Successful Rural Hosted Accommodation in Western Australia: Gender Matters

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1 Introduction

There have been many contributors to our understanding of the rural tourism phenomenon. The geographers’ view of tourism pays special attention to the inherent differences between urban and rural tourism settings. They draw valid attention to the impact that transport and access have on tourism, as well as the pressures of alternate and often competing uses of the land to determine carrying capacity and the wider concerns of sustainability (Hall and Page 2002). However, such a focus on the location of the tourism asset overlooks the human involvement in the production of rural tourism and recreation service. What are the characteristics and success correlates of rural entrepreneurs? This chapter uses data collected from a survey offered to all identifiable owners of hosted accommodation in Western Australia to explore this question. We find that gender is one area where significant differences do exist.

Many hosted accommodation businesses in this study were conducted on the farm, often not primarily because of the idyllic location of the farm. But, rather because of the pragmatic decisions of the owners of the farm-based business to diversify the range of income producing activities that the land can sustain. With many farms having a traditional patriarchal farming heritage it seemed often to fall upon the matriarch of the family to develop and manage such non-core farm activities as the bed and breakfast or farmstay accommodation business.
In times of hardship in rural settings these non-core activities do add significantly to the survival of the farm and the farming family. However, as farms modernize and attitudes to gender roles evolve there is perhaps an expectation that the gap between the roles and responsibilities of male and female farm owners will reduce as is suggested by Still et al. (2005). However, in the research discussed in this chapter it is revealed that gender differences in Western Australian rural settings are still significant and sizeable. It appears that females are running rural businesses with lower levels of capital and concomitant lower levels of success than their male counterparts. Whilst we can only speculate on the reasons for this, the focus of the overarching research agenda does allow for some potential explanations of this gender inequality.

2 The Research Conducted

Research focusing on the owners of hosted accommodation in Western Australia was conducted in late 2004 and early 2005 via mail questionnaire to 650 urban and rural businesses. The research sought to understand the characteristics of the owners, how they defined and measured success and how successful their businesses were.

The data presented in this chapter reports on some of the significant differences between the rural and urban owners in that overarching study. The variables measured encompassed items that focused on the owner and some that focused on the business, they included:

- Demographic characteristics such as age, gender, number of children and education level
- Personal experience (years of management, business ownership and industry experience)
- Personal financial satisfaction
- Personal net worth
- Personal networks (time spent in these networks)
- Overall success (subjective self-assessment)
- Personal health (using a scale commonly used for self-reporting physical and mental health)
- Personal values (such as commitment to marriage and frugality)
- Hours worked in the business
- Use of the Internet in the business
- Estimated annual sales
- Occupancy rates.