AUSTRALIAN INDIGENOUS TOURISM CONFERENCE
SONGLINES - CULTURAL THREADS

WAITOC
Western Australian Indigenous Tourism Operators Council

National Indigenous Tourism Statement from Naarm

Recommendations for Enhancing Support for Indigenous Tourism in Australia

Background

Indigenous tourism in Australia is more than just a business sector; it is a bridge to understanding, preserving, and celebrating the ancient cultures of Australia's First Nations. It provides visitors with immersive experiences that connect them with the rich traditions, stories, and lands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Therefore, the Indigenous tourism sector plays a vital role in ensuring the continuity of cultural practices, the promotion of reconciliation, and the economic empowerment of Indigenous communities.

While Indigenous tourism continues to grow and contribute significantly to Australia's economy, it also plays a crucial role in promoting the country internationally. Tourists who engage with Indigenous cultural experiences often gain a deeper appreciation for Australia's ancient heritage, its people, and its landscapes, which in turn enhances the nation's reputation globally and is by far its most unique selling proposition. This sector not only benefits Indigenous businesses but also bolsters the broader tourism industry, generating revenue that impacts countless other businesses in accommodation, food services, retail, and transport along with other ancillary business sectors.

In October 2024, delegates from the Australian Indigenous tourism sector came together in collaboration, sharing their stories, challenges, and successes over a 3 day conference at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG). This gathering included hundreds of Indigenous tourism business owners and operators, Industry leaders and innovators along with other important industry stakeholders.

The following Statement and recommendations were identified as solutions to issues and challenges that their industry faces every day throughout Australia.

The Challenges

Despite the evident value of Indigenous tourism, operators continue to face challenges that limit their growth and impact. These challenges include:

a) Bureaucratic red tape that restricts access to cultural lands.
b) Insufficient funding to sustain businesses between peak and off-seasons.
c) Barriers to meaningful collaboration with non-Indigenous enterprises.
d) A lack of capacity-building resources.
e) Indigenous operators bear additional burdens - these include cultural responsibilities, community expectations, and personal commitments - that can lead to burnout and limit business expansion.
f) One persistent challenge is the lack of meaningful engagement and follow-through by government bodies and funding agencies to provide continuity and consistency to the industry's development opportunities. Many opportunities are hard to access, have unrealistic outcomes that go beyond that of mainstream programs, or have limited support, usually no longer than a four-year term, with some being over even a shorter period.

Past appeals for development support that consider the extra challenges of this specialised industry have often gone unheard or received only minimal responses. This sentiment is shared widely among Indigenous tourism operators, who feel that their voices, experiences, professional insight, and concerns have not been adequately addressed.

Recommendations

As a result of these reoccurring themes, we present fourteen (14) Recommendations for the government and stakeholders to consider, aimed at improving resource support for Indigenous tourism in Australia:

1. **Foster Collaboration**: Encourage initiatives that promote collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous tourism businesses, facilitating joint ventures and knowledge exchange to create co-branded experiences that benefit all parties. Foster Partnership Campaigns encouraging conversations between Indigenous tourism businesses and non-Indigenous tourism businesses.

2. **Streamline Access to Country**: Simplify and expedite access for Indigenous operators to their traditional lands for cultural experiences, removing excessive costs and bureaucratic hurdles related to government-owned land, native title lands (for Native Title Member's tourism businesses), Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation held properties, and unallocated Crown land.

3. **Provide Long-term Funding**: Increase funding for Indigenous tourism infrastructure and develop reasonable, accessible pathways for grants that support new and existing Indigenous tourism businesses. This will allow the businesses to build capacity and avoid business owner burnout due to a lack of much-needed administration staffing support. The principles of tourism attainability and sustainability will be acknowledged.

4. **Establish Revenue Buffers**: Support the creation of financial buffer programs to support Indigenous operators during the off-season, ensuring they can maintain staff and operations throughout the year.

5. **Support Business Expansion**: Facilitate the growth of Indigenous businesses into diverse products and services, supporting not just tourism but broader cultural and economic initiatives that foster community resilience.

6. **Recognise the Broader Role of Indigenous Tourism**: Position Indigenous tourism as a critical driver of cultural preservation, social education, and reconciliation, acknowledging its impact beyond mere economic transactions.

7. **Enhance Workforce Development**: Invest in a dedicated fund for the recruitment, training, and retention of Indigenous staff within tourism, addressing capacity issues and ensuring that Indigenous voices and perspectives are central to the visitor experience.

8. **Promote Indigenous Tourism Globally**: Boost marketing support for Indigenous tourism operators, amplifying their stories and experiences through national and international campaigns that highlight Australia's unique cultural heritage.

9. **Protect Cultural Knowledge**: Ensure strong legal protections for Indigenous intellectual and cultural property, allowing operators to share their heritage ethically and with confidence. Indigenous Data Sovereignty to be acknowledged and included in all contracts, programs, reports and policies for Indigenous tourism businesses. The Fake Art Campaign to be included in conversations around protecting Indigenous cultural knowledge. Asserting cultural accreditation for any tours or with tour operator businesses aligned to the cultural policy & protocols of the traditional country they are/or intend to operate must seek cultural accreditation, this includes a mandatory undertaken of approved accreditation /awareness programs.

10. **Support the development and Maintenance of a National Indigenous Tourism Body**: Support the establishment and maintenance of a unified national Indigenous tourism body, providing ongoing collaboration among participants of the Australian Indigenous Tourism sector. This body should act as a central organisation to represent, support, and advocate for Indigenous tourism operators across the country, fostering unity and consistent growth.

11. **Support an Annual Australian Indigenous Tourism Conference (AITC) Gathering:** Provide dedicated resources and funding to ensure the gathering of Indigenous tourism delegates at an annual AITC. This support will enable broad participation from Indigenous tourism business owners, operators, and leaders across Australia. The annual conference will serve as a consistent platform for sharing stories, addressing challenges, celebrating successes, and collaborating on solutions. It will play a vital role in strengthening networks, driving sector growth, and supporting cultural preservation and economic empowerment for Indigenous tourism nationwide.

12. **Fair Remuneration for Indigenous Tourism Leaders**: Allocate funding to ensure Indigenous tourism leaders serving as directors, advisors, or representatives of peak Indigenous tourism organisations are fairly compensated. This remuneration acknowledges their time, efforts, skills, and experience while ensuring their continued advocacy and support for Indigenous tourism operators at regional and national levels. It also compensates for the time they spend away from their own tourism businesses to focus on sector-wide advancement.

13. **Increase IBA Funding for Indigenous Tourism:** Increase IBA's funding allocation specifically for Indigenous tourism, providing substantial support for both new and established businesses. This funding should target infrastructure development, business expansion, capacity-building, and workforce development to address the gaps that currently limit growth and sustainability in the sector.

14. **Promote Equitable Access to Tourism Opportunities for All Native Title Holders**: Prevent the monopolisation of tourism-related opportunities by Native Title organisations, ensuring that individual Native Title community members who are tourism business owners and operators also have fair access and not just the Native Title holder organisation. This includes cultural immersion, cultural awareness opportunities, Welcome to Country, and smoking ceremonies. Government policies should foster an inclusive environment that recognises the rights, contributions, and potential of all Indigenous tourism operators, supporting wider economic growth, cultural preservation, and community benefit.

A Call to Action: "Meet Us Halfway"

We invite the Australian Government, industry leaders, and other stakeholders to meet us halfway in supporting Indigenous tourism operators. Together, we can build a stronger, more inclusive, and resilient tourism sector that not only preserves cultural heritage but also drives economic growth, supports community well-being, and enriches visitors' experiences to Australia.

By working collaboratively, we can ensure that Indigenous tourism continues to contribute meaningfully to our communities, country, culture, and the wider economy, ultimately benefiting all Australians.

We acknowledge that Indigenous tourism leaders have been raising these concerns for years. The time for meaningful change is now. We stand ready to work in partnership to bring these recommendations to life, creating a brighter, more sustainable future for Indigenous tourism in Australia.

Let us move forward together, with genuine commitment and action, to achieve the outcomes that Indigenous tourism operators have long been advocating for.

AITC delegates endorsed this Statement on the 30th of October, 2024.