# Practitioner Note – Community priorities for the future of tourism on Mitiaro

## Reflections on major tourism perspectives on Mitiaro

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.

Mitiaro in the Cook Islands is one of the three islands of Nga-Pu-Toru, also known as 'Nukuroa'. Located a 1.5hour flight to the North-East of the main island Rarotonga. With a population under 200, Mitiaro it is described as a "secluded paradise"[1]. The island is popular for its caves, twin freshwater lakes, seafood, churches, plantations, and pristine coastline. In 2022, 1% of visitors to the Cook Islands travelled to Mitiaro[2], making it an emerging tourism destination.

**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 Mitiaro, 22 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.
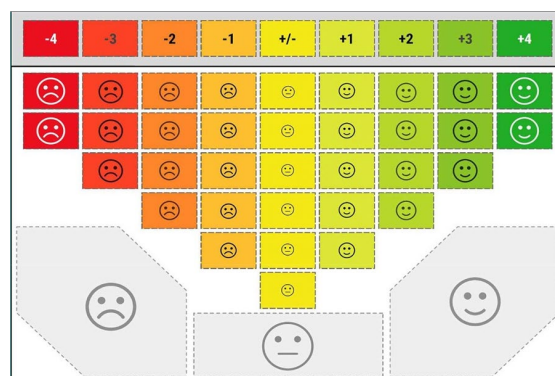
Least important (-4) ⟶ Very important (+4)



Figure 1. Mat and scale for statement ranking.

Results identified three distinct discourses or perspectives of tourism (we call 'perspectives' from here on) that reflect what individuals on Mitiaro

[1] Cook Islands Tourism. Like a local in Mitiaro. Accessible https://cookislands.travel/islands/mitiaro
[2] Cook Islands Tourism Corporation (2022). The Cook Islands International Visitor Survey Report. July – September 2022.

[3] SPTO (2021). Pacific 2030. Sustainable Tourism Policy Framework. Accessible https://southpacificislands.travel/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Pacific-Sustainable-Tourism-Policy-Framework.pdf

would like out of tourism in the future. These perspectives are introduced in more detail below (see also Table 1 in the Appendix):

1. **Access, value of culture and health.**
2. **Economic benefits and cultural protection.**
3. **Traditional roles, practices and community stability**

The qualitative insights are based on the observations of the Research Associate and open-ended responses provided by participants. The Qualitative explanations are based on the open-ended responses provided by participants.

> **Qualitative insight**
> For many people, working in tourism on Mitiaro only generates a secondary income. This means they also have other jobs, for example in government, as tourism income is often not stable enough. Most participants acknowledged that they would benefit from more tourists to Mitiaro with older and more experienced participants suggesting that visitor numbers to Mitiaro were better when there was direct access to the Cooks Islands from the Northern Hemisphere. Others acknowledged the consistent visitor numbers during COVID -19 when Government through Cook Islands Tourism subsidised domestic travel to the outer islands. Since these packages have returned to market price and the visitors have been predominately from New Zealand, the arrival numbers to Mitiaro have dropped. Community solidarity and culture are strong in Mitiaro and there was a clear consensus amongst most participants that tourism was not required to strengthen these two areas.

**PERSPECTIVE 1: Access, value of culture and health.**

Participants represented by Perspective 1 prioritised Infrastructure outcomes, which were more important to this group than others, in particular:
- Enhancing digital infrastructure for local peoples (e.g., mobile network coverage, internet speed) (+4), and
- improving transport infrastructure (air, roads, wharves and jetties) and access to communities (+3).

Also of high importance to this group were cultural outcomes, in particular promoting and supporting the value of authentic cultural and creative industries (+4).

Health and safety outcomes were more important to this group than others, including:

- Improving sanitation and hygiene (+2), and
- Improving the physical health of local people (0).

Economic and livelihood outcomes were important to this group, but many were less important to this group than others.

Some aspects of social outcomes were more important to this group than others, like building peoples' career, skills, and education (+2), and empowers marginalised people (0). However, several were less important to this group than to others, including:

- Preserving natural resources for future generations (-3),
- allowing people to attend to important family and community obligations (-3), and
- promoting gender equality (-4).

Environmental and climate change outcomes were of low priority to this group, in particular:



- Supporting the community to adapt to climate change (0),
- conserving and enhancing local environments/ecosystems (-2), and
- protecting community access and use of local resource (e.g., potable water, beach access) (-4).

**People associated with Perspective 1 were:**
- More likely to be females.
- Less likely to be 50 years of age and over.
- Less likely to work in tourism.

## PERSPECTIVE 2: Economic benefits and cultural protection

Participants associated with Perspective 2 prioritised economic and livelihood outcomes. The following tourism outcomes were more important to this group than others:
- Tourism benefiting local people financially (+4),
- benefits being fairly distributed within a community (+4),
- contributing to a growing national economy (+3),
- using local goods and services (+2), and
- creating secure and decent employment (+1).

Also very important to this group were cultural outcomes, and encouraging visitors to learn about local cultures and custom (+2), was more important to this group than others.

There were some community and social outcomes that were important, and others that were less of a priority to this group. More important to this group than others were:
- Involving local communities in the planning, development and management (+3),
- preserving natural resources for future generations (+1),
- Not increasing the cost of living (0), and
- and allowing people to attend to important family and community obligations (0).

In contrast, less important to this group than others were:
- Empowering marginalised people (-2),
- supporting traditional roles of men and women (-2), and
- enhancing community solidarity and stability (-4).

Also of low priority were infrastructure and health and safety outcomes, including:
- Improving the mental health of local people (-2),
- improving the physical health of local people (-3), and
- enhancing digital infrastructure for local peoples (-3).

Of lowest priority was the statement of 'tourism not contributing to climate change' (-4).
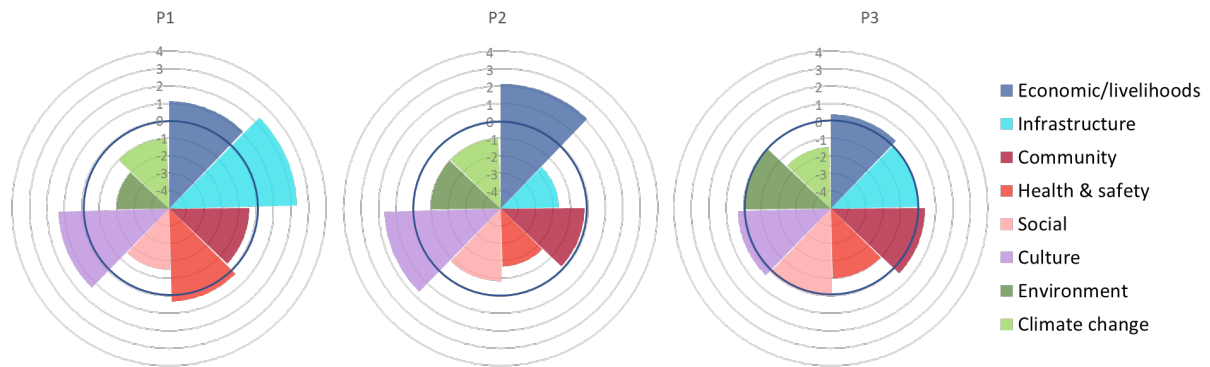
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Figure 2. Importance of statement categories for each perspective, whereby the size of each piece reflects the relative importance of statements within each category.

**Qualitative insight**

Participants associated with Perspective **2** reflected and understood that tourism is important for the national economy, and this was found to be important for the future too. Participants believed having economic opportunities locally to be very important to move on from subsistence living. Ensuring tourism income becomes stable was regarded a priority. Fair distribution was also very important and participants in this group believed that Mitiaro has a chance to make it right and make sure that tourism works for the local people. Participants believed this needs to include involving the community into tourism decision making, because they are the ones that live there and those who are affected by these decisions. Protecting culture was important not only to support tourism but also for future generations, because it provides identity, and income generating opportunities for the mamas, e.g., through weaving and handicrafts. People did not believe delivering health outcomes should be the role of tourism. Tourism was also not seen as needed to generate community solidarity, or to help the community recover from shocks. Participants did not believe tourism was contributing to climate change and therefore, addressing it was seen out of their control.

**People associated with Perspective 2 were:**
- Either male or female.
- Slightly more likely to work in tourism.

## PERSPECTIVE 3: TRADITIONAL ROLES, PRACTICES AND COMMUNITY STABILITY

Participants associated with this perspective prioritised certain community outcomes. More important to this group than others were:
- Supporting communities to recover from economic and environmental shocks (+4), and
- enhancing community solidarity and stability (+2).

Also more important were:
- Supporting traditional roles of men and women (+4), and
- promoting gender equality (0).

Also somewhat important, and more important to this group than others, were environmental outcomes, including:
- Minimising energy use, water uses, waste generation and pollution (+2), and
- conserving and enhancing local environments/ecosystems (+1).

Economic outcomes were important, e.g., supporting and regenerates subsistence livelihoods (+3). However, they were less important to this group than to other groups, in particular:
- Encouraging small businesses/entrepreneurship (+1),
- contributing to a growing national economy (0),
- benefits being fairly distributed within a community (-1),
- creating secure and decent employment (-2), and
- using local goods and services (-3).

Protecting, promoting, and reviving local culture and heritage was important (+3), however, overall,

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cultural outcomes overall were less important to this group than others, including:
- Promoting and supporting the value of authentic cultural and creative industries (0), and
- encouraging visitors to learn about local cultures and custom (-2).

Tourism improving transport infrastructure was of lower importance to this group than others (-3), and so was tourism not increasing the cost of living (-4). Finally, tourism not contributing to climate change was also less important (-4).

**Qualitative insight**
Participants in this group interpreted traditional roles more broadly. Roles were linked to traditional practices and culture, including attire and cultural identity, and participants thought these should be revived. Tourist should respect these roles and their attires should reflect this, which also links to the importance of educating tourists on local cultures. Encouraging small businesses was regarded important as participants thought new businesses were needed on Mitiaro. However, participants explained that for the people to produce things locally, they would need to see the value in what they do. Improving transport infrastructure was not seen as a priority for tourism but rather something the government is, and should, help with. Cost of living was not regarded a priority as many people live off the land and sea on Mitiaro, and participants did not see how tourism could reduce the cost of living. Participants also did not see tourism making a difference in addressing climate change.

**People associated with Perspective 3 were:**
- More likely to be male.
- More likely to be 50 years of age and over.
- More likely to be lower educated.

**Consensus and disagreement**
There was strong agreement on some objectives that were somewhat important to all groups. These were tourism enabling people to financially support their extended family, e.g. to help pay for school fees (+1,0,+2), and tourism being respectful of local decision-making (+1,+1,+1). There was also strong agreement on tourism helping fund environmental conservation and protection (0,-1,0) being neither important nor unimportant, and Tourism not contributing to climate change (-2,-4,-4) being less important. There were no outcomes that were of high priority to all groups (Table 1).

There was strong disagreement between groups on infrastructure outcomes, including tourism enhancing digital infrastructure for local peoples (e.g. mobile network coverage, internet speed) (+4,-3,+1), and tourism improving transport infrastructure (air, roads, wharves and jetties) and access to communities (+3,-1,-3). There was also strong disagreement on the importance of tourism supporting communities to recover from economic and environmental shocks (e.g. COVID-19, cyclones) (-2,-1,+4), and tourism supporting traditional roles of men and women (-1,-2,+4).

**Implications**
Certain livelihood and economic outcomes were somewhat to very important to all groups, in particular tourism benefitting local people financially and encouraging small businesses/entrepreneurship, which cannot be overlooked. Creating economic opportunities locally was very important to people on Mitiaro. Tourism on Mitiaro is still in its infancy, and people recognise that there is an opportunity to do it right, for tourism to serve the local people and to ensure benefits are spread across the community. Many believed that being respectful of local decision making was critical in achieving this.

Protecting, promoting, and reviving local culture and heritage and promoting and supporting the value of authentic cultural and creative industries was regarded at least as somewhat important by all participants, because culture is linked to peoples' identity. Participants found encouraging visitors to learn about local culture to be of lower priority. Instead, efforts should focus on educating local children first.

Environmental and climate change outcomes were of lower priority, perhaps because tourism on Mitiaro has not led to environmental degradation. Participants thought tourism had a somewhat important role to play in supporting the community to adapt to climate change, whereby most did not see addressing climate change through tourism as a priority. Most did not see

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how tourism contributes, or how it could make a difference.

Participants greatly disagreed on the importance of tourism improving infrastructure, in particular infrastructure related to transport and access. Some believed it to be critical to local people and the future success of tourism, others did not see this to be the role of tourism but rather the government's responsibility.

The Q-sort exercise has revealed that almost all tourism outcomes are important to at least some groups. This highlights the need for holistic planning to ensure certain outcomes are not achieved at the cost of others and understanding and managing trade-offs will be critical. All perspectives need to be understood, respected and included in decision making to arrive at a tourism model that is able to balance (fairly and sustainably) the different outcomes that tourism brings.

### Next steps
We acknowledge the importance the people on Mitiaro 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 achieved through tourism.

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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 - Access, value of culture and health.** | - Tourism enhances digital infrastructure for local peoples (+4) <br> - Promotes and supports the value of authentic cultural and creative industries (+4) <br> - Financial benefits to local people (+3) <br> - Encouraging small business/entrepreneurship (+3) <br> - Improves transport infrastructure and access to communities (+3) | Supports the provision of community utilities (0) <br> Supports the community to adapt to climate change (0) <br> Helps fund environmental conservation and protection (0) <br> - Empowers marginalised people (0) <br> - Improves physical health of local people (0) | - Preserves natural resources for future generations (-3) <br> - Allows people to attend to important family obligations (-3) <br> - Tourism does not increase the cost of living (-3) <br> - Promotes gender equality (-4) <br> - Protects community access and use of local resource (-4) | Helps fund environmental conservation and protection (0,-1,0) <br> Enables people to financially support their extended family (+1,0,+2) <br> Is respectful of local decision-making (+1,+1,+1) | Supports community to recover from shocks (-2,-1,+4) <br> Tourism enhances digital infrastructure for local peoples (+4,-3,+1) <br> - Supports traditional roles of men and women (-1,-2,+4) <br> - Improves transport infrastructure and access to |
| **P2 - Economic benefits and** | - Financial benefits to local people (+4) | - Improves sanitation and hygiene (0) | - Tourism enhances digital | | |

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|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| cultural protection. | - Benefits are fairly distributed within a community (+4)<br>- Encouraging small business/entrepreneurship (+3)<br>- Growing national economy (+3)<br>- Involves local communities in planning, development and management (+3) | - Enables people to financially support their extended family (0)<br>- Supports and regenerates subsistence livelihoods (0)<br>- Allows people to attend to important family obligations (0)<br>- Tourism does not increase the cost of living (0) | infrastructure for local peoples (-3)<br>- Improves physical health of local people (-3)<br>- Promotes gender equality (-3)<br>- Enhances community solidarity and stability (-4)<br>- Tourism does not contribute to climate change (-4) | Tourism does not contribute to climate change (-2,-4,-4) | communities (+3,-1,-3) |
| **P3 - Traditional roles, practices and community stability** | - Supports community to recover from shocks (+4)<br>- Supports traditional roles of men and women (+4)<br>- Financial benefits to local people (+3)<br>- Protects, promotes, and revives local culture and heritage (+3)<br>- Supports and regenerates subsistence livelihoods (+3) | - Growing national economy (0)<br>- Promotes and supports the value of authentic cultural and creative industries (0)<br>- builds peoples' career, skills, and education (0)<br>Helps fund environmental conservation and protection (0)<br>- Improves mental health of local people (0) | - Uses local goods and services (-3)<br>- Protects community access and use of local resource (-3)<br>- Improves transport infrastructure and access to communities (-3)<br>- Tourism does not increase the cost of living (-4)<br>- Tourism does not contribute to climate change (-4) | | |