

Is anybody listening? Children and young people's participation in tourism policy

Antonia Canosa, Mona Ji Hyun Yang, Siqi Emily Lu and Brent Moyle

Abstract

Purpose – This study explores the extent to which children and young people are incorporated into tourism policy and planning in Australia. This study aims to critically assess their recognition as stakeholders in destination governance and to evaluate whether their participation is framed meaningfully or tokenistically.

Design/methodology/approach – A thematic analysis was conducted on 233 strategic planning documents produced between 2000 and 2030 across national, state, regional and local levels of Australian tourism governance. The analysis examined how children and young people are represented within policy discourse.

Findings – Results reveal that youth are rarely acknowledged as stakeholders in tourism governance. When mentioned, they are predominantly framed as market segments rather than as citizens with rights, agency and situated knowledge. This study highlights a systemic absence of child-inclusive governance, challenging assumptions that destination planning is inherently community-centred. Evidence suggests that current efforts to involve young people in policymaking remain largely tokenistic, undermining both community wellbeing and long-term destination sustainability.

Practical implications – The findings reveal the need for participatory models that meaningfully involve children and young people into tourism planning processes. Such models have the potential to enhance destination governance, strengthen community resilience and ensure that tourism development aligns with broader principles of social inclusion and sustainability.

Originality/value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this research is among the first to systematically examine the role of children and young people in tourism policy in Australia. By interrogating their exclusion from destination governance, the study contributes new insights into the intersection of youth rights, participation and tourism planning.

Keywords Tourism policy, Young people, Youth, Children, Voice, Participatory rights

Paper type Research paper

(Information about the authors can be found at the end of this article.)

有人在听吗？儿童与青年在旅游政策中的参与

摘要

目的：本研究探讨澳大利亚旅游政策与规划中儿童与青年的被纳入程度，旨在批判性地评估他们在目的地治理中作为利益相关者的认可情况，并分析其参与是有意义的实质性参与，还是流于形式的象征性参与。

设计/方法论/研究路径：研究对 2000 年至 2030 年间澳大利亚国家、州、区域及地方各级旅游治理中产生的 233 份战略规划文件进行了主题分析，重点考察政策话语中如何呈现儿童与青年。

研究结果：结果显示，青年在旅游治理中极少被承认为利益相关者。即便被提及，也主要以“细分市场”的形象出现，而非作为拥有权利、主观能动性和情境知识的公民。研究揭示了系统性缺乏纳入儿童的治理模式，挑战了目的地规划天然以社区为中心的传统假设。证据表明，当前让年轻人参与政策制定的努力仍主要是象征性的，这既损害了社区福祉，也危及目的地的长期可持续性。

原创性：本研究是最早系统考察儿童与青年在澳大利亚旅游政策中角色的研究之一。通过审视他们在目的地治理中的排斥现象，研究为青年权利、参与及旅游规划的交叉领域提供了新的见解。

实践意义：研究结果表明，需要建立能让儿童和青年有意义地参与旅游规划过程的参与式模型。这些模型有望提升目的地治理水平，增强社区韧性，并确保旅游发展符合社会包容与可持续性的更广泛原则。

关键词 儿童, 青年, 年轻人, 旅游政策, 参与权利, 声音

文章类型 研究型论文

Received 3 February 2026

Revised 8 April 2026

7 May 2026

Accepted 24 May 2026

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Resumen

Objetivo: Este estudio analiza en qué medida se tiene en cuenta a los niños y los jóvenes en las políticas y la planificación turísticas de Australia. Su objetivo es evaluar críticamente su reconocimiento como partes interesadas en la gobernanza de los destinos turísticos y determinar si su participación se enfoca de manera significativa o es meramente simbólica.

Diseño/metodología/enfoque: Se llevó a cabo un análisis temático de 233 documentos de planificación estratégica elaborados entre 2000 y 2030 en los ámbitos nacional, estatal, regional y local de la gobernanza turística australiana. El análisis examinó cómo se representa a los niños y jóvenes en el discurso político.

Resultados: Los resultados revelan que rara vez se reconoce a los jóvenes como partes interesadas en la gobernanza turística. Cuando se les menciona, se les enmarca predominantemente como segmentos de mercado en lugar de como ciudadanos con derechos, capacidad de acción y conocimiento contextual. El estudio pone de relieve la ausencia sistémica de una gobernanza inclusiva de la infancia y cuestiona la suposición de que la planificación de los destinos está intrínsecamente centrada en la comunidad. Las pruebas sugieren que los esfuerzos actuales por involucrar a los jóvenes en la formulación de políticas siguen siendo, en gran medida, simbólicos, lo que socava tanto el bienestar de la comunidad como la sostenibilidad a largo plazo de los destinos.

Originalidad: Esta investigación es una de las primeras en examinar sistemáticamente el papel de los niños y los jóvenes en la política turística de Australia. Al cuestionar su exclusión de la gobernanza de los destinos, el estudio aporta nuevas perspectivas sobre la intersección entre los derechos de los jóvenes, la participación y la planificación turística.

Implicaciones prácticas: Los resultados revelan la necesidad de modelos participativos que involucren de manera significativa a los niños y los jóvenes en los procesos de planificación turística. Dichos modelos tienen el potencial de mejorar la gobernanza de los destinos, fortalecer la resiliencia de la comunidad y garantizar que el desarrollo turístico se ajuste a principios más amplios de inclusión social y sostenibilidad.

Palabras clave Niños, Juventud, Jóvenes, Política turística, Derechos de participación, Voz

Tipo de papel Trabajo de investigación

Introduction

Children and young people [1] constitute a significant proportion of the global population, yet their perspectives remain largely absent from public policy processes, including those related to tourism (Canosa and Graham, 2023). Historically, their exclusion has been normalised through assumptions about age, dependency and political marginality, reinforced by their lack of voting rights and limited formal civic authority (Bessant 2003). Since the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989, however, global policy discourse has increasingly recognised children and young people as active rights-holders with legitimate claims to participation in matters affecting their lives. Within Australia, youth citizenship and participatory rights have since become prominent features of national and state policy frameworks, achieving what Bessant (2003) describes as “near obligatory status” within youth governance discourse. Despite this shift, operationalising meaningful youth participation continues to present substantial challenges, stemming from structural constraints, adult-centric assumptions about children’s capacities and the absence of established mechanisms for facilitating ethical and substantive engagement (Cahill and Dadvand, 2018; Canosa et al., 2022; Cuevas-Parra, 2021; Walker et al., 2019).

While Australia has implemented several formal mechanisms to promote youth engagement, such as the Australian Government’s *Engage Strategy* and the establishment of youth advisory bodies at multiple jurisdictional levels, such initiatives have not been systematically extended to the tourism sector (Australian Government, 2024). Tourism represents a socially, culturally and economically significant domain of community life, yet children and young people remain largely unacknowledged as stakeholders in destination governance (Canosa et al., 2025). Existing research has emphasised the influence of young people in shaping family travel decisions (see e.g. Carr, 2011; Curtale, 2018; Schänzel and Yeoman, 2015) and highlighted their potential contributions to sustainable tourism development at the destination level (see, e.g. Koščak et al., 2024; Nottingham, 2022; Partanen et al., 2023; Seraphin et al., 2020).

However, empirical studies indicate that young people are rarely afforded opportunities to participate in tourism policy development. Instead, they are predominantly conceptualised as members of consumer market segments, particularly the youth and family tourism markets, rather than as citizens with rights, agency and situated knowledge of place (Canosa *et al.*, 2026).

Such market-oriented framing prioritises the economic utility of children and young people while obscuring their broader civic identities and contributions to community wellbeing. Their limited visibility within tourism governance stands in contrast to contemporary rights-based frameworks, which advocate for young people's meaningful participation in policy development that directly or indirectly affects their lives (Lundy *et al.*, 2021). This absence raises critical questions about intergenerational equity, democratic legitimacy and the inclusiveness of tourism planning processes, key social dimensions of destination sustainability that influence the long-term resilience and legitimacy of tourism development. Subsequently, this research critically examined how children and young people are represented within Australian tourism policy and planning across national, state, regional and local levels. Drawing on a systematic review of 233 tourism policy and planning documents produced between 2000 and 2030, the study investigates:

- How children and young people are conceptualised within tourism policy discourse.
- The extent to which they are included in the consultation processes informing policy development.

This research contributes to growing debates on youth rights, participatory governance and destination sustainability by examining how children and young people are positioned within tourism policy frameworks. While empirically grounded in the Australian context, the analytical approach and findings offer broader insights into how participatory inclusion is articulated and constrained within tourism policy. Findings indicate that limited consideration of children and young people in governance processes has implications for the long-term social, cultural and environmental sustainability of destinations, with relevance for other regions and for the inclusion of additional under-represented groups in tourism policymaking. By documenting these patterns, the study highlights the critical importance of meaningfully engaging stakeholders whose perspectives are essential to inclusive and responsive tourism policy and planning.

Background

Understanding how children and young people are positioned within tourism policy requires situating this inquiry within broader historical and theoretical developments surrounding youth participation and rights. Over the past three decades, there has been a substantial global shift towards recognising children and young people as competent social actors capable of contributing meaningfully to policy formation (Canosa *et al.*, 2022). This shift has been driven principally by the UNCRC, adopted in 1989, which established children's participation as a fundamental human right. Article 12 of the UNCRC asserts that children capable of forming their own views have the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting them, with their perspectives afforded due weight according to age and maturity (United, 1989). Scholars widely acknowledge the UNCRC as the first binding international legal instrument to codify the full range of children's rights and to articulate participation as a cornerstone of democratic practice.

In the years following the UNCRC's adoption, a growing body of literature has examined the meanings, mechanisms and challenges associated with children's participation in public decision-making (Byrne and Lundy, 2019; Josefsson and Wall, 2020; McMellon and Tisdall, 2020). Much of this research is underpinned by rights-based and social inclusion paradigms, which argue that participation contributes to children's empowerment, enhances

policy relevance and mitigates marginalisation (ESRC Seminar Series Participants, 2004; Hill *et al.*, 2004). Sinclair (2004) emphasised that participation is multi-dimensional, shaped by factors such as the level of influence afforded, the focus of decision-making, the mode of engagement and the characteristics of the children involved. One of the earliest and most influential conceptual models in this field is Hart's (1992) "Ladder of Participation," which differentiates between non-participatory forms – such as manipulation, decoration and tokenism – and higher rungs representing meaningful involvement and shared decision-making between adults and children. While Hart's model has been critiqued for its linearity, it remains foundational in debates concerning the authenticity of children's participation and the risk of symbolic or performative engagement (Evans, 2007).

Subsequent scholarship has further refined understandings of meaningful participation, highlighting the need to acknowledge children's agency and the diverse ways they engage with civic life (Cahill and Dadvand, 2018). Despite this conceptual progress, concerns persist regarding the substantial gap between the principle and practice of participation. Empirical studies repeatedly demonstrate that opportunities presented to young people are often superficial, tokenistic or confined to consultation rather than genuine decision-making power (Cahill and Dadvand, 2018; Evans, 2007). Such shortcomings not only compromise the integrity of participatory processes but also risk fostering disillusionment and mistrust among young people towards institutional systems.

Within the field of tourism, the participation of children and young people has received comparatively limited attention, particularly in relation to governance, planning and policy processes. While tourism research increasingly recognises children as active participants in family travel experiences and influential actors in household tourism decisions (Schänzel and Yeoman, 2015), their positioning as legitimate stakeholders within tourism systems remains underexplored. This gap persists despite broader calls within tourism studies for more inclusive, participatory and socially just governance frameworks (Canosa *et al.*, 2025).

Tourism scholarship on participatory governance emphasises the importance of widening decision-making beyond state and industry actors to include diverse community voices, particularly in the context of sustainable tourism (Bramwell and Lane, 2011). However, critical perspectives caution that participation is often rhetorical rather than transformative. Higgins-Desbiolles (2020) highlighted how tourism governance frequently endorses diversity and inclusion without meaningfully redistributing power or valuing marginalised knowledges. Postcolonial critiques similarly draw attention to the ways in which voice is mediated, constrained or rendered symbolic, reproducing existing hierarchies of authority and expertise (Chambers and Buzinde, 2015).

Intersectional approaches to inclusion in tourism further demonstrate that participation is shaped by multiple, intersecting social positions, including age, gender, class, ethnicity and place (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Scheyvens and Biddulph, 2018). Despite this, age remains comparatively under-theorised within tourism governance research. Emerging studies have begun to address this gap by examining the potential contributions of young people to tourism governance, particularly in relation to sustainable destination development, cultural stewardship and intergenerational knowledge-sharing (see, e.g. Canosa and Graham, 2023; Koščak *et al.*, 2024; Partanen *et al.*, 2023; Seraphin *et al.*, 2020). While these studies highlight the distinctive place-based knowledge young people hold, they also point to the continued marginalisation of youth perspectives within tourism policy contexts.

At a global level, some organisations, most notably End Child Prostitution and Trafficking International (ECPAT), have implemented structures designed to integrate children and young people into organisational decision-making, such as the Child and Youth Advisory Committee and dedicated child participation strategies (ECPAT International, 2024). These initiatives suggest a growing acknowledgement of youth agency and the value of youth-informed governance, yet they remain the exception rather than the norm.

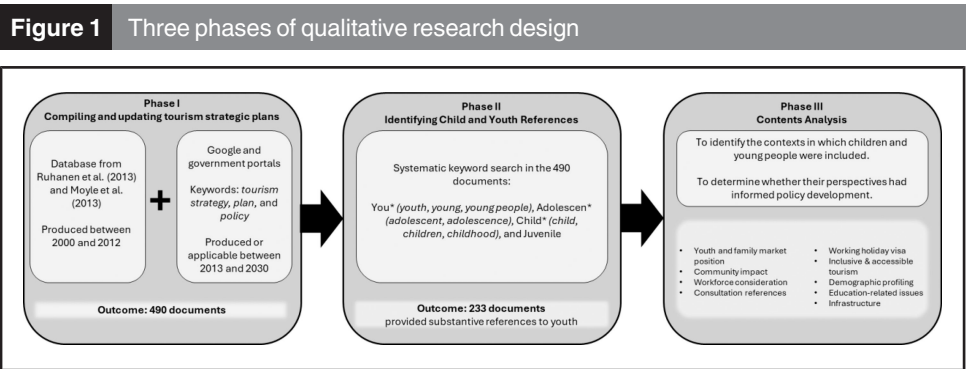
In Australia, youth participation is increasingly embedded within national policy frameworks, particularly in domains such as education, social services and child protection (Dimopoulos *et al.*, 2024). Nonetheless, tourism policy has not kept pace with these developments. Existing tourism strategies tend to prioritise economic considerations, market competitiveness and industry growth, leaving limited space for social policy perspectives informed by children's rights or participatory governance frameworks (Canosa and Graham, 2023). This disconnect highlights the need for empirical examination of how young people are represented within tourism planning and the extent to which their voices shape destination governance.

This research contributes to an emerging yet critically important area of scholarship by analysing the incorporation of children and young people into Australian tourism policy and planning. By doing so, it brings together established discourses on youth participation with the underexplored domain of tourism governance, offering insights into the structural, discursive and procedural barriers that continue to limit young people's involvement in shaping tourism futures.

Method

This research adopted a three-phase qualitative research design to examine how children and young people are represented within Australian tourism policy and planning, and to assess the extent to which they are included in the consultation processes that inform policy development (see Figure 1). The approach builds upon established methods used in tourism policy analysis (Moyle *et al.*, 2013; Ruhanen *et al.*, 2013) and aligns with contemporary frameworks for analysing the treatment of social groups within strategic planning documents (Lu *et al.*, 2025). Together, these phases enabled a comprehensive examination of the discourses, representations and participatory mechanisms associated with children and young people across multiple scales of Australian tourism governance.

Phase 1 involved compiling and updating a national database of tourism strategic plans. This database drew on earlier work that systematically identified and analysed tourism strategies produced between 2000 and 2012 (Moyle *et al.*, 2013; Ruhanen *et al.*, 2013). For the present study, the database was expanded to include documents produced or applicable between 2013 and 2030. As a result, the time span of the policy and planning documents ranged from 2000 to 2030 to ensure a comprehensive coverage of documents. A structured online search was undertaken using Google and government portals, applying keyword combinations such as “tourism, strategy, plan and policy” to identify relevant documents across national, state, regional and local jurisdictions. Each document was then evaluated using criteria adapted from Moyle *et al.* (2013). To be included, a document had to meet the following conditions: it was produced by a government body or recognised tourism organisation; it contained the term “tourism” in its title or it referenced “tourism” sufficiently to indicate that it constituted a major focus of the strategy. This screening process yielded 490 documents, which were



subsequently catalogued according to governance level, year of publication, organisational authorship and strategic scope.

Phase 2 sought to identify whether and how children and young people were referenced in each of the 490 documents. To achieve this, a systematic keyword search was undertaken using terminology commonly associated with youth participation and childhood studies, including “You* (*youth, young, young people*), Adolescen* (*adolescent, adolescence*), Child* (*child, children, childhood*) and Juvenile.” This approach mirrors methods used in previous analyses of youth representation in policy (Canosa *et al.*, 2022). All extracted text segments containing these terms were compiled into a data set for further examination. Each extract was reviewed to determine its relevance to the study, and documents were excluded where references were incidental or unrelated to issues affecting children or young people. After this screening process, 233 documents remained and were deemed to provide substantive references to youth. These documents represented a diverse cross-section of Australia’s tourism governance landscape, comprising national (2%), state (18%), regional (39%) and local (41%) strategies.

Phase 3 involved a qualitative content analysis of the selected documents. Drawing on established procedures for examining discourse within public policy (Dredge and Jamal, 2015; Fairclough, 2013), each document was systematically analysed to identify the contexts in which children and young people were included and to determine whether their perspectives had informed policy development. An initial coding framework was developed deductively from themes prevalent in the tourism literature, including youth and family market positioning, community impacts, workforce considerations and consultation references. As the analysis progressed, additional inductive codes were generated to capture emerging themes not represented in the initial framework. These included references to working holiday visa programs, inclusive and accessible tourism for children and youth with disabilities, demographic profiling, education-related issues and infrastructure such as parks, playgrounds and childcare facilities.

Adopting an approach implemented by Lu *et al.* (2025), coding was conducted iteratively through a collaborative qualitative analysis process involving multiple members of the research team. The team met regularly throughout the data analysis stage to review coded extracts, discuss interpretations and make collective adjustments to the coding framework. Themes were progressively refined with code definitions revised, merged or expanded as new patterns emerged from the data (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Where differences in interpretation arose, these were examined through reflexive discussion and resolved through consensus rather than assessed using a formal inter-coder reliability statistic, consistent with the interpretive and discursive orientation of the study.

To enhance consistency and reduce potential bias, coding decisions and framework revisions were documented throughout the analysis process, and emerging themes were continuously checked among team members. This collaborative and reflective approach strengthened the credibility, transparency and replicability of the study while supporting the identification of dominant narrative patterns, underlying assumptions and discursive constructions shaping how children and young people were positioned within tourism policy. Particular attention was given to examining whether policy documents reported any consultation with children or young people and to assessing whether youth perspectives were meaningfully integrated into decision-making processes or merely referenced in passing.

In line with Jenkins’s (1978) definition of public policy as a set of interrelated decisions concerning the selection of goals and the means of achieving them within a specific governance context, this analytical framework provided a coherent basis for examining the intentionality, inclusivity and democratic legitimacy of tourism policy decisions that affect young people. Despite the breadth of the data set, it should be acknowledged that policy documents varied substantially in focus, ranging from tourism-specific plans to broader regional development strategies in which tourism represented only one component.

Findings: how are children and young people conceptualised in current Australian tourism policies and plans?

Across the 233 strategic documents reviewed, four dominant ways of framing youth emerged: market segment and product development; labour, retention and regional sustainability; community and social profiling of tourism destinations; and consultation processes. [Table 1](#) provides an overview of the distribution of documents across the different levels of governance and states. This overview offers important contextual grounding for the Phase 3 content analysis, which examines how these framings are articulated in policy documents and how children and young people are positioned within tourism governance.

Market segment and product development

Analysis of national, state, regional and local tourism-related policy documents reveals that children and young people are predominantly conceptualised through an economic lens, primarily as a market segment within the broader visitor economy. This framing is most evident in documents explicitly focused on tourism and visitor economy strategies, though it also appears – albeit more implicitly – in broader regional development and economic planning documents where tourism is one of several focal sectors. Across the data set, young people are most frequently referenced in the context of market segmentation, particularly within two overlapping categories: the youth tourism market (referred to in 96 documents) and the family tourism market (referred to in 76 documents). In the former, youth are framed as independent travellers, often associated with adventure, cultural exchange and budget-conscious travel. In the latter, children are positioned as passive

Table 1 Overview of strategic tourism policy documents

<i>Government level</i>	<i># of documents</i>	<i>Market segment and product development</i>	<i>Labour, retention and regional sustainability</i>	<i>Community and social profile of tourism destination</i>	<i>Consultation</i>
National	5	4 (80%)	5 (100%)	1 (20%)	0
State	42	21 (50%)	17 (41%)	11 (26%)	0 (0%)
ACT	2	1	1	0	0
NSW	3	2	0	1	0
NT	2	2	0	0	0
QLD	13	5	9	2	0
SA	7	4	0	4	0
TAS	4	1	1	1	0
VIC	3	2	1	3	0
WA	8	4	5	0	0
Regional	91	46 (51%)	42 (46%)	40 (44%)	3 (3%)
ACT	0	0	0	0	0
NSW	26	12	12	18	0
NT	8	7	4	6	0
QLD	26	14	13	2	0
SA	2	1	0	1	0
TAS	9	3	2	3	0
VIC	18	8	10	8	3
WA	2	1	1	2	0
Local	95	48 (51%)	33 (35%)	52 (55%)	4 (4%)
ACT	0	0	0	0	0
NSW	8	4	2	6	3
NT	1	0	0	1	0
QLD	25	12	11	10	1
SA	10	6	2	3	0
TAS	5	0	2	3	0
VIC	28	15	10	16	0
WA	18	11	6	13	0

beneficiaries of tourism experiences, often used to justify the development of family-friendly infrastructure, attractions and services.

A recurring theme is the positioning of young people as a growing and influential consumer group. For instance, one policy highlights that *“the growing Millennials market (those following Generation X) means that holiday destinations and tourism businesses now need to consider the needs of the youth market”* (Tourism North East, 2016, p. 13). This framing highlights the economic imperative to cater to younger demographics. Their value is articulated in terms of their consumption patterns, seeking *“unique and authentic experiences,”* being *“guided by recommendations from friends,”* and desiring *“opportunities to learn something new.”* These characteristics are leveraged to justify targeted marketing and product development aimed at capturing this segment’s spending power.

In addition, and in particular, the tourism industry-focused documents identify families with young children as a key market segment, often linked to the development of family-friendly attractions, accommodations and services. This includes emphasis on accessible and inclusive tourism infrastructure, such as stroller-friendly pathways, child-safe environments and inclusive recreational facilities. Recommendations such as *“continue to explore the development of activities-experiences for kids as an avenue to attract families”* and the promotion of facilities like *“the youth centre, pool and skate park in day trips,”* illustrate how children are positioned as conduits for economic gain (Evolve Solutions, 2014, p. 72).

In contrast, non-tourism-specific documents, particularly those focused on regional development or community wellbeing, highlight the importance of retaining young families in local areas. In these contexts, children are not framed as tourists but as residents, with policy attention directed towards the provision of entertainment, events, child-oriented infrastructure (e.g. parks, playgrounds) and broader liveability factors that support family life. These amenities are often indirectly linked to tourism by enhancing the overall attractiveness of a region for both visitors and potential new residents. Overall, the findings indicate a dominant economic rationality in how children and young people are conceptualised within tourism planning and marketing. This market-oriented framing prioritises children and young people’s role as consumers within the visitor economy, which might potentially undermine the importance of positioning them from rights-based perspectives.

Labour, retention and regional sustainability

Another common conceptualisation of children and young people in Australian tourism policies is in relation to the tourism workforce (referred to in 96 policies). This framing is particularly prominent in discussions surrounding labour supply, youth retention and regional development. At the regional and local levels, especially in smaller states and less densely populated areas such as Tasmania, Western Australia and South Australia, young people are primarily referenced in the context of demographic sustainability. Policies from these jurisdictions frequently highlight the challenge of youth outmigration and the resulting socio-economic implications for local communities.

Tourism and hospitality are positioned as strategic sectors for engaging young people, both to provide immediate employment opportunities and to foster longer-term community attachment. These policies often link tourism workforce development with broader educational and vocational training initiatives, suggesting, at face value, a holistic approach to youth retention that integrates employment with lifestyle and learning opportunities. In the context of Indigenous youth, for example, the directive of the Kakadu National Park Management Plan 2016–2026 (Australian Government, 2016, p. 40) is to *“develop and implement career pathway programmes for young Bininj/Mungguy.”* While the inclusion of cultural and environmental education (*“teach them about culture, country and park management”*) suggests a broader developmental aim, the ultimate goal remains aligned with workforce integration.

At the national and state levels, a significant subset of policy documents foregrounds the Working Holiday Maker visa program as a critical mechanism for addressing labour shortages in the tourism and hospitality sectors. Young international visitors are described as “*important to Australia’s tourism industry*,” with their value quantified through economic metrics such as the \$17bn they contribute annually and their representation as “*one quarter of Australia’s international arrivals*” (Tourism Australia, 2019, p. 17). The emphasis on their extended stays and regional travel patterns further highlights their utility in sustaining and dispersing tourism revenue. This utilitarian framing is reinforced by the allocation of \$10 m to a global youth campaign aimed at attracting more working holiday visitors, highlighting a strategic investment in youth as labour resources (Tourism Australia, 2019).

These policies frame young international visitors not only as tourists but also as temporary labourers, particularly in regional and seasonal contexts. The dual framing positions youth as both consumers and producers within the tourism economy. While this approach addresses immediate workforce needs, it also reflects a commodified view of youth mobility, where young people are valued primarily for their economic utility. Whether through tourism or targeted employment programs, young people are framed less as citizens with rights and more as labourers to be mobilised for national benefit.

Community and social profile of the tourism destination

Children and young people are also frequently acknowledged through reference to the social (referred to in 86 policies) and community (referred to in 41 policies) profile of the tourist destination where they live. Children are most often referred to in relation to community infrastructure, such as playgrounds, skate parks and youth centres, which are often positioned as assets that enhance both resident wellbeing and visitor appeal. These facilities are typically framed within a broader “family-friendly” tourism narrative, rather than as part of a child-centred development strategy.

Similarly to the previous theme of *Labour, retention and regional sustainability*, young people are referred to in the context of labour markets and outmigration. The Goulburn region, for example, highlights a significant outward migration of young people aged 15–24, noting that this trend exceeds regional averages. The policy states:

Young people, aged 15–24, are migrating out of Goulburn at higher rates than regional averages, likely seeking employment and education opportunities [...] there is significant outward migration of young people across all local government areas (Victoria State Government, 2022a, p. 6).

As such, the policies often reinforce the narrative that young people are an important source of innovation and labour to be retained in regional and remote areas of Australia. For instance, the Bathurst Region Destination Management Plan 2019 (Flagship Communications, 2019, p. 43) focuses on a tourism narrative that celebrates youth as a source of “*energy and excitement*,” contributing to the city’s evolving identity. The statement, “*each generation of youth brings an energy and excitement [...] Bathurst can ignite passion while definitely entertaining you*,” positions young people as symbolic contributors to the city’s cultural vibrancy. Likewise, the South Australian Visitor Economy Sector Plan 2030 (Government of South Australia, 2019, p. 27), focuses on attracting “*young people to pursue a career in the sector, driving new ideas, skills and enthusiasm that industry needs to achieve our ambitious goals*.”

In addition, some local strategies are beginning to recognise the role of arts and cultural initiatives in fostering youth engagement and social cohesion. For example, policies that aim to “*increase the number of youth and Indigenous participants in arts and culture activities/programs*” reflect a more inclusive and participatory approach (Central Goldfields Shire Council, 2020, p. 54). These initiatives are framed as enhancing the liveability and social cohesiveness of the tourism destination, particularly by creating opportunities for

youth participation and connection. This suggests a growing awareness of the potential for cultural tourism and community arts to serve as platforms for youth empowerment and place-based identity building. These representations, however, are largely rhetorical, with limited evidence of targeted infrastructure or participatory planning that directly engages children and young people as stakeholders in tourism development.

Are children and young people being consulted in the development of Australia's tourism policies?

A critical finding of this policy review is the absence of evidence indicating that children and young people were meaningfully consulted in the development of tourism policies at the national, state, regional or local levels (only referred to in seven policies). Despite the increasing recognition of the importance of inclusive policymaking, this cohort appears to be consistently overlooked in formal consultation processes. Where references to youth or children were made, they were typically broad and non-specific, often grouped with other underrepresented populations. For instance, one policy document states the need to:

Ensure that the voices of underrepresented groups, such as youth, women, those living in rural settings and Aboriginal people are included in employment, training and workforce planning initiatives ([Victoria State Government, 2022b](#), p. 32).

This statement, while acknowledging the importance of inclusivity, lacks detail on whether and how youth voices were sought or incorporated, reflecting a tokenistic commitment rather than a demonstrable action. In a few documents, children are indirectly referenced only as part of family units, and there is no indication that children or young people were directly engaged or that their perspectives were independently considered. This suggests that their views were either mediated through adults or entirely absent from the consultation process, as the following quote from the Byron Shire Draft Sustainable Visitation Strategy 2020–2030 suggests:

Council engaged with the community, industry, visitors, staff and stakeholders to inform the SVS, through a variety of activities [...] Visitor focus groups with visitors who [...] were families with children, young singles/couples and adult households with no children ([Byron Shire Council, 2020](#), p. 11).

Notably, there is a significant lack of emphasis on involving children and young people in national tourism policy and planning. Of the five national tourism policy documents reviewed, none reported consulting with this cohort or mentioned the importance of consulting all stakeholders, including children and young people. Overall, the findings highlight a significant gap in participatory tourism planning. The lack of targeted engagement with children and young people not only undermines the inclusivity of these strategies but also misses an opportunity to incorporate the unique insights and needs of a vital demographic in shaping the future of tourism.

Discussion

Findings of this research reveal a persistent marginalisation of children and young people within Australian tourism policy and planning, despite decades of international advocacy emphasising their rights to participate in decisions affecting their lives ([Cahill and Dadvand, 2018](#); [Lundy et al., 2021](#)). Although global frameworks, including the UNCRC, position children as competent social actors capable of offering valuable insights into community and policy development ([Canosa and Graham, 2023](#)), their absence from tourism governance structures suggests a disconnect between rights-based aspirations and policy practice. The analysis demonstrates that young people are predominantly represented as market segments, labour resources or demographic indicators rather than as citizens with agency. This instrumentalisation highlights a fundamental misalignment between contemporary participatory principles and the economic rationalities that dominate tourism planning.

A key contribution of this piece lies in its empirical demonstration of how tourism policy discourse systematically constructs youth through narrow economic framings. By emphasising children and young people as consumers in the youth or family tourism markets, or as contributors to labour supply through the Working Holiday Maker programme, policy documents reinforce neoliberal logics that privilege economic value over social equity. These narratives reduce young people to their perceived utility – shaping consumption patterns, filling workforce gaps or supporting regional growth – while neglecting their rights, experiential knowledge and place-based perspectives. In doing so, tourism policy risks perpetuating unequal power relations between generations, limiting opportunities for intergenerational justice and the co-creation of sustainable tourism futures (Canosa *et al.*, 2025; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Weaver *et al.*, 2021).

This research contributes to theory by extending youth participation scholarship into the largely underdeveloped domain of tourism governance. While previous studies in childhood and youth studies have exposed the gap between symbolic and meaningful participation (Evans, 2007; Cahill and Dadvand, 2018), this research demonstrates how these concerns manifest specifically within tourism, a sector that has often claimed to be community-centred yet seldom operationalises inclusive engagement practices. The near-complete absence of youth consultation across 233 policy documents illustrates what Lundy *et al.* (2021) identified as “structural invisibility,” wherein children’s perspectives are not actively suppressed but are omitted by virtue of institutionalised adult-centric norms. By identifying this invisibility within tourism planning, the study advances theoretical understandings of how governance systems privilege certain actors while marginalising others, reinforcing the need to interrogate whose voices count in shaping destination futures.

The analysis highlights the conceptual tensions between economic-driven tourism policy frameworks and rights-based approaches to youth participation. Tourism strategies tend to prioritise growth, competitiveness and visitor economy metrics, leaving limited scope for social policy considerations such as youth wellbeing, civic engagement or intergenerational equity. This study argues that such economic framing is insufficient for addressing the complexities of contemporary tourism destinations, which increasingly grapple with issues of sustainability, social inclusion and community resilience. As scholars of sustainable tourism have long emphasised, destination planning must be rooted in community-based and participatory governance approaches to ensure long-term viability (Weaver *et al.*, 2021). Yet these approaches remain unattainable when young people – who constitute a significant segment of current and future communities – are excluded from decision-making processes.

Practically, this research highlights the urgent need for tourism policymakers to adopt more child-inclusive governance mechanisms. The absence of youth consultation represents a missed opportunity to integrate fresh perspectives, lived experiences and innovative ideas into tourism planning. Young people possess unique insights into their local environments, hold strong views about their communities and engage daily with spaces that are directly shaped by tourism activities. Meaningful engagement with this demographic could enrich destination planning by identifying emerging issues, enhancing community relevance and fostering long-term civic attachment among younger residents. Moreover, actively involving young people can support broader policy goals related to social cohesion, youth development and regional sustainability.

Findings articulate an urgent need for a paradigm shift in how tourism policy conceptualises the role of children and young people. Rather than viewing youth primarily through economic metrics, policymakers should adopt rights-based, participatory frameworks that recognise children as legitimate stakeholders with a vested interest in the future of their communities. This shift involves not only revisiting consultation practices but also challenging the underlying assumptions that shape policy discourse. The integration of youth voices should not be positioned as an optional or symbolic gesture, but as a fundamental component of equitable, democratic and sustainable tourism governance.

By bringing these insights together, the research contributes to knowledge by exposing a critical blind spot in tourism planning and offering empirical evidence of the systemic absence of youth perspectives. It advances theory by bridging youth participation literature with tourism governance debates, demonstrating the need for intergenerational perspectives in destination planning. While grounded in the Australian context, the findings offer a basis for examining similar dynamics in other regions and for considering how tourism governance engages with additional under-represented stakeholder groups. Finally, it provides practical guidance for policymakers seeking to foster more inclusive, resilient and community-centred tourism futures. Recognising young people as rights-holders and partners in decision-making is not only an ethical imperative but also a strategic opportunity to strengthen the social foundations upon which sustainable tourism development may flourish.

Implications and recommendations

Building on contemporary participatory frameworks that highlight the importance of meaningfully engaging children and young people (Byrne and Lundy, 2019; Cahill and Dadvand, 2018; Canosa and Graham, 2023), the findings of this study indicate that Australian tourism policymaking currently makes limited provision for the systematic inclusion of youth perspectives. Across the policies analysed, children and young people are rarely positioned as stakeholders with a defined role in shaping tourism futures. Addressing this gap requires not only the development of new engagement mechanisms but also explicit consideration of feasibility, resourcing and power relations embedded in participatory processes.

A core implication of the study, which has relevance internationally, is the need for tourism planning processes to adopt child-centred engagement strategies that are both age-appropriate and grounded in participatory rights principles. While older adolescents may be able to contribute to strategic discussions and deliberative forums, younger children are more likely to engage through experiential, creative or place-based methods focused on everyday interactions with tourism environments (see Canosa *et al.*, 2026).

Youth engagement in tourism governance is also more likely to be sustained and resourced when it is embedded within existing policy and planning structures. Aligning tourism initiatives with national youth strategies, local government youth engagement mandates and obligations under the UNCRC, provides a feasible pathway for resourcing such work through cross-portfolio collaboration. Partnerships with schools, youth organisations, councils and community groups can further reduce costs by leveraging existing infrastructure, expertise and safeguarding frameworks, while ensuring that engagement is supported by trusted adults.

More structured forms of participation, such as Youth Advisory Groups at local, regional or state levels, offer a mechanism for continuity and institutional memory. To ensure representativeness, such groups should reflect diverse backgrounds – including Indigenous youth, young people from rural and remote communities and culturally and linguistically diverse populations – and should leverage existing youth advisory bodies where possible. Clear timeframes, defined roles and appropriate recognition, alongside guidance and facilitation, also help ensure that participation processes remain manageable for young people and the organisations involved, particularly over extended periods.

Integrating children and young people into tourism governance requires systematic monitoring and evaluation. Tracking the extent, nature and quality of youth participation across planning processes provides an evidence base for continuous improvement, while clear documentation of how youth input informs policy outcomes supports accountability and avoids symbolic inclusion. Over time, such evaluation and reporting mechanisms can help shift organisational cultures towards more inclusive, intergenerationally informed approaches to policy design. These recommendations highlight a pathway towards a more equitable and participatory tourism policy landscape, one that recognises children and young people as knowledgeable contributors to community life and essential stakeholders and partners in shaping sustainable tourism futures (Canosa *et al.*, 2025).

Conclusion

This research provides the first comprehensive analysis of how children and young people are represented within Australian tourism policy and planning across national, state, regional and local levels. By examining 233 strategic planning documents spanning three decades, the research reveals a consistent pattern: children and young people are largely absent from tourism governance and are predominantly framed through narrow economic constructs. They are depicted as tourism consumers within youth or family markets, as elements of regional labour strategies or as demographic indicators contributing to community profiling. Yet across these representations, their perspectives as citizens, rights-holders and contributors to destination futures remain largely unnoticed. The findings demonstrate that meaningful youth participation in tourism policy is almost entirely missing, with only a handful of documents making vague or symbolic references to youth involvement.

The innovation of this study lies in its integration of youth participation theory with tourism governance analysis, a connection that has remained underexplored despite the growing recognition of children's participatory rights globally. By drawing from childhood studies, children's rights frameworks and tourism policy research, this study exposes the structural invisibility of young people within tourism planning and highlights the implications of this oversight for community wellbeing and destination sustainability. It challenges the prevailing assumption that tourism policy is inherently community-oriented, showing instead that it frequently neglects the needs, insights and aspirations of a sizeable and significant segment of the community.

The research makes several contributions to theory and practice. Empirically, it documents the limited presence of children and young people in Australian tourism policy and provides a robust evidence base for rethinking participatory governance in the sector. Theoretically, it expands the scope of youth participation scholarship by demonstrating how economic rationalities shape policy discourse and overshadow rights-based perspectives. Practically, the findings point to the need for governance approaches that more systematically incorporate youth perspectives, support intergenerational equity and align tourism policy with broader public commitments to participation. Taken together, the study highlights the value of recognising young people as active contributors to tourism policymaking, particularly as destinations seek governance models that respond to sustainability and community wellbeing challenges.

Limitations

While the present study critically examined how children and young people are represented within Australian tourism policy and planning documents, we acknowledge that a more differentiated treatment of age cohorts, youth sub-groups and specific policy domains would offer additional nuance. A more fine-grained analysis could reveal variations in how different groups of children and young people are positioned across distinct tourism policy contexts, and how participation opportunities may differ accordingly. This is an important avenue for future research.

The analysis of policy documents is also restricted to publicly available strategic planning documents, which may not fully capture internal consultation processes or informal engagement activities. The diversity of document types also introduces variation in scope, purpose and audience, making it challenging to directly compare policy intentions across all governance levels. Moreover, the keyword search approach, while systematic, may not identify more implicit or nuanced framings of young people within policy discourse.

Subsequently, further work is needed to explore how policymakers understand and operationalise youth participation in practice, including analysis of internal planning documents, consultation reports and interviews with policy actors. Future research could extend this work by empirically investigating how children and young people are engaged in tourism policymaking practices *in situ*, and by identifying the institutional and structural drivers that shape their exclusion. Comparative studies across different countries or tourism governance systems would also deepen understanding of how cultural, political and institutional contexts shape youth

inclusion. Additionally, participatory research involving children and young people directly could illuminate their perspectives on tourism development, their priorities for destination futures and the mechanisms they believe would support meaningful engagement.

Notes

- [1.] In line with Article 1 of the UNCRC, this manuscript defines a “child as any person under the age of 18, unless majority is attained earlier under applicable law” (UNCRC, 1989). While the UN defines youth as ages 15–24, the terms “children” and “young people” are used interchangeably here to reflect the fluid and overlapping boundaries between childhood and adulthood (Sibley, 1995).

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Note: Tourism policy and planning documents included in the study’s analytical dataset are identified with an asterisk (*) in the reference list and are cited in the findings section as primary sources.

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