



Karrke Aboriginal Cultural Tour Case Study



Purpose

This case study will provide information on an Aboriginal owned and operated remote tourism business in the Northern Territory which has grown to now enable the owners to be self-employed on country. It highlights the importance of selling your idea, knowing the back end of running a business and details how this particular business sought business and other financial support to allow for continuous improvement and planning for future growth.



Description of Karrke Aboriginal Cultural Tour

¹ Karrke Aboriginal Culture Tour is owned and operated by Christine Breden – Traditional Owner and partner Peter Abbott who live in a small Aboriginal Community called Wanmarra, population of 10. Wanmarra Community is 450km south west of Alice Springs. The Community shares a common boundary on the south eastern side with Watarrka National Park and on the northern side with Kings Creek Station on the Luritja Highway. The Luritja Highway is the tourist access road into Watarrka National Park and to the iconic visitor destination of Kings Canyon.

Karrke is the name for the Western Bowerbird in the Arrernte language.

Karrke operates a 1 hour tour Wednesday to Sunday, four times a day sharing with their visitors Luritja and Pertame (Southern Arrernte) language and culture, bush tucker and medicine, the making of spears, boomerangs, music sticks and seed jewellery.

Early Days

In 2010 the NT Centre for Appropriate Technologies (CAT) offered financial support to communities to start businesses. This funding allowed the residents of Wanmarra Community to investigate business opportunities which mainly focused on a market garden. The original aim was for the community to live and work on country to develop maintained houses with adequate power and water supplies and community members becoming independent from welfare.

CAT's Bushlight Livelihoods Project provided the Community with a business plan that highlighted the requirements of running a business on country. The community tried growing bush tomatoes from 2010 – 2012 for sale commercially, but this venture proved to be unviable.

Christine and Peter however soon realised the potential of sharing their culture with visitors to Watarrka National Park and particularly the adjacent Kings Canyon. An initial idea was to develop a campground which included a cultural interpretation element. It was quickly realised that a campground at their location might not give an adequate financial return given other accommodation facilities in the area including Kings Canyon Resort, Kings Creek Station and APT's Wilderness Lodge. Instead, Christine and Peter looked closely at offering a tour that would be able to complement the activities and facilities already available in the region.

Making the venture more attractive was the fact that visitation to Watarrka National Park was over 400,000 per annum and visitors stayed at least one night.

In 2011 with Central Lands Council (CLC) and NT Parks and Wildlife funding they commenced discussions with the Wanmarra Community to lease a section of land on which the tours would be conducted. The old Luritja Road allowed easy access to the section of the land and was well away from their personal living space. An initial 3 year lease was awarded to Christine and Peter and they are currently seeking a 12 year renewal.

Karrke Pty Ltd commenced in 2014 and conducted their first tour in January 2015. In the first year of operation 744 visitors experienced the product.

Peter has no doubts that the 100 familiarisation tours conducted on site in the early days markedly assisted in the growth of their business. Peter and Christine invited management and staff of Delaware Kings Canyon Resort, Kings Creek Station, Inbound Tour Operators and Travel Agents to experience their tour first hand. These famils included Across Australia who offer community emersion tours; which has grown into a strong business partnership.

In late 2015 a Tourism Infrastructure Development Funding (TIDF) grant from the NT Government of \$101,000 enabled the building of an ablution block and 3 large banyans / shade structures. Indigenous Business Development (IBA) funding of \$27,000 was also provided to ensure that connection to the internet was available to allow for electronic funds transfer.



Consolidation of the Business

In early 2016 APT closed the adjacent Wilderness Lodge which provided on average 3 - 4 visitors a day to Karrke. Based on previous feedback from familiarisation tours, Peter decided to concentrate on the education group tour market and from March 2016 the education group market has filled the hole left from lodge's closure.

2016 was a solid growth year with 1293 visitors. Peter and Christine regard this period as a steep learning curve. Issues dealt with included deciding upon best options for partnership agreements, hosting Asian groups on familiarisation tours, and making arrangements with hire van companies to allow their rental vehicles to travel on the 2km dirt road to access the tour. Karrke also worked with Delaware Kings Canyon Resort which now offers a 2 day package to Watarrka National Park including the Karrke tour.

Not surprisingly, the area requiring most support was the back end of running a business- this included. bookkeeping, legal business requirements, website channel management and booking systems.

It is estimated that over 1700 visitors will come to the Karrke site during 2017 with the majority of Karrke's



clients now being free independent travellers (FIT's). The growth in visitor numbers has had an unanticipated flow on effect- Christine cannot keep up the supply of small paintings, clapping sticks and painted seed jewellery that Karrke sells to the visitors. They have also dealt with community issues related to the understanding of pricing mechanisms e.g. the difference between gross and net profit for a saleable item.

Peter and Christine appreciate the mentoring and business support they have received on tourism from the Department of the Trade, Business and Innovation (DTBI), the Department of Tourism and Culture (DTC), Tourism Central Australia (TCA) and Ian Conway the owner of Kings Creek Station. A Small Business Champion from DTBI has visited Karrke regularly, and Peter believes that this engagement and support has been vital in commencing and consolidating their business.

Future Business Development

Peter would like to see a more simplified process to access the various Territory and Federal funding and training support programs available. This would assist knowing what support is available, how to access the support program and would take the pressure off small businesses having to complete applications at the last minute through lack of knowledge of the processes. Peter and Christine think that accessing training courses for running the back end of a business is critical. Undertaking such training whilst accompanied by the younger generation is also considered most valuable, enabling the younger generation to utilise these skills in possibly running the business in the future.

Christine and Peter would also like to see the wider community and family being part of Karrke Aboriginal Culture Tour so they can also be empowered by independence. Their daughter has already taken the lead in the education groups' part of the business. They are keen to work with other local Aboriginal communities in providing employment and training and enabling further expansion of the Karrke experience.

Karrke has recently developed a marketing plan with an associated action plan. Peter has noted that his team needs to better develop skills and confidence in marketing their business

² Future plans for Karrke include the development of a native plants garden including Garu (bush tomato), Pmerlpe (native quandong / wild peach), Kampurarrpa (desert raisin) and Ngalurru (Eremophila longifolia / weeping emu bush). Peter believes this will be of benefit to the community as a whole and is vital in keeping the Karrke business growing and providing an increased variety of tours. The harvest would not be sold commercially but would be traded with other communities- a cultural norm for aboriginal communities.

Their plans are to grow the business into different markets include working with wholesalers, large coach companies and inbound tourism operators. Peter knows these business partnerships are vital for expanding and will see the Karrke experience included into various packaged products.

The access road to the Karrke tourism site is via a wide dirt road. With Government support they would like to see the road sealed to allow all weather access and provide surety of access for large coach companies. A road infrastructure grant application is a priority for 2018.

Key Learnings to Date

Peter and Christine have identified the following key learnings on their journey to date:

- Signal your ideas to the Department of Trade, Business and Innovation, Department of Tourism and Culture or your local tourism association so they can consult with you on options available.
- Discuss and sell your idea with the wider tourism industry to gain support in the areas of business and infrastructure development.
- Obtain as much data and research as possible and understand what it means.
- Ensure appropriate training, especially a strong knowledge in the governance of business including bookkeeping, registering your business name and planning for business growth.
- Have the ability to overview the businesses income and expenses while always analysing your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.



Further Information and Key Contacts:

Tourism NT

tourismnt.com.au
08 8951 8584
Tourism.Development@nt.gov.au

Department of Trade, Business and Innovation

1800 193 111
businessnt@nt.gov.au

Tourism Top End

1300 138 886
info@tourismtopend.com.au

Tourism Central Australia

1800 645 199
info@discoverca.com.au

¹ <https://www.karrke.com.au/> & <https://www.facebook.com/Karrke-Aboriginal-experience-274435232680258/>

² Pintupi Luritja names of native plants sourced from <http://eflora.nt.gov.au/>