



ASIAN DEVELOPMENT BANK



Te Puna Vai Marama

Cook Islands Centre for Research



# SURVEY OF TOURISM ATTITUDES OF RESIDENTS

**COOK ISLANDS ANALYSIS REPORT**

2024

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## Executive Summary

This research is a product of the Asian Development Bank project *TA-6628 REG: Promoting Innovations in Regional Cooperation and Integration in the Aftermath of Covid-19 – Sustainable tourism Component*. We would like to acknowledge the Asian Development Bank as funders of this research.

For many Pacific Nations, tourism is one of the main economic activities and its impact extends to all aspects of island life both positively and negatively. One major yet under considered aspect is the issue of tourism carrying capacity. Understanding residents' tolerance for tourism is an essential element of carrying capacity methodology. A Survey of Tourism Attitudes of Residents Survey (STAR) was carried out by local consultancy Te Puna Vai Mārama in the islands of Rarotonga and Aitutaki in the Cook Islands. This survey sought to identify and ascertain the attitudes of Cook Islands residents towards tourism; develop a deeper understanding of the elements related to tourism that are more likely to influence these attitudes; and gauge whether residents feel that the impacts of tourism and visitor numbers have overwhelmed the islands, are at a tolerable level, or have the capacity to expand.

### Key Findings:

- Based on the findings below, this research concludes that tourism could be sustained into the future at its present level. There is, however, not enough evidence to support an expansion or reduction in the number of tourists.
- There was widespread agreement with both the positive and negative impacts of tourism. The positive impacts of tourism participants agreed with most were:
  - "Tourism contributes to growing the local economy" (94.4%); and
  - "Tourism creates secure and decent employment" (83.2%).
- The negative impacts of tourism respondents agreed with most were:
  - "Tourism puts a strain on energy and water resources" (70.8%); and
  - "House and rental prices have increased because of tourism" (69.1%).
- Over two thirds (67.2%) of respondents believed that the positive impacts outweighed the negative impacts. There was slight variation in agreement across all demographic variables.
- Majority of respondents thought the impact of tourism overall was positive (85% in Aitutaki and 71% in Rarotonga). This also differed slightly across age groups and having income from tourism.
- When asked about their continued support for tourism, most respondents (85.7%) agreed they supported tourism and wanted to see it remain important in future. This differed slightly by age and income from tourism.
- Majority of respondents were satisfied with the current number of tourists (49.3% in Rarotonga and 63.4% in Aitutaki). This differed slightly by gender. A greater proportion of Rarotonga respondents felt there were 'too many' (30.8%) while a greater proportion of Aitutaki respondents felt there were 'too few' (31.8%).
- Qualitative data shows that a majority of respondents thought economic gain was the biggest advantage of tourism. Furthermore, many also liked the new relationships tourism built including the opportunities to promote the Cook Islands. Pressure on infrastructure and environmental damage were cited by many as the biggest disadvantage. Additionally, many were also concerned about tourist behaviour. Many respondents had comments on how to improve tourism in the Cook Islands, such as better educating tourists and limiting tourist numbers.

- Respondents thought that environmental issues were generally the most important development priorities. 'Healthy ocean and land biodiversity' was the most important issue to the respondents, followed by the 'cost of living'.

## Introduction

For many Pacific Nations, tourism is one of the main economic activities and its impact extends to all aspects of island life both positively and negatively. One major yet under considered aspect is the issue of tourism carrying capacity. Issues surrounding tourism carrying capacity and the need to determine sustainable tourism outcomes in the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) Pacific Member States has been identified in a number of publications. For example, the ADB project Pacific Private Sector Development Initiative (PSDI) state in their (2021) publication '*Looking Forward Vol 1 Evaluating the Challenges for Pacific Tourism After Covid-19*' that "Carrying capacity studies have not yet been conducted in the DMCs but are essential to resilience planning and ensuring the tourism sectors longer-term sustainability". As such, the ADB, supported by the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation (CITC)- the responsible body for destination management and promotion- have begun a scoping study to develop an outline methodology to assess tourism carrying capacity that could be replicated for use in ADB Pacific Member States.

In 2023, Stage One of the scoping study was conducted, which involved a rapid assessment of the status of the resources and infrastructure that are vital to the tourism sector on the islands of Rarotonga and Aitutaki. A traffic light system was used to communicate the status of each resource in relation to its proximity to carrying capacity, and to provide a basis of the key indicators to be used in long-term monitoring. The results from this assessment are mapped out in the concept paper '*Promoting Innovations in Regional Cooperation and Integration in the Aftermath of COVID-19 - Sustainable Tourism Component: Tourism Carrying Capacity Assessment for Pacific Islands including Cook Islands Case Study*'. Many resources were at a sustainable level within carrying capacity, such as air routes, visitor accommodation (beds), medical services, roading, public transport, vehicle hire, telecommunications, and the condition of the lagoon for recreational use. Marine resources, the local workforce, tourism training, and activities such as fishing, reef walking, and whale watching were close to exceeding carrying capacity. However, the state of surface and groundwater pollution, reduced wetland environments and activities (e.g., turtle tourism) are areas where capacity has been exceeded. Rarotonga and Aitutaki differed particularly in the state of their potable water, power generation, waste water and solid waste treatment. The availability of potable water and power generation do not meet current demands in Aitutaki; potable water was nearing capacity but power generation was sustainable in Rarotonga. Capacity for solid waste and wastewater treatment were sustainable in Aitutaki, but in a more critical state in Rarotonga, with wastewater treatment, particularly, having exceeded capacity.

Conducting a social assessment is part of Stage Two of the scoping study. Te Puna Vai Mārama was engaged by the ADB to design and conduct a Survey of Tourism Attitudes of Residents Survey (STAR) and to collate, analyse and report on the survey data. This study will contribute the perspective of residents, and shed light on social elements not already addressed in Stage 1 of the assessment to help paint a holistic picture of the state of tourism in the Cook Islands.

## Aims of the Study

There are three aims to this study; 1) to ascertain the attitudes of Cook Islands residents towards tourism; 2) develop a deeper understanding of the elements related to tourism that are more likely to influence these attitudes; and 3) gauge whether residents feel that the impacts of tourism and visitor numbers have overwhelmed the islands, are at a tolerable level, or have the capacity to expand.

## Methodology

Te Puna Vai Mārama worked with the international consultant who undertook Stage One of this project to refine the STAR survey questionnaire to fit within the Cook Islands context. The survey was designed based on previous carrying capacity studies in other contexts, as well as the previous CITC Community Attitudes Towards Tourism (CATT) surveys.

Data collection commenced late September 2024 in Rarotonga and Aitutaki by Te Puna Vai Mārama. To obtain the largest number of respondents, data was collected over seven days in front of a bank and supermarket in Avarua, the main township in Rarotonga between 10am - 2.30pm - the busiest time of day. In Aitutaki, data was collected over two days, at several locations across the island including outside the Cook Islands Tourism Office, and several small supermarkets. Surveys ranged between 5-10 minutes to complete on tablets using Kobo Toolbox software (paper versions were also available), and was either self- or interviewer-administered by the two available staff. The survey was offered in both English and Cook Islands Māori.

In total, 414 Cook Islands residents participated in the survey; 366 residents of Rarotonga, 42 residents of Aitutaki and six residents of outer islands (Pa Enea). 162 respondents were men, 250 were women, and two indicated their gender was "other". Ages ranged between 15-75+ in Rarotonga, and 15-74 in Aitutaki.

The data was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Data for residents of Rarotonga, Aitutaki and those who answered the survey in Rarotonga but mostly lived in the Pa Enea were generally analyzed together, but disaggregated between Rarotonga and Aitutaki where there were found to be statistically significant differences. Some demographic variables, as well as Likert scale data have been aggregated for where appropriate. The statistical analysis and tests applied to achieve the required results include frequency and mean analysis, crosstabulation analysis, non-parametric tests (namely Mann-Whitney U tests and Kruskal Wallis tests to help identify significant differences across demographic groups) and some correlation analysis to identify relationships between certain variables using the Spearman's Rank Correlation.

## Results

### 1. Demographic Data

#### 1.1 Residency of respondents

Of the 414 respondents, the large majority reside in Rarotonga, while a small number reside in Aitutaki, and less than two percent of the respondents lived in the Pa Enua but were surveyed while visiting Rarotonga (Figure 1).

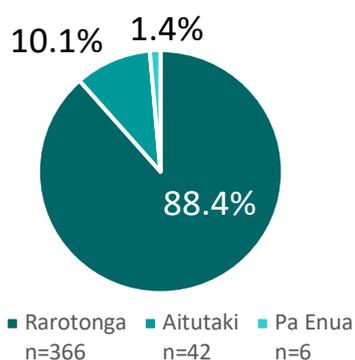


Figure 1. Residency of respondents (n = 414).

#### 1.2 Gender

Respondents that identified as women accounted for sixty percent, while 39.1% were men (figure 2). Additionally, two respondents indicated their gender was “other”, making up <1% of respondents.

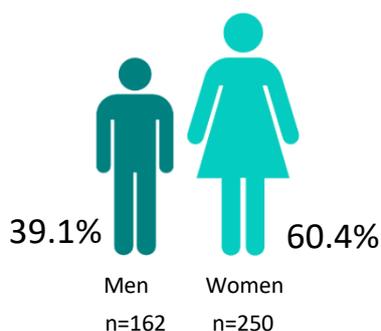


Figure 2. Gender ratio of respondents (n=412). Individuals that identified as “other” is not indicated here due to the statistical indifference (<1%).

1.3

#### Age

The age results reflect a similar distribution to the population of the Cook Islands (figure 3). There was an underrepresentation of respondents aged 15-24 years of age, and an overrepresentation of those aged 55-64. Women accounted for the majority of participants in all age ranges, except for those aged 55-64, had the highest participation rate for men. Furthermore, majority of the female participants were in the younger age ranges (25-34).

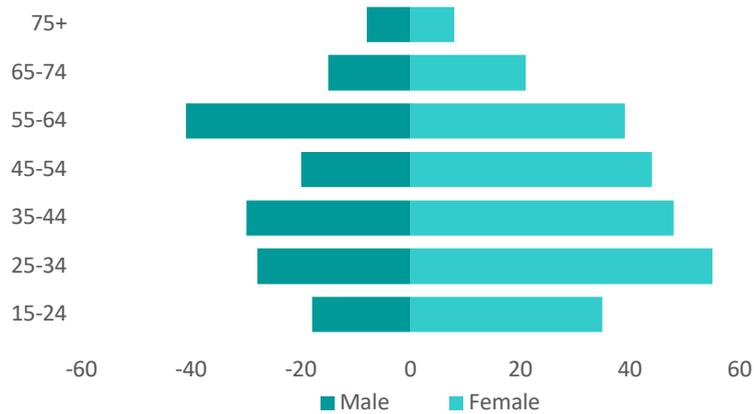


Figure 3. Age ratio between males and females (n = 412).

### 1.4 Ethnicity

Over sixty percent of participants identified as Cook Islands Māori while the remaining identified as other ethnicities. It is worth noting that the ratio of the latter is higher than eighteen percent of 'other ethnicities' of the overall population, recorded in the 2021 Cook Islands census (Cook Islands Statistics Office, 2022) (18%). This may be somewhat misleading as the 2021 Census was done during COVID-19 when few foreign workers were in the country

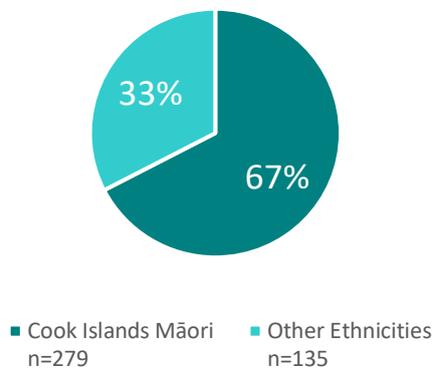


Figure 4. Ethnicity ratio of individuals (n = 414) identifying as either 'Cook Islands Māori' or 'other'.

## 1.5 Economic gain from tourism

Many respondents were economically involved in tourism. This includes individuals in hospitality, but also retail, events, health and beauty, as well as accommodation operators (Cook Islands Tourism Business Confidence Index Survey, 2023). Around two-thirds of respondents in both Aitutaki and Rarotonga were earning part of their income from tourism (to supplement their overall income) (figure 5).

Census data shows that of the employed population aged 15 and over in Rarotonga, 41.4% are mainly employed in industries where they may be earning some income from tourism: wholesale and retail trade; restaurants and accommodation; and arts, recreation and other services. In Aitutaki, this is 51.2% (Cook Islands Statistics Office, 2022). However, the results from this survey may be higher than this as it may also include those for whom tourism provides supplementary income.

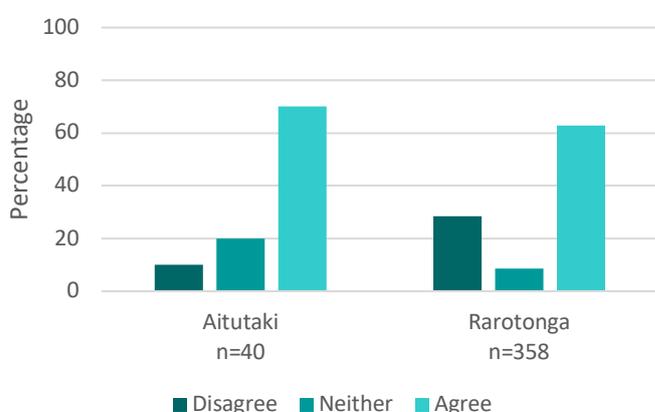


Figure 5. Some income from tourism by Island

Respondents were also asked the extent to which they agreed their income was dependent on tourism (figure 6). There was a greater dependency on tourism for residents in Aitutaki than those in Rarotonga. This may reflect a diversity of other industries in Rarotonga (as the economic hub of the Cook Islands).

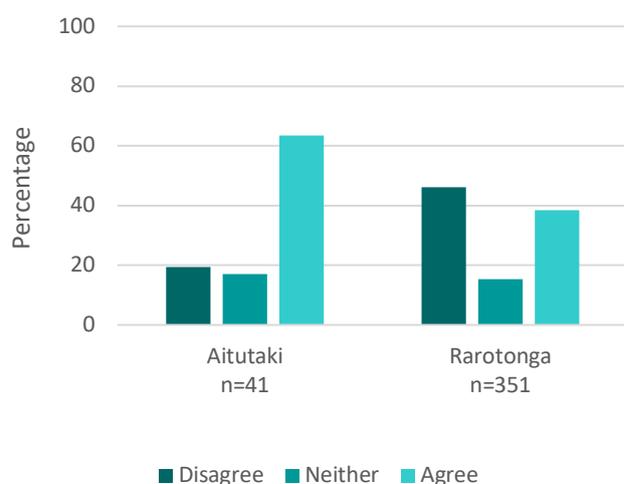
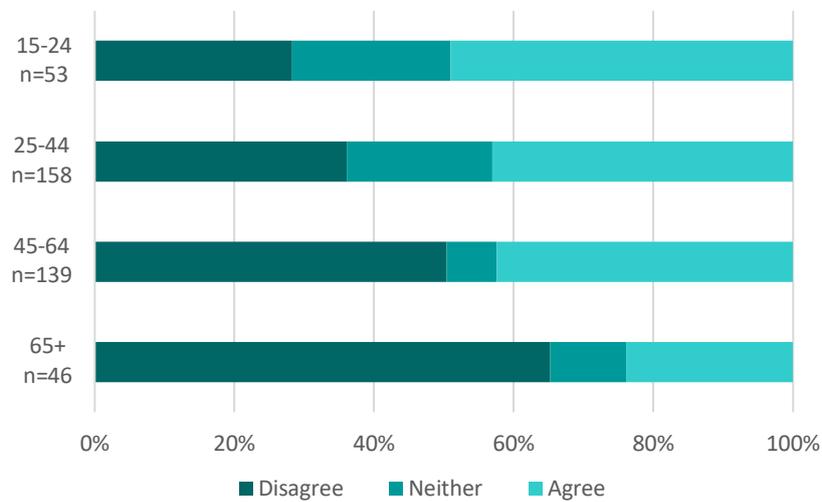


Figure 6. Income dependency on tourism by island. Across Islands: Sig = .038 (Mann-Whitney U test)

Age ranges of those whose income was 'highly dependent' on tourism is shown below (figure 7). The data shows a decrease in income dependency with age. Young people (15-24) were significantly more likely to be dependent on tourism for income, while those aged 65+ were the least dependent on tourism for income.



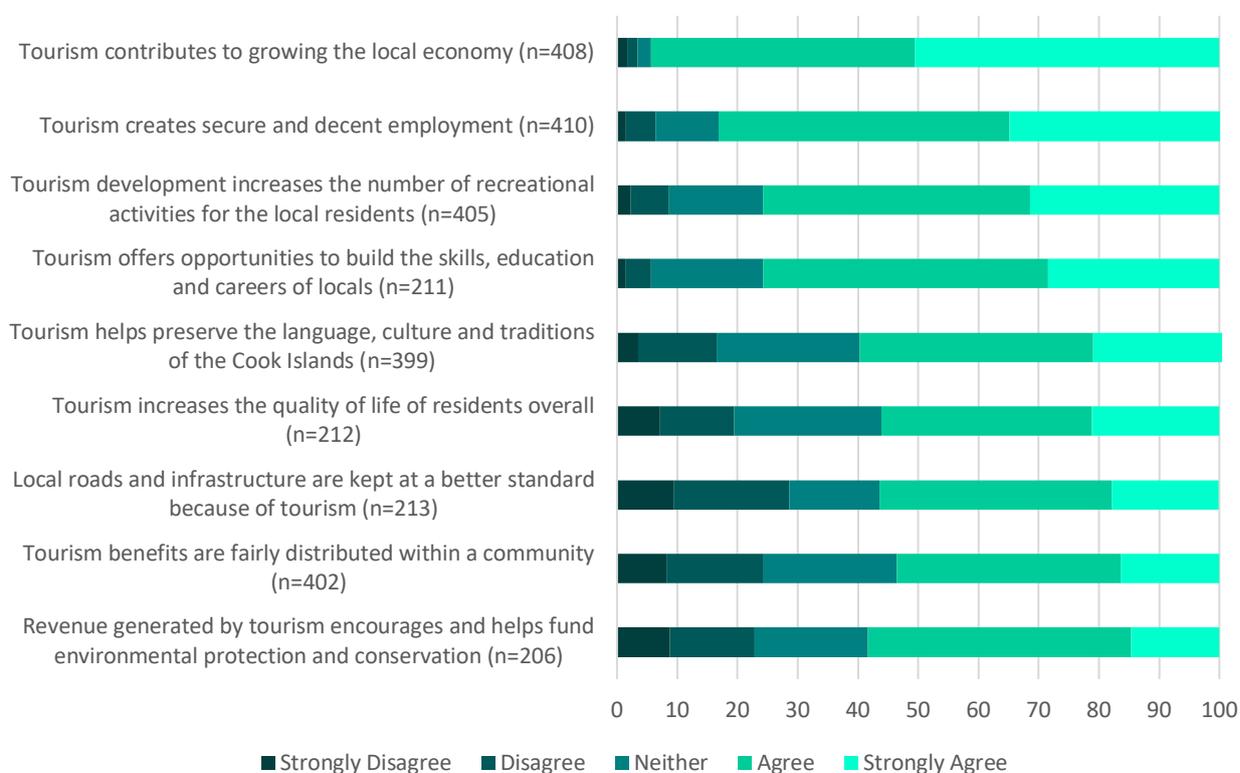
**Figure 5.** Income dependence on tourism by age. Across-age: sig = 0.003 (Kruskal Wallis Test).

## 2. Positive and negative impacts of tourism

This section asked respondents to what extent they agreed with the following statements about the specific impacts of tourism on a 5-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Half these statements were 'positive', and half were 'negative'.

### 2.2 Positive impacts of tourism statements

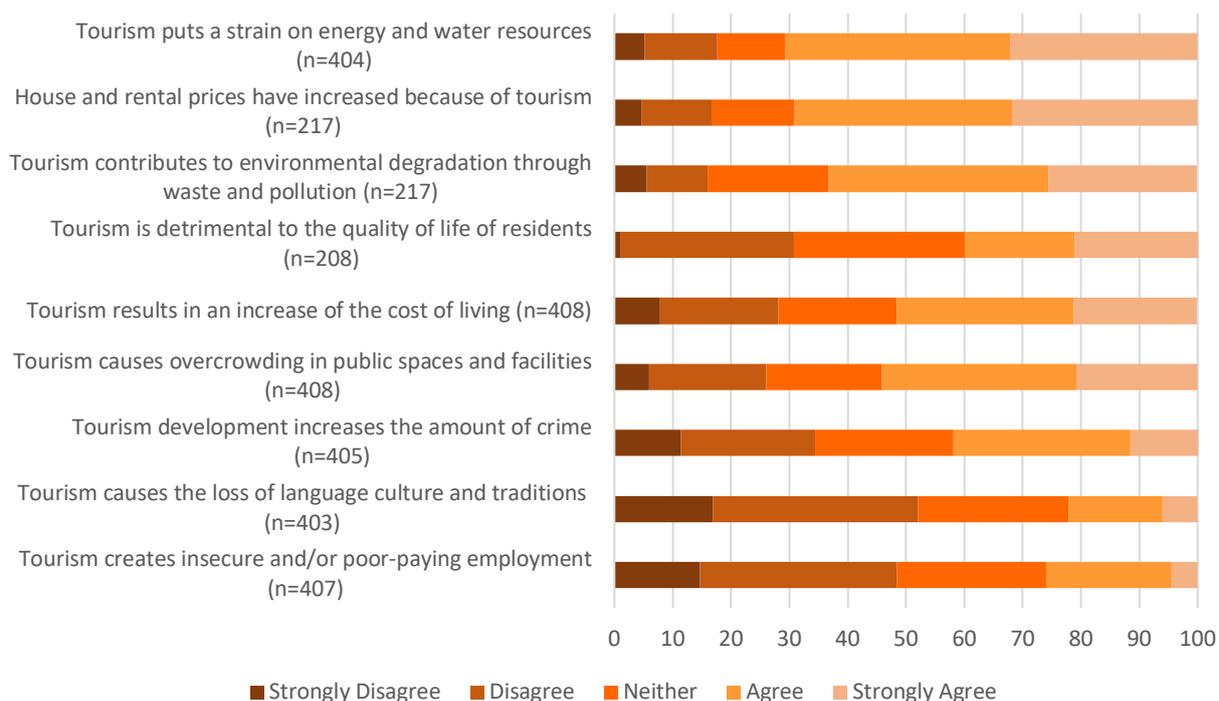
For each statement about the positive impacts of tourism, more than fifty percent of participants were agreeable (figure 8). Almost all agreed that tourism contributed to growing the local economy (94.4%), with over fifty percent strongly agreeing. Respondents also largely agreed with "Tourism creates secure and decent employment" (83.2% at least agreeing). The least agreeable statement was around the fair distribution of the benefits of tourism.



**Figure 6.** Positive impact statements of tourism ranked in order of highest to lowest proportion of those who voted "strongly agree" across all islands..

## 2.3 Negative impacts of tourism statements

Generally, respondents were less in agreement with the negative impacts of tourism statements compared to the positive responses. The most agreeable statements suggest concerns for the impact that tourism has on energy and water resources (70.8% of respondents at least agreeing), closely followed by the difficulty that the industry has placed on housing and rental prices (69.1% at least agreeing). On the other hand, majority of respondents did not agree that that tourism was a driver for the loss of language, culture and traditions, or caused poor-quality employment.



**Figure 7.** Negative impact statements of tourism ranked in order of highest to lowest proportion of those who voted "strongly agree" across all islands.

There were found to be significant differences between Rarotonga and Aitutaki for some of these statements, whereby residents of Rarotonga felt more strongly about the negative impacts of tourism relating to overcrowding, resource strain, crime, rental prices, and environmental degradation (the mean value for these negative statements listed were higher for Rarotongan residents than Aitutaki residents). Despite documented deterrents to the carrying capacity for solid waste, water resources, waste water, and power on both islands (see ADB, 2024), these findings suggest that Rarotongan residents are more critical of tourism, independent of the objective state of these resources, where as Aitutaki residents are less so.

### 3. Attitudes Towards Tourism Overall

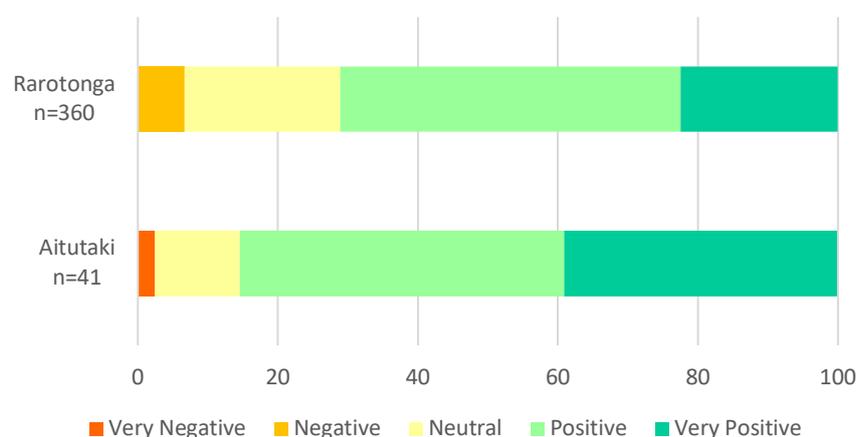
Key questions to ascertain attitudes of residents were:

- what respondents thought the overall impact of tourism was;
- whether they thought the positives outweighed the negatives;
- whether they supported tourism and wanted tourism to continue;
- how they felt about current tourist numbers.

Responses to each of the following key statements about the impact of and support for tourism have been broken down into percentages. It was also of interest to discern whether respondents' attitudes towards the impact of tourism and tourist numbers varied by the demographic variables of age, gender, ethnicity, and economic gain (recoded variable) from tourism. To determine this, the relevant non-parametric tests (namely the Mann-Whitney U test and the Kruskal Wallis Test) were applied to identify significant differences, and then further comparisons could be made.

#### 3.1 The impact of tourism

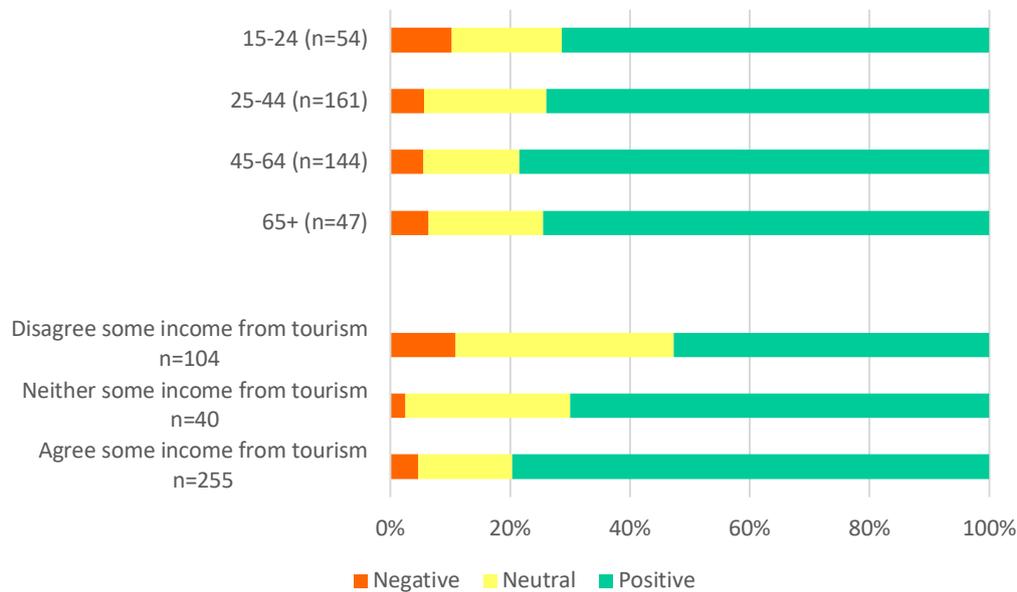
Respondents were asked what they thought the overall impact of tourism was on a 5-point scale from 'very negative' to 'very positive' (figure 11).



**Figure 10.** Overall impact of tourism by island. Across Islands: Sig= .003 (Mann Whitney-U test).

Overall, the impact of tourism was viewed favourably across both islands. The vast majority of respondents thought that the impact of tourism was at least either 'positive' or 'very positive' This proportion was larger for Aitutaki residents than Rarotonga (85.3% in Aitutaki and 71.1% in Rarotonga). Just under a quarter of respondents rated the impact of tourism as "neutral" in Rarotonga (22.2%), and this constituted only 12.2% of respondents in Aitutaki. Very few respondents across both islands believed the overall impact of tourism was negative to some degree (6.5% in Rarotonga and 2.4% in Aitutaki).

Results differed across age groups and having partial income from tourism with overall positive responses (figure 12). Younger people (15-24 years of age) had the least positive responses, while individuals from 45-64 years of age had the most positive response. Additionally, a far greater proportion of those who had some income from tourism also felt the impact of tourism was more positive than those who did not have income from tourism (79.6% compared to 55.7%).



**Figure 11.** Overall impact of tourism by age and partial income from tourism. Across age: Sig=.035 (Kruskai Wallis test); across income from tourism: sig=<.001 (Kruskai Wallis Test).

A Spearman’s correlation analysis was conducted to assess the direction and strength of the association between positive and negative statements about tourism’s impact and the overall impact of tourism. The strongest association was observed for the positive statement ‘*Tourism helps preserve the language, culture and traditions of the Cook Islands*’, which showed a moderate positive correlation ( $r_s[395] = .442, p = <.001$ ). This was followed by the positive statement ‘*Tourism increases the quality of life of residents overall*’, which also exhibited a moderate positive relationship ( $r_s[208] = .376, p = <.001$ ). These findings suggest that agreement with these statements moderately predicts a positive perception of tourism’s overall impact. Overall, positive statements demonstrated slightly stronger correlations with the perceived impact of tourism than the negative ones, indicating that the positive impacts of tourism may play a more significant role in shaping respondents’ views on tourism.

### 3.2 Positive impacts of tourism outweigh negative impacts

This question asked respondents to what extent they agreed on a 5-point Likert scale that “the positive impacts of tourism outweighed the negative impacts”.

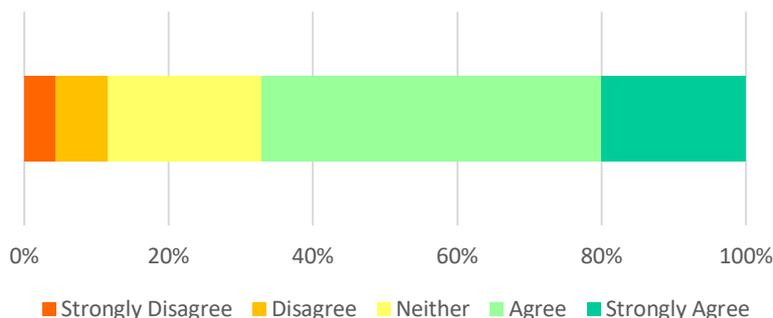
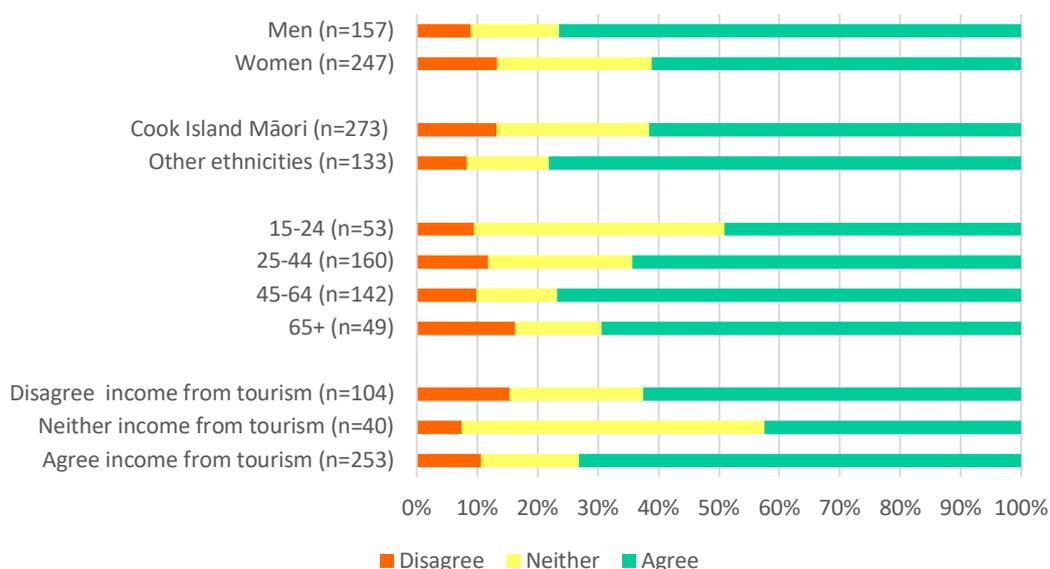


Figure 12. Positive Benefits of Tourism Outweigh Negatives (n=406)

Over two thirds of respondents (67.2%) agreed that the positive impacts of tourism outweighed the negative impacts. Only 12.3% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed. Those who were more in agreement that the positive benefits of tourism outweighed the negatives were more likely to rate the overall impact of tourism as more positive. This is supported by a moderate positive correlational relationship ( $r_{s[403]} = .473, p < .001$ )

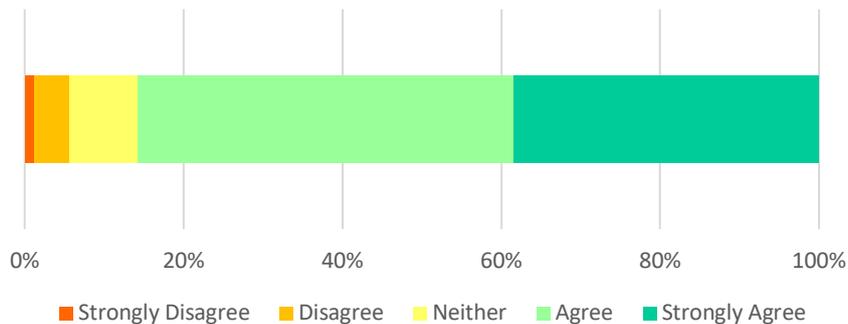
There were found to be statistically significant differences in responses to this question across all demographic categories, displayed in figure 14 below. Men were in stronger agreement that the positive benefits of tourism outweighed the negatives than women (76.4% compared to 61.1%), and those of other ethnicities were in stronger agreement than those who were Cook Islands Māori (78.2% compared to 61.5%). Those who had personal income from tourism were also more in agreement than those who did not (73.1% compared to 62.5%). Young people (15-24 year olds) were the least convinced the positives outweighed the negatives (49.1% agreeing), while those aged 45-64 were more in agreement (76.8% agreeing).



**Figure 13.** Positive Benefits of Tourism Outweigh Negatives by Demographic Across gender: Sig. = .002 (Mann-Whitney U Test); across ethnicity Sig. = .001 (A Mann-Whitney U Test), across age: Sig. = .012 (Kruskal Wallis Test); across income from tourism: Sig. = .002 (Kruskal Wallis Test).

### 3.3 Supporting Tourism and Wanting it to Remain Important

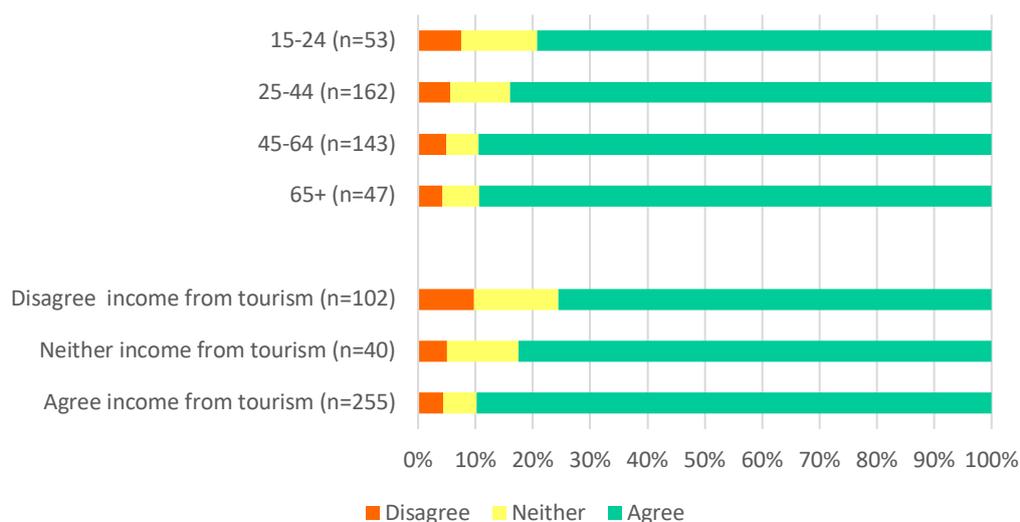
This question asked respondents to what extent they agreed on a 5-point Likert scale that they “supported tourism and wanted to see it remain important to their island”.



**Figure 14.** Supporting Tourism and Wanting it to Remain Important (n=406)

As can be seen in figure 15, a substantial majority of respondents agreed that they support tourism and wanted to see it remain important (85.7%). A small proportion (8.6%) were neutral, and an even smaller proportion (5.6%) disagreed to some degree. Those who rated the overall impact of tourism more positively were likely to indicate their continued support for tourism, this is supported by a moderate positive correlational relationship ( $r_{s[404]} = .566, p < .001$ )

Statistically significant differences in responses were found across age and having personal income from tourism, these are shown in the graph below (figure 16). Those in the older age brackets (45+) and those who had personal income from tourism were more likely to agree they supported tourism and wanted it to remain important.

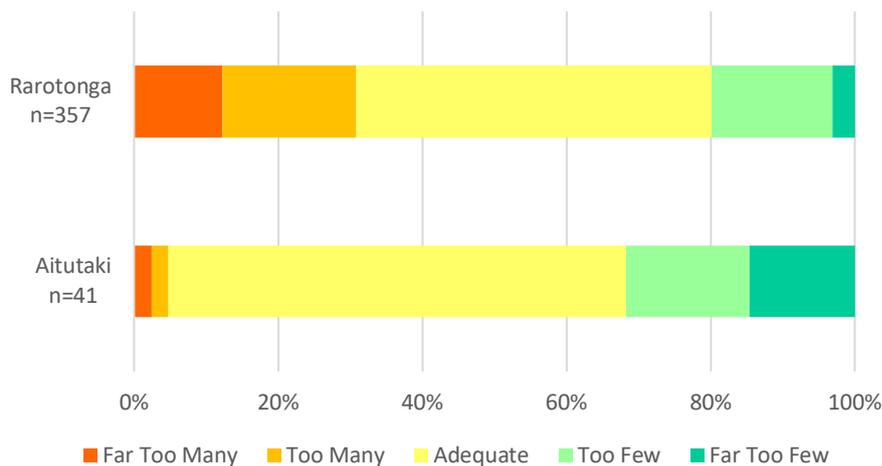


**Figure 15.** Supporting Tourism and Wanting it to Remain Important by Age and Income from Tourism Across income from tourism: Sig. = .002 (Mann-Whitney U Test; across age: Sig= .012

A spearman’s correlation test was used to understand which impacts of tourism which had the strongest relationship with a respondent’s support for tourism. Greater agreement with “Revenue generated by tourism encourages and helps fund environmental protection and conservation” (rs[199] =.476, p<.001) and “Tourism benefits are fairly distributed within a community” (rs[396] =.459, p<.001) were found to have the strongest correlations, in other words, these impacts were the most likely to influence a respondents stance on whether or not they supported tourism and wanted to see it remain important. Generally, the correlation coefficients were stronger for positive impact of tourism statements, meaning that despite the positive impacts of tourism may have a greater influence than the negative impacts on determining respondents’ continued support for tourism.

### 3.4 Perspective on the Current Number of Tourists

This question asked respondents how they felt about the current number of tourists, on a 5-point scale from “far too many”, to “far too few” (implying there could be more).

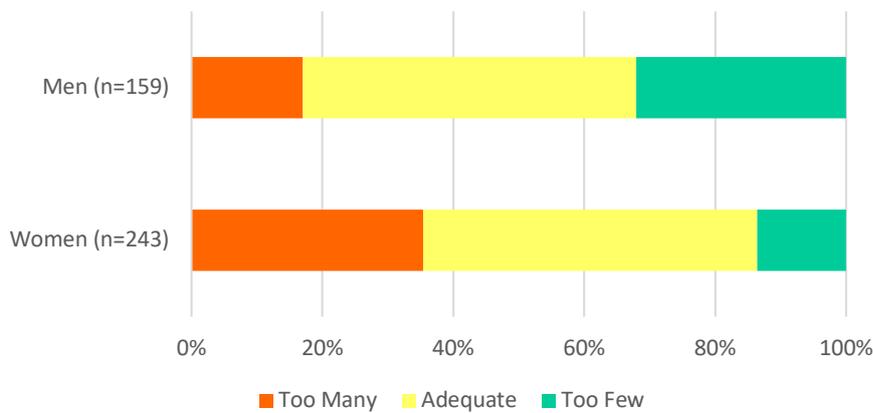


**Figure 16.** Perspective on Current Numbers of Tourists By Island Across Islands: Sig=.003 (Mann Whitney-U test)

As displayed in the graph above (figure 17), the majority of respondents thought the number of tourists is currently ‘adequate’ on both islands, however this proportion was significantly greater for Aitutaki residents (63.4% compared to 49.3% for Rarotonga). Significantly more Rarotonga respondents thought there were ‘too many’ tourists (30.8%) than ‘too few’ (19.9). Reversely for Aitutaki residents, a greater proportion thought there were “too few” (31.8%) than “too many” (4.8%). That more Aitutaki residents saw room for expansion is a similar result to that found by the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation (CITC) Community Attitudes Towards Tourism (CATT) survey (CITC, 2023), which found that Aitutaki respondents were more in agreement that “The Cook Islands has the capacity to host more tourists” than those in Rarotonga (mean of 3.9 compared to 3.1).

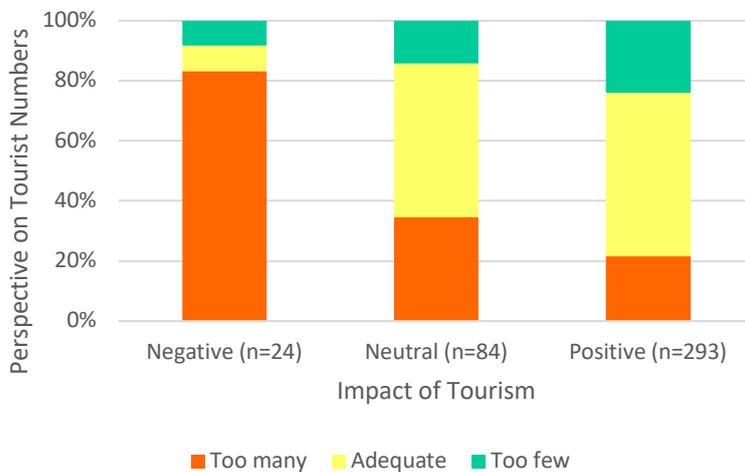
Perspectives on the number of tourists were similar across most demographic groups except gender, as shown in the next graph (figure 18). Although the majority of both men and women were content with current tourists numbers, a greater proportion women felt there were at least “too many” tourists (35.4%), while a greater proportion of men felt there were ‘too few’ (32.1%). Again, this result aligns with findings from the CITC CATT survey (2023), which found that men were more in

agreement that “the Cook Islands has the capacity to host more tourists” than women (mean of 3.6 compared to 3.1).



**Figure 17.** Perspective on Current Numbers of Tourist by Gender. Across gender: Sig. = <.001 (Mann-Whitney U Test)

Perspectives on the number of tourists differ by respondents’ views on the impact of tourism overall as shown in figure 19 below. A far greater proportion of those who believed the impact of tourism was ‘negative’ overall also held the view that there were ‘too many tourists’ (83.3%) than those who thought the impact of tourism was neutral or positive. Those who believed the impact of tourism was either “neutral” or “positive” tended to be more satisfied with the current tourist numbers, with a majority indicating they felt tourist numbers were “adequate” (51.2% for “neutral” and 54.6% for positive).



**Figure 18.** Perspective on the Number of Tourists by Impact of Tourism



tourists brings opportunities to learn from other cultures” and “I feel proud to live in a place that can attract tourists” had means of 3.8 and 4.3 respectively.

Some respondents, while acknowledging the benefits, also acknowledged these benefits were conditional or entwined with drawbacks. For example, *male 45-54* stated ““I think there are many advantages to tourism but they are dependent on your position or job within the industry”, while *female 55-64* stated “The income is beneficial but sometimes the affect has too much of an impact”.

## 4.2 Biggest Disadvantages of Tourism

There were text 324 responses to the question “What is the biggest disadvantage you associate with tourism?”. The most frequently mentioned words are displayed in the word map below.



Figure 20. Biggest Disadvantages of Tourism Word Map

A prominent theme appeared around ‘environmental damage’. The words “environment/environmental” and “degradation” were commonly cited, while some specified the further how the environment was damaged through “pollution”, “waste” and rubbish”. “Infrastructure” was frequently mentioned, as well as “resource” use or “strain” commonly appearing in responses. Although environmental degradation and infrastructure strain was a common concern shared by many, respondents differed in where they located blame or responsibility for the issue. Some indicated that it was the tourists causing the issue through their consumption, for example, *male - no age given*, commented “[tourists’] use of resources is too high”. Conversely, some indicated the issue was a local one caused by the inability of infrastructure to provide for tourist consumption. *Male 45-54* states “Tourism depends on the ability of our infrastructure development to keep up with the number of tourists. This is where we are falling short”. Similarly, *female 45-54* explains “when operators cannot provide the facilities to cater to the tourists, like toilets, then it affects the environment”. As explained in stage 1 of the scoping study, many of these issues are not strictly caused by tourism, but can be exacerbated by tourism and subsequently can create negative sentiment or a sense of competition between residents and visitors.

Other frequently mentioned words were “Crowding/overcrowding/busyness”, with some highlighting the “number” of tourists as an issue, as well as negative words related to poor tourist “behaviour” or “attitudes” such as “disrespect” “ignorant, “entitled” or “rude”. Concerns around tourist behaviour was also a common theme in the 2023 CATT survey qualitative data (CITC, 2023). “Acculturation” was used to represent any descriptions of a ‘loss or dilution of culture’, which was highlighted as a disadvantage by many respondents. Female, 55-64, commented that “[tourism] actually changes our culture, it changes it to suit the tourists, it doesn’t remain true to us”.

increasing everyday “costs” and issues with “accommodation” for locals were also identified as disadvantages, with some respondents going further to mention “disparity” or question the distribution of the economic benefits of tourism. *Female 35-44* mentions “social impacts such as widening disparity between rich and poor” as a disadvantage. A couple of respondents challenged where the economic benefits of tourism were going. *Male 45-54* stated “there is a lot of tourism generated income not staying in the Cook Islands”, while another asked “If we make so much money from tourism, why aren’t these businesses pitching in to better our infrastructure?” (*male, no age given*). A few respondents felt that the economic dependency on tourism was negative, for example, female 75+ stated “I think tourism is too important to the island, we are vulnerable”.

### 4.3 Final Comments

The survey concluded with an open-ended question asking “Is there anything else you would like to add?”. In total, 98 respondents took the opportunity to comment further. This text was analysed thematically.

Many themes appearing in the final open-ended question mirrored those in the prior open-ended questions. Several respondents expressed their appreciation for tourism, for reasons such as providing employment, its contribution to the Cook Islands economy, or even just expressing pleasure at meeting tourists. For example, *female 35-44* stated “tourism brings changes for the betterment of our future”. A few respondents acknowledged the necessity of tourism, such as in this response from *male, 55-64*, “we’re practically a big hotel, we all work for the big hotel, so without tourism, we got no jobs”. However, many other respondents highlighted the need for diversification of the Cook Islands economy. For example, *female 15-24*, commented “We are too invested in tourism to run the economy. Other avenues need to be explored”.

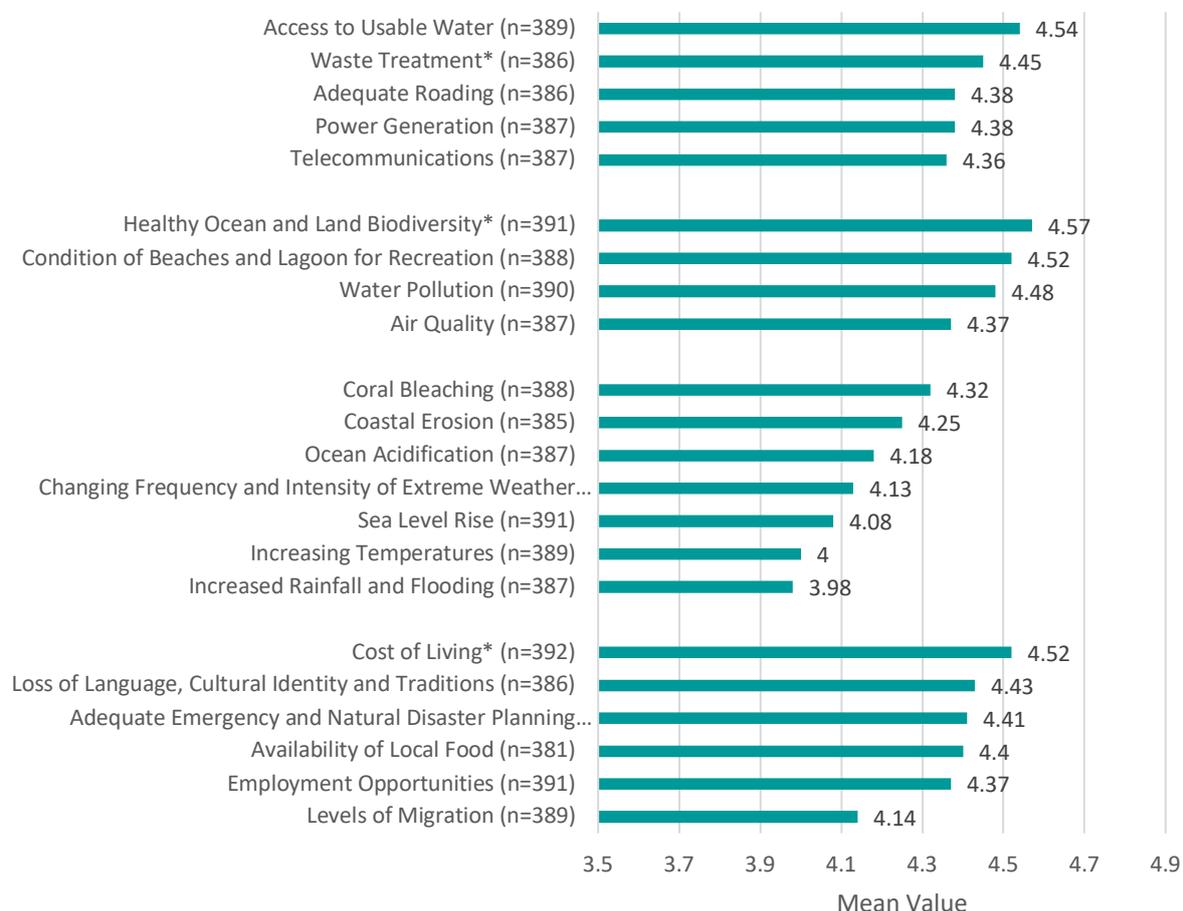
Many used this opportunity to call for change in the Cook Islands tourism industry, with some specifying changes they would like to see. A few called for change in the approach to tourism, such as female 45-54 who stated “we can’t get around it so *Mana Tiaki | guardianship* is a good direction to go. Welcome to OUR home”, or change in the priorities of tourism, such as female 55-64 who stated “If tourism is more eco-friendly and attracting more environmentalist attitudes in tourists and the industry prioritized the environment and biodiversity it would make tourism better for everyone”. Many respondents commented on educating tourists on issues such as tourist dress and attire, attitudes, safety, and their environmental impact. Several other respondents identified the quality or type of tourists current visiting the Cook Islands as an issue, for example, female 15-24 believed “We need to improve the quality of tourists we have. Too many of our tourists bring bad habits and are not classy”. Many others identified the need for a cap on the number of tourists, with one respondent even stating “I operate short-term stay properties. I would happily agree to a 10 percent reduction in bookings to preserve and protect this beautiful piece of paradise. Limit the visitor numbers!! PLEASE!! F or the sake of the country and future generations” (Male, 55-64). One

respondent (female, 55-64) even shared their solutions on the seasonal spread of tourists, stating “Tourists come in intense seasons, and it would be good to spread this out”. Comments around limits on or the spread of tourist numbers is a novel finding; while there were many suggestions for tourism development given by respondents in the 2023 CATT survey, none of the suggestions addressed a need for a cap or redistribution on tourist numbers.

Finally, some distinctly lamented changing Cook Islands values, priorities, or ways of life as described by one respondent, “Overall tourism has pulled our people further away from our natural purposeful way of being, we have convinced ourselves we must exist to serve tourists instead of serving our people first... Culture has become something we do for money, not because we are passionate about keeping it alive for ourselves.” (female, 25-34). Another respondent recommended “Stop focusing just on dollars focus more on quality of life” (Male, 75+). While gauging the impact of tourism on Cook Islands culture has been a component of both this study and previous Cook Islands Tourism CATT surveys, there has been no quantitative data gathered on how much residents think tourism has ‘changed their way of life’ or ‘common societal values’.

## 5. Development Priorities

This section asked respondents to indicate how important they thought the following development issues were, on a 5-point scale from “not important” to “critically important”. These issues were grouped into thematic groups; infrastructure issues, environmental issues, climate change issues, and social and cultural issues. Mean values were used to more easily rank the statements.

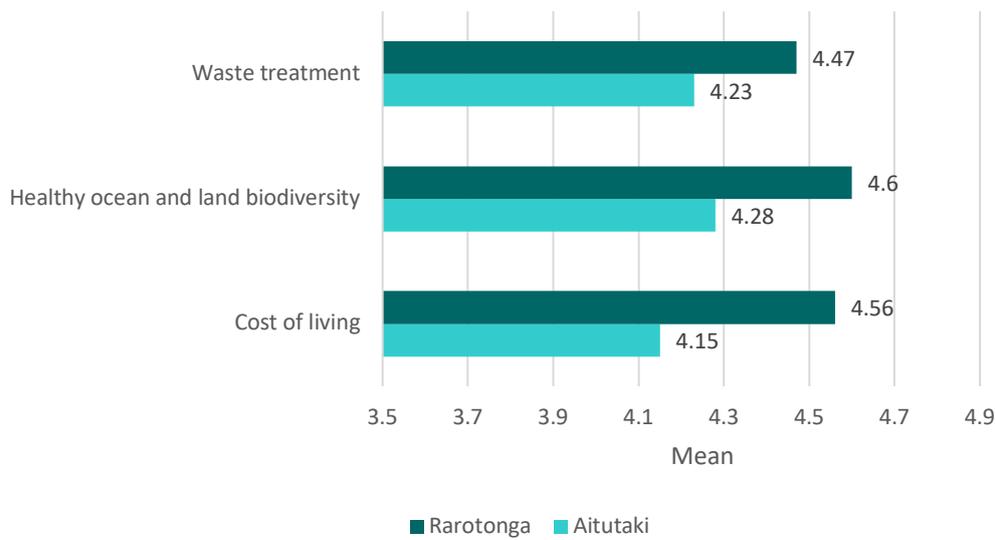


**Figure 21.** Importance of Development Issues Ranked by Mean

Overall, respondents viewed these issues as important. In general, respondents were most concerned with environmental issues, and were the least concerned with climate change issues. The issue of “healthy ocean and land biodiversity” was the most important issue to the respondents (mean of 4.57), followed by the “access to usable water” (mean of 4.54). The importance that residents place on these issues is mirrored by the qualitative data, where issues related to the environment and resources were highlighted as items residents were concerned about. The importance of access to usable water to respondents may also be linked to the current political climate, where tariffs on water usage in Rarotonga are being implemented by the state water agency, with substantial opposition.

There were statistically significant differences identified between means were identified in 3 issues; waste treatment, healthy ocean and land biodiversity, and cost of living across Rarotonga and

Aitutaki. These are listed in the table below (figure 23).



**Figure 22.** Significant differences for development issues between Aitutaki and Rarotonga. Waste treatment Sig= .041 (Mann Whitney-U test); healthy ocean and land biodiversity Sig= .045 (Mann Whitney-U test); cost of living Sig= .006 (Mann Whitney-U test)

Residents of Rarotonga felt these issues were more critical on average than residents of Aitutaki. Particularly for the issue of waste treatment, residents' perceptions align with the assessments made in Stage 1 of the carrying capacity scoping study, which found waste treatment in a more critical state in Rarotonga than Aitutaki.

## Conclusion

Given the stance of residents on tourist numbers and a generally positive outlook on tourism in its current balance, this research concludes that this level of tourism could be sustained into future. However, the findings within this study also support no change to the present level of tourism. There is not enough evidence to support the increase or reduction of tourist numbers from a residents' perspective. The main points for discussion from this research are listed below:

- The findings from this study point to a current social tolerance of the present level and impacts of tourism, with favourable attitudes of residents across the four key questions.
  - Cook Island residents largely hold the view that tourism has a positive impact overall (85% agreeing in Aitutaki and 71% agreeing in Rarotonga).
  - There is substantial support for tourism and widespread desire to see it remain important (86% agreement).
  - The majority of respondents (67%) indicated they believed the positive impacts of tourism outweighed the negative ones.
- There was widespread agreement with both the positive and negative impacts of tourism.
  - The economic contribution of tourism to the Cook Islands residents was the most prominent positive impact. This survey found around two-thirds of respondents were earning some income from tourism, and the impact of tourism on the economy and employment were the most agreeable statements out of the positive impacts, as well as being a distinct theme in the qualitative data.
  - Both the quantitative and qualitative data reveal residents are concerned about the major issues highlighted in Stage 1 of the scoping study related to the stresses and impacts imposed by largely uncontrolled development and poorly designed infrastructure, such as the strain on energy and water resources, the cost of housing forced by a market that favours tourism accommodation over local rentals, and damage to the environment.
- Although residents are conscious of the detriments of tourism, these results show respondents still support it overall. A correlational analysis found that greater agreement with the positive impacts of tourism in particular are more likely to coincide with a more positive view of tourism overall, suggesting the positive impacts of tourism may play a greater role in influencing resident's attitudes towards tourism overall. This indicates that the negative impacts of tourism can be tolerated at present given the extent of the benefits.
- Residents are tolerant of the present number of tourists (63.4% tolerant in Aitutaki and 49.3% in Rarotonga). At the time of surveying, the Cook Islands was experiencing 'peak tourism season', where tourist numbers spike between June-October. The number of visitor arrivals was just under 16,800 for August 2024, and just under 17,400 for September. This number has substantially increased since the same period in 2023 (Cook Islands Statistics Office, 2023).
- From the feedback comments collected in the survey, some residents advocated for limits to tourist numbers, or higher-value tourism rather than an increase in tourist numbers.
- There were some differences found between the islands of Rarotonga and Aitutaki. The data revealed a greater income dependency on tourism in Aitutaki compared to Rarotonga, (63.4% compared to 38.5%), which illustrates two very different economic contexts. In stage 1 of the scoping study, Aitutaki particularly was identified by stakeholders as nearing or close to breaching tourism capacity as infrastructure, particularly power and water, are unable to meet the island needs amidst the continued expansion of tourism. Despite the

concerns highlighted, the Aitutaki residents surveyed were relatively less critical of the strain tourism places on power and water resources, were more complementary of tourism, and were either more satisfied with tourist numbers or saw room for expansion.

- This work also helps identify priority areas for decision makers going forward. These are issues which residents have both rated as highly important, as well as agreed that tourism has impacted negatively: the cost of living, availability of water and power resources, and the condition of the environment.
- This study makes a unique contribution in the following ways. Firstly, as some survey questions were modelled off the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation Community Attitudes Towards Tourism (CATT) survey, some data from this study is compatible with historical data produced by the CATT surveys and can be used for up-to-date monitoring. Second, this study also expands on previous surveys by allowing participants to take a more critical stance on tourism. Respondents were directly asked to identify the impact of tourism as positive, neutral, or negative, as well as offer their thoughts on the number of tourists as able to increase, adequate at the current level, as well as too many. While majority of residents felt positively about tourism and satisfied with current numbers, it should be acknowledged that there were a portion of residents who expressed that tourism was negative overall and that there were 'too many' tourists. Finally, given that the merits and drawbacks of tourism are already well established through previous CATT surveys, this research attempts to further this by understanding how residents weigh up both in relation to one another, and the factors that are the most important when determining one's overall outlook on how they view tourism.
- We suggest that this survey is conducted every 3-4 years in future to monitor the social capacity of tourism, given that carrying capacity is a dynamic construct, and particularly as climate change comes into effect and its impacts on tourism begin to be observed.

Recommendations for future similar surveys include:

- A short survey length (5-10 minutes for completion), as well as offering it participants in Māori as well as English to increase survey uptake and accessibility.
- Themes found on the qualitative data could be incorporated into the survey as Likert scale questions. Namely, these are positive themes around pride in sharing the Cook Islands with visitors, and the social diversity from meeting visitors, and negative themes around changing way of life and economic vulnerability from over-dependency on tourism.

This study will have continuing value for the tourism industry and residents of the Cook Islands. Including resident's perspectives in studies on tourism carrying capacity is essential in developing appropriate monitoring mechanisms that will allow for tourism to continue in a way that safeguards the wellbeing of residents.

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