

# Investigating the Roles of the Indigenous Tour Guide

## **Abstract**

*This paper extends the current research on the role of guides for particular niche markets. It investigates the roles of indigenous guides and compares them to tour guides and ecotour guides. Indigenous tour guides are unique in that they are part of the fabric of the site and interpret the value of the area within their own cultural context. This means the major difference in roles for indigenous tour guides is that the resource management role becomes focused on conserving local cultural values (both site and society) and interpreting the contemporary nature of Aboriginal culture. To conserve local cultural values, indigenous guides act as gatekeepers using a range of strategies, such as limiting the information given and directing access, which limits commodification of their culture. These findings have important implications for training both indigenous and non-indigenous tour guides as well as how other agencies promote Aboriginal owned tour businesses.*

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## **Introduction**

A skilful guide is one of the most valuable assets a tourism company can have. In many ways, a guide is the 'face' of a business or company (Pond, 1993). Many foreign visitors tend to view their tour guides as representatives of the region or country (Pond, 1993). Due to the importance of guides and the growth in heritage tourism, there is increasing interest in roles of tour guides (Holloway, 1981; Hughes, 1991; Weiler & Davis, 1993).

Although the Oxford dictionary (Ludowyk & Moore, 1996) defines a guide simply as...*a person who shows others the way* (p. 362), research has found the role of a tour guide is much broader (Cohen, 1985; Holloway, 1981). In a review about the origin, structure and dynamics of tour guiding, Cohen (1985) created a model based on its historic beginnings with the pathfinders and mentors of ancient times. He re-named these two roles to make them more relevant to modern tour guiding and called the pathfinder role 'leadership', and the mentor role 'mediatory'. As a leader, the tour guide has to organise (i.e. provide direction, access, and control) and build the team (i.e. ensure group cohesion and morale). As a mentor, the guide acts as an interactionary (or 'middleman') and is an educator for the group.

Since 1985, researchers have been using Cohen's framework as a basis for studies about the role of guides for particular niche tourism markets. In particular, studies have been conducted into the roles of ecotour and nature-based guides (Crabtree & Weiler, 1994; Gurung, Simmons & Devlin, 1996; Haig, 1997; Weiler & Davis, 1993). Weiler,

Johnson & Davis (1991) and Weiler & Davis (1993) extended Cohen's model by adding an additional area of resource management (Table 1). That is, nature-based tour guides also encourage participants to reduce their impacts on-site, and they facilitate a change in values towards long-term conservation. Haig (1997) confirmed this in a survey of ecotourists and non-ecotourists when it was found ecotourists particularly valued the role of the guide in motivating environmentally friendly behaviour.

This paper extends the current research on the role of guides for particular niche markets. It investigates the roles of indigenous guides at Mutawintji National Park. It specifically asks whether Cohen's (1985) roles are applicable to the roles of the indigenous tour guide and whether the additional role of resource management, applicable to nature-based tour guides, is also applicable to the role of the indigenous tour guide. Such research is important for training and quality assurance in this growing industry and for improving our understanding of tour guiding generally.

### **The indigenous Guide Industry in Australia**

The provision of indigenous cultural tourism experiences is a growing industry in Australia. Around 14% of all international tourists are estimated to visit Aboriginal sites and cultural displays in Australia and the level of participation increased by an average of 34% per annum between 1993-1996 (South Australia Tourist Commission, 1998). A number of complex issues are associated with this growing Aboriginal-tourist relationship such as the sanitisation of the information presented, the homogenisation of diverse Aboriginal cultures, the authenticity of the product, and the lack of reference to contemporary Aboriginal culture

(Altman, 1993; Finlayson, 1991).

A common way tourists encounter indigenous culture in Australia is through a visit to a national park. Aboriginal people participate in a variety of ways in the management of certain national parks. Such participation creates employment, keeps people close to their community and country, provides management with local knowledge and skills, implements traditional practices that benefit local biodiversity, and contributes to a cultural tourism experience. For example, national parks such as Uluru and Kakadu offer visitors the chance to undertake a guided tour of the area led by a local Aborigine.

Face-to-face interpretation is the most effective means of managing complex issues associated with the growing Aboriginal-tourist relationship, because direct contact with an Aboriginal guide means the visitor can discuss and clarify a range of issues and misconceptions (Pond, 1993). Given the concerns about the Aboriginal-tourist relationship, it is important to identify the roles of indigenous tour guides. A better understanding of these roles is essential not only to address cross-cultural issues for Aboriginal culture, but also to improve the quality of the experience for the tourist, and to improve guide training (Hughes, 1991).

### **Methods**

This study was conducted in Western New South Wales at Mutawintji National Park, 130 km north-east of Broken Hill. The park has many sites of great significance to local Aborigines and the wider community including rock art sites, occupation sites and stone arrangements. Two sacred sites are entirely closed to the public: the Snake Cave and Mushroom Rock. Access to two other sites, Mutawintji Historic site and Ngalkirrkka, is permitted only in the company of an accredited guide.

Mutawintji National Park was the first national park in New South Wales to contract its ranger-guided tours to the local land council. The Aboriginal Discovery Ranger program provides Aboriginal guides employed by Mutawintji Heritage tours - wholly owned by the Mutawintji Local Aboriginal Land Council. Most guides have received accreditation to run tours to Mutawintji Historic site and Ngalkirrkka after completing a tour guide training school held by the Local Aboriginal Land Council and the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service. On Discovery Ranger tours, local Aboriginal (Paakintji) guides are presenting Aboriginal culture to non-Aboriginal people.

Material for this paper has been

*Table 1: The Role of a Tour Guide and Nature-Based or Ecotour Guide (in italics).*

	<b>Outer directed</b>	<b>Inner-directed</b>
Leadership Sphere	Instrumental: provides direction, access, security and safety.	Social: maintains cohesion within the group.
Mediatory Sphere	Interactionary: organises meals etc, makes the setting non-threatening.	Teacher/Communicator: provides information, and interpretation.
<i>Resource Management</i>	<i>Motivator: reduces impact on site</i>	<i>Environmental interpreter: encourages long-term behaviour.</i>

Source: Cohen, 1985; Weiler & Davis, 1993.

taken from a larger research project that sought to investigate guides' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities when presenting Aboriginal culture. Due to an almost complete lack of published research on indigenous tour guiding, an interpretivist research framework, which acknowledges the individuality of respondents, was adopted for this study (Neuman, 1999; Sarantakos, 1998). The investigation was conducted using qualitative research techniques, including semi-structured interviews and observations of the tours. Two field visits were undertaken to participate in and observe tours at Mutawintji Historic Site. The data from this paper has been drawn from observation of these tours and at least two interviews with each of five Aboriginal guides, as well as two Aboriginal members of the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service who have also taken tours in recent times. Guides had generally been working for between three and sixteen years. The interviews were tape-recorded and analysed with the help of QSR NUD.IST a qualitative data analysis computer program.

## Results

*The people gotta understand... Understand that for us to maintain our culture we need land and we need country... to ... pass things on...*

### **The leadership roles**

According to Cohen (1985) the instrumental role provides direction, access, security and safety for the group. At Mutawintji Historic Site much of the instrumental role is pre-determined. Regulations specify the type of appropriate behaviour of guides and visitors and restricts access to the site unless a guide is accredited (Table 2). However, the indigenous tour guide also fulfilled the instrumental role at the start of the tour, as they told visitors to

follow the guide at all times and not to wander off the track. Visitors are also given orientation at the start of the tour about how long the tour will take and the terrain about to be encountered. They also told participants that they would require equipment such as a hat, sunscreen, water and walking shoes prior to undertaking the tour. Warnings were given at appropriate times during the tour. For example *Take it nice and easy coming down this way thanks and be careful going down this way, it is a bit steep*. Guides also waited at each stop for the group to gather before continuing the presentation.

During the interviews, a number of guides also clearly identified this instrumental role. For example, one guide stated there was a need to *...Make sure that everyone understands the rules and regulations*. Others identified a need to warn visitors if extra care was needed at a particular stage of the tour, while others said they often stopped and engaged the visitors to give those lagging behind an opportunity to catch up.

The other role within the leadership sphere is social - one that maintains cohesion within the group. Guides reported that humour was seen as an important way to maintain group cohesion (Table 2). For example one guide stated that humour is important because *They all laugh... you know it breaks the ice and they sort of start talking to ya*. It was also used to encourage people to acknowledge strangers as members of the same group. Humour was also used as a means to "wake-up" people, to change the pace of the tour, to renew people's interest in their surroundings and to ensure an enjoyable experience.

### **The mediatory roles**

The role of interactionary was important to indigenous tour guides. Indeed this particular

role went beyond that normally associated with a tour guide. For example, Aboriginal guides said they saw their roles not simply as a guide but as representatives of Paakintji, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and of all Aboriginal people in Australia.

Another way the role of interactionary was fulfilled was through the use of language (Table 2). Guides frequently used Paakintji language when describing plants, animals and plants. Examples were provided of how English words have been derived, often through mispronunciation, from Paakintji (e.g., Mulga for Malka, and Mootwingee instead of Mutawintji). Aboriginal concepts were explained to tourists by use of analogies, metaphors and similes that the tourist could understand. Examples of this include likening Mutawintji to a cathedral and the engraving site to a library. Guides often stated they asked people how they felt when they walked into a cathedral or a mosque in order to gain respect for the site. One guide likened smoking ceremonies to the use of incense by Catholics. Guides referred to the engraving as *archives of our people*. These comparisons bring Aboriginal culture into a familiar context to the visitor. One guide said *whatever analogy ... you know the guide thinks is gonna best get...[the message across]...you know...[to]...what is usually a pretty mixed audiences...you know that's fine*.

The mediatory role of teacher was also seen as a key part of an indigenous tour guide's activities. For example, one guide said *that if visitors have any questions and that they want to ask, they pull you over any time*. In addition, hands-on learning rather than simply pointing out things of interest was emphasised. Activities included passing around a leaf to visitors for them to crush and smell it, showing them a piece of gypsum and explaining that this was burned

Table 2: Key Findings From the Study at Mutawintji National Park.

Role	Observations on Tours	Examples from interviews
Instrumental Leadership Role	Access is only allowed when accompanied by a guide. Guide organises keys to gates etc. Guides often stated relevant aspects throughout the tour, for example, <i>take it nice and easy coming down this way.</i>	One guide stated <i>Make sure everyone understands the rules and regulations.</i> Others said they often stopped and engaged the visitors to give those lagging behind an opportunity to catch up.
Social Leadership Role	Guides used humour to wake up people and to renew people's interest. Activities were often participatory and hands on.	Describing part of their work as that of being an 'entertainer'. Guides reported using humour to acknowledge strangers in the group and to break the ice.
Interactionary Mediator Role	Guides told dreamtime stories. They also explained the use of plants as a resource. Plant, animal, and sites were named using the local Wimpatji language (Paakintji).	Recognise their position as representatives of Paakintji and Aboriginal people generally. Guides indicated they used analogies and metaphors to interpret the site. They also indicated the importance of this in terms of education
Teacher/Communicator Mediator role	Guides had hands-on activities involving bushfoods, ochre and tools. The significance and meaning of engravings was told.	They stated they educated people by creating personal links between themselves and the visitor, telling their own stories as well as interpreting the stories of the site. One guide said <i>Its not a dead culture, what's in text books, but a living culture, and it is a good way of showing people instead of 'em doing their own interpretation of the site. It's best that they get a true story of it so they can't go away making their own conclusions what that art work means.</i>
Resource Management Role of Motivator	Guides explained the regulations associated with the site. Guides make constant reminders to respect the site. For example one guide asked visitors not to walk over a particular engraved slab. Guides told dreamtime stories to a certain or agreed level of meaning.	Most guides stated they discouraged people wandering off the track in order to reduce physical impact on the site. This also served to keep visitors away from spiritually significant areas close by.
Resource Management Role of Environmental Interpreter	Focus is on the cultural perspective about caring for country. While wandering off trails is discouraged and guides asked visitors not walk over engraved slabs, the emphasis was on a sacred landscape. Guides showed the fragility of the landscape by showing old walking trails. They used metaphors and analogies so that the importance of the site to the local culture could be understood.	None in terms of what might traditionally be expected for a nature based guide. It was frequently stated from an Aboriginal point of view. For example <i>The people gotta understand .... Understand that for us to maintain our culture we need land and we need country... to ... pass things on or Passing on knowledge. Teaching people about how knowledge was lost.</i>

and crushed to make white ochre. The reason why this type of learning was emphasised was because it made the experience more personal for the tourist. The main stated aim of Aboriginal guides was to change visitors' attitudes and perceptions of Aborigines and Aboriginal culture. They did this by creating personal links between

themselves and the visitor, telling their own stories as well as interpreting the stories of the site. *It's not a dead culture, what's in text books, but a living culture, and it is a good way of showing people instead of 'em doing their own interpretation of the site. It's best that they get a true story of it so they can't go away making their own*

*conclusions what that art work means.* Another stated *If you can change one person's attitude in fifty, well you know you are doing something because you know you are getting across somewhere.*

### **The resource management roles**

The resource management role

that encourages participants to reduce their impacts on-site has to be seen in a cultural context in that guides reduced the impact the tour might have on Paakintji sites and society. For example, access is tightly controlled through permits and accredited guides. Indeed two sacred sites are entirely closed to the public. Wandering off trails is discouraged and guides asked that visitors not cause cultural offence by walking over engraved slabs. While guides picked a few leaves of certain plants to show bush tucker, they discouraged the group from doing it and explained why.

In addition, guides were also careful about how much information and interaction tourists had with the Paakintji culture. The local Aboriginal Elders approve the information given by the guides. Guides also stated that dreaming stories were told when the opportunity arose, but that these stories often had several layers of meaning and when told to participants only certain levels were explained. So that while Cohen (1985) includes access as part of the organiser role, access is especially important to Paakintji and the Mutawintji Local Aboriginal Land Council. At Mutawintji, access goes beyond organising a visit to keeping visitors away from spiritually significant sites and limiting the information told to tourists.

Another aspect of the resource management role as described by Weiler and Davis (1993) is that of environmental interpreter who encourages changed values. This role was not expressed in terms of a European conservation ethic, but clearly in terms of local cultural heritage. One guide emphasised that *it is the landscape that is sacred*. Another stated *our story is the land*. These statements emphasise the Aboriginal perspective that the landscape, not just the site, is sacred and requires protection.

However, challenging people's understanding of Aboriginal culture was also stated as a major aim by the Aboriginal guides. The first time a Paakintji guide was asked about the most important aspect to guiding, he gave a powerful and moving response. *Passing on knowledge. Teaching people about how knowledge was lost. Like in the missions in the area where people were flogged, sometimes killed for talking to their children of their culture and in their language... The mission contributed to the loss of knowledge of Aboriginal culture by the treatment of those people living in them - floggings, sometimes killings.* Another stated *probably one of the main points is... just to tell about how special the area is... It still is... a sacred area where people gather.* Or *... a lot of people didn't sort of realise... why our land was so important to Aboriginal people... because our story is the land and our stories are in the land ... they're not books or anything like that there ... they're out there in that landscape and that and our foods are out there... and everything like that ... our dreaming stories are not in little towns and the people are in towns but not the stories ... you know ... and the history's out there in the bush.*

The result of such interpretation is that the participants have an opportunity to interact and meet with the Paakintji. This creates more personal experiences. *The more information I give about myself... I think the better a lot of people will feel about Aboriginals ...* or as another guide stated *after one tour he came across and shook my hand and ... he said you opened a few eyes [up to] the Aboriginal people....*

### Discussion

Guided tours are an interesting area of inquiry because they function in many different environmental contexts with groups of varying types and purposes (Pearce, 1984). This study shows how the roles of an indigenous guide compare with the original framework developed by Cohen (1985) for tour guides. Like the research conducted by Weiler & Davis (1993) on nature-based tour guides, Cohen's (1985) framework has had to be modified for the cross-cultural context of the tour (Table 3).

This result is a reflection that the environment is not an objectively definable entity, it is culturally constructed in the form and imagery of society. In other words, the environmental/

Table 3: The Roles Proposed for Indigenous Tour Guides.

	Administration/ management role	Psycho-social role
Leadership Sphere	Instrumental: provides direction, access, security and safety.	Social: maintains cohesion within the group. <i>Tension management between people of different culture. Creates cohesion between guide and group.</i>
Mediatory Sphere	Interactionary: organises meals etc, makes the setting non-threatening.	Communicator: provides information, and interpretation.
Resource Management	<i>Gatekeeper: Restricts access through both hard management (permits) and soft management techniques (access to a few sacrifice areas, limiting information given)</i>	<i>Heritage interpreter: encourages long-term change of values by participants both in terms of the historic and contemporary nature of the indigenous culture and the site.</i>

cultural context changes with the particular type of tour. A tour guide, showing a group a range of sites in a region, largely interacts within the tourists' own cultural context. Tourists want cultural interaction at a particular cultural site but do not expect a tour guide to play that particular role (Hughes, 1991). That is for tour guides, the environment is both focused on and defined by the tour group. By contrast, a nature-based or ecotour guide's environment is largely defined by the tour group (i.e. a conservation ethic) but it is more broadly focused to include the surroundings as well as the tour group. Like the ecotour guide, the indigenous tour guide's environment is broadly focused to include both the tour group and the surroundings, but they define it, not by the tour group, but within their own cultural context.

Interpreting the value of an area within an indigenous tour guide's own cultural context is also what tourists appear to want (Holloway, 1981; Moscardo & Pearce, 1999). For example, Moscardo and Pearce (1989) found tourists to Melville Island in northern Australia were most satisfied when there was direct contact with Aboriginal communities. Visitors to such areas come to have an authentic and worthwhile cross-cultural experience (Hughes, 1991). This suggests cultural exchange with an indigenous tour guide may be a critical part of the experience for tourists at Mutawintji.

Given the above demands and expectations of tourists, what is appropriate commodification of the Paakintji culture? Commodification is a topic of much discussion in the Aboriginal tourism literature (Mercer, 1995; Ryan & Huyton, 2000; Whittaker, 1999). Uncontrolled access in other areas of Australia has led to major conflict between pro-development tourist organisations and the Aboriginal community (Mercer, 1995). Yet if managed

appropriately it may be possible to keep tourists at arms length from the Aboriginal community (Ryan & Huyton, 2000). This study shows that the Paakintji at Mutawintji have carefully considered what is appropriate. A range of management techniques, such as excluding people from some areas and limiting the amount of information given about their culture, has been implemented. Critical amongst these strategies is the guide, who acts as a gatekeeper to both the site and the society.

Another difference between ecotour guides and indigenous guides is the style of education. While a nature-based or ecotour guide may try to create a long-term conservation ethic,

**Excluding people from some areas and limiting information can work within a framework of direct contact with an indigenous guide to challenge misconceptions and promote long term understanding.**

Paakintji guides act as constructivist educators (Klein & Merritt, 1994). That is Aboriginal guides attempt to remove pre-conceived notions that the site and society is a part of history and replace it with an understanding of the site and society in a contemporary context. The ecotour guide often creates a conservation ethic by simply stating the types of behaviours appropriate for long-term conservation (Weiler & Davis, 1993). By contrast, indigenous tour guides create long-term understanding, attitudes and behaviours towards Aboriginal culture by challenging stereotypes or misconceptions through talking to participants and emphasising the contemporary nature of their society. Should a non-indigenous tour guide try to interpret the site the same way, the experience and message would not be the same and perhaps less effective.

This suggests the Paakintji see authentic and worthwhile cultural exchange with the tourist also as a critical part of the tour experience.

Our study has two important implications for indigenous guide training. Firstly, participants on a tour with an indigenous tour guide are immediately thrust into the context of the site because the guide is part of the fabric of the experience. As such, training indigenous guides to use humour to 'break the ice' at the initial stage of the tour where there are cultural differences between the group and the guide, may be an important aspect in training. Initially there may be some tension (i.e. excitement or apprehension) about meeting another culture. Such a strategy helps create a bond between the guide and the participant. Training indigenous guides to also use analogies and metaphors to explain concepts from the tourists' own perspective may also be important in delivering key messages.

Secondly Haig (1997) found that the ecotourists believe it is vitally important for guides to provide access to sites. Weiler and Davis (1993) showed access was also seen as important for commercial organisations and land management agencies. This study has shown that access, in its broadest context, is particularly important for the Paakintji guides. As the site is sacred, control of access is vital. Visitation is restricted so that a guide must be present and these guides must be accredited. Given this importance, the training of non-indigenous guides to such sacred areas needs to emphasise the privilege of being allowed to access sites of such immense cultural value.

To conclude, Aboriginal tourism has until recently been promoted with little consideration of the concerns for Aboriginal people. It is often conducted in a way that ignores the diversity of

Aboriginal culture and the contemporary nature of Aboriginality. Much research has been conducted on describing and understanding the impacts of tourism on similar host societies throughout the world (Moscardo & Pearce, 1999). This research shows that when such tourism is managed and organised by the local indigenous community, they can take some level of control. At Mutawintji, the Paakintji are controlling the impact of tourism by carefully regulating access and interpreting the contemporary nature of Aboriginality to tourists.

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