

Article

Teaching the Whitefella—The Role of Cultural Tourism in Opening Remote Indigenous Art Centres to Non-Indigenous Visitors

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Abstract: This article explores how a remote Aboriginal-owned and -run art centre, Ikuntji Artists in Haasts Bluff, has developed grassroots-level cultural tourism. While not many remote Indigenous art centres engage with the tourism industry, Aboriginal tourism engagement has only recently been identified by the Northern Territory Government as a major business development area. Steered by the member artists and the board, the art centre has been able to create a range of workshops and activities that can be offered to small-scale tour operators. Over the past five years, an arts festival and various workshops for university field students and other small tour operators have been hosted. Member artists, staff and the board as well as the community see cultural tourism as an opportunity to share their culture by way of teaching visitors about the Luritja language, culture and country. Thus, this article argues that art centres can engage meaningfully in cultural tourism and support remote Indigenous communities in the sustainable development of cultural tourism.

Keywords: Indigenous art; Aboriginal art; Haasts Bluff; Ikuntji Artists; cultural tourism; Central Australia; Indigenous tourism

1. Introduction

In the past decade, the interest in and demand for visiting remote Indigenous Australian communities and art centres in particular has risen significantly.¹ This has been a boost to the Indigenous market in the communities that have opened up to visitors. The Indigenous art market experienced a decline as a result of the Global Financial Crisis from 2008 until ca. 2014 (see [Acker and Woodhead 2015](#)). This had a direct impact on the income of many Indigenous artists ([Acker and Woodhead 2015](#); [Throsby and Petetskaya 2017, 2019](#)). Coupled with the growing interest of tourists in visiting remote Indigenous art centres² and discerning buyers increasingly wanting to buy directly from the artists rather than galleries, cultural tourism at a grassroots level has become part of the diversified art centre business model in some remote Indigenous communities³. Some art centre boards have identified the opportunities associated with cultural tourism and have sought to expand into this sector.⁴ This

¹ See, for example, the Central Land Council publication on this: <https://www.clc.org.au/articles/info/tourism>.

² The author has witnessed this growth in the community-led art centre she manages at Haasts Bluff/Ikuntji. In the rest of the article, “art centre” will refer to a remote Indigenous art centre.

³ In 1991, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody ([AustLII 1991](#)) already highlighted Indigenous tourism as one of the main industries for employment for Indigenous people. This was followed by the 2003 White Paper, “A Medium to Long Term Strategy for Tourism” ([Department of Industry Tourism and Resources DITR](#)), which emphasised the importance of the Indigenous tourism sector to be developed see ([Buultjens and White 2008](#)).

⁴ Examples for this are Injalak Arts in Gunbalanya or Maruku Arts at Uluru.

article does not look into identifying the difficulties associated with establishing sustainable tourism in remote Indigenous communities or the differences between the international and domestic markets in tourism.⁵ It will give different examples of how art centres work in the cultural tourism sector whilst focusing on the particular grassroots-level development at Ikuntji Artists in Haasts Bluff. Not all art centres have expanded into the tourism sector, and in fact some are strictly closed to tourists.⁶

Cultural experiences offered at remote Indigenous art centres vary and depend on a range of factors, including the location and artistic practices of the artists but also on the board of directors and the local community. For instance, whether the board wants to develop tourism and if the community is willing to open its doors to tourists. Tourism in the Northern Territory has been led by the natural wonders to visit, including Uluru—Kata Tjuta and Kakadu National Parks as well as other smaller national parks (Ryan and Huyton 2000). The opening up of some remote Indigenous communities led by art centres means a reshaping of the tourist trails. Not all communities open up to tourism as a means to further the income streams to them. The Northern Territory Government is supporting this opening up towards tourism through its Turbocharging Tourism (Northern Territory Government 2019a) and Arts Trails strategies (Northern Territory Government 2019b). This paper highlights how a small remote Indigenous art centre, Ikuntji Artists, has identified the opportunities associated with cultural tourism for the community and how this has led to an opening up of the community for visitors and an engagement with tourism directed by the community at its pace.

2. Cultural Tourism in Remote Indigenous Communities and Art Centres in the Northern Territory

Cultural tourism exists in remote Indigenous communities in various forms: the spectrum stretches from tourists visiting art centres and only meeting artists in the studios while they are painting for as little as ten minutes to paying to be volunteers at organisations, such as the Kapululangu—Aboriginal Women’s Law and Culture Centre in Balgo, offering volunteers to be “malpas”—companions to old ladies who support them in living in the country for extended periods of time (Tripasista 2019). Volunteering as a way of experiencing cultural tourism has become an option for many younger travellers. Art centres, such as Warlukurlangu Artists in Yuendumu, take up to 100 volunteers per year to support artists and arts workers alike.⁷ Although they do not offer workshops or other cultural experiences, such as visits to nearby important cultural sites, volunteering is considered by many volunteers to be a cultural experience⁸ and it has supported the art centre in becoming one of the most successful in Central Australia, building the capacity of the centre by having many helping hands to assist the over 500 artists painting at the art centre. Volunteers are used at Warlukurlangu Artists to deal with the sheer volume of the task of working with such a large number of artists and producing ca. 8000 paintings per annum.⁹ Thus, volunteering in cultural tourism is part of the art centre’s strategy to building the business, and it has opened up Yuendumu community to visitors, but in particular to volunteers at the art centre.

The demand and interest in Indigenous cultural tourist experiences is highlighted through the public program of “Parrtjima—festival in light” in Alice Springs. The first Parrtjima festival took place in 2016. Admission to the festival is free, and it is the only light festival entirely focused on Indigenous Australian art from the region.¹⁰ The third annual festival, held in April 2019, saw a

⁵ This was part of an extensive research project through Ninti One Limited, with Damien Jacobsen being the lead researcher (Jacobsen 2014a, 2014b).

⁶ Art centres in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands in particular are closed to visitors and tourism and do not want to expand into that sector.

⁷ Personal communication with Gloria Morales in 2014.

⁸ Personal communications with former volunteers at Warlukurlangu Artists in 2014–16.

⁹ Personal communication with Cecilia Alfonso in 2018.

¹⁰ Parrtjima (2019) gives an insight into the program of previous years.

free nightly program of films, talks, performances, and workshops.¹¹ The demand for the public program was so high that workshops were booked out in advance. Concerts and performances reached maximum capacity and visitors had to be turned away. As the only festival of its kind, it attracts both interstate and international tourists to Central Australia, many of them seeking to experience and learn about Indigenous Australian culture. Thus, the success of Parrtjima suggests demand for Indigenous cultural tourism and Indigenous cultural experiences. An ever-increasing number of Central Australian Indigenous art centres participate in the festival and engage with cultural tourism through it. Parrtjima is part of the Northern Territory Government strategy to develop cultural tourism in the Northern Territory and to attract tourists not only to visit the landscape but also to experience Indigenous Australian culture.¹²

The Northern Territory government has identified the tourism sector as one of the biggest growth industries in the Northern Territory and has significantly invested in it over the past two years¹³. This shifts the focus of key employment sectors from mining (including offshore oil and gas mining) to adventure¹⁴ and cultural tourism. The “Turbocharging Tourism” strategy developed by the Northern Territory government includes Arts Trails¹⁵ linking the Top End with the Red Centre through main arteries and reaching remote locations via outback art trails. Furthermore, the strategy not only invests in tourism businesses but also identifies remote Indigenous art centres as places of cultural experiences and of interest to visitors.¹⁶ Over the past three years, the Northern Territory government has opened up various funding opportunities for businesses—both Indigenous and non-Indigenous—to be involved in the arts trails. As part of the strategy, regions have been created, with major centres receiving particular attention.¹⁷

The focus of most tour operators is on the natural landscape highlights in the region. Tourist numbers prior to the closure of the Uluru climb (in October 2019) have soared to an all-time high and are already up by 70,000 half-way through the tourist season (Zhuang 2019). Consequently, the demand by tourists for Indigenous cultural experiences is not matched by the experiences available. Tourists have the option to visit the national parks, participate in bush tucker tours, and visit galleries in Alice Springs, but interaction with Indigenous culture is often out of reach for most tourists, and the engagement of Indigenous staff is low in most tourist businesses. Indigenous tourist experiences are few, and if available, they are primarily bush tucker tours.¹⁸ Few options are available to tourists wanting to move off the beaten track of Uluru and Alice Springs and who want an Indigenous cultural experience.

Cultural tourism in remote Indigenous communities is significantly more developed in the Top End of the Northern Territory than in Central Australia. Examples for this are the tours on offer at Injalak Arts near Kakadu National Park or the cruise ships that stop at the Tiwi Islands for tours as well as at Nhulunbuy/Yirrkala. Despite Uluru and the Red Centre attracting much higher tourist numbers

¹¹ The festival saw a record number of visitors in 2019. Most nights visitors had to queue to access the grounds and the festival was spread over two locations: the Alice Springs Desert Park and the Todd Mall (NT Major Events 2019; Chlanda 2019).

¹² A strategy to develop the participation of Aboriginal people and businesses is currently being developed by the Northern Territory Government in consultation with the Aboriginal Tourism Advisory Council. The NT Tourism Strategy 2030, which the NT Aboriginal Tourism Strategy will be part of, will be launched in October 2019.

¹³ Most recently, another \$67 million was earmarked for the further development of tourism, including the Arts Trails in the Northern Territory.

¹⁴ New mountain bike paths were constructed across Alice Springs, and a plan to develop the Larapinta Trail for mountain biking is a part of the strategy (Chlanda 2018).

¹⁵ Arts Trails are such a crucial part of the Northern Territory government policy that a minister for Arts Trails was put in place, and that portfolio is held by someone other than the Minister for Tourism and Culture.

¹⁶ Many art centres have received significant funding for infrastructure improvements over the past two years in order to develop them as stops on the Arts Trail.

¹⁷ Darwin, Alice Springs, Tennant Creek, and Katherine fall into the main arteries of the Arts Trails, thus receiving specified funding to develop cultural centres further and build a National Aboriginal Art Gallery in Alice Springs. Remote art centres are in some cases being linked to the main art trails; for example, Injalak Arts is linked to Kakadu National Park and Hermannsburg Historic Precinct has been identified as a major cultural destination.

¹⁸ For example, Karrnte Camp near Watarrka National Park, bush tucker tours at Oak Valley and at the Alice Springs Desert Park.

to Central Australia,¹⁹ there are fewer cultural experiences on offer and thus fewer Indigenous people are employed in the southern and central part of the Northern Territory than in the northern part.²⁰ In fact, the Top End has seen a decline in tourist numbers over the past few years, during which Central Australia experienced an increase.²¹

The location of the community or art centre can become the main attraction of visiting a place; for example, if the art centre or community is located near a rock art site, as is the case in Gunbalanya/Oenpelli with Injalak Arts, or on an island such as Tiwi Arts on the Tiwi Islands, visiting the place then becomes a day trip for tourists and turns the art centre and community into a cultural destination. In relation to the diversity of artistic practice being part of the destination experience of cultural tourism, some communities focus on hosting annual festivals, such as Garma at Yirrkala and the Barunga Festival at Barunga, which are open to the public and attract tourists. Other art centres, such as Walkatjara Arts at Uluru, have an open studio which tourists can visit and observe artists painting. Maruku Arts through Voyages Resorts at Uluru/Yulara offers two-hour painting workshops with artists that are very popular. The latter two examples are both located at Uluru; however, cultural experiences on offer in Alice Springs are limited to Parrtjima at the Alice Springs Desert Park and in the Todd Mall as well as Desert Mob. Desert Mob is an annual arts festival held on the first weekend of September. It is the only event of its kind in Australia, bringing together over 40 art centres from the Desert²² membership in an exhibition, symposium, and market place. Aboriginal artists travel to Desert Mob and showcase their work in the exhibition. The event is one of the key events in the Indigenous art events calendar in Australia. There are minimal opportunities to experience cultural tourism in Alice Springs outside of Parrtjima and Desert Mob. All art centres based in Alice Springs (Tjanpi Desert Weavers, Iltja Ntjarra Many Hands Art, Tangentyere Arts and Yarrenty Altere)²³ have gallery spaces of some kind for visitors. However, no regular workshops or activities are offered through them; rather, the opportunities available in the town-based art centres and gallery spaces remain mainly in the observation aspect of cultural tourism.

As a response to the increasing demand, Ikuntji Artists Aboriginal Corporation, located in the community of Haasts Bluff, 230 km west of Alice Springs, has been offering small-scale, intimate experiences with artists “on country”²⁴. Interest in expansion into tourism was first expressed by the board of directors in 2013. This resulted in hosting a festival in 2014 and was a testing ground for how tourist engagement could be economically viable for the business. In addition, over the past three years, artists and members from the art centre have welcomed annually students from the University of Queensland and the International Education Services in Brisbane as small groups.

3. Cultural Tourism at Ikuntji Artists

This article explores how the board and the members of Ikuntji Artists have identified its beneficial location in the West MacDonnell region—only 58 km off the Red Centre Way and off the bitumen, its vicinity to Alice Springs and on a major tourist drive—and developed small-scale, grassroots-level tourism. Visitor numbers to the West MacDonnell region are in the thousands;²⁵ however, prior to

¹⁹ According to Tourism NT, Uluru in the Lasseter region attracts more than twice as many tourists as Kakadu (Northern Territory Government—Tourism NT 2019c).

²⁰ Only a total of 144 Aboriginal tourism businesses exist in all of the Northern Territory. The role of Aboriginal engagement and employment in the tourism industry is a great factor of the NT Aboriginal Tourism Strategy. It looks at expanding it and addressing the mentioned supply and demand discrepancies.

²¹ See visitor statistics for all Northern Territory regions online (Northern Territory Government—Tourism NT 2019d).

²² Desert Inc is the peak body for Indigenous art centres in Central Australia, including Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia.

²³ These art centres understand themselves as the Aboriginal Art Precinct.

²⁴ “On country” refers to workshops being held on the country of the workshop holders, such as the workshops at Haasts Bluff being held outside of the community but within the boundaries of the land trust, thus on the ancestral country of the artists.

²⁵ The West MacDonnell Ranges have seen a major development plan for tourism, which focuses in particular on natural sites and lacks engagement with Indigenous art centres as possible cultural destinations.

2012, annual visitor numbers to Ikuntji Artists were less than 200. Tourists were not making the additional side trip to the community. No marketing strategy targeting tourism was in place, and tourists were not part of the potential audience for the art centre and community. No road signage existed, and the art centre was not included on any tourist maps marking it as accessible for tourists. A few organised tours, such as Palya Fine Art Tours or tours organised by commercial galleries, focused on avid collectors who used to fly into the community and access the art centre for the sole purpose of purchasing art. However, these tours were irregular, and the art centre had no possibility of influencing the length of their stay.

Member artists and the board of directors envisage various opportunities in developing cultural tourism in Haasts Bluff. Opportunities linked to economic development are limited in the community due to its size (150 people) and the lack of economic ventures engaging with the community. Ikuntji Artists is the only locally-owned and -run organisation in Haasts Bluff. There are various other institutions, such as the primary school and local council, that offer employment; however, none of these can offer new employment opportunities for the existing 60 job²⁶ seekers. The art centre facilitates cultural tourism on various levels, by creating income and jobs for artists and art workers and expanding the business into cultural tourism. This expansion results in an opening of the community for visitors, volunteers, tour groups and students, bringing in revenue and in return providing further employment opportunities.

In 2017, the road regulations, which demanded that all visitors applied for a general permit to travel to Haasts Bluff, were changed. The community decided to trial a transit permit to visit the art centre. This decision was preceded by many meetings, during which the importance of opportunities for employment and income through sales was flagged by the board to the community and to the art centre members in particular. All travel permits are processed through the Central Land Council (CLC), and the change resulted in a faster processing time of the permits (only 24 h in the case of the transit permit instead of up to several months for an entry permit). This ensures that visitors still inquire through CLC about road conditions, potential closures of the community for “sorry business” or for ceremony, and that they do not visit at inappropriate times. At the same time, it makes the community more accessible to visitors.

The accessibility of the community and therefore the art centre reached a peak when, in January 2018, a number of road signs were set up by the Northern Territory Department of Roads and Infrastructure. Situated at the main turn off from the bitumen, 40 km west of Glen Helen, which is part of the Red Centre Way, the large road signs lead tourists to the art centre. This visibility for tourists on the main track has meant a significant increase in visitor numbers to the art centre: over 1000 visitors per annum now make their way to Ikuntji Artists.

While tourism to the community is growing, other services are declining. The police station has been closed since August 2015, and for the past two years, the local health clinic has closed for four months over summer. This indicates a significant withdrawal of funding for a small community.²⁷ However, through the insistence of the local community to engage with tourism and to offer workshops for small tours, investment into the art centre from the Northern Territory Government—in particular, the Department of Tourism and Culture—has increased significantly at the same time as other services have decreased in the community. Thus, the art centre takes on another role, not only offering employment and income opportunities, as well as maintaining cultural ties and being a community hub, but also one of advocacy to the government by showcasing the vibrant community life of Haasts Bluff.

²⁶ This figure only takes into account people who are registered job seekers and not anyone else who works part-time or casually, who may therefore count as underemployed. The figure was supplied by the Community Development Program.

²⁷ Haasts Bluff has a population of 138 according to the 2016 Census ([Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016](#)).

4. 21 Years Ikuntji Artists Festival

In 2014, Ikuntji Artists hosted for the first time an arts and culture festival. The festival involved one and a half years of planning, a festival committee, and a large group of 35 local employees in the preparation and hosting of the festival. The festival was instigated by the board of directors of Ikuntji Artists as a way of celebrating 21 years of continuous existence of the art centre (Ikuntji Artists 2014). The board saw an opportunity to develop a niche festival in the Central Australian events calendar.²⁸

Originally, the festival was supposed to take place in August 2013 to coincide with the anniversary of the commencement of arts workshops in 1992. However, in the planning process, it became obvious that more planning and preparation time was required in order to involve the entire community. The festival was not only about the event itself but also about the future of Ikuntji Artists as a cultural destination. Planning and organising the festival took into account the possibility of this ongoing opportunity: on the one hand, possibly becoming an annual event, and on the other hand, Ikuntji Artists opening up to tourists on a regular and long-term basis. Activities offered at the festival were chosen not only to engage tourists for that weekend but also to see which workshops and activities artists preferred to offer to visitors in the future, and which activities were easiest to organise and were the most engaging. The response of visitors to the various activities was considered by artists and discussed after the festival. Thus, overall, the festival was understood as an opportunity to engage with tourism in a measured and controlled manner. The parameters were set by the community and the artists in particular, but always with a consideration of future cultural tourism ventures of Ikuntji Artists in mind.

Many artists and community members were concerned about how Ikuntji Artists could become more open to tourism without jeopardising their privacy and cultural beliefs. Key concerns included that tourists may not respect people's houses and enter them without permission; that tourists would take photos of the houses and children without permission and never return any copies of the photos to community; and that sacred places would be disturbed by tourists, either by them walking into them or taking photos of them. Addressing these concerns was crucial to the success of the festival and of any future cultural tourism at Haasts Bluff. Therefore, the festival committee and the master of ceremonies addressed these concerns in various ways throughout the opening and closing ceremonies. Precautions taken by the festival committee included a map detailing places to go and restricted-access places in which no photos could be taken. A brochure showing photos and short biographies of the most prolific artists was produced so that visitors could approach them and included a history of the art movement contextualising the importance of the festival. In the opening speeches of the ceremonies, visitors were asked to be mindful of people's homes and privacy, not to enter them without permission, and to refrain from taking photos of people's houses. Visitors were also invited to send back photos of the festival to the art centre so that the community would also have a record of the festivities.

Upon the appointment of a festival committee, which consisted of artists from the art centre, the committee decided the date, length and the festival schedule. All activities were chosen by the committee and they included workshops, jewellery-making workshop, film screenings, competitions, such as spear and boomerang throwing, an opening and closing ceremony, an exhibition of artworks, damper and kangaroo tail cooking, sunrise photography tour, a concert at night with Aboriginal bands from other communities, and an impromptu onsite art auction. The festival spanned over three days on a long June weekend. The days were filled with activities from an early photography tour start to a late concert night. The festival offered the first opportunity for visitors to come to Haasts Bluff and stay overnight at a local camp ground.²⁹ The various aspects of the program required that 35 local people

²⁸ [Creative Spirits \(2019\)](#) lists a comprehensive calendar of Indigenous festivals.

²⁹ The primary school opened its grounds and made them accessible as a camp ground over the weekend, including the bathroom facilities. By doing this, visitors were camping in the middle of the community and had the opportunity to stay on after the concert at night.

were employed for the preparations and the hosting of the festival. For example, the preparations for the opening ceremony entailed four weeks of dancing classes for children after school, during which old people taught young children. During the opening and closing ceremonies, these dances were then performed to a large audience. Visitors were also invited to participate and get painted as part of the process. Singers and dancers were not only from Haasts Bluff community but from Papunya, Mount Liebig and Kintore communities, which showed the collective effort of the festival and the involvement of the greater Western Desert region.

Indigenous festivals are part of the annual calendar in many communities across the Top End of Australia, but not in Central Australia.³⁰ Artists and community members had no previous experience in hosting it but were eager to be involved and to learn. This general interest in the festival from the community side was reflected in the comments by visitors: "It was a wonderful opportunity to speak to artists about their paintings and to experience immediately culture on country."³¹ The willingness to share and let visitors participate in all activities was considered by many visitors as extraordinary.

The epitome of this aspect of sharing and letting visitors participate was the opening ceremony. During the opening ceremony, non-Indigenous people were invited to participate and get painted. They learnt to dance and perform together with artists while other artists sang the songs. The ceremony extended over two hours, and the majority of non-Indigenous participants were male staff from the various organisations and local council in the community. Through their participation, they subsequently felt a stronger bond with community members and a connection beyond their normal daily involvement with the community. One staff member mentioned, "I feel more part of the community now and feel very privileged and proud to be working here."³² Prior to the performance, non-Indigenous participants were painted by Indigenous artists in the studio shed at the back of the art centre. The space was closed for non-participants and women. As part of the preparation, non-Indigenous participants were instructed on how to dance and how to mimic artists as part of the performance³³. There was limited time for the preparation of non-Indigenous participants; in fact, they were asked to trust the other dancers and follow their lead throughout the ceremony. The experience of being painted and able to participate in the opening ceremony was summed up by one person as "A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity of learning directly from Aboriginal people!".³⁴ For Ikuntji artists, it was a significant step in the opening up of the community for visitors and in making them feel welcome on country.

5. Small-Scale Tours to Ikuntji Artists

Since 2016, Ikuntji Artists has welcomed study groups from the University of Queensland, School of Arts and Communications, to the art centre. These annual field trips are offered as an elective to students from within the School of Arts and Communications. During the most recent field trip, students were able to stay overnight at Haasts Bluff for the first time. As part of the expansion into cultural tourism, the art centre has invested in building onsite accommodation for visitors, contractors and volunteers.³⁵ This enables the art centre to host field study groups as well as other groups of

³⁰ The Barunga Festival, Mowanjun Arts Festival or Garma Festival are just a few of these. Desert Mob could be counted as an Indigenous festival in Alice Springs; however, it is not focused on one community or organised by one but by the peak body Desert Inc.

³¹ Anonymous reply from Ikuntji Artists Festival Survey 2014.

³² Personal communication with Macdonnell Regional Council staff after the festival in 2014.

³³ Experiential learning is often highlighted as a traditional form of learning for Indigenous Australians. The teaching of the dance was entirely conveyed by experiencing it.

³⁴ Anonymous comment on Ikuntji Artists' Festival survey 2014.

³⁵ This was funded by the Northern Territory Government under the Immediate Works Grant Scheme, and the fitting of the building was funded by the Aboriginal Business Development Scheme of the Department of Business, Northern Territory Government.

up to eight people.³⁶ The accommodation includes bathroom facilities and a common room with a kitchen space.

The field study encompasses students being taken by artists of Ikuntji Artists to various sites on country to find bush tucker such as witchetty grubs and honey ants, source wood for clapping sticks, digging sticks—shown in Figure 1 are a student, Yessica Trapero, and arts worker, Kelly Dixon, with a finished digging stick—and boomerangs, and collect seeds for making jewellery. The program is flexible and can be adjusted to the time frame of tour requests. However, ideally, it spans five days, giving each student or visitor the opportunity to engage meaningfully with artists and to experience ways of living on country, which is the preferred option of the board. During the field study, students learn about remote Indigenous art centres and the business and the role of the art centre within the community. Most days are filled with workshops run by a number of artists. The large group of students (up to 15 students and university staff) is split into smaller groups with a ratio of two artists to three students, taking gender into account. On occasion, this means one of the groups is led by male artists while the others are female-run. This almost one-on-one experience makes the interaction more meaningful for both artists and students. The cultural experience through this close interaction is a connection building between both sides and to some degree a two-way learning experience.



Figure 1. Yessica Trapero and Kelly Dixon at the back of the art centre holding the spear that they made together in September 2017, photo by Chrischona Schmidt/Ikuntji Artists.

Artists maintain control over how the workshops are run. Interested artists sign up in advance for the workshops and decide how to pair up. The entire program is designed by artists in collaboration with art centre management; artists decide the places to go hunting, cutting wood for boomerangs and clapping sticks, and for cooking kangaroo tails. These plans can—and do—vary day to day. The program changes according to which artists want to participate and their interests. For example,

³⁶ In Central Australia, no other art centre has comparable visitor facilities. It is a point of difference and an investment by the community into the sustainability and future of the art centre. The lack of visitor accommodation is a barrier to having more cultural tourism for many communities.

in the first year, students went to Roma Gorge in the West MacDonnell Ranges National Park with artist Garrard Anderson as part of their field study. They visited the gorge, which is covered in rock engravings, and were guided by him and others in understanding the significance of the rock art for local Luritja people. Anderson's expertise as a ranger and his knowledge of Roma Gorge enabled him to take the group there and show them the rock art. The choice of activities depends not only on the expertise of the particular artist leading the workshop but also the weather and time of year. For example, honey ants can only be found after the rain; therefore, digging for honey ants can only take place as a hunting trip if it has rained in the weeks prior to the group visit.

The artists see the workshops and engagement with the students as an opportunity to share knowledge regarding culture and teach non-Indigenous students about the country. In art centre discussions and at meetings, they emphasise how these student field trips focus on teaching non-Indigenous people about the Luritja culture and country. One afternoon in 2018, field study students were invited to a place outside of the community. Younger artists set up a campfire and old ladies instructed younger artists and non-Indigenous students how to dance. The old ladies sang and gave instructions while the younger artists taught the students each move. This invitation was special for artists and students alike. It created a connection between both groups and was offered to the students after having spent time the previous days talking to artists, hearing their stories about paintings and learning about art centre business. As the cultural program is flexible, artists can decide what they feel comfortable with and how much they would like to share and teach outsiders. This is crucial for the artists and supports them in responding individually to the interests of each group. Overall, the model developed at Ikuntji Artists creates a meaningful engagement between artists and visitors, which is valued by both sides.

6. Why Cultural Tourism at Ikuntji Artists?

This paper demonstrates the various ways in which cultural tourism expansion at Ikuntji Artists is led by the community desire to open up opportunities to non-Indigenous visitors to experience the culture of Haasts Bluff while benefiting economically. Furthermore, it is about teaching and sharing knowledge around the country and culture. The artists determine how much they want to share with each group and each person as they go along. No artist is ever pressured to participate in the workshops or cultural tours. They can decide if they want to run a workshop or hunting trip and where they want to go. They choose the kinds of workshops to hold and have been able to experiment with a variety of workshops. They have determined which ones they prefer, such as jewellery-making, clap stick carving, and "tjupi" (honey ant) and "maku" (witchetty grub) hunting trips. Therefore, these forms of cultural tourism are grassroots level and determined by the community at the pace of the community and at the scale wanted by the community. The growth is organic, without the impact of mass tourism, and gives the community the possibility to train and upskill staff in the process of growing a sustainable business.³⁷ This means that no external staff are needed but that the development of the tourism component of the art centre is growing slowly but consistently. It ensures a place for local Indigenous staff and community members in its future development whilst training them to become tour guides and workshop conductors.

In summary, Ikuntji Artists has developed a range of cultural tourism activities that can be offered to small-scale tour operators. The workshops and activities not only present the opportunity of creating an engagement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures but also bring together artists from across the community and from different family groups opening up to others about their culture. Cultural tourism at Haasts Bluff employs people, brings economic opportunities to a community

³⁷ Compare this with [Altman and Finlayson \(2003\)](#) argument for the sustainable development of tourism in ecological terms.

otherwise lacking a local economy,³⁸ and creates an interactive space, whilst at the same time having the power to overcome existing frictions within the community. Cultural tourism at Ikuntji Artists is therefore a meaningful way to diversify and expand the art centre model.

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³⁸ Most employment at Haasts Bluff is through the service providers located in the community rather than through businesses. This means that very few opportunities are created outside of this closed economy. As Morphy argues, art centres are often pivotal for economic development in remote Indigenous communities (Morphy 2005).

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