

Social Needs of Grey Nomads Travelling in Queensland

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is on 'Grey Nomads' visiting and travelling through a coastal Central Queensland community. Social issues for Grey Nomads during their journey to the coastal site were investigated. The Grey Nomads' attitudes to their social activities and concerns whilst travelling also formed part of the research project. Other articles on Grey Nomads and their habits (Horneman, Carter, Wei and Ruys 2002; Onyx and Leonard 2005; Onyx and Leonard 2007a, 2007b), confirm that there has been little research to date on this rapidly increasing tourist group within Australia. As Australia, by all accounts, has a rapidly ageing population (ABS 1996; ABS 2000; Onyx and Leonard 2005; Cassidy 2008; Obst, Brayley and King 2008), this retired, semi-nomadic, cohort requires examination. Open ended in-depth interviews were undertaken with twenty two participants. Such research and the subsequent findings can only serve to inform and enhance the provision of services and the liveability of Grey Nomads.

Keywords: Grey Nomads, Australia, social needs, tourism, ageing population

Introduction

For many older Australians, reaching retirement age does not restrict them to a life at home, or a life devoid of leisure and excitement. Once obligations have been fulfilled, many ageing Australians are able to travel as they wish (Onyx and Leonard 2005: 64). Many of these older Australians are identified by the colloquial term 'Grey Nomads'. The term Grey Nomad is applied to the section of the ageing Australian population who use their retirement years as a time to experience travel and holidaying activities once freed from the constraints of work and family commitments (Carter 2002; Higgs and Quirk 2007; Leonard, Onyx and Maher n.d.; Obst, Brayley and King 2008; Onyx and Leonard 2007a; Onyx and Leonard 2006; Onyx and Leonard, 2005; Prideaux and McClymont 2006).

Comment [g1]: This idealistic as there are real restrictions – fatigue/costs/vehicle types/distance from support

The usual mode of transport for this mature aged, travelling cohort are four wheel drives towing caravans, and mobile or motorhomes (Prideaux and McClymont 2006). They generally travel in the colder winter months of southern Australia to the warmer winter in northern Australia, and in particular Queensland. Some travel 'around' Australia, some travel continuously, while others only travel between June and September each year.

Comment [g2]: Add any supporting data – differentiate btw Qld, NT, WA

This paper discusses issues connected to the Grey Nomads' social activities and needs. What they do for enjoyment and who they interact with were salient issues within this research.

Background of Grey Nomads

For at least four months of each year, Grey Nomads frequent the northern half of Australia, to escape the colder climate of southern Australia (Onyx and Leonard 2005). Happiness, leisure, relaxation, rest, fun, travelling and seeing the sites Australia has to offer form an important part of their *raison d'être*.

Lago and Poffley (1993) revealed that tourism operators should thoroughly evaluate Grey Nomads concerning the needs and ages of their customers (Cassidy 2008). McGuire, Uysal and McDonald (1998), examined the methods utilised by the tourist trade to attract seniors to tourism. Romsa and Blenman (1989) studied the travel patterns of older German people, and revealed that retirees had comparable requirements when contrasted with the population in general. Van Harssel and Rudd (1992) studied single senior travellers and their lifestyle profiles, and Schlagel and Tas (1992) explored the conventional distinctiveness and requirements of the senior tourist market (Cassidy 2008). Research undertaken by Wei and Ruys (1998)

established that mature aged travellers needed security, ease, safekeeping, assistance and contentment whilst touring throughout Australia (Cassidy 2008).

A contemporary study by Backman, Backman and Silverberg (1999), established that mature aged travellers (older than 65 years) were more likely to reside at their destination for extended periods of time, spend longer planning prior to their trip, and pay a visit to acquaintances and relations during their travel than less mature travellers (aged 55-64). These results are contrary to an analysis described by Norvell (1985), who found little difference between those aged younger than 50 years old, and a slightly older group, aged 50 to 64. Both age groups travelled for comparable intentions, with a passionate need to travel for leisure (Horneman, Carter, Wei and Ruys 2002).

Additionally, several studies acknowledge the most significant desires and rewards sought by mature aged travellers (Guinn 1980; Romsa and Blenman 1989; Kersetter and Gitelson 1990; Thomas and Butts 1998; Backman, Backman and Silverberg 1999; Moisey and Bichis 1999).

In a study of retired self drive travellers in Cairns, North Queensland, Mings (1997), also suggests that Grey Nomads can be acknowledged as resembling their snowbird equivalents in the USA and Canada. In 1999, Pearce (1999) researched the self drive tourist market and observed that this type of travel is preferred for retired Australians.

As is evident in the literature, only a small amount of research has been carried out on the population of ageing Australians who choose to travel the country at their own pace, using their own means of transport and accommodation. Large numbers of Grey Nomads traverse the Australian continent every year. While this may be a seasonal lifestyle for some, for others it is a way of life, they just continue to travel.

Researching Grey Nomads

Comment [g3]: Add explanation North American colloq.

Comment [g4]: 2 points can you compare grey nomads with other older travellers such as train/ship travellers and what does large numbers mean in real terms and as a percentage of the population

Comment [g5]: Needs supporting evidence

This paper draws on research conducted about the social needs of Grey Nomads travelling to, and holidaying in a Central Queensland coastal location. The research that forms the basis of this paper was undertaken over a two month period in 2008, at a sea side location in Central Queensland. At any given time throughout the data collection period, large numbers of Grey Nomads were in residence at the location.

Findings

With Australia's ageing population, Grey Nomads are beginning to form a large sector of the internal tourism market in Australia. While there have been many instances of older retirees travelling to sojourn for the winter months in the northern climes of Australia, this activity now has become a 'must do' on the calendars of vast numbers of individuals belonging to this cohort.

Throughout the data collection a number of salient themes and categories emerged. Of these, the theme of 'Social' is represented here. Within this theme were a number of sub themes or categories.

Social

Many of the Grey Nomads in this research project spoke about their social activities and community engagement. A lot of them enjoyed sports with other co-travellers while at the caravan park. Ben and Betty recounted the various social experiences they and their community of friends engaged in for leisure.

Betty: Usually we play golf. Usually we bring our golf sticks and play at Emu Park or Yeppoon. There's a couple over there [indicates], she plays bowls. Usually every afternoon for a bit of a social gathering we have happy hour.

Ben: Happy hour, a cup of tea or a beer in a big circle, they have a lot of things.

Betty: We all get together, everybody like sits and once one starts, it starts off like that. Yeah, you sit down and you meet people.

This is in direct contrast to the research of Mings (1997), who found that the Cairns Grey Nomad group did not like to socialise with others in their caravan park. In fact, many of them shied away from this type of social interaction. In opposition to the findings of Mings (1997), Onyx and Leonard (2006: 95-96) found similar results to the research cohort under investigation here.

Many important and lasting friendships and social support networks are formed during the journeying and sojourning phases of the travel. As Ben told me

We've met people from Perth, they were here three or four years ago and ever since then, ...they called in, and ever since that day it's only every one or two months they've got to ring us up and they're up, or heading back down. They've been right up to Cooktown, they came up the west coast and he rang up from Katherine about two nights ago heading for home again. Like things like that, you meet people and people meet you and years later you've got something to look forward to, hearing from them and at least everybody's happy.

This is also consistent with the findings of Onyx and Leonard (2005: 67).

In their article on Grey Nomads and road safety impacts and risk management, Obst, Brayley and King (2008) found that '[r]espondents indicated that they stayed in touch with people they met even when they returned home... Hence it would appear that this population has strong social networks and established communication channels' (2008: 3-4). Indeed, one of the interviewees responded to questions about this issue with the following statement.

Jack: I suppose we have social support really. We've got some friends down in Maleny, who are old family friends, who if something happened we'd call on them. Yeah, we've got sort of friends like that, so that if something really happened, we've got support like that...

In order to support this further, two other respondents also told of similar social networks they had developed over their years of travelling.

Marsha: We stopped on the way up and that's with people we met on the road and they know we're coming up...

Evan: ...spend a couple of days with them; don't want to wear out our welcome...

Marsha: Well, they live at Beerwah, they would not come down our way very often 'cause...

Evan: When they do, they drop in.

Marsha: They're coming down this year.

Evan: Yeah, they flew down and spent Easter with us.

Marsha: But they know we're coming up so there's no need for them...

Evan: When they come down they stay with us.

These findings are further substantiated by Onyx and Leonard (2005: 65) who suggest that

[T]he one thing that almost all Grey Nomads point to as the most positive part of the experience is meeting other people. Some of these new acquaintances become lifelong friends.

Another couple from the Grey Nomad group also spoke about their experiences of friendship and sociability while travelling and in the caravan park.

Mark: Oh yes, you've got to be social you can't just sit on your... and talk to yourself all the time. But yeah you make friends when you are travelling, caravan parks...

Allison: Especially fishing friends of Mark, they'll come around to see what he's caught that morning. Oh yes, we've been out to the Chinese dinner and they had Christmas dinner in July, yeah...

Another participant added that she found the caravan park very social and very inclusive of all those staying there. Each event was a drawcard for all inhabitants of the park. Further, these social events were also much anticipated and well attended.

Interviewer: Did you go to the Christmas in July?

Natalie: Oh up here, oh did we ever, that was fantastic... fairly social sort of people... and a fiftieth wedding anniversary... So that was a surprise. So everyone came [laughs]. It's amazing what you can make do with when you're away like this and how, if there's a birthday we've got to do a happy hour... well there's plenty of time for social activities for a park, but when you get home it's all quiet [laughs] for a few weeks.

Prideaux and McClymont (2006: 46-47) also found this in their work on Australian caravanners.

All of the Grey Nomads interviewed had some form of contact with their home base. Many used the internet and emailed home. This form of communication also aided in keeping them up-to-date with current technology social networking devices. Many used the internet to research places of interest, look for allied health professionals and as a conduit to the outside world. Three groups of the interviewees expand on this below.

Jack: But then home's not far. It's three hours and a phone call or otherwise the internet. Or, mobile phone... Yep, I've got the laptop. It's wireless and that's another story...

Mark: At least once a week we always ring up generally on a Sunday evening, the son in law and daughter are looking after our affairs while we are away so we've got no problems there. We've got a mobile. The only time we use it is when we are travelling, we don't ever use it at home.

Liam: All we need in Melbourne, our son does.

Mia: Yeah, he does everything there is there.

Liam: He's only five minutes away from where we live.

Mia: So, we sort of feel comfortable leaving our home.

Liam: And we've got some very good neighbours, very good neighbours...

Prideaux and McClymont (2006) have also made this connection in their research.

They highlight the fact that

Caravan parks are also beginning to realise that the provision of individual caravan parking spaces as well as internet facilities are becoming the new requirements to remain competitive (Prideaux and McClymont 2006: 57).

As is evident from the responses of the research cohort, many of the Grey Nomads in this research feel the need to keep in contact with home, even though they have willingly chosen to leave it, and to be 'away'. This is consistent with the notion of security, both personal and property, and also speaks to the levels of familial and social support in place at the Grey Nomad's home bases.

Conclusion

It can be understood from this research that many older Australians embrace their retirement and begin the long journey of 'seeing Australia'. Many only travel for the southern winter months, when they 'go north' to experience the more hospitable weather in northern Australia and Queensland in particular. Many of these people also have extended support networks in place, and travel to see or to catch up with friends they have made along the way. These appear to be enduring relationships.

This research is significant because it offers an explanation of the many ideas and beliefs connected to the Grey Nomads as a travelling, ageing cohort of elderly Australians. This group finds fulfillment and adventure in their activities of journeying around Australia, or to the warmer northern states. They do not perceive their lives as dull, boring and over. As Australia has an ageing population, the

expectation that there will be many more Grey Nomads out on the roads between June and September every year is not just a possibility, it will be an eventuality.

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