

Southern Cross University

Visitors to Ballina's Ocean Beaches

Using persuasive communication to achieve economic and behavioural outcomes for water-based activities at Ballina's ocean beaches



Lighthouse Beach, Ballina (J. Mackellar)

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this project was to understand behaviour and visitation to Ballina local government area (LGA), in particular, visitor engagement with water-based activities at Ballina's ocean beaches. The specific research objectives were conducted in four stages and included:

- **Stage 1** - Identifying a pool of salient beliefs held by visitors to Ballina with regard to engaging in water-based activities at Ballina's ocean beaches.
- **Stage 2** - Assessing visitor travel and spending behaviour and distinguishing between the perceptions of visitors who engage in water-based activities at Ballina's beaches and the perceptions of those who do not.
- **Stage 3** - Developing a communication intervention based on the perceptions identified in previous stages.
- **Stage 4** –
Part 1. Assessing the potential for the communication intervention to shift tourists' perceptions related to behaviours of visiting Ballina and engaging in water-based activities at Ballina's ocean beaches.
Part 2. Determining the numbers of visitors coming to Ballina, the types of visitors and their behaviour, in order to model impacts on the visitor economy.

Summary

Background

As part of the NSW Government Shark Management Strategy, several shark mitigation measures have been discussed, researched and trialled in Ballina NSW. They include smart drumlines, barriers, helicopter surveillance, drones and personal deterrents. While many of these measures continue to be trialled, there has been little research effort to understand the attitudes and behaviour of visitors to the region. Understanding tourists' perceptions, current behaviour and behavioural intentions to visit Ballina's beaches is crucial for management strategies designed to minimise negative impacts and encourage positive outcomes.

Methods

This project captured visit and expenditure behaviour along with perceptions, current behaviour and behavioural intentions of visitors and non-visitors toward engaging in water-based activities at Ballina's ocean beaches including, but not limited to, perceived safety and comfort in relation to sharks, during the period of implementation of NSW Department of Primary Industries (DPI) Shark Management Strategy (SMS).

The project involved several stages gathering primary qualitative and quantitative data from visitors to Ballina LGA. Data related to travel, spending and water-based

activities were important to the study to identify those who do vs do not currently engage in water-based activities at Ballina's ocean beaches. Based on behaviour change theory, the study inventoried and measured beliefs that underpin the behaviour of the two groups and how the groups differ, i.e. facilitators and constraints to visitors' decisions to go in the water. Differences in beliefs were used to develop and test a "communication intervention" (CI) designed to impact a visitor's decision to visit and engage in water-based activities at Ballina's ocean beaches. In the final stage of the study, the trial communication intervention was administered via an on-line panel provider together with a pre- and post-intervention survey to determine its efficacy in impacting respondents' perceptions and behaviours.

Results

The project provided insight into the behaviour of visitors to Ballina with some important considerations for decision-makers.

- With regard to the behaviour of engaging in water-based activities at Ballina's ocean beaches, the research indicates that the presence of sharks appears to be the least important belief. What drives the behaviour of engaging in water-based activities at Ballina's ocean beaches is being able to swim in clear, clean, pristine water, where amenities and surf lifesaving patrols are present, and accommodation is close by.
- Convincing non beach users of the presence and activities of lifesavers (trained volunteers) and lifeguards (paid professionals) was identified as key to persuading visitors to engage in water-based activities at Ballina's ocean beaches.
- A trial communication intervention confirmed that, if communicated persuasively, visitors' perceptions, attitudes and behavioural intentions can be improved, potentially resulting in increasing engagement in water-based activities.
- The visitor profile and economic modelling results indicate the 2015 and subsequent shark incidents, at Ballina LGA beaches, have had no long-term impact on the numbers of visitors coming to Ballina Shire. Visitor numbers to Ballina LGA are strong and on-the-rise. There is a high rate of return visitation, with many visitors returning to the same or similar accommodation, often booking a year in advance. Any short-term seasonal impacts on visitation in 2015 have been overcome as visitation has grown to reach the one million visitor mark.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The project found visitors to Ballina who engage in water-based activities hold a stronger belief that it is easy to do so at a patrolled beach than those who do not engage in water-based activities. The researchers recommend promoting the presence of lifeguards/lifesavers, listening stations, drone surveillance and other aspects of the shark mitigation strategy to strengthen the current belief that an interaction with a shark is extremely unlikely. This may strengthen awareness and

establish positive perceptions by those who do not currently visit the beach. A detailed list of recommendations is included in the main report.

The study collected data from current and potential visitors and used these, together with the latest data on visitor profiles and behaviour, to understand visitor decision-making and behaviour and to model economic impact. Beyond immediate behaviour and economic results, the findings can underpin decisions for region-specific research, economic modelling and strategic communication with visitors throughout NSW.

NOTE:

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