Beyond shopping and gambling: re-imagining Australian cities as settings for memorable nature-based experiences

Betty Weiler
Southern Cross University, betty.weiler@scu.edu.au

H Y. Chen

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Re-imagining Australian cities as settings for 
memorable nature-based experiences

Professor Betty Weiler and Hanyu Chen
Southern Cross University

Biography
Betty Weiler is a Research Professor in the School of Tourism and 
Hospitality Management at Southern Cross University Australia. Her 30 
years of tourism research, education and training and consultancy work have 
spanned several continents, mainly working with colleagues and in-country 
managers, tourism operators and trainers in Australia, North America, Latin 
America, and Southeast Asia. Her 150+ publications in international tourism 
research journals and other scholarly outlets have centred on the tourist 
experience, particularly the role of the tour guide and heritage/nature interpretation, including 
several projects on the inbound China market. Much of Betty’s work has been in partnership 
with protected areas and wildlife and heritage attractions, with her most recent work focusing 
on managing visitors and influencing their on-site and post-visit behaviour. Many outputs 
from Betty’s research include training packages, manuals, and tool kits continue to be used by 
and/or inform tourism practice, particularly in the areas of interpretation and tour guiding. 
Finally, Betty is a multi-award winning PhD supervisor, an editorial board member of six 
international tourism journals, and co-author of the first scholarly monograph on tour guiding.

Abstract
The desire for a quality nature-based experience is a key driver for Chinese to visit Australia. 
The inbound holiday travel market from China has been dominated by package tourists, 
whose travel expectations and experiences have been investigated, analysed and reported by 
numerous academic and government researchers. Typically, their travel occurs within 
temporally and spatially limited itineraries, constrained by factors including the supply chain, 
aviation policy and practices, on-ground costs and tour guiding services. The travel patterns 
of the growing independent travel market from China have been much less researched, 
although both markets appear to share many of the same constraints, motivations, 
expectations and perceptions of Australia as a destination. When Chinese select a holiday 
destination, “world class beauty and natural environment” is consistently ranked in the top 
five, along with good food, wine and cuisine, and safety.

Understanding what constitutes a beautiful and natural environment provides important clues 
about new and modified travel experiences that can be developed for the Chinese market. 
Informed by the perceptions, interests and constraints faced by Chinese travellers, this paper 
explores city travel experiences, focusing particularly on diversifying and deepening 
opportunities for nature-based experiences in cities. A number of elements are identified as 
key to successfully marketing and delivering nature-based experiences in cities, and these are 
examined in relation to both package tourists and independent tourists. To re-image and re- 
position Australian cities as settings for memorable nature-based experiences, a continuum of 
nature-based experiences in urban environments that can realistically be developed are 
presented. Key requirements and potential experiences along the continuum are outlined.
What is a memorable experience?
Generally speaking, a positive or memorable experience can be defined as “an experience [positively] remembered and recalled after the event has occurred” (Kim, Ritchie & McCormick, 2010). Western research suggests memorability comes from:

- Positive affect (feelings/emotions) (Bruner, 1991; Wirtz et al, 2003; Larsen & Jenssen, 2004; Curtin, 2010; Tung & Ritchie, 2011);
- Surprise, novelty, and/or local distinctiveness/difference from home (Reder et al, 2002; CTC, 2004; Morgan, 2006; Curtin, 2010; Kim et al, 2010);
- Abundant choices, spontaneity, free time / flexibility and/or engagement (CTC, 2004; Morgan, 2006; Curtin, 2010; Kim et al, 2010).

According to Chinese literature culturally appropriate experiences are:

- Aesthetics, harmony (Sun et al, 2014);
- Blend of nature, culture, history/heritage (Cater, 2006; Cheng et al 2011; TA, 2012).

What is a nature-based experience?
The literature has described 3 types of nature-based experiences:

- Experiences in nature (e.g. scenic tour);
- Experiences about nature (e.g. wildlife viewing);
- Experiences for nature (e.g. ecotourism, EE) (Dowling et al, 1981).

But what is “nature” and “nature-based” to the Chinese market, and how important is it to a Chinese visitor? The literature proffers various responses to this question:

- “Nature-based experience is a key driver for Chinese to visit Australia” (TRA, 2014);
- “When selecting a long-haul holiday destination, natural beauty is the most important pulling factor for Chinese visitors” (International market research findings, TRA);
- “Nature-based experience is pursued in outbound travel among most Chinese” (64%) (TA, 2012);
- “One of the main attractions for the Chinese visitor to Australia is having a nature-based experience: 65% hope to have a nature-based experience and 26% a wildlife experience.” (TRA, 2014);
- “Two of the top five factors when Chinese are selecting a holiday destination are related to nature: ‘world class beauty and natural environments‘ and ‘spectacular coastal scenery’” (TA, 2014).

What is nature, a natural environment, and a nature-based experience?
What is “world class beauty and natural environments”?

- only 10% associated this with remote coastal environments,
- only 8% with wide-open inland / outback environments,
- only 4% with wilderness/mountain environments (TA 2014).

However, there is a strong desire

- to experience a natural environment that is different to home,
- to view natural landscapes (beaches, islands, mountains, grassland, countryside),
- to see wildlife (TA, 2011).

But is this what Chinese tourists are getting?
Current Chinese inbound visitors’ travel behaviour in Australia

How long do they stay?
The average length of stay of a holiday traveller is about 10 days (TA 2014).

Where do they go?

(Source: South Australian Tourism Commission, 2013)
Sample itineraries:
- Sydney, Nelson Bay, Central Coast, Sydney, Blue Mountains, Melbourne, Phillip Island, Melbourne, Bendigo, Twelve Apostles, Melbourne (7 days);
- Sydney, Blue Mountains, Cairns (Kuranda and Green Island), Brisbane, Gold Coast, Melbourne (9 days);
- Sydney, Wollongong (Jervis Bay), Sydney, Gold Coast, Brisbane, Gold Coast, Melbourne, Ballarat, Melbourne (11 days).

How much nature is experienced in cities?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sydney: (2 days)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sydney Opera House (1.5 hours)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fish Market (30 mins)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Royal Botanic Garden + Sydney Tower + St Mary’s Cathedral,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hyde Park + the Rocks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bondi Beach (1 hour)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Sydney:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sydney Aquarium (30 mins)</td>
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<td>Taronga Zoo (30 mins)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sydney Opera house (30 mins)</td>
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<td>Bondi Beach (1 hour)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Melbourne:</th>
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<tr>
<td>St Patrick’s Cathedral (20 mins)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Captain Cook’s cottage (15 mins)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brunswick Street (15 mins)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parliament House</td>
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<tr>
<td>Royal Botanic Garden (20 mins)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eureka Skydeck (30 mins)</td>
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<td>Phillip Island (40 mins)</td>
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What can we do better?
Offer a continuum of nature-based experiences in cities:
- Experiences in nature (e.g. scenic tour);
- Experiences about nature (e.g. wildlife viewing);
- Experiences for nature (e.g. ecotourism, EE).

Include elements that make experiences memorable and culturally appropriate:
- Positive affect (feelings/emotions);
- Surprise, novelty, and/or local distinctiveness/difference from home;
- Abundant choices, spontaneity, free time / flexibility and/or engagement;
- Aesthetics, harmony;
- Blend of nature, culture, heritage/history.

Key elements of experiences in, about and for nature
- Access to reliable travel information – on-line and in Chinese;
- Infrastructure to facilitate free time activity (easy to access; easy to pay);
- Chinese-language interpretation, preferably face-to-face, via trained guides – for Gen Y, maybe “aps”;
- Culturally-appropriate settings – human and nature co-exist; human-enhanced nature OK;
- Culturally-appropriate interpretation – use of aesthetics, poetry / story-telling, legends, analogies / metaphors.
**Key elements of experiences in nature (backdrop)**

Quality natural environments:

- air quality (Li, 2011; Zhu and Yao, 2008);
- water quality (Li, 2011; Zhu and Yao, 2008);
- climate/weather (Li, 2011; Zheng and Yan, 2013);
- vegetation density (Li, 2011; Zhu and Yao, 2008; Zheng and Yan, 2013; Di et al., 2010);
- cleanliness/pollution-free (Li, 2011; Zhu and Yao, 2008);
- aesthetic / attractive (Wang et al., 2012).

Quality nature-based experiences:

- breathing fresh air (Shan et al., 2014);
- seeing water (rivers, lakes, beach), blended with (Sun and Gong, 2008; Gao, Zhang and Zhuang, 2009; Di et al., 2010; Hsu et al, 2007);
- viewing heritage buildings and hearing heritage stories (Frost et al., 2014; Li, 2011; Sun and Gong, 2008).

**Key elements of experiences about nature (attractions-based)**

Nature-based experiences at attractions such as zoos, botanic gardens and city parks (Zhu et al., 2010). Quality natural environments, plus positive affect, novelty/local distinctiveness, free time/choice, engagement. For example:

- Learning/educational experiences (nature and heritage) (Liu, 2004; Ma et al, 2008) via guides (GPTs) and aps/on-site written commentary (independents);
- Low-level physical activities and group-oriented program (Zhang and Yang, 2014) e.g. walking, cycling, golf, water-based activities such as rowing, paddling, surfing, diving, fishing (Tourism Australia 2014);
- Bird-watching and wildlife-based experiences (terrestrial and marine) (Tourism Australia, 2014);
- Incorporate local festivals and events (Tourism Australia, 2014).

**Key elements of Experiences for nature (green-travel)**

Environmentally responsible tourism including green-label tours, accommodation, restaurants and attractions (Zhang, 2010).

- Nature-based experiences that engage with local community in a positive way.
- Activities that foster support and protection of heritage.
- Activities that are pro-conservation – toward wildlife, nature and environment.
Continuum of potentially memorable city-based experiences in nature

Continuum of experiences:
- Experiences in nature;
- Experiences about nature;
- Experiences for nature.

Repositioning strategies:
- Psychological repositioning;
- Competitive repositioning;
- Associative repositioning;
- Real repositioning.

Limitations need to take into account as does the non-holiday market; both groups and independent travellers (e.g. education, business, VFR). Constraints must also be considered (e.g. the supply chain, aviation policy and practices, on-ground costs and quality/service issues). There is also a need for collaboration across countries and sectors (research, industry, government) in order to reposition Australian cities as settings for memorable nature-based experiences.

Distribution of inbound holiday travel
Continuum of memorable nature-based experiences in cities

**Experiences with nature as backdrop**
- experiences in nature

Requirements:
- Environment that is perceived as high quality by the market, including air, water, climate, vegetation density, cleanliness

Experiential components:
- Breathing fresh air AND
- Viewing water (beaches, lakes, rivers) AND
- Viewing built heritage
- Coach-based, cruise-based and or self-drive?
- Local festival/event?

**Nature-based experiences at attractions such as zoos, botanical gardens and city parks**
- experiences about nature

Requirements:
- As in A, plus
- One or more nature-based attractions

Experiential components:
- As in A, plus
- Learning/educational experiences AND/OR
- Low-level physical activities and group-oriented experiences AND/OR
- Wildlife-based experiences

**Environmentally responsible nature-based tourist experiences**
- experiences for nature

Requirements:
- As in B, plus
- Green-label accommodation, restaurants and transportation

Experiential components:
- Experiences that engage with local community in a positive way AND/OR
- Activities that foster support and protection of heritage AND/OR
- Activities that are pro-conservation – toward wildlife, nature and environment

What do you look for when choosing a holiday destination?

![Graph showing what respondents look for when choosing a holiday destination]

**What does ‘world class beauty and natural environment’ mean to you?**

![Graph showing what constitutes ‘world class beauty and natural environment’]

- Remarkable scenery to soak up and enjoy: 64%
- Engaging with nature first hand, for example by hiking, bike riding or scuba diving: 18%
- World Heritage status areas: 10%
- Visiting sites of historical, cultural or religious significance: 8%
- None of the above: 0%