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

By

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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.

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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.