in the late 19th century when a change in perception saw people valuing the spiritual properties of the landscape over the material (Hall, 1998), and National Parks began to be established in Australia and North America. In the 20th century, this thinking continued and was expressed in the establishment of environmental organisations such as the World Conservation Union in 1948 and the World Wide Fund for Nature in 1960.

During this time, the failure of economic development models (such as those proposed by Rostow, 1960) to stimulate growth in developing countries and alleviate poverty highlighted the need for alternative economic development models, which would take into account the ecological consequences of economic expansion (Mishan, 1967; Hamilton, 1969; Meadows *et al.*, 1972; Bernstein, 1973; Illich, 1989). Following this, early conceptualisations of sustainable development occurred around international conferences (e.g. the Stockholm Conference on Humans and the Environment in 1972) and conceptualisation within literature and conferences in the form of *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows *et al.*, 1972), *Ecological Principles for Economic Development* (Dasmann *et al.*, 1973), the Brandt Commission Report of 1980 and *Our Common Future* (World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), 1987). Sustainable development was subsequently discussed at the G7 Summit at Paris in 1989 (Brown, 1996) and in the *World Conservation Strategy* in 1981 (International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), 1991). For the first time, these strategies endorsed and used the term 'sustainable development', with the World Conservation Strategy being followed up with *Caring for the Earth* in 1991 (IUCN, UNEP, WWF, 1991). Most famously sustainable development was reflected upon in Rio, at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992.

The international acceptance of sustainable development appeared to be a success because of its timing. The concept emerged when scientific, economic and environmental problems were converging (Wood, 1993). For example, it became evident that new high-yielding crop varieties, which required large amounts of pesticides, herbicides and water to grow and resist disease, were unable to provide economic benefits to less developed countries as had been expected. In addition to this, the concept of sustainable development emerged in the light of a rapidly growing conservation movement, which resulted in the environmental impacts of development being given more attention, and ultimately developmental debates such as those at Fraser Island and the Daintree in Queensland, Australia and the Franklin River in Tasmania, Australia. Moreover, the concept of sustainable development received bureaucratic and business support because it did not reject economic growth, but rather put forward the notion that economic growth could enhance environmental protection through a free market (Wood, 1993).

The most commonly used definition of sustainable development is that formulated by the Brundtland Commission in 1987 as a 'process to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED, 1987:8). The report elaborated that this involved two key concepts:

- the concept of needs and subjective well being, particularly to the poor to whom priority should be given;
- the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organisation on the environment's ability to meet the present and future needs. (WCED, 1987: 43)

Since then, there have been definitional debates regarding sustainable development (see Pearce *et al.* (1989) for a list of some of the definitions). Despite these, Driml (1996) noted that the concept of sustainable development has advanced in two directions since it was first defined. These are:

- (1) conceptual support at a local, national and international level; and
- (2) technical advancement through defining how sustainable development may be implemented, including conceptual and definitional arguments, as well as indicators and descriptors needed to operationalise the concept.

The following analysis concentrates on the latter and describes how sustainable development was incorporated into the tourism industry and renamed 'sustainable tourism'.

Sustainable Tourism

Within the tourism literature, the term 'sustainable tourism' is now commonly used. However, the term has been subjected to debates not only regarding its definition but also its validity and operationalisation. In terms of its definition, some authors have criticised sustainable tourism for being defined in a parochial, sectoral sense (Butler, 1993; Hunter, 1995; Wall, 1997). They argue that sustainable tourism, although it may share some areas of concern with sustainable development, emphasises growth in order for business viability to be maintained, therefore it has its own specific tourism-centric agenda. For this reason,

we concur with these authors and define sustainable tourism in broader terms, transferring the principles of sustainable development into the context of tourism needs (Bramwell & Lane, 1993; Butler, 1993; Sadler, 1993; Ding & Pigram, 1995; Hunter, 1995; Wall, 1997). Muller (1994: 132) suggests that the objective of sustainable tourism is to influence the following factors:

- economic health,
- subjective well being of the locals,
- unspoilt nature, protection of resources,
- healthy culture and
- optimum satisfaction of guest requirements.

In describing sustainable tourism, Muller (1994: 132) argues that the target situation is balanced tourism development where no one element (subjective well-being/environmental/healthy culture/visitor satisfaction) predominates. On the other hand, Hunter (1997) suggests that a spectrum of four sustainable tourism approaches exists, therefore the concept of balancing all goals is unrealistic. Indeed, Hunter (1997: 859) argues that sustainable tourism

need not (indeed should not) imply that these often competing aspects are somehow to be balanced. In reality, trade-off decisions taken on a day to day basis will almost certainly produce priorities which emerge to skew the destination area based tourism environment system in favor of certain aspects.

Hunter's trade-off approach has been advocated by several other authors whose definitions range from what he describes as being weak (emphasising satisfaction of tourists) through to strong (where tourism may only be allowed to operate at a juvenile level) (Coccossis, 1996; Carlsen, 1997; Hunter, 1997).

The recognition of the differing interests within tourism is a key factor which can differentiate sustainable tourism from maintainable tourism. If all interests are not recognised, tourism in a region may continue to operate but not at its optimum level. As a result it is likely that one of the stakeholder groups involved in tourism will not have full confidence in tourism, thus increasing divisions between the competing interests.

Despite this apparently simple differentiation between the two types of tourism, within the literature there remains some degree of pessimism about the possibility of achieving 'sustainable tourism'. The term sustainable tourism has been criticised for implying a weak parochial approach, whereby too much emphasis has been placed on business viability to the detriment of the environment and cultural factors and their connections with other sectors (Nelson & Butler, 1993; Coccossis, 1996; Hunter, 1997; Wall, 1997). In addition to these criticisms, one of the most common criticisms is that the term lacks integrity. It has been suggested that sustainable tourism is no more than a 'buzz word' or marketing gimmick where sensible, sensitive, sophisticated and superficial replace the traditional sun, sand, sea and sex associated with mass tourism (Wheeller, 1997; Cater & Lowman, 1994; Driml, 1996; Butcher, 1997; Wall, 1997).

Despite this, the concept of sustainable tourism has formed the definitional basis for one form of tourism, ecotourism. Ecotourism has been defined as 'nature based tourism that involves education and interpretation of the natural environment and is managed to be ecologically sustainable' (Commonwealth

Department of Tourism, 1994: 17). This form of tourism has experienced a rapid increase in popularity over the last 20 years, which has been attributed to an increasing interest in the environment. However, despite its popularity, it has also been criticised as being used by operators to attract clients as well as to charge more for their product (Wight, 1993). Accreditation programmes in Australia such as the Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Programme (NEAP) have attempted to alleviate this problem by accrediting operators on the condition that their operation can demonstrate sustainable practice. Businesses are required to meet minimum standards in such areas as minimisation of environmental impacts, interpretation, contributions to conservation and local community involvement (Ecotourism Association of Australia, 2000). Therefore it may be assumed that, according to NEAP, ecologically sustainable tourism may be identified by these indicators.

Shifts in Perceptions of Sustainable Tourism

Clarke (1997) identifies four changes in the way in which sustainable tourism has been referred to or defined. The first holds sustainable tourism in the opposite position to mass tourism. In this position sustainable tourism operates on a small scale and mass tourism on a large, unsustainable scale. The second position emerged in the 1990s, advocating that instead of a dichotomy, a continuum of tourism types where one form could be adapted to another. However, scale was still a defining attribute and the notion that sustainable tourism was a definable end-point remained. This position was replaced by a third, that mass tourism could be made 'more sustainable' and sustainability should be its goal rather than a definable end-point for small-scale operations alone. As a result, operationalising current knowledge became the focus, and codes of practice and guidelines were introduced whilst government control and consumers encouraged more sustainable practices. The most recent position is one of convergence. Sustainable tourism is seen as a goal which is applicable to all forms of tourism regardless of scale. It recognises that a precise definition of sustainable tourism is less important than the journey towards it.

A further position could be added to Clarke's positions of sustainable tourism: the notion that the context for sustainable tourism has also changed over time. For example, in Australia, with the decline in agricultural profits, regional townships and councils are making efforts to facilitate sustainable tourism in their region (e.g. Douglas Shire Council, 1998; Ipswich City Council, 1999). This marks a change in perception, whereby sustainable tourism is no longer considered to have minimal disturbance in pristine landscape settings, but rather can apply in a range of landscape settings. Thus, it may be applied on a continuum from pristine to disturbed landscapes and from rural regions to urbanised regions such as the Gold Coast in Australia.

In addition, changes in perception have occurred regarding the way in which sustainable tourism is seen to impact on the surrounding environment. Early advocates of sustainable tourism, in conservation battles such as those of Cooloola, Fraser Island, the Franklin River and the Wet Tropics in Australia, argued that protecting areas for tourism was a viable alternative to extractive industries such as logging. This was because tourism was perceived to be an

environmentally benign industry capable of earning ongoing capital and, in particular, foreign exchange (Coppock, 1982; Jafari, 1990; Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996). However, it has now become accepted that tourism inevitably impacts on local economies, local populations, the environment and indeed the tourists themselves (Mathieson & Wall, 1982; Butler, 1991).

In addition, perceptions of scale have changed in relation to sustainable tourism. Further to Clarke’s suggestion that it may be applicable to large- and small-scale operations, it is now considered to be attainable at local, regional, national and global levels, as well as in the operations themselves (see Figure 1). Strategies and guidelines for sustainable tourism are now being produced not only for operations but also within local, regional and national planning (e.g. Queensland Tourism and Travel Corporation, 1997; Douglas Shire Council, 1998; Office of National Tourism, 1996). However, such strategies tend to deal with sustainable tourism at a less detailed level than the tourism literature.

Finally, using the arguments of Hunter (1997) and Wall (1997) it could be argued that sustainable tourism has emphasised the developmental aspect of sustainable development. Therefore, unlike sustainable development which is underpinned by the notion of development, sustainable tourism has changed its focus from the traditional notion of environmental ethics, quality of life and cultural integrity with notions of growth and progress, to focus on business viability and customer satisfaction.

These arguments all suggest that the changing perceptions of sustainable tourism may be summarised in terms of its scale, impact, context and process (see Figure 1).

Differing perceptions play an important role in the way in which sustainable tourism has been defined within the literature and operationalised by the tourism industry. Within the industry, different management regimes and personalities can affect who stakeholders are perceived to be, how they are identified and how their needs are perceived. Ultimately this can affect the outcomes, goals and directions of the management of tourism.

Cater (1995) argues that there are four loosely grouped stakeholder categories which have mutually reinforcing aims in ensuring sustainable tourism development. These are the host population, tourist guests, tourism organisations and the natural environment. Probably, the third category should be divided into operators and regulators, since these stakeholders play an equally important role

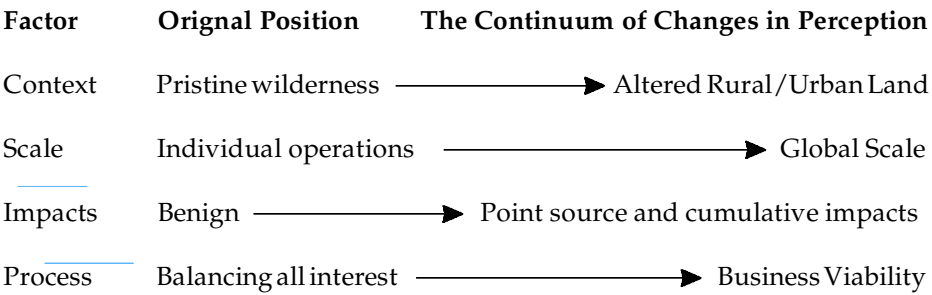


Figure 1 An illustration of sustainable tourism’s application to all landscape types and differing scales.

in developing and managing the tourism product, especially the natural environment. Adopting this framework, all stakeholder perceptions within the tourism system will be considered.

Given that sustainable tourism assumes the meeting of subjective needs as an underlying principle, the concept of perception is also relevant at the policy, planning and management level. This is because it can aid in formulating a holistic goal relevant to the largest numbers of stakeholders (Liu *et al.*, 1987; Ap, 1992).

Stakeholder Theory

The first definition of 'stakeholder' was developed by the Stanford Research Institute in 1963, who defined stakeholders as groups upon which an organisation depends for continued survival. This narrow definition was broadened by Freeman (1984: 46) who defined a stakeholder in a management and organisational context as 'any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organisation's objectives'. Freeman's work was considered seminal (Sautter & Leisen, 1999; Mitchell *et al.*, 1997; Rowley, 1997; Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Jones, 1995) as it redefined thinking regarding the purpose of an organisation.

Recently, stakeholder theory has been applied to tourism. Its application has been broadened within this context, so that not only has it been applied in the form of an ethical business management tool (see Robson & Robson, 1996) but more commonly it has also been described in the context of being a planning and management tool (see Sautter & Leisen, 1999; Yuksel *et al.*, 1999; Getz & Jamal, 1994; Ritchie, 1993). In relation to the former, Robson & Robson (1996) argue that to tourism operators, stakeholder theory means stakeholders should be involved in decision-making processes. In addition to identification, stakeholders' concerns, goals and values must also be included in the strategic framework of businesses.

In relation to the latter, whereby stakeholder theory has been described as a planning and management tool, it is evident that stakeholder management and increased community participation in tourism has been discussed, particularly in relation to sustainable tourism (see McKercher, 1993; Baum, 1994; Ritchie, 1993; Getz & Jamal, 1994; Simmons, 1994; Butler, 1999; Yuksel *et al.*, 1999). In particular, stakeholder identification and involvement has been recognised as a key step towards achieving partnerships and collaboration within tourism (see Selin 1999; Bramwell & Lane, 1999; Jamal & Getz, 1999; Medeiros de Araujo & Bramwell, 1999). As was illustrated earlier, sustainable tourism is based on several assumptions including the notion that subjective needs should be met. In addition to this, sustainable tourism is a form of planning and management, whereby tourism is viewed in a holistic manner and different interests such as environmental, financial, community and tourists' satisfaction are addressed. Therefore, stakeholder analysis seems a logical method for identifying the multiple subjective opinions of those with a stake in tourism; and for planning it in a way to avoid any costs associated with poor planning and management and the resultant conflicts (Yuksel *et al.*, 1999). Grindle and Wellard (1997) argue that the advantage of stakeholder analysis is that it provides a methodology for a better understanding of environmental and developmental problems and

interaction through comparative analysis of the different perspectives and stakeholder interests at different levels. This concept of equality means that no single source or level of 'stake' prioritises the interest of these different groups (Sautter & Lesien, 1999). Indeed, Robson and Robson (1996) state that stakeholder analysis is a concept which could be considered to be a construct of the 1990s in its attempt to 'correct' the potential inequalities which can occur in free market capitalism.

Recently, the process by which stakeholders can be identified has also been defined. Grimble and Wellard (1997: 175) define stakeholder analysis as 'a holistic approach or procedure for gaining an understanding of a system, and assessing the impact of changes to that system, by means of identifying the main actors or stakeholders and assessing their respective interests in the system.' Similarly, Sautter and Leisen (1999) state that, in order to implement stakeholder management, the tourism researcher must have a full appreciation of all the persons or groups who have interests in the planning, process, delivery and/or outcomes of the tourism service. Using Freeman's (1984) definition, they caution against cursory observations of the most obvious stakeholders and argue stakeholder identification should look at who affects or are affected by the tourism service, both at present and in the past. Finally, they note that clear distinctions should be made between a stakeholder role and a group. People classified as members of groups often shares perspectives or serve in multiple roles within the larger macro environment. Other approaches to stakeholder assessment have been made by Medeiros de Araujo and Bramwell (1999) who suggest various approaches and Hall (2000) who outlined a seven-step stakeholder audit.

In addition to identifying stakeholders, methods have been suggested for involving them in tourism planning. Glass (1979) writes that when involving stakeholders, different techniques should be used to achieve different objectives and categorised a typology of participatory techniques to deal with this. Yuksel *et al.* (1999) concur with this idea of having multiple techniques to achieve differing objectives. They too suggest many techniques to facilitate the ongoing involvement of stakeholders in tourism planning. These include drop-in centres, nominal group techniques, citizen surveys, focus groups, task forces and consensus-building meetings.

Tourism Stakeholders and Perception

In order to involve stakeholders in the planning and management of tourism, an understanding of their perceptions is necessary. Gee and Fayos-Sola (1997) recognise this need, arguing that impacts can be perceived differently by different community members and that tourism can inevitably cause host-guest conflict. Therefore, understanding stakeholder perceptions could be seen as a preventative mechanism against 'maintainable tourism' which involves management based on assumptions rather than understandings. Indeed understanding stakeholder perceptions could be seen as a prerequisite for sustainable tourism, as previously argued.

For this study perception is defined as 'residents' dispositions towards tourism (Ap, 1992: 671) and it relates to human awareness and understanding

and it is, therefore, more closely related to cognition in psychological terms (Whyte, 1977). The term 'perception' is used rather than attitude, which represents a person's predisposition and prior knowledge of tourism issues, which stakeholders may not necessarily have (Ap, 1992).

Despite calls by several authors (e.g. Gee & Fayos-Sola, 1997; Liu *et al.*, 1987; Ap, 1992), few studies exist which examine different stakeholder perceptions within a given area (see Pizam, 1978; Barron, 1995; Young, 1997). Rather, studies tend to focus on one stakeholder group. For example, a substantial amount of work now exists on host community perceptions of tourism impacts. Since the 1980s residents' input and perceptions have been incorporated into the planning of destination areas because residents are increasingly seen as an essential part of the hospitality atmosphere and one of the key resources for sustaining the product (Simmons, 1994). Therefore, central to the idea of host community involvement is the desire for sustainability (Liu *et al.*, 1987; Simmons, 1994; Joppe, 1996). It is argued that involving the community can minimise opposition to development and minimise social impacts because community fears and aspirations are taken into account through the management of regions (Keogh, 1990; Ap, 1992). The concept of host community involvement to attain sustainable development in the tourism industry has been recognised by the Australian government in its National Ecotourism Strategy (Commonwealth Department of Tourism, 1994). However, no studies exist in terms of host community perceptions of sustainable tourism. This limitation applies to tourists as well.

On the other hand, we can gain some idea as to how the term sustainable tourism is perceived by operators (see Forsyth, 1995) and regulators (see codes of practice and extension documents, for example Tourism Council of Australia and CRC for Sustainable Tourism, 1999; Office of National Tourism, 1996). However, the study of stakeholder perceptions of sustainable tourism is limited in that no studies exist which explore stakeholder groups' perceptions of sustainable tourism *in situ*. Moreover, there is a lack of research pertaining to comparisons of different stakeholder perceptions. Without this information effective and relevant management plans cannot be implemented, thus hindering the goal of meeting subjective beliefs or perceptions and ultimately achieving sustainable tourism. In order to do this, a methodology is needed which will allow stakeholders' subjective needs to emerge in a given area.

Study Area: The Daintree Region, Far North Queensland, Australia

The Daintree Region in Far North Queensland, Australia is approximately 100 km north of Cairns (Figure 2). It has become famous for its tropical lowland rainforest which extends to the reef, as well as the controversies surrounding its protection and World Heritage Listing in 1988. In this study, the region was considered to extend from the Daintree River in the south, to Cape Tribulation in the north, including the lowland area between the coast and the McDowall mountain range to the east. It also included Daintree Village situated on the southern side of the Daintree River, approximately 10 km inland from the coast. Within this area, much of which was subdivided in the late 1970s and is now subject to strict vegetation clearance controls, there are privately owned and public lands, farms and tourism operations. The population of the region is

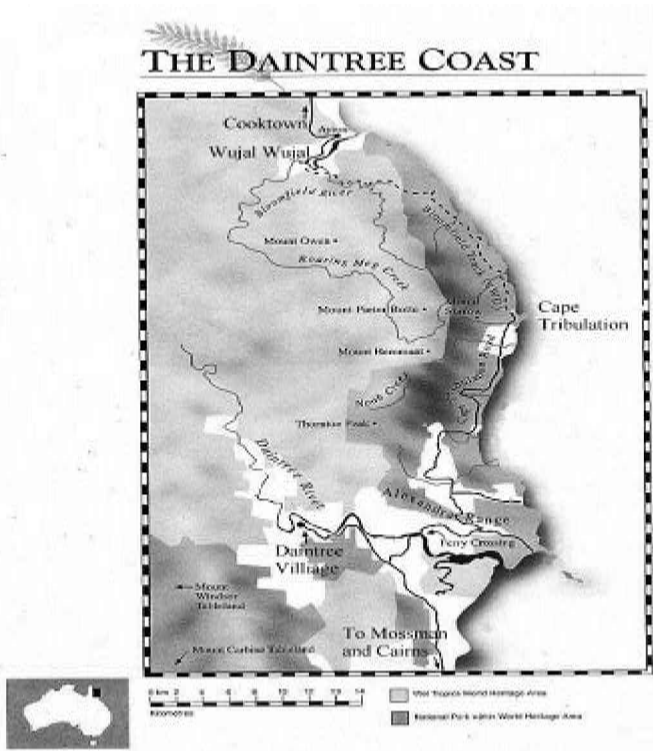


Figure 2 The Daintree Region of Far North Queensland (*Source: McColl, 1997*)

difficult to ascertain, although it was estimated in 1996 that approximately 600 people lived north of the Daintree River and 71 in Daintree Village (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996; Gutteridge, Haskins and Davey Pty Ltd, 1998).

Tourism in the Daintree has increased rapidly in the last 15 years (Figure 3). In 1997 it was estimated that 180,582 self-drive and 177,289 commercial passenger tourists visited the region (Cummings, 1997). Of these 357,871 tourists, it was estimated that in 1997, 99,800 stayed the night in the study region (Cummings, 1997). These tourists came from the gateway towns of Port Douglas and Cairns, approximately 60 and 100 km to the south respectively.

Identifying the Stakeholders

In order to study stakeholder perceptions, it was necessary to identify the stakeholders in the Daintree region. For this study, stakeholders in the Daintree were defined as those people who were directly involved or affected by the management of the region. At a generic level, this included four stakeholder groups: local people, tourist operators, tourists and regulators. Regulators were defined as those who contributed to the management of the area (such as employees of government departments, councillors, contributors to management strategies such as consultants and members of tourism organisations). Local people were those who lived in the study area. Operators were defined as

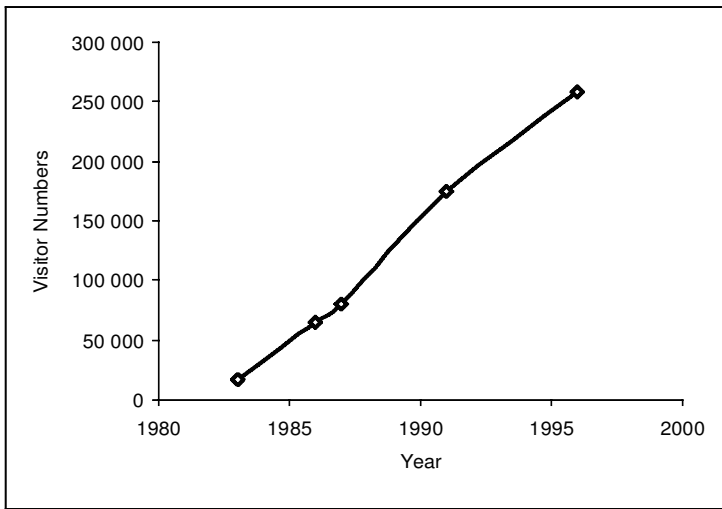


Figure 3 The growth in visitor numbers in Daintree since 1983 (*Source: Cummings, 1997*)

those operating businesses in the study area and tourists were those people who visited the area from more than 40 km away. As this research was particularly interested in understanding perceptions of the tourist experience, special focus was given to this stakeholder group.

It is argued there that one of the flaws in identifying stakeholder groups is that any definition implies that stakeholder groups are homogeneous, independent groups. However, within the Daintree, stakeholders interact with each other and are affected by each other’s perceptions (see Figure 4).

For example, a local person could also be a tourist operator and perhaps even a regulator and a regulator could be a local and/or an operator. Although neither of these groups could be tourists, the tourists visiting the region were also a complex stakeholder group. Indeed preliminary observations revealed they were clearly non-homogeneous and included subgroups. These groups were identified as follows: tourists on bus trips; self-drive tourists (or FITs); backpackers; and those people staying in eco-lodges. It was found that the tourist subgroups also overlapped as it is possible for backpackers to drive themselves to the Daintree or take a bus tour, and for self-drive tourists to stay in an eco-lodge and/or do a tour while they are there. As a consequence, the tourist subgroups were categorised according to their length of stay, and if only for one day, their mode of transport.

In addition to the overlap in the different types of tourists, interactions occur between tourists and regulators, operators and local people. Thus, the reaction of local people with tourists may influence the tourist experience or conversely, the numbers and type of tourism in a region may affect the way in which tourists are perceived by local people, operators or regulators. Therefore, the Daintree stakeholder system is an interactive one, which includes stakeholder ‘subgroups’, such as tourists. The linkages between stakeholder groups and subgroups are illustrated in Figure 5.

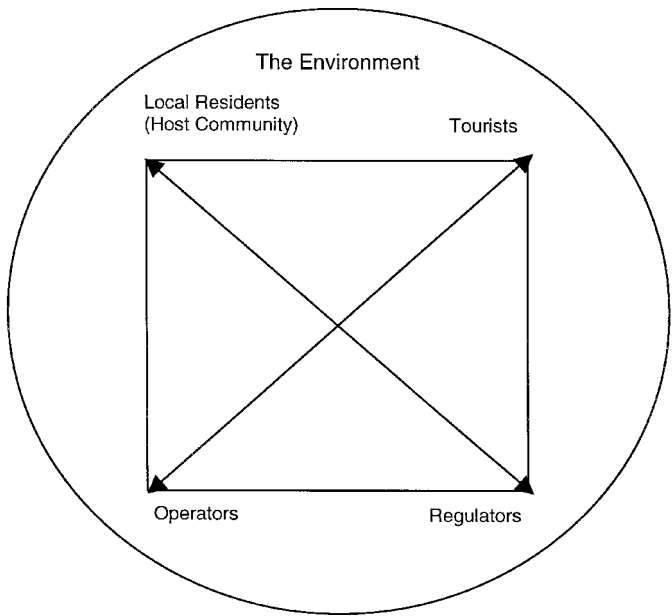


Figure 4 The sustainable tourism stakeholder system which includes interconnected stakeholder groups

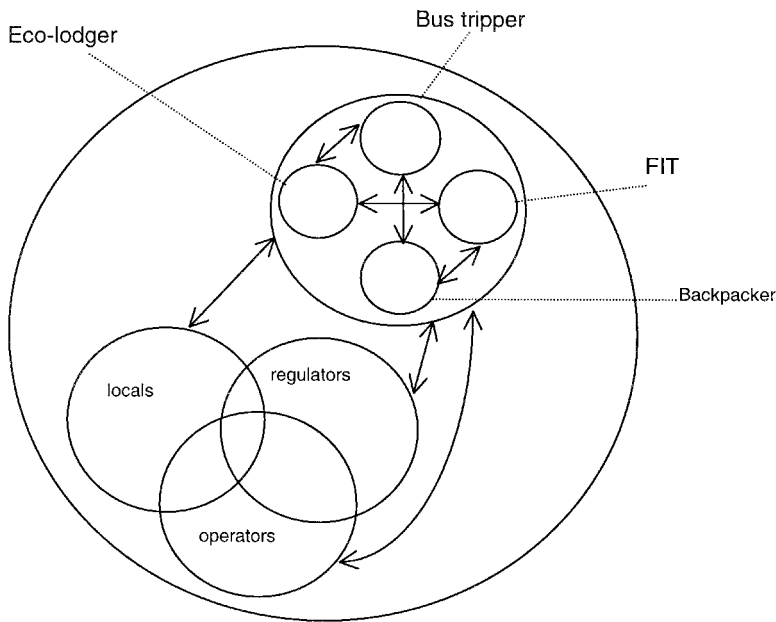


Figure 5 The Daintree stakeholder system which consists of multiple, interactive and non-homogeneous stakeholder groups

Research Methodology

As the focus of the study was to understand stakeholder perceptions of sustainable tourism in the Daintree region, a multi-stage, multi-method, iterative style of data collection was chosen. This involved collecting data using a variety of methods in consecutive phases, which were informed by each other (see Bryman, 1988; Patton, 1990). For this study the iterative methods were designed so that each stakeholder group was addressed twice, first to gather insights into the issues they felt were relevant and, second, to explore these issues in detail. Following this, the stakeholder groups’ perceptions were compared with the management strategies for the area and also between groups. The synthesis for this study involved determining whether tourists perceived tourism in the Daintree in a similar or different manner to locals, operators and regulators and how these perceptions related back to management strategies for the area.

The methods of data collection included observations, content analysis, in-depth interviews and focus groups (see Table 1). The results of all data were analysed using the constant comparative method, whereby conceptual categories were formed from emergent themes and responses to interview questions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Table 1 Methods for each iterative cycle of data collection

	<i>Locals</i>	<i>Operators</i>	<i>Tourists</i>	<i>Regulators</i>
Iterative Cycle 1	In-depth interviews	In-depth interviews	Observation	In-depth interviews
Iterative Cycle 2	In-depth interviews	In-depth interviews	Focus groups	Content analysis

The methods were chosen according to pragmatic factors, as it would not have been possible to conduct in-depth interviews with commercial bus tourists due to their limited time in the Daintree, and therefore focus groups were more appropriate.

Phase 1: Gathering Local Insights and Understandings

As the objective of the first phase was to gain insights into local issues and to explore perceptions of locals, operators and regulators, a qualitative questionnaire was designed and applied to a small purposive sample to collect extensive information from each respondent (Patton 1990; Peterson 1994). Stakeholders interviewed at this stage included operators, regulators and local people. The purposive sample involved 11 stakeholders who clearly had one stakeholder role (e.g. either regulators, local people or operators) as well as nine respondents who held several stakeholder roles (such as local people who held regulatory positions). As this stage was designed to gather preliminary insights, responses from people who held multiple roles were analysed for each stakeholder role that the individual had. Therefore in total there were eight responses analysed for operators, ten for regulators and nine for locals (including indigenous and non-indigenous local people).

The interview questions were broad and encouraged respondents to describe their perceptions of tourism in the region. Interviews were taped, transcribed and analysed into conceptual categories using the constant comparative method

(Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and the NUDiST[®] computer program (Qualitative Solutions and Research, 1997). The categories which emerged are now described.

Classification of Phase 1

In total, 14 categories emerged from the data which were then grouped into four parent themes (see Table 2). The parent themes were:

- (1) the tourism product,
- (2) the impacts,
- (3) planning for present and future, and
- (4) the host community.

When classifying perceptions according to stakeholder group, divergence between stakeholder groups became evident, as well as convergent categories which reached across all groups. For example, regulators were primarily concerned with issues related to infrastructure, locals were primarily concerned with the effects of tourism on their community and operators were primarily concerned with issues such as the tourism product, marketing and tourist (dis)satisfaction. As these categories emerged from the data they represent the elements of sustainable tourism relevant to the region and its stakeholders.

The four parent themes parallel the suggestion by Cater (1995) that there are four components to sustainable tourism, including the host population (the host community); tourist guests and tourism organisations (the tourism product and planning for the present and future); and the natural environment (the impacts).

Within the literature it has been suggested that perceptions of sustainable tourism are personal and contextual and what is perceived as sustainable practice differs between people and locations (Kearsley *et al.*, 1998). Similarly, it is evident here that stakeholder concerns are often contextual and localised. For example, local people were concerned with local issues and operators were concerned with issues directly affecting them, such as marketing and the tourism product.

As this paper is concerned with stakeholder perceptions of sustainable tourism and, in particular, the tourist experience, the analysis will concentrate on one of the parent themes raised in the interviews, the tourism product. In

Table 2 Stakeholder perceptions of the elements of sustainable tourism in the Daintree

<i>Parent theme</i>	<i>Emergent categories</i>	<i>Concern primarily from:</i>
The tourism product	Tourism disappointment, tourist numbers, marketing, the product and operators, controversial history of area	All stakeholder groups, although it was most prevalent amongst operators
The impacts	Subdivision development, positive/negative impacts of tourism, infrastructure	All stakeholder groups
Planning for present and future	Management strategies, access, achieving sustainable tourism	Regulators
The host community	Effect of tourism on local people	Locals

particular, there were three concerns within this theme that will be discussed: the tourism experience; the tourism product; and tourist numbers.

The tourism experience

The feeling that tourists were disappointed with the experience they had in the Daintree emerged from the analysis and was an issue raised mostly by operators and locals. There was a strong feeling that tourists expected a wilderness experience in the Daintree because of marketing. This can be illustrated by a quote from a respondents:

People have reported back to us disappointment with their wilderness experience in the Daintree as a result of the regime that is taking place up there with the very high tourism numbers...

Product and operators

Some operators expressed concern that the quality of the product offered in the Daintree was poor, whilst others felt it was adequate. There were also concerns regarding the opportunistic attitudes of operators with little regard for the tourist experience:

people can just paint a bus up, say they are a safari company and go up and down.

Tourist numbers

Concern was expressed by most stakeholders regarding the increasing numbers of tourists in the Daintree. No group appeared to give more consideration to the issue than another.

So this whole business of the ebb and flow of tourism in the Daintree is going to be quite crucial.

Well they come up for the rainforest experience, they are sardines in cans.

The threat to the environment, crowding resulting in tourist dissatisfaction and a lack of infrastructure were commonly raised concerns, although some regulators felt the infrastructure was adequate. There were calls by some respondents to change the type of tourism, not the numbers of tourists, and also a desire for more control.

In some point in time we have to decide how many people it is appropriate to visit the Daintree, in what manner and we have to start heading towards certain goal posts or otherwise the beast will be controlling us rather than us controlling it.

Overall the in-depth interviews provided broad insights into the way in which regulators, local people and operators viewed tourism in the Daintree region. In relation to perceptions of the tourism experience, four issues were raised which suggested that the management of tourism in the Daintree was operating at a maintainable level. These issues indicated there were divergences in opinions amongst stakeholders regarding management and a lack of confidence in the quality of the tourist experience. First, there was a perception that tourists were

disappointed with their experience as they were unable to experience what they felt the Daintree was being marketed as. Second, some operators perceived operator quality as being of a poor standard. Third, the control of numbers was perceived to be an important issue by all stakeholder groups as high numbers were perceived to detract from the tourism experience. Fourth, there was divergence amongst regulators as to whether the infrastructure provided in the Daintree was adequate for the tourism numbers currently visiting the region. These four factors suggested that there may be a lack of support for the current management of tourism in the Daintree.

Phase 2: Content Analysis of the Management Strategies

Following the in-depth interviews, content analysis of the existing management strategies was undertaken to establish whether the management strategies addressed the issues of sustainable tourism raised by stakeholders interviewed in Phase 1. Content analysis has been described as

any research technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics within text. (Stone *et al.*, 1966: 5)

Content analysis assumes a relationship between the frequency to which an item is mentioned or referred to in literature and its significance. It has been used within tourism studies to assess how places are presented in tourism promotional literature (for a review of the literature see Young, 1997).

As there was no consolidated management strategy for the region, the strategic documents of government agencies, local council, tourism associations and interest groups with known involvement in Daintree planning issues were used as sources for the content analysis. While management strategies may not be direct extensions of regulator opinion (they were often written by consultants on contract) they do provide the basis on which many decisions for the management of the area are made.

As the aim of the content analysis was to assess the extent to which existing management strategies addressed issues of concern to stakeholders, each document was assessed for how frequently it referred to the issues raised by stakeholders. It became apparent that the management strategies reflected the broad concerns of all stakeholder groups interviewed, such as impacts, infrastructure and subdivision development.

However, in terms of the tourism product, although the management strategies addressed marketing, a dichotomy became apparent with respect to the tourism experience. Management strategies appeared to be less concerned than the interviewed stakeholders, with issues related to the product on offer, tourist numbers and tourist satisfaction. In addition to this, there were other major deviations in perceptions of tourism. The management strategies gave more attention to the positive impacts of tourism, marketing and local people, than stakeholders interviewed. Conversely, the stakeholders gave more attention to the management of tourism in the Daintree, subdivision development and the controversial nature and history of the Daintree region.

Phase 3: Gathering Tourists' Perceptions of Tourism

To clarify the tourism experience, focus groups were used to explore tourists' perceptions. A focus group is 'a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment. It is conducted with approximately 7 to 10 people by a skilled interviewer' (Krueger, 1994: 3). Having being popular in market research for the last 30 years, focus groups have been rediscovered by social scientists since the 1980s (Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1996). If led by a skilled moderator, focus groups, which are normally made up of a homogeneous group, are highly effective in idea generation. They are also effective in gaining insights into perceptions and allowing for divergences and convergences of opinions within homogeneous groups to occur and be explored (e.g. Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1996).

For this study the focus groups were conducted on the four different tourist subgroups that were observed in the Daintree region. They were recruited by distributing leaflets and offering incentives (Wimmer & Dominick, 1997). For backpackers and eco-lodgers staying in the Daintree, the focus groups were conducted at a backpacker hostel and an eco-lodge. For FITs and bus-trippers the focus groups were conducted at the gateway towns of Port Douglas and Cairns. The group size ranged from eight to 12, with the most common group size being eight. In total the six groups had 53 participants. Two groups were scheduled for each tourist subgroup, although low tourists numbers resulted in only one large group being held for eco-lodgers ($n = 9$) and bus-trippers ($n = 8$). The focus groups addressed and validated the relevance of the four parent themes raised by using prompts which were developed from the emergent categories in the in-depth interviews and content analysis in phase one.

Results of the focus groups

Each focus group discussion was analysed for responses to questions and also for themes which emerged from the conversations within the group. In addition, each group discussion was analysed for convergences and divergences within the group and between groups (Krueger, 1996).

In terms of satisfaction, bus-trippers were the most satisfied with their experience in the Daintree. They were particularly happy with the interpretation given to them on tours, their guides and experiences of the Daintree from the outside as opposed to being immersed in it. Bus-trippers suggested that the numbers in the Daintree were acceptable, although they would not like to see an increase.

Eco-lodgers were mixed in their satisfaction levels. Some felt that they had been unable to experience the Daintree and were unable to feel like independent travellers because of poor signage. Others considered that the area was too commercialised and over-developed, which detracted from their expected wilderness experience. Overall, eco-lodgers did not seem to be concerned with visitor numbers. Eco-lodgers were uncomfortable with the notion of limiting tourist numbers in the future, some feeling that the area should be open to everyone to visit and that limitations may result in the area becoming exclusive.

Backpackers were divided over whether they wanted to be immersed in the rainforest or to view and experience it from the periphery. Backpackers were particularly interested in learning about the wildlife, plants, dangerous aspects,

cultural history, uniqueness and local people of the region, but considered they were constrained due to poor signage. Some backpackers were unhappy with the number of tourists in the region, but like FITs and eco-lodgers, were uncomfortable with the notion of limiting numbers, believing that it would be unfair. Some expressed a desire to have longer walking tracks.

Of all the tourist subgroups, FITs appeared to be most dissatisfied with their experience in the Daintree. Moreover, many of their comments were similar to those of eco-lodgers. For example, like eco-lodgers an emergent theme was surprise about the commercialisation, real estate signs and development in the region. As a result, some felt that they did not get the rugged experience they had expected. Also, like eco-lodgers, some participants felt they were unable to experience the rainforest. On the other hand, some participants were satisfied and argued that they were able to have a rainforest experience. FITs attributed some of their dissatisfaction to a perceived lack of effective signage and interpretation. For this reason, some FITs felt that although they preferred to travel independently, their experience had been compromised by not taking a tour. The need for a central, neutral interpretation centre was expressed as being needed so that tourists did not feel lost and confused in the region. However, some participants were uncomfortable with this idea, feeling that a centre may precipitate over-development in the region. Finally, a desire for longer walks was expressed by one of the two groups.

FITs, like other groups, were divided in their opinion on tourist numbers. Some felt that there were too many people in the Daintree and others felt the numbers were appropriate for the area. Like eco-lodgers and backpackers, FITs appeared to be uncomfortable with the concept of limiting numbers of tourists.

Table 3 A comparison of tourists’ perceptions of the Daintree tourism experience

	<i>Bus-trippers</i>	<i>Eco-lodgers</i>	<i>Backpackers</i>	<i>FITs</i>
<i>Satisfaction</i>	Very satisfied. Enjoyed experiencing rainforest from the outside.	Mixed satisfaction levels. Some felt it was too commercialised, thus it detracted from a wilderness experience.	Mixed satisfaction. Some felt unable to get a rainforest experience, and others were happy to experience from periphery.	Dissatisfied. Surprised the area was so commercialised. Some felt unable to get a rainforest experience.
<i>Interpretation and signage</i>	Very satisfied with it.	Some felt it was poor	Some felt it was poor	Felt a real lack of signage.
<i>Numbers</i>	Acceptable, but would not like an increase.	Not concerned with numbers. Uncomfortable with notion of limiting numbers.	Some were concerned with numbers, but uncomfortable with notion of limiting numbers.	Some felt numbers were too high. Uncomfortable with the idea of limiting numbers.

Thus there were mixed satisfaction rates according to the differing tourist subgroups (see Table 3). However, crowding was not necessarily the cause of their disappointment.

Comparison of Stakeholder Perceptions

A comparison of stakeholder perceptions revealed that in the Daintree region there were convergences and divergences in perceptions of tourism. In addition to this, it was found that while some groups had homogeneous views on some aspects of the tourism experience, there were also divergent opinions within stakeholder groups.

In terms of similarities, the study revealed the following:

- Locals, operators and regulators all had concerns about the impacts of tourism, although locals gave greater emphasis to the social impacts than operators and regulators. Some stakeholders within each of these stakeholder groups also expressed concern over the quality of the tourism product, although the predominant concern regarding this issue was from operators;
- Locals, operators, regulators, and some tourists had similar concerns with what they perceived to be high numbers of tourists in the region.
- Locals and operators had similar perceptions of what tourists expected in the Daintree as both stakeholder groups suggested that tourists sought a wilderness experience whilst in the area. Some of these operators and locals also agreed that tourists were unable to receive this experience and suggested that they felt the tourism product was of a poor standard.

Finally, rather than expressing a common perception, the lack of recognition by locals, operators and regulators of the types of tourist subgroups within the Daintree was also significant.

Overall, many differences in perceptions appeared between stakeholder groups. The results from the first phase revealed that local people, operators and regulators differed in what they perceived to be the primary concerns about tourism in the Daintree. Locals were concerned with the effects of tourism on the local community; operators were primarily concerned with issues related to the tourism product, such as product quality, marketing and tourist satisfaction; and the regulators' primary concern was with infrastructure. As a consequence, the content analysis illustrated that the management strategies for the region did not reflect all stakeholders' perceptions, but rather tended to reflect those of the regulators, thus concentrating on issues such as infrastructure provision and impacts, with little attention being given to the types of tourists in the region, tourist satisfaction or the social impacts of tourism.

Differences in perceptions could also be seen between those working with or living in the Daintree (locals, operators and regulators) and those visiting the Daintree (tourists). Locals, operators and regulators expressed a desire for the control of tourist numbers, but overall the tourists seemed uncomfortable with this notion. Second, locals, operators and regulators did not perceive interpretation as an integral component of the tourists experience, which was a key factor contributing towards a satisfactory experience. Indeed the perceived lack of

interpretation was a major cause of dissatisfaction for FITs, eco-lodgers and backpackers, and a major cause for satisfaction amongst bus-trippers who received it through a guide.

Further differences in perception between stakeholder groups were illustrated during the first phase, when many operators suggested that bus companies were being established with no regard for tourists or interpretation, and consequently they were providing a less than satisfactory experience. In contrast, among the tourist groups, bus-trippers appeared to be by far the most satisfied with their experience, and were particularly happy with the guiding and interpretation provided.

As well as differences between groups, this study also revealed that within the Daintree region, differences within stakeholder groups also occurred. Whilst converging in their concern over infrastructure provision, regulators differed in their perceptions of whether the infrastructure currently provided within the region was adequate. Operators also differed in their perception of the quality of the product in the region, as some felt it was adequate whilst others felt that it was not.

As the emphasis of this study was on the tourism experience, special focus was given to tourists, whose stakeholder group appeared to have four distinct subgroups which were based on their behavioural characteristics: FITs, bus-trippers, eco-lodgers and backpackers. These subgroups had differing perceptions of the tourism experience and, in particular, the interpretation, tourists numbers and satisfaction with the experience. Overall FITs were dissatisfied primarily because they felt that they did not receive the wilderness experience which they were expecting. They felt that the interpretation was poor, and some felt there were too many tourists, although respondents in this group did not appear to be comfortable with the notion of controlling or limiting tourists numbers. Bus-trippers perceived their experience in a very different manner. Unlike FITs, they seemed very satisfied with their experience, were happy with the interpretation given to them through their guides and felt that the numbers in the Daintree were not too high, nor too low. They did not appear to be as interested in immersing themselves within the rainforest as FITs were, which along with their guide, is a likely reason for their increased satisfaction. Eco-lodgers were similar to FITs, although their satisfaction level was more mixed. Some felt that they could not get the wilderness experience they were seeking and commented that the interpretation was poor. Overall they felt that the numbers of tourists in the Daintree were satisfactory, but like FITs they were uncomfortable with the notion of limiting numbers. Backpackers, on the other hand, appeared to be more sensitive to the numbers of tourists in the Daintree than FITs, eco-lodgers or backpackers and some felt there were too many and that limits should be imposed. Backpackers' satisfaction was mixed – some were happy to view the Daintree from the periphery (like bus-trippers) and were more interested in a tropical beach experience, whilst others (like FITs) wanted immersion and expressed disappointment with their inability to achieve this. They had mixed perceptions regarding the adequacy of interpretation in the region.

Conclusions

This study has focused on stakeholder perceptions of the tourism experience in the Daintree region, and it has found that stakeholder perceptions are

heterogeneous and context specific. The differences in perception may be related to the definitional and operational arguments regarding sustainable tourism, whereby sustainable tourism is a concept which may involve trade-offs between competing interests (Hunter, 1997). The competing aspects of sustainable tourism are represented by stakeholder groups, whose perceptions need to be understood in order to prevent conflict between groups (Gee & Fayos-Sola 1997). Moreover, without a clear understanding of differing subgroups of tourists, management strategies may not be adequate in addressing the expectations and needs of these differing groups.

These results provide an example of how maintainable tourism can occur when stakeholder perceptions are not taken into account. In the Daintree, maintainable tourism is represented by the current situation, where stakeholder perceptions are not always convergent with management strategies and neither understood nor recognised by stakeholders outside of a particular group. For example, locals, operators and regulators paid little attention to the differing types of tourists that visit the region. However, the results revealed that subgroups of tourists did exist and that the different subgroups had different behaviour, expectations and, consequently, differing levels of satisfaction, all of which did not appear to be recognised by regulators or management strategies. Ultimately, this 'maintainable' situation could result in a drop in tourist numbers, and, in consequence, a loss of income to the local community and local resentment. Indeed, sustainable tourism will not exist in the region until it is managed in such a way that differing perceptions are taken into account. In relation to the tourism experience, this means that the region must offer FITs, eco-lodgers, bus-trippers and backpackers an experience (which may not necessarily be the same for each subgroup) which will satisfy them to the greatest degree possible. At the same time, future tourism planning must also take into account the perceptions of operators, locals and regulators, as tourism impacts and interacts with all these stakeholder groups.

The results of this study also suggest that an understanding of stakeholder perceptions is advantageous as it facilitates an understanding of whether tourism is sustainable, or maintainable, on a regional scale. However, an understanding of stakeholder perceptions is limited in that it does not address all aspects of sustainability, such as impact mitigation or minimisation. However, when combined with schemes such as NEAP, which addresses mostly the environmental impacts of individual operators, an understanding of stakeholder perceptions can ensure that the socio-cultural as well as the environmental aspects of sustainable tourism have been addressed.

In summary, this study investigated stakeholder perceptions of tourism in the Daintree, and the issues of sustainable tourism that emerged were: the tourism product; the impacts; planning for the present and future; and the host community. These emergent themes were then validated against management strategies and tourists' perceptions, which allowed an understanding of stakeholder perceptions of tourism to be gained. This paper has concentrated on the themes of the tourism product, and it was found that one way to further bridge the nexus between sustainable tourism and maintainable tourism in the Daintree is through an understanding of all stakeholder perceptions of tourism. Indeed, until perceptions are fully incorporated into the management strategies for the

area, the management of resources in the region may continue to be 'maintainable' rather than 'sustainable' tourism. Whilst maintainable tourism does not mean that tourism ceases to exist, it is a non-optimal situation where the elements of sustainable tourism are not met. This can ultimately result in the net loss of tourists and income derived from the industry, damage to the environment and the dissatisfaction of local residents.

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