Exploring Practitioner Conceptualisations of Professionalism and the Impact of Professionalisation on the Work of Australian Ecotour Guides

By

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

I, Sandra Sun-Ah Ponting, certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

[Signature]

June 30th 2009
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY.......................................................i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ....................................................................................ii
LIST OF TABLES ..............................................................................................viii
LIST OF FIGURES .............................................................................................ix
ABSTRACT .........................................................................................................x

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND .......... 1

1.1 Professionalism .......................................................................................... 1
    1.1.1 Introduction ....................................................................................... 1
    1.1.2 The Professions and their Professionalism ........................................... 2

1.2 Development of the Study .......................................................................... 6
    1.2.1 Some Background ............................................................................ 6
    1.2.2 Who Are Ecotour Guides? ................................................................. 6
    1.2.3 Justification for Research .................................................................. 8

1.3 Thesis Aim and Objectives ....................................................................... 10

1.4 Approach to Study .................................................................................... 11
    1.4.1 Introduction ..................................................................................... 11
    1.4.2 Theoretical Perspectives ................................................................. 11
    1.4.3 Methodological Approach ............................................................... 12

1.5 Contribution of the Study ....................................................................... 13

1.6 Summary .................................................................................................. 13

1.7 Thesis Outline ........................................................................................ 14

CHAPTER TWO: SETTING THE CONTEXT FOR ECOTOUR GUIDING .......... 16

2.1 Introduction ............................................................................................. 16

2.2 Tour Guiding ........................................................................................... 18
    2.2.1 Introduction ..................................................................................... 18
    2.2.2 Tour Guiding in the Past ................................................................. 18
    2.2.3 Learning About Contemporary Tour Guides .................................... 21
    2.2.4 Beyond Tour Guiding Role Studies ............................................... 25

2.3 Ecotourism and Tour Guiding ................................................................ 30
CHAPTER THREE: PROFESSIONALISM IN AUSTRALIAN ECOTOUR GUIDING

3.1 Introduction

3.2 Conceptualising Work

3.2.1 Introduction

3.2.2 Meanings of Work – Creating Self-Identity

3.2.3 Work as Emotional Labour

3.3 Professionalisation and the Professions

3.3.1 Introduction

3.3.2 Defining Professionalisation

3.3.3 Different Ways of Understanding the Professions

3.4 Professionalism and Ecotour Guiding

3.4.1 Introduction

3.4.2 The Concept of Professional Ecotour Guides

3.5 Events of Professionalisation for Australian Ecotour Guides

3.5.1 Stages of Professionalisation

3.5.2 Codes of Guiding Practice

3.5.3 Expert Knowledge and Skills - Training and Educational Programs

3.5.4 Professional Certification Programs by Professional Associations

3.5.5 Caveat - Professionalisation for Ecotour Guides

3.6 Summary

CHAPTER FOUR: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS

4.1 Introduction

4.2 Interpretivist Approach to Methodology

4.3 Developing The Research Questions

4.4 A Case Study of the EcoGuide Australia Certification Program
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.4.1 Why Study The Case?</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.2 Validity and Reliability of the Study</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.3 Interpretivist Case Study Ethics and Politics</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5 Case Study Research Process and Procedures</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5.1 Introduction</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5.2 Semi-Structured Interviews</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5.3 Ecotour Observation</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5.4 Questionnaire Surveys of Tourists</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5.5 Data Recording and Transcriptions</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5.6 Data Analysis and Interpretation</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6 Strengths and Limitations of the Case Study Approach</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7 Summary</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER FIVE: CONTEXTUALISING THE SPECIALISED WORK OF AUSTRALIAN ECOTOUR GUIDES</strong></td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Introduction</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 Specialised Work of Ecotour Guides</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.1 Work Responsibility</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2 The Title of ‘Ecotour Guide’</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 Knowledge and Skills of an Ecotour Guide</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 Performing Specialised Work</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.1 Expert Knowledge and Skills</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.2 Central Task - Environmental Interpretation</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.3 Expert Skill – Providing Meaningful Experiences of Nature</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.4 Expert Knowledge - Accurate Environmental Knowledge</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.5 Achieving Overall Tourist Satisfaction</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5 Summary</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER SIX: CONCEPTUALISING PROFESSIONAL ECOTOUR GUIDES</strong></td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1 Introduction</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2 Professional Guides are Passionate Guides</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3 Passion for Nature</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.1 Working for Nature</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.1 Commitment to Nature Conservation</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1 A typology of Australian tour guides.............................................................29
Table 2.2 Key roles of general and ecotour guides in tour guiding literature..............37
Table 3.1 Defining characteristics of professions..........................................................61
Table 3.2 Stages of professionalisation in the Australian ecotour guiding sector .......73
Table 3.3 Summary of professional certification and accreditation programs available for tour guides in Australia ..................................................................................................................85
Table 4.1 Details of research participants....................................................................117
Table 4.1 Details of research participants (continued)..................................................118
Table 5.1 Empirical support for the work (roles) of ecotour guides identified in the literature ........................................................................................................................................136
Table 5.1 Empirical support for the work (roles) of ecotour guides identified in the literature (continued)........................................................................................................................................137
Table 5.2 Most memorable experience from ecotours.................................................142
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1 The dynamics of the tourist guide’s role ...................................................... 23
Figure 2.2 Images of ecotour guide brochures ............................................................... 27
Figure 5.1 Expert knowledge and skills for the specialised work of ecotour guides .... 157
Figure 6.1 Ecotour guides’ conceptual model of a professional .................................. 161
Figure 8.1 Challenges to being a professional ecotour guide ........................................ 222
Figure 8.2 Striving for an ideal state of ecotour guiding professionalism ...................... 237
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate the work of ecotour guides, and the impact professionalisation has on raising ecotour guides’ levels of professionalism. A review of literature and research across the topics of tour guiding, ecotourism and ecotour guiding revealed that professionalisation theory has not been engaged in the ongoing debate concerning the professionalisation of ecotourism. Despite frequent use of the term ‘professional’ in ecotourism discourse, investigation showed that its use is arbitrary, poorly defined, and lacking a sound theoretical and empirical basis. Interpretivist epistemology guided a case study of Ecotourism Australia’s EcoGuide Certification Program which involved in-depth interviews with certified and non-certified ecotour guides as well as key ecotourism industry stakeholders, ecotour observations, and questionnaire surveys of tourists. From the collected data a number of interpretations were drawn. Firstly, ecotour guides’ conceptualise a professional in their field in terms of their passion for nature and people. Secondly, certified EcoGuides did not report any tangible benefits of certification. Thirdly there are significant disparities between the perceptions of ecotour guides and key industry stakeholders in relation to professionalisation. In meeting the interpretivist imperative to provide useful, practical results, the study concludes by discussing the practical implications of the research findings. In the final analysis it is suggested that professionalism may yet be achieved if a collaborative professionalisation can be developed between ecotour guides and the ecotourism industry.