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Disasters, Market Changes and ‘The Big Smoke’: Understanding the Decline of Remote Tourism in Katherine, Northern Territory Australia

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Abstract

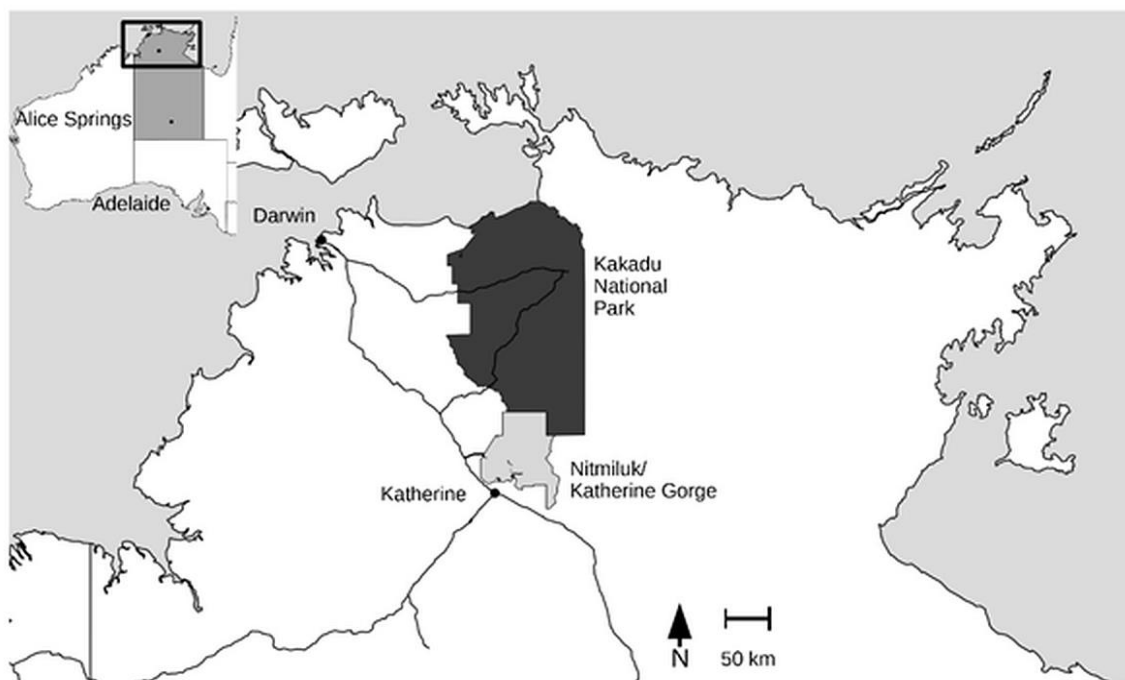
This chapter examines the decline of tourism in Katherine, one of the Northern Territory’s iconic remote destinations. While the decline coincided with severe floods damaging much of the town and its tourism infrastructure in 1998, other factors such as the overall decline of Outback tourism in Australia and changes in key markets such as backpackers and self-drive tourists contributed to the difficulty in reviving Katherine’s tourism industry following the floods. Katherine tourism demonstrates characteristics consistent with the Beyond Periphery model of tourism development in remote or sparsely populated areas. The chapter argues that Katherine has become even more distant and disconnected from tourist markets, investors and policy makers since the floods. Key issues for future development include an increasingly uneven relationship between Katherine and the capital city of Darwin, and an inability to identify alternative markets and development paths independent of the dominant tourism structures in the Northern Territory. Katherine is an example of a remote destination which initially had substantial competitive advantages because of its location and levels of local investment in tourism, but has since lost those advantages due to a failure to respond to changing market forces. The chapter thus emphasises the fragile nature of tourism in remote locations, and its vulnerability to exogenous shocks and changing government priorities, reminding us of the broader challenges for economic development in remote resource peripheries.

Keywords: Beyond periphery; Natural disasters; Outback tourism; Road-based tourism

6.1 Introduction

During the 1990s, Katherine, in the Top End of the Northern Territory of Australia (Fig. 6.1), was among the most successful destinations in ‘Outback’ Australia. It attracted over 300,000 overnight tourist trips in 1997 and experienced rapid growth as a result of new hotel and resort developments, the expansion of tourism at Nitmiluk (Katherine Gorge) National Park, and large numbers of coach tours using Katherine as a base for entry to world heritage listed Kakadu National Park (Northern Territory Tourist Commission, 1994a, b). In late January 1998, however, the town was hit by a major flood brought on by the remnants of Cyclone Les, which had crossed the northern coast several days previously (Skertchly & Skertchly, 1999). The flood caused severe damage to much of the town, cut off transport access, and damaged a number of prominent tourist attractions (Faulkner & Vikulov, 2001). While tourist numbers were relatively stable in the immediate aftermath of the floods, there was a steady decline over the following decade, with record lows estimated in 2003, 2007, and 2009, and a nadir of 175,000 visitors in 2013 (Tourism Research Australia, 2017). Recent visitor data suggest a small increase in trips since that time, driven mostly by visitors from nearby locations, while international and ‘non-local’ Australian visitor numbers have continued to decline steadily (Table 6.1).

Fig. 6.1 The top end region of Australia’s Northern Territory (created by authors)



While the floods posed a great threat to the tourism industry in Katherine, by 2001 leading tourism academics in Australia were suggesting that the industry was ‘back on track’, with substantial investment in flood recovery, marketing, and support for local tourism businesses (Faulkner & Vikulov, 2001). There is no doubt, however, that Katherine lost its place among the leading Outback tourism destinations in the years following the flood, and the prospects for a tourism revival even 20 years later are questionable. This chapter places the experience of Katherine tourism in the context of recent developments in theories about the economic geography of sparsely populated and remote areas. Specifically, the barriers to tourism re-

growth in Katherine are explored using the *Beyond Periphery* framework used previously to discuss demographic and economic development in remote and sparsely populated areas (Carson & Carson, 2014; Carson, Ensign, Rasmussen, & Taylor, 2011; Taylor, 2016). The *Beyond Periphery* framework suggests that small scale, isolation, and a dependence on external markets and government intervention lead to specific development trajectories for remote settlements and destinations. Carson and colleagues (2014) argued that these factors are not necessarily disadvantageous to tourism growth, but rather lead to a need for different destination planning and management strategies than might be employed in less remote areas.

In this chapter, we extend the applications of the *Beyond Periphery* model to tourism geography by arguing that remote exotic destinations can also have large scale, high accessibility, and interdependence attributes which affect their prospects for long-term growth. The presence of these attributes in an otherwise *Beyond Periphery* environment may have been a substantial part of the reason for Katherine's failure to revive. In particular, the need for continued large-scale development to sustain previous visitor numbers, the proximity to a larger economic centre and alternative destination hub (the city of Darwin, just 300 km to the north), and the extent to which certain businesses in Katherine had been important players in a broader 'Outback' tourism boom in the 1990s meant that Katherine was perhaps more vulnerable to long-term impacts of shocks such as the 1998 floods than other exotic destinations that are otherwise more disconnected, distant, and dynamic. The analysis has important implications for thinking about what might comprise an economically robust exotic tourism sector in countries like Australia, Canada and Sweden, and in this regard builds on previous work (Schmallegger & Carson, 2010a) critiquing models of investment in tourism development in these sorts of geographies.

The chapter draws on a wide range of data sources and insights collected by the authors during more than a decade long involvement in tourism-related research in the Northern Territory. This includes formal interviews with a number of current and former tourism stakeholders involved in Katherine tourism since the 1970s; informal discussions with locals and tourism stakeholders conducted during several visits to Katherine and the surrounding area between 2005 and 2016; unstructured observations collected during numerous tourism and government stakeholder meetings in Darwin (as part of activities organised by Tourism NT and the Tourism Research Group at Charles Darwin University); and analysis of past and contemporary public documents (e.g. regional tourism development strategies, local marketing plans, newspaper articles), as well as secondary population and visitor data records (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017; Tourism Research Australia, 2017).

The following section provides a short review of the *Beyond Periphery* model. The chapter then introduces the specific geographic, historic and tourism development context of the Katherine case study region, before examining the various reasons for Katherine's tourism decline in more detail. The final conclusion will link the case study observations back to the *Beyond Periphery* framework to discuss what can be learned from destinations like Katherine to better understand and navigate the challenges presented by the dynamic, disconnected, dependent, and delicate nature of tourism in remote and sparsely populated settings.

6.2 Beyond Periphery: Tourism and the '8Ds' of Remote Human and Economic Geography

The *Beyond Periphery* model proposed by Carson and colleagues (Carson et al., 2011; Carson & Carson, 2014; Taylor, 2016) provides a framework for understanding the human

and economic geographies of remote and sparsely populated areas of developed nations, particularly those found in Australia, Canada, the USA and the Nordic countries in Europe. The main idea is that development trajectories in these remote settings operate outside traditional core-periphery structures (Friedmann, 1966) that have often been used to explain economic development in rural hinterland regions surrounding major urban centres. Core-periphery models assume direct linkages between an advanced urban or metropolitan centre and a less developed periphery through flows of products, people and capital. These relationships are relatively stable and gradually self-reinforcing, usually to the extent that the periphery becomes increasingly dependent on the core where populations, markets, knowledge and political power concentrate. Settlements located 'beyond' such core-periphery contexts do not have a clear core to rely on as sources of capital or markets for their products, suggesting that they are forced to seek more flexible and dynamic linkages elsewhere.

The *Beyond Periphery* framework can be summarised through eight indicators starting with the letter 'D'—distant, diverse, discontinuous, disconnected, dependent, dynamic, detailed, and delicate. These Ds refer to contextual key characteristics of sparsely populated and remote areas that help explain why local communities are faced with different challenges and opportunities for development than communities in other (less remote and more densely populated) rural peripheries.

- *Distant*: remote settlements are typically located at great distance from any urban centres, limiting the extent to which human and economic interactions can take place on a regular basis. Physical distance is often exacerbated by improving transport and communication technologies and infrastructure, meaning that remote areas can become more remote and isolated over time as they miss out on new technologies or infrastructure available in urban areas. With physical or face-to-face interactions becoming more redundant as a result of better technologies, remote areas are often the first to lose locally-based services and are also increasingly bypassed in transport routes (Carson & Cleary, 2010). In addition to physical distance, issues of economic, social and cultural distance emerging from different economic histories and demographic pathways separate remote settlements from those in urban or more densely populated areas. This is particularly apparent in remote Indigenous communities but also in the context of predominantly blue collar working populations in remote resource towns.
- *Diverse* and *Discontinuous*: Within remote and sparsely populated areas, settlements are characterised by great economic and demographic diversity resulting from different development histories and a historic lack of connectivity between settlements. This diversity stems from a relatively unpredictable and noncentrifugal expansion of population and economic development (Bylund, 1960). Unlike rural fringe settlements that have been established through urban growth and economic and population spillover, remote settlements have emerged more opportunistically, depending on the location of specific natural resources or their strategic importance for particular national agendas (e.g. for military purposes or to manage Indigenous populations). They may therefore have different reasons for existence and, even when located relatively close to one another, may not be connected through transport links, social relations or a common cultural identity.
- *Disconnected*: Poor transport, economic and historic links with larger urban centres, as well as with other remote settlements, mean that network connections are relatively weak in remote areas. This is not to say that networks do not exist, but that connections (e.g. for access to markets, labour exchange, knowledge transfer, economic investment, or migration) are not centred on a clearly defined core that can

facilitate stable, predictable and mutual flows of capital. Instead, connections tend to be more chaotic, directed to multiple external sources for different purposes, and fluctuating according to changing economic or political circumstances (Carson, 2011). This condition forces remote settlements into a situation of continuous external ‘connection-seeking’, as their relationships with particular markets and sources of capital are fragile and temporary (Schmallegger, Carson, & Tremblay, 2010).

- *Dependent*: Dependence on external agents, such as distantly-based investors or political decision-makers, is a common feature of socio-economic development in remote areas. Local or ‘home-grown’ populations are usually too small or lack the economic and human capacity to drive endogenous development and sustain local populations and economies. While such dependency relationships with external stakeholders may also exist in less remote areas, their scale and temporal characteristics are usually different in remote areas. Development initiatives in remote areas tend to be focused on ‘big projects’, which promise quick economic return for external investors or governments. Such projects are predominantly found in the resource extraction sector, but government funded projects around military or transport infrastructure of ‘national importance’ have also been prominent examples (Bone, 2003; Huskey & Morehouse, 1992). They tend to trigger short periods of economic ‘boom’, leading to an influx of external workers and other temporary populations who are able to capitalise on short-term employment and economic opportunities. Meanwhile, local (and in particular Indigenous) populations struggle to gain long-term benefits and often remain dependent on government income support and welfare schemes administered by distant government agencies (Taylor, Larson, Stoeckl, & Carson, 2011).
- *Dynamic*: Waves of ‘boom and bust’ have been common in remote areas, meaning that the economic and demographic fortunes of settlements can change dramatically as a result of external investment or policy decisions within very short periods of time. The dependence on outside markets and capital, paired with a small local population, a relatively narrow skill base and high rates of population mobility, means that settlements have limited capacity to buffer the cyclonic fluctuations inherent to key industries in remote areas (Barnes, Hayter, & Hay, 2001). Similarly, new policy interventions or changes in transport and other service infrastructure can become tipping points and alter the demographic and economic bases of remote settlements almost overnight (Taylor & Carson, 2009).
- *Detailed*: Changes to local settlement systems may appear rather small at the surface level but have profound impacts on local populations and economies. The small nature of remote settlements means that seemingly small events (e.g. the in- or outmigration of a single influential entrepreneur) can trigger a cascade effect with rather dramatic and often unforeseen consequences. Such small localised events are frequently hidden from larger regional statistics and therefore go unnoticed. Research into remote settlement development thus needs to pay more attention to issues at small scale and local level detail in order to uncover the nature of change—this includes local rather than regional scale analyses, as well as more nuanced temporal and social scale perspectives (Carson, Carson, Porter, Ahlin, & Sköld, 2016).
- *Delicate*: The various Ds combined generate highly delicate social, cultural, and economic structures in remote communities, making them vulnerable to external shocks. Their dependence on externally controlled industries and governments causes pressures on local communities to strike compromises that may ultimately upset sensitive socio-cultural or natural environments. In some cases, remote settlements are home to disadvantaged populations who do not have the means nor the desire to leave

their communities when major industries go bust or particular government service programs interfere with local agendas. Balancing the tensions between community, industry and political interests is thus a very delicate matter, complicated by the ‘boom and bust’ nature of development endeavours.

The 8Ds have previously been used to illustrate specific issues of demographic and economic development in remote areas (Carson et al., 2011; Carson & Carson, 2014; Taylor, 2016). The framework has also been used to generically discuss changing population mobility and the resulting issues and opportunities for tourism in remote areas (Carson, Carson, & Lundmark, 2014). From this perspective, remote tourism destinations are often characterised by a certain ‘boom and bust’ single-industry dependence that is strikingly similar to that commonly found in remote resource towns: they are dependent on (and often ‘addicted’ to) external investment and government protection; they are centred around big investment projects that generate fast but temporary economic growth; they become locked into an ongoing cycle of external connection-seeking in the absence of a single reliable core centre; they generate development (infrastructure, jobs, services etc.) that remains highly localised rather than ‘spilling over’ to the wider region; and they largely benefit external stakeholders and temporary workers rather than local populations (Schmallegger et al., 2010). The following case study examines the development of tourism in Katherine and discusses how the *Beyond Periphery* framework helps in understanding the challenges for rejuvenation and renewed development in the aftermath of a major natural disaster.

6.3 The Geographic, Historic and Tourism Context of Katherine

Katherine town is located about 300 km south of the capital city of Darwin in Australia’s Northern Territory (NT) (Fig. 6.1). Katherine was settled in the late 19th century, and by the turn of the 20th century had a small tourism sector based on travellers mostly associated with the sheep and cattle industries and gold mining (Maff, Lewis, & Cook, 1986). Katherine’s geographical importance was initially as part of the network of overland telegraph stations that serviced the telegraph line from Adelaide to Darwin. By the end of World War One, Katherine was also the final stop on the Darwin-Pine Creek railway, and rail access to Darwin led to rapid population growth in the 1920s. Tourism benefited from major infrastructure investments in the town during World War Two, including construction of an all-weather road linking Alice Springs and Darwin, and establishment of a military airbase near Katherine which remains the main economic activity and accounts for half of the resident population to this day. By the early 1970s, Katherine was home to over 2,500 people, and grew to 5,500 by 1986 and over 9,000 by 1996 (Harwood, Carson, Marino, & McTurk, 2011).

The early 1970s also saw the start of Katherine’s tourism ‘boom’ with construction of two new hotels, the conversion of historical Springvale Homestead (the oldest standing pastoral homestead in the Northern Territory) into a tourist attraction, and the increasing commercialisation of guided boat tours to Katherine Gorge (Berzins, 2007). Katherine’s tourism boom was driven in large part by substantial investment from locally-based company *Travel North*, which was formed in 1968 and at various times was the only operator running tours to the Gorge, as well as running Springvale Homestead and a number of accommodation and travel agency businesses in town (Sarney, 2014). *Travel North* continued to dominate Katherine tourism well into the 1990s, and Katherine was at this time a major departure point for tours into Kakadu National Park and elsewhere throughout the Northern Territory’s tropical ‘Top End’ region.

Nitmiluk (being the traditional name of the Gorge) has been the most important tourism attraction in the region since the 1970s, with 250,000 visitors per year in the past several years (Tourism NT, 2017). The Gorge is situated about 30 km north of Katherine and just off the Stuart Highway which connects Darwin and Katherine. In 1989, the Gorge was handed back to the traditional Indigenous owners (the Jawoyn people) as part of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act. The Jawoyn people subsequently leased the Gorge and surrounding land back to the NT Government to be run as Nitmiluk National Park, and established Nitmiluk Tours in 1993 to run the signature boat tours in the Gorge (Fig. 6.2) in partnership with *Travel North* (Nitmiluk Tours, 2017). *Travel North* was required by the Government to sell its entire Gorge operations to the Jawoyn people in 2005, and has since cut its ties with tourism in the Gorge. The company made only very limited investment in refreshing and refurbishing its businesses after the 1998 flood, and has divested itself of other assets since selling its interest in Nitmiluk. In the meantime, Nitmiluk Tours has invested in developing the Gorge site (including investment in accommodation and various other visitor services), but has made limited investment in Katherine town. While there have been two new accommodation businesses built in Katherine in the last decade, the remaining stock dates from the 1980s and is in urgent need of refreshing and refurbishment (Fig. 6.3).

Fig. 6.2 Tourists on the signature boat tour at Nimiluk Gorge, run by Indigenous-owned Nitmiluk Tours (Photo Doris A. Carson)



Fig. 6.3 Outdated and tired budget accommodation in Katherine town (Photo Doris A. Carson)



Katherine can be considered 'remote' in terms of its distance from what has been its key domestic and international markets. Nevertheless, it is relatively proximate to Darwin, which also has a strong tourism industry including operators servicing Nitmiluk, Kakadu National Park and many of the other natural attractions in the Top End which had been key to Katherine's tourism development. Katherine's market advantage had been its geographic positioning in relation to road-based tourism, with self-drive and coach tourists needing to pass through Katherine to access Darwin from anywhere else in Australia. Consequently, Katherine still markets itself heavily in terms of various drive routes (e.g. *Savannah Way*, *Outback Way*, *Explorer's Way*, *Overlander's Way*, *Arnhem Way*) on which it is located. Katherine has not had regular commercial air services since the mid-1990s, although services to Darwin have briefly reappeared from time to time, and so the destination has never been able to directly access markets based on air travel. Since 2004, railway passengers on the Ghan tourist railway from Adelaide to Darwin have emerged as a new, yet very small and seasonal, market. Passengers can stop in Katherine once a week during peak season (May–October) for several hours, with the option to book local tours (primarily to Nitmiluk, but also to Springvale Homestead and other town-based historical sites). Katherine has had, compared to many other Australian 'Outback' towns, a quite diverse economic history, including significant agricultural, mining, manufacturing, defence, social services, education and tourism activities (Maff, Lewis, & Cook, 1986), suggesting that it did not evolve as a classic remote single-industry town.

Katherine was the site of some failed experiments in early sheep and peanut farming, but has otherwise had quite successful agricultural development, and has been home to agricultural research stations since the 1940s. Nevertheless, Katherine's economic diversity was shrinking by 1998, despite two decades of strong population growth. Light manufacturing had become

less important, and agricultural activities had primarily focussed on large-scale cattle farming by this time. Harwood and colleagues (2011) analysed evidence of demographic and socio-economic change in Katherine following the 1998 floods. They concluded that the floods (and subsequent floods in 2006) resulted in the closing down of local businesses, out-migration of 'economically active' populations including self-employed business owners, and the in-migration of 'economically disengaged' populations who may have moved in from surrounding regions as a result of the floods. In recent times, there has been great concern locally about managing these populations, particularly people with limited access to secure housing and with substance abuse problems. Relatively high rates of unemployment and homelessness and relatively low levels of education and income particularly among Indigenous residents who make up one quarter of the population have been a common feature of Katherine's socio-economic profile. The population size of the Katherine local government area has been stagnant since the 1996 Census at just under 10,000 residents.

In some ways, Katherine has become more 'remote', distant and isolated as a result of loss of air services, declining economic performance, and low population growth. However, its relative proximity to Darwin has meant that it is not quite 'remote enough' to retain its tourist (and tourism business) markets. Changing travel patterns (including from long-haul drive to shorter fly-drive itineraries) and the re-centering of Top End tourism in Darwin has meant that even road-based tourists are no longer obliged to stop overnight in Katherine. The 1998 floods certainly contributed to both the distancing and marginalising of Katherine as a tourism destination, but this chapter now argues that the floods were just one contributor, and that other aspects related to 'remote' tourism (and 'Outback Australian' tourism in particular) played a key role both in the immediate aftermath of the floods and in the longer term.

6.4 Tourism Decline and the Floods

Despite the significance of the 1998 Katherine flood as an historical event in Australia, there has been very little academic examination of its impacts on the town socially, economically or demographically. A small number of papers describe the flood itself (Skertchley & Skertchly, 2000), while one of Australia's leading tourism management researchers, late Professor Bill Faulkner, and his colleague Svetlana Vikulov (2001) published an analysis of Katherine tourism post-flood. More recently, Harwood and colleagues (2011) included Katherine as a case example of experiences of demographic change after natural disasters. Faulkner and Vikulov (2001) centred their paper on a claim that Katherine was already 'back on track' even just a year or two after the flood. In contrast, Harwood and colleagues depicted Katherine as a town that had not recovered in more than ten years and which still faced substantial barriers to revitalising its tourism industry and other economic activities.

Faulkner and Vikulov (2001) cited seven aspects of Katherine's post-flood recovery as signs of being 'back on track'. They were:

1. That visitor numbers for the 1998 peak season following the flood were higher than for 1997;
2. That the clean-up occurred relatively quickly, in part because clean-up labour could be sourced from the military base;
3. That the various associations responsible for planning for and responding to flood impacts (Katherine Region Counter-Disaster Planning Group, Reconstruction Task Force, Regional Coordination Committee), including impacts on tourism (Katherine Regional Tourism Association), were well prepared, well resourced and well coordinated;

4. That tourism businesses were able to re-book customers quickly and efficiently;
5. That tourism was somewhat assisted by a market of people attracted to the region either to see the results of the flood, or to contribute to the recovery process;
6. That a well financed and effective marketing campaign was quickly put in place; and
7. That the natural environment (particularly the Gorge) recovered very quickly.

Strong government intervention in the recovery process was a key factor in at least items 2, 3, 4 and 6.

A closer reading of the paper, however, offers a more nuanced view. The researchers note that the impacts of disasters on tourism destinations are often played down by industry who fear negative marketing impacts. At the same time, the main method informing Faulkner and Vikulov's (2001) paper was interviews with tourism and 'recovery' stakeholders. The apparent increase in visitors in 1998 was likely the result of reconstruction crews and media staying in the town, and these were temporary markets. Tourists were often re-booked to stay in Darwin and to undertake day trips from there to the sites they would otherwise have accessed from Katherine. Both at this time, and after the next large flood in 2006, there is evidence of Katherine-based tourism businesses closing down or relocating to Darwin. 'Back on track' also seems an overly optimistic statement to be made in a paper written less than a year after the event, while noting that many tourism attractions (including Springvale Homestead) remained closed or inaccessible (Fig. 6.4). In fact, several smaller operators and attractions did not reopen after the flood, and a couple of accommodation facilities in town were converted into residential housing, leading to a substantial loss in local tourism product and supply of tourist accommodation. In addition, former local tourism managers described how the local tourism industry lost much of its vibe and energy after the flood, partly because of exhaustion, burnout and continuing financial struggles following the post-flood recovery work, and partly because the recovery swallowed up substantial government funding that was subsequently missing to support development in forthcoming years.

More substantially, however, Faulkner and Vikulov (2001) spent very little time considering the broader context of tourism in Katherine, and the factors which were already influencing its development path prior to the flood. While the 1998 flood event was particularly severe, it was by no means unexpected (floods had long been a major focus of the Counter-Disaster Planning group), with the Katherine region renowned in the scientific literature as experiencing regular and severe flood events (Baker & Pickup, 1987). So it was not just the scale of flooding which made 1998 such a critical event, but its timing.

By the late 1990s, the golden era of Outback tourism in Australia had begun to come to an end (Taylor & Carson, 2010). Between 1998 and 2008, visitor numbers of Australia's several 'Outback' labelled regions declined by over one third, and there have been only marginal increases in visitor numbers and other performance indicators since that time. The reasons for decline are complex, but are linked to changing trip preferences in terms of modes of transport, trip length, and demographics. Three market segments have been noted as experiencing substantial decline—backpackers (particularly internationals) (Carson, Boyle, & Hoedlmaier, 2007), long-haul self-drive tourists (Schmallegger, Taylor, & Carson, 2011; Holyoak, Carson, & Schmallegger, 2009), and coach travellers (Schmallegger, 2010). These were, in the 1990s, three of the more important markets for Katherine. By the turn of this century, the Outback was hosting a second generation of tourists, and tourism marketers suggest that this generation was looking for something more or different than what the first generation had experienced. In particular, there was a new desire to experience Outback destinations in a more active way rather than simply view scenery and natural attractions

(Schmallegger et al., 2011). Visitors were also looking for differentiation between different Outback destinations, while destination marketing organisations (DMOs) appeared to be producing ever more similar promotional material focusing on the visual appeal of natural attractions and common Outback scenery (Carson & Taylor, 2009).

Fig. 6.4 Historic Springvale Homestead remains closed in 2019 and is in urgent need of renovation (*Photo Doris A. Carson*)



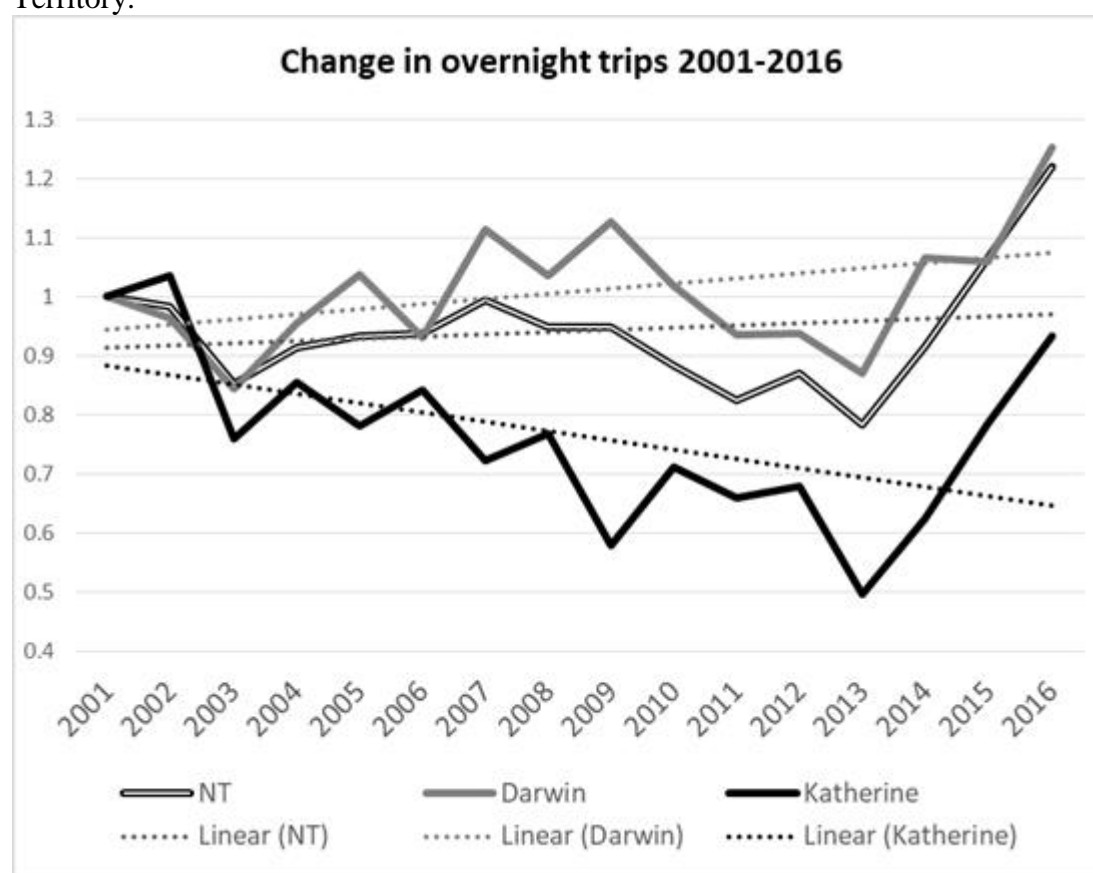
The decline of road-based tourism (self-drive and coach) reflects these trends, but also the rise of low cost airline travel, which changed and reduced the range of readily accessible Outback destinations (Baker & Donnet, 2012). Outback trip itineraries which once included thousands of kilometres, weeks of road travel and brief visits to a large number of (mostly natural) attractions have changed to visits of a few days to one site and its immediate surrounds. Destinations such as Katherine, which do not have low cost air access, lost their status as a result. Finally, the average trip length for both international and domestic visitors has shortened in the past 20 years, meaning that fewer destinations are visited. Even the remaining substantial long-haul, road-based markets (e.g. older ‘grey nomads’ with RVs, caravans and four-wheel-drive cars) have changed their itineraries, with the Northern Territory losing out to ‘newer’ destinations in Western Australia in particular (Taylor & Carson, 2010). Nevertheless, the DMOs with an interest in Katherine (e.g. Katherine Regional Tourism Association, Tourism Top End, and Tourism NT) have continued to invest in marketing to self-drive tourists, largely in the absence of alternative markets. Marketing continues to be relatively generic aiming to capture a very broad market, although there are specific strategies for four-wheel-drive tourists in particular. The cornerstone of the marketing has been the various drive tourism routes which connect to Katherine, even though by the end of the first decade of this century, these routes (and the idea of ‘touring routes’ in general without deeper visitor engagement, signature experiences, and high quality

commercial products) had become viewed as somewhat losing their market appeal both in Australia and globally (Cartan & Carson, 2011).

Another substantial challenge for Katherine tourism has been the strong economic and tourism growth in Darwin, and the resulting change in destination hierarchies within the Top End region. Visitor numbers to Darwin and its immediate surrounding region were relatively strong during the first decade of this century while other Outback destinations have declined. This has been largely due to the presence of low cost airlines in Darwin, a fast growing local population, and investment in new tourism attractions and infrastructure in the city (Schmallegger & Carson, 2010b). In addition, major investment in oil and gas developments in the city triggered a major construction and housing boom and led to a boost in non-leisure visitor numbers to Darwin (i.e. business tourists and non-resident workers), meaning that Darwin-based tourism and accommodation providers flourished, while regional spillover of tourist and economic benefits beyond the city borders remained limited. Key performance indicators for Darwin (such as its share of overall visitor numbers and visitor nights in the Northern Territory, and average length of stay) have improved since 2001, while Katherine's performance has remained rather flat or declined (Fig. 6.5, Table 6.1). Tourism development and marketing across the Top End of the Northern Territory has thus been substantially focussed on Darwin since the early 2000s.

Darwin has usurped Katherine's role as the main gateway to the Top End, with the great majority of day tours to Kakadu National Park, Nitmiluk and even Katherine town itself originating in Darwin (Buultjens, Wilde, & Crummy, 2011). This may of course be to some extent part of the legacy of the floods (when businesses re-booked customers on Darwin-based itineraries), but it is most certainly also an outcome of the shifting Outback tourism markets. Critically, the location of Nitmiluk between Katherine and Darwin means that many day trippers to the Gorge do not travel on to visit the town—a decoupling of the two destinations that has had a substantial negative impact on the latter. This disconnect between the region's main tourist attraction (the Gorge) and the main population centre (Katherine town) was already apparent before the flood, with past tourism strategies repeatedly emphasising the need to better integrate the Gorge with experiences available in town and the surrounding region (Northern Territory Tourist Commission, 1994a, b). However, the increase in day trips in the late 1990s seems to have exacerbated the lack of integration between Nitmiluk and Katherine. In addition, improved facilities, accommodation and amenities at Nitmiluk have created a relatively self-contained destination and visitor hub at the Gorge even for those who stay overnight. At the same time, a persistent lack of new investment in (or at least upgrading of) accommodation facilities and complementary visitor services in Katherine town has meant that the town has struggled to compete with Nitmiluk for overnight visitors.

Fig. 6.5 Percentage change in overnight trips to Katherine, Darwin and the Northern Territory.



Source Based on data from Australia's National and International Visitor Surveys (Tourism Research Australia, 2017)

Note Visitor data collections from the 1990s used different metrics and are therefore not comparable to the data collected by Tourism Research Australia since the early 2000s

Darwin is also a primary destination for the Ghan tourist train, along with Alice Springs (some 1200 km south of Katherine). The possibilities that the train presented for intermediate destinations, such as Katherine, have largely not been realised because of tight stopover itineraries and reductions in services in recent years (due to demand being lower than expected). Darwin and Alice Springs have also assumed greater political significance in tourism marketing and management since the consolidation of the Northern Territory's official 'tourism regions' (defined and supported by NT Government funding) from nine to two in 2008. Katherine no longer is the centre of its own tourism region, and instead belongs to the Top End region, including Darwin, Kakadu National Park, and Nitmiluk, but with Darwin as the main centre. Katherine also lost much of its influence in tourism-related decision-making when a number of political and administrative key positions were moved from Katherine to Darwin in the early 2000s as part of economic rationalisations and centralisation of government services, thus reducing Katherine's lobbying power within the NT Government.

The demographic and socio-economic changes in Katherine described earlier in the chapter—focussing on a decline in economically 'active' populations and an increase in economically 'disengaged' populations—are linked in some ways to the flood events of 1998 and 2006. They also, however, reflect a broader shift in the human geography of the Northern

Territory, with large numbers of mostly Indigenous people who once lived in remote communities and traditional homelands moving into the larger urban centres (Taylor & Carson, 2009). These new populations were increasingly drawn to towns like Katherine to seek education and employment opportunities, access to health and other services, and escape from the negative aspects of remote living (e.g. high police presence and incarceration rates, prohibition of alcohol, episodes of family and broader violence) that were most keenly highlighted in 2007 when remote community management was taken over by the Australian Government as part of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (Taylor & Carson, 2009). The displacement of Indigenous people from remote communities continues to be a major challenge for policymakers and leaders in urban centres like Katherine, and the resultant social problems have led to a perceived reduction in the attractiveness of those centres for conventional leisure tourists (Carson, Carson, & Taylor, 2013). Local business owners in Katherine have repeatedly complained about the negative town image arising from increasing numbers of out-of-town Indigenous visitors camping in public spaces designed for conventional tourists (Fig. 6.6).

Other local factors which might be related to the floods and/or have more complex origins include the downgrading of what were some of the showcase businesses in the 1990s. At the time of the floods (and even before then) there was some acceptance that Katherine tourism businesses, including the bus station, the shopping centre, and some accommodation houses, were rather 'tired' and required refurbishment (Northern Territory Tourist Commission, 1994a, b). The floods may have presented an opportunity for that refurbishment to occur, but the domination of assets by a single local business which was not in a position to make major re-investments, and by distantly headquartered businesses who shifted their attention to Darwin meant that many assets were allowed to continue to decline. There has been some re-investment in more recent years, but it may be a case of 'too little, too late' to recapture lost markets or inspire substantial new markets. Even though new buyers have acquired some of the old assets in town, they have not (yet) invested in upgrading the standard of facilities to any great extent. More importantly, while Darwin and even Nitmiluk have attracted major new tourism and infrastructure investment in recent years, such investment has been conspicuously absent in Katherine town. There has certainly not been any substantial new product introduced to the market in Katherine since the floods, making it difficult to reinstate Katherine as a successful mass tourism destination. Instead, discussions around new tourism investment for the region continue to focus on improving the visitor experience at Nitmiluk (as for example evidenced by recent debates around installing a multi-million dollar skywalk over the Gorge), suggesting that the town's position within the regional destination hierarchy continues to decline.

Fig. 6.6 Indigenous visitors from ‘out of town’, sitting in front of the tourist transit centre, with one of the few remaining long-haul bus services running through Katherine (*Photo Doris A. Carson*)



6.5 Prospects for a Revitalised Tourism Sector?

While the story of Katherine tourism since the 1998 floods has generally been a negative one, there are some prospects of a more positive path ahead. Certainly, Nitmiluk continues to be a successful mass tourism destination (for NT standards), and there remains the possibility for the town to leverage off that destination more effectively. Katherine may be able to provide complementary products for those who do wish to stay overnight, with a particular emphasis on increasing the range and quality of food and beverage and accommodation options available to visitors to the Gorge. Repositioning Katherine as a secondary destination for Gorge visitors rather than as the gateway to the Gorge might open up new markets that can be sourced through Darwin. Darwin's residential growth also provides opportunities for new and expanded markets, and recent visitor statistics have shown moderate increases in both VFR (visiting friends and relatives) and local business and government tourism in recent years (Table 6.1). Similarly, business tourists and non-resident workers associated with the recent major upgrade of the Tindal air force base near Katherine are expected to benefit tourism and hospitality businesses in town. Remote area tourism marketing rarely considers the value of local and non-leisure oriented markets (which at times may even include Indigenous people visiting from remote communities) (Taylor, Carson, Carson, & Brokensha, 2015; Schmallegger et al., 2010), but Katherine is a rare case which not only has a comparatively large urban centre nearby but seems to attract a range of alternative population mobilities that could be harnessed for new tourism development.

Table 6.1 Selected tourism indicators for Katherine

	2001	2006	2011	2016
Overnight trips to Katherine region ('000)	351	296	232	328
- Percentage of leisure trips	59%	56%	61%	52%
- Percentage of business trips	16%	27%	21%	26%
- Percentage of VFR trips	10%	10%	7%	16%
- Percentage of international visitors	23%	17%	16%	13%
Katherine's share of all NT trips	24%	21%	19%	18%
Darwin's share of all NT trips	45%	45%	51%	46%
Visitor nights in Katherine region ('000)	1243	890	958	1274
Katherine share of NT nights	12%	9%	10%	10%
Darwin share of NT nights	37%	44%	49%	50%
Mean length of stay in Katherine region	3.5	3.0	4.1	3.9
Mean length of stay in Darwin	5.8	7.1	7.6	7.6
Hospitality employment in Katherine region	6.7%	6.6%	7.5%	6.2%
Large accommodation facilities (hotels, motels, serviced apartments with more than 15 rooms)	-	9	9	7

Source: Tourism Research Australia (2017) and Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017)

Katherine's urban history remains its primary non-nature based attraction. A decoupling from the mass nature-based destinations of Nitmiluk and Kakadu may present an opportunity to focus local tourism efforts more on this history. This strategy is reflected in the Katherine stopover itinerary for the Ghan, and exploiting it further might mean that Katherine can offer a diversity of product and experiences that are not usually found in remote destinations in Australia (Carson, Prideaux, Coghlan, & Taylor, 2009). With *Travel North* divesting itself of some local assets, there is also the chance for new operators to come in and identify new opportunities and new markets. These new opportunities and new markets are unlikely to be of the scale that Katherine experienced in the 1990s, and they may not support the type of mass development that is typically preferred by governments with an interest in remote tourism, particularly in the context of the Northern Territory where large-scale resort developments have been the preferred approach (Schmallegger & Carson, 2010a). However, if what the evolution of Katherine tourism as described in this chapter reflects is an increasing localising of opportunities, then more niche and small-scale activities would seem appropriate. Smaller scale and better targeted development might also help manage the relationship between tourism and the uneasy social environment in Katherine at the moment, as well as provide more realistic opportunities for Indigenous communities to participate in the tourism sector.

6.6 Conclusions

We have previously characterised ‘remote tourism’ in the *Beyond Periphery* model as involving destinations which are largely disconnected from major transport routes, source markets, and other destinations (Schmallegger et al., 2010). Remote destinations are therefore often ‘propped up’ by substantial government investment and large-scale tourism developments that require few local complementary products. As a result, destinations even in close proximity to one another can have very different development paths and markets (Carson et al., 2014). In this regard, Katherine is an interesting example of the evolution of a remote tourism destination. The destination prior to the 1998 floods had some of the key characteristics that have been associated with remote tourism. It relied on largely very distant markets, targeted mass tourism, and had a focus on nature-based and passive sightseeing tourism experiences. There was also strong government support for tourism, particularly through development of visitor services at Nitmiluk and the support of local DMOs. Counter to the stereotype, however, was the strong involvement of a key local business (although overall there were relatively few industry players), and the use of urban history as an important part of the attraction mix. One could also argue that Katherine was well connected to the (then) substantial flows of road-based travellers in Outback Australia, and to a regional network of attractions and amenities stretching across the Top End of the Northern Territory.

The 1998 floods represent a bifurcation point, not just because of their immediate damaging impact on businesses and infrastructure, but because of their timing at what was already a critical juncture in Outback tourism development. Part of the reason for the optimistic view of recovery espoused by Faulkner and Vikulov (2001) at the time may well have been the expectation that Outback tourism would continue to grow with larger numbers of tourists embarking on long-haul road-based trips, and particularly self-drive trips. However, the possibility of recovering to a similar state to what had existed before 1998 was in part taken away by the decline in road based tourism that began at about this time. Katherine after the floods found itself more *distant* from the flows of tourists in the Outback that began to be centred on destinations with low cost air access.

In addition to it becoming increasingly *disconnected* from tourist flows in Australia, Katherine as a destination has become more aligned with aspects of the *Beyond Periphery* model since the turn of this century. The decoupling of Katherine town as a destination from the larger nature-based destinations in the region is reflective of a *discontinuous* process of tourism development, in which individual locations, even in relatively close proximity, develop tourism in different ways, suggesting that ‘one-size-fits-all’ regional marketing and development approaches frequently do not work in such large, *diverse* and *disconnected* regions. In this case, Kakadu and Nitmiluk have turned north to Darwin in their development strategies, leaving Katherine town more isolated in the south. The combination of circumstances which led to a more Darwin-centric development in the region reinforces the observation that remote destinations run the risk of becoming more *distant* and *disconnected* over time, even as (or even because) transport and other technologies theoretically allow for greater connectivity between remote places.

Katherine tourism development through the early boom period was *dependent* on the decisions of a few major players, and that has largely remained the case after the floods. The actions (or inactions) of a few local players, along with the outmigration of a handful of businesses and influential political stakeholders, illustrate the problematic role of *detail* in remote development processes, suggesting that small numbers and seemingly innocuous

changes can have substantial implications for local development pathways. There has also been a persistent dependence on government to invest in ‘recovery’ and marketing of previously successful products and destination experiences, possibly at the expense of the introduction of new ideas and realisation of new opportunities.

There is also a sense of *delicacy* in discussing the future of Katherine tourism, with local social issues threatening the attractiveness of the town (Carson et al., 2013), and something of a competition for government and industry support between Katherine-based businesses and the Indigenous operators of Nitmiluk Tours in particular. Nitmiluk’s status as an Indigenous managed National Park puts it in a prominent political position (at both Territory and federal government levels) which is not occupied by the town-based businesses, causing frustrations among some non-Indigenous business owners.

The evidence suggests that Katherine tourism was in need of innovation and rejuvenation prior to the 1998 floods, and the need to rethink and reposition tourism was heightened by the floods. At the same time, the floods may have served to detract attention from the broader and less obvious trends impacting Katherine’s development, again emphasising the need to look more at the *details* affecting remote tourism and overall development pathways. The focus on flood recovery may thus have reinforced ways of ‘doing tourism’ that have ultimately led to Katherine falling further behind. Twenty years later, Katherine’s public tourism image appears to still be attempting to reach out to the markets of the 1990s (particularly the long-haul self-drive market), and there may be some risk that this will make it difficult to recognise and exploit new markets or new ways of attracting markets through stronger links with Darwin.

A contribution of the Katherine story in the continuing efforts to develop conceptualisations of ‘remote tourism’ is the reminder that there is in fact a diversity of destinations that may be somewhat distant from population centres, tourism markets and tourism industry representatives. Some remote destinations are heavily dependent on a single attraction (in Australia, these would include Uluru/Ayers Rock and the Great Barrier Reef), while others are part of regional sets of attractions often linked by modes of transport and benefiting from collaboration between ‘local’ providers who may nevertheless be distant from one another (Cartan & Carson, 2011). While remote areas are generally sparsely populated from a resident population point of view, there are often relatively large urban centres within remote areas which have the capacity to attract investment and resources even in difficult times (Carson et al., 2010), and to out-compete even better established destinations as a result. In this regard, the uneven relationship between Katherine (with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants) and Darwin (population nearly 150,000) appears to be an important part of the story described in this chapter, and warrants further investigation as a feature of ‘remote tourism’. Continuing urbanisation is a trend that also affects remote and sparsely populated areas, and thus introduces a new facilitator of *dynamic* change to these territories.

Katherine, while a remote destination as described in the *Beyond Periphery* model, is relatively accessible in Australian terms, has in the past been relatively well-linked with other destinations in the region, and has grown on the back of a mix of large-scale and small-scale developments. Accessibility, interdependence, and the flexibility that should be associated with diverse development have, however, been shown to be quite fragile assets for tourism development in Katherine, which has been apparently powerless to fight back against the *dynamic* changes caused by the floods, but also by changing market conditions in Outback tourism generally. There remains a need to better understand how innovative development

and repositioning can better occur in remote destinations, as markets continue to change and the challenges of isolation and product homogeneity persist. The Katherine story provides some insights into how remote destinations may be dramatically changed by complex combinations of circumstances.

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