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Guide accreditation in the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area:
a study of the practices, attitudes, and concerns of small tourism operators

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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the attitudes, practices, and needs of tour operators in the Wet Tropics World Heritage area with respect to the recruitment and training of tour guides. The results will be used to help determine the need and demand for an official Wet Tropics guide accreditation system, as well as the form that system should take. The study also served to add more contacts to the Wet Tropics Management Authority's growing network of tour operators, tour groups, and research scientists. Tour operators' guide training practices varied with their business type and resources; many of the smallest operators provided a few days of on-the-job training and no formal certification, yet still delivered a high level of interpretation. Interviews revealed tour operators' key concerns to be the need for the accreditation system to recognize the value of field experience and prior learning, as well as supplement online work with in-the-workplace assessment. Overall, demand does exist for the guide training tools that an accreditation system would provide. Even those operators that did not overtly support accreditation had attitudes of ownership towards the Wet Tropics and would be likely to support an accreditation scheme if it were established that the scheme would enhance people's appreciation of the area.

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INTRODUCTION

The Wet Tropics World Heritage Area (WTWHA):

The Wet Tropics World Heritage Area is an ideal site for a study of tourism management in sensitive ecological areas. Its World Heritage status means that it is recognized as a globally significant ecosystem meriting special protection. At the same time, it is one of the most visited tourist attractions in Australia, bringing in a wide range of domestic and international tourists. The continuing coexistence of the thriving tourism industry and the complex ecological community makes it of special interest as an example for the wider world.

The WTWHA is a unique bioregion covering 900,000 hectares and extending along the eastern coast of tropical North Queensland, Australia, from Cooktown in the north to Townsville in the south (see map 1). The WTWHA was listed a World Heritage Area (WHA) in 1988 on the grounds that it satisfied all four of the following UNESCO World Heritage natural criteria:

> vii. It is an outstanding example representing the major stages of the earth's history, including the record of life, and significant ongoing geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features.
> ix. It is an outstanding example representing significant, ongoing ecological and biological processes;
> vii. It contains superlative natural phenomena and areas of exceptional natural beauty;
> x. It contains the most important significant habitats for in situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation ("Criteria" 2006).

It is one of only 13 natural sites around the world to meet them all (2006).

Despite the legal and political benefits conferred by World Heritage listing, the WTWHA continues to present a number of complex management issues. World Heritage listing afforded protection to the area's national parks and forestry land (*Handbook* 1999), but this only makes up 80% of the WTWHA (*Managing* 2001). Another 2% of the WTWHA is privately owned in about 115 separate parcels ("Managing" 2006), and a majority of WTWHA land is additionally potentially subject to the native title rights of Rainforest Aboriginal People (*Managing* 2001). The number of interests focused on WTWHA land requires extensive communication and diplomacy to be a part of every management decision.

Increasing the pressure on the WTWHA is the rapidly growing population of North Queensland. Approximately 350,000 people live within 50 km of the region's 3,000 km

boundary (2001), and the number is rising. One yearlong 2002 study of ten popular sites found that nearly one million people visited in 300,000 vehicles (Bentrupperbäumer et. al. 2002). Between local use and tourist use, the WTWHA experiences an estimated 4.4 million visits each year (2006). Without careful attention such heavy traffic has the potential to damage the region. Small-scale physical impacts, spreading of exotic plants and animals, disturbance of wildlife, land clearing, pollution, and resource use have been cited as major drawbacks of even responsible tourism (Braithwaite 2001). Several WTWHA tourist sites have begun to show degradation from heavy use (*Wet Tropics* 2000, *Managing* 2001). Consistent best practice from tourism operators will be necessary to minimize these impacts.

The Wet Tropics Management Authority (WTMA):

The Wet Tropics Management Authority is an independent government agency directly answering to both the State and Federal governments (Prideaux et. al. 2007). It is responsible for the protection of the WTWHA, a process that involves cooperation with the Department of Environment and Resource Management (DERM), Queensland Parks and Wildlife Services (QPWS), Traditional Owners, and private landholders (2007). Its roles as defined in its 2008/2009 Annual Report include:

1. Develop and implement policies and programs for management of the Area
2. Advise and make recommendations to the Minister and the Ministerial Council
3. Administer funding arrangements
4. Rehabilitate and restore the Area
5. Gather, research, analyse and disseminate information on the Area
6. Develop public and community education programs
7. Promote the Area locally, nationally and internationally
8. Monitor the state of the Area
9. Advise and report to the Minister and the Ministerial Council on the state of the Area (*Annual Report* 2009).

Its mission could be summarized as the preservation, conservation, and presentation of the WTWHA.

This study is primarily concerned with roles 5, 6, and 7, which relate to the presentation of the WTWHA for the appreciation of the general public. Under them, the WTMA manages the Tourism Industry Liaison Group, publishes guide handbooks and educational materials such as the Wet Tropics Magazine, and works with representatives from other WHAs.

Importance of tourism in the WTWHA:

Tourism is extremely important to the economic success of North Queensland, and the WTWHA is one of the area's biggest tourist attractions. The gross economic value of tourism directly generated by the WTWHA is estimated at $426 million, an increase of $47 million over the previous evaluation in 1997 (Prideaux et. al. 2007). Visitation to the Wet Tropics creates over 13, 000 direct and indirect jobs, more than any other World Heritage Area in Australia (*Economic* 2008). In addition, studies have shown that the experiencing region's unique nature is the single primary draw to visiting tourists, and that visiting tourists strongly support conservation of the region (Prideaux et. al. 2007, Bentrupperbäumer et. al. 2006, Bentrupperbäumer et. al. 2002). Over 90% of visitors to the ten sites in a 2002 study listed the chance to see natural features and scenery as "important" to "very important" reasons for visiting (Bentrupperbäumer et. al. 2002). They also reported very high satisfaction with their visit (2002). Thus not only are there ecological reasons to keep WTWHA in good condition, but considerable economic incentive as well. Staying on the leading edge of sustainable and professional tourism practice is necessary keep up the good reputation that the area has among tourists.

Setting a global example:

As a highly used yet well-protected World Heritage Area, the WTWHA is in a unique position to serve as an example to WHA sites around the world. Good examples of management are especially necessary for developing countries that do not yet have the resources or expertise to capitalize on their WHA sites in a responsible way. For this reason, in May and June of 2009 the WTMA invited representatives from the East Rennell WHA in the Solomon Islands to participate in a training workshop (*Annual Report* 2009). They worked on skills such as establishing WHA responsibilities, building an educational toolkit, and managing relationships with native peoples (2009). Their training will help the Solomon Islands reap more benefits from tourism while at the same time preserving their natural environment. In the last five years the WTMA has conducted similar training with delegates from Lorentz National Park WHA in West Papua, Mulu WHA in Malaysia, and various national parks in New Caledonia and Thailand

(Chantrill 2009). The WTMA plans to continue expanding this role as a leader in WHA management for the Asia Pacific region (2009).

Definition of ecotourism:

In its Nature-Based Tourism Strategy, WTMA states that tourism will be managed in the context of the Queensland Ecotourism Plan, which is to say it must:

1. Be ecologically sustainable
2. Be appropriate to its environmental and cultural setting
3. Provide visitor satisfaction and enhance understanding
4. Benefit local communities, and
5. Be marketed responsibly (*Wet Tropics* 2000).

A general consensus exists among scholars of ecotourism supporting this definition (Braithwaite 2001, Buckley 2009). However, no legislation exists over use of the label "ecotourism" for marketing purposes, and even operators who do not meet the five criteria are catching onto the trend of attaching the prefix "eco-" to whatever possible (Buckley 2009). To remedy this, in 2002 an international accreditation organization was proposed that would evaluate tour operators (2009). Its stamp of approval would provide a distinction between true ecotours and those only posing as such. Predictably, talks got bogged down in the logistics of implementation, as the introduction of different criteria for permits at different sites would create additional difficulty for bureaucrats (2009). This type of organization is a long way from becoming a reality (2009).

In the meantime a host of private companies, some for profit and some not, offer "ecocertification" services. Some are much more stringent than others, and for the uninitiated tourist differentiating between the equally official-looking logos takes effort and detective work that few are inclined to invest. Studies have suggested that while tourists increasingly profess to care about the eco-friendliness of their choices, most tourists do not know the difference between leading Australian ecocertifications (Wearing et. al. 2002, Gutleber unpubl.).

**Importance of interpretation to ecotourism:**

This study focuses mainly on the third criteria: providing visitor satisfaction and enhancing understanding. This is known as "interpretation," as the tour guide acts as the interpreter between the customer and the natural environment, translating phenomena they might not understand or even notice into intelligible language and ideas. Quality interpretation can

impact visitor attitudes and behaviors towards conservation of a site. In one study of visitors to the Galapagos Islands, visitors were surveyed before and after they completed an interpretive tour. They displayed an increased understanding of relevant ecological issues and supported stricter protections on the archipelago following the tour (Powell et. al. 2008). They also reported an increase in their likelihood of conducting ecologically conscious behaviors such as recycling and voting for candidates that support environmental protection (2008). Given the opportunity to donate to the preservation of the Galapagos following the tour, they gave an average of $172 each (2008). Without interpretation, they may have enjoyed the scenery without gaining the same level of understanding.

When it comes to understanding, the delivery of interpretation matters. Compared to the 90% of visitors who ranked viewing scenery as important, only 42% of visitors ranked learning about native plants and animals important (Bentrupperbäumer et. al. 2006). For interpretation to reach those who will not actively seek it out, it must be entertaining and engaging. A 2004 study of interpretive practices found that the most effective interpreters:

1. Develop in-depth knowledge of natural or cultural protected areas being interpreted, and apply that knowledge to build a range of relevant messages with compelling stories.
2. Develop in-depth knowledge of the audience. Recognize the perceptions, experience and knowledge of the audience and develop the interpretive project with respect to audience diversity, including cultural, age and gender differences.
3. Apply effective communication techniques: develop clear objectives, organize each programme or product around a central relevant idea or ideas, plan for all aspects of the project and evaluate the success of the interpretive work.
4. Provide audience members with multiple opportunities to find their own connections between interpretive messages/interpretive experiences and their daily lives and motivations, thus providing stimulation to reflect on their lifestyle.
5. Recognize that it is inspiration, passion and emotion that often drive action.
6. Use specific local sites, apply practical hands-on and active methods and involve multiple senses (Adams 2004).

Training for eco-guide positions seldom includes all of these techniques. Because the nature of their work is to educate informally, eco-guide training often focuses on resource management, omitting the training in effective interaction with customers typically given to formal educators (Skanavis et. al. 2009). To provide the highest quality of interpretation, a guide must be proficient at both.
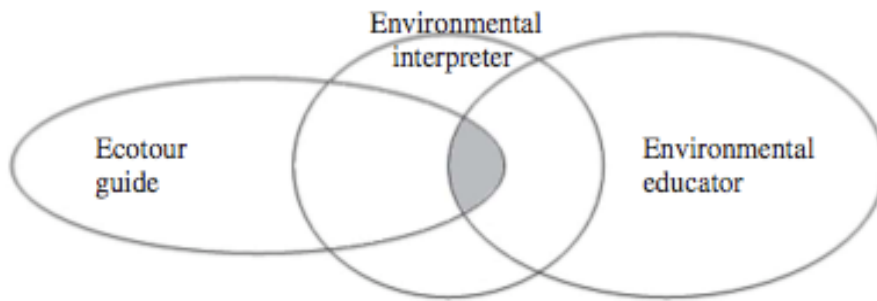
Figure 1. The link between ecotour guides, environmental interpreters, and environmental educators (Skanavis et. al. 2009).

Surveys have revealed that interpretation in the WTWHA has some major areas for potential improvement. One 2002 study found that 63.6% of site-level respondents were unaware that the site they just visited was a World Heritage Site, and 80% could not identify where the boundaries of the WTWHA are (Bentrupperbäumer et. al. 2006). Additionally, when asked why the Wet Tropics had been listed as a World Heritage Area, 91.7% of respondents did not reference even one of the four natural criteria for World Heritage listing (2006). The WTWHA is a significant and unique environment not just to Australia, but to the world, so the low level of public knowledge is somewhat surprising. On a more encouraging note, 77.1% of respondents believed that the WTWHA is "considerably" or "very" important (2006). The next step is to increase the general understanding and appreciation of why that is.

Existing models for improving and standardizing interpretation:

A variety of models already exist for the training and assessment of eco-guides. These incorporate tools such as workshops, on-the-job training, informational CD-roms, and online training and assessment. Some of the best known are the Tourism Certificate III and IV courses provided by Technical and Further Education (TAFE). These courses take several weeks and can be completed at TAFE centers around the country, often with both full-time, part-time, and online options ("Certificate" 2009). They train guides in skills such as first aid, group leadership, risk management, and cultural sensitivity (2009). However, they are standardized national courses that provide basic guiding skills without incorporating significant regional ecological knowledge. Presentation of Wet Tropics values would require additional site-specific

study, although the skills covered by TAFE are useful to ensure that information is delivered in a manner appropriate and interesting to the group.

The Kakadu World Heritage Area in the Northern Territory of Australia has addressed this by linking commercial tour operator permits to the completion of the "Kakadu knowledge for tour guides" course unit in 2008 ("Kakadu" 2009). The course can be completed online at any pace as an add-on to the TAFE III certification, and provides information on the park's environmental issues, natural history, and cultural history (2009). This approach is possible as a model for the Wet Tropics.

Another model is that of Savannah Guides, a training and accreditation program for guides in the outback of northern Australia. Its listed goals include forming networks between tour guides, promoting sustainable practices, and improving interpretation and public education ("Training"). It conducts three training schools each year at varying locations across the savannah featuring presentations from experts ("Training"). Recommendations from peers and workplace assessments conducted by certified evaluators complement the assessments and training programs conducted at these workshops ("Training"). An adaptation specific to the Wet Tropics is a possibility for WTWHA guide accreditation.

Proposed Wet Tropics guide accreditation:

The WTMA recognizes a number of benefits to accreditation. The tourism industry serves as a key contact point with visitors, and as such is the main presenter of World Heritage values (*Tourism* 2009). Accreditation is a means of ensuring that these values are represented accurately and transmitted well, providing tools and a supportive framework to help the tourism industry maintain high standards of presentation (2009). The example set by the industry's practices sends a message not just to tourists, but to managers of other World Heritage sites around the world, so best practice is especially important in the WTWHA. Key objectives for a WTWHA accreditation system include:

1. Encourage the delivery of high quality professional products (the raising of the bar in terms of professional standard and approach)
2. Incorporate inclusion of accurate and informed interpretive services.
3. Provide means for identifying and promoting quality tourism services and products (2009).

The specific methods of achieving each objective are still in the planning and consulting stages. However, planning has advanced enough that some clear potential options and concerns have become evident.

To achieve the first objective, incentives will be necessary for tour operators to improve their interpretive practices. This incentive could take the form of some sort of link between guide accreditation and permitting, an approach already adopted by the Kakadu WHA . Alternatively to Kakadu's mandatory accreditation, guide accreditation could be voluntary but linked to cheaper and longer-lasting permits, a strategy used to encourage business eco-accreditation in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (Gutleber unpubl.). For the WTMA, this could mean developing a set of policy recommendations to pass on to QPWS, who would do the actual implementation and enforcement.

For the second objective, quality information would have to be recommended to guides, along with training on how to most effectively pass it on to customers. Like Kakadu's system, this could be done through a partnership with TAFE. The TAFE 3 certificate already covers the basics of guiding techniques, and the ecological knowledge specific to the Wet Tropics could be added as an additional unit to the course or taken on its own. Designing the actual curriculum would be a matter of further research and consultation with outside ecology experts and educational planners.

For the third objective, the WTMA would need to publicize tour operators that met its standards. Incentives could include official recognition on its website, magazine, and e-newsletter. It could also involve granting them the use of a World Heritage Tour Operator logo for promotional purposes. This approach would have to be coupled with public education for what the logos signify. As had already been mentioned, the abundance of qualifications operators use to legitimize themselves are not created equal, and are a source of confusion for customers. Official explanations about what each certification means, as well as why they are important, may help create a more discriminating consumer.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The primary purposes of this study are to assess:

1. The need for additional guide training based on the interpretation levels currently offered
2. The demand on the part of tour operators for the tools that would be provided by such a system
3. The practical concerns that exist on the part of operators relating to accreditation

The results will be used as a part of the grant application for further funding to develop and implement widespread guide accreditation and publish handbooks with information relevant to guides' concerns. Additionally, the contacts made will be useful in the process of forming a network of tour operators, tourism bodies, and research scientists that WTMA can continue to consult in the policy-making process.

METHODS

Finding contacts:

As the initial study was primarily concerned with large mainstream tour operators, this follow-up was primarily concerned with the backpacker market consisting of smaller companies, sole operators, and attractions. The contact list was begun by gathering brochures from hostels and information centers. The search targeted terrestrial operators working within the wet tropics who used the label eco- or advertised an interpretive component to their tour. Contacting operators found in brochures often led to new leads, and WTMA was able to additionally recommend a few operators that they have had contact with in the past. Of the 12 intensive interviews conducted, 7 tour operators were found in the brochures gathered in Cairns, 3 online, and 2 recommended by other tour operators during interviews.

The contact list was additionally determined by which operators were the most reachable. Of the 19 operators actually called, 6 promised to call or email with their response and then failed to do so, and 1 actively refused to be interviewed. Callbacks to difficult-to-reach operators sometimes yielded results, but several unfulfilled promises to get back in touch was interpreted as a request not to participate.

Designing the questionnaire:

Different types of tour operation have differing concerns and priorities associated with interpretation and accreditation. Accordingly a slightly different questionnaire was designed for each business type to ensure that the questions would be relevant to their specific concerns (see Appendix). A new category was also introduced for tour operations so small that they are run by a single owner-operator family or individual.

The 11-question interview has three parts: 4 questions assessing operators' attitudes towards guide accreditation, 5 questions about their existing guide training and interpretive practices, and 2 questions investigating the specific type of accreditation system would work for them in the real world. The tour companies' questionnaire has an additional question about their operational practices. The questions about their attitudes served to investigate the demand for an accreditation system, and the questions about their practices served to measure the actual need for such a system to improve interpretation. The questions about the actual implementation of

accreditation serve to compile a list of concerns for the WTMA to consider when designing the plan.

Conducting the interviews:

Because small-scale tour operators and especially owner-operators are constantly on the job, six of the 12 interviews were conducted by phone. Five interviews were conducted in person, either at WTMA offices if the operators had time to stop by, or at their workplace. One interview was conducted by email, but email was only offered as an option if a subject declined to do a phone interview.

The interviews lasted half an hour to an hour, and generally the face-to-face interviews lasted longer than the phone interviews. During the interview the important points of the subject's responses were typed in the form under the appropriate questions. To maintain the natural flow of conversation, questions were often visited out of order, and if the subject's responses pertained to a different question than the one asked, their responses were filled in under the new category. Thus the interview notes are not intended to be a transcript of exactly what was said, but an interpretation of the subject's main views with as many exact quotes included as possible.

In three situations we had the opportunity to go and see the attraction or tour that the interviewee operated. This experience lent additional perspective to the interviews, but will not be given its own section in the analysis. The omission is due to the fact that it was not possible to see enough attractions in person to make significant comparisons between these observations.

Scoring the responses:

The tour operators were given a score based on their assessed degree of favorability towards guide accreditation, the level of guide training they currently provide, and the complexity of the interpretation they offer. This was done only to correlate the factors, not to rank operators or establish some as "better" than others.

Favorability scores were based on the enthusiasm with which operators supported a more universal accreditation or conversely the number of reservations they raised concerning accreditation. A score of five indicates advocacy of universal guide accreditation, and a score of

12

one indicates significant doubts about the effectiveness of accreditation and unwillingness to support it unless specific issues are dealt with.

Guide training scores were based on the amount of additional training the operator provides after hiring new guides, with five indicating significant paid training time and encouragement to get further certifications, and one being no training.

Interpretation scores were based on the complexity of the information they discussed when asked about the interpretation they provided. A score of five indicates balanced discussion of unresolved ecological issues, including perspectives on why these issues exist. A score of one indicates basic identification and description of flora and fauna.

Note that these scores were based only on what the operator mentioned in the interview, not on any additional information about their tour. It remains possible that operators provide interpretation on tour at a more complex level than they specifically discussed in the interview, or that guides provide a higher or lower level than managers expect. However, they are scored on what they mentioned as a reasonable means of assessing how great of a priority it is to them.

RESULTS

Results of scoring:

      A wide variation was found both between and within business types. Smaller operators generally provided much less in the way of official training, but this did not always adversely affect the complexity of interpretation provided. In three cases small operators providing only on-the-job training scored as highly in their interpretation as larger operators with much more extensive training programs.

      Favorability towards accreditation showed little relationship to the other factors. Two operators who were very favorable towards accreditation in their interviews provided little training and scored at the basic level of interpretation. Three operators who expressed doubts about the usefulness of accreditation scored four or five, a complex level of interpretation.

      Two-thirds of operators scored a four or a five in their favorability, so a demand for more extensive guide accreditation does appear to exist among WTWHA tour operators (see table 1).

Common concerns of owner-operators:

      On-the-job training was the primary training method for owner-operators. A major reason given for this was not having the money to give staff time off to complete additional training or undergo formal accreditation programs. One operator even said that while his business was accredited, he planned not to renew the certification, as the expenses outweighed the benefits. However, owner-operators maintained that although in that respect they lacked the resources of larger tour companies, they still provided an equal to superior quality of interpretation.   They gave several reasons for this:

1. More personal experience to draw from makes for a richer experience for tourists;
2. Smaller group sizes allow information to be more personalized and ultimately remembered better by patrons;
3. Use of guides that are in the business because of their personal interest and passion rather than financial gain means that guides will do their own research to fill up gaps in their knowledge.

Owner-operators' primary sources of information were books, the internet, personal experience, and dialogue with friends and co-workers. Some saw this as a more than adequate supply of information, while others said that there needed to be more information available that was relevant to wet tropics guides, scientifically verified, and compiled into an easily accessible location. Four operators complained that they have seen guides rely too much on word of mouth, hearing a story from another guide and then repeating it as fact without checking it.

Two owner-operators advised that for their packed business schedules online courses would be the most practical option for additional training. For assessment, they recommended in-the-workplace assessment as a reliable and minimally inconvenient method. One operator mentioned that off-site courses and workshops are a good for both training and assessment, and if they were focused on the off-season more operators would be able to attend. Two mentioned TAFE as a useful tool.

Common concerns of attractions:

As there were only two attractions that were large enough not to qualify as owner-operators, characterizing their common concerns is more difficult. However, compared to owner-operators they showed an increased concern with the demands of maintaining their larger facilities. They felt that interpretation must take second place to the health and safety of patrons and captive animals.

Because of their greater number of staff and greater resources, they had an increased ability to conduct longer training periods for new staff. They were also more likely to have already participated in existing business accreditation programs. Both attractions had some form of business accreditation, compared to only one of the owner-operators and two of the tour companies. A major reason for their accreditation was separating themselves from competitors and marketing themselves towards increasingly picky tourists.

For the practical details of guide accreditation, one attraction stressed the importance of having an outside authority other than the guide's own boss perform assessments, holding up TAFE as an example. Another attraction commented that online training would be easiest because of the remote location of their site.

Common concerns of tour companies:

Like the attractions, the tour companies had the resources to put guides through outside accreditation programs, and two specifically mentioned TAFE as useful tool. Interestingly though, attitudes towards accreditation had the widest difference of any of the three business types. Tour companies included two of the most favorable views towards accreditation as well as the least favorable.

Their reasons varied for choosing the attractions to which they take their tours. Primary reasons were:

1. Showing tourists the highest diversity of ecosystems;
2. Cultural significance of sites;
3. Demand from tourists for a particular experience;
4. Abundance of wildlife at various locations.

All tour companies seemed to deliver complex interpretation, but were more likely to spend time talking about the logistical details of running a tour company than about the importance of interpretation. Owner-operators put much more detail into their descriptions of the interpretive material they provide.

	Favorability Towards Accreditation	Training Provided	Complexity of Interpretation
Owner-operator 1	4	N/A	2
Owner-operator 2	2	N/A	2
Owner-operator 3	2	2	4
Owner-operator 4	2	3	5
Owner-operator 5	4	1	2
Owner-operator 6	4	2	5
Attraction 1	5	3	2
Attraction 2	5	5	5
Tour Company 1	5	5	4
Tour Company 2	5	4	5
Tour Company 3	1	3	3

Table 1. Comparison of owner-operators, attractions, and tour companies based on three factors.

	Owner-operator	Attraction	Tour company
Views on accreditation	Often too expensive and time consuming for companies with few staff.	Necessary to set quality attractions apart from imitators	Not enough consensus to generalize.
Views on training	A few days of on-the job training takes care of most training needs. Staff should do follow-up research of their own interest.	Training period necessary prior to beginning work. Additional training can take place in the form of attending workshops.	Trainee period useful for bus drivers where one guide drives and another talks.
Views on interpretation	Interpretation is a critical part of the tour. Small tours provide more information in an interactive way, but misinformation from other guides a problem.	Interpretation important but skills and safety training often take precedence.	Interpretation is important but marketing and logistical concerns often take precedence.
Most practical training method	3 votes online courses, 1 vote TAFE model, 1 vote on-the-job assessment, 1 vote accreditation is unnecessary paperwork	1 vote TAFE model, 1 vote online courses because of remote location.	2 votes TAFE model, 1 vote accreditation is unnecessary paperwork.

Table 2. Summary of views of owner-operators, attractions, and tour companies.

DISCUSSION

Favorability towards accreditation:

As mentioned earlier, two-thirds of operators interviewed reacted favorably towards the idea of wet-tropics-wide guide accreditation, and those that had reservations still often agreed with the scheme in theory as long as certain concerns were addressed. One factor to consider in this is that participation in the study was voluntary, and operators with favorable opinions towards WTMA in general may have been more likely to agree to make time for an interview.

Nonetheless, even among those operators that did not support accreditation, demand for increased consistency and complexity of interpretation does appear to exist. Many operators mentioned their annoyance at hearing guides from other companies tell inconsistent stories, and the wish to dispel misconceptions was a common theme when operators talked about their interpretive goals. Others discussed the need to educate people on the underlying ecological issues of the area rather than just on sensationalized creatures such as crocodiles, cassowaries, and koalas. These attitudes show that tour operators do feel some ownership of the WTWHA and care about other people appreciating it properly. If it were demonstrated to them that an accreditation program would be effective at addressing these issues, they would most likely support it readily.

Emphasis on interpretation by owner-operators:

Owner-operators generally went into the most detail about the type of interpretation they provide. A likely contributing factor is that owner-operators conduct tours themselves as well as running the business, and so are much more familiar with the interpretive material than a manager of a larger company who does not actually conduct tours. This must be taken into account when interpreting the results, as it is reasonable that the guides of a larger tour operation may be just as passionate about their interpretation as the most enthusiastic owner-operator.   In larger operations it was managers who were interviewed, so although they set the standards for the company, they were a step further removed from the actual delivery of interpretation.

Owner-operators also showed in several cases a high level of complex interpretation with no outside accreditation involvement and only a few days of on-the-job training. This is a strong

argument for the necessity of recognition of prior learning as a part of any accreditation scheme. Operators with limited free time that are already providing high-level interpretation are unlikely to support a program that requires them to go through repetitive or unnecessary additional training.

Those providing the most complex interpretation all spoke of difficulty finding good, independently motivated staff, a concern probably stemming from their limited ability to spend time bringing weaker applicants up to scratch. One possible way accreditation could address this issue is that it would allow operators to hire staff on the condition that they complete the course within a certain amount of time. This would allow small operators with high standards more freedom in choosing who they hire.

Finally, owner-operators called for increased access to handbooks and materials of confirmed accuracy, a tool that would be especially useful to this largely self-trained demographic. Two operators in their interviews cited as their primary resource a particular guidebook that the WTMA is trying to discourage the use of on the grounds that the author presents his opinions as fact. A database of recommended readings and websites would help owner-operators find more reliable information.

Debate over effectiveness of online courses:

Interviewees held conflicting opinions on the subject of online courses. Three operators specifically supported online training and accreditation on the basis that the added convenience could make accreditation possible for many who would not be able to otherwise. For some operators, especially those in remote locations, the internet is the only practical way to access new information. Three others discredited online training as a useless measure. They argued that online assessments do not actually indicate proficiency in guiding, and serve only to bolster the credentials of anyone with the patience to fill out the forms. Further investigation is needed on the best specific way to improve the effectiveness of online training and address the concerns of these operators. Ideally online courses would be coupled with an in-person assessment, as guides displayed an understandable lack of trust in self-assessment.

Emphasis on the value of real-life experience:

Four operators displayed attitudes valuing real-life experience with wildlife and customers more highly than what they considered the "book learning" approach favored by larger operators and accreditation programs. These operators all were mostly or entirely self-trained, and one even went so far as to say that he specifically hires guides without formal training as they lack the bad habits and misconceptions perpetuated by "guide gossip." These operators' were also the ones most likely to discredit online learning.

Their attitudes suggest that an effective way of communicating with self-trained operators may be to emphasize the field credentials of those who are designing the training program. Many WTMA officials have extensive previous experience working as tour guides, zookeepers, or researchers, but there still seems to be a perception on the part of some smaller operators that they are "office people" who do not understand the concerns of "real people." In addition, it may be helpful to publicize the extent to which tour operators are being included in the policymaking process through channels such as the Tourism Industry Liaison Group.

Lack of marketing effectiveness of accreditation:

Only the two attractions with existing business accreditation commented that they thought their business accreditation was an effective marketing tool. This is borne out by studies showing a low recognition of accreditation on the part of tourists (Wearing 2002). When it comes to personal marketing, only one operator said specifically that they were more likely to hire accredited guides. Two specifically said that they do not think that accreditation gives guides an advantage in the job market. This will need to change if accreditation is to be widely adopted. Linking guide accreditation to permitting is one obvious way to improve the desirability of accredited guides. Public education about accreditation could also help, as tour operators could then market the fact that they employ certified Wet Tropics guides.

Summary of recommendations:

1. Make official handbooks available to tour guides so that they can more easily increase their knowledge and know that their stories are consistent with other guides. Compile a list of outside sources that guides can know are reputable.

2. Continue investigating possible modes of accreditation, as demand does seem to exist among small operators for the tools accreditation would provide.

3. Incorporate some recognition of prior learning into any accreditation course so that unaccredited but experienced guides do not need to repeat material.

4. If there is an online component to the proposed accreditation course, make sure it is rigorous and supported by in-person assessment.

5. Improve recognition of ecocertification on the part of consumers through public education.

6. In training workshops, include presentations by experts and field researchers and incorporate on-site practice, as small tour operators have a greater respect for field experience than for book learning.

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APPENDIX

Owner-operator interview questions:

1. Are you familiar with the concept of guide eco-accreditation? If yes, do you think it's important for tour guides?

2. What is your background and experience as a guide?

3. If you hire anyone, how did you select them? if not, then is difficulty of finding anyone with appropriate knowledge and skills a factor in that?

4. How, if at all, do you train them further once they have been hired?

5. What decisions have you made in how to present the wet tropics to tourists who might not be familiar with it (this could be both through tours or signage)?

6. Do you consider interpretation important? If yes, then what motivates you to improve on the quality of your interpretation (marketing, conservation, professionalism, other)?

7. What is your opinion of the quality of the experience provided by larger vs. small tour operators?

8. Do you think that (you, they, the WTWHA in general?) could benefit from an accreditation system as a tool for training guides? (what would you be looking for in such a system?)

9. What form of training would be easiest (online course, in-the-workplace assessment, other suggestions)?

10. Do you see your tour operation as contributing to the management and conservation of the world heritage area? If yes, then how (through education, through sustainable operation, financially)?

11. Do you provide any information about aboriginal culture? If yes, how do you check that it is both accurate and appropriate to share?

Tour company interview questions:

1. Are you familiar with the concept of guide eco-accreditation? If yes, do you think it's important for tour guides?

2. What existing levels of training do your guides have? What criteria do you use to select them?

4. How, if at all, do you train them further once they have been hired?

5. How do you decide to which attractions to take your business?

6. Do you consider interpretation important? If yes, then what motivates you to improve on the quality of your interpretation (marketing, conservation, professionalism, other)?

7. Would you be interested in an eco-accreditation system as a tool for training your guides, and if so what would you be looking for in such a system?

8. Would you be willing to give time off to guides to complete additional training?

9. What form of training would be easiest (online course, in-the-workplace assessment, other suggestions)?

10. Do you see your tour operation as contributing to the management and conservation of the world heritage area? If yes, then how (through education, through sustainable operation, financially)?

11. What decisions have you made in how to present the Wet Tropics to tourists who might not be familiar with it?

12. Do you provide any information about aboriginal culture? If yes, how do you check that it is both accurate and appropriate to share?

Attraction interview questions:

1. Are you familiar with the concept of guide eco-accreditation? If yes, do you think it's important for tour guides?

2. What existing levels of training do your guides have? What criteria do you use to select them? (how do you advertise and where)

3. How, if at all, do you train them further once they have been hired?

4. What decisions have you made concerning how to present the Wet Tropics to tourists who might not be familiar with it (through guide talking points or permanent infrastructure)?

5. Do you consider interpretation important? If yes, then what motivates you to improve on the quality of your interpretation (marketing, conservation, professionalism, other)?

6. Would you be interested in an eco-accreditation system as a tool for training your guides, and if so what would you be looking for in such a system?

7. Would you be willing to give time off to guides to complete additional training?

8. What form of training would be easiest (online course, in-the-workplace assessment, other suggestions)?

9. Do you see your tour operation as contributing to the management and conservation of the world heritage area? If yes, then how (through education, through sustainable operation, financially)?

10. Do you provide any information about aboriginal culture? If yes, how do you check that it is both accurate and appropriate to share?

11. What kind of a relationship do you feel that your organization has to the world heritage area?