

GEOTOURISM: WHO IS A GEOTOURIST?[©]

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Abstract

Ecotourism is ecologically sustainable tourism, focusing on natural areas. Its aim is to foster environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation. Geotourism is ecotourism with an added geological theme.

Geotourism has great potential as a new niche ecotourism product, but will require the same disciplines that apply to other niche, 'high value' tourism activities. Where ever tourism contributes a direct environmental benefit to a visited location, its clients gain empathy for the holistic heritage of the area, and this reward creates enhanced customer loyalty to the operator.

The Commonwealth Government's 1994 National Ecotourism Strategy considered that ecotourists may include a mix of independent travelers, people who travel in organised groups of a scientific, educational or recreational nature, and individuals or families who are interested in an ecotourism experience as part of a varied holiday. Whilst based on limited sources, the Strategy then considered that the ecotourist appears to be well educated, professional/semi-professional, 20-50 years of age, independent and individualistic, looking for alternatives to be traditional tourist destinations and experiences, and with significant spending power.

Having regard to demographic and lifestyle considerations, it is hoped that geotourism, if positioned as a supplementary, knowledge-adding product within an attractive ecotourism experience, will attract a different demographic i.e. affluent 'over 45 y.o.' customers. These may come from amongst geoscience professionals from within these segmentations, as well as their partners and friends, particularly through alumni and professional societies such as the Geological Society of Australia.

Given the relatively small size of the Australian 'geoscience interest' market, product content packaging will be critical. To address this issue, Leisure Solutions[®] and the School of Marketing, Tourism & Leisure at Edith Cowan University are currently undertaking a cooperative market research survey of members of the Geological Society of Australia.

This paper addresses the rationale for and scope of this research work as well as reviews other available research material which can assist marketers in understanding who are the people most likely to be interested in geotourism, as well as introducing some of the preliminary results from this study.

Keywords

Sustainable Geotourism, Marketing, Over 45 y.o., Geotourists, Alumni, Experiential Tourism.

Nature of Geotourism

Ecotourism

Ecotourism is ecologically sustainable tourism with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation.

Ecotourism began with small groups travelling to relatively undisturbed areas, appreciating natural scenery and traditional cultures.

World tourism has become an immense global industry, with an impact related to its size. Now ecotourism is increasingly seen as part of world tourism. Governments and the tourism industry are using 'ecotourism' as a brand for 'good' or 'green' tourism, though at times all seem oblivious of its original objectives.

In the past, sustainable small-scale ecotourism was led by academics keen to avoid inflicting damage, and with the conscience to leave untouched locations unable to survive any level of attention.

The downside of the mainstreaming of ecotourism is that the activity itself may progressively destroy the very values that appeal to the ecotourist. This is a continuing problem, particularly now as the greatest impact of mass ecotourism is falling on the most fragile environments.

To address this situation, the peak Australian industry association, Ecotourism Australia Ltd, manages a certification scheme to provide industry, protected area managers, local communities and travelers with an assurance that a certified product is backed by a commitment to best practice ecological sustainability, natural area management and the provision of quality ecotourism experiences.

Geotourism

Geotourism continues to develop as a distinct area of special interest tourism (Dowling and Newsome, 2008). Geotourism is ecotourism or tourism related to geological sites and features, including geomorphological sites and landscapes (Joyce 2006).

Geotours visit natural scenic landforms and explain the surface and deep processes that shaped them. Tourists, seeking to have the natural environment interpreted for them, can expect explanations of geology as well as flora and fauna, creating a holistic view of ecosystems. This enhances their support for the conservation of ecosystems for future generations.

The complexity of geology has so far restricted geotour leadership in Australia to geologists, and often to those with a sense of adventure e.g. Greg Mortimer, David Roots, Robert Coenraads, Ian Hutton, and Chris Bowkes.

Geotourism has the same objectives as ecotourism, but particularly seeks to explain the beauty and origins of the Earth - all landscapes, landforms, plants and animals - 'Geologica' (Coenraads R.R and Koivula, J.I., 2007). Geotourism complements scenic beauty with revelations of how they were formed. Geotourists see this additional information as doubling the value of a tour.

A significant feature of geotourism is that it does not require untouched landscapes as its playground. A great tour can equally be delivered on a quarry floor, in a historic mining area e.g. the Jianguashi Gold Ecological Park, Taiwan, and in Chillagoe, North Queensland (Robinson, 1979), on roads in a national park, or in total wilderness.

However, it is important to note that geotourism is defined differently in the USA. According to a recent major travel industry survey report polling some 55 million Americans undertaken (Stokes, Cook S. D., and Drew D, 2003), geotourism is understood to encompass all aspects of travel, not just the environment. Its definition – ‘tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of the place being visited, including its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of its residents – describes completely all aspects of sustainability in travel’. The study also found that three segments of these geotourists are inclined ‘to exhibit geotourism attitudes and behaviours – these geotourists seek culture and unique experiences when they travel’. The three identified segments are:

- Geo-Savys - <35 y.o., well educated and environmentally aware.
- Urban Sophisticates – affluent, focusing on cultural and social aspects of tourism.
- Good Citizens – older, less sophisticated, but socially conscious.

Geotourism, by diluting the mainly biological/cultural emphasis of mainstream ecotourism, will allow ecotourism to expand away from (in part) environmentally sensitive areas. So geotourism can be seen as more eco-friendly than ecotourism per se. Geotourism therefore offers the opportunity to provide relief from the overuse of ecologically sensitive areas. It is therefore ecologically sustainable, environmentally educative, locally beneficial and as fostering tourist satisfaction (Dowling and Newsome, 2008).

Sustainable Marketing of Geotourism

Development of New Niche Products

Clearly some careful consideration needs to be given to driving growth in high-yield sectors through the development of successful niche markets, which is indeed one of the strategies proposed in the *Tourism White Paper* (Australian Government, 2004).

Identifying new niches such as geotourism is an obvious response to this approach. In this regard, in the year ended June 2007 (Tourism Research Australia, 2007), there were some 3.5 million international ‘nature tourism’ visitors representing about some 68% of all international visitors to Australia. The top three nature activities for international visitors were visiting a national/state park (68%); visiting wildlife park/zoo/aquarium (58%); and visiting botanical and other public gardens (53%).

Nature based activities including visiting national parks/state parks, bushwalking or rainforest walks, visiting botanical or other public gardens, going whale or dolphin watching and visiting farms along with a plethora of active outdoor activities featured highly as preferred activities of domestic tourists in Australia in a detailed segmentation report undertaken earlier this year (Tourism Research Australia, 2008).

Sustainable Geotourism

Pfarr and Megerle, 2006 have cited work by Buckley, 2003 and Lang, 2003 that defines geotourism as the intersection of nature-based tourism focusing on geo-objects and sustainable development. They see geotourism in the context not only of a new market segment but also as a ‘normative direction contributing to geo-conservation and sustainable development’. The authors also cite Megerle and Megerle, 2002 who suggest that geotourism should be viewed as part of a holistic management approach to the broad field of geological and landscape history including its interconnectedness with flora and fauna, the cultivated landscape, and present land use. They see sustainability and environmental education as integral parts.

Geotourism is ecologically sustainable tourism that explains the scenery in terms of how geological processes formed the patterns that can be observed in landforms in a plethora of landscapes such as mountains, deserts and islands, and in the rock outcrops that can be observed in coastal cliffs, creeks, road cuttings, lookouts, quarries, mine sites, and through walks in national parks. Most of these are erosional sites, none need to be ecologically challenged.

Geotourism does not need wilderness, but it can go there. Geotourism can be delivered through a wide range of transport modes e.g. cars, coaches, ships, boats, and on foot.

The potential impact of increasing world tourism is enormous, and this should preclude its involvement with wilderness areas. Global tourism must be ecologically sustainable, and shifting the emphasis from ecotourism to geotourism represents a positive step towards more sustainable global tourism.

Marketing Experiential Tourism

The marketing of the Australian tourism industry for both inbound and domestic customers has become segmented in both demographics and activities. It could be argued that industry marketers have lost sight of the proposition that the offered product value must be compelling in content, variety and quality so as to attract customers from the widest spectrum of demographic groupings.

The global market is looking for unique product experiences and a broader mix of experiences e.g. in the adventure tourism business, a New Zealand operator offers jet boats, 'bungy jumping', 'heli-skiing' all in a single product! The group tour market is well suited to this new approach. Customers for tours have become more sophisticated, well traveled and discerning and generally come from higher socio-economic demographics. They are also intelligent, 'thinking' travelers.

The incorporation of the geotourism experience with traditional nature tourism and elements of cultural tourism creates a more holistic experience, and is a move towards the 'experiential tourism' model. In short, 'experiential tourists seek memorable experiences (Smith, 2006).

In this sense, sustainability is achieved through providing a high quality experience encouraging return visitation, and attracting new customers by 'word of mouth'.

Geotourism has great potential as a new niche ecotourism product. However, it will still require the same disciplines that apply to other niche, 'high value' tourism activities. Robinson and Roots, 2008 have argued that marketing management decisions need to be considered as part of the overall marketing mix – the five Ps – product, place, price, promotion and people.

Geotourism – Place/Position

The 1994 National Ecotourism Strategy ('the Strategy') considered that ecotourists may include a mix of independent travelers, people who travel in organised groups of a scientific, educational or recreational nature, and individuals or families who are interested in an ecotourism experience as part of a varied holiday. Whilst based on limited sources, the Strategy then considered that the ecotourist appears to be well educated, professional/semi-professional, 20-50 years of age, independent and individualistic, looking for alternatives to be traditional tourist destinations and experiences, and with significant spending power.

With the passage of time and with the benefit of more detailed research, a different picture of the ecotourist is emerging, with a suggested focus on older rather than younger travelers.

However, virtually nothing is known about the needs and wants of Australian ecotourists with a particular interest in geology and/or geological landforms.

Need for Market Research

Given the relatively small size of the Australian ‘geoscience interest’ market, content packaging to meet ‘geotourist’ needs will be critical. To address this issue, Leisure Solutions[®] and the School of Marketing, Tourism & Leisure at Edith Cowan University (ECU) have recently undertaken a cooperative market research study involving some 2,300 members of the Geological Society of Australia (GSA).

1. The research project provided an opportunity for ECU students to gain a real-world experience of conducting market research. Students’ engagement in the project will enhance their learning experience in tourism research and analysis unit.
2. On the other hand, ECU students will provide fresh ideas and valuable input into this research project. The result of the research will be used by Leisure Solutions[®] for geotourism product development.

Research is an essential element of tourism policy, planning, development, management and marketing. Tourism Research and Analysis II (TSM2107) is a unit provided by the School of Marketing, Tourism and Leisure at ECU.

Research Methodology

Leisure Solutions[®] is undertaking market research on geo-tourism products so as to determine the extent of interest of members of the GSA in participating in commercial domestic (Australian) and overseas travel in geo-tourism related activities. ECU students will help Leisure Solutions[®] to achieve this goal by engaging in the research process including survey questionnaire development, data collection and data analysis.

Industry engagement is one of the strategic priority areas of ECU. The cooperation between ECU and Leisure Solutions[®] through this market research project serves as an excellent example of a strategic partnership between ECU and the emerging geotourism industry. By working on real-world industry projects, the students are able to apply their knowledge from the classroom. It is an interesting and valuable learning experience for the students, which will be helpful in their future professional life. In return, an industry partner is able to utilise the intellectual resources available from the University to serve their research purpose.

Research Objectives – Geological Society of Australia

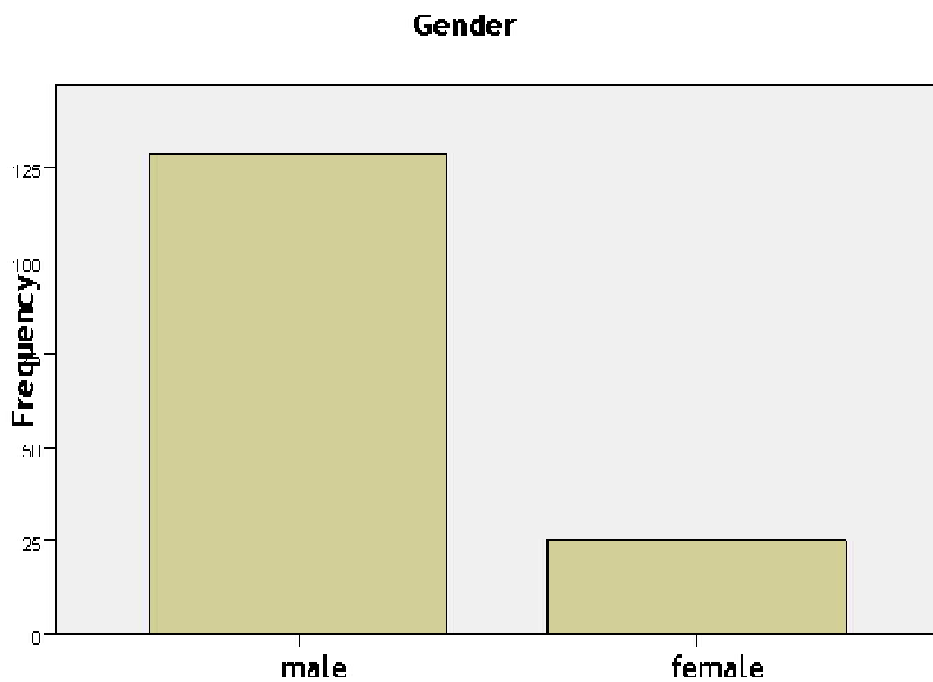
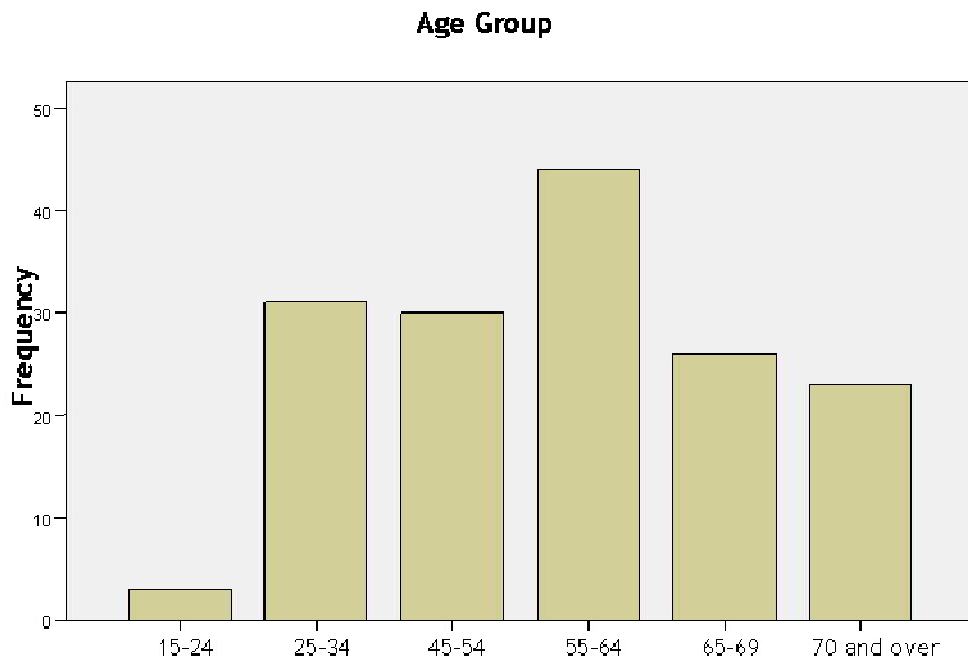
The study objectives can be summarised as follows.

- Who are the potential travelers (the ‘geotourists’) and what are their demographic characteristics?
- What are their potential interests in geotourism in Australia and around the world?
- What are the purposes for their visits?
- How likely will they be to commit to a geo-tour within two years time?

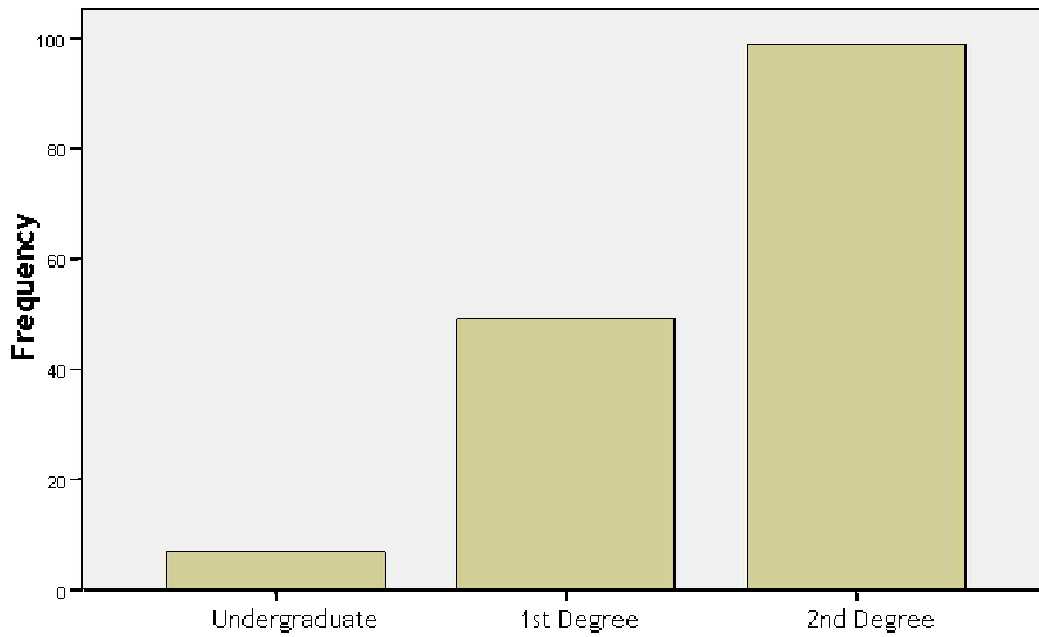
Research Results

159 respondents (i.e. some 7% of the GSA membership) responded by completing a short two page questionnaire. The following series of graphs summarise the preliminary demographic analysis of survey respondents.

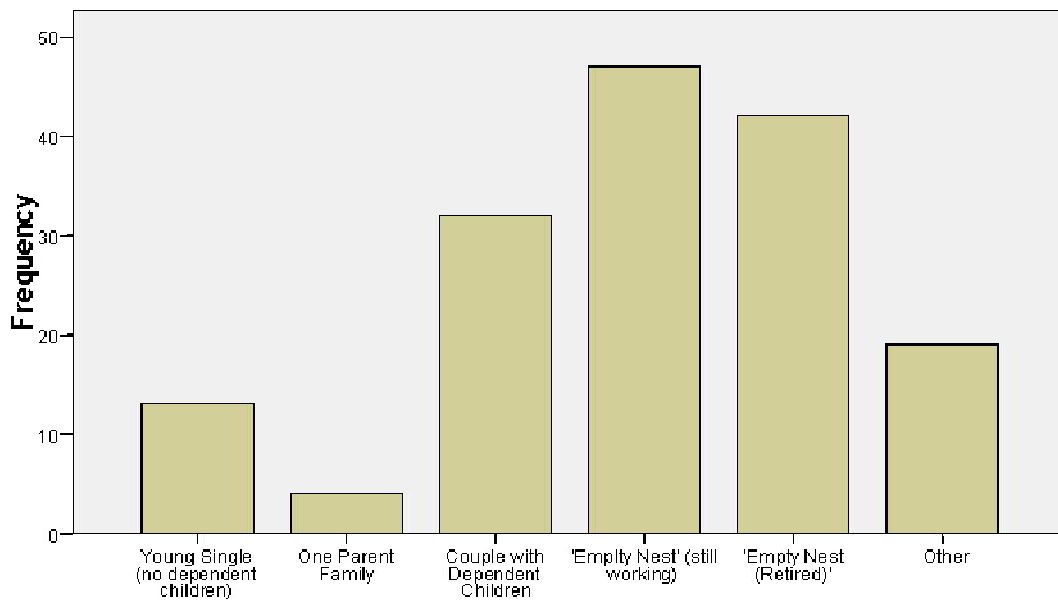
Of particular interest from the second graph is the fact that 16% of respondents were of female in circumstances where female membership of the GSA is less than 3%.



Education



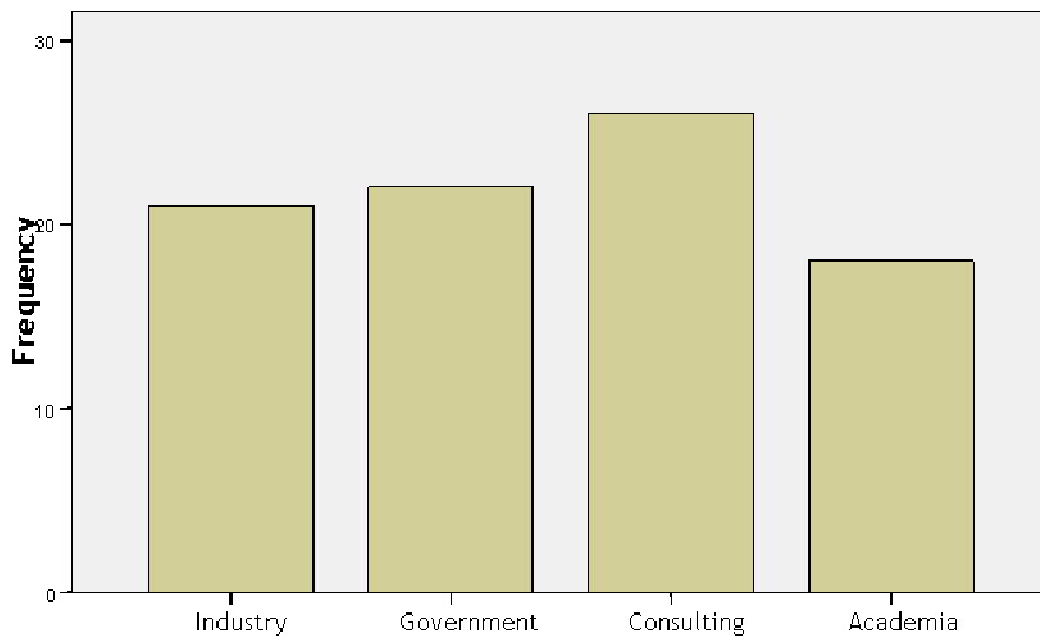
Family characteristics



Gross family weekly income (A\$)



Employment Sector



Travel Purpose:

Reflecting on the extensive work undertaken by Stokes, Cook S. D., and Drew D, 2003, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on the purpose of visiting a 'geotourism' site by stating their

graded views about various offered purposes. The results of this analysis summarises the travel purpose of the respondents in descending order of importance as follows.

Very Important (All respondents)

- **Increasing knowledge of geological sites and landforms**
- **To satisfy my curiosity**
- **To have a memorable experience**
- **To obtain intellectual stimulation**
- **Visiting destinations offering a unique bundle of features and attractions (i.e. ecology, geology, culture and history)**
- Seeing something different
- Visiting geological sites and landforms underpinning unique ecological sites (flora/fauna)
- Visiting new destinations where I can experience the outdoors but still have comfortable accommodation
- Visiting places where I can walk around in historic/charming towns/locations
- Getting some exercise
- Visiting a destination valued by most people (i.e. World Heritage)
- Meeting people from other cultures
- Visiting favorite destinations that I have been to before
- Enjoying different fine food and wines
- Being with my family and friends
- **Experiencing a different lifestyle**
- **Physically resting/relaxing**
- **Being daring and adventuresome**
- **Being able to share my travel experiences after returning home**
- **Visiting destinations offering a wide variety of cultural/art events and attractions**

Very Unimportant (All respondents)

Defining the Target Customers – the 45 y.o. plus Market for Geotourists

During 2008, the number of Australians over the age of 45 is predicted to exceed those under 45.

Broadly speaking, these people fall into two groups i.e. ‘mature or seniors’ (+63) and ‘baby boomers’ (45 – 62). According to Canning, 2008, these ‘baby boomers’ are predicted to spend more than \$34 billion on recreation this year (spokesperson from market researcher, Forseechange). Moreover, baby boomers embrace new technologies and are very open and adaptable, going online frequently. They are especially confident with travel sites, both for research and purchases (spokesperson from market research company, Evergreen).

Recent work undertaken by Tourism Research Australia, 2008 has examined these age profiles in considerable detail particularly from a life-stage analysis viewpoint. The research indicates the following.

- People in their late working life (ages 50-59, with or without children) are generally ‘empty nesters’ who possess large discretionary incomes, as they are generally debt free after having paid off their mortgages, their children will have completed or neared completion of their higher education, and most will no longer have older children living at home.
- However, for those in early post retirement (ages 55-64, not working), they are also largely debt free with even more discretionary income available for travel purchases.

- Those in late post retirement (ages 65-69, not working), possess much more time to investigate travel and other purchase and weigh up the value of their purchase, and make more considered decisions than younger groups.
- Finally, for those later in life (+70), as technological, health and medical advances continue, life expectancies will continue to increase, resulting in this group being healthier, fitter and more able to continue to travel than past generations reaching this age.

Stroud, 2007 argues that lifestyle not age is the key determinant in marketing to the '50-plus market'. He argues that whilst age predicts an 'average' of customer behaviour, life style predicts actual behaviour. Based on extensive studies undertaken with over 2000 respondents in the UK, Stroud has defined seven lifestyle groups, of which three groups fall into the grouping of high affluence and a progressive outlook, and are therefore most likely to be interested in new travel products.

- Live Wires (17% of the +50 market, average age of 58) – people who have busy and fulfilling lives – they enjoy technology and are keen to keep up to date with the latest developments. Socialising and holidaying are important parts of their lives, as is maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Their main priority is to continue enjoying their comfortable existence.
- Bittersweet Have it All (11% of the +50 market, average age of 65) – people who are financially secure, live in comfortable homes and take regular holidays. They enjoy good health and overall are living a comfortable retirement. However, they tend to reject change, are intolerant and self-righteous, and are not happy with the way the world is developing.
- Rat Race Junkies (15% of the +50 market, average age of 54) – people who are ambitious and still working. Many are bringing up their second or third family, are anxious about their finances, but won't compromise their buying habits. They like feeling good about themselves and are driven to succeed in their career, home and family. They are anxious about how the future might develop and assume that they will work forever, out of both interest and financial need.

Marketing to the 'Baby Boomer' Geotourists?

The following broadly describes the characteristics of what could be grouped as 'baby boomer' travelers considered attractive for experiential tourism marketing.

- Age Group, 45 to 62.
- Lifestyle rather than age predicts actual behaviour.
- 'Live Wires' Lifestyle – people who have busy and fulfilling lives – they enjoy technology and are keen to keep up to date with the latest developments.
- Their main priority is to continue enjoying their comfortable existence.
- The older members of this group are also largely debt free with discretionary income available for travel purchases.

'Alumni' Geotourists?

Having regard to these demographic and lifestyle considerations, it is hoped that geotourism, if positioned as a supplementary knowledge-adding product within an attractive ecotourism experience, will attract affluent 'over 45 y.o.' customers. These may come from amongst geoscience professionals from within these segmentations, as well as their partners and friends, particularly through alumni and professional societies such as the GSA, the Australian Institute of Geoscientists (AIG), and The Australasian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy (AusIMM).

Based on preliminary information sourced from these associations, it is estimated that the Australian market size of geologists in this age-group who are associated with these organisations (i.e. 'alumni' geologists) may be of the order of 2,200 to 2,500. There are of course other smaller geoscience societies in Australia (e.g. the Association of Exploration Geochemists, the Australian Geoscience Information Association, the Australian Quaternary Association, the Australian National Chapter, International Association of Hydrologists, the Australian Society of Exploration Geophysicists, and the Petroleum Exploration Society of Australia). Allowing for overlapping memberships, it is not unreasonable to expect that the total 'alumni' market of 'baby boomer' geologists may be conservatively around 3,000 – 4,000 in total.

Secondary teachers in Australia who specialise in either earth or environmental sciences or in geography streams of 'society and environmental studies' may also have an interest in geotourism. A recent research study suggests that a total of some 26,500 individuals may fit into this category, of which it could be expected that perhaps some 16,000 may fall within the over 45 age range.

Based on these estimates, it is considered that the over 45 y.o. market of Australians most interested to participate in geotourism is of the order of some 20,000 individuals (as well as their partners).

This potential market size could be expanded by considering accessing the alumni of universities. Some 22 of the 38 Australian tertiary institutions teach earth sciences, natural or environmental courses (available at <http://www.gsa.org.au/resources/careers.html>). All of these institutions have affiliated alumni programs. To this can be added the alumni of friends groups associated with cultural institutions committed to natural history e.g. the Australian Museum, Western Australian Museum, South Australian Museum etc.

Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that in the wider community, other 'alumni' groupings such the medical profession and engineers represent a potential customer base. Bushwalking groups should also be considered.

Summary of Some Preliminary Findings from the Market Research

1. 72% of respondents fell in age category 45-70 years old.
2. 96% of respondents have first or second degree education level.
3. Respondents have different social and esteem needs and wants, have good gross income and will be able to afford travel to geotourism sites in Australia and overseas.
4. Overall respondents prefer to travel to an Australian and overseas geo-site independently rather than take group tours, although there are different responses depending on age and destination type.
5. The most important purposes for respondents are, inter alia; increasing knowledge of geological sites and landforms; to satisfy curiosity; to have a memorable experience; to obtain intellectual stimulation; and visiting destinations offering a unique bundle of features such as ecology, experience of different cultures and history by satisfying their curiosity. Female respondents place a higher level of importance on visiting destinations offering a unique bundle of these features.
6. Female respondents place a higher level of importance on enjoying fine foods and wines.

Conclusions

The geotourism 'emerging tourism' niche is still in an early stage of commercial development, particularly in Australia. Only very limited research data is available about the needs and wants of geotourists, even amongst those people who know most about geology and geomorphology.

Nevertheless, it is suspected that the geotourism experience with traditional nature tourism and elements of cultural tourism creating a more holistic experience, will prove a highly attractive move towards achieving the 'experiential tourism' approach. To be regarded as a higher yield niche, it is anticipated that this model will need to be strategically marketed to older travelers who have both the time and resources to realise the model's potential for full commercial development.

Ultimately it is hoped that the geotourists of the future may extend beyond the 'experiential' model to embrace a wider group of demographics, and to be more broadly defined along the lines understood in the USA and in other countries e.g. Taiwan, where national geoscientific assets are better understood, more intelligently interpreted, and more effectively marketed by both destination managers and tourism operators than we currently see happening in Australia.

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