

Assessing tourism potentials in the Fitzroy Valley

Promoting sustainable Indigenous tourism
development in WA's Kimberley region

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Preface

This report was prepared for Environs Kimberley in collaboration with Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre (BCEC). Curtin University's Tourism Research Cluster developed the material based on the analysis of the data collected and based on published documents, industry reports and government statements.

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Acknowledgement

We acknowledge that when in Perth we are on Whadjuk Noongar land and in the Fitzroy Valley we are on the land of five language groups. We acknowledge that the sovereignty of Bunuba, Walmajarri, Wangkatjungka, Nyikina and Gooniyandi people was never ceded and pay respect to Elders, past and present, and acknowledge the important role Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders continue to play in caring for country.

Disclaimer

All information in this report was considered correct and current at the time of publication and any errors or omissions are unintentional. The Tourism Research Cluster disclaims all and any liability to any person in respect of the consequences of any action or consequence for such persons in reliance, whether wholly or partially, on this report.

Cover Image: Tour boat at Danggu Geikie Gorge. Photo: Tourism WA

Above Image: Bush walkers explore Mornington Wilderness Camp located in the upper catchment area of the Fitzroy River. Photo: Tim Nicol

1. Introduction

What the project is about

This research project aimed to investigate tourism potentials for the Fitzroy Valley under three different scenarios: the present situation, if a National Park was to be declared, and if the Kimberley was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Furthermore, the study sought to assess potential visitor numbers, expenditure and consequent employment opportunities under these three scenarios, while assessing Traditional Owner preferences and aspirations for development in the Fitzroy Valley. To achieve this, a mixed method approach was adopted including a desktop study, extensive surveying with three thousand potential visitors to the region, multiple in-depth interviews with key tourism stakeholders and Indigenous community members who live and/or work in the region, analyses of 2016 Census data to identify strategic industries of existing strength, and an estimation of job creation opportunities.

About the study area

The Fitzroy Valley is nestled within the West Kimberley region of Western Australia. The largely undisturbed dramatic landscape of the West Kimberley is home to outstanding biological diversity, cultural richness and significant evidence of Australia's evolutionary path through geology and fossil records. The Martuwarra Fitzroy River, one of the largest free-flowing rivers of Northern Australia and the largest river in WA, dissects the Valley from east to west and dictates not only its topography, but most of the life that centres around it. Home to five distinct language groups (Bunuba, Walmajarri, Wangkatjungka, Nyikina and Gooniyandi), the Fitzroy Valley sustains a rich and continuing Aboriginal culture dating back tens of thousands of years.



Fitzroy Bridge connects to Fitzroy Crossing, the central hub of the Fitzroy region. Photo: Sean Scott

Here's what we found

...about the Martuwarra Fitzroy River

Aboriginal nations in the Valley demonstrate strong connections and affiliations with the bodies of water in the area. In this study, all Indigenous interviewees – with no exception – describe their relationship to the Martuwarra Fitzroy River as one of deep belonging and custodianship. Due to the central and active role the river plays in the life of local communities, water governance is a priority area of concern for Indigenous peoples in the Fitzroy Valley.

...about the local economy

As of March 2020, the Kimberley had a 16.2% unemployment rate making job creation a priority. Overall, the Kimberley region demonstrated a growing trend in unemployment rates over the past ten years, and employment opportunities need to grow alongside the estimated population growth. Tourism, evidently a labour-intensive industry, provides 12.2% of the Kimberley's jobs. Currently, about 1,500-1,800 people are employed through tourism in the Kimberley, of whom 145 are Aboriginal (Kimberley Development Commission, 2020b; REMPLAN, 2021)*.

...about tourism in the Fitzroy Valley

Interviewees stressed the striking landscapes, rich biodiversity, geological significance, but most of all the cultural diversity and long-standing traditions as key attractions of the Fitzroy Valley.

Essentially all participants interviewed in the study were receptive to tourism development in the region. Respondents saw tourism as an avenue to attain valuable economic output, much-needed environmental protection and sustained social improvements combined.

*please find references listed in the full report



A cruise on the Fitzroy's waters or a bushwalk along its tree-lined banks will reveal an abundance of unique fish and birdlife.
Photo: Ruchira Somaweera



Telegraph Pool is a popular fishing and camping location along the Fitzroy River. Photo: Matt Deakin

The benefits of tourism identified by respondents include:

- providing **employment in remote regions** and bringing more cash flow to the area; building capacity by **learning transferable skills**, enabling communities to **work on Country** using traditional skills and knowledge intrinsic to Indigenous ways of life whilst encouraging **inter-generational transfer of knowledge**;
- **fostering reconciliation** via cultural exchange between Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous people;
- supporting **sustainable environment management**, as tourism relies heavily on healthy and clean ecosystems; and
- **instilling pride** in Indigenous people's cultural identity and **building a sense of purpose**, offering younger generations prospects and meaningful opportunities to stay in their communities.

Challenges identified by interviewees that inhibit locals from making the most of tourism industry opportunities include:

- **lack of business education** and training;
- **lack of inter-generational wealth** (start-up capital); cultural shyness and symptomatic **lack of confidence**; **difficulty accessing funding**;
- priority cultural obligations affecting **business commitment**; and
- **poor facilities available**, such as internet coverage.

Here's what we found

...about the impact of a National Park on tourism

Local interviewees associated the designation of National Parks with economic benefits and an increase in job opportunities for Indigenous people. While most interviewed Traditional Owners are in favour of expanding National Park protection in the Fitzroy Valley, a high level of control is deemed paramount to ensure traditional ways are respected and Aboriginal people are active contributors and beneficiaries.

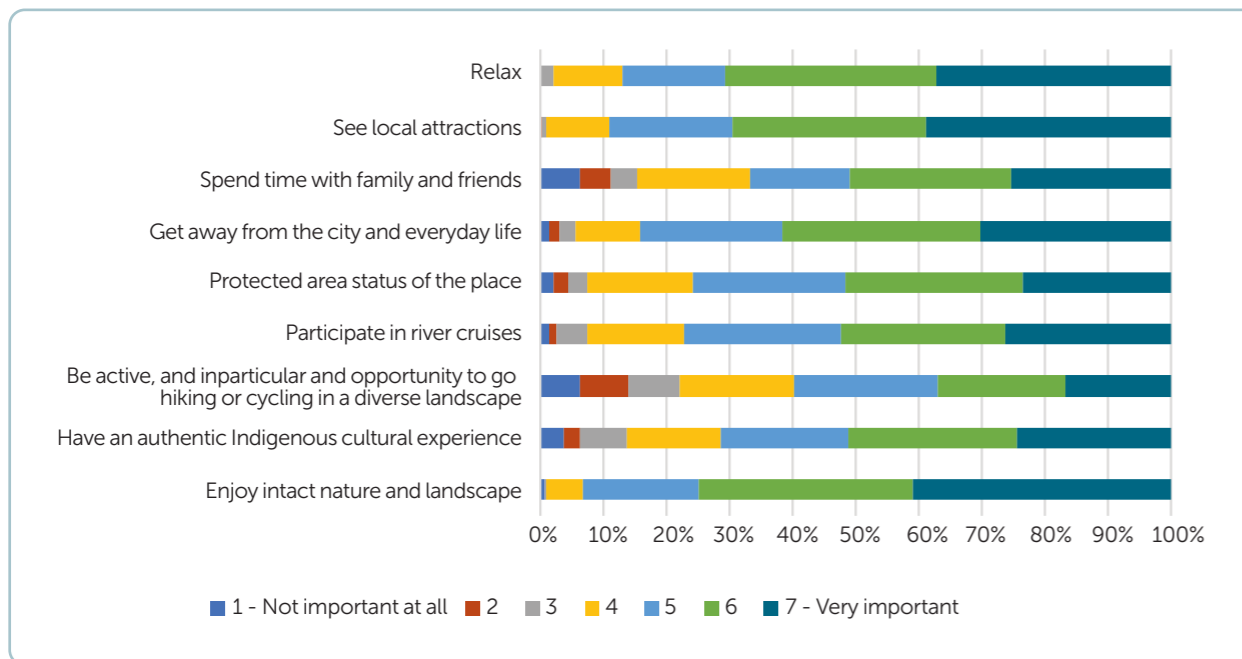
According to our findings, a new National Park in the Valley could:

- **increase the probability of visitation by 9%** compared to if the area was not declared either a National Park or a World Heritage site;
- **generate an additional AU\$13 million to AU\$43 million** in tourism spending annually due to future tourism demand;
- **create an equivalent of approximately 160 full-time additional strictly tourism-related jobs**, adopting conservative estimates.

The UNESCO World Heritage designation scenario generated similar results to the National Park scenario on the domestic Australian market. Note that its effect is likely to be greater on international tourism markets.

Enjoying intact nature and landscapes was rated as being of highest importance when analysing factors that influence future visits. Seeing local attractions achieved the second highest average, indicating the relevance of creating attraction points to boost visitation in the region. Aboriginal experiences also resulted in higher declared levels of interest.

Perceived importance of factors in determining a visit to the Fitzroy Valley.



Harnessing the benefits of tourism development:

Our findings suggest that tourism development can make a relevant contribution to the Fitzroy Valley in a sustainable way that respects economic, cultural, social and environmental standards. However, a number of initiatives need to be put in place in order to harness the benefits of tourism development in the region.

To enhance tourism in the Fitzroy Valley:

- **Declare parts of the Fitzroy Valley as a National Park** in collaboration with Traditional Owners. Expanding the National Park along the river would conserve the ecological and cultural value of the Martuwarra Fitzroy River and increase the area's attractiveness.
- **Take complementary actions to protect the unique natural, cultural and spiritual landscape** that hinges upon a functioning Martuwarra Fitzroy River catchment.
- **Enable Traditional Owners to take leadership in the tourism development process** to ensure local ownership, commitment, confidence and 'Indigenised jobs'.
- **Ensure the involvement of local youth.**
- **Improve the region's safety and security.**
- **Expand the amount of quality accommodation** available in Fitzroy Crossing and surrounding areas in order to ensure tourists are encouraged to stay overnight.
- **Expand the number, quality and interconnections** of attractions in the Fitzroy Valley (i.e. events calendar, hiking, 4WD & MTB trails, theatre/performances, wildlife watching).
- **Ensure a balanced mix of self-guided and guided experiences;** self-guided tours meet the demand of some tourists while guided experiences enrich the experience.
- **Extend the amount of business training and individualised mentoring** available to Indigenous tourism entrepreneurs (existing and emerging).
- **Initiate a process of World Heritage Site application** with a WHS centre located in Fitzroy Crossing after additional consultation on its impact on international markets.
- **Learn from the success of ranger programs and arts centres** and incorporate these to the tourism product.
- **Expand advertising and communication about the Fitzroy Valley and its tourism attractions** in order to increase much-needed awareness among the target markets.
- **Ensure that small tourism operators receive support with administration, marketing & insurance.** To provide ongoing job opportunities, tourism requires investment in human resources and businesses at different scales and stages of development.
- **Promote infrastructure investment into digital connectivity and transportation** to make it easier for locals to live/work on Country and to benefit tourism attractiveness. Encourage mutually beneficial strategic partnerships between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous tourism businesses that result in attractive products due to complementary competences and capabilities.
- **Create opportunities for local Aboriginal people to travel** and experience quality tourism products themselves in order to raise awareness about tourist needs.
- **Strengthen tourism networking organisations** (such as destination management and marketing organisations) in order to optimise network benefits and 'experience bundles'.

