

GUESTS ON OUR COUNTRY: CREATING AN INDIGENOUS APPROACH TO TOURISM

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Abstract

The Budj Bim National Heritage Landscape, within the traditional country of Gunditjmarra people is on Australia's National Heritage List. Gunditjmarra, the traditional owners, have a vision of restoring their country and welcoming guests onto their land. Having experienced conventional tourism, Gunditjmarra have created an innovative, self-managed model using the concept of 'guests on country'. Gunditjmarra see tourism as a way to share their unique landscape, to offer deeper cultural encounters and sustain their own story. Building culturally-appropriate tourism partnerships is the next step.

Key words

Indigenous tourism; reconciliation; healing; respect.

Introduction

The Budj Bim landscape¹ is within the traditional country of Gunditjmarra people (*Gunditj* = country, *marra* = person). Located in the south-west of Victoria (Australia), part of this place is on Australia's National Heritage List and Gunditjmarra are the traditional owners. Gunditjmarra have fought for and won back native title and cultural rights over their traditional land, and now they are seeking to build sustainable tourism enterprises, products and experiences. Gunditjmarra have a long-held vision of restoring their country and of welcoming guests to experience the Budj Bim landscape with the Indigenous people who care for it.

The paper examines the factors leading to the failure of the first tourism venture in the 1990s and the emergence of a distinctive Gunditjmarra approach - 'guests on country' - in their *2007 Sustainable Tourism Plan*. Bringing this concept into practice continues to be a challenge. This paper examines why this concept is potentially transformative – for the guest and the hosts, and for the country itself.

The paper also illustrates how a relatively small Indigenous community is working at two very different levels in tourism: at the strategic level to gain community, industry and government support for their vision, and at a very personal level, to share culture with their guests.

¹ This term refers to a broader landscape centred on Budj Bim/Mt Eccles but extending beyond the boundaries of the Budj Bim National Heritage Landscape; it used in the Budj Bim Master Plan (Tract 2014).



Figure 1: Gunditjmarra Country (GMTOAC 2014)

Gunditjmarra Country

Gunditjmarra country is land and sea country. It extends from the wild southern coast of western Victoria to the drier Wimmera plains in the north, an area of approximately 15,000 km². At the heart of their traditional country is the Budj Bim landscape, a place of spiritual, cultural and economic significance to Gunditjmarra. More than 30,000 years ago the Gunditjmarra witnessed a volcanic eruption and knew it to be the revelation of an important creation ancestor, *Budj Bim*. The volcanic cone known today as Mt Eccles, along with Mt Napier and other associated landforms are expressions of *Budj Bim*²; these landscape elements are considered ‘an outstanding example of the process of ancestral beings revealing themselves to Aboriginal people as part of a changing physical and social landscape’.³ Mt Eccles was the source of massive lava flow that moved south towards the coast, diverting rivers and streams and creating large wetlands. Gunditjmarra actively manipulated these new resources, using volcanic stone to construct weirs, channels and traps, forming a large-scale aquaculture system focused on Lake Condah that represents a ‘rare, intact and representative example of “intensively manipulated eco-cultural landscapes” that has survived through the continuity of Gunditjmarra cultural and social practices and active management of the landscape’.⁴ The resultant expansion of available food resources supported a ‘large, settled Aboriginal community systematically farming and smoking eels for food and trade’; close to the lake and on the lava flows Gunditjmarra built circular stone dwellings and other structures.⁵

² (Budj Bim Trails)

³ (Aust. Govt. Australian Heritage Database)

⁴ (Context 2013: 73)

⁵ (Budj Bim National Heritage List webpage)



Figure 2: Excavation of a channel in the aquaculture system dated to c6600BP (McNiven & Bell 2010).

Gunditjmara were one of the first Australian peoples impacted when European colonists expanded their interests from Van Diemens Land (Tasmania) into what is now known as Victoria in the 1830s. Gunditjmara had lived on this land since time immemorial⁶ and the impact of colonial occupation was significant. Knowing their country so well, Gunditjmara were able to fight back, engaging in guerrilla warfare against the colonists for over 20 years - the Eumerella Wars. The stony country to which they retreated is part of the Budj Bim landscape. Ultimately Aboriginal people across Victoria were forced to live on a reserve: the Gunditjmara insisted on remaining on their ancestral land and the resultant mission was built within sight of Budj Bim and close to Lake Condah, the centre of aquaculture. The mission officially closed in 1919 with its remaining infrastructure demolished over the next decades up until 1950s, but Gunditjmara continued to live in the area, retaining their connections and advocating for the return of the mission and their traditional country. The mission was returned in 1987 after a legal battle, and Gunditjmara became cultural heritage custodians under Aboriginal Heritage Act and gained native title, both in 2007.⁷

In Australia, the word ‘country’ has come to have a particular meaning. Country is more than just land or property and it is specific. Country is:

‘a place that gives and receives life ... People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country, and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy ... country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life ... Because of this richness, country is home, and peace; nourishment for body, mind, and spirit; heart’s ease.’⁸

‘Gunditjmara country’ embodies all of these aspects of connection and meaning, as does the transformative concept of ‘guests on country’. The Gunditjmara have a bold vision for this landscape:

⁶ Current dating indicates at least 30,000 years BP.

⁷ (Weir 2009:6-7)

⁸ (Rose 1996:7-8)

‘as a tourism destination and as a home to the Gunditjmarra community’.⁹ For a people so impacted by colonisation, the open-hearted offer to share country is remarkable.

Impacts of tourism on Gunditjmarra

In the mid 1980s, Gunditjmarra partnered with the Victorian state government on a tourism enterprise as part of the hand-back of the Lake Condah Mission. The project involved a new accommodation complex next to the mission, with cabins and relocatable bunk houses clustered around a combined recreation room, kitchen and amenities block. Gunditjmarra were required to provide all the visitor services: tours, bookings, management, hospitality etc. The government’s tourism agency held the lease, and Gunditjmarra had little choice or control.¹⁰

A protest erupted and Gunditjmarra community members occupied the complex, arguing that it should support their access to country first and foremost. The Lake Condah Mission, of ‘singular significance ... as a place that has been instrumental in the shaping of their present-day community’, was now open for tourists too, a double impact.¹¹ Denise Lovett, a Gunditjmarra woman reflected that her community wanted to be on country and visit the mission but instead they were required to serve ‘white fellas’, looking after the needs of tourists.¹²

The tourism venture had failed badly, creating deep divisions within the Gunditjmarra community. While there were practical issues underpinning its failure such as poor planning, inadequate facilities, lack of training and support for those expected to run the project, the concept itself was deeply flawed, failing to respond to the intrinsic needs of the Gunditjmarra community to reconnect to country and to heal themselves.¹³

Why guests on country is potentially transformative

In 2007 Gunditjmarra created their own *Sustainable Tourism Plan*, incorporating a culturally-driven concept of sustainability and a vision of Gunditjmarra caring for country and culture, with tourists as guests, engaging with Gunditjmarra in real on-country experiences, not as viewers of ‘scheduled performances’. For Gunditjmarra, the opportunity to spend time on country, carrying out important cultural activities, is vital for community identity, well-being and the passing on of knowledge.¹⁴ The concept of ‘guests on country’ is culturally-based and therefore potentially transformative. It seeks a cultural and social relationship with the visitor, rather than simply economic exchange. The relationship of host and guest is mutually respectful: guests are invited and hosts are welcoming and sharing.

The concept of guest is fundamental to being culturally authentic. Because a guest is invited and trusted, the host can be authentically themselves. The host is not a performer and the guest is not a consumer. The experience is one of cultural encounter to which both need to be open.

The concept of guest reinforces that the Budj Bim landscape is the home of Gunditjmarra. It is not empty and it is not *terra nullius*. Nor is it ‘public’ to be entered into without invitation as a visitor might to a national park for example. Traditionally, entering an Aboriginal clan’s country involved protocols to gain permission and be welcomed; now this tradition is being given a contemporary purpose.

⁹ (GMTOAC, n.d.:1)

¹⁰ (Context 1993:156-160; Denise Lovett Interview)

¹¹ (Context 1993:135-136)

¹² (Lovett Interview)

¹³ (Context 1993:168)

¹⁴ (Context 2007)



Figure 3 – Learning about Gunditjmara fish trap baskets (GMTOAC 2009).

‘Guests on country’ recognises that the rights and needs of Gunditjmara are paramount in this place and that story is the most important artefact of Gunditjmara history. Story connects the past with the present and connects visitors to the people and the landscape.’¹⁵ And the landscape, living and changing since water was returned to Lake Condah shapes the dialogues between guests and hosts.¹⁶ It is an intriguing and complex landscape, and one which each Gunditjmara cultural interpreter can speak about, drawing on collective and personal cultural knowledge. Holding the story safe is a powerful assertion of Gunditjmara culture, and the opportunity to encounter place and people, past, present and future will deeply engage visitors.

Examined within the framework of heritage theory, this concept exemplifies ideas about encounter, entanglement and tourist imaginaries, recognising that how guests engage with a place like the Budj Bim landscape will inevitably hinge on meaningful moments of encounter with the people of the place and with themselves. Visits will challenge preconceptions, and each guest will shape their own interpretation based on the engagements that actually happen, not on a standard description contained in a tour package. Moreover, the interfolding of nature and culture evident in the Gunditjmara worldview will engage guests in this distinctive imaginary, perhaps providing a new way of seeing the world beyond Budj Bim.

Challenges and opportunities

The concept of ‘guests on country’ clearly comes with challenges. First it runs counter to current approaches to tourism marketing where people, places and experiences are available for sale as commodities in an open market. On the other hand, international tourists to Australia are seeking authentic Indigenous cultural experiences, with a recent study indicating that this included being hosted by Aboriginal people, having opportunities to interact with Aboriginal people, visit Aboriginal land, meet local communities and see Aboriginal people in their traditional settings.¹⁷ However, this

¹⁵ (Tract 2014:50)

¹⁶ (Context 2009)

¹⁷ (Moontide Management 2012:3-4)

study also reveals that most people do not seek the deeply immersive experiences that these expressed desires seem to indicate, suggesting the need to clarify how the ‘guest on country’ concept can be meaningfully delivered.¹⁸

Budj Bim Tours is an Aboriginal community-owned enterprise that has run a variety of tours to different parts of the Budj Bim landscape since 1999: it is the main face of the ‘guests on country’ concept. Its 2010 business plan was ambitious, reflecting the importance of Guntijmara as the cultural landscape interpreters, the transmission of culture and the need to become a self-sustaining enterprise. But with dropping visitor numbers to the region, by 2013 different options were being examined.¹⁹ The most serious challenges were the lack of resources to support the development of the enterprise and employ staff. Budj Bim Tours sourced its cultural interpreters from the Budj Bim Rangers and community elders. If demand expanded, Budj Bim Tours may not be able to meet the demand on the ‘casual employment’ basis it could offer.²⁰

When the Budj Bim landscape was recognised as a potential ‘game changer’ in a new regional tourism strategy in 2012, it appeared that significant financial resources could become available for tourism development.²¹ While Guntijmara are keen to access funding, their past experience means an insistence on retaining cultural control. As CEO Damein Bell says: ‘this is not about selling our story ... we have the country, we have the people and we have the cultural resources ... Guntijmara will continue to be the cultural interpreters here.’ He emphasises the importance of sharing the stories of the Budj Bim landscape, told through the eyes and experience of Guntijmara.²²

The potential scale of tourism suggested in the regional plan, and the challenges facing the Budj Bim Tours operation, meant rethinking about how tourism experiences will be delivered across the wider Budj Bim landscape while building on the vision and principles from 2007 to ensure that Guntijmara remain as the principal cultural interpreters and beneficiaries of Guntijmara culture.²³

Tourism services and products offer a key economic opportunity for Guntijmara, along with eel farming and harvesting. Both support a continuing connection to country, engage and sustain cultural knowledge and strengthen Guntijmara identity. Each activity leverages the cultural and natural resources of the Budj Bim landscape.²⁴ Aside from the economic risks associated with new enterprises, there are also cultural and personal risks and challenges as the Budj Bim Tours operation reveals.

The new tourism plan – the *Budj Bim Master Plan* – builds on the foundations of the earlier plans, putting Guntijmara culture, needs and aspirations as the primary goals. Guntijmara will set the pace at which tourism develops, ensuring that tourism is a part of Budj Bim, but never dominates. Nor will the pace of development ever compromise nature or culture, nor drive Guntijmara people, nor fail to recognise their rights, needs and aspirations.²⁵ Tourism, Guntijmara style, will enable community members to engage in their own way and only if they want to.

Rather than continuing to take on all the roles of operating a tour guide service, Guntijmara have decided to establish partnerships with the wider tourism sector to support the primary Guntijmara role as hosts and cultural interpreters.²⁶ Guntijmara interpreters will be encouraged to find their own

¹⁸ (Insight Communications 2013)

¹⁹ (Insight 2010:10-11; Insight 2013:6)

²⁰ (Insight 2013:11)

²¹ (Urban Enterprise 2012:19)

²² (Damein Bell Interview)

²³ (Tract 2014; Context 2007)

²⁴ (GMTOAC 2013:23)

²⁵ (Tract 2014:v)

²⁶ (Tract: 2014:v)

voice, enabling each interpreter to be and feel authentic, speaking from their own experience rather than having to fit a standard tourism mould. Through this approach, there will be space for Guditjmara individuals to create their own ways of engaging with guests.

Tourism is no longer imposed by an outside body as occurred in the mid 1980s-90s. Now inviting a visitor is a choice, freely engaged in. The *Budj Bim Master Plan* demonstrates the extent of the change: it avows that the Lake Condah Mission is for Guditjmara – as a ‘meeting place, an administrative centre, a symbol of political struggle and a link to family histories’ – it is no longer open to unaccompanied visitors.²⁷

Conclusions

The stories of the Budj Bim landscape are expansive. They stretch across the country, linking creation stories, clans and families, histories and recent experiences into a vast network of potential encounters for the culturally ‘open’ guest. The Budj Bim landscape is at the heart of Guditjmara country: it is a place that has sustained Guditjmara people for thousands of years, and their vision is that it will sustain them culturally, socially and economically into the future.

For Guditjmara, an important next step is broader recognition of the universal values encompassed by the Budj Bim landscape, and the recently announcement of Victorian Government support for its addition to Australia’s World Heritage Tentative List is heartening.

Guests on country offers a distinctly different approach, and seven years after it was first articulated the concept remains strong. It advances our understanding of how ‘heritage tourism’ might become a richer world of guest imaginaries and encounters. The challenge now is to build the cultural awareness of the tourism industry as they establish new partnerships to ensure that never again is Guditjmara well-being sacrificed to tourism.

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²⁷ (Tract 2014:28)

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