

**A SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF VISITORS TO THE SOUTH PACIFIC
OUTER ISLANDS OF VANUATU.**

Frances Cassidy

The University of Southern Queensland

Faculty of Business

P.O. Box 4196

Springfield Qld 4300

Australia

Email: cassidy@usq.edu.au

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ABSTRACT

The research reported in this paper sought to develop a socio-demographic profile of Australian visitors to the outer islands in the Pacific, specifically Vanuatu and the outer islands of Espiritu Santo and Tangoa. 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 a great disparity in the amount of tourism to each country and the dollar value that the tourist represents. At the time of writing, there is unrest in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Fiji has recently undergone considerable devastation and hardship due to recent flooding and political unrest, hence a decline in tourism visitor numbers.

Following the lead of other successful South Pacific Nations, Vanuatu has emphasised tourism as a means of economic development and a source of foreign exchange.

Key Words: socio-demographic profile, Pacific, outer islands, Vanuatu.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Development of tourism in remote communities, particularly where the community is island based is an area of investigation that has attracted the attention of a number of researchers including Craig-Smith & Fagence (1994), Fagence (1997), Main (1989) and Tisdell and McKee (1988). Fagence (1997) for example, noted that Nauru faced an uncertain future unless new industries such as tourism were developed. Remote communities face a raft of problems developing a sustainable industry base (Dowling 1999), however, these problems are not insolvable as demonstrated by tourism development in large islands including Hawaii (Craig-Smith 1996). Problems commonly encountered include distance, environmental impacts (Bushell & Sinha 2000), lack of infrastructure (King & McVey 1997), poor transport connections (King & McVey 1997; Main 1989), unwelcome income distribution consequences, lack of political and administrative leadership and a lack of destination knowledge by potential visitors (Weaver & Lawton 2006). These problems associated with remote island communities are relevant to the Vanuatu islands.

To date, the focus of tourism development in Vanuatu has centred on the main island of Efate, particularly in the capital of Port Vila. This is a legacy from the colonial past, where the former colonial administrators of the United Kingdom and France concentrated development in Port Vila at the expense of the outlying islands of Espiritu Santo, Pentecost and other islands. As a consequence of the neglect of regional economic development in the outer islands there is a legacy of poor infrastructure, particularly in transport, education, health and tourism infrastructure.

The outer islands of Vanuatu appear to have much to offer visitors, including unique cultures, abundant coral reefs, diving and fishing, as well as desirable scenery that include 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 tourism destination.

Investigations of the nature and style of tourism planning in the Pacific region (Jensen 1999; Craig-Smith & Fagence 1992, 1994; Muqbil 1995; Sofield 1991) have revealed variation in style and approach, and in commitment by governments. Vanuatu does have a tourism plan, whereas some other Pacific Island countries do not. However, there have been several changes within the government in Vanuatu and the Minister for Tourism has changed several times over recent years. This has led to a lack of commitment and consistent practice by governments and indicates that governments, at times, fail to ‘accord promotion of tourism (a) sufficiently high priority to ensure it completes on even terms with other segments of local economies’ (Kissling 1990 p.1)

As Britton’s (1982) research implied, the shackles of colonialism have often been broken by many small island states in the Pacific region, but a new post-colonial order and dependence has replaced the export of primary produce with an alternative dependence on importing international visitors. This is substantiated by the growth in visitor numbers to Vanuatu.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research investigation 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 Cassidy, Brown & Prideaux (2006), McElroy (2003), Rao (2002). Furthermore, remote communities generally face problems in developing sustainable industries (Dowling 1999). However, these problems are not unsolvable, as shown by successful tourism developments in Bali and Fiji (Mistilis & Tolar 2000), and smaller island nations, including the Maldives (Sathiendrakumar & Tisdell 1988; Dowling 1999), Malta (Bull 1991), and Saipan (Craig-Smith 1996). The challenges which face the South Pacific countries in relation to tourism planning and achieving an appropriate balance between community aspirations and destination marketing have also been examined (King, McVey & Simons 2000).

In remote islands, these issues mentioned previously 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 & Lawton 2006), or in terms of push-pull demand mechanisms (Cassidy 2006; 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 outer islands of Vanuatu. Hence considerable public funds are directed towards tourism marketing internationally by core providers but not by the peripherals.

The complex nature of destination development, particularly in remote regions that have a number of associated issues including cultural differences, infrastructure and apparent confusion on the part of government on the implementation of proactive tourism development policies, has generated limited literature and identified interesting areas of study. However, it appears that the central issues involved in the study of tourism development in Vanuatu’s outer islands are the willingness of the key local stakeholders to develop a tourism product that can be marketed and the identification of a market for that product. Identifying a common ground between the two groups will involve compromise on the part of the stakeholders rather than the tourist because of the mobile nature of the tourist and the immobile nature of much of the tourism product.

Destinations are a combination of tourism products including accommodation, transportation, shopping, climate, attractions, culture and tours, and infrastructure that offer an integrated experience to the traveller. In most instances, destinations are regarded as well defined geographical areas, such as a country, an island or a town (Hall 2000; Davidson & Maitland 1997). According to Buhalis (2000), it is now recognised that a destination can also have a 'perceptual concept' which the consumer can interpret subjectively according to their past experiences, cultural background, reason for visit and educational background. Hence it is important to develop the socio-demographic profile of the tourist to the outer islands of Vanuatu and so develop an appreciation of the relevant market.

OBJECTIVES AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS RESEARCH

Developing the socio-demographic tourist profile of the traveller to the outer islands is important in the academic and commercial arenas and also for the local communities involved as it will develop the Australian traveller profile for stakeholders to consider producing suitable travel experiences for the relevant market share. The systems theory stresses the interdependency of all the components that make up the travel and tourism industry; the retail travel agents, accommodation houses, destination organisations, tour operators, ground operators and communities (Mill & Morrison 1992; Leiper 2003).

The results of this research will have significant implications for the wholesale and retail travel industries in major markets such as Australia and New Zealand, as well as for the tourism industry in Vanuatu, as it will provide a profile of the Australian tourist to the outer islands.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Tourism research is predicated on a range of methodologies including secondary and primary research using both quantitative and qualitative methods (Ryan 1995). This research uses qualitative research methods. As existing secondary data was insufficient to develop the profile of the tourist to the outer islands, primary data was collected from visitor questionnaires.

According to Ritchie and Goeldner (1994) the research design should include the following elements:

- the selection of data collection method,
- design of the data collection instrument,
- the selection of subjects for the sample,
- plan of data processing and analysis,
- administration of the survey.

The primary research for this study took place at Bauerfield International Airport in Port Vila, Vanuatu, where departing travellers, over 18 years of age, were asked to complete questionnaires. In this research, the objective was to gather data to enable the analysis of the profiles of the two groups (1) those who *did* and (2) those who *did not* visit the outer islands.

Questionnaires were seen as the most suitable method to gather primary data given the context of this research. In the first instance, they enabled the researcher to distribute the questionnaire personally, which allowed respondents to seek clarification of specific points if needed, and, secondly, they enabled direct collection of research-specific information. Questionnaires were amended slightly after pilot testing a sample of 12 past visitors to Vanuatu for validation of responses.

The researcher surveyed 185 travellers departing Vanuatu and flying to Australia. This sample represented all Australian tourists returning to Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne over a one week period. Of these respondents, 164 indicated that they did not go to an outer island while only 21 respondents indicated that they had visited an outer island of Vanuatu (11.35%). It is the leisure visitor to the outer islands which this particular paper focuses on as a niche group. The total numbers represent a significant number of passengers travelling during this period. The exact percentage of travellers captured for each flight is not known as the load factor (number of passengers carried on each flight) could not be obtained by the researcher.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). This package was chosen because it is a versatile computer package which will perform the statistical procedures required to analyse the relevant data. A number of analytical techniques were considered including chi-square, cross tabulation, frequency distributions, analysis of variance (ANOVA) and factor analysis. Other studies which have used similar methodology include Suvilehto & Borg (2001) and Ryan (1995), Coakes & Steed (2001) and Darren & Bacon (2000) specifically used cross tabulations of travel trends.

FINDINGS

The prime objective of this research was to develop a profile of the Australian tourist to Vanuatu and particularly a profile of those who went to an outer island and those who did not. The respondents were asked to complete four questions pertaining to demographics and one regarding their travel party. The development of a general profile of the Australian traveller to Vanuatu, the questions relating to demographics information – ‘Age’, ‘Gender’, ‘State’ and ‘Occupation’ were analysed. Further analysis was then conducted to ascertain if the demographics of those travelling to an outer island of Vanuatu were markedly different to those who did not travel to an outer island.

The results shown in Table 1 compare the age groups of those who *did* and those who *did not* travel to an outer island.

Table 1 Age of respondents

Age group	Did not travel to an outer island, Percentage (%)	Did travel to an outer island, Percentage (%)
20 years and under	2.7	0
21-29 years	36.2	14.3
30-39 years	29.1	33.3
40-49 years	12.1	14.3
50-59	14.2	33.3
60 years and over	5.7	4.8

The age of respondents in the 20 years and under and the 60 years and over tend to indicate that figures for both age groups are very low in the two groups. From these findings it would appear that Vanuatu as a destination, does not appeal to either of the age groups from the sample of respondents surveyed. The research also indicates that there were more respondents between the ages of 30-39 and 50-59 years who travelled to an outer island.

Gender

Table 2 shows that of the respondents surveyed the greater percentage was of females who did not travel to an outer island. This result was greater than the male percentage. However, of those who did travel to an outer island the results indicated that there was little difference between the number of males and females travelling to an outer island. The reasons for this are not known.

Table 2 Gender of those who went to an outer island.

Gender	Did not go to an outer island Percentage (%)	Did travel to an outer island Percentage (%)
Male	35.9	47.6
Female	64.1	52.4

It would appear that females are prepared to travel to the capital Port Vila while fewer females tend to travel to an outer island.

Respondents by Australian States

Respondents to the survey indicated that those from New South Wales were more likely to travel to the main island of Efate than to an outer island while the majority respondents who travelled to an outer island were from Queensland.

Table 3 Respondents by Australian States

State	Did not travel to an outer island, Percentage (%)	Did travel to an outer island, Percentage (%)
New South Wales	47.4	14.9
Queensland	26.3	48.2
Victoria	10.5	48.2
Other States combined	15.8	7.1

In the majority of instances there was only one or in some cases two respondents per postcode, with the exception of Queensland which had three or four respondents for several postcodes thus indicating that the respondents were travelling as a family or group.

Occupation

It is evident from the survey results of the two groups, that a professional occupation ranked first followed by technical/trade. Those who responded to the survey that they were retired scored a low response rate with the total number of seven. This would indicate that Vanuatu is not considered a destination for the retiree market.

Table 4 Occupation of respondents.

Occupation	Did not travel to an outer island, Percentage (%)	Did travel to an outer island, Percentage (%)
Professional	33.1	47.6
Technical/Trade	13.6	14.3
Clerical/Sales	9.9	14.3
Manager/Executive	11.3	0
Self-employed	0	9.5
Retired	3.5	9.5
Other	28.3	4.8

Travelling alone or with others

The information contained in Table 5 indicated that the respondents who *did not* go to the outer islands do not usually travel as part of a special interest group but tend to travel as couples. The figures also indicate that those who *did* travel to the outer islands travelled as couples and it also appears that no family groups travelled to the outer island.

Table 5 Travelling alone or with others

Travel group	Did not travel to an outer island Percentage (%)	Did travel to an outer island Percentage (%)
Special interest group	6.6	25
Family group	13.9	0
Single	16.7	30
Couple	62.8	45

SUMMARY OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE AUSTRALIAN TRAVELLER

The major socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents are listed in the following points.

- The tourist sample of Australians departing Vanuatu consisted of 35.9% males and 64.1% females who did not visit an outer island during their stay in Vanuatu and 47.6% males and 52.4% females who did visit an outer island. Most of those who did not visit an outer island were aged between 21-29 years (36.2%). Of those who did visit an outer island the age groups were equal at 33.3% each for 30-39 years and 50-59 years.

- The largest group (47.4%) of respondents who did not visit the outer islands was from New South Wales, while the Queensland respondents were more likely to visit the outer islands (48.2%).

- Within both groups of those who did and those who did not travel to an outer island the professional occupation category scored the highest with 33.1% (did) and 47.6% (did not) respectively.

- Those who did not travel to an outer island 62.8% travelled as couples, whilst of those who did travel to an outer island 45% went as couples.

CONCLUSION

According to the South Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO) 60,611 tourists travelled to Vanuatu's main island of Efate in 2004 (http://www.south-pacific.travel/spto/export/sites/spto/investment/table_A3.shtml, February 2009). SPTO does not have any data available on the number of travellers who visited the outer islands of Vanuatu during the same period. There appears to be a lack of interest in this area of research together with budgetary constraints on the Vanuatu Tourism Organisation (VTO). Limited number of tourists visiting the outer islands and the low level of infrastructure development may also be reasons for the lack of VTO interest in promoting the periphery areas of Vanuatu. As a consequence it is difficult to deliver a quality product without tourist input.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The generalisability of the findings was limited by the following: the time of year and the sample size both factors which were attributed to cost and time constraints. It is therefore suggested that further research address these shortcomings by conducting a longitudinal study involving a greater sample size. Furthermore as the sample in this study was limited to Australians only because of their dominance in this market, further studies could broaden the sample to include other nationalities.

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