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

Reflections on major tourism perspectives on Aitutaki

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.

Aitutaki is part of the Cook Islands and located 220km north of the main island Rarotonga. It is Cook Islands' second most visited island[1], with between 20-30% of all international tourists visiting Aitutaki between 2012 and 2019[2]. Visitors like to experience the beach, go swimming or snorkelling and to engage in other water activities around the lagoon, with cruising, kayaking and stand-up paddle boarding being the most popular. They value Aitutaki for its simple way of life, lack of traffic, friendly locals and perfect beaches[2]. Despite its attractiveness, the island is facing freshwater supply issues and threats from climate change.

Approach

This Practitioner Note was informed by a study applying Q methodology. This methodology is applied to help 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 Aitutaki, 33 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 Framework[3], 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.

Figure 1. Mat and scale for statement ranking.

[1] Cook Islands. Aitutaki. Accessible https://cookislands.travel/islands/aitutaki

[2] Milne, S. (2019). Aitutaki Dimensions: International Visitors and Community Attitudes. Pacific Tourism Data Initiative

[3] 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 four distinct discourses or perspectives of tourism (we call 'perspectives' from here on) that reflect what individuals on Aitutaki would like out of tourism in the future. These perspectives are introduced in more detail below (see also Table 1 in the Appendix):

1. **Valuing culture and equal economic benefits.**
2. **Community access to water and sanitation infrastructure and environmental conservation**
3. **Livelihoods and health for local people.**
4. **Financial benefits and infrastructure**

The qualitative insights are based on the observations derived by the Research Associate and open-ended responses provided by participants at the end of the Q-sort exercise. The Qualitative explanations are based on the open-ended responses provided by participants.

> **Qualitative insight**
> Aitutaki participants placed a strong emphasis on culture as a part of their identity and in essence an attraction for visitors. A common point of discussion was for Aitutaki businesses to be owned and operated by Aitutakians. The strain on freshwater resources for the resident population was a reoccurring topic as well, highlighting an infrastructural issue and the discontent with local and national Governance priorities and planning. Current developments taking place such as the Arutanga wharf dredging and the new boat to facilitate more tourists on the Aitutaki lagoon were cautionary topics of discussion amongst individuals demonstrating a concern for future developments and their implications on the terrestrial and marine environment for Aitutaki.

PERSPECTIVE 1: VALUING CULTURE AND EQUAL ECONOMIC BENEFITS

Participants represented by Perspective 1 prioritised cultural outcomes, including:
- Promoting and supporting the value of authentic cultural and creative industries (+4),
- encouraging visitors to learn about local cultures and custom (+3), and
- protecting, promoting, and reviving local culture and heritage (+2).

In addition, economic and livelihood outcomes were important to this group, as well as social aspects contributing to peoples' livelihoods. More important to this group than others were:
- Benefits being fairly distributed within a community (+4), and
- building peoples' career, skills, and education (+3).

Infrastructure outcomes where somewhat important but supporting the provision of community utilities (-1) was less important to this group than others.

Community and health and safety outcomes were of low priority to this group, and less important to this group than others, including improving sanitation and hygiene (-2).

Tourism delivering environmental and climate change outcomes were also less important to this group, including:
- Helping fund environmental conservation and protection (-2),
- minimising energy use, water uses, waste generation and pollution (-4), and
- Not contributing to climate change (-4).

> **Qualitative insight**
> Cultural outcomes were important to participants in this group, because culture reflects who they are, and keeping it alive was seen as important to tell the story of Aitutaki. Participants also believed that the customs and culture, including lived Indigenous Knowledge on Aitutaki attracts tourists. As such, it should be valued more. Participants also wanted benefits from tourism to be fairly distributed to ensure the lower paying jobs which are important to the tourism sector are valued. There was also a sentiment that people wanted equality and for the community to grow together. Participants expressed that they enjoy seeing others do well. Climate change was seen as a lower priority. Tourism was described as a big beast and difficult to avoid its contribution to climate change. Participants in this group were also concerned about the waste production, energy use and water use of tourism, which impacts local people. However, they did not see this change in the future as more tourists mean more strains on local resources.

PERSPECTIVE 2: COMMUNITY ACCESS TO WATER AND SANITATION INFRASTRUCTURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

Most important to participants associated with Perspective 2 were specific environmental and health and safety outcomes. The following were more important to this group than others:
- Improving sanitation and hygiene (+4), and
- Conserving and enhancing local environments/ecosystems (+4).

In addition, supporting the community to adapt to climate change was also important (+2), and other environmental outcomes were neither important nor unimportant.

Overall, this group prioritised tourism outcomes that help improve infrastructure, including:
- Improving transport infrastructure (air, roads, wharves and jetties) and access to communities (+3), and
- supporting the provision of community utilities (+3).

In addition, cultural outcomes were also of importance to this group.

Economic outcomes were neither important nor unimportant, but they were less important to this group than others, including tourism benefitting local people financially (+1).

Less important to this group were social and certain health outcomes, including:
- Improving the physical health of local people (-4), and
- allowing people to attend to important family and community obligations (-4).
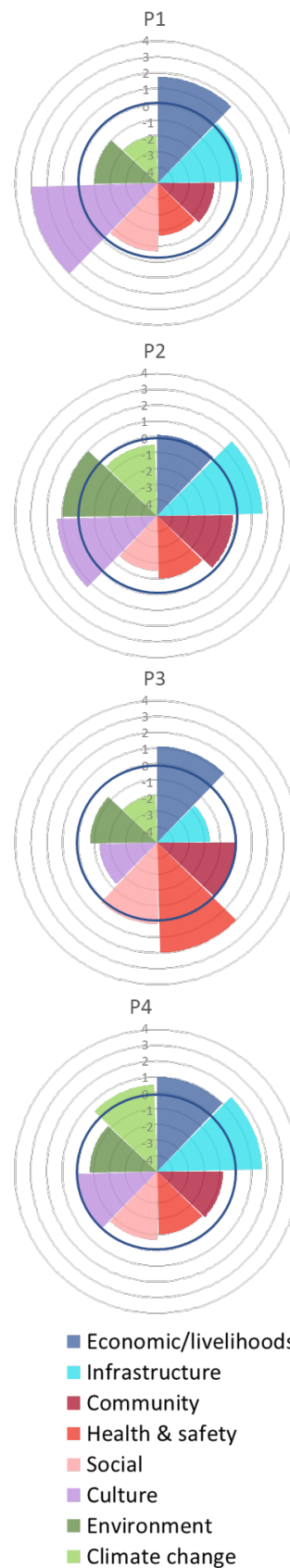

Figure 2. Importance of statement categories for each perspective, whereby the size of each piece reflects the relative importance of statements within each category.

> **Qualitative insight**
> Participants directly linked sanitation and hygiene to the provision of community utilities and natural resources. They argued that inadequate infrastructure can limit the number of tourists the island can support. Respondents demanded more consideration of the cost of tourism that local people bear, and what their needs are in terms of infrastructure. Most important to the local people are access to safe drinking water and consistent power supply. There was also demand for visitors to better understand the local context and environment, including limitations to water resources. One participant argued that tourists are attracted to the pristine environment, which may be impacted without proper sanitation and hygiene. Participants reflected on the fact that they sometimes abuse the environment and addressing this should be a priority. An example was the quality of the lagoon, whereby people are so busy selling it they forget to protect it. Addressing this was seen to have positive implications for locals and visitors. Participants expressed that they were not currently allowed to attend to important family and community obligations, and participants did not see it changing as often, work was placed before family. Finally, participants regarded physical health as important, but this was not necessarily related to tourism. Instead, they saw this as an individual responsibility.

People associated with Perspective 2 were:
- Both males and females.
- More likely to be between the age of 30-49.

PERSPECTIVE 3: LIVELIHOODS AND HEALTH FOR LOCAL PEOPLE

Participants associated with this perspective prioritised health and safety and economic outcomes. More important to this group than others were:
- Improving physical health of local people (+4),
- creating secure and decent employment (+4), and
- encouraging small businesses/ entrepreneurship (+3).

- Social outcomes were also more important to this group than others, including:
- Preserving natural resources for future generations (+3),
- allowing people to attend to important family and community obligations (+1), and
- supporting traditional roles of men and women (-1).

Involving local communities in the planning, development and management (+2) was also important, and more important to this group than others.

> **Qualitative insight**
> Decent employment and encouraging small business were very important to this group. Prioritising local produce and goods was seen to help with that too. Participants also suggested that if pay was higher, it would help retain people on the island. Participants believed there to be a lot of talent and tourism should support local people. Preserving natural resources was also important because the environment and natural landscape provides peoples' food. Encouraging visitors to learn about the culture was less important, because it was seen as more important for locals to learn first. Others believed that visitors can already learn if they wish to. Tourism was seen to generate a lot of waste and water was also recognised as an issue. However, participants thought addressing this was of a lower priority, perhaps because they didn't see how this could be changed in the future. Addressing climate change was also less important to this group. Their voice was perceived as small in comparison to larger countries' emissions. Some participants were also confused about the evidence of global warming, stating that Aitutaki was getting colder.

Less important to this group and not as important than to others were infrastructure and cultural outcomes, including:
- Improving transport infrastructure (air, roads, wharves and jetties) and access to communities (-2),
- enhancing digital infrastructure for local peoples (-2),
- promoting and supporting the value of authentic cultural and creative industries (-1), and

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- encouraging visitors to learn about local cultures and custom (-4).

Environmental outcomes were of lower priority, whereby climate change was of lowest importance to this group, including the statement of 'tourism not contributing to climate change' (-4).

People associated with Perspective 3 were:
- More likely to be male.
- Slightly more likely to be working in the private sector.
- More likely to have vocational or university education.

PERSPECTIVE 4: FINANCIAL BENEFITS AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Most important to participants associated with Perspective 4 were infrastructure outcomes. Improving transport infrastructure (air, roads, wharves and jetties) and access to communities (+4) was more important to this group than others.

Also of high priority were economic outcomes. More important to this group than others were:
- Tourism contributing to a growing national economy (+4), and
- using local goods and services, e.g., locally grown fruit and vegetables and minimises imports (+3).

Tourism delivering climate change outcomes was also more important to this group than others, including ensuring tourism not contributing to climate change (-1).

Priorities on environmental outcomes were mixed for this group. Helping fund environmental conservation and protection (+3) was more important to this group than others, but other outcomes were of lower importance and less important to this group than others:
- Conserving and enhancing local environments/ecosystems (0), and
- protecting community access and use of local resource (-4).

Views on social and cultural outcomes were also mixed, but empowering marginalised people (+1) was more important to this group then to others. Encouraging visitors to learn about culture on the other hand was less important (-3).

Community and health and safety outcomes were of lower priorities to this group, in particular improving the physical health of local people (-4).

Qualitative insight
Participants in Discourse 4 prioritised access because they believed that if there was no access, they would not have jobs. Access was also seen as important for growing tourism. This also applied to water infrastructure. Similar, internet and digital infrastructure were seen as important to support tourism and hence a priority. Tourism contributing to the economy was a priority to this group because participants believed a better economy results in more finance to support families and communities. Participants saw tourism as the most important industry in the Cook Islands and believed it should remain that way. Health and education were seen to depend on tourism contributing to the economy, as there are no other strong economic sectors. Participants explained that tourists cannot buy something made in Aitutaki, souvenirs come from Fiji or Rarotonga. But there are many skilled people on the island, and they should be encouraged to start small businesses which would increase the value of their traditional skills. Health outcomes were of a lower priority, they were seen as the Ministry of Health's responsibility and not that of tourism.

People associated with Perspective 4 were:
- More likely to be female.
- More likely to be between the age of 18-29 and 50-69.
- More likely to be working for the government.

Consensus and disagreement
There was strong agreement on several outcomes being of lower importance, including:
- Supporting communities to recover from economic and environmental shocks (e.g. COVID-19, cyclones) (-1,-2,-2,-1), and
- not increasing the cost of living (-1,-2,-2,-1).

There was also agreement on the importance of tourism supporting the community to adapt to climate change (e.g. tree planting, coastal protection, coral restoration, education) (0,+2,0,+2), and tourism protecting, promoting,

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and reviving local culture and heritage (e.g. arts, language, custom, architecture) (+2,+2,+1,+2) (Table 1).

There was strong disagreement between groups on a range of outcomes, including:
- Benefits being fairly distributed within a community (+4,+1,0,-3),
- encouraging visitors to learn about local cultures and custom (+3,0,-4,-3),
- contributing to a growing national economy (+2,0,-3,+4), and
- improving the physical health of local people (-1,-4,+4,-4).

Implications

Results show that tourism delivering economic outcomes to the local community directly was at least somewhat important to all groups. The importance of tourism benefiting local people financially should not be overlooked. The need to encourage small businesses and entrepreneurship was also at least somewhat important to all groups, as many saw value in having more local businesses on the island. This was seen to go hand in hand with the importance for tourism to use more local goods and services, which was expected to increase the value of local products and produce, and the skills required to produce them.

Tourism should play a role in protecting and promoting culture as it was seen as very important to people's identities and an important resource for tourism. Efforts on cultural education should primarily be targeted at the local population, as there was disagreement on how important it is to encourage visitors to do so.

The risk of climate change has been recognised, whereby tourism's role was seen in helping the community to adapt to the impacts (which was at least somewhat important to all groups), rather than playing a big role in addressing climate change through emissions reductions. While most recognised tourism's contribution, sentiment was

that the island is too small to make a difference, and transport associated with tourism impossible to change. Instead, addressing local environmental issues, such as access to freshwater and the health of the lagoon, which were often linked to infrastructure and sanitation and hygiene issues, should be prioritised.

Because there were no outcomes that were least important to all groups, holistic planning to ensure certain outcomes are not achieved at the cost of others and understanding and managing trade-offs will be critical.

Next steps

We acknowledge the importance the people on Aitutaki place on economic/livelihoods, cultural infrastructure and health and safety outcomes. Results of this study will be compared to Q studies in several other case study destinations in the Pacific, 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.

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 - Valuing culture and equal economic benefits.	- Tourism benefits are fairly distributed within a community (+4) - promotes and supports the value of authentic cultural and creative industries (+4) - Financial benefits to local people (+3) - Builds peoples' career, skills, and education (+3) - Encourages visitors to learn about local cultures and custom (+3)	- Secure and decent employment (0) - Involves local communities in planning, development and management (0) - Promotes gender equality (0) - Preserves natural resources for future generations (0) - Protects community access and use of local resource (0)	- Enhances community solidarity and stability (-3) - Empowers marginalised people (-3) - Supports traditional roles of men and women (-3) - Minimises energy use, water use, waste generation and pollution (-4) - Tourism does not contribute to climate change (-4)	Supports community to recover from shocks (-1,-2,-2,-1) Tourism does not increase the cost of living (-1,-2,-2,-1) Supports the community to adapt to climate change (0,2,0,2) Protects, promotes, and revives local culture and heritage (2,2,1,2)	- Tourism benefits are fairly distributed within a community (+4,+1,0,-3) - Encourages visitors to learn about local cultures and custom (+3,0,-4,-3) Growing national economy (+2,0,-3,+4) - Improves physical health of local people (-1,-4,+4,-4)
P2 - Community access to water and sanitation infrastructure and environmental conservation	- Conserves and enhances local environments/ecosystems (+4) - Improves sanitation and hygiene (+4) - Improves transport infrastructure and access (+3) - Supports provision of community utilities (+3) - Is respectful of local decision making (+3)	- Encourages visitors to learn about local cultures and custom (0) - Growing national economy (0) - Encourages small business/entrepreneurship (0) - Protects community access and use of local resource (0) - Helps fund environmental conservation and protection (0)	- Improves mental health of local people (-3) - Supports traditional roles of men and women (-3) - Tourism does not contribute to climate change (-3) - Improves physical health of local people (-4) - Allows people to attend to important family obligations (-4)		
P3 - Livelihoods and health for local people	- Secure and decent employment (+4) - Improves physical health of local people (+4) - Is respectful of local decision making (+3) - Preserves natural resources for future generations (+3) - Encourages small business/entrepreneurship (+3)	- Supports provision of community utilities (0) - Supports the community to adapt to climate change (0) - Tourism benefits are fairly distributed within a community (0) - Use of local goods and services (0) - Builds peoples' career, skills, and education (0)	- Growing national economy (-3) - Minimises energy use, water use, waste generation and pollution (-3) - Enhances digital infrastructure (-3) - Encourages visitors to learn about local cultures and custom (-4) - Tourism does not contribute to climate change (-4)		

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| P4 –
Financial benefits and infrastructure | - Improves transport infrastructure and access (+4)
- Growing national economy (+4)
- Financial benefits to local people (+3)
- Helps fund environmental conservation and protection (+3)
- Use of local goods and services (+3) | - Preserves natural resources for future generations (0)
- Involves local communities in planning, development and management (0)
- Conserves and enhances local environments/ecosystems (0)
- Supports provision of community utilities (0)
- Improves mental health of local people (0) | Allows people to attend to important family obligations (-3)
- Tourism benefits are fairly distributed within a community (-3)
- Encourages visitors to learn about local cultures and custom (-3)
- Improves physical health of local people (-4)
- Protects community access and use of local resource (-4) | | |