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AUSTRALIA

Ninti One Limited

**Inquiry into Opportunities and Methods for Stimulating the
Tourism Industry in Northern Australia**

February 2017

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Introduction

Ninti One welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the inquiry into opportunities and methods for stimulating the tourism industry in Northern Australia. Our expertise and experience in working and conducting research in remote Australia and our Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP) research project on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tourism Product have informed the content of our submission.

About Ninti One

Established in 2003, Ninti One is a not-for-profit, independent national company that builds opportunities for people in remote Australia through research, innovation and community development. Ninti One manages the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP) and is focused on delivering solutions to the economic challenges that affect remote Australia. Through our research, we provide practical responses to the complex issues that can restrict full economic participation. We are a partnership organisation of more than fifty stakeholders mostly located in remote Australia, including the Australian Government, state and territory governments, small-to-medium enterprises, universities and other research providers, industries including mining, pastoralism and tourism.

Our activities relevant to this inquiry include our research project on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tourism Product, our research project on Aboriginal Cultural Enterprise and our work with the Broadband for the Bush Alliance.

More information about our projects can be found at www.nintione.com.au and www.crc-rep.com

1. Domestic and international tourism comprising: recreational, environmental, cultural, educational, and industrial tourism

While developing niche tourism (which includes cultural tourism) is advisable based on outcomes arising from assessments at local/regional levels, niche tourism should be viewed as one component of developing destinations in northern Australia as a series of integrated tourism regions. This must also include the Torres Strait, a region too often left out of the tourism development agenda. Funding for developing destination regions should emphasise the importance of building local industry based on local capabilities and synergies. This approach is based on our CRC-REP research on Aboriginal tourism enterprise clustering in remote Australia which argues that roles be put in place dedicated to the development of tourism regions to function as coordinated clusters. Under this approach, tourism operators are facilitated to operate and develop their businesses as regional actors, functioning as part of a collective instead of acting alone as individual entities. This includes provision to regularly meet, communicate in an ongoing manner, share knowledge, innovate, integrate as a destination and develop promotion marketing/materials (e.g. branding). Under this approach, the forms of tourism developed in each region are driven by the interests of regional stakeholders in relation to opportunities/constraints. Regions also create better platforms to address issues like illegal camping, dumping and over-use of resources (e.g. over

fishing). Development should aim to preserve the qualities Australia values about the many regions of northern Australia – particularly the natural landscapes.

The regions of northern Australia currently receive far more domestic visitors than international. While domestic visitation is highly dispersed, international visitation tends to be confined to key areas (e.g. Cairns, Darwin, Kakadu). Away from international visitor ‘hubs’, consistent visitor flows are primarily by domestic tourists, which is a considerable challenge given that studies for many years have continually indicated little or no domestic tourist interest in cultural tourism provided by Aboriginal tourism operators. CRC-REP research on reconciliation issues for Aboriginal tourism operators argues that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people develop tourism appealing to domestic visitors. This means steps be implemented to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can provide tourism services and infrastructure, such as food, accommodation, supplies, transport etc. throughout northern Australia. Not only does this earmark diverse tourism enterprise, employment and capacity building pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it increases opportunities for interaction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. The potential contribution to reconciliation under this approach is much greater than if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people focus primarily on cultural tourism. Moreover, steps should be implemented to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can provide ancillary needs for tourism, such as food production, logistics etc.

For international visitors, our CRC-REP research identified that experiences involving adventure, authenticity and novelty were important for visitors motivated to learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Improving international visitor awareness of remote Aboriginal tourism before they arrive in Australia is important. This might include taking part in activities designed to familiarise international market segments with the diversity of culture and tourism experiences provided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote Australia. Part of this should also involve establishing a strong internet presence that provides international visitors easy access to information about Aboriginal tourism in remote Australia. In addition, tourism operators throughout Northern Australia should be provided more opportunities and support to develop partnerships with tourism industry to improve international visitor access to Aboriginal tourism in remote areas. These partnerships can also be an important way for Aboriginal tourism operators to ensure the general tourism industry provides appropriate information to international visitors.

Recommendations:

Structure Northern Australia as integrated tourism regions driven by local capabilities and assets

Facilitate and fund creation of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tourism business clusters

Implement steps facilitating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to develop tourism services and infrastructure, such as food, accommodation, supplies, transport etc. throughout Northern Australia

Improve international visitor awareness of remote Aboriginal tourism offerings through targeted information campaign

Encourage partnerships between remote Aboriginal tourism operators and larger peak tourism industry bodies and players.

2. The role of peak bodies, local communities, and all levels of government in developing and promoting tourism opportunities nationally and internationally, including regulations and workforce issues that may inhibit tourism development

The existing tourism agency structure (e.g. regional) may need to be reconsidered, especially in terms of the provision for appropriate representation and involvement by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people involved in tourism. At present, only Western Australia has an appropriate representation platform for Aboriginal tourism operators (known as WAITOC), however operators in northern Queensland, the Torres Strait and the Northern Territory are devoid of such an agency. Moreover, there is no existing agency that brings together all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tourism operators. Indeed, the sector have been voicing the need for such a peak body for several years. Such a platform is needed to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have appropriate opportunity to voice their perspectives, needs, plans and outlook for tourism in northern Australia. The suggestion here is that opportunities and methods for stimulating the tourism industry in northern Australia need to be driven by parties that include a strong, appropriately representative voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tourism operators.

Recommendations:

Creation of peak body to represent and ensure the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tourism operators in the development and future of Northern Australia.

Creation of National peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tourism operators.

3. Communication and transport infrastructure (particularly air, sea, road and rail transport and port infrastructure) which may facilitate and grow tourism.

Provision of infrastructure increasing length of stay, capacity and dispersal – broaden market appeal of the region should be given priority. Investment requirement includes developing remote tourism as much as niche opportunities. This includes development of more local infrastructure such as more camp grounds (particularly to minimise uncontrolled camping and resultant degradation), ablutions, walking/hiking/bush (for bikes etc.) trails etc. In terms of new tourism assets, there is scope to build on existing initiatives. For example, work on the Dreaming Track in Cape York has commenced but encountered difficulties and subsequently stalled. Substantial resources, partnership and other needs are required to ensure the initiative moves forward. The Dreaming Track is anticipated to traverse outstanding landscapes and is poised to offer a world class tourism experience in Northern Australia. Initiatives such as the Dreaming Track provide local communities with large scale tourism assets from which to develop complementary enterprises and employment.

Port infrastructure

Development of port infrastructure will support tourism operators to diversify markets and increase visitor numbers in remote areas. Key ports in coastal regional communities across northern Australia

(including the Torres Strait) should be assessed and developed. For example, steps need to be taken to ensure Cooktown can provide consistently accessible berthing for cruise ships. Cooktown has been developing the foreshore at the mouth of the Endeavour River, however issues remain with the provision of consistently accessible berthing for cruise ships (existing space is also used by commercial fishing vessels). Local government are more than likely able to advise on issues and needs in this regard. Aboriginal people, as well as the broader community, in Cooktown and Hopevale have been engaged in ongoing discussion (with cruise companies) to host cruise visitors, and in 2016 there were instances of cruise ships unable to bring passengers ashore due to weather conditions that are regular and normal in the region. In one case, a Hopevale Aboriginal small tourism operator bus waited for a scheduled group but due to the weather, the ship stayed offshore and the group did not come ashore. The operator not only lost revenue, but also the additional costs of preparing for the group. Such losses have considerable financial impact on small remote tourism businesses.

Air travel

The cost of regional air travel in northern Australia, including the Torres Strait, is often excessive. Understandably, reducing regional air travel costs is a complex matter involving numerous factors. Tourism discussion should include consideration of tourism campaign aimed at increasing regional air travel demand – including air travel extending the ‘typical’ dry season tourism period into the wet season. Where permissible, tourism enterprises, products, packages or experiences should be developed to stimulate demand into the wet season. Aside from extending the tourism season in northern Australia, tourism in remote, regional areas may also include package/experiences that involve air transit from major travel hubs (e.g. Darwin, Cairns, Kununurra etc.). Both scenarios (tourism that requires regional air transit and extending the wet season) are already observable in northern Australia. A study to further identify how to increase these opportunities would benefit tourism businesses.

Digital capacity and digital infrastructure

Our work with Broadband for the Bush Alliance has highlighted the need to build digital capacity of rural and remote businesses, including tourism businesses. Small to medium enterprises in rural and remote areas have had to date very limited access to digital training and opportunities to take full advantage of to digital tools available to run and grow their businesses. Creation and funding for dedicated digital capacity building programs, including mentoring programs would benefit tourism businesses. A suite of dedicated digital mentoring programs for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tourism operators should also be considered. Additionally, increasing access to reliable telecommunications infrastructures and expansion of mobile coverage in remote Australia is urgently required to meet tourism businesses and clients’ needs and expectations. Increasing mobile coverage on all major highways to allow business users and travellers to access emergency services as well as stay connected to their digital communities should be given priority.

Recommendations:

Increase provision of tourism infrastructure in remote areas such as building new camping grounds, designated dumping points, additional bush trails, hiking opportunities

Develop remote port infrastructure to enable higher cruise ship visitations and build opportunities for remote tourism experiences, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tourism operators.

Expansion of mobile coverage on all major highways should be given priority

Create funding programs to build tourism operators' digital capacity

Create and support specific programs for building digital capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tourism operators, including digital mentoring programs.