

Practitioner Note – Community priorities for the future of tourism on Rarotonga

Reflections on major tourism perspectives on Rarotonga

September 2023

Context

This practitioner note presents results of the first stage of the ARC-Linkage project ‘Developing a transformative tourism model for the South Pacific’, focused on identifying long-term tourism goals of stakeholders. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted many shortcomings and vulnerabilities of the pre-COVID-19 tourism system, including its single-minded focus on serving the visitor and determining success in narrow economic terms. As part of the recovery and rethinking the tourism system, the call for tourism to deliver outcomes for host-communities has gained renewed traction, and together with it, the recognition that success should be defined more holistically.

Rarotonga is the main island of the Cook Islands. It receives by far the largest share of tourists, with close to 99% of visitors to the Cook Islands visiting Rarotonga. In 2022, most visitors (90%) came from New Zealand. People visit the Cook Islands for the warm weather, relaxing atmosphere, its safety, friendly people and pristine beaches¹. Water based activities are most popular, with almost all visitors going to the beach, swimming, and snorkelling. Also popular are local markets¹. Despite its attractiveness boosting a pristine marine and terrestrial environment, the island is facing threats from deep sea mining and climate change.

Approach

This Practitioner Note was informed by a study applying Q methodology. This methodology is applied to gain a deeper understanding of how people think about complex issues. Q methodology groups people with similar views to identify dominant discourses (common views or perspectives of how people talk or think about a particular issue, in this case tourism). On Rarotonga, 47 representatives from tourism, related sectors and the community participated in the study and expressed their priorities for the future of tourism. They did this by sorting 34 statements describing outcomes that tourism may or should deliver in order of importance. As

indicated by Figure 1, the two statements considered most important were placed by respondents on the far right (+4) of the mat, the two statements considered the least important were placed on the far left (-4) of the mat. All other statements were placed somewhere in between depending on their relative importance.

Statements shown to participants were developed based on the South Pacific Sustainable Tourism Policy Framework², amongst others. They can be grouped into the following:

Economic

- **Economic & livelihoods:** Tourism delivering economic and livelihood outcomes.
- **Infrastructure:** Tourism providing infrastructure outcomes.

Community

- **Community:** Tourism contributing to community outcomes.
- **Health & Safety:** Tourism strengthening health and safety aspects.
- **Social:** Tourism enhancing social outcomes.

Culture

- **Culture:** Tourism supporting cultural outcomes.

Environment

- **Environment:** Tourism contributing to improving environmental outcomes.
- **Climate Change:** Tourism contributing to addressing climate change risk.

Least important (-4) → Very important (+4)

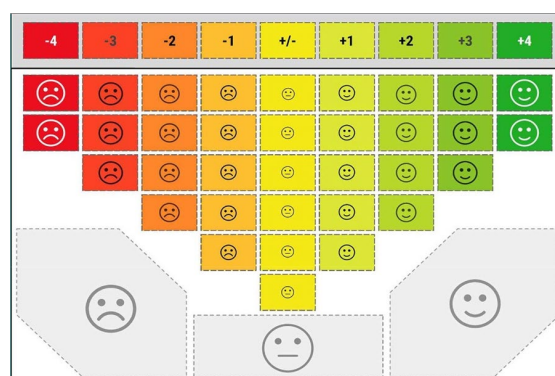


Figure 1. Mat and scale for statement ranking.

¹ Cook Islands Tourism Corporation (2022). The Cook Islands International Visitor Survey Report. July – September 2022.

² SPTO (2021). Pacific 2030. Sustainable Tourism Policy Framework. Accessible <https://southpacificislands.travel/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Pacific-Sustainable-Tourism-Policy-Framework.pdf>

Results identified three distinct discourses or perspectives of tourism (we call ‘perspectives’ from here on) that reflect what individuals on Rarotonga would like out of tourism in the future. These perspectives are introduced in more detail below (see also Table 1 in the Appendix). This research identified three distinct perspectives:

1. **Individual and national economic benefits and protecting cultural heritage.**
2. **Environmental outcomes and community respect.**
3. **Stability, safety, and resource use.**

In addition, the research generated qualitative insights based on the observations of the Research Associate and open-ended responses provided by participants after the Q-sort exercise. The Qualitative explanations are based on the open-ended responses provided by participants.

Qualitative insight

Pre-COVID-19, most participants acknowledged that the tourism levels were running the risk of being unsustainable and highlighted a sense of relief for their well-being and the environment when the borders closed. The strain of tourism volume on the existing infrastructure and the environment became a common point of discussion, with the Muri Lagoon and its algae issues, and the landfill used as key examples. However, participants did place importance on the economic value of tourism as the number one industry in the Cook Islands but emphasised that a shift needed to be placed on the quality of visitors rather than just visitor arrival numbers. Although participants acknowledged the negative impacts of tourism, they also recognised Rarotonga as having built its premise on tourism and did not see any other industry taking over in the short to medium interim. Sea bed mining was proposed as an avenue of diversification in the long term for some and seen as a threat for others.

PERSPECTIVE 1: INDIVIDUAL AND NATIONAL ECONOMIC BENEFITS AND PROTECTING CULTURAL HERITAGE

Participants represented by Perspective 1 prioritised economic and livelihood outcomes, including:

- Contributing to the Cook Island economy (+4),
- benefitting local people financially (+4),
- encouraging small businesses/entrepreneurship (+3), and

- creating secure and decent employment (+3).

In addition, cultural outcomes were most important to this group:

- Protecting, promoting, and reviving local culture and heritage (+3)
- promoting and supporting the value of authentic cultural and creative industries (+2), and
- encouraging visitors to learn about local cultures and custom (+2).

Infrastructure outcomes were also more important to this group than others, including:

- Improving transport infrastructure (+2), and
- enhancing digital infrastructure for local peoples (+2).

None of the community or social outcomes was very important to this group, but the following outcomes were more important to this group:

- Enhancing community solidarity and stability (0),
- promoting gender equality (0), and
- supporting traditional roles of men and women (-1).

Less important to this group than others was preserving natural resources for future generations (-2).

Health and safety outcomes were less important to this group, including:

- Improving sanitation and hygiene (-1), and
- Improving the physical health of local people (-3).

Tourism delivering environmental and climate change outcomes were least important to this group, including:

- Supporting the community to adapt to climate change (0),
- conserving and enhancing local environments/ecosystems (-1),
- minimising energy use, water uses, waste generation and pollution (-4).



Qualitative insight:

Participants associated with Perspective 1 acknowledged the economic importance of tourism to the Cook Islands. It was seen as the way of the future; they did not want it to change as they personally benefited from it. The impacts of COVID-19 have highlighted this too, which made some place higher importance on economic outcomes. Participants also valued the positive economic flow-on effects of tourism to local supply chains, which was seen to encourage more people to produce local products and produce, thus creating more jobs. Similar, people saw local produce, culture and customs go hand in hand. Participants recognised the need for locals to know their culture to be able to produce local products and cater to the industry. This was one of the reasons why protecting culture was so important to this group. Participants recognised the negative effects of tourism, in particular environmental impacts such as high water consumption and waste production. These were accepted as the negative trade-offs to achieve economic benefits. Participants understood tourism's contribution to climate change. However, they saw transport as a requirement for tourism in the Cook Island and did not see how this could be changed. They also believed the Cook Islands are too small to make a difference in addressing climate change.

People associated with Perspective 1 were:

- More strongly represented by people under 50 years of age.
- More likely to work in the private sector.
- More likely to have completed vocational education.

PERSPECTIVE 2: ENVIRONMENTAL OUTCOMES AND COMMUNITY RESPECT

Participants associated with Perspective 2 prioritised tourism outcomes that address climate change and protect the environment. The following tourism outcomes were more important to this group than others:

- Helping fund environmental conservation and protection (+4),

- supporting the community to adapt to climate change (+3),
- protecting community access and use of local resource (+2), and
- not contributing to climate change (+2).

Also more important to this group were community outcomes, including:

- Involving local communities in the planning, development and management (+3), and
- Tourism being respectful of local decision-making (+2).

This also includes economic outcomes that focus on localising supply chains, which has positive consequences for both the environment and the community: Using local goods and services, e.g., locally grown fruit and vegetables and minimises imports (+4).

Culture and economic outcomes were neither important nor unimportant, but some economic outcomes were less important to this group than to others. These were:

- Contributing to a growing national economy (0), and
- enabling people to financially support their extended family (-2).

Less important to this group were social and health and safety outcomes, including:

- Empowering marginalised people (-2),
- improving the physical health of local people (-3), and
- promoting gender equality (-4).



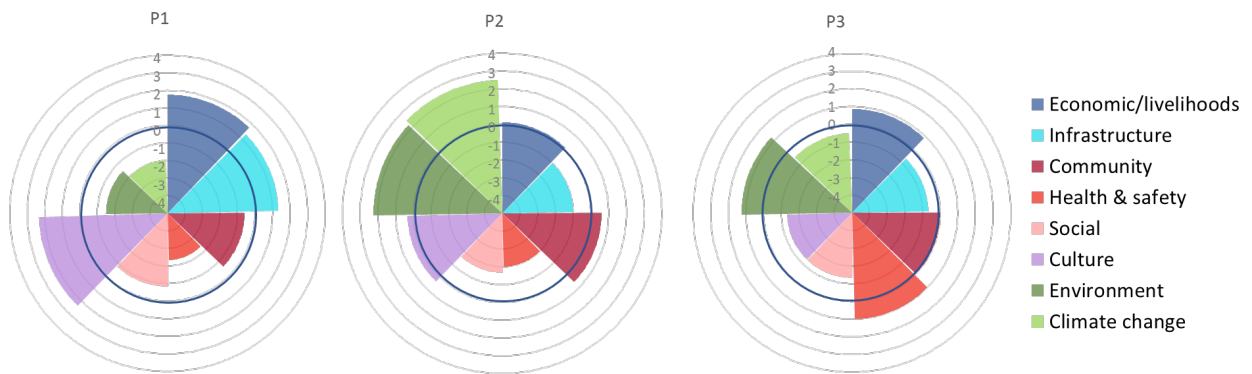


Figure 2. Importance of statement categories for each perspective, whereby the size of each piece reflects the relative importance of statements within each category.

Qualitative insight:

Participants associated with Perspective 2 valued the environment and wanted to maintain it for future generations. Degrading the environment was not a trade-off people are willing to accept. Instead, participants in this group strongly agreed that tourism needs to play a role in protecting the environment as it directly benefits from it, e.g. by supporting businesses who are working in this space. Participants also understood tourism’s contribution to climate change and while they were unsure how this could change, addressing tourism’s footprint was a top priority. Being involved in decision-making on tourism was also very important, to avoid the risk of tourism growing out of proportion, and to ensure tourism serves the people. Health outcomes were not seen as tourism’s responsibility and there was also agreement that supporting traditional gender roles and gender equality were of lower priority. It was either not seen as an issue, because roles were changing anyway, or because these were seen as broader social issues not linked to tourism.

People associated with Perspective 2 were:

- More likely to be non-Cook Islander.
- Those working for NGOs are more likely to associate with this perspective.
- More likely to have a university degree.

PERSPECTIVE 3: STABILITY, SAFETY, AND RESOURCE USE

Participants associated with this perspective also prioritised some environmental outcomes, including:

- conserves and enhances local environments/ecosystems (+4), and
 - minimising energy use, water uses, waste generation and pollution (+4),
- whereby protecting community access and use of local resource (-4) was least important to this group. Also more important to this group than others were health and safety outcomes, and those helping the community to recover from shocks, including:
- Improving sanitation and hygiene (+3),
 - supporting communities to recover from economic and environmental shocks (+2),
 - improving the physical health of local people (+1), and
 - improving the mental health of local people (-1).
- Economic outcomes were also important, including supporting and regenerating subsistence livelihoods (+2), which was more important to this group than others.

Community outcomes were neither important nor unimportant, but involving local communities in the planning, development and management (-1) was less important to this group than others.

- Also less important to this group than to other groups were cultural outcomes, including:
- Promoting and supporting the value of authentic cultural and creative industries (-2), and
 - encouraging visitors to learn about local cultures and custom (-2).

Social outcomes were of a low priority to this group, with an exception of preserves natural resources for future generations (+3).

Qualitative insight:

Participants associated with Perspective 3 were concerned about resource use and would like tourism to address water and waste issues.

Participants pointed out that whenever there is a water shortage, they were the first ones to be impacted. This links to conserving local environments, which was also a priority outcome, because people were not able to use environmental resources (like swimming in a lagoon) like they used to. Cultural outcomes were of a lower priority. This did not mean culture was not important to this group. They believed the limited resources were better invested in addressing other issues than helping tourists learn about culture. Access to resources such as beaches was also a low priority, because participants did not believe this becoming an issue, especially if local people are involved in decision-making.

People associated with Perspective 3 were:

- More likely to be female.
- More likely to be Cook Islands Maori.
- More likely to be not working in tourism.

Consensus and disagreement

There was strongest agreement on tourism allowing people to attend to important family and community obligations being less important (-1,-3,-3), and for tourism to empower marginalised people (women, disabled, youth) (-1,-2,-1). There was agreement on tourism building peoples' career, skills, and education (+1,+1,0) and tourism supporting and regenerating subsistence livelihoods (0,-1,+2) being somewhat important. There were no outcomes that were consistently of high priority to all groups (Table 1).

There was strong disagreement between groups related to the priority of environmental and climate change outcomes tourism may deliver, including:

- Conserving and enhancing local environments/ecosystems (-1,+3,+4),
- preserving natural resources for future generations (-2,+2,+3),
- not contributing to climate change (-4,+2,-3),
- protecting community access and use of local resource (e.g. potable water, beach access) (-2,+2,-4), and

- minimising energy use, water uses, waste generation and pollution (-4,0,+4).

Implications

Tourism creating decent employment was at least somewhat important to all groups, as well as tourism benefitting local people financially, and using local goods and services. This confirms the economic importance of tourism to people on Rarotonga. Many rely on tourism to generate a livelihood and this should not be overlooked.

All groups thought tourism helping to fund environmental conservation and protection was at least somewhat important. This may be linked to participants' good understanding of the environmental impacts tourism causes. Stress to freshwater resources and waste were commonly mentioned examples. However, there was strong disagreement on the importance to minimise energy use, water uses, waste generation, which may be due to the fact that people do not see these changing as visitor numbers grow.

Participants on Rarotonga understood that tourism contributes to climate change and is impacting the environment. However, not all groups thought addressing climate change was a priority. This may be because other outcomes were more important, or they placed it as a low priority because they were reflecting on the current situation more so than thinking about preferred future outcomes.

There was a small number of outcomes that were of lower priority to all groups. These included allowing people to attend to important family and community obligations, improving the mental health of local people and supporting traditional roles of men and women. Participants either did not recognise these as an issue, or did not see tourism play an important role in facilitating these outcomes.

The Q-sort exercise has revealed that almost all tourism outcomes are important to at least some groups. The findings also show that different groups have varying priorities, and these depend on factors such as tourism involvement, demographics and other individual values or attitudes. Tourism planning and management therefore must be cognisant of these different views, to ensure certain outcomes are not achieved at the cost of others and trade-offs are understood and managed.

Next steps

We acknowledge the importance the people on Rarotonga place on economic, livelihoods, environmental and cultural outcomes. Results of this study will be compared to Q studies in several other case study destinations, to identify whether the degree of tourism development has an impact on people’s priorities (as they seem to be influenced by their experience with tourism). In addition, we are looking forward to working with Te Ipukarea Society and the Cook Island Tourism Cooperation to identify how multiple benefits can be achieved through tourism.

Acknowledgement

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For further information please contact

Professor Christopher Fleming via chris.fleming@griffith.edu.au

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Appendix

Table 1. Significant statements of each of the discourses on what outcomes local people perceive as important/less important (the numbers ranging from +4 to -4 represent the scale presented in Figure 1).

TYPE of Perspective	Important outcomes	Neither important nor unimportant	Least important outcomes	Agreement	Disagreement
P1 - Individual and national economic benefits, and protecting cultural heritage.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Growing national economy (+4) - Financial benefits to local people (+4) - Secure and decent employment (+3) - Encouraging small business/entrepreneurship (+3) - Protects, promotes, and revives local culture and heritage (-3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports the community to adapt to climate change (0) Supports community to recover from shocks (0) Supports the provision of community utilities (0) Supports and regenerates subsistence livelihoods (0) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tourism does not contribute to climate change (-4) - Minimises energy use, water use, waste generation and pollution (-4) - Improves mental health of local people (-3) - Improves physical health of local people (-3) - Tourism does not increase the cost of living (-3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Allows people to attend to important family obligations (-2,-3,-3) - Builds peoples' career, skills, and education (+1,+1,0) - Empowers marginalised people (-1,-2,-1) Supports the provision of community utilities (0,0,+1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Minimises energy use, waster use, waste generation and pollution (-4,0,+4) - Protects community access and use of local resource (-2,+2,-4) - Tourism does not contribute to climate change (-4,+2,-3) - Preserves natural resources for future generations (-2,+2,+3)
P2 - Environmental outcomes and community respect.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Funds environmental conservation and protection (+4) - Use of local goods and services (+4) - Involves local communities in planning, development and management (+3) Supports the community to adapt to climate change (+3) - Conserves and enhances local environments/ecosystems (+3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Minimises energy use, water use, waste generation and pollution (0) - Growing national economy (0) - Protects, promotes, and revives local culture and heritage (0) - Encourages visitors to learn about local cultures and custom (0) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Supports traditional roles of men and women (-4) - Promotes gender equality (-4) - Allows people to attend to important family obligations (-3) - Improves mental health of local people (-3) - Improves physical health of local people (-3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports the provision of community utilities (0,0,+1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Preserves natural resources for future generations (-2,+2,+3)

P3 - Stability, safety, and resource use.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conserves and enhances local environments/ecosystems (+4) - Minimises energy use, water use, waste generation and pollution (+4) - Preserves natural resources for future generations (+3) - Growing national economy (+3) - Improves sanitation and hygiene (+3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use of local goods and services (0) - Financial benefits to local people (0) - Protects, promotes, and revives local culture and heritage (0) - Builds peoples' career, skills, and education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Supports traditional roles of men and women (-4) - Protects community access and use of local resource (-4) - Promotes gender equality (-3) - Allows people to attend to important family obligations (-3) - Tourism does not contribute to climate change (-3) 		
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