

# Pivotal Role of Tour Guides for Visitors` Connection with Nature: Conceptual and Practical Issues

Ismar Borges de Lima

**Abstract**— This paper deals with the pivotal role of tour guides for connecting visitors with nature. The guides can introduce outsiders to a specific natural assets, forests, savannah, marine reserve, providing specific in-situ information about a certain biome, ecosystem, landscapes, while raising awareness of and respect for nature. As an example, bush tucker or a wildlife encounter mediated by guides can be a fascinating experience in getting to know about a local forested area by using the senses. Reconnection with nature is important for a better understanding of the intrinsic values and of the environmental services the natural environment offers to us; notions which more than often are not clearly perceived in our modern, highly urban-based and industrialized society. The paper examines the instrumental (tour management), mediatory (experience management), and interpretive (resource management) roles of guides. The paper offers an original approach and comprehensive understanding on the theme by critically appraising this tourism niche. It provides a conceptual review of key aspects related to `guiding` and seeks to illustrate the case with some examples of guided tours in Australia. Methodologically, the paper is qualitative oriented.

**Keywords**—Connection with nature, environmental interpretation, visitors, tour guides, Australia.

## I. INTRODUCTION

**G**UIDING implies a multitude of ways for acquiring knowledge and learning about a visited destination. According to Weiler and Black (2015), more than 280 papers are related specifically to tour guides or tour guiding, and 91 per cent have been published since 1990 (p.5). Within the tourism literature, terms used are `tour guide`, `tourist guide`, `tour leader`, `tour manager`, `tour escort`, and `courier` (Weiler and Black, 2015, p.2), and even `tour conductor`. There is a sort of consensus among researchers about the instrumental (leadership) role of the guide in order to keep a tour running successfully for the visitors in terms of safety, logistics, and certainly as individuals in charge of the mediation and interpretation of content and sites, “this in turn has drawn attention to the importance of the communicative competency

of guides, including the application of best practice principles in interpretation and intercultural communication” (Weiler and Black, 2015, p.2), which, are also elements of a successful tourism operation.

As explained by Beck and Cable (2002), interpretation is a communicational process which helps to interconnect the visitors to the [cultural, nature] resource [or place], it is visitor centered. For example, interpretation is habitually perceived as effective in terms of managing the interactional processes between `visitors` and `wildlife` because it can result in levels of environmental awareness with an augmented view of a conservation ethic (Beckmann 1991; Moscardo, 1998; Howard, 2000), and Orams (1996) emphatically states that interpretation [in guiding] is the most effective strategy for managing wildlife encounters. Interpretation should provoke visitors to reflect and to connect with cultural and natural elements of visited sites, to local people, culture, artefacts, and to historical events to the extent it can fill them with information which can lead to thoughtfulness about care and of stewardship (Weiler and Black, 2015, p. 18).

The tour guide is an individual expected to be prepared and knowledgeable to escort groups of visitors in venues, places and sites of touristic interest such as natural areas, historic buildings, museums; thus, they are expected to provide interpretation of cultural and natural assets “in an inspiring and entertaining manner” (Weiler and Black, 2015, p.3). Mediation is thus critical for touching one`s perception and feeling in regard to specific themes and topics in hosting places, particularly in terms of post-visit postures, “the strategic use of tour guides to influence on-site behavior and change post-visit attitudes and behaviors might also be considered as mediation” (Weiler, 2015, p.35). However, Holloway (1981) and Cohen (1982) have noted more than 30 years ago that the role of guides have not been properly valued; rather, as an occupation, being lamentably marginalized, overlooked in some cases, mostly in terms of pecuniary rewards, , particularly in developing countries. Tour guiding commonly demands eclectically skill, abilities and training in introducing and mediating culture, places, ecosystems, landscapes, and local people attributes.

Concerned with the role of guides and the benefits and enhancement they could provide for visitors, local stakeholders, and destination sites, Cohen (1985) presented two conceptual spheres with course of action for the guides: tour management in which guides have an instrumental

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(leadership) role in organizing and managing group(s); and the experience management in which guides have as a role to facilitate visitors' engagement and learning (mediation) (Refer to Table 1.0). In 1993, Weiler and Davis advanced the discussion by adding a third sphere to Cohen's model with a focus on the role of the guide in destination/resource management. Cohen's (1985) and Weiler and Davis's (1993) "conceptual frameworks have stood the test of time in drawing attention to both the diversity of guiding roles that are common to all contexts and types of tour guiding, and the specialist roles that ecotour/nature guides are required to perform" (p. 25).

By taking into account the three spheres, a framework is proposed in this paper aiming to examine the roles of guides and the relevance of guiding, that is, instrumental (tour management), mediatory (experience management), and interpretive (resource management) (Table 1.0). In regard to 'resource management' it can refer to both cultural/heritage and natural resources. Guides can use interpretation or mediation to explain or connect visitors to some aspects of an Indigenous community, or, Indigenous lifestyle and traditional knowledge.

Within the perspective of these three spheres, guides can add value to a visitor experience and to a local site, or destination, contributing to the conservation process. That is, "nature-based tour guides also encourage participants to reduce their impacts on-site, and they facilitate a change in values towards long-term conservation" (Weiler and Black, 2015). The guides can also introduce outsiders to a specific culture providing specific information, raising awareness of and respect for Indigenous peoples. As an example, bush tucker or a wildlife encounter guided (led and mediated) by Indigenous people can be a fascinating experience in getting to know about a local forested area by using the senses. The three key spheres can be used to analyze tour guides, guided tours, and tourism operations at a local and regional level.

TABLE 1.0  
THE THREE KEY SPHERES OF TOUR GUIDING AND THE ROLES OF A  
CONTEMPORARY TOUR GUIDE

<b>Sphere 1:</b> Tour management	<b>Instrumental (leadership) roles</b> focused on organizing and managing the group
<b>Sphere 2:</b> Experience management	<b>Mediatory roles</b> focused on facilitating individual's engagement and learning
<b>Sphere 3:</b> Destination/Resource management	<b>Interpretive and role-modelling roles</b> focused on the sustainability of host environments, communities and destinations.
<b>Source:</b> Weiler and Black (2015, p. 28) – Cohen's (1985) Framework adapted.	

Jennings and Weiler (2006) explain that tour guides can mediate a visitors' connection to localities and local issues to the extent that they can enhance or detract them from their experience, either facilitating or inhibiting outcomes, because the guides perform both an instrumental and mediatory role. Weiler and Black (2015) provide four domains in a framework to examine the mediatory role of tour guides, and they make a distinction between mediation and interpretation, in that 'interpretation' is a role in itself with a collection of techniques necessary for mediation by using interpretive strategies such as

analogies, anecdotes, narratives, storytelling, metaphors, and even non-verbal communication such as artefacts and experiencing through the senses (touching, listening, tasting, smelling, seeing) (Cohen, 1985; Moscardo, 1998; Colquhoun, 2005; Jennings and Weiler, 2006; Weiler and Davis, 1993).

Put simply, there is no mediation without interpretation, because the techniques used in the interpretation can help "visitors to understand and feel empathy towards objects, persons, sites or environments" (Weiler and Black, 2015, p.35), it is the guide's role to get the visitors "under the skin of visited destinations" (McGrath 2007, p. 376), and the mediation role is all-encompassing in regard to enhancing a visitor's experience as pointed out by Weiler and Black (2015): mediating/brokering physical access; mediating/brokering encounters (interactions); mediating/brokering understanding (intellectual access); and mediating/brokering empathy (emotional access).

In order to satisfactorily act as a guide, a set of competences are necessary in guiding, particularly in dealing with heterogeneous, multicultural visitors. Such competences are: fluency in the visitors' language; a local culturally knowledgeable person; social-interpersonal skills; expression and demonstration of cultural pride; discernment in what is culturally appropriate to share; and engaging in two-way communication (Weiler and Black, 2015, p.65).

In regard to the role of guides and natural resource management, the cases examined in the literature reveal that the guides face restrictions in achieving wide-ranging conservation outcomes. Most of their roles in terms of nature management rest on reducing on-site impacts by delivering 'conservation messages' to visitors while putting emphasis on their conduct at the moment of having contact with natural assets either a forest or a reef. In their studies, Medio et. al. (2000) mention the role of guides in mitigating impacts on coral reefs by divers or snorkelers.

The guides can play an interventionist role in guiding visitors on the trails by working with them in order to avoid excessive noise, off-track walks, collection or removal of natural elements, including those of cultural value such as sacred rocks, petrified wood, etc. (Widner and Roggenbuck, 2000; Littlefair and Buckley, 2008), and certainly "guided tours and roving interpretation rangers [can]... convey important conservation messages to visitors, helping them to enjoy, connect with and value our significant and special places" (Colquhoun, 2005, p. 7). Guides, as well as rangers, and a series of tour educators can play a pivotal role in introducing and connecting visitors to nature and wildlife in natural settings, such as Parks and bush areas (see Fig. 1).



Source: Ismar Lima, field work, 2015.

Fig. 1 – A Ranger At David Fleay Wildlife Park, On Gold Coast Region, Australia, Delivering Environmental Education Messages For Visitors About The Habitat, Physical Characteristics, Behaviour And Food Preferences Of The Wallabies.

In their literature review, Zeppel & Muloin (2008) stated that visitors who are exposed to environmental messages are reported to have higher levels of pro-conservation behavior, and are more environmentally cognizant. Some evidence shows that a tour guide who makes himself/herself authoritatively respected can lead visitors into more responsible behavior during their stay in natural areas (Littlefair, 2003). Table 2.0 provides an outline of the main sustainability outcomes and how tour guiding can help to achieve them. The list includes the enhancement of the visitors` understanding and valuing of communities, cultures and environments, as well as purposeful actions aiming at influencing visitors` behavior *en route* and at destinations. These contributions to sustainability outcomes can be achieved through Indigenous tourism operations, particularly because of their traditional values, tenets, beliefs, and lifestyles, which strongly connect them to nature and landscapes.

TABLE 2.0

POSSIBLE TOUR GUIDING CONTRIBUTIONS TO SUSTAINABILITY OUTCOMES

A Selection of Sustainability Outcomes	How tour guiding can contribute to meeting sustainability outcomes
Improved understanding of natural and cultural values	Enhancing visitors` understanding and valuing of communities, cultures and environments
Increased economic prosperity of local businesses and communities	Influencing visitors` behavior <i>en route</i> and at destinations
Increased social benefits to/engagement of local communities	
Reduced production and responsible disposal of waste	
Reduced use of water and energy	
Protected/improved quality of environmental conditions (e.g. water, soil, air quality)	-Influencing and monitoring visitors` behavior <i>en route</i> and at destinations -Fostering visitors` post-visit attitudes and behaviors
Protected/improved biodiversity conservation of the destination	-Enhancing visitors` understanding and valuing of communities, cultures and environments.
Greater respect for/enhancement of culture, Heritage and/or traditions	-Influencing and monitoring visitors` behavior <i>en route</i> and at destinations -Fostering visitors` post-visit attitudes and behaviors

Source: Weiler & Black, 2015, p.73, adapted from Choi and Sirakaya (2006), Moore et al. (2009), Tonge et al. (2005) and WTTC (1996).

**Australian tour guides and natural assets: An aboriginal perspective**

In the Tourism Australia Corporate Website, the search engine for Aboriginal operators provides information on registered Aboriginal-related tours in Australia. In total, Tourism Australia has 53 Aboriginal-related enterprises over its seven States, including Tasmania. The Aboriginal Tour Operators are recognized under the Indigenous Tourism Champions Program, ITCP, which is an accreditation only granted to companies that are at least 50 per cent Indigenous owned and managed.

The accreditation program aims to gather authentic Indigenous operators as a critical point of differentiation in a very competitive segmented market, moving away from highly commoditized Indigenous stereotypes usually linked to face-painted tribal dances, and the traditional didgeridoo, a musical wind instrument, as well as boomerang shows and the fire-making performances by grass-and-stick friction methods. These Aboriginal cultural-artistic elements are of the utmost importance in being publicly presented, but the Indigenous culture is certainly beyond being represented by certain “labels”. Howard et al. (2001) came to a conclusion on Indigenous tour guides that they play “a role in mediating access to information (understanding) not only through their use of interpretive techniques and role-modelling, but also by challenging stereotypes and visitors` misconceptions about Aboriginal culture.”

The ITCP accredited tour operators are categorized according to ‘product type’ and ‘experience type’. For example, ‘experience type’ is related to: urban culture, active adventures, art and culture, bush and outback, coastal escapes, day tours, extended journeys, festivals and events, and food adventures (bush tucker tours). All these experiences with Aboriginal operators (enterprises) have distinct types of guiding and interpretation with a focus on Indigenous culture and heritage, as well as local landscape and natural resources. The profiles of the Aboriginal operators are mostly related to culture and natural experiences with guiding having a strong participation. Their key profiles are: Aboriginal guiding, activities and experiences in pristine remote beaches, lush rainforests, hidden waterfalls, as well as in the rugged outback and gorges; they include tastes of Australia in the tucker tours, the healing power of nature, visiting ancient rock art galleries, autochthonous arts, story-telling with special attention to dreamtime, and tours for catching fish and mud crab, as well as camping.

As noted by Weiler and Yu (2007), “guides can provide visitors with opportunities to use all of their senses to appreciate the host culture and share and experience local stories, music and food”. ‘Dreamtime’ is a very important aspect of Aboriginal culture and imperative for Indigenous tourism operations. It deals with the notions of ‘Dreaming`, or ‘Tjukurrpa’, which, as a concept, is an understanding of ‘law` and ‘life`; the dreamtime is all about the “dreaming stories [which] pass on important knowledge, cultural values and belief systems to later generations” (Australia Government,

2015). Through song, dance, painting, and storytelling and as an active way of keeping a rich Aboriginal identity and heritage, most visitors are taught about Aboriginal issues through the dreaming stories, tales, and narratives making their experience very unique (Zeppel, 2003; 2006; 2007).

Table 3.0 shows some of the Aboriginal ITCP accredited tourism enterprises. The 53 listed operators' profiles can be accessed online on the Tourism Australia Corporate website. The operators are mostly in New South Wales, Queensland, and the Western and Northern Territories. The list is certainly not exhaustive as the Aboriginal Owned and Operated Tourism Directory Handbook provides information on over 200 operators in the country which include 'walking tours, fishing cruises, outback safaris, and bush tucker'. According to the handbook, "no Australian holiday experience is complete without a journey guided by the first peoples of this land, and an encounter with the culture of Australia's traditional custodians" (Aboriginal & Indigenous Australia, 2005).

TABLE 3.0

SOME ABORIGINAL ITCP ACCREDITED GUIDED TOURS IN AUSTRALIA AND THEIR ROLE IN CONNECTING VISITORS WITH NATURE AND LOCAL CULTURE.

Australian Aboriginal Tourism Enterprise	Action Field and Operation Features
Barradict Sport Fishing Charters	It is aboriginal owned and guided. It provides services by skilled and knowledgeable tour guide/owner to ensure visitors enjoy the best of the awesome fishing, abundant mud crabs and the spectacular scenery along the Kimberley Coast.
Brambuk the National Park & Cultural Centre	The guided tours in the Grampians National Park (the place of Aboriginal communities) provide walks, abundant wildlife, waterfalls, rugged rock formations, spectacular views and stunning spring wildflower displays. It is also a place rich in Dreaming stories, sacred sites, bush tucker, water and shelter. It is central to the Dreaming of the Djab Wurrung and the Jardwadjali peoples and is home to over 200 ancient Rock Art Sites.
Brian Lee Hunters Creek Tagalong Tours	It is managed and guided, Brian Lee, an Aboriginal Kimberley character. His Hunter's Creek Tagalong Tour showcases scenery whilst giving insights into the country and culture of the Saltwater people of the Dampier Peninsula. Visitors have the opportunity to learn traditional hunting methods before cooking up their catches and taste freshly caught seafood.
Davidson's Arnhemland Safaris	It provides safaris with wilderness experience for discovering a place where the visitor can relax, soak up the ambience, learn and simply be amazed by the "spiritual power" of landscape, wildlife and cultural connection to the world's oldest continuing living culture of an Aboriginal Australia.
<b>Source:</b> Examples extracted from the Tourism Australia Corporate Website, available at, <a href="http://www.tourism.australia.com/aboriginal/operator-directory.aspx">http://www.tourism.australia.com/aboriginal/operator-directory.aspx</a>	

## II. CONCLUSION

Reconnection with nature is important for a better

understanding of the intrinsic values and of the environmental services the natural environment offers to us; notions which more than often are not clearly perceived in our modern, highly urban-based and industrialized society. Tour guides and Park rangers have had this bridging role for connecting visitors with nature; they play a role as guides, managers, rangers, educators, and performers; thus, playing an important mediatory role in wildlife and nature encounters. Landscapes, ecosystem, traditional knowledge, world views, and various cultural and heritage assets have been the object of 'mediation' by the guides/rangers. Through a mediatory role, visitors are becoming even more aware of the various values and importance of nature, particularly in terms of nature protection and conservation leading to an increased recognition of the need of sustainable practices in the human-nature relations.

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