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Working while travelling: Tourism development oppor- tunities for agricultural regions

Abstract

While the backpacker visitor has received increasing attention over the past several decades, the notion of backpackers who work during their travels, despite some exceptions, has not been considered in such detail. Therefore, this paper examines the concept of the working backpacker and considers the opportunities this market subset can offer rural and regional areas. Utilising an Australian case study where 234 working backpacker visitors were surveyed; a preliminary analysis of this market is presented as well as the identification of possible implications and opportunities for rural and regional areas, particularly where agriculture dominates the local economic base. The study found that working backpackers, although visiting the area solely for employment purposes, still stimulate demand for tourism products and activities that showcase local assets and culture. Coupled with the fact that working backpackers often stay in these regions for a considerable length of time, the research shows that there is an opportunity for regional and rural areas is to capitalise on this opportunity and expand the economic base by value adding to the working backpackers' experience through the provision of simple services and activities that backpackers can participate in during their leisure time. It is suggested that such efforts can generate significant economic opportunities for the region through tourism.

Keywords:

working backpacker; agricultural regions; rural tourism; Australia

Introduction

The backpacker tourist has received increasing attention over the past decade by both the tourism industry and the academic community. This interest has arisen from the recognition of the significant contribution the backpacker market makes to national tourism exports; this has particularly been the case in Australia. With the advent of detailed research into this visitor segment, it has been recognised that backpackers tend to visit Australia longer than other tourists, travel more widely and spend more in total on their trip than other tourists. A further point of interest in this market is due to the fact that backpackers tend to travel further afield than other tourists thereby part of their spending is directed at regional and rural communities (Buchanan, & Rossetto,

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1997). An economically important component of the backpacker market is the 'working backpacker', a visitor who funds part of their travels by partaking in incidental employment whilst visiting the country. Indeed, the economic importance of this market is increasingly being recognised and has been recognised by some as essential to the Australian harvest industry (Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business [DEWRSB], 2000). Although there is a growing literature on the backpacker market more generally (Cohen, 1973; Loker-Murphy, & Pearce, 1995; Loker-Murphy, 1996; Pearce, 1990; Richards, & Wilson, 2004; Riley, 1988; Ross, 1993; Slaughter, 2004), the literature is lacking an examination of the working backpacker, aside from relatively recent work by Cooper, O'Mahony and Erfurt (2004). The tourism-related opportunities working backpackers can generate for rural and regional areas have also yet to be considered.

This paper examines the concept of the working backpacker and the potential this market subset offers regional and rural communities. Based on an Australian case study of working backpacker visitors to the Burdekin Region in North Queensland, several possible implications and opportunities for regional and rural areas more broadly are considered.

Literature review

The backpacker market has been drawing increasing interest from both the tourism industry and academic researchers. This has been attributed to the increasing numbers of backpacker travellers, the general resilience of this type of traveller to global or regional events and the fact that backpackers tend to have longer stays than other travellers; thus generating significant economic contributions to the host destination (Thomas, 2002). The term 'backpacker' arose to represent this segment of the mainstream tourism market. Backpackers are defined as young budget travellers who: exhibit a preference for budget accommodation; place emphasis on meeting other people (locals and travellers); have independently organised and flexible travel schedules; go on longer rather than brief holidays; and, place an emphasis on informal and participatory recreation activities (Loker-Murphy, & Pearce, 1995). The modern day backpacker has been likened to other youth travel movements throughout the ages including: the 'grand tours' of the 17th & 18th century aristocracy; the early 19th century 'tramps' that travelled the European countryside in search of employment and adventure; the later trend of affluent youth escaping the European industrial cities to the unspoilt countryside destinations in their leisure time; and the post World War II 'drifters', students and middle-class youth who ventured from the typical mass tourist routes and left their homes and way of life (Adler, 1985; Loker-Murphy, & Pearce, 1995). Similarly, today's backpackers are recognised as travelling further afield than other tourists in an attempt to discover new places, peoples and cultures (Loker-Murphy, & Pearce, 1995).

The backpacker visitor is recognised in many countries as a significant contributor to tourism exports and this is certainly the case in Australia. Based on the most recent data in 2008 Australia received 559,000 backpackers visitors, representing 10% of all

international visitors and 25% of visitor nights spent in Australia (Tourism Australia, 2009). The economic contribution of this market becomes more obvious when comparisons are made to international visitors more generally. In 2008, backpackers stayed for an average of 73 nights in Australia as opposed to 28 nights for all other visitors. Despite their preferences for 'budget' holidays, backpackers average total spend is almost twice that of other travellers no doubt due to their extended length of stay. During 2003 this amounted to a total of \$2.2 billion, representing 20% of total expenditure by international visitors (Bureau of Tourism Research, 2004).

Australia draws the largest share of international backpackers from the United Kingdom (20% of all backpacker visitors); however Germany, the United States, New Zealand and Japan are also key source markets for backpacker visitors. The vast majority of backpackers are young travellers, with nine in 10 backpackers aged between 18-30 years, with an equal split between males and females (Tourism Australia, 2009). In terms of visitation, the vast majority visited the eastern states of New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria, with must see destinations including the Australian icons of Sydney, Cairns, the Great Barrier Reef, Byron Bay, Uluru and Fraser Island. Research has found that the main influences on backpacker's decisions to visit Australia included, experiencing Australia's: natural landscapes and wildlife; coastlines and beaches; rural areas and the outback; cultural life and aboriginal culture (Tourism Queensland, 2001). Backpacker motivation studies have found the most common motivations for visiting Australia included seeking exciting active and adventurous outdoor activities, meeting local people and characters, fulfilling a life long dream or ambition and seeking to enjoy and improve their knowledge of Australia's physical settings, environment, history and culture (Loker, 1992; Loker-Murphy, 1996; Tourism Australia, 2009).

Riley (1988) finds that the backpacker visitor is more focused on leisure, adventure and an alternative way of life, although it is not uncommon for them to travel for education purposes or to seek temporary work to further extend travel and leisure time. This is despite the fact that tourism and work are usually perceived as two contradicting fields of human activity (Uriely, 2001). Cohen (1973) coined the term 'working holidays' in response to youth, which travel to another country to engage in work for short periods, usually during their summer school vacations. Similarly, Uriely and Reichel (2000) define those who engage in situations that combine work with tourist-oriented activities as 'working tourists'. Uriely (2001) finds that the tendency to engage in certain jobs primarily as a means to travel is mainly associated with 'non-institutionalised' young tourists who have a tendency towards low spending as a result of their desire to finance their prolonged trip, and Australia attracts a considerable number of backpackers who desire to work while holidaying in Australia. Indeed, Cooper et al (2004) claim that the employment variable is becoming increasingly important in the movement patterns of backpacker visitors in Australia.

To facilitate the needs of such tourists; the Australian government implemented the Working Holiday Maker Program (WHMP); a scheme which allows visitors to Au-

stralia (between the ages of 18 and 30) to have an extended holiday by supplementing their travel funds through incidental employment. This obviously is an attractive proposition for backpacker visitors who generally stay in the country for considerable period of time and use temporary work as a means of supplementing more extensive travels. A further objective of the scheme is to promote cultural understanding by allowing visitors to experience closer contact with a local community, and the reciprocal nature of the arrangements with 14 other countries ensures Australians are offered similar opportunities through working holidays overseas (Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs [DIMIA], 2004). The number of working holiday visas granted to international visitors have grown from 65,000 in 1998-99 to 88,758 in 2002-03 and recipients of these visas were primarily from the United Kingdom (39,711), Ireland (11,128) and Japan (9,711) (DIMIA, 2004).

Working holiday makers have been found to have a positive effect on the Australian economy, spending an estimated \$1.3 billion annually (DIMIA, 2004). Harding and Webster (2002) claim that these visitors contribute towards macroeconomic demand for labour and the current account surplus to the extent they spend more domestically than they depart with, that is, they have a positive expenditure balance. The WHMP also assists Australian employers by ensuring a large pool of seasonal workers, and has been supported by Australia's National Farmers Federation due to the schemes assistance in overcoming the chronic shortage of reliable agricultural labour during harvest times (Macbeth, & Westerhausen, 2001). In fact, studies have found that in some areas backpackers on the WHMP do comprise increasing proportions of the total labour force (Hanson, & Bell, 2002). However, it should be noted that backpackers who work in Australia do not solely work in agriculture, but also construction, manufacturing, clerical and hospitality positions, among others. Despite this, Harding and Webster's (2002) survey of 1001 working holiday makers visiting Australia in 2002 found that 15.9% worked as fruit and vegetable pickers, which represented the largest group for any single occupational classification.

Due to the fact that backpackers tend to travel further afield for their experiences than other tourists, part of their spending is directed at rural and regional Australian communities (Buchanan, & Rossetto, 1997). Backpackers can often make up more than half of all international visitors and visitor nights, and are therefore particularly important to regional and rural economies (Office of National Tourism, 1998). This has also been found to be the case in Asia and the United Kingdom (Slaughter, 2002). As was mentioned previously, backpacker motivations for visiting Australia included a desire to experience rural areas and the outback. This desire, coupled with the fact that much of the seasonal work available for working holiday makers is also in rural Australia suggests that working backpackers offer significant tourism opportunities for these areas. These opportunities have been realised by a number of rural agricultural regions in Australia who are attempting to attract backpacker visitors to their region, such as the 'Harvest Trail Circuit' which specifically targets working backpackers (Cooper et al, 2004). A further example of this is occurring in a rural agricultural community in

North Queensland, Australia who want to encourage backpackers to visit their region for 'work *and* play'.

CASE STUDY: THE BURDEKIN REGION

The Burdekin region is located on the North Queensland east coast of Australia, approximately 90 kilometres south of the city of Townsville and only several hours drive north of the Whitsunday Islands and Mackay. The region has a population of approximately 20,000 people, and typical of many Australian rural areas is economically reliant on its agricultural industries of sugar cane, horticulture and grazing. The region is considered to be the largest and most successful sugar producing area in Australia with more than 700,000 hectares of land producing in excess of 1.1 million tonnes of raw sugar each year and earning over \$400 million for the local economy (Burdekin Shire Council, 2000).

The Burdekin region, like many small towns located between major tourism centres, has a number of relatively basic budget accommodation options ranging from camping and caravan parks to motels, with minimal infrastructure, services and attractions catering to the tourist market. With such a small tourism sector, limited data is available on visitors to the area; however 1998 figures show that there were 20,845 room nights for the year, with tourism takings for the same period of \$835,000 resulting in the direct employment of 51 people (AEC Group, 1999). Visitation to the region is highly seasonal, peaking during the winter months and can be attributed to the 'migration' of domestic visitors travelling to the northern areas of Queensland to escape the colder southern winters of New South Wales and Victoria. These visitors are generally retirees and repeat visitors who come to the area to pursue recreational fishing and other nature based activities. Although modest by most standards, tourism is making a small but significant contribution to the local economy and may in time provide the opportunity to diversify the economic reliance on agricultural exports.

A second group of visitors to the Burdekin region are clearly evident each year. During the agricultural harvesting season (between June and September) the Burdekin region receives a relative influx of backpacker visitors who travel to the area to engage in temporary paid employment on one of the number of farms in the region, although unfortunately data is not available on the size of this market. Farmers in the area have become reliant on these working backpackers as the local employee base is insufficient to fulfil the large numbers needed for the labour intensive task of fruit and vegetable harvesting. It is assumed that the Burdekin's backpacker market consists almost entirely of those persons who stay in the region for work purposes and the market has generally evolved through word of mouth, with backpackers telling each other where they can find work (AEC Group, 1999).

Fortunately for the region, word-of-mouth is the primary information source used by the visiting backpackers, as marketing of the region is an issue. As discussed above, the tourism industry is still at an early stage and is not yet seen as a priority or viable economic sector by many parts of the community. Some local council funding has

been made available in recent years and allows for a small visitor information centre staffed by volunteers and for the production of a promotional booklet. Marketing outside the region is almost nonexistent and only occurs on an extremely limited basis under the auspices of individual operators. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine backpackers motivations for visiting the region and their perceptions of the area as a work and holiday destination, with the objective being to gain an insight into the working backpacker visitor so that appropriate initiatives could be implemented to enhance the economic contribution of this market for the region.

Method and results

To investigate backpacker's motivations for visiting the Burdekin region and their perceptions of the area as a work and holiday destination, a non-probability convenience sample of backpacker visitors was sought. The study deliberately coincided with the peak backpacker visitation period to the Burdekin, i.e. the region's harvesting season, which occurs between the months of June and September. Backpackers were identified by their age, group, dress and accommodation based on Pearce's (1990) definition that budget travellers stay in less expensive accommodation, dress more casually and are often younger than other groups of tourists. Respondents were sought from the four backpacker accommodation establishments in the region and the caravan and camping park which is also popular with backpacker visitors. The decision to conduct the surveys in these locations is consistent with previous studies of the backpacker market (Murphy, 1995). Surveys were conducted within common facilities of the establishments such as TV rooms, kitchens and recreation areas. All backpackers within these common areas of the respective complexes at the times of sampling were approached and invited to participate by filling in a self-administered questionnaire, containing a series of structured and unstructured questions. A second sampling procedure was also conducted at backpacker establishments in the two neighbouring centres of Townsville and Bowen in an attempt to maximise the potential sample size of the study.

On completion of the sampling period, 234 completed and useable surveys were collected, which represented a response rate of 94%. Although this may be considered a small sample size for a quantitative instrument, 234 respondents is a realistic representation of the backpacker visitor population of the Burdekin Region. This can be attributed to the fact that there is a relatively slow visitor turnover due to the fact that backpackers generally stay in the area for at least one week and up to nine weeks, thereby reducing the ability to survey large numbers of visitors within the time frame of the study. It was also found that the same respondents were being approached repeatedly suggesting that the potential survey population was diminishing. Therefore the sample size was considered suitable for this particular study. Data was coded and analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

While a demographic profile of backpacker visitors was not the primary focus of the study, it was deemed useful to determine whether the demographic profile of working backpacker visitors to the Burdekin differed from the demographic characteristics

of backpackers generally (as identified previously in the literature review). However it was found that this was not the case; the gender of backpackers was relatively evenly distributed between males and females, 52.2% and 47.8% respectively; the largest proportion of visitors were aged between 21 and 24 years of age, and were generally students (34.8%). As with other backpacker studies the majority of visitors originated from the United Kingdom (45.1%) and Europe (22.8%) and the majority of respondents were staying in Australia for up to 12 months (61.2%).

Respondents were asked a number of questions about the Burdekin region including their reasons for visiting the region and their planned activities, the information sources which influenced their choice to visit, their expected length of stay in the region, and whether they were first time or repeat visitors. The main purpose for visiting the Burdekin for the vast majority of visitors (79%) was to seek work, with a further 8.5% of respondents en route to another destination. Consistent with the main purpose of visiting, 76.8% of respondents stated that they *only* planned to work while they were staying in the region. A smaller percentage (13.8%) indicated that they planned to participate in a form of sightseeing and/or activity as well as work, with a further 6.3% stating that they were working but unsure what there was to do in the area in terms of sightseeing/activities. In terms of information sources it was found that only 21.4% of backpackers to the Burdekin had heard of the region before they arrived in Queensland and the majority had heard of the region through word of mouth sources through other backpackers, friends/relatives or Australians they had encountered on their travels. The majority of backpackers planned to stay in the area for either 1 week (31.7%) or two weeks (23.7%). The remaining 44.6% of visitors planned to stay for a period of up to two months, with backpackers staying in the region for an average of 25 days. The vast majority of respondents (93.2%) were visiting the Burdekin for the first time, and 31.3% stated that they would visit again, although a number of these respondents stated that it would be for work purposes only. More than half of respondents (62.7%) stated that they would recommend the Burdekin to other backpackers as a destination to visit especially for the purpose of seasonal work.

The remaining questions in the survey aimed to determine backpackers' perceptions of the Burdekin region as a work *and* holiday destination. Respondents were asked if they had, or planned to, participate in any activities or sightseeing while staying in the region, and were also asked in a series of open-ended questions about; distinctive or unique characteristics of the region; improvements needed in the region, and the types of activities and services that should be offered for backpacker visitors. The vast majority of backpackers visiting the region (74.5%) had not participated, or did not plan to participate in any activities or sightseeing during their visit. The remaining 25.5% of respondents stated that they had engaged in some form of activity or sightseeing in the region, and for the majority of these respondents this included; visiting the local beach, the tourist displays/centres in town and a nearby dam and creek. Those respondents that indicated they had not participated in any activities or sightseeing while in the region were prompted for their reasoning behind this decision. Reasons for not participating included: only working while in the region to fund further travels (26%),

lack of time (20.8%) and lack of money (19.5%). A lack of information about things to do in the region (16.9%) and a lack of interest in the regions offerings (15.6%) were also cited as reasons for non-participation.

When asked about the distinctive and/or unique characteristics of the region, respondents considered these to be the sugar cane (42%), the rural community atmosphere (29%) and the natural landscape (20.3%). A 22-year-old female respondent from Canada stated that "the atmosphere is a unique experience with the farmers and the small towns". In terms of improvements in the region the most frequently cited responses related to facilities and services (31.1%), which included shopping and entertainment facilities such as pubs and restaurants. The provision of activities and tours (27.2%), transportation infrastructure improvements (26.2%) and improved information on points of interest in the region (5.8%) were also cited for this question. Qualitative responses further illustrate this; "tourist information vastly needs improving to raise awareness of attractions" (25-year-old male, United Kingdom), and "there is a need for more things to do in leisure time that are easily accessible" (20-year-old female, Canada).

Respondents were also asked to respond to an open-ended question, which asked what sort of activities, tours, etc. should be offered for backpackers in the Burdekin Region? The most frequently requested activity (47.9%) was for tours to local sites of interest such as cane farms, sugar mills and tours to the beach, as well as social activities for backpackers (28.7%) with examples given including barbecues, inter-hostel sports competitions and trips to places of interest in the region. A 24-year-old female respondent from the United Kingdom stated that, "*I think most backpackers come here to work and have little money for much else except living. Any activities would need to be of low cost*". While a 21-year-old male from Holland provided a more detailed description of what activities he would like to see offered to backpacker visitors:

"For example, a one day tour: start in the morning visiting a sugar cane field (see how they cut the sugar cane); visit a sugar mill and at night go and see how they burn the cane (possibly let the people burn a bit so they can tell other people they did it)".

Discussion

The Burdekin region case study provides some useful insights into the working backpacker and the opportunities available for rural and regional areas to tap into this market segment. The survey results showed that while the main purpose for visiting the region was to work, there was considerable support for the provision of activities and tours to local sites of interest, in conjunction with some form of social interaction with other backpackers. These results are in keeping with Cooper et al (2004) assertion that, increasingly the 'real' travel experience is when contact is made with locals, partly through integration into local social life and by meeting other backpackers in a short-term working environment. Similarly, Uriely and Reichel (2000) found that working is providing an integral part of the tourist experience as it provides opportunities for more authentic social relationships through extended periods of social engagement.

As the 21-year-old male from Holland's quote showed, there is a real interest in rural agricultural areas and Bowen, Cox and Fox (1991) find that visitors to agricultural areas desire to learn more about or experience aesthetic pleasure from agriculture and many visitors are genuinely interested in the lifestyles and environments of these areas. Although backpackers may primarily be visiting a region for work purposes there is recognition that unique experiences can be had in rural agricultural areas such as the Burdekin in conjunction with their work objectives. Attempting to meet this gap can only enhance the visitor experience and in turn, generate positive word of mouth for the destination. Keeping in mind backpackers' preferences for 'budget holidays', small scale, simple offering which capitalise on the region's current assets, can provide tourism opportunities for the region that, if not for the working backpacker visitors, are likely not to exist at all due to the small visitor market of many rural areas. Slaughter (2002) also found that backpackers are not looking for fully catered tours but are willing to take on some of the roles of a tour guide to help reduce the costs, which makes provision of these tours within the means of smaller tour operators in rural communities.

The positive word of mouth that such tours and activities could generate for the region is also an important consideration. Hanson and Bell (2002) found that the reputation of the region is very important in attracting working holiday makers. The positive experiences of working holiday makers in the agricultural region of Tully in Far Northern Queensland have seen a steady flow of working visitors to the region which has effectively averted a major labour crisis in the area. By the same token, an area's reputation can act to dissuade workers from travelling there for work as has been the case in two traditional working backpacker areas in Queensland, Childers and Bundaberg, following tragic events involving backpacker visitors. As was mentioned previously, providing opportunities for backpackers to experience the local assets and culture of the region can help enhance their visitor and work experience, and hopefully encourage positive reports of the area to other backpackers, thus generating further visitors and economic returns for the community.

A further opportunity for rural and regional areas like the Burdekin which attracts working backpackers, is the considerable length of stay of this visitor segment. It would be almost unheard of for an international tourist to stay in the one place for an average of 25 days, for most visitors that would almost be their entire stay in Australia. While the Burdekin region already benefits from backpacker spending during this period on accommodation, food and beverage and other sundry items, having a visitor in the region for such an amount of time gives plenty of opportunity to entice them to part with some of their hard earned dollars before they leave for their next destination. The opportunity exists for these communities to value add to the backpackers stay in the region by providing small, low cost activities, which are unique to the region.

This is where the tourism opportunities for regional and rural areas lie: with the backpacker market, more specifically the working backpacker who's primary motivation is to work to fund further travels but is not adverse to experiencing the local culture

where they are visiting for such a significant amount of time. If regional and rural areas can capitalise on their local characteristics and assets, something as simple as visiting a sugar cane mill or another unique characteristic of the area, may encourage backpackers to not only visit for work but also to play, and in turn inject more tourist dollars into the local community.

As has been discussed, backpackers make an important economic contribution to Australian tourism exports and working holiday makers alone spend an estimated \$1.3 billion annually. Due to the fact that backpackers are more likely to visit regional and rural areas than other tourists, their impacts are very important to these areas and may serve to alleviate some of the challenges faced by rural areas; particularly the decline of traditional economic industries such as agriculture, which has flow on effects such as high unemployment and depopulation as residents leave in search of employment. However, despite the potential benefits espoused within this paper, as with all forms of tourism a caveat must be placed on this discussion. It is well accepted that the local community, usually those that do not see a direct personal benefit from encouraging visitors to their region, can often resist and/or resent the introduction of tourism, particularly within agrarian communities there is often a perception that when tourism becomes established agriculture will be driven out (Cox, & Fox, 1991). Therefore it is considered essential that when developing tourism in rural agricultural communities local identity is retained, and to minimise any negative impacts of tourism, the needs and wants of the local community serve as a starting point for the planning and implementation of tourist offerings (Lankford, Williams, & Knowles-Lankford, 1997).

Conclusions

This paper has sought to provide a first foray into the concept of the working backpacker and the potential opportunities this market subset may offer regional and rural communities. Although the backpacker traveller is a global phenomenon this study has investigated a segment of the Australian backpacker market and assumptions cannot be made that the Australian experience can be translated verbatim to other countries, although there are likely to be many synergies. However, utilising the Burdekin region case study it can be seen that there are a number of potential opportunities for regional and rural areas to tap into this market, particularly as in many areas backpackers make up over half of all visitors. However, a conscious effort must be made by these regions to harness the opportunities presented by the working backpacker segment. The provision of simple services and activities can generate significant, albeit small, economic opportunities for the region, which would otherwise be lost to the next destination the backpacker travels to. Also due to the fact that backpackers stay in these areas for considerable period of time, even if it is for the purpose of funding further travel, there is an opportunity to entice them to spend their money and minimise economic leakages to other destinations. Enhancing the backpacker experience in these working destinations provides opportunities for unique experiences; working with a local community while experiencing rural Australia, which has been found to be one of the primary motivations for visiting the country. Because, although backpackers in these regions may primarily be visiting for work, they are still tourists on holidays and if a unique experience is on offer they are more than likely to take it.

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Submitted: 11/20/2009

Accepted: 07/10/2010