Professionalisation of an Organisation: An Examination of the

Savannah Guides Ecotourism Association

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Introduction

This paper analyses the ways individuals in an ecotourism association, called ‘Savannah Guides’, decide to maintain and retain their membership of that overarching organisation. The ongoing membership of their organisation is a part of their ethos and identity as individual ecotourism operators and as ecotourism operators within the Savannah Guides organisation. Individuals are attracted to the group through ideals such as group cohesion and professional development, but also by marketing opportunities for the group which are intended to lead to identifiable recognition by tourists. The attractions of regimented organisational conduct reflect a willingness of conformity and acceptance, but also a marked culture of submission and uniformity within the organisational structure (Hynes 1999).

The Savannah Guides are a not-for-profit organisation that provides a model for the expansion and the accomplishment of world’s best practice nature-based and culture-based outback tourism in the tropical savannas region of northern Australia. The principles, ethos and ongoing participation of this association in the creation of a professional ‘group identity’ have provided a ‘remote area guiding model’ that, as far as is known, is perhaps unique to ecotourism anywhere in the world (Hynes 1999: 13). This model comprises a uniformity and consistency of ecotourism guiding services that are made available to the touring public across the tropical savannas region of northern Australia. Recognition of their skills and high standard of guiding attributes and services are evidenced in their code of conduct when guiding tours,
their elevated status as superior ecotour guides, and finally their standardisation, of uniforms and dress conventions. All these attributes serve to set this group apart from and above other more mediocre ecotour guiding models.

Inculcation, ritual, initiation and belonging are all factors essential to maintain a group’s structure and cohesion. In this paper the motivations and experiences of the ecotourism guides are analysed to provide an ‘insider’ account of conformity within this organisation. An examination of the overlap between the guides as individuals, and the guides as group adherents highlights the common characteristics between organisational structure and individual agency.

**Background Data**

The choice of a participant cohort for this study is based on the fact that the group under examination is made up of an existing group of participants, thereby providing access to a convenient and distinct representative group for a study concerning ecotour guides (cf. Whyte 1955).

All the interviews were undertaken at Savannah Guide Schools held at various locations around the outback and tropical savannas regions of northern Australia. The interviews lasted between forty and sixty minutes. As the 'Schools' are held biannually, there was every opportunity to re-acquaint myself with participants, and to verify my emergent interpretations of the data (Gulati 1998: 103).

The majority of my data was obtained through interviews (Maxwell 1996: 89; Wellman 1977: 56). The interviews, like those in similar studies (Dunne 1997: 29;
Mason 1996: 39), were in-depth, semi-structured and covered diverse topics related to ecotourism and interpretive guiding.

The interviews explored a number of themes, such as length of time as a member of the Savannah Guides, previous employment roles, satisfaction levels regarding membership of the group and applicability of accreditation processes for new group members. In particular, I focused on how the individuals became ecotour guides and how they came to join the Savannah Guides organisation. In total I interviewed thirty-nine participants. The interviews were conducted in different locations across the outback region of northern Australia. Some of these locations included: Katherine (in the Northern Territory), Mareeba, Longreach and, the townships of Normanton and Croydon, in north western Queensland.

Throughout the data collection process, I was given freedom of access to various documents and other organisational materials that were relevant to my research. Many of these were ‘snapshots’ of the history and organisational life of the members of the ecotour organisation. These documents provided me with verification of the Savannah Guides collective activities.

**Conforming to Organisational Codes of Conduct**

Individual organisations have their own standards and rules that define them as different from other organisations. Suitability and affinity with other members of the cohort help fledgling members to adjust to group norms and regulations. New members’ acceptance and inclusion in organisational activities requires adjustment by the new initiates and tolerance from the older adherents.
The Savannah Guides association has a number of different levels of accredited or recognised guide status for individuals to attain. Initially, there is the level of trainee Savannah Guide. Then, there are the levels of Site Interpreter and Roving Interpreter, both of which are considered by the Savannah Guide organisation to be of equal status. A Site Interpreter interprets a particular ‘site’ for the tourists. A Roving Interpreter interprets various sites and flora and fauna for tourists as they move through the savanna country. Finally, there is the level of full Savannah Guide. A Savannah Guide can be either a static guide or a ‘mobile’ guide, who has achieved the higher status level (see Table 1).

**TABLE 1**

**Individual Savannah Guide Membership**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Savannah Guide Level</th>
<th>Description of Level</th>
<th>Accreditation Requirements</th>
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| Savannah Guide       | Senior guide with supervisory duties or capabilities | 1. Attendance of at least two guide schools over a two year period  
2. Minimum two years as a Roving/Site Interpreter  
3. Current First Aid Certificate  
4. Aussie Host attendance  
5. Met all requirements to be a Savannah Guide |
| Site Interpreter     | High level professional guide with in-depth regional knowledge | 1. Attendance of at least one guide school  
2. Current First Aid Certificate  
3. Aussie Host attendance |
| Roving Interpreter   | High level professional guide with in-depth knowledge across a wide area | As above |
| Trainee Guide        | A guide with a career vision | 1. Potential |
committed to Savannah Guides and undertaking continued training with a Savannah Guide mentor acknowledged by a member of the Joongai to progress to a higher level
2. Attendance at one guide school
3. Current First Aid Certificate
4. Aussie Host attendance

Within the company, or ‘enterprise’ level of accreditation, there are also a number of levels that contribute to the make-up of the group. The first group, the mobile operators, has two levels. The first is the Savannah Guide Operator accreditation, which is the lower level and which is followed by the more prestigious and up-market level of Master Operator. To progress from one level to another, specific companies must be recommended for inclusion and/or up-grade by other members of the Savannah Guide network.

There are also two other levels within the enterprise level of operators, called ‘location levels’. The first entry level is that of the Savannah Guide Site. The second, and higher level, is that of the Savannah Guide Station. To gain admission to the first level, the area must be recommended by another Savannah Guide. To be accredited at the higher level the same conditions apply. The entire acceptance, accreditation and up grade procedures only take place at one of the two Savannah Guide Schools held each year (see Table 2).

**TABLE 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Savannah Guide Enterprise Membership</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Category Level</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savannah Guide Station</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savannah Guide Site</td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savannah Guide Operator/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master Operator</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


These ‘levels’ of membership are an important sociological component of the Savannah Guides fellowship. However, they were not in place initially, and members became Savannah Guides by virtue of adherence to Savannah Guide rules and regulations and of their individual acceptance by other members of the association. In other words, originally acceptability did not include a test of capability.

Appointment to a level of Savannah Guide status can include recognition of guides’ prior learning. Recognised prior learning (RPL) is a theme relevant to all levels of Savannah Guides. Three of the guides spoke of ‘recognised prior learning’. One explained that the levels within the organisation are important in order to recognise different skill levels. This guide added that there needs to be a system of recognition for people who bring different but relevant skills to the Savannah Guide network. Use of this type of category of RPL is indicative of the marketing and managerial rhetoric that the organisation has adopted within the last few years.

I think recognition of previous skills and learning is a good way to go, because you can’t just become a guide overnight. It shows that you’re dedicated, that you’re going to do your time, and you’re dedicated and, after doing it for a couple of years, you do pick up a lot of learning. What do they call it? Prior learning recognition
[sic], because you’re out there for years and years doing it. There is an amount of prior learning and no amount of book knowledge or reading can give you that hands-on experience. So, the prior learning, I think, is very important (Guide 25, male, Employee, Site Interpreter).

This guide conducted a tour for the entire cohort attending one of the Savannah Guide Schools. The guide clearly displayed his expertise and knowledge of his tour site and geographic area. The guide’s accumulated prior learning was apparent in his interpretation of the tour. However, the guide was not officially inducted as a Site Interpreter, into the group, until three Schools later. Normally, the guide would have been inducted that evening, at a peer group assessment. One of the findings of this research is that there appears to be an inconsistency and flaunting of the written rules when it comes to making decisions about membership within the association. The members seem to just ‘accept’ these circumstances. Rule and norm breaking appear to be common practice within the organisation. Recognition of members’ skills base and prior learning achievements are acknowledged but can sometimes be overlooked and left to be revisited later when circumstances and memories are recalled.

Each new member of the Savannah Guides has their own set of values and norms to bring to the association. Members of the group bring personal agendas to the new group situation – activities and ideas to be accommodated – the actions and beliefs having been developed from previous group interactions. In other words, the organisation does not begin as ‘value free’ because individuals bring their own set of ‘baggage’ to the situation. Pre-existing outlines of behaviour, including both explicit and implicit approaches, will steer the initial actions of the group (Bogdan and Taylor 1975: 15; Gladstein Ancona 1990: 337). The notion of something being value free is contentious for sociologists and the groups they study. All bring ‘baggage’ to a
situation, whether they are on the outside looking in, or in the inside looking out. For example, preconceived ideas about organisational processes and management may be deeply ingrained in some guides’ attitudes to group performance and execution of management initiatives and decisions. Guides in positions of power in the group are more able to influence their preferred ways of performance and management during decision formulation.

Research into aspects of organisational life offers insight into how the culture, individual and group interact and transact to sustain themselves and one another (Parker 2000: 132). Moreover, as with many other bureaucratic organisations, adherence to given norms and rules may only be sanctioned when it suits the hierarchy. Thus, this organisation only uses group rules as a convenience, in order to highlight certain processes that the management committee deem important. In doing so, the organisation strives to eradicate individuality and to create adherents who will follow organisational norms almost without question.

As has been argued by Hochschild (1983), notions of individual subjectivity are inseparable from work practice analyses in service work that has an interactive component. In this case, the leaders of the group are able to exert some form of impression management over each individual. Hochschild (1983) has underlined the distress felt by employees who have been subjected to exploitation of their feelings and personalities by an organisation, but not all the employees comply by allowing their inner selves to become governed by organisational requirements and decrees. Instead, many employees try to create interpretations of their roles in the workplace that do not harm personal beliefs of themselves (Leidner 1993: 23). Therefore, the
employees internalise the group norms, and to some extent, accept the appropriated forms of self-identity as given. For example, I noticed that many of the guides did not conform to the rigid standards of compliance with wearing and presentation of the Savannah Guide uniform. Many of the guides wore individualised versions of the uniform, such as a different hat or added adornments like feathers or alternative hatbands. This was a source of distress to the then president, who voiced his opinions at Savannah Guide Schools. But the practice allowed each recalcitrant guide a small feeling of autonomy and individuality.

Conclusion
This paper has presented on overview of how an ecotour organisation, the Savannah Guides, constructs itself as a highly recognised ecotour guiding association. Its members are made up of ecotour guides who wish to be part of the overarching group and therefore gain recognition as a high class and yet standardised group of ecotour guides that deliver high quality ecotourism experiences to tourists across the tropical savannas region of northern Australia.

Many of the group have sought membership within this organisation so as to be able to attain and maintain a perceived recognised quality level of ecotourism experiences that are attractive to tourists. This has made the group one of most highly recognised tourism service deliverers in outback Australia. However, the organisation needs to become more adherent to its own set of rules and regulations, which would provide for a more cohesive association. This, in turn, would then create closer links within the group, and thus a stronger bond between members, instead of the more divisive approach currently presented by the main steering committee.
Participants in the organisational membership and at the Savannah Guide Schools are the recipients of a closely aligned membership, which at times is very supportive of its membership base. Recognised Prior Learning (RPL) is also an important component of the inculcation process and acceptance into the group as an ecotour guide of outstanding quality and disposition. However, non-adherence to many of the rules and regulations leaves the management group open to criticism and disapproval by any or all of their members. Moreover, this has appeared to not be a problem for this organisation. All members are very accepting of the status quo, and life and membership continue in an unbroken and idyllic manner.

References


**Endnote**

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1 I am aware that there are two separate spellings of savanna – i.e. Savannah and savanna. It is correct to use either one. The Savannah Guides use their spelling to differentiate themselves in the tourism sector. The alternate spelling is used to identify a place or region, such as the tropical savannas of northern Australia, or the tropical savannas of Africa. However, the Savannah Guides utilise the same spelling as the city of Georgia, located in the USA.