WHY ARE THE OUTER ISLANDS IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC POPULAR WITH SOME TOURISTS AND NOT WITH OTHERS? THE VANUATU EXAMPLE

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ABSTRACT
The research reported in this paper sought to identify the key determinants of small island tourism in the Pacific region because of the unique problems faced by such small islands in an era of mass tourism. It thereby addresses a gap in the literature. In investigating this problem, the opinions of 185 Australian tourists were surveyed as they returned from holidaying in Vanuatu. This sample included those who had visited outer islands such as Espiritu Santo as well as those who had not ventured beyond the main island of Efate. Findings indicated that to both samples, the cost of airfares was a very important influence on the decision to visit the region. However, those who did not travel to an outer island felt that additional advertising and marketing as well as more exposure in travel brochures was required, whereas those who did visit outer islands considered that cultural awareness was the most important factor influencing their decision. The need for higher standards of accommodation and improved awareness of tourists’ needs as other significant influences were also identified.

INTRODUCTION
The research reported in this paper describes the findings of an investigation into identifying the drivers of remote Pacific island tourism. The research was undertaken on Espiritu Santo, an outer island of Vanuatu and addresses a gap in the current literature on small island. In global terms, the Pacific region attracts approximately 5.4% of the world’s international tourism arrivals (Pacific Asia Travel Association PATA 1999). In spite of its small size, tourism is one of the mainstays of the region’s economy and is a major employer in many of the countries in the region (Milne 1990, 1991, 1992). Parnwell (1993, p. 235) noted: “tourism represents a potentially powerful means by which economic activity might be spread to peripheral, economically underdeveloped areas”. Projected growth in intra-Pacific travel and increased interest in heritage and cultural tourism is essential for developing tourism growth. Problems associated with tourism development and marketing in small remote areas are well illustrated in the South Pacific where there are two effective orders of remoteness:
geographically remote island nations such as Nauru, Pitcairn Island, Tonga, Cook Islands occupy an outer periphery location relative to the major tourism generating nations, and remote or peripheral regions within remote island nations. In the case of island nations such as Vanuatu these are termed ‘outer’ islands.

Research into the development of sustainable tourism in remote communities, particularly those which are island based, has attracted the attention of a number of researchers including Craig-Smith & Fagence (1994), Craig-Smith (1996), Main (1989), Fagence (1997) and PATA (1991), Tisdell and McKee (1988). According to Fagence (1997) Nauru faces an uncertain future if new industries such as tourism are not developed and able to achieve long term sustainability. Further, remote communities generally face problems in developing sustainable industries (Dowling 1999). However, these are not insolvable as tourism has succeeded in larger islands such as Bali and Fiji (Mistilis & Tolar 2000), Hawaii (Craig-Smith 1996) and smaller island nations including the Maldives (Sathiendrakumar & Tisdell 1988; Dowling 1999), Saipan (Craig-Smith 1996) and Malta (Bull 1991).

Problems commonly encountered include distance, environmental impacts (Carlsen 1999; Bushell & Sinha 2000), lack of infrastructure (King & McVey 1997), poor transport connections (King & McVey 1997; Main 1989), unwelcome income distribution consequences (Tisdell & McKee 1988), lack of political and administrative leadership and a lack of destination knowledge by potential visitors. In remote islands these issues can be seen in different contexts - a core–periphery problem where the political centre of power resides in larger islands and where the main city is the main centre of tourism development, particularly in the early stages (Weaver 1998), or in terms of push-pull motivational mechanisms that may be operating (Dann 1977). The impact of both forces shapes development and can be seen in many tourism areas. For example, the main island of Efate receives more international visitors than the nation’s outer islands, a reflection of the considerable public funds that are directed towards international tourism marketing.

In a study of Barbados, Dann (1977) found that ‘pull’ factors in the destination such as sunshine and sea, draw tourists to certain destinations or resort areas, while ‘push’ factors in the origin nation work to encourage or push the tourist to travel to a particular country. Push factors include income and nostalgia. In developing tourism in Vanuatu both forces can be observed. The emphasis on developing the main island of Efate at the expense of the outer islands such as Espiritu Santo, Tanna, Malekula, Pentecost, Ambae and Maewo result in the pull factors being strongest on Efate. Lack of development of the outer islands reduces their pull power and dilutes their ability to take advantage of push factors in major generating regions.

Although Vanuatu is considered a less developed country (LDC), tourism has been seen to have economic advantages as well as social, cultural and
environmental benefits (Weaver 1998; Weaver & Lawton 2002). Tourism in poorer countries provides financial reasons for preserving cultural, historical and natural resources or traditions, which might otherwise neglected or degraded (Waters 1996; Mings 1969). Some researchers disagree however, and consider that tourism, especially mass tourism, has led to problems including environmental issues, cultural and social degradation, unequal distribution of economic benefits and eventual spread of disease (Harrison 1992 Krippendorf 1987: Lea 1988).

In initiating development in remote areas, some conditions need to be met (Milne 1992; King & McVey 1997) and include: government recognition of the development of tourism, willingness by residents to accept that development may impact on their lifestyle, acceptance by both private and public sectors that they must contribute to tourism infrastructure, and lastly, effective marketing of remote localities (Bonham & Mak 1996). These are significant for small island states whose traditional primary product exports are declining and there are few options apart from tourism to generate export income.

Primary production such as bananas, cocoa beans, green coffee, coconuts and maize, has fallen in recent years with productivity falling by 27% in 1999, 11% in 2000 and 26% in 2001 (Vanuatu Review 2005). Thus tourism is one of the few relatively reliable sources of foreign exchange. To date, tourism development in Vanuatu has been mainly centred on the main island, Efate, particularly in the capital Port Vila. This is a legacy from the past, as colonial administrators from the United Kingdom and France concentrated development in Port Vila rather than the outlying islands of Espiritu Santo, Pentecost and others. Consequently neglect of regional economic development in the outer islands has left a legacy of poor transport, education, health and tourism infrastructure.

The outer islands have much to offer, including unique cultures, abundant coral reefs, diving and fishing, as well as idyllic beaches, forests, and mountainous panoramas. Together with the tourism product currently available on Efate, the tourism potential of Espiritu Santo, Pentecost and other islands could provide a broader range of tourism experiences making the country more attractive as a destination. Vanuatu forms part of the Melanesian region, which comprises Papua New Guinea (PNG), New Caledonia, Solomon Islands and Fiji. Tourism has been developed in each of these countries. However, there is great disparity in the amount of tourism to each country and financial returns from tourism. In recent years, unrest in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, New Caledonia and Fiji, has at times, caused steep declines in tourism arrivals and gross tourism receipts.

Espiritu Santo is known for its casual life style, beaches and culture, however, tourism facilities are under-promoted and there are only a few developed tourist attractions. There are World War II relics for diving and it is noted for the fact that James Michener wrote the well known novel ‘Tales of the South Pacific’ (1947) when Espiritu Santo was a major US military during the war and about
250,000 service personal were stationed on the island. Much of the infrastructure from this time still exists (Douglas 1996). Currently Espiritu Santo produces copra, coffee and cocoa and exports beef and has a small tourism industry. The number of visiting cruise ships has fallen and because they usually stay for only a day so they have limited impact on the local way of life (Douglas & Douglas 1996). World War II wrecks are popular with divers, particularly the ‘President Coolidge’, an intact US warship sunk near the coast. ‘Million Dollar Point’ where considerable military equipment was dumped is also a popular diving location. There appears to be little recognition by the national government of the aspirations of residents of outer islands to develop tourism and little effort to identify and develop the necessary infrastructure to support tourism. This lack of commitment hinders tourism and is surprising given the importance of special niche tours, or ecotourism in general, to this, and other Pacific Islands.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
In order to gather sufficient data to address the research question, namely to identify why the outer islands of the South Pacific are popular with some tourists and not others, primary quantitative data was collected by distributing questionnaires to visitors in the outer islands. Respondents were asked to rank a series of questions in order of importance from 1 (representing the most important point) to 9 (the least important point). Secondary data was derived from government sources, the tourism industry and general literature on Vanuatu and the outer islands. The researchers also consulted travel brochures, academic and government reports from the Research School of Pacific Studies at the Australian National University (ANU), Vanuatu Bureau of Statistics (VBS), Government of Vanuatu, the National Tourism Office of Vanuatu (NOTV) and the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA). This paper reports on the findings of the questionnaire. Despite some previous research into Vanuatu's tourism industry, there was a gap in the knowledge about traveller needs in Vanuatu and the outer islands. There is also a knowledge gap on issues related to the tourism needs of a number of Pacific Island regions including Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia (Berno & Douglas 1998; Sofield 1996). One major gap is understanding visitor and local resident needs.

A survey was conducted at Bauerfield International Airport, Port Vila, Vanuatu during a one-week period in 1999. Before undertaking the survey the instrument was piloted and modified where necessary. The survey was distributed by one of the authors to allow respondents to clarify points about the survey if required. The survey targeted two groups of tourists; those visiting only the main island and those visiting outer islands. A total of 185 valid responses were collected and represented 0.37% of all tourists visiting Vanuatu during 1999. Because of the small sample size and its timing, some significant visitor groups may have been under or over represented. The primary data collected came from two sub-sets of travellers returning to Australia viz.:
1. Respondents who did not travel to an outer island (164 respondents), and
2. Respondents who did travel to an outer island, (21 respondents).

The survey frame was designed to include all adults over 18 years of age who were visiting Vanuatu for leisure reasons. Only one person who was approached did not agree to participate. Questionnaire data was analysed by cross tabulation of the tested variables to determine travel trends to the outer islands of Vanuatu (Coakes & Steed 2001; Pallant 2001; Darren & Bacon 2000). Previous studies that utilised this methodology were reported by Suvilehto & Borg (2001) and Ryan (1995).

RESEARCH FINDINGS
Table 1 shows response rates and rankings of respondents based on patterns of visitation within the country. The most important reason for not travelling to the outer island given was the high cost of airfares followed by factors that pointed to a lack of knowledge of the specific attractions located in the outer islands. The high cost of airfares was also a major concern for respondents who did travel to the outer islands. Respondents who travelled to an outer island ranked the need for cultural awareness by tourists as the most important consideration in their desire to travel to an outer island. When asked to give recommendations, respondents indicated that the outer islands should have additional advertising and marketing, and should have more exposure in the wholesale travel brochures. Travellers to the outer islands also indicated that there was a need for a better standard of accommodation than is currently available, a wider range of activities and they also expressed the need for local residents to have a greater awareness of visitor needs.

Table 1. In what ways can the outer islands of Vanuatu be more desirable as a holiday destination for Australian visitors?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Did not travel to an outer island</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Did travel to an outer island</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less expensive airfares to the islands</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional advertising/marketing</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More exposure in travel brochures</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural awareness by tourists</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher standard of accommodation</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of tourists’ needs and wants</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wider choice of accommodation</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop a wider range of activities/entertainment</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More flights to the islands</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: developed from interview data from travellers to Vanuatu
These findings have specific implications for developing more tourist ‘friendly’ tourism services particularly in the accommodation and attractions sectors in the outer islands of Vanuatu. The responses of the two groups indicate that there is a difference between the perceptions of the outer islands by respondents who did not go to an outer island and the recommendations of respondents who actually experienced the product. Whilst those who did not visit an outer island did not believe that the accommodation there should be of a higher standard, those who experienced the accommodation thought that it needed improvement.

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This investigation was designed to identify factors that would assist peripheral areas develop their tourism sectors. There is an urgent need to increase tourism activity in these regions as income from traditional commodity based export industries are declining. The study found that respondents who only visited the main island of Efate were deterred from visiting outer islands because of high airfares and also a lack of knowledge of the experiences that were on offer. Whereas the cost of airfares was quite significant to both groups, respondents who visited the outer islands also identified the need to build greater cultural awareness and to improve accommodation standards.

However, these findings should be seen as needing further refinement because of limitations of timing and sampling in this research. It is suggested that consideration be given to conduct further studies including longitudinal studies in order to overcome timing deficiencies such as seasonality effects and broadening the sampling frame to include tourists from other countries to gain a wider perspective about tourism needs in the region.

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