Identifying Business Practices Promoting Sustainability in Aboriginal Tourism Enterprises in Remote Australia

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Abstract: Aboriginal tourism entrepreneurs operating in remote regions of Australia draw on their 60,000 years of heritage to offer unique and distinct cultural experiences to domestic and international tourists. Living and operating in remote climates presents challenges to achieving successful and sustainable enterprises, including extreme weather, substandard infrastructure, distance from policy makers, distance from markets and the commercialisation of culture, which is customarily owned by and for use by traditional custodians, to produce and deliver a market-ready tourism product. However, many remote Aboriginal tourism entrepreneurs nevertheless achieve success and sustainability. This paper builds on the work of Foley to identify the characteristics of successful remote Aboriginal tourism enterprises and Aboriginal entrepreneurs in remote areas and the resourceful and creative business practices used by remote Aboriginal entrepreneurs to overcome barriers to success and finds that ongoing connections to community and culture are a key factor in that success. It also draws on the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals to identify how the characteristics of remote tourism entrepreneurs and enterprises promote or inhibit the achievement of sustainability and suggests that they offer a framework for effective support of remote Aboriginal entrepreneurs. It concludes by noting that the industry would benefit from further investigation of the contributions made to sustainability by remote Aboriginal tourism enterprises and their stakeholders.

Keywords: Aboriginal; entrepreneur; regional; ingenuity; Australia; remote; tourism

1. Introduction

The Indigenous Peoples of Australia are the oldest continuing living culture on earth [1], and diverse cultural groups of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have cared for the land now known as Australia for more than 60,000 years. Their caring for and inhabiting the land for this length of time, which includes practice of production [2] and international trade [3], is evidence of the longest form of sustainability practice in human history, a practice that has continued to the present day, including in the tourism industry, making Aboriginal Australian tourism enterprises an example of sustainable tourism.

The United Nations World Tourism Organization [4] defines sustainable tourism as ‘tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities’. Building on many years of research in the field, the first global conversation on sustainable tourism took place in 1999 [5], with the United Nations (UN), non-government organisations (NGOs) and industry taking part. From there, work in the field continued, and in 2015, the UN drew on this to develop its seventeen Sustainable Development Goals, which range from the elimination of poverty and hunger to environmental sustainability and the development of ‘Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions’ [6]. The UNWTO
reviewed these for their relevance to sustainable tourism and found that each of the goals could be applied to tourism to support sustainability [6]. As a result, the United Nations 70th General Assembly designated 2017 the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. Increased focus on the mechanisms and goals of sustainable tourism has combined with academic discourse to link sustainable tourism with other forms of tourism.

In Australia, Indigenous tourism has increasingly been linked with sustainability practice. For example, in 2012 a gathering of Indigenous tourism stakeholders developed ‘The Larrakia Declaration on the Development of Indigenous Tourism’ [7], which was designed to both enable the diversity of Indigenous cultures to permeate tourism enterprises and ensure agreement regarding the purposes and practice of Indigenous tourism, promoting their sustainability. However, as Kunasekaran [8] note, there is as yet no broad definition that integrates Indigenous tourism and sustainable tourism. While the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals and the Larrakia Declaration both emphasise the importance of place in tourism, the Sustainable Development Goals lack any acknowledgement of the contribution of Indigenous Peoples or inclusion of their knowledges on how to manage land sustainably, which is particularly relevant in the Australian context given the importance of the Indigenous People’s caring for Country prior to and during the many years before sustainability became a necessary term. Country, used as a proper noun, refers to land cared for by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. This is a missed opportunity for the UN to recognise the intergenerational contributions of Indigenous Peoples who engage in tourism enterprises and integrate the principles of self-determination, now supported by the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples [9]—one which may have occurred because Indigenous tourism is commonly defined based on its presentation of aspects of the Indigenous hosts’ culture rather than on the nature and practices of the tourism enterprises themselves.

This paper therefore proposes a new definition of Aboriginal Australian tourism. It surveys the literature on Aboriginal entrepreneurship and obstacles to its success, and identifies how the practices of remote Aboriginal tourism enterprises work towards an integrated concept of Indigenous and sustainable tourism, using the themes identified by Foley [10] in his study of urban Aboriginal entrepreneurs—Positivity, Face, Chaos, Education and Industry Experience, Networking, Immediate Family, and Discrimination—to frame its findings. It then investigates the links between remote Aboriginal tourism enterprises and the Sustainable Development Goals [11], using qualitative data from interviews with Aboriginal tourism enterprises to establish how their practice reflects the values of contemporary sustainability themes. Finally, it identifies key practices of remote Aboriginal tourism operators that lead to sustainable enterprises, notes the links between culture, sustainability and success, and proposes the use of the Sustainable Development Goals as a framework for supporting the development of successful remote Aboriginal tourism enterprises.

2. Context

In Australia, although 70% of Australians live in major cities, only one percent of the population of those major cities is Aboriginal, whereas Aboriginal people make up 45% of the population in very remote areas [12]. Just over six percent of the combined urban, rural and remote Indigenous workforce is comprised of business owners. However, the most recent census identified almost 12,000 Indigenous business owners with businesses in regional or remote Australia that were delivering functional services and most likely to do well [13]. Many of these businesses were in the tourism industry.

Unique landscapes and vast wilderness are key features of remote Australia, and the tourism industry’s marketing of Australia as a country of open landscapes facilitates opportunities for those living in such remote areas, including Aboriginal people and groups, to develop tourism enterprises and participate in the tourism industry. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tourism is distinguished from other forms of remote tourism by the fact that it presents consumers with products featuring not only natural attractions, but also Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander narratives and culturally relevant skills. It is a growing market: national Aboriginal tourism data showed that international
and domestic visitors who participated in Aboriginal tourism across Australia in 2010–2011 spent a total of $3.8 billion [14], and by 2015–2016, the combined income of the top 500 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander corporations was $1.92 billion, an increase of 1.9% on the previous year [15]. Recent (non-national) publications report that there are 50 Aboriginal cultural tourism experiences available or in development in NSW [16], and Tourism Australia champions 38 Aboriginal tourism businesses nationally in urban and non-urban areas [17]). However, it is important to note that as defined by the government, Aboriginal tourism does not need to be Aboriginal owned or operated, or include Aboriginal people or outcomes, which works against the achievement of sustainable tourism as defined by the UNWTO.

In contrast to the government definition, this paper defines Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tourism not by the content of its products, but as tourism enterprises involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in ownership roles, as participants or as beneficiaries [18]. It outlines the conditions in which remote Aboriginal tourism enterprises operate, and works to apply an entrepreneurial-themed framework developed by Foley [10], an Aboriginal academic, to this area of enquiry, in order to identify not only the challenges faced by Aboriginal tourism operators, which have already been extensively studied, but also the business opportunities and strategies they use to optimise enterprise goals and meet market expectations. Finally, it connects these to sustainability goals. Particular focus is given to identifying the characteristics of Aboriginal tourism enterprises and how these may be linked to resulting entrepreneurial actions and sustainable practice. We aim to contribute meaningful findings on the contribution of remote Aboriginal tourism operators to both Indigenous and broader sustainable tourism agendas. The research was undertaken in the entrepreneurs’ contexts, in areas identified by the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP) [19] as remote based on their distance from urban centres and populations.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Aboriginal Tourism Enterprises

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are not new to enterprise. Aboriginal nations were exchanging goods such as boomerangs, pituri, shell ornaments and ochre along established trade routes [20] and trading internationally with the Macassan, Javanese and Malay peoples [20] long before the colonisation of Australia by English settlers, and Aboriginal people have continued to act as entrepreneurs ever since. In the twenty-first century, Aboriginal enterprises have experienced rapid growth [21], even though the percentage of Aboriginal entrepreneurs—the precursors to the development of such enterprises—represents a smaller component of Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal employment [13,22]. However, whilst the gap is closing [13], the growth in Aboriginal enterprises is not evenly distributed throughout Australia, with remote Aboriginal residents less likely to become entrepreneurs [21].

Both urban and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tourism enterprises are typically small to medium in size, with varying operational models. Some are owned and operated by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person and/or their family; some are owned by community groups and managed by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people; some are owned by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people and managed by non-Aboriginal people; and some are owned by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people whilst a separate, non-Aboriginal organisation operates the enterprise [23]. In addition to this, some Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people work for non-Aboriginal organisations to provide Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander content for their broader mainstream tourism products. This diversity in enterprise structure reflects the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their contexts within the industry and reiterates the need for further investigation to understand both how these enterprises operate within the challenges of the tourism industry [23] and how their operations link to or enable sustainable practice.
While remoteness and sustainability can be attractions in tourism, the nature of remoteness presents challenges to entrepreneurs [24]. Remote Australian environments experience extreme weather, substandard infrastructure and distance from policy makers, and for enterprise operators, this is also exacerbated by distance from markets. Identifying, dealing with and overcoming challenges such as these is made more difficult for remote operators because they often lack access to specialised support, metropolitan services and political capital. In addition to this, the commercialisation of culture to produce and deliver a market-ready tourism product can also be a challenge [25], as there are varying levels of access to culture, challenges around what to share and how to share it with non-Aboriginal people and varying customer expectations about what constitutes a cultural experience.

Foley [10] has contributed meaningfully to our knowledge of Aboriginal entrepreneurship, identifying characteristics of Aboriginal entrepreneurs operating in an urban context and writing from a perspective of success. However, more attention is required to further understand Aboriginal entrepreneurial activity, particularly across different population bases and geographies. This paper acknowledges Foley’s work in urban areas and asks a follow-up question: how do remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander entrepreneurial operators view and engage with the conditions that their tourism enterprises operate in? To support the growth of Aboriginal enterprises in remote Australia and to contribute to the tourism and enterprise literature, this study also explores how remote Aboriginal tourism enterprises overcome barriers to success and achieve sustainability.

3.2. Challenges and Inhibitors to Success and Sustainability

Aboriginal tourism entrepreneurs draw on 60,000 years of heritage to offer unique and distinct cultural experiences to domestic and international tourists [26], and in remote regions, it is argued that these enterprises provide opportunities to empower local communities [27] and contribute to regional sustainability and economic development [28,29]. Furthermore, and in contrast to alternative studies such as Whitford [30] which mention an adhoc approach by Indigenous operators to tourism skills, knowledge and education, Jacobsen has found that Aboriginal entrepreneurs in remote regions display high levels of business acumen and success [31]. However, the benefits to Aboriginal communities and local regions that were anticipated as a result of this success have not been realised. In part this is because, despite the promotion of Aboriginal ownership of tourism enterprises by state and federal governments [32], small financial returns have tended to result in enterprises closing once government grant funding stops [33]. To further understand the lack of sustainable development, research has been undertaken to identify inhibitors of enterprise success [34–36].

Inhibitors related to operating business enterprises include insufficient start-up finance, insufficient capital [34,36] and deficiencies in the area of business skills (including marketing expertise and education) that result in entrepreneurs having a limited understanding of the tourism market and their enterprise’s place within it [30,37]. The commercialisation of culture to produce and deliver a market-ready tourism product can also be a challenge, as culture which is customarily owned by and for use by Traditional Owners is converted into a marketable tourism product [25]. These factors may result in the development of homogenous products that do not reflect the cultural differences of tourism operators [32] and in low levels of demand for Aboriginal tourism products [38]. Racism and legitimacy issues also act as inhibitors to the growth of Aboriginal enterprises [36,39,40], and Ruhanen [36] recommends that further research be conducted in this context to understand how to dispel poor perceptions of Aboriginal tourism enterprises in the marketplace and promote their long-term success.

Whilst Aboriginal entrepreneurs enter the tourism market with varying economic, social, cultural and symbolic capitals [41], a lack of financial capital—arguably a consequence of colonialism [42]—impacts their capacity to develop sustainable tourism enterprises in remote Australia [43]. In addition to having less access to financial support, Aboriginal people in remote areas who enter the tourism industry are also more likely to have had less engagement in education and to experience higher levels of health issues [44]. And while the UN Sustainable Development Goals do not differentiate between the needs of remote and urban peoples, due to the inherent differences
between urban and remote areas in Australia, different approaches to tourism policy and planning are required for remote areas [43]. Operating Aboriginal enterprises in remote climates presents additional challenges [24] due to extreme weather, substandard infrastructure, distance from policy makers and distance from markets [43], and despite the significant role governments play in supporting the development of sustainable remote Aboriginal tourism enterprises [45] there remains much room for growth. Entrepreneurs in remote areas are further impacted by changing policy initiatives [46] and have limited influence on political and economic decision-making, which occurs in urban areas [43]. It is unrealistic to expect Aboriginal entrepreneurs to possess all the forms of capital required for success. Collaboration between stakeholders that brings together individuals and groups who can contribute different forms of capital, including the financial, and thus support the success of Aboriginal enterprises is needed instead [47]. While there are often mismatches in motives between Aboriginal entrepreneurs and external stakeholders who may have different understandings of the purposes of Aboriginal businesses, within remote regions, Jacobsen [31] has identified that high levels of cooperation between Aboriginal enterprises do tend to result in enterprise success.

In addition, while there has been extensive research into potential inhibitors of the success of Aboriginal enterprises, both the inhibitors and the measures of success commonly identified reflect a neo-liberal approach to Aboriginal tourism which tends to consider economic measures—particularly employment rates—as the sole determiners of success [31,45,48]. These measures ignore the potential for Aboriginal enterprises to contribute to a more sustainable tourism industry [48] through the creation of a balance between economic benefits and cultural and environmental preservation [49]. They also show limited understanding of how sustainable tourism within stakeholder groups can result in objectives that focus on other economic and/or social factors instead [50]. The limits of this approach are evident in government approaches to remote tourism, which focus on creating homogenous experiences via large organisations that target mass international tourist markets promoting Aboriginal tourism (involving varying levels of Aboriginal engagement) and result in limited opportunities for the development of small, diversified local tourism enterprises and employment opportunities [43,51] that are distinctly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owned and operated and which are sustainable due to their size. In contrast, an ideal approach for Aboriginal tourism enterprises would be to develop marketing strategies that balance commercial success with community development objectives [50] to achieve sustainability. To achieve this, Aboriginal enterprises need the opportunity to develop products that both meet target segment demands [52,53] and reduce the social and environmental impacts of tourism [53,54].

There are also contradictions between Western and Aboriginal measures of success. In Aboriginal tourism research, traditional (tangible) measures of success such as visitor numbers are often applied, and studies tend to focus on negative aspects of Aboriginal enterprises, with findings used to support stereotypes such as the belief that Aboriginal entrepreneurs are unable to adapt to and operate in Western markets [55]. In fact, studies into the motivations of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal entrepreneurs have identified that both groups are interested in financial success. However, Aboriginal entrepreneurs are more likely to measure success using a mix of tangible and intangible measures, rather than focusing on financial success alone. They have a stronger focus on social aims, such as creating Aboriginal jobs or contributing to the community [39], and are more likely to employ Aboriginal people [21]. Aboriginal enterprises also provide opportunities for employees to use their cultural capital, act as ambassadors and dispel stereotypes [55,56]. Some of these measures of success also fit better with a sustainable tourism lens, and all are in need of further investigation.

Finally, research has identified that Aboriginal entrepreneurs are not a homogenous group; they have diverse needs, and more flexible government support is needed to meet them [39,57]. In addition, management education that supports Aboriginal people in enterprise needs to include Aboriginal perspectives [58]. Marketing recommendations are also identified in the literature, with studies highlighting the importance of including Aboriginal perspectives in destination promotional materials [59], the benefits of providing training for Aboriginal entrepreneurs on social media
management to increase their capacity to correct cultural misconceptions [60] and the importance of adapting the marketing mix to incorporate the pillars of sustainability [61]. Conceptual frameworks to support culturally sustainable Indigenous frameworks have also been developed [49,62] and recommend that future research in the context of Aboriginal enterprises should move beyond conceptual ideas to include Indigenous voices and have actionable outcomes.

As previously mentioned, many studies have identified inhibitors that can impact the success of Aboriginal enterprises in remote Australia, including limited social, economic, cultural and symbolic capital [39,47]. However, little consideration has been given to identifying how Aboriginal enterprises overcome these barriers. One reason for this may be that researching small enterprises in remote areas comes with challenges such as access, relationship building and the role of academia in producing results that identify meaningful impacts for already busy businesspeople being generous with their time. Research that considers how to overcome this issue from the perspective of both Aboriginal stakeholders [36] and non-Aboriginal partners or stakeholders who help to bridge capital gaps [39] is therefore required. Such research would provide valuable insights from successful Aboriginal enterprises operating in these areas [31] and would be key to supporting the growth of sustainable Aboriginal tourism enterprises in remote Australia.

4. Methods

4.1. Ethical Research Methods

This study endeavoured to complement existing valid and reliable data collection practices with established protocols for culturally appropriate research design, in order to support the researcher in undertaking a culturally appropriate and ethically sound research process. The research underpinning this paper therefore enacted the principles of ethical Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research outlined by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) [63] by embedding culturally appropriate approaches to research throughout the research design. This ensured an ethically sound research design, which is evidenced by the privileging of Aboriginal voices throughout this paper, particularly in the literature review and among the interview respondents, as called for by Rigney [64]. However, there are currently no academic resources to support the ethical undertaking of academic research in business-specific contexts, and there remains a need for this type of discourse.

This study used qualitative data collection methods when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents to enable in-depth consultation with Aboriginal Peoples with regard to Aboriginal issues [65–67]. It collected data through in-depth semi-structured interviews with respondents in Aboriginal tourism enterprises. Each interview began with a framing question that provided direction for subsequent questions, and the interview process remained fluid to allow the researcher to follow up threads that might lead to the revelation of critical data. Interview questions were broadly framed, on topics such as organisational models, industry experience, role support, types of information used in decision-making, product development and consumer interest in Aboriginal culture, and care was taken to retain the intent in each question. The interviews were conversational, as this allowed the interviewer to adjust questions to match the understanding of the respondent and follow the respondent’s direction while still maintaining the intent of each question [68]. Multiple questions were designed to encourage deep discussion of focal issues and achieve rich data that would reveal both overt and latent issues [69].

4.2. Respondent Selection

Approximately fifteen enterprises were approached to participate, based on their positions within the remote Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander tourism industry as defined by Bunten [18], with all enterprises being Aboriginal owned, and four being Aboriginal owned and Aboriginal operated. The sample was purposively sought to ensure that the respondents and their enterprises reflected the variance that exists with the industry, including the variety of operational models (Aboriginal owned
and operated/Aboriginal owned and non-Aboriginal operated), job descriptions that directly impact marketing (general manager/marketing manager) and region types (desert/tropics). Differences in physical location, enterprise size, model types and land agreements affect each enterprise’s operations, access to infrastructure and staff recruitment capabilities. Eight interviews were undertaken on Country with managers of Aboriginal enterprises. The nature of data collection across a national selection of respondents meant that the exercise was time consuming and expensive and led to a smaller sample size; however, it is hoped that the effort dedicated to reaching respondents in their own contexts has supported the gathering of meaningful data.

Five Aboriginal and three non-Aboriginal respondents, all working within Aboriginal owned remote Aboriginal tourism enterprises, participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews. The respondents’ roles are as follows:

1. A1 Manager
2. B2 Manager
3. C3 Manager
4. D4 Cultural Services Manager
5. E5 Marketing Manager
6. F6 Director
7. G7 Director
8. I9 Manager

As respondents involved in marketing and management were sought, some of them were non-Indigenous; however, they were still positioned within enterprises directed by Aboriginal entrepreneurs. Respondents were reached through existing networks, which is consistent with Indigenist research methods [63].

4.3. Interviews

Conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews on Country also provided insight into each operator’s physical operational environment, and this increased level of engagement may have led to higher rates of respondent participation. The interview questions were designed to encourage conversation without restricting the respondents by using guiding terms or jargon.

Examples of interview questions include:

- How long has your organisation been operational?
- What is your role title and main responsibilities?
- Does anyone in the organisation’s role directly support or compliment yours?
- Do you have any formal qualifications related to your role?
- Which marketing activities and strategies do you notice are effective?
- What information do you use to assist you in designing product offerings for consumers? Where does it come from?
- Are you able to gauge consumer’s interests in Aboriginal culture before product consumption?
- Does your understanding of their perceptions influence the way you market your organisation?

Interviews with non-Aboriginal respondents took around one hour each, and interviews with Aboriginal respondents took between half an hour and a few hours; these interviews were sometimes preceded by a period of several days during which appropriate introductions and discussions to establish heritage, connections and Country took place. The researcher visiting the place of operations for each enterprise and spending time there, including participating as a regular domestic consumer of the tourism product, is believed to have enriched the quality of the semi-structured interviews, as this mix of activities enabled her to gain an understanding of each respondent’s context that was only available by being ‘in the field’ to undertake the interviews and analyse the data.
4.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, particularly the function of identifying latent themes, was considered the most appropriate method of analysing the data obtained from the semi-structured in-depth interviews. Data collected during the semi-structured interviews were therefore analysed thematically using a coding approach, identifying themes of entrepreneurship and working to understand how the themes were inter-related [70]. Attride-Stirling finds that this approach allows ‘breaking up the text into clearly defined clusters of themes’, noting that ‘the researcher is able to unravel the mass of textual data and make sense of others’ sense-making, using more than intuition’ [70] (p. 402).

The researcher used nVivo for Mac Beta 2014 for this analysis. This software is designed to support the organisation of data and the process of synthesising information from semi-structured or unstructured data. While its function is only to organise the data, Sinkovics [71] argue that application of software in qualitative data analysis removes potential researcher biases and improves the trustworthiness of results by enabling the researcher to build a body of evidence for their findings.

Verbatim semi-structured in-depth interview transcripts were entered into the nVivo program. Next, its free coding function was used to enable the researcher to identify each instance where a particular theme, called a node, was mentioned by each respondent. Free coding was the most appropriate approach, given the variety in the terminology used and the types of discussions within the transcripts—for example, language used during the interview included not only common marketing language, but also words describing marketing actions that were not the usual terms for those processes and Aboriginal English. Nodes were then coded using a deductive approach, meaning that they were predetermined by the researcher based on what information would address the research questions [72]. However, they remained broad, to avoid missing important details, and included labels such as ‘marketing’, ‘planning’ and ‘relationships’. Once the data was coded into nodes, the software could display all related pieces of data, enabling the researcher to peruse all data related to the identified node. This supported the researcher in analysing narratives; however, it remains true that the quality of the data was determined by the research design and the validity of the insights derived by the researcher.

5. Results and Discussion

Respondents not only described their activities, but often also described antecedents to those actions, usually presenting actions developed as an outcome of problem solving. Through this presentation of ‘what we did’ and ‘why’, a set of internal characteristics emerged, followed by a set of actions that operationalised entrepreneurial traits.

Analysis of the data showed both internal motivations and external circumstances that led to entrepreneurial activities, with themes being labelled Positivity, Chaos, Education and Industry Experience, Networking, Immediate Family and Discrimination [10] (pp. 140–146). The data on entrepreneurial characteristics and actions found in this paper were ordered by their relationship to the entrepreneurial traits discussed by Foley in his work on urban Aboriginal entrepreneurs—as previously mentioned, these traits are Positivity, Face, Chaos, Education and Industry Experience, Networking, Immediate Family and Discrimination [10] (pp. 138–145)—and are presented by theme below. However, it is important to note that some themes emerged that were not identified by Foley, suggesting key differences between how urban and remote Aboriginal entrepreneurs develop successful and sustainable enterprises. The presentation of the findings below, centring the words of respondents, enacts the privileging of Indigenous voices in research [64].

5.1. Internal Forces

Internal forces—i.e., the characteristics and dispositions of remote Aboriginal tourism entrepreneurs—presented themselves in themes of Positivity, Education and Industry Experience, Networking and Cultural Cognisance, and were validated by qualifying statements demonstrating the privileging of voices, as presented below.
5.2. Positivity

Foley [10] identified ‘Positivity’ as a key characteristic of successful urban Aboriginal entrepreneurs and defined it as ‘a positive application to their business and family life’ (p. 140). All of the respondents in this study likewise spoke positively of their enterprises and experiences. They were forward-looking, and when mentioning issues that had occurred in the past, they usually followed up with anecdotes about what they did to overcome those issues and how they had learned from their experiences. They also spoke positively of future opportunities they perceived:

*Now that we have Aboriginal owners, we are going to have cultural tours. The goal is to have Aboriginal employees and Aboriginal tours that leave from the grounds (of the resort).* (I9)

This positivity suggests opportunities to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth [11] with ongoing support at federal, state and/or local government levels, as operators indicated their positivity towards engaging in the industry.

5.3. Education and Industry Experience

Foley noted that the successful urban Aboriginal entrepreneurs in his study had a high level of education, with most having tertiary or technical and further education qualifications, and many having extensive industry experience [10]. Likewise, most respondents in this study spoke of having vast experience gained through both employment and community life and explained how they had adapted these skills and experiences to help them initiate and run an enterprise:

*See, I have grown with the place. When I first came here, I didn’t have much business sense because I come from a teaching background that’s totally different to running a business or company. From a business sense, I just needed to get my head around it. And I have grown with the place to understand what jargon to use and just learn how a business is operated.* (C3)

*All of my previous careers and skills are required to operate this business, from mechanic, logistics, remote area travel, 4WD training, small business management, etc. . . .* (B2)

In contrast to the work of Foley [10], remote Aboriginal entrepreneurs placed more emphasis on their experience than on their education, possibly reflecting the different levels of access to educational opportunities in remote areas [44]. This suggests that local and national government support is needed to implement Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education [11] in remote areas. Given the entrepreneurs’ successful transfer of skills to the context of a remote tourism enterprise, supporting remote education would also further support the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure [11] in remote areas.

5.4. Networking

Foley identified ‘networking’ as a significant trait predicting success among urban Aboriginal entrepreneurs but also noted that this networking tended to occur outside of the Aboriginal community [10]. On going into business, urban Aboriginal entrepreneurs found that they needed to step away from involvement with their Indigenous communities and even their extended families, working by themselves and networking predominantly with non-Indigenous people and organisations to ensure success. Some of the remote Aboriginal entrepreneurs in our study also stressed the many responsibilities they undertook in running their businesses:

*Being a small organisation, I have to do a bit of everything.* (E5)

*I was everything (in the tourism operation), you name it. I washed the cars. I did everything in my job.* (A1)
However, others explained that responsibilities in their enterprises were divided based on the strengths of family and community members, implying that they retained and even increased their connections to immediate and extended family and to the community as part of creating a sustainable enterprise. This implies the ability of remote Aboriginal tourism operators to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities, alongside Goal 9 as referenced above [11].

5.5. Cultural Cognisance

Along with their continuing engagement with family and community, the remote respondents in the study continued to be connected to their cultures and to draw on them in creating their businesses. Respondents spoke about culture in positive ways, describing how their cultures had been adapted to suit market needs, and many spoke with pride of having the opportunity to work with their community to prepare knowledge and share it with customers:

The cultural tourism has been a big focus in the last two years. It's very popular and has been received so well, and the team has gone from very small and inexperienced to producing such a great product now, and I think it's because it's authentic, it's not a show or performance, it's very real and contemporary. It's a goal to continue and develop that. (E5)

This is again in contrast to Foley [10], whose work did not identify any significant links between connection to culture and the success of urban Aboriginal enterprises and in fact implied the opposite. The degree to which this inclusion of culture and engaging connection and relationships supports Sustainable Development Goal 10: Reduce Inequality Within and Among Countries [11] would benefit from further investigation.

5.6. External Forces

External forces—i.e., the circumstantial, locational, industry, societal or cultural forces that respondents felt impacted the enterprise and forced improvements or changes—are discussed next under the headings of Market and Opportunity Awareness, Geographical Location, Continual Improvements and Cultural Context.

5.7. Market and Opportunity Awareness

Foley [10] identified the ability to see ‘market conditions, resource mobilization and other societal factors’ (p. 141) as opportunities as a predictor of success among urban Aboriginal entrepreneurs, and all of the remote respondents in this study displayed this ability. They spoke of their ‘market’ and detailed what they understood it to be, and most spoke of having ideas and strategies to reach new markets, plans to direct marketing efforts more effectively or strategies to improve access to markets:

When I did my research, we didn’t focus on targeting our marketing to a domestic audience because it’s just a waste of time. We did it for the first couple of years just to start off, to see what happened. But in the end, we thought we’ll market internationally and if we pick up domestic audience, then that’s good, but if we don’t then that’s just it. There was a deliberate strategy. (A1)

We more aim for internationals because internationals are more interested in Aboriginal culture, less likely to be bigoted old farts, and because we charge a lot more for our tours, we don’t get bigoted old farts very often. Our customers really want to know about it. (G7)

Some respondents displayed their awareness of opportunity when they discussed developing products to ensure that they could offer tourism products year round, regardless of season. For some locations, this meant developing products around unique seasonal events or overcoming perceptions that there are seasons in which to avoid visiting their areas.

We are open and accessible all year round, which is unique for the top end. (E5)
... when [name of creek] creek floods, we send helicopters across to get the customers. The CEO prays for rain so we can whisk the customers off in the helicopter. We are the only company that can land a helicopter in the park. That’s a great product. (E5)

Most respondents talked of diversification within their enterprises as a means of maintaining pace, growing or moving into new areas. They discussed the market circumstances that led them to consider moving into new areas, and their optimism in following leads to diversify.

And then we noticed that people came along and would ask us about plants. We said ‘okay, we’ll add that’. (C3)

I have always been diverse, always been a consultant in a manner of speaking. When I started tourism, I started consultancy at the same time because it was slow to get started, so I did the consultancy work to backfill the tourism. (A1)

One traveller coming through and noticed our food stuff and nominated us for the Jaguar Award, a national award, and we won that. And that gave us some exposure. And then also magazines and stuff. (C3)

When I was running tours, I ran two strands; I ran cultural tours, and those people came and were very aware and respectful, and they understood I was Aboriginal. The other side was mainstream tourism with a cultural focus, and those were those ones that you had people, like photography tours, the primary focus was wildlife and photography and the cultural side were secondary. (A1)

This connects to Foley identification of industry experience as a key predictor of sustainable enterprise development, in that the respondents drew on their experience in the tourism industry to identify new opportunities and develop suitable products in response to them, which allowed their businesses to continue operating and even to expand. It also further demonstrates the ability of these remote enterprises to achieve Sustainable Development Goals 9 and 11 [11].

5.8. Geographical Location

As Foley’s study focused on urban Aboriginal entrepreneurs on Australia’s eastern seaboard only, he noted that characteristics of success for Aboriginal entrepreneurs might be different in other regions, in ways specifically linked to the geography and culture of those regions [10]. Confirming this, all respondents in this study commented that their geographical location was a key feature of their enterprise and helped them to be successful. Aboriginal operators chose to share information only from their own Country, but they also discussed how they utilised the key natural features of their Country, and all respondents spoke of ways in which they had developed products so that consumers could enjoy the areas that they called home:

... when Kakadu is closed and we are in full flood, if it is too high for us to run cruises, we still have the speed boat. The helicopters are owned by [name of Aboriginal group]. (D4)

Cognisant of their remote locations, respondents discussed attempts to collaborate within the tourism value chain to reinvigorate interest or to create a travel ‘pathway’ for tourists. Some recognised a need to work together to develop a destination in order to attract people to a region, but found that remoteness could create challenges:

I think that for us to move forward we obviously need the tourism commission to come on-board and market the whole area so that we can get visitors to the region; that is vital. (C3)

The desire for operators to acknowledge and work with the challenges and advantages presented by operating tourism on their Country demonstrates their commitment to caring for Country, which is aligned with Sustainable Development Goals 12: Responsible Consumption and Production, 14: Life Below Water and 15: Life On Land [11].
5.9. Continual Improvements

An element of the remote entrepreneurs’ success not noted in Foley’s discussion of urban Aboriginal entrepreneurs was a commitment to continual improvements in the business. All respondents spoke of being responsive to customers’ needs, feedback and market trends. Respondents described starting out and developing products, and then using a process of trial and error to continue to refine those products based on consumer reactions:

I would respond to every bit of feedback that I got to make my product better. (A1)

We have built it up and worked out what works, and what doesn’t work so well. (E5)

… [name] is not only one of the few Aboriginal entrepreneurs, she is also one of the only women entrepreneurs. When it dawned on us that that was the case, we slightly adjusted our marketing to appeal more to women. We realised that women feel comfortable with other women. (G6)

Again, this strongly implies the ability to achieve Sustainable Development Goals 9 and 11, along with Goal 5: Gender Equality [11], particularly if the enterprises receive consistent financial support from local and national governments.

5.10. Culturally Contextual

Finally, linked to the importance of connection to culture in achieving sustainable remote Aboriginal enterprises was the importance of adapting culture to share it with tourists. Many respondents spoke of adapting culture to the context of the tourism industry by identifying new ways to offer cultural products, such as creating shorter engagements or contracting their services to complementary tourism organisations. One respondent spoke of their need to ‘warn’ customers that they would be undertaking a cultural experience, in order to weed out tourists who might not be prepared for genuine cultural engagement:

They [local Aboriginal owned tourism destination not offering their own cultural product] are also marketing a flight from Wilpena to here for our culture. (C3)

They are doing an organised ride commencing here so (name of Elder) is doing a Welcome to Country. (C3)

… we realised we needed to change their expectations, so we ended up writing that couple of paragraphs (stating that the tour is about Aboriginal culture). We tried it on a friend’s clients first and she got glowing remarks. (E6)

As in work by Foley [10], all Aboriginal owner-operator respondents reported issues with discrimination and racism. These were predominantly issues at the level of the consumer: for example, racist consumers making engagement difficult for the operator through language or behaviour.

Some of the customers [ … ] out of sheer ignorance they ask dumb questions. (F6)

(like) Do I live in a hut? [ … ] So I give them stupid answers. (G7)

However, the same issues were also reported at the industry level, where operators identified problems in trying to work with industry.

It’s taken inbound operators to get over the idea of an Aboriginal enterprise actually being reliable enough to turn up on time and all that stuff. We have now taken out enough of their tourists to prove that we have a quality product and that we turn up on time. (G7)
Foley noted that urban Aboriginal entrepreneurs’ experience of both institutionalised and individual racism was often a motivating factor in their pursuit of business success [10]. The remote Aboriginal entrepreneurs in this study framed racism as a problem to be avoided when dealing with tourists (e.g., by focusing on a clientele more willing to engage with their products respectfully) and overcome when interacting with the industry (e.g., by demonstrating the inaccuracy of negative stereotypes), but nevertheless as an issue that had to be confronted constantly. However, they did not report experiencing an additional kind of discrimination that Foley’s respondents reported, which is discrimination from within their own community based on a perception that they were not sharing their resources with the community appropriately [10]. This may be because of the continuing engagement with community and culture that differentiates remote Aboriginal entrepreneurs from their urban counterparts.

The continuing evidence of racism in the workplace of the operators demonstrates the need for national and local government support to achieve Sustainable Development Goals 3: Ensure Healthy Lives and Promote Well Being and 10: Reduced Inequalities [11]. The role played by culture and connections to community and culture in both creating sustainable remote enterprises and supporting remote entrepreneurs would benefit from further study.

6. Summary

This research has sought to identify characteristics of Aboriginal entrepreneurs that precede entrepreneurial actions. The findings show that while some of the characteristics Foley identified in urban Aboriginal entrepreneurs are also shown by remote Aboriginal entrepreneurs (namely Positivity, Education and Industry Experience and Networking), remote Aboriginal entrepreneurs also show some different characteristics (Cultural Cognisance), and when considered in the industry-specific context of tourism, these translate into different actions.

Our analysis identifies both characteristics that are internal to the individual, leading to the entrepreneurial nature of the enterprise (Positivity, Education and Industry Experience, Networking and Cultural Cognisance), and external forces that impact the enterprises, resulting in entrepreneurial activities (Market and Opportunity Awareness, Geographical Location, Continual Improvement and Cultural Context). It identifies how these characteristics support enterprises in facing and perhaps overcoming barriers to operation and therefore to success. Critically, contrary to work by Foley [10] findings on urban Aboriginal entrepreneurs, our interviews revealed that a continuing connection to community and culture was a key component enabling remote entrepreneurs to achieve success and sustainability. Respondents discussed the involvement of family and community in their businesses and the use and application of culture throughout their enterprise and products. This may only be a predictor of success and sustainability due to the nature and purpose of their operations, as the tourism industry facilitates the sharing of culture. The data is industry-specific, and other remote Aboriginal entrepreneurs operating in different industries may not experience the same direct business benefits from continuing engagement with community and culture. However, the fact that these remote Aboriginal entrepreneurs did not experience the alienation from their own communities that the urban Aboriginal entrepreneurs Foley engaged with did is not necessarily linked to the nature of their businesses and thus suggests that connection to community and culture may still be a strong predictor of success and sustainability for all kinds of remote Aboriginal enterprises. Finally, engaging with the identified Sustainable Development Goals [11] may provide a framework for national, state and local governments to more effectively support remote Aboriginal tourism entrepreneurs and ensure the sustainability of their enterprises.

7. Limitations

As previously mentioned, the need to engage with interview respondents in context and on Country meant that this paper draws on a small sample size. Its results are therefore not generalisable. The context of sustainability and the themes of Aboriginal entrepreneurship were also applied to this
study in the context of the tourism industry only, meaning that the results show some industry-specific idiosyncrasies. Furthermore, the paper focuses only on remote enterprise, meaning that its results cannot be applied to urban or rural cases.

This paper offers an exploratory view of remote Aboriginal tourism enterprises and entrepreneurial activities only. The researcher focused on the selection of appropriate respondents as a means to ensure quality data for each case. Future research would benefit from replicating this study using an increased sample size and applying it to varied populations, including urban, remote and industry-specific populations, as well as investigating similarities with other Indigenous peoples around the world undertaking tourism on Country.

8. Conclusions and Implications

This paper identifies key characteristics of successful remote Aboriginal tourism entrepreneurs operating on Country in Australia and highlights the importance of connection to community and culture in creating sustainable enterprises in this area. It also notes connections (intentional or otherwise) between remote Aboriginal tourism practices and the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals [6] and shows how the development of successful Aboriginal businesses on Country, which include culture and are part of remote Aboriginal communities, may support the achievement of goals ranging from ‘Decent Work and Economic Growth’ to ‘Reducing Inequality’ and how the respondents’ commitment to developing culturally appropriate and accessible products and working within the specifics of their local geography to create and market those products speak to goals including ‘Responsible Production and Consumption’, ‘Climate Action’, ‘Life Below Water’ and ‘Life on Land’ [11]. Work by Foley [10] work on the characteristics of urban Aboriginal entrepreneurs was used to frame its findings and highlight key elements in the practices of remote Aboriginal tourism entrepreneurs, in particular strong connections to family, community and culture, that support them in achieving business success and sustainability. The themes listed by Foley were used to not only identify the challenges and barriers to success faced by these entrepreneurial enterprises, but also explore the resourceful and creative business practices used by remote entrepreneurs to overcome these barriers. The findings highlight both internal characteristics—that is, the characteristics of the entrepreneurs themselves, including Positivity, Education and Industry Experience, Networking and Cultural Cognisance—and the external contextual perspective (Market and Opportunity Awareness, Geographical Location, Continual Improvement and Cultural Context) that produced entrepreneurial actions. Our identification of the importance of Aboriginal culture and connections with community to the practices of remote Aboriginal tourism enterprises, in contrast to work by Foley [10], highlights the need for further research on this topic. In particular, the roles of culture and community as strengths in remote Aboriginal business practice should be investigated and promulgated to counteract previous negative narratives. It is also imperative to explore links between the business practices of the longest continuing culture on the planet and the sustainability of this culture, evidently practiced in all aspects of life for eons, to contribute to future narratives of sustainability. Improving understanding of how remote Aboriginal operators enact sustainable entrepreneurialism may support the development of knowledge and improve our understanding of how tourism can operate sustainably despite challenges and barriers, and the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals offer a framework for doing so.

Improved understanding of how remote Aboriginal enterprises encounter and overcome barriers will also support the viability of industry in remote areas and add to a strengths-based discourse on Aboriginal business. Furthermore, it is hoped that the development of an evidence-based discourse on the success and sustainability of remote Aboriginal enterprises will promote the future development of evidence-based policy by policymakers and support the integration of Aboriginal knowledges in the development of sustainable tourism goals.
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