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DESERTS ON THE MOVE

Mobility is key to life in Australia's huge desert regions – and healthcare, education, training, technical services and employment need to understand and plan better for it.

This is the view emerging from research with the Desert Knowledge CRC by Professor Bernard Guerin of the University of South Australia and Dr Pauline Guerin of Flinders University.

“If we are to adapt to deserts, live and work in them successfully, it is vital we understand mobility,” Prof. Guerin says. “In deserts resources are thinly dispersed across huge landscapes, and the desert life – people, plants and animals – moves in order to access these resources.”

However, this mobility poses considerable headaches for governments and service providers whose services are often patterned on delivery in cities, where resources, skills and clients are closely concentrated. “Desert services are frequently like trying to hit a moving target, and this is frustrating for both providers and clients.”

“For years it has produced contradictory policies in government, on the one hand trying to push desert people out of small settlements and into larger towns so they can receive services like schooling and healthcare – and on the other, trying to make them stay in their settlements so services can be brought to them.”

“At all events, governments find it hard keeping track of desert people for accountability purposes. Bureaucracy and policy cannot seem to function without a permanent, fixed address and it behoves the people to adapt to bureaucracy rather than the other way around.”

The issue of mobility applies especially to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, but also to many other desert inhabitants including miners, tourists, grey nomads, public servants and technical experts, who move around as work opportunities and personal preferences dictate, the Guerins say.

“The nature of deserts encourages mobility and, in the case of Aboriginal Australians there are compelling reasons around family, respect and traditional law that cause people to move frequently but in patterned ways. In the old days some of this was called ‘going walkabout’ and was misunderstood by many employers. We know there are strong cultural and social reasons behind it – but we need to understand more in order to design service delivery that better meets their needs.”

In recent times mobility has been augmented by widespread use of 4WDs and SUVs. The rise of the grey nomad, in particular, has confronted planners with thorny questions about where best to locate healthcare services in desert regions to serve a growing itinerant population who need them more than other age groups do, they add.

“But this might be more a perceived problem than a real one. Technology is coming to the rescue with new ways that services can be delivered to people no matter where they are – telemedicine, videoconferencing, online education and training, online technical advice and so on.” And Desert Knowledge CRC is trialling the ‘iOutback™’ electronic bulletin board for online information to grey nomads and others moving around the desert.

For these educational and health online services to be effective in desert Australia, however, there will need to be dramatic improvement in the coverage and quality of broadband and mobile telephony services, Prof. Guerin adds. “One hopes that the federal Government’s \$43 billion National Broadband Network proposal will pay close attention to the needs of desert Australians as well as those in the cities – not fall into the same trap of developing services suited only to an urban setting.”

But the key to delivering services to highly mobile Australians is to understand better the patterns of mobility, the reasons people are mobile and the context in which mobility occurs, they say.

“At one level this seems like an issue that applies particularly to the half million people who live in desert Australia, but at another level it applies to a population that is increasingly mobile not just within Australia but also travelling all over the world for work and leisure. So solving the problem in the deserts may teach us ways to address other forms of population mobility.”

The study of mobility also reveals disturbing aspects of society. For example, while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are highly mobile, there are places they clearly avoid because they do not have positive experiences when they travel and stop for accommodation. “Our experience both in Australia and in NZ is that indigenous people come up against a lot of racism, which often makes it unpleasant to be mobile outside of their own communities, and this constricts their scope for mobility and service delivery.”

“Issues such as this need more careful investigation, especially in the context of continued pressure from some government agencies to move desert dwellers into towns and cities for education, healthcare and employment. This can be counter-productive and finding out more about the patterns of mobility will help us find better solutions.”

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