

We're a happy bunch, but why is a mystery

By NICOLETTE BURKE

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AUSTRALIANS are among the happiest people in the world and happier than the statistics say we should be, a study has found.

A report by economist Andrew Leigh, from the Australian National University, has found Australians consistently have rated at the top of happiness surveys since the 1940s.

In terms of industrialised nations, only Iceland outranks Australia on happiness and life satisfaction.

Dr Leigh, however, says it is hard to explain why Australians are as happy as their are because we are far happier than our economic performance and levels of economic growth predict.

Dr Leigh says there is a direct correlation between the economic progress of a country, specifically its gross domestic product, and the happiness of its people. "We do seem happier than our GDP would predict. Clearly weather effects people's happiness and the Australian geography means we spend more time outdoors," he says. "The weather, beaches and our culture are reasons we are happier than predicted."

In cross-national surveys conducted from the 1940s to the 1980s, Australians consistently have ranked themselves highly on measures of subjective wellbeing. "Across 10 happiness surveys, conducted between 1948 and 2005, we found Australia consistently ranked at or near the top," Dr Leigh says.

"The most recent survey, conducted in 2004-05, reported that Australia was the happiest of all 30 countries surveyed.

"Compared with people in other countries, Australians are pretty happy with their lives. Throughout the period that happiness and life satisfaction surveys have been conducted, Australia consistently has ranked among top tier nations."

Dr Leigh's study is in response to research by British economists which found Australians relatively unhappy. "According to Blanchflower and Oswald's paper, Happiness and the Human Development Index: The Paradox of Australia, our homeland ranks very highly in the UN Human Development Index but her citizens are just not that happy," Dr Leigh and his co-author Dr Justin Wolfers wrote.

Samantha Krieg, 14, from Sheidow Park, and cousin Ashley Dent, of Oaklands Park, believe Australia is a happy country. "Everyone is so friendly here," she said. "I've been overseas and I can see that in Australia people are generally happier and have a better attitude."