

## **Cultural Tourism and Museums**

**Dr Lynda Kelly, Head of Australian Museum Eureka Prizes, Web  
and Audience Research**

**Australian Museum, Sydney**

A large assortment of people visit museums: from the very young to the very old; and in a range of groups: families, friends, schools, couples. Museums are exciting places for visitors as they tell stories about the objects they hold and the research they undertake in a variety of ways. Museums are unique contexts for learning, often called “free-choice” learning environments (Falk & Dierking, 2000). Museums have the opportunity to shape identities—through access to objects, information and knowledge visitors can see themselves and their culture reflected in ways that encourage new connections, meaning making and learning (Bradburne, 1998; Carr, 2003a; Falk, 2004; Falk & Dierking, 1992, 2000; Hein, 1998; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Silverman, 1995; Weil, 1997). Museums have developed from being repositories of knowledge and objects to having a ‘... multifaceted, outward looking role as hosts who invite visitors inside to wonder, encounter and learn’ (Schauble, Leinhardt & Martin, 1997, p.3).

However, in the twenty-first century there are many challenges facing museums. These include increased competition and pressures on attendances because of the proliferation of leisure choices for more sophisticated consumers and the rise of access to the internet (Lynch, Burton, Scott, Wilson & Smith, 2000). Across the world museums are finding themselves competing in the marketplace with other leisure, learning and educational providers (Falk & Dierking, 2000; Lynch et al., 2000; Mintz, 1994) within what has been called the “experience economy”, defined as the wide range of currently available educational leisure experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

The demands of the “information age” have raised new questions for museums, particularly in the areas of access and authority (Cameron, 2003, 2006; Freedman,

2000). It has been argued that museums need to move from being suppliers of information to providing usable knowledge and tools for visitors to explore their own ideas and reach their own conclusions (Bradburne, 1998; Hein, 1997) because increasing access to technologies, such as the internet, ‘... have put the power of communication, information gathering, and analysis in the hands of the individuals of the world’ (Freedman, 2000, p.299). Freedman also argued that museums should become mediators of information and knowledge for a range of users to access on their terms, through their own choices, and within their own place and time.

Funding cuts have resulted in more limited resources requiring museums to operate on a more commercial basis and to be more collaborative through partnerships (Brown, 1997; Garnett, 2002). As well, there is a need for museums to stay relevant and be responsive to pressing social and environmental issues such as population and sustainability, social justice and Indigenous rights (Bradburne, 1998; Brown, 1997; Griffin, 1998; Kelly, Cook & Gordon, 2006; Kelly & Gordon, 2002; Skramstad, 1999; Weil, 1994, 1999). Other world pressures such as terrorism, global warming and climate change are also affecting museums, not just locally but globally in terms of both the capacity to host travelling exhibitions, in loaning collections and in visitation.

Museums have always been tourist destinations. The earliest museums were founded on the premise of “education for the uneducated masses” (Bennett, 1995), “cabinets of curiosities” (Weil, 1995) established to ‘... raise the level of public understanding ... to elevate the spirit of its visitors ... to refine and uplift the common taste’ (Weil, 1997, p.257).

Museums have been intimately linked with the leisure sector, especially in studies related to marketing of museums (Burton & Scott, 2003; Crang, 1996; Harkin, 1995; Lynch et al., 2000; Masberg & Silverman, 1996; Packer & Ballantyne, 2002; Prentice, Witt & Hamer, 1998; Ryan & Glendon, 1998; Scott & Burton, 2000; Tian, Crompton & Witt, 1996; Witcomb, 2003). Research has found that strong motivations to visit museums are for leisure and entertainment (Moore, 1997; Packer, 2004; Packer &

Ballantyne, 2002). For example, a survey of 413 Australian Museum visitors found that 71% of adults visited museums generally for entertainment purposes (Kelly, 2001). In that study international tourists were analysed separately to see whether there were any differences to Sydney-based visitors, however results were the same—tourists visited museums for new experiences, worthwhile leisure, learning and entertainment.

## **The Australian Museum and tourists**

The Museum was established in 1827 and is Australia's (and one of the world's) oldest natural history and anthropological museums. It is based on the "classic" collecting institutions of the nineteenth century (Bennett, 1995; Strahan, 1979), with the current building and collections reflecting that era's approaches to natural history museums, also seen in similar museums around the world (such as the American Museum of Natural History, New York; Field Museum, Chicago; Smithsonian Natural History Museum, Washington; and the Natural History Museum, London). The mission of the Australian Museum is 'Inspiring the exploration of nature and cultures' (Australian Museum, 2005, p.1). The primary functions of the Museum are to make information, collections and research available to a wide range of audiences through undertaking scientific research and managing a vast range of collections in the areas of zoology, mineralogy, palaeontology and anthropology. As well, public communication and learning through physical exhibitions, public programs, publishing, regional outreach and on-line delivery of services are ways the Museum communicates with its wide variety of audiences (Australian Museum, 2005). The Museum attracts between 250,000-400,000 visitors to the College Street site each year, depending on what exhibitions and programs are showing at that time (Australian Museum Audience Research Centre, 2006a).

Exit surveys conducted from March 2005-January 2007 revealed that around 38% of Australian Museum visitors were international tourists, with the following general characteristics:

- Where they live:

- 27% North America
- 26% UK
- 8% Germany
- 3% France
- 14% other Europe
- 5% New Zealand
- 4% Japan
- 7% Other Asia
- 1% China
- 3% Africa/South America/Pacific
- Visited for general visit; tourist destination
- Seen tourist brochure/guidebook; billboard/sign outside
- Most liked *Indigenous Australians* exhibition, other favourites are *Skeletons* and the *Wildlife Photographer of the Year* exhibition—a mix of those based on the Museum's collections and a well-known international travelling exhibition
- 32% visited alone; 22% with spouse/partner; 23% with family
- 10% visited Australian Museum before
- Other places visited in Sydney:
  - 10% Powerhouse Museum
  - 25% Art Gallery of NSW
  - 27% Taronga Zoo
  - 36% Sydney Aquarium
  - 16% Maritime Museum
  - 14% Museum of Contemporary Art
- 6% had visited the Museum's website before visiting.

## 2006 research study

The Australian Museum's Corporate Strategic plan recognised that international tourists are a key market for the museum, and increasing our percentage of these visitors is identified as a key strategy action. Given this emphasis, a study of tourism was undertaken by the Museum during the early part of 2006 (Australian Museum Audience Research Centre, 2006b) to provide market information about tourist audiences in order to enable the development of marketing strategies aimed specifically at encouraging more tourists to visit the Museum. In particular, we looked at the following questions:

- What trends are likely to occur in tourism to Australia over the next 10 years?
- What are the trends in cultural tourism?
- What is the profile of tourists who do and do not visit the Australian Museum? What visitor experiences do they seek? What are their sources of information?
- What levels of awareness of the Museum exist amongst tourist operators and intermediaries?

The research involved four strands of data collection:

- Desk research to draw together existing information on tourism profiles, patterns and trends.
- Onsite survey of 153 out-of-town visitors to the Australian Museum to gather information on visitor profiles, information sources, visitor experience and responses to possible new packages and programs.
- Intercept interviews with 102 tourists in central Sydney (CBD) to gauge awareness, interest and responses to possible new packages and programs.
- Executive interviews with 15 tourism operators and intermediaries to gather market information and explore potential marketing initiatives.

This paper focusses on the results for international tourists only.

## **What did we find?**

There is increased competition in Sydney—generally international visitors who are interested in and want to visit museums will do so and those who are not interested won't. Most of those who do visit museums are shorter-stay tourists, with potential identified to increase visits by the working-holiday market, especially at the end of their stay. In general a range of venues are visited, with general tourists (CBD) focussed more on general sights and scenes, including outdoor places such as beaches and wildlife parks, as well as icon destinations such as the Opera House and the Blue Mountains. However, they all want to experience the unique Sydney/Australia, and seek adult-targeted experiences, not child or family-based activities.

Tourists at the Australian Museum were asked what they had heard about the Museum that prompted them to visit. The main themes in their responses fell into four main areas:

- Displays about Australian history and culture and natural history
- Displays about Aboriginal history and culture
- General descriptions in guide books and tourist publications
- Specific recommendations from friends and family, or 'heard it was interesting'.

There was high interest expressed by Museum visitors in Indigenous topics, followed by behind-the-scenes tours and dangerous creatures, whereas CBD tourists tended to visit sights such as beaches and were more interested in topics about animals and beaches, as well as dangerous animals.

## **Tourism trends: operators' perspectives**

Fifteen interviews were held with representatives of a range of Sydney tourism operators, including backpacker accommodation; 3 – 5 star accommodation; local tour operators; inbound tour operators; industry bodies; tourism publications; and visitor centres. They identified a number of key tourism trends that have an impact on museums.

Travellers to Australia have become more **worldly** in recent times. Travelling has become just a regular part of life, rather than a one-off experience—everybody travels. Australia is therefore not the first foreign country most tourists have visited, and Sydney is not the first big city that most tourists have seen. This means that the competitive set for each city’s tourist destinations includes overseas attractions of a similar ilk. For example, the Smithsonian is now in the same competitive set as the Australian Museum, even though visiting it would be part of a totally different travel experience. Worldly travellers also have vastly increased expectations of what the travel experience will offer.

Today’s tourists talk about having more **pressure** in their daily life, and less time for holidays (just like all of us really!). Therefore there is increased pressure for holidays to be not just value for money, but value for time. There is less pre-trip planning, which means greater reliance on information and referrals they receive when they arrive at their destination. Tourism operators also report rising interest in indulgence or relaxation experiences, as tourists are finding it increasingly difficult to meet these needs in their daily life.

Tourists to Australia are increasingly seeking **authentic experiences** that have an emotional impact. They want to be affected by their travels. To some extent, it is this desire for authenticity that is driving a growth in independent travel. While seeing the sights remains important, tourists increasingly want to get the “feel” of the places they visit. This means they are gravitating to “live” experiences that enable some form of interaction (i.e. live animals, people, performances). They prefer experiences that use multiple senses. Authenticity also means having experiences in a natural context (i.e. where they would naturally occur). For example, more tourists are willing to pay extra to see Australia’s native animals in the wild. Finally, a desire for authenticity means tourists are placing a higher value on having local personalities with expert knowledge to guide them, rather than a generic tour guide.

Worldly travellers look for each destination they visit to have its own identity in order to have a unique experience wherever they travel. Australia’s **destination identity**

incorporates drinking and mateship; sport; the beach and endless summer; iconic fauna (koalas, kangaroos); dangerous and deadly fauna; convict history and Indigenous. Australia's Indigenous people are considered a key aspect of Australia's unique identity. From the point of view of European tourists especially, Australia's Indigenous culture is more interesting than our relatively brief white-settler history. For a significant proportion of the tourist market, the primary interest in Indigenous culture is about purchasing an artefact to take home. For the remainder of those interested in Australia's Indigenous culture, the focus is on the issues, lifestyles and culture of contemporary Indigenous communities. Social justice elements are of interest to a smaller proportion of the market.

As tourists have become more worldly, they have also become more confident to make their own decisions. Industry stakeholders in this research reported that interest in package travel has declined in maturing tourist markets, because packages are seen to offer less opportunity for an authentic experience. Pre-trip planning focuses on the highlights of the travel destination: tourists know the 'big things' they are going to do before they arrive. However, they are content to leave everything else to their arrival.

According to Sydney tourism operators, there has not been any noticeable change in recent times around tourist interest in **cultural tourism**. Cultural tourism in Sydney is limited to some extent by Sydney's identity as an outdoor city. It is difficult for tourists to fit cultural tourism within this paradigm; it is simply not what one comes to Sydney to do. In this context, visiting museums is also not perceived as essential to get a "feel" for Australia, or even Sydney. Further, they expect that museums in Sydney will fall short of high standards set by overseas competitors, such as the Smithsonian, resulting in less willingness to visit. Consequently, while many international visitors do visit a cultural venue while in Australia, many of these visits occur in travel destinations other than Sydney. For tourists on a travel itinerary, Sydney is commonly viewed as a shopping destination with some iconic tourist sights. Cultural tourism in Sydney is primarily a wet weather activity. Having positioned Sydney in their minds as a permanently sunny, warm destination, rainy weather usually prompts an extension of shopping time.

Generally, it was found that tourism operators themselves showed relatively low interest in, and awareness, of the variety of cultural experiences currently available. Therefore, they may not be confident advocates for such experiences for their clients. Also several questioned the role that the Australian Museum could play when compared with Sydney Aquarium, Sydney Wildlife World and Taronga Zoo—venues where they felt the unique Australian fauna is already covered in-depth and with real animals.

## Conclusion

What is a typical international tourist visitor like? Meet Paul and Carolyn:

We're Paul and Carolyn, 54 and 38, both professionals living and working in London. We consider ourselves to be worldly travellers, having recently done the Inca trail in Peru and last year attending a conference in Budapest where Paul was a keynote speaker. Although Paul has older children from a former relationship we don't travel with them, preferring to stay in quality hotels or with our many colleagues and friends living across Australia.

We have been to Sydney several times now and just love the outdoors, beaches, shopping and café lifestyle. We always visit the cultural attractions, with art galleries being particular favourites. We have visited most of the icon museums of the world, and were very impressed with the Smithsonian, New York Natural History Museum and a quaint hunting museum we visited in Budapest.

When we go to museums we like to do a morning or afternoon tour which we book on the day, and a cost of around \$15 doesn't faze us. We love visiting museum shops and always buy a book as a reminder of our experience, souvenirs for Paul's boys and presents for our hosts.

We think the Australian Museum's Aboriginal display is fantastic. Initially, we were not interested in social justice (preferring to find out what is a real and fake 'artefact' to buy later), but we were moved by the contemporary stories of survival and hope, we never knew this happened in Australia.

Although we have a general plan of action before we leave London, we prefer to be a bit spontaneous and usually go by the recommendations in the local guide books and Lonely Planet of course!

Museums have always been leisure and tourist destinations. However in modern times the challenges are to remain relevant and be seen as a must-see destination among all the currently available leisure activities—to stand out in the crowd as a place to both

learn and be entertained. My doctoral research found that people visit museums to learn, to be educated and to be entertained in an exciting and stimulating environment that is enjoyable for them and all members of their group—adult visitors wanted museum learning experiences that were both educational *and* entertaining. I also found that museums should not be concerned about promoting their entertainment value and role, as results indicated that visitors felt entertainment added to learning, not detracted from it (Kelly, 2007).

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, a wide range of people visit museums, yet all of them, including tourists want the same thing from their experiences:

- respect for them as individuals
- choice
- a welcoming atmosphere from trained, aware, friendly, knowledgeable staff, both front and back of house
- to see themselves reflected in programs, exhibitions, collections and staffing
- to be able to understand the “work” of the museum
- active and varied learning experiences that are both group-based and individual
- involvement
- a contemporary experience, both in communication and interpretation modes, with content/issues that are relevant, current and significant.

The challenge for museums is to understand the needs of diverse audiences and provide experiences that meet these in an environment of increasing competition and enormous social and world change.

## **Acknowledgements**

The research that this paper is based on was undertaken by Gillian Savage and Nicole Bailey, Environmetrics in partnership with the Australian Museum, Sydney.

## Bibliography

- Australian Museum. (2005). *Corporate Strategic Plan, 2005-2008*. Sydney: Australian Museum.
- Australian Museum Audience Research Centre. (2006a). *Australian Museum Visitors* (unpublished report). Sydney: Australian Museum.
- Australian Museum Audience Research Centre. (2006b). *Tourist markets for the Australian Museum: a research study* (unpublished report). Sydney: Australian Museum.
- Bennett, T. (1995). *The Birth of the Museum: history, theory, politics*. London: Routledge.
- Bradburne, J. (1998). Dinosaurs and White Elephants: the Science Centre in the 21st Century. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 17(2), 119-137.
- Brown, E. (1997). Toward A Natural History Museum for the 21st Century. *Museum News, November/December*, 38-49.
- Burton, C., & Scott, C. (2003). Museums: Challenges for the 21st Century. *Marketing Management*, 5(2), 56-68.
- Cameron, F. (2003). Transgressing fear - engaging emotions and opinion - a case for museums in the 21st century. *Open Museum Journal*, 6.
- Cameron, F. (2006). Beyond Surface Representations: Museums, Edgy Topics, Civic Responsibilities and Modes of Engagement. *Open Museum Journal*, 8.
- Carr, D. (1999). The Need for the Museum. *Museum News, March/April*, 31-52.
- Carr, D. (2003a). Observing Collaborations Between Libraries and Museums. *Curator*, 46(2), 123-129.
- Carr, D. (2003b). *The Promise of Cultural Institutions*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press.
- Crang, M. (1996). Magic Kingdom or a Quixotic Quest for Authenticity? *Annals of Tourism Research*, 23(2), 415-431.
- Falk, J. (2004). The Director's Cut: Toward an Improved Understanding of Learning from Museums. *Science Education*, 88(Supplement 1), S82-S96.
- Falk, J., & Dierking, L. (1992). *The Museum Experience*. Washington: Whalesback Books.
- Falk, J., & Dierking, L. (2000). *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press.
- Falk, J., & Dierking, L. (Eds.). (1995). *Public Institutions for Personal Learning: Establishing a Research Agenda*. Washington: American Association of Museums.
- Freedman, G. (2000). The Changing Nature of Museums. *Curator*, 43(4), 295-306.
- Garnett, R. (2002). *The Impact of Science Centres/Museums on Their Surrounding Communities* (unpublished report). Canberra: ASTC/ECSITE.
- Griffin, D. (1998). Not the Last Hurrah! *Muse*, 2-3, 13-15.
- Harkin, M. (1995). Modernist Anthropology and Tourism of the Authentic. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 22(3), 650-670.
- Hein, G. (1997). *The Maze and the Web: Implications of Constructivist Theory for Visitor Studies*. Paper presented at the Visitor Studies Association Conference, Alabama.
- Hein, G. (1998). *Learning in the Museum*. London: Routledge.
- Hooper-Greenhill, E. (2000). *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*. London: Routledge.

- Kelly, L. (2001). *Developing a model of museum visiting*. Paper presented at the Museums Australia Annual Conference, Canberra.
- Kelly, L. (2007). *Visitors and Learners: Adult Museum Visitors' Learning Identities*. University of Technology, Sydney.
- Kelly, L., Cook, C., & Gordon, P. (2006). Building Relationships Through Communities of Practice: Museums and Indigenous People. *Curator*, 49(2), 217-234.
- Kelly, L., & Gordon, P. (2002). Developing a Community of Practice: Museums and Reconciliation in Australia. In R. Sandell (Ed.), *Museums, Society, Inequality* (pp. 153-174). London: Routledge.
- Lynch, R., Burton, C., Scott, C., Wilson, P., & Smith, P. (2000). *Leisure and Change: implications for museums in the 21st century*. Sydney: Powerhouse Publishing.
- Masberg, B., & Silverman, L. (1996). Visitor Experiences at Heritage Sites: A Phenomenological Approach. *Journal of Travel Research*, 34(4), 20-25.
- Mintz, A. (1994). That's Edutainment! *Museum News*, November/December.
- Moore, K. (1997). *Museums and Popular Culture*. London: Cassell.
- Packer, J. (2003). Motivational factors and the visitor experience: A comparison of museums and other contexts. In L. Kelly & J. Barrett (Eds.), *Proceedings of UNCOVER - graduate research in the museum sector Conference 2002* (pp. 191-197). Sydney: Australian Museum and University of Sydney.
- Packer, J. (2004). *Motivational Factors and the Experience of Learning in Educational Leisure Settings*. Unpublished PhD, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane.
- Packer, J., & Ballantyne, R. (2002). Motivational Factors and the Visitor Experience: A Comparison of Three Sites. *Curator*, 45(2), 183-198.
- Pine, B., & Gilmore, J. (1999). The Experience Economy. *Museum News*, March/April, 45-48.
- Pitman, B. (Ed.). (1999). *Presence of Mind: Museums and the Spirit of Learning*. Washington: American Association of Museums.
- Prentice, R., Witt, S., & Hamer, C. (1998). Tourism as Experience. The Case of Heritage Parks. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 25(1), 1-24.
- Rennie, L., & Johnston, D. (2004). The Nature of Learning and Its Implications for Research on Learning from Museums. *Science Education*, 88(Supplement 1), S4-S16.
- Ryan, C., & Glendon, I. (1998). Application of Leisure Motivation Scale to Tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 25, 169-184.
- Schauble, L., Beane, D., Coates, G., Martin, L., & Sterling, P. (1996). Outside the Classroom Walls: Learning in Informal Environments. In L. Schauble & R. Glaser (Eds.), *Innovations in Learning: New Environments for Education* (pp. 5-24). Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Schauble, L., Leinhardt, G., & Martin, L. (1997). A Framework for Organising a Cumulative Research Agenda in Informal Learning Contexts. *Journal of Museum Education*, 22, 3-8.
- Scott, C., & Burton, C. (2000). What do we seek in our leisure? *Museum National*(May), 26.
- Seagram, B., Patten, L., & Lockett, C. (1993). Audience Research and Exhibit Development: A Framework. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 12, 29-41.

- Silverman, L. (1995). Visitor Meaning Making in Museums for a New Age. *Curator*, 38(3), 161-169.
- Skramstad, H. (1999). An Agenda for American Museums in the Twenty-First Century. *Daedalus*, 128(3), 109-128.
- Strahan, R. (Ed.). (1979). *Rare and Curious Specimens: An Illustrated History of the Australian Museum 1827-1979*. Sydney: The Australian Museum.
- Tian, S., Crompton, J., & Witt, P. (1996). Integrating Constraints and Benefits to Identify Responsive Target Markets for Museum Attractions. *Journal of Travel Research*, Fall, 34-45.
- Weil, S. (1994). Creampuffs and Hardball: Are You Really Worth What You Cost? *Museum News*, 73(5), 42-44, 62.
- Weil, S. (1995). *A Cabinet of Curiosities: Inquiries Into Museums and Their Prospects*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Weil, S. (1997). The Museum and The Public. *Curator*, 16(3), 257-271.
- Weil, S. (1999). From Being *about* Something to Being *for* Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum. *Daedalus*, 128(3), 229-258.
- Weil, S. (2002). *Making Museums Matter*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Witcomb, A. (2003). *Re-Imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum*. London: Routledge.