

Grey Nomads travelling in Queensland, Australia: social and health needs

WENDY HILLMAN*

ABSTRACT

At any time of the year, and particularly in the colder months of the southern part of the Australian continent, many caravans and mobile homes can be seen on the roads of northern Australia, and Queensland, in particular. Mainly during June, July, August and September, Grey Nomads frequent the northern half of Australia, to escape the colder climate of southern Australia. The term Grey Nomad is applied to the section of the older Australian population who use their retirement years as a time to experience travel once freed from the constraints of work and family commitments. This paper draws on research conducted about the health and social needs of Grey Nomads holidaying in a Central Queensland, Australia, coastal location. Open-ended, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 20 participants. Contingency plans concerning wellness, wellbeing and medical conditions all formed a part of the Grey Nomads' daily existence while travelling. Many important and lasting friendships and social support networks were formed during the journeying and sojourning phases of the travel. Many of the Grey Nomads interviewed felt the need to keep in contact with home, even though they willingly chose to leave it, and to be 'away'. Just as the Grey Nomad cohort have concerns and solutions about their health and related issues, so too, they have concerns for social networks and family connectedness while travelling in Australia.

KEY WORDS—Grey Nomads, Australia, social needs, health needs, caravanning, tourism, ageing population.

Introduction

At any time of the year, and particularly in the colder months of the southern part of the Australian continent, many caravans and mobile homes can be seen on the roads of northern Australia, and Queensland, in particular. For at least four months of each year, mainly during June, July, August and September, Grey Nomads frequent the northern half of Australia, to escape

* School of Health and Human Services, Faculty of Sciences, Engineering and Health, CQUniversity, Australia.

the colder climate of southern Australia (Onyx and Leonard 2005). According to Onyx and Leonard

While all respondents were travelling for at least 3 months, many were travelling for much longer periods. Approximately 15% had already travelled for a year or more when approached, and 20% intended to continue travelling for at least two years, or indefinitely. For most, this was the second or third such trip. A common pattern was to travel all year, but return home briefly over the Christmas period to see family. (2006: 95)

For the purposes of this research, the term Grey Nomad can be defined as a percentage of the older Australian population who, after reaching retirement age or later years, embrace the travel ethic, and tour Australia as they please, usually for at least three or four months each year. The term Grey Nomad is applied to the section of the older Australian population who use their retirement years as a time to experience travel and holidaying activities once freed from the constraints of work and family commitments (Carter 2002; Higgs and Quirk 2007; Leonard, Onyx and Maher 2007; Obst, Brayley and King 2008; Onyx and Leonard 2005, 2006, 2007; Prideaux and McClymont 2006).

Lago and Poffley (1993) have researched older travellers and examined the different demographics that make up this cohort. They also investigated this group with respect to family structure, health status and income. Their findings revealed that tourism operators should thoroughly evaluate older travellers concerning the needs and ages of their customers (*see also* Cassidy 2008). McGuire, Uysal and McDonald (1988) examined the methods utilised by the tourist trade to attract all older people, and not just Grey Nomads, to tourism. They also looked at how older tourists gathered their information about travelling. Van Harssel and Rudd (1992) studied single older travellers and their lifestyle profiles, and found that older travellers have become the 'demographic discovery' of the current age, and that as their numbers grow, their lifestyles are now surprisingly different from those older travellers of previous generations. Likewise, Schlagel and Tas (1992) explored the conventional distinctiveness and requirements of the older tourist market (Cassidy 2008), and found that as individuals get older there are three distinct changes that become apparent. These changes are: physiological, lifestyle and economic (Schlagel and Tas 1992). Research undertaken by Wei and Ruys (1998) via the National Seniors Association of Australia established that older travellers needed security, simplicity, safekeeping, assistance and contentment to be of importance to this market whilst touring throughout Australia (Cassidy 2008). These authors have highlighted a set of interesting ideas connected to older people and travel. Seeking older individuals' thoughts regarding travel in later life is the focus of this paper, and connects well to notions of older peoples' health while

travelling, and their interactions through social and other support networks while on a prolonged journey.

A study by Backman, Backman and Silverberg (1999) established that older travellers (aged more than 65 years) were more likely to reside at their destination for extended periods of time, spend longer planning prior to their trip, and pay a visit to acquaintances and relations during their travel than younger travellers (aged 55–64). The findings by Backman, Backman and Silverberg (1999) with regards to age of the older travellers they interviewed are contrary to an analysis described by Norvell (1985), who found little difference between those aged younger than 50 years old, and a slightly older group, aged 50–64. Both age groups travelled for comparable intentions, with a burning need to travel for leisure (Horneman *et al.* 2002).

From the time of the early 1980s, several studies acknowledged the most significant desires and advantages sought after by older travellers (Backman, Backman and Silverberg 1999; Guinn 1980; Kerstetter and Gitelson 1990; Moisey and Bichis 1999; Romsa and Blenman 1989; Thomas and Butts 1998). The most often talked about incentives or preferred advantages of the travel were learning and knowledge, relaxation and recreation, physical training and health, and visits to acquaintances and relations. Therefore, older travellers, including the group known as ‘Grey Nomads’, construct their journeys to suit their particular needs and the envisaged outcomes of the travel itself. The altered mindset seems to be directed to more energetic leisure activities, with a clear emphasis on wellbeing and vigour. Even though such results are helpful for describing the older traveller (as well as the Grey Nomad sector), their relevance is inadequate, as the multiplicity of travel choices cannot be completely established here (Horneman *et al.* 2002).

The predisposition of the self-drive market has become an enormous success, especially in North America, with older travellers known as ‘snowbirds’ (McHugh and Mings 1992; Onyx and Leonard 2005: 62; Vincent and De Los Santos 1990). These ‘snowbirds’ are habitual nomads, migrating from the snow belt in northern United States of America (USA) and Canada to sojourn for the winter in the southern states, especially Arizona, Florida and Texas. Even though approximations differ, numbers are most likely in the millions. For instance, throughout the winter of 1993–94, approximately 220,000 older people moved to Phoenix, Arizona, and one-third of these inhabited Recreational Vehicle resorts (Mings and McHugh 1995). Likewise, the Rio Grande valley in Texas had approximately 66,000 Recreational Vehicle sites by the year 1990 (Vincent and De Los Santos 1990). Unmistakably, snowbirds make up a key sector of the subsequent older recreational sector. They can stay in their chosen holiday location for time-frames of up to four months (Onyx and Leonard 2005).

In a study of retired self-drive travellers in Cairns, North Queensland, Mings (1997) also suggests that Grey Nomads can be acknowledged as resembling their snowbird equivalents in the USA and Canada. Mings (1997) recognises that the Cairns Grey Nomads will travel longer distances than their comparable cohort in North America. The quantity of travel amounts to 323 kilometres per week for the Australians, compared to 217 kilometres per week for the North Americans. Mings (1997) also established that the Australian group is likely to develop less camaraderie among members of their travelling network. Furthermore, 76 per cent of respondents in Cairns declared no association with co-inhabitants in the caravan park researched by Mings (1997). Moreover, Mings (1997) additionally implied that caravan parks in Australia may perhaps need to cater for a greater range of leisure activities aimed specifically at the Grey Nomad market (Onyx and Leonard 2005).

Limited . . . recreational opportunities in their van parks force Queensland snowbirds [read Grey Nomads] to seek recreation elsewhere. Another effect of having relatively few in-park recreation opportunities is that close personal ties among snowbirds are not easily initiated or nurtured. (Mings 1997: 176, cited in Onyx and Leonard 2005: 63)

An important point that needs to be highlighted here is that snowbirds are an American cultural phenomenon, quite different from Australian Grey Nomads. The snowbirds travel from home to a resort where they stay for the winter, and where they are entertained. Grey Nomads, as the name implies, move around as part of the experience of discovering Australia (and themselves). The motivations are quite different.

In 1999, Pearce researched the self-drive tourist market and observed that this type of travel is perfect for retired Australians for effortless access, and as a significant, collective pursuit offering a reflective encounter. But even inside the self-drive travel market there are individually diverse configurations of impetus. Therefore, travel for the older cohort (including Grey Nomads) is, for some in Queensland, more concentrated on touring and extensive travel, and for others more concentrated on nature-based activities (*e.g.* national parks and ecotours). Conversely, it has been noted that Grey Nomads stay for lengthier time-frames at a preferred destination linked to water sports and fishing activities (Onyx and Leonard 2005).

As is evident in the literature, only a small amount of research has been carried out on the population of older Australians who choose to travel the country at their own pace, using their own means of transport and accommodation. Large numbers of Grey Nomads traverse the Australian continent every year. While this may be a seasonal lifestyle for some, for others it is a way of life, they just continue to travel. These salient issues suggest some important areas for research, including the issues covered in

this paper. These issues are important for an older population. In particular, an older, mobile cohort who need to feel secure in the knowledge that they can access both health and welfare services, and that they can call upon family members and friends, as necessary, through the use of digital and electronic technology when needed. Furthermore, social engagement of others with similar interests and lifestyles can only succeed in maintaining and retaining a happy and healthy approach to the older years.

Researching Grey Nomads

This current paper draws on research conducted about the health and social needs of Grey Nomads travelling to, and holidaying in a Central Queensland, Australia, coastal location. The research that forms the basis of the work was undertaken over a two-month period in 2008, at a caravan park frequented annually by large numbers of Grey Nomads, at a seaside location in Central Queensland. The research site consisted of a large caravan park, adjacent to a lake, which is also in close proximity to the ocean. At any given time throughout the data collection period, large numbers of Grey Nomads were in residence at the location. The caravan park itself is owned and operated by a middle-aged couple and their teenage children who live in a house on the property. Their home also serves as the Reception Centre for arrivals and departures of the Grey Nomads, and offers a point of reference for other information as required.

Both verbal and written permission to conduct the research was sought and obtained from the owners of the caravan park. Ethics approval was applied for and granted from the author's university. The owners of the caravan park acted as 'gate keepers' throughout the interviewing process, and escorted me to the initial couple I would interview, each time I arrived to undertake the research. I visited the caravan park on numerous occasions. Due to these constraints I employed a 'snowballing' technique for the research project, where I would interview the first couple and then get them to direct me to another couple they believed would be willing to partake in the research. Using this approach, I was able to gain access to a number of participants in order to complete the project. A further limiting condition was the number of participants able to be interviewed. I had secured a small Faculty research grant to undertake the research, and my budget and time were both limited due to financial constraints.

All participants in the project were given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity, and to comply with the ethical requirements of the university. Each participant was also provided with an information sheet, informing them of the parameters of the research, and inviting them to participate in

the research itself. Further, they were also required, by university ethics, to sign an Informed Consent form. The form complied with the ethical requirements of the university, and included a section to alert the participants that the interviews would be recorded. The form also served as a legal document that stated the signing participant was willing and able to take part in the research endeavour and to have the interview recorded, with a view to transcription at a later date.

Open-ended, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 20 participants. The respondent group was comprised of nine couples and two individuals, all of whom were aged 56 years or older. All interviewees identified themselves as Grey Nomads (*see also* Obst, Brayley and King 2008: 10), and all were retired. All participants came from outside Queensland. The data were collected through face-to-face interviews with each participant at the research site. Each interview lasted up to 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded for transcription purposes. All the transcribed interviews were imported into NVivo. Thematic analysis was carried out on the interviews, using a hierarchical coding structure and sub-categories for each node or theme (*see* Richards 2005). Therefore, a Grounded Theory technique was employed as an inductive interpretative approach in order to ground the theory for the project in the data and thus concentrate on emerging categories or themes that the data itself provided (Charmaz 2006).

The interview schedule, consisting of 18 questions, was asked of each participant. Standard demographic questions pertaining to age, marital status, and current life and relationship status (*e.g.* retired or not retired; married, single, widowed, *etc.*) were asked initially. Other questions included inquiry about travelling times and duration, mode of transport, travelling companions, and accommodation used during travel. Further questions were associated with health concerns, community engagement and social activities involved in travelling within Australia, and also during the length of stay in coastal Central Queensland. All the open-ended questions were developed through rigorous engagement with the literature on Grey Nomads and similar cohorts of older travellers.

The aim of the study was to investigate how Grey Nomads in Australia perceived their health and social needs and activities when these were limited or conversely maximised by their travel plans and aspirations.

All participants approached to be a part of the research were eager and enthusiastic about their inclusion in the project. According to Dann (2001), even though older tourists are excellent participants, not many researchers utilise such a rich source of data. Indeed, Van Harssel (1994: 375) encapsulates this well from an interview with a participant, 'You know you are getting older when you have all the answers, but nobody is asking the questions anymore'. All interviews were conducted within close proximity to

the caravans, usually outside these portable homes, or beside the lake. In one case, the interviewer was invited into the caravan, and the interview took place inside the mobile home. The data collected from the interviews form the basis for the next section of the paper, which presents the findings of the research project.

Findings

Within Australia's ageing population, Grey Nomads are beginning to form a large sector of the internal tourism market in Australia. While there have been many instances of older retirees travelling to sojourn for the winter months in the northern climes of Australia, this activity now has become a 'must do' on the calendars of vast numbers of individuals belonging to the Grey Nomad cohort.

Throughout the data collection a number of salient themes and categories emerged. These themes and categories are represented here. The main themes extrapolated from the data were those of 'Health' and 'Social', within a broad context. Within each theme were a number of sub-themes or categories. The following section will begin with the findings concerning the health issues of Grey Nomads and then continue with the findings on their social activities and experiences.

Health

When asked about their health concerns, many of the Grey Nomads responded about general health and wellbeing as a concern that each of them had. A number of them spoke about these issues during their interviews. Many of the Grey Nomads offered some relevant information about their general health and wellbeing.

In 2001 I had major heart operation then I came pretty well [*sic*] and we travelled all around Australia, Northern Territory, Western Australia back across the Nullarbor for four and a half months. We've done a bit of travelling since then. My health is pretty good now. (Mark)

We feel because of the life we're leading with very little stress, that we won't have . . . We consider the idea of getting rid of the stress because stress is 90 per cent of the illness. (Jack)

Indeed, Onyx and Leonard (2007) also highlight this finding by suggesting that the Grey Nomads are free of responsibility while they are travelling and away from home. Therefore, 'because they have no responsibility they have no stress and so their health is much better' (Onyx and Leonard 2007: 389).

While the Grey Nomads interviewed for this study were able to de-stress while they were travelling and holidaying, they also expressed concerns for the health of friends, who had to remain at home, and could not travel because of poor physical condition and issues associated with disadvantaged personal health conditions. Their feelings for their friends did not affect the travel plans of those participating in this research project, even though they too may have had major health issues in the past.

Allison: Well, he's [referring to her husband] had all his health problems fixed up. He's had a quadruple bypass and he's had a back operation but he's been all fixed up so he's doing alright for now.

Mark: . . .but other than soreness . . . but it doesn't stop me much.

Allison: I survived meningitis nearly 14 years ago but I was lucky to survive that because they flew me to Melbourne from home in a helicopter, I didn't know anything about it. He found me unconscious in the morning, and I've been through all that.

According to Higgs and Quirk (2007) the health status and profile of Grey Nomads is comparable to the rest of the older population. That is, they have analogous needs and situations. In one study in which the most prevalent chronic disease was hypertension, it was not the fact of chronic disease that was preventing travel (Higgs and Quirk 2007: 255).

As a further illustration of this point, Mary and Nathan relate an incident that happened while they were journeying across the Nullarbor Plain.¹ It was obviously quite frightening for them at the time, but they can see the lighter side to this health emergency now.

Mary: Coming back across the Nullarbor three years ago. It was about 45 degrees and there was a head wind, and we got to Coober Pedy and we decided to pull over for the day. My sister's caravan had started lifting, so they [the two husbands] got up to fix it and he [her husband] hadn't got a hat on. He said, 'I've just got to go to the toilet', and he passed out in the toilet. So we thought it was his heart, so we raced over. A bloke came and got us luckily. A bloke there was a paramedic wasn't he?

Nathan: [wryly] Yeah, but it's just one of those things, you know.

Obst, Brayley and King (2008) also highlight this issue in their research on Grey Nomads. They found that 5 per cent of their interviewees had faced a medical emergency when they were travelling. Some of these incidents included falls resulting in broken arms and damaged knees. Another experienced an attack of kidney stones when travelling through a remote location and at least 14 per cent of their participants had numerous health issues while travelling. Some of these emergencies included: back injuries,

diagnosis of cervical cancer, deep vein thrombosis, fainting spells, pneumonia, severe arthritis and severe chest pains. Local general practitioners and local regional hospitals provided the treatment for all these conditions (Obst, Brayley and King 2008: 8).

Therefore, although Grey Nomads are fit enough to travel, many of them leave their homes and social protective networks to undertake journeys that sometimes stretch their physical capacity beyond its limits. As Onyx and Leonard (2007: 285) suggest, these older Australians are leaving home and social support networks at a time of life where many others are seen to be embracing the restrictions of old age more responsibly. Further, Nimrod also argues that

Retirees place tourism higher in their priorities (Statts and Pierfelice 2003). A central explanation for this tendency is that today's retirees are healthier, richer, more educated, more independent and more obligation-free than older people in the past. (2008: 861–2; see also Martin and Preston 1994; Zimmer, Brayley and Searle 1995)

Of those Grey Nomads interviewed, many had supportive medical practitioners at home who provided a number of services to accommodate their patients while they travelled. The Grey Nomads also had other plans in place if they required medical assistance during their journeys. When asked, Ben spoke about the health situations he and his wife had anticipated when they were away from home. He spoke about the medications they carried with them and the other drugs they needed:

Only just normal everyday medication but we've got doctors we go to up here for our scripts, for our little blood pressure tablets. You know, to calm me down and like that. There are no major medical problems. In town we've got access to the doctors there, we've been going to them . . . we're on file there, if you want anything, just a check up. (Ben)

Similarly, when asked about forethought regarding their health while travelling, Mark reported that he had had the same experience as Ben with his general practitioner from his home base.

They [the doctors] have given me enough prescription medication to last me for three months. (Mark)

Likewise, Nathan and Mary had a very supportive general practitioner, who was sympathetic about their wishes and travel plans.

Nathan: We are conscious of the fact that, you know, I have got some medical history and that, we try and plan our stays to be relatively close to civilisation, if you know what I mean, so that should anything occur then it's just a matter of just going to the hospital.

Mary: But both of us have six-monthly check-ups in October and April and then the rest of the year's our own, all being well (laughs).

Our doctor gave us a written thing for our health in case we need to, and we can take it to where we go, but we've never needed it.

Nathan: We always mention to the doctor that we are going to be away for two months or three months and she'll say, 'Alright'. She stocks us all up and off we go, and if she said, 'No you can't go because . . .', we wouldn't.

Moreover, Nimrod (2008: 862) implies that tourism presents a challenge, frequently shared with a partner, which necessitates planning, resolving unforeseen problems, dealing with new conditions, new individuals, cuisine, and so on. Dealing with these challenges successfully is borne out through the return home with travel stories and supporting photographs and memorabilia (*see also* Weiss 2005).

All of the Grey Nomads interviewed willingly talked about their health status and health concerns if any, while travelling in Australia. They also spoke freely when asked about their social activities and engagements experienced as Grey Nomads with their immediate caravan park cohort. The next section concerns the findings regarding the social activities and network groups of the research sample.

Social

Many of the Grey Nomads interviewed spoke about their social activities and community engagement. A lot of them enjoyed sports with other co-travellers while at the caravan park in coastal Central Queensland. Ben and Betty recounted the various social experiences they and their community of friends engaged in for leisure.

Betty: Usually we play golf. Usually we bring our golf sticks and play at [names a local golf course] or [names another local golf course]. There's a couple over there (indicates), she plays bowls. Usually every afternoon for a bit of a social gathering we have happy hour.

Ben: Happy hour, a cup of tea or a beer in a big circle, they have a lot of things.

Betty: We all get together, everybody like sits and once one starts, it starts off like that. Yeah, you sit down and you meet people.

These findings are in direct contrast to the research of Mings (1997), who found that the Cairns Grey Nomad group did not like to socialise with others in their caravan park. In fact, many of them shied away from any type of social interaction. In opposition to the findings of Mings (1997), Onyx and Leonard found that, similar to the research cohort under investigation here,

Grey Nomads are highly sociable and formed strong social networks with each other, including long-term friendships. While travelling along the highway, it is compulsory

to wave to all oncoming caravans/motorhomes. 'Happy hours' around a camp fire are a highlight of the day. They also travel in groups for a time, keep in touch with each other and organise meeting places using CB radio or satellite communication. This camaraderie is not only an additional motivation for this lifestyle but also changes situations from one of fear and risk, to one of adventure. If anyone stops at the side of the road, it is inevitable that others will stop to see if they need help. (2006: 95–6)

Many important and lasting friendships and social support networks are formed during the journeying and sojourning phases of the travel. These seem to make for more active and healthy attitudes and approaches to life, wellbeing and sociability. As Ben told me:

We've met people from Perth, they were here three or four years ago and ever since then, . . . they called in, and ever since that day it's only every one or two months they've got to ring us up and they're up, or heading back down. They've been right up to Cooktown, they came up the west coast and he rang up from Katherine about two nights ago heading for home again. Like things like that, you meet people and people meet you and years later you've got something to look forward to, hearing from them and at least everybody's happy.

This is also consistent with the findings of Onyx and Leonard (2005) who report that Grey Nomads frequently did develop long-term and very complex arrangements with new friends throughout their travel experiences, but they did not inevitably become acquainted with other Grey Nomads within their chosen caravan park. The most noteworthy friendships were made with others encountered on the road, and travelling similar routes, outside caravan parks (2005: 67).

In their article on Grey Nomads and road safety impacts and risk management, Obst, Brayley and King found that '[r]espondents indicated that they stayed in touch with people they met even when they returned home . . . Hence it would appear that this population has strong social networks and established communication channels' (2008: 3–4). Indeed, one of the interviewees responded to questions regarding this issue with the following statement that reinforces previous findings.

I suppose we have social support really. We've got some friends down in Maleny, who are old family friends, who if something happened we'd call on them. Yeah, we've got sort of friends like that, so that if something really happened, we've got support like that . . . (Jack)

These findings are further substantiated by Onyx and Leonard (2005: 65) who suggest that Grey Nomads revel in the experience of meeting new friends. The travellers make known that these new-found relationships are positive, and that these acquaintances become permanent friends. Dann also argues that 'senior tourists . . . like visiting family and friends . . . [and] socialising with their co-travellers' (2001: 13).

Another couple from the Grey Nomad group (Mark and Allison) also spoke about their experiences of friendship and sociability while travelling and while in the caravan park.

Mark: Oh yes, you've got to be social you can't just sit on your . . . and talk to yourself all the time. But yeah you make friends when you are travelling, caravan parks . . .

Allison: Especially fishing friends of Mark, they'll come around to see what he's caught that morning. Oh yes, we've been out to the Chinese dinner and they had Christmas dinner in July, yeah. . .

Further, another participant added that she found the caravan park very social, very welcoming and very inclusive of all those staying there. Each event was a drawcard for all inhabitants of the park. Further, these social events were also much anticipated and well attended. Nimrod (2008: 861) believes that '[m]ost evidence shows that leisure has a central role in explaining post retirement psychological well being'.

Interviewer: Did you go to the Christmas in July?

Natalie: Oh up here, oh did we ever, that was fantastic . . . fairly social sort of people . . . and a fiftieth wedding anniversary . . . So that was a surprise. So everyone came (laughs). It's amazing what you can make do with when you're away like this and how, if there's a birthday we've got to do a happy hour . . . well there's plenty of time for social activities for a park, but when you get home it's all quiet (laughs) for a few weeks.

Indeed, Prideaux and McClymont also found in their work on Australian caravaners that within many caravan parks, the chance to engage with and meet other like-minded travellers through many social 'events such as BBQs, afternoon tea, happy hours, campfires and other social events', was a highlight of the experience of this cohort (2006: 46–7).

The times spent living and co-habiting with other Grey Nomads in a caravan park, or while travelling together, are indicative of strong networks of solidarity and support. Similar types of support are also to be found amongst family members and relatives at home. Additionally, Tomljenovic and Faulkner state that

Because they may be free of work-related constraints, older residents have more opportunities to engage in leisure-oriented activities. Tourism often exerts a positive influence on the provision of recreational facilities and the range of shopping, restaurant, and entertainment facilities for the enjoyment of both residents and tourists. (2000: 100)

In her gerontological study of awareness in approaching older age, Neugarten (1968) found that as people reach their older years, they

become more comfortable with their achievements and ability, and exhibit a preoccupation with self-fulfilment. However, Neugarten (1968) also found that the heightened awareness of 'nearing the end' gave older people an enthusiasm to gain as much enjoyment as possible through cramming as many activities and experiences into their time left. Further, as Cleaver and Muller (2002) argue, it is to be expected that as people retire their value orientations experience a shift in status, and their decision to explore the world and become a tourist are realised (Astic and Muller 1999).

All of the Grey Nomads interviewed had some form of contact with their home base. Many rang on a weekly basis to catch up on the latest news from home. While others who also contacted home each week just wanted reassurance that their houses and gardens were still intact. Many used the opportunity to speak to their grandchildren. Yet others used the internet and emailed home. Some others used the technology as an ongoing communication portal to keep in contact with their grandchildren by email. This form of communication also aided in keeping them up-to-date with current technology social-networking devices. Many used the internet to research places of interest, look for allied health professionals and as a conduit to the outside world. Three groups of the interviewees respond:

But then home's not far. It's three hours and a phone call or otherwise the internet. Or, mobile phone... Yep, I've got the laptop. It's wireless and that's another story... (Jack)

At least once a week we always ring up generally on a Sunday evening, the son-in-law and daughter are looking after our affairs while we are away so we've got no problems there. We've got a mobile. The only time we use it is when we are travelling, we don't ever use it at home. (Mark)

Liam: All we need in Melbourne, our son does.

Mia: Yeah, he does everything there is there.

Liam: He's only five minutes away from where we live.

Mia: So, we sort of feel comfortable leaving our home.

Liam: And we've got some very good neighbours, very good neighbours...

As is evident from the responses of the research cohort, many of the Grey Nomads interviewed feel the need to keep in contact with home, even though they have willingly chosen to leave it, and to be 'away'. This is consistent with the notion of security, both personal and property, and also speaks to the levels of familial and social support in place at the Grey Nomad's home bases.

Just as the Grey Nomad cohort have concerns and solutions about their health and related issues, so too, they have concerns for social networks and family connectedness while travelling in Australia. The findings section has presented some of the interesting sections of the research project. The

conclusion will present an overview of the project, some ideas about implications for further research, and also offer some thoughts about the significance of the research.

Conclusion

This research has been concerned with the older group of Australians commonly referred to as Grey Nomads. The study undertaken regarding this group has examined the health and social situations pertinent to them. The Grey Nomads' attitudes to health, wellbeing, medical conditions, medication and strategies to deal with emergencies have been examined. As Nimrod (2008: 862) suggests, tourism presents a challenge, frequently shared with a partner, which necessitates planning, resolving unforeseen problems, dealing with new conditions, new individuals, cuisine, and so on. Dealing with these challenges successfully is borne out through the return home with travel stories and supporting photographs and memorabilia (*see also Weiss 2005*).

Specifically, the Grey Nomads reported that even though many of them had pre-existing and ongoing medical conditions, this did not prevent them travelling throughout Australia, and to Queensland; a round trip of between 4,000 and 6,000 kilometres, depending on Queensland destination, and original point of departure. Most had contingency plans in place, in the event that an unseen emergency developed. Others had bi-annual medical check-ups and the blessing of their medical practitioners before commencing their journeys. Yet others carried lists of prescribed medications they used, and some, like others who have chronic or debilitating diseases, also carried letters from their doctors outlining medical conditions and other relevant information. These measures acted both as a stop gap in times of trouble and also as a reassuring fallback position for the Grey Nomads travelling away from home and families.

The social issues connected with travelling Australia in a caravan were also explored. Making friends along the way, or engaging with new acquaintances at the caravan parks, were all part of the social aspects of the experience. Indeed, 'happy hour' was a main event on the daily calendar. Other scheduled events such as 'Christmas in July' and planned trips as a social group to local restaurants all formed part of the necessary social events list for the Grey Nomad group.

Likewise, contact with home, as both a social activity and support mechanism, and a means of checking on valued possessions and loved ones, also provided the Grey Nomads with current experience in the use of technology and social-networking sites and devices, while allaying any fears

about home and relatives. Prideaux and McClymont (2006) have also made a connection to the fact that Grey Nomads are currently *au fait* with latest technologies. They suggest that caravan parks now realise that the provision of wireless internet connections and other social-networking facilities are an imperative part of the attraction to patronise technologically savvy parks (Prideaux and McClymont 2006: 57).

It can be understood from the research that many older Australians embrace their retirement and begin the long journey of 'seeing Australia'. Many only travel for the southern winter months of June, July, August and September, when they 'go north' to experience the more hospitable weather in northern Australia, and Queensland in particular. These older Australians are still travelling even though their health may be deteriorating. As it becomes apparent that they may not have a lot of 'time left to live', many older people become acutely aware of the fact that travel may be one of the last experiences they undertake (Wilcock 2007). The participants in this study did not believe their morbidity to be a problem, as they have many safeguards and networks to accommodate for ill-health eventualities (*see* Rudd *et al.* 2008). Many of these people also have extended support networks in place, and travel to see, or to catch up with, friends they have made along the way. These appear to be enduring relationships. Family, friends at home and properties are all only a mobile phone call or internet connection away, as all the Grey Nomads in the research project used modern technology to remain in at least weekly contact, with friends and family, and to check on gardens and other prized possessions (Boulton-Lewis *et al.* 2007).

Within the emerging literature concerning Grey Nomads, this article makes a contribution in two ways. Firstly, the research provides a comparison and contrast to the North American and current Australian literature in the area of 'ageing' travel and tourism. Secondly, it relates to health and social aspects of the older, travelling population in Australia, known as 'Grey Nomads', and gives the participants a 'voice' from within their own lived experience (Sedgley, Pritchard and Morgan 2011).

This article has investigated some of the questions in a relatively under-examined area of tourism: Grey Nomads, or older people and travel. It would be interesting to do a more longitudinal study on Grey Nomads and their habits; including needs and use of health services and medical practitioners (*see* Nimrod 2008). It would also be useful to focus on the social activities of Grey Nomads, as inventive and progressive ways of dealing with successful ageing can only inform the debates and programme provision surrounding the importance of these issues for an older population. This research further suggests an important implication that emerges from the study. Planning by health professionals and health providers to meet the needs of this

expanding and ageing population will need to be taken into consideration and instigated as the cohort of Grey Nomads continues to increase and to travel to destinations 'around Australia'.

Due to financial and time constraints, only a small cohort of 20 Grey Nomads were interviewed for this research project. As the participant group was modest in size, it would be difficult to generalise the findings to the wider Grey Nomad population of Australia and beyond. However, the data collection was robust and rigorous, culminating in rich data. So, wherever the location, Grey Nomads will continue to travel, socialise, have health problems and just enjoy themselves away from the stress that work and responsibilities bring. Stress relief and activities which are stress reducing form a large part of the daily lives of the Grey Nomads interviewed. While some of the cohort did travel to warmer climates in order to improve their health status, many of them had friends who could not travel because of their poor health status (*see* Lago and Poffley 1993; Peel, McClure and Bartlett 2005).

The research is significant because it explains many ideas and issues connected to the Grey Nomads as a travelling cohort of older Australians. The group finds fulfilment and adventure in their activities of journeying around Australia, or to the warmer northern states. They do not perceive their lives as dull, boring and over (*see* Jacobs 2005). They engage in the use of modern technology to stay informed and in touch (Camarinha-Matos and Afsarmanesh 2009). As Australia has an ageing population, the expectation that there will be many more Grey Nomads out on the roads between June and September every year is not just a possibility, it will be an eventuality.

Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges the support received from the Faculty of Sciences, Engineering and Health at CQUniversity, Australia, for the provision of a Faculty Research Grant 2008, which enabled the research to be carried out. The author also wishes to thank the Associate Editor, Dr Glenda Cook and the two anonymous reviewers for their informative and positive comments on the initial draft of this paper.

NOTE

- 1 'The Nullarbor Plain is a flat limestone plain stretching across the southern part of South Australia and Western Australia. The limestone was laid down 25 million years ago on an ancient seabed and has since been uplifted as a limestone layer between 15 and 60 metres thick. The climate is classified as arid to semi-arid with 150 mm to 250 mm of annual rainfall and mild winters. Summer weather is extremely variable. Hot days with daytime temperatures

exceeding 40 °C can be followed by mild cloudy days in the low 20 s. Summer rainfall is unreliable, usually comprising localised heavy showers or coastal drizzle. The mean summer temperature ranges from 18 °C to 33 °C (Travelling Australia 2011).

References

- Astic, G. and Muller, T. 1999. Delighting the senior tourist. *Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behaviour*, **12**, 71–80.
- Backman, K., Backman, S. and Silverberg, K. 1999. An investigation into the psychographics of senior nature-based travelers. *Tourism Recreation Research*, **24**, 1, 13–22.
- Boulton-Lewis, G., Buys, L., Lovie-Kitchin, J., Barnett, K. and David, N. 2007. Ageing, learning and computer technology. *Educational Gerontology*, **22**, 3, 253–70.
- Camarinha-Matos, L. and Afsarmanesh, H. 2009. Collaborative mechanisms for a new perspective on active ageing. In *Proceedings of DEST 2009. 3rd IEEE International Conference on Digital Ecosystems and Technologies*, 31 May–3 June 2009, Istanbul, Turkey, 475–80.
- Carter, P. 2002. Domestic caravanning and camping: results from the 2000 National Visitor Survey. *Tourism Research Report*, **4**, 2, 1–27.
- Cassidy, F. 2008. Are we there yet? An exploratory study of Baby Boomers travelling with their grandchildren. Paper presented at the JCU Symposium, 31 October, Cairns, Australia.
- Charmaz, K. 2006. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Data Analysis*. Sage, London.
- Cleaver, M. and Muller, T. 2002. I want to pretend I'm eleven years younger: subjective age and seniors' motives for vacation travel. *Social Indicators Research*, **60**, 1/3, 227–41.
- Dann, G. 2001. Senior tourism and quality of life. *Journal of Hospitality and Leisure Marketing*, **9**, 1/2, 5–19.
- Guinn, R. 1980. Elderly recreational vehicle tourists: motivations for leisure. *Journal of Travel Research*, **19**, 1, 9–12.
- Higgs, P. and Quirk, F. 2007. 'Grey nomads' in Australia: are they a good model for successful ageing and health. *Annals of the New York Academy of Science*, **1114**, 1, 251–7.
- Horneman, L., Carter, R., Wei, S. and Ruys, H. 2002. Profiling the senior traveller: an Australian perspective. *Journal of Travel Research*, **41**, 1, 23–37.
- Jacobs, T. 2005. Being old, feeling old. Between autonomy and dependence in the area of 'active ageing'. Department of Sociology, University of Antwerp, 1–12. Available online at http://www.ageing-in-europe.org/torunpapers/ESA_RN_Ageing_Torun2005_Jacobs.pdf [Accessed 6 October 2011].
- Kerstetter, D. and Gitelson, R. 1990. An exploratory study of the relationship between benefit profiles of college educated older adults and travel behaviour characteristics. In *Proceedings of the 21st Annual Conference of the Travel and Tourism Research Association*. New Orleans, Louisiana, 175–87.
- Lago, D. and Poffley, J. 1993. The ageing population and the hospitality industry in 2010: important trends and probably services. *Hospitality Research Journal*, **17**, 1, 29–47.
- Leonard, R., Onyx, J. and Maher, A. 2007. Constructing short-term episodic volunteering experiences: matching grey nomads and the needs of small country towns. *Third Sector Review*, **13**, 2, 1–15.

- Martin, L. and Preston, S. 1994. *Demography of Ageing*. National Academy Press, Washington DC.
- McGuire, F., Uysal, M. and McDonald, G. 1988. Attracting the older traveler. *Tourism Management*, **9**, 2, 161–4.
- McHugh, K. and Mings, R. 1992. Canadian snowbirds in Arizona. *Journal of Applied Recreational Research*, **17**, 3, 255–77.
- Mings, R. 1997. Tracking 'snowbirds' in Australia: winter sun seekers in far north Queensland. *Australian Geographical Studies*, **35**, 2, 168–82.
- Mings, R. and McHugh, K. 1995. Wintering in American sunbelt: linking place and behavior. *The Journal of Tourism Studies*, **6**, 2, 56–61.
- Moisey, R. and Bichis, M. 1999. Psychographics of the senior nature tourists: the Katy Nature Trail. *Tourism Recreation Research*, **24**, 1, 69–76.
- Neugarten, B. 1968. The awareness of middle age. In Neugarten, B. (ed.), *Middle Age and Ageing*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 93–8.
- Nimrod, G. 2008. Retirement and tourism: themes in retirees' narratives. *Annals of Tourism Research*, **35**, 4, 859–78.
- Norvell, H. 1985. Outlook for retired/older traveller market segments. In *Proceedings of the Eleventh Annual Travel Outlook Forum*, Travel Data Centre, Washington DC, 135–43.
- Obst, P., Brayley, N. and King, M. 2008. Grey nomads: road safety impacts and risk management. Paper presented at the Australasian Road Safety Research, Policing and Education Conference, 10–12 November, Adelaide, Australia.
- Onyx, J. and Leonard, R. 2005. Australian grey nomads and American snowbirds: similarities and differences. *The Journal of Tourism Studies*, **16**, 1, 61–8.
- Onyx, J. and Leonard, R. 2006. Grey nomads: the potential for volunteering in outback towns. Paper presented at the Inaugural Volunteering Research Symposium, 7–8 March, Melbourne. Available online at www.volunteeringaustralia.org.
- Onyx, J. and Leonard, R. 2007. The grey nomad phenomenon: changing the script of ageing. *International Journal of Ageing and Human Development*, **64**, 4, 381–98.
- Pearce, P. 1999. Touring for pleasure: studies of the self drive travel market. *Tourism Recreation Research*, **24**, 1, 35–42.
- Peel, N., McClure, R. and Bartlett, H. 2005. Behavioural determinants of healthy ageing. *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, **28**, 3, 298–302.
- Prideaux, B. and McClymont, H. 2006. The changing profile of caravanners in Australia. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, **8**, 1, 45–58.
- Richards, L. 2005. *Handling Qualitative Data: A Practical Guide*. Sage, London.
- Romsa, G. and Blenman, M. 1989. Vacation patterns of the elderly German. *Annals of Tourism Research*, **16**, 2, 178–88.
- Rudd, D., Mills, R., Flanegin, F. and Litzinger, P. 2008. The new majority: marketing to the mature audience. *Journal of Business and Behavioural Sciences*, **19**, 2, 199–209.
- Schlagel, B. and Tas, R. 1992. Addressing the needs of the elderly market: an increasing concern of the hospitality industry. Paper presented at the CHRIE Conference, Orlando, Florida.
- Sedgley, D., Pritchard, A. and Morgan, N. 2011. Tourism and ageing: a transformative research agenda. *Annals of Tourism Research*, **38**, 2, 422–36.
- Statts, S. and Pierfelice, L. 2003. Travel: a long-range goal of retired women. *The Journal of Psychology*, **137**, 5, 483–94.
- Thomas, D. and Butts, F. 1998. Assessing leisure motivators and satisfaction of international elderhostel participants. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, **7**, 1, 31–8.

- Tomljenovic, R. and Faulkner, B. 2000. Tourism and older residents in a sunbelt resort. *Annals of Tourism Research*, **27**, 1, 93–114.
- Travelling Australia 2011. *Nullarbor*. Available online at <http://travelling-australia.info/start.htm> [Accessed 25 September 2011].
- Van Harsseel, J. 1994. The senior travel market: distinct, diverse, demanding. In Theobald, W. (ed.), *Global Tourism: The Next Decade*. Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford, 363–77.
- Van Harsseel, J. and Rudd, D. 1992. *The Senior Travel Market: Distinct, Diverse, Demanding*. Institute of Travel, Hotel and Restaurant Administration. CHRIE, Orlando, Florida.
- Vincent, V. and De Los Santos, G. 1990. Winter Texans: two segments of the senior travel market. *Journal of Travel Research*, **29**, 1, 9–12.
- Wei, S. and Ruys, H. 1998. *Industry and Senior Perception Survey*. Department of Families, Youth and Community Care, Brisbane, Australia.
- Weiss, R. 2005. *The Experience of Retirement*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York.
- Wilcock, A. 2007. Active ageing: dream or reality? *New Zealand Journal of Occupational Therapy*, **54**, 1, 15–20.
- Zimmer, Z., Brayley, R. and Searle, M. 1995. Whether to go or where to go: identification of important influences on seniors' decisions to travel. *Journal of Travel Research*, **33**, 3, 3–10.

Accepted 8 February 2012; first published online 12 April 2012

Address for correspondence:

Wendy Hillman, School of Health and Human Services,
Faculty of Sciences, Engineering and Health, CQUniversity,
77/1.11 Bruce Highway, North Rockhampton,
Queensland 4702, Australia.

E-mail: w.hillman@cqu.edu.au