Engaging with our Pacific communities: Enhancing capacity in tourism management and best practice through the co-development of an international standard guide training program.

Dr Kaye Walker and Professor Betty Weiler
School of Tourism and Hospitality Management

Summary

This project developed a Pacific region tourism guide training program of an international standard to enhance community capacity and improve practice in the tourism industry. Through observation and consultation with local community and industry members, gaps in knowledge and understanding were identified. By combining the SCU’s leading research and professional expertise in guide training, program development and assessment with multiple teaching and learning activities - capacity around these gaps was improved. Regional investment and engagement in the program was ensured by involving a team of contributors including locals, staff from the Tongan Government (contractor) and the University of the South Pacific, which has a responsibility for regional community training.

The achievements were multiple and included community capacity developments such as:

- The first Oceania guide training certification program;
- 66 certified guides were trained;
- Immediate employment opportunities;
- Improved local knowledge, skills, sense of pride, engagement and responsibility in the industry; and
- An on-going relationship with the Tonga Government and the University of the South Pacific.

Background

Tonga permits a controversial wildlife tourism industry that allows interaction and swimming with Humpback whales and their newborn young in an important breeding and birthing area of the South Pacific Ocean. This ‘Oceania’ Humpback whale subpopulation is listed by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature as an “Endangered” species and hence the industry’s operational conduct and management has been under scrutiny by conservation agencies and regional governing bodies, including the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme.

Other Pacific nations now also wish to conduct similar tourism activities as it has become Tonga’s most important industry with regard to the import of foreign currency and regional local employment. Consequently, the industry has spread through the nation’s island groups but in the absence of appropriate skills and understanding. Hence, the Tongan government recognized the need for an international standard workforce training certification to ensure demonstrably best practice throughout their wide-spread operations. This is necessary to not only ensure the sustainability of the industry, but also the protection of the resource and to satisfy external inquiry. A major issue identified was the local disinclination to comply with the industry’s best practice guidelines, largely due to a limited community-wide engagement and understanding of the industry, the whales and tourist motivations and expectations.

Learning

The innovative aspects of this project meant the contributors experienced a learning curve with respect to their scholarship and professional fields of knowledge. It meant their knowledge could be assessed in application, and due to the research outcomes in May and September/October various adjustments were...
subsequently made to the training program before final delivery. In addition, to the contribution to their empirical learning, it also contributed to their understanding of the sustainability aspects of the industry in a culturally diverse region. The need to learn the specific socio-cultural influences of communities was needed in order to create an effective on-going program that moves beyond the previous generically accepted models of regional training. This type of learning can only be achieved through community engagement.

Outcomes

The first certified guide training program of its kind in this region was developed and delivery of the training occurred by a team of trainers and local assistants lead and co-managed by SCU and the Tongan Business Enterprise Centre (the contractor). Sixty six nationally certified guides were trained with immediate employment opportunities.

The project directly increased knowledge and understanding of:

- the industry’s role and sustainability locally, regionally, and internationally;
- the role and importance of industry regulation compliance;
- the role of tourists, their typology and management;
- the whales, their behaviours and their significance regionally; and
- the wildlife guide’s role, best practice and international standard expectations.

A further significant outcome was improved inter- and intra-operational relations and communications.

Impact

The *industry, local community, Tonga and the region* (via resource protection) have benefited through improved industry performance and relations which has stimulated the pending legislation of national industry regulations, and University of the South Pacific’s interest in adopting the program for region-wide delivery.

*Community* participants were empowered with knowledge, understanding and skill enhancement. The project generated an increased capacity of community participants to identify and address aspects of their role and issues they felt to be most important in an industry that is largely owned and managed by expatriates.

This project joined *stakeholders* in a mutually beneficial focus around sustainability. *Southern Cross University* has benefited through the conduct of leading edge research addressing contemporary industry requirements and the subsequent publications and scholarship applications.

**Awards Category**

Community Impact

**Good practice principles**

Collaboration, mutual benefit, capacity building, industry identified need.

**Recognition**

This project was the recipient of Southern Cross University’s Excellence in Community Engagement Award for Community Impact in 2012.