

# 7

## **Closing the Gap? Transforming Indigenous tourism through recognition, redistribution and representation**

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### **Introduction**

Fifty years ago Australia's Indigenous people gained full citizenship rights in a public referendum. Whilst this event afforded citizen rights under Australian law, the constitutional recognition and questions of a treaty for the First Peoples of Australia still remain at the forefront of public debate. First Peoples and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are accorded certain rights, which play out in various ways in the law, political economy and public sphere of Australia. Indigenous people are also culturally different and have experienced historical (and present) trauma, marginalisation and neglect as a result of colonial and post-colonial domination (Atkinson, 2002). Recently Indigenous people have (erroneously) become a 'problem' to Australian society and governments (Altman, 2009). The agenda of manufacturing Indigenous Australians, as a problem, is multifaceted including a perennial effort to assimilate them in Australia's body politic. However more recently, the 'problem' of Indigenous Australians has been articulated through comparison of Indigenous socio-economic indicators such as child mortality, incarceration and unemployment with similar figures of white Australia. The lack of progress in key indicators prompts public policy responses and media attention to create a discourse of 'closing the gap' (see the Australian Prime Minister's, *Closing the Gap* reports 2009-2017).

As a consequence of such conditions, a dominant political and discursive view has emerged in Australia that Indigenous people should not be seen as citizens with structural rights, but rather they should be seen as citizens predominated by a sense of individual agency and personal responsibility for their living conditions (Altman, 2014). The latter view sees solutions to the gap sourced in neoliberalism. Under the neoliberal approach, 'closing the gap' is about new ways of schooling, working, spending, home owning and mobility for Indigenous people, which disciplines them to the dictates of the market economy; these initiatives are akin to the assimilation strategies of the 1950s with a contemporary veneer. Adopting these new ways means that the interrelated (Indigenous) ways of being: kinship, language, ceremony, ties to country (place) and law are devalued or eroded as the primacy of the individual is key focus of improvement. This view is held by both conservative and liberal based political parties in Australia and has the support of some Indigenous Australian leaders. Altman (2014) argues that the three interrelated concepts of recognition, redistribution and representation (see Fraser, 1999, 2009) may be a more useful frame to reconfigure the so-called 'close the gap problems' of Indigenous Australians.

What does this have to do with tourism? Tourism, despite its apparent carefree nature, is an ideological concept and practice. The discourse of tourism as an industry is a recent phenomenon and has usurped the discourse of tourism as a social force (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006). Indeed the 1980 Manila Declaration on World Tourism, with its emphasis on social justice and inclusion, seems out-moded with the discourses on tourism as an industry predominant today. The Declaration stated that "In the practice of tourism, spiritual elements must take precedence over technical and material elements" (UNWTO, 1980). At the heart of the Declaration is the affirmation of the originality of cultures and respect for the moral heritage of peoples.

The timing of the Declaration ironically heralded the development of mass tourism. In the mid-1980s the global airline industry was deregulated and this afforded opportunities for greater tourism industry development. Neil Leiper in 1979 (see Leiper, 1995) identified that there was a concerted effort by tourism businesses prior to the 1980s to argue that tourism was a serious industry worthy of government support and facilitation. Simultaneously, tourism morphed into an individualistic and hedonistic pursuit of the consuming tourists, who could demand any product and experience that their money could purchase; thus diminishing the earlier

forms of, say, pilgrimages and social tourism, where social and spiritual values prevailed.

At the risk of oversimplification, there appears to be a duality of tourism as both a burgeoning industry and a smaller, socially-oriented leisure activity with certain socio-ecological underpinnings; both with quite different purposes. While a niche segment for responsible tourism remains evident and tourism is still used as a space of intercultural contact, this is only a very small niche market and is seen to be an odd outlier, for the most part. The impacts of this shift have been recently framed as structural violence which impacts on both humans and non-human natures through the systematic production of inequalities, excessive waste and ‘spaces of exception’ – i.e., a tourism bubble where normal local socio-environmental rules are not applicable (Büscher & Fletcher, 2016). Indigenous tourism falls into this category, as demonstrated in some recent studies where it is analysed as: inauthentic (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006), mutually beneficial exploitation (Whyte, 2010), cultural exploitation (McLaren, 1998) and a source of environmental injustice (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2013) to name a few.

How might Indigenous tourism negotiate the dominant tourism frame, and for what purpose can Indigenous tourism be conducted? Is Indigenous Australian tourism about ‘closing the gap’, and what exactly might that mean?

Based on Fraser’s (1999, 2009) justice framework, we offer tourism cases where the justice frames of recognition, redistribution and representation are present in the Indigenous tourism contexts. These cases exemplify how attention to each element of the justice frame is important in maintaining tradition and livelihoods in ways determined by Indigenous people. This framework counters neoliberal logic which does little for Indigenous traditions and self-determination.

## **Neoliberal commodified Indigenous tourism and the alternative**

Indigenous tourism does not necessarily privilege Indigenous engagement and benefit. One of the most used definitions of Indigenous tourism comes from Butler and Hinch (1996:10) who define it as “tourism activities in which Indigenous people are directly involved either through control and/or by having their culture serve as the essence of the attraction”. They offer