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NATIONAL TRUST

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The Executive Officer
Rural and Regional Committee
Parliament House
Melbourne 3002

Dear Sir/Madam

Inquiry into Rural and Regional Tourism

Please find attached a submission into the above inquiry by the Landscape Committee of the National Trust of Australia (Victoria). If you require any further information or a contact point, please call myself or Wendy Dwyer on the above number or by email on wendy.dwyer@nattrust.com.au.

Yours sincerely

Dr Steven Cooke
Manager Conservation and Heritage Services

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO RURAL AND REGIONAL TOURISM

By the Landscape Committee of the National Trust of Australia (Victoria)

The Landscape Committee of the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) believes that tourism in rural and regional Victoria is failing to capitalise on one of its greatest assets, that is, the quality of the Victorian landscape.

There is a long tradition in Australia of valuing the coast and the bush as destinations for tourism and recreational purposes, but little has been done to encourage a wider appreciation of the rural landscapes. For example, the pastoral hill country of South Gippsland, the small historic towns, and the expansive plains of the Wimmera all have special qualities, unique to this part of the world. With wise planning and development, such areas could become major tourist destinations attracting local, interstate and international travellers, thus helping to ensure that the economic benefits of tourism are spread throughout rural and regional Victoria

Landscape quality

The farmland landscapes of Victoria figure prominently in literature, paintings and films, but are often ignored in tourist promotional material. The rural scenery of this state is the equal of any in the world, and though it may lack the spectacular historic sites of France, or the geological marvels of the Rocky Mountains, a closer acquaintance reveals scenery in which the natural world and human influence interact to create uniquely rich and diverse environments.

Victoria's Western District is just one example. Previously the poor cousin of the much lauded Great Ocean Road to the south, local groups are now working to promote tourism to a region which includes Australia's youngest volcanoes and lava flows, which are currently the subject of an application for UNESCO Global Geopark status; an outstanding collection of dry stone walls, extensive salt lakes protected under the International Ramsar Convention for rich bird life; important Aboriginal archaeological sites; numerous heritage homesteads; and many unique and charming small towns. Other areas of rural Victoria have equally impressive landscape features which are a draw card for tourists.

Protection of landscape values

To capitalise on the tourism assets of Victoria's rural landscape, it is necessary to ensure that the qualities that attract visitors are wisely managed. Many countries already recognise both the potential of landscape-based tourism, and the risks posed by different forms of inappropriate development. To counter this they have instigated legislation to ensure that landscapes can be protected as a sustainable resource into the future.

In the United Kingdom, regions with outstanding scenery may be designated National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty or National Scenic Area, enabling increased protection of rural landscape. Further protection is applied over wider areas through specific policies such as "*Planning Policy Statement 7: Sustainable Development in Rural Areas*". The role of the rural landscape in attracting 75 million overseas visitors to France each year (75.1m 2004, WTO figures) is acknowledged by several measures including local and national government support for a system of protected areas known as 'Parcs Naturels Regionaux de France'. These have been created to stem the detrimental effects, and potential damage to tourism, from spreading urbanisation and other development projects.

Closer to home New Zealand has also introduced measures to promote landscape assessment and protect its scenery from adverse development such as the proliferation of life-style subdivisions.

At the international level, in 2003 the World Conservation Union, (IUCN), created a specific category in its protected area listing for rural, lived-in landscapes. Called "Category V: Protected Landscapes" these are defined as areas of "land, with coast and sea as appropriate, where the interaction of people and nature over time has produced an area of distinct character with significant aesthetic, ecological and/or cultural value, and often with high biological diversity." Although currently making up only a small proportion of UNESCO's classified landscapes, Category V is the most rapidly growing type of reserve.

Victoria's rural landscape is under threat from many directions. These include inappropriate subdivision and proliferation of large residential dwellings on prominent hill sites; poorly sited developments such as abattoirs, feed lots and wind farms; and loss of landscape character through vegetation clearing, both of remnant forest and of tree lines, including avenues in country towns, many comprising exotic tree species. Unchecked, such changes will undermine the opportunity to develop a profitable rural-focussed tourist industry.

The best way to control adverse landscape change in Victoria at present is through the local planning scheme, which can protect landscapes through application of a Significant Landscape Overlay. Sadly, many rural shire councils have failed to use this tool. Their reluctance may be in part because there are still few published guidelines to explain the use of the SLO and the definition of landscape quality is often seen as problematic. To resolve this, many local planners have turned to authorities such as the National Trust, and incorporated their landscape classifications as the basis for SLOs. Others have used alternative planning tools such as the Environmental Significance Overlay or Vegetation Protection Overlays, to support landscape protection.

Although there have been studies such as the Great Ocean Road Landscape Assessment, which have emphasised the value of cultural landscapes, their protection in Victoria remains limited in extent and often weak in application. To change this there needs to be greater recognition of the role that landscape tourism can play in the development of regional areas and greater support from responsible authorities to apply and monitor the controls available. As noted earlier, in some areas, such as the

Western District, local groups have been very active in attracting visitors through promoting the scientific, historic and aesthetic qualities of their regions, but to achieve the full potential of this process, they need more support from the State government.

Education and promotion of landscape tourism

In Victoria the marketing of rural landscapes as places to visit is more challenging than the marketing of coast or bush because the range of "things to do" is not as obvious or well understood. Potential tourists therefore need guidance as to where to go and what to do when they get there. Regional visitor centres are valuable sources of information, but too often what they have to offer is dominated by pamphlets and brochures advertising local tourist businesses, rather than material which educates the visitor, about the region, its landscape and its history. A notable exception to this dearth of general information is the material provided by Parks Victoria, particularly the leaflets telling visitors about the environment and public facilities in designated parks and reserves. It would be a valuable addition to the tourist literature if local councils could produce comparable material for areas covered by planning overlays, including those designated as Significant Landscapes, briefly describing what is important about them, and why they should be protected. Roadside signs could be erected to indicate a tourist was travelling through a significant landscape. In addition, the National Trust could be funded to supply material on landscapes they have classified as of cultural significance.

Tourists need the opportunity to explore landscapes at different scales, including driving, walking or cycling, and individual site visits. In Victoria driving tends to be the most popular, but to learn about local areas it is important to encourage drivers to leave the fast main roads and travel more slowly on small side roads, a movement endorsed by Victoria's premier motoring organization, the RACV. In many countries published maps identify particularly scenic roads, often highlighting them in green, while in the United States there is a formal process for the designation of certain country roads as scenic by-ways, where speed limits are reduced, and roadside pull-offs are frequent.

In recent years the proliferation of walking groups and the popularity of Victoria's Rail Trails is evidence of a growing interest in travel at walking or cycling pace. Several rural councils are now exploring options for expanding their trail networks, both to attract visitors and to improve the health of local residents through increased physical activity. The process is much easier in some areas than others. In the central goldfields the pattern of small, closely spaced towns and scattered historical sites provides landscape interest on a walking scale, while the history of settlement has left a legacy of mixed public and private land, with many options for trail development. In others parts of the state, settlements and features of interest are more widely spaced, and much of the land is private, so there are fewer opportunities to create off-road walking and cycling trails. In this situation disused road reserves may be an option for trail creation. Where their alignment is often less than ideal, and they miss attractions such as hilltops, which offer views or sites of geological or biological importance, it may be possible to supplement them with permissive paths across private land to places of interest. In this case the land owners might be compensated

in some way, such as through rate concessions, payment of legal liability insurance and construction of stiles over fences to reduce the risk of gates being left open.

While driving, walking and cycling may in themselves produce little revenue for the regions, the associated demand for accommodation, food and site visits is potentially a major source of income and employment. Slow travel allows time for exploration away from main roads, for stopping at out-of-the-way towns, and for visits to regional food outlets such as wineries and specialist food producers. Slow travellers stay in regions, rather than drive through them to distant iconic destinations. Regional motels, bed and breakfast establishments camping grounds and restaurants will all benefit.

Conclusion

- There is considerable potential to develop landscape - based tourism in rural and regional Victoria.
- Whilst tourism depends on landscapes, conversely landscapes also depend on tourism and other ways to encourage economic benefits through their recognition. Otherwise the regulatory controls necessary to protect them may be seen as costing money and adding unnecessary red tape.
- To succeed the tourism needs to be managed with the maintenance of landscape values as one of its aims: this could be done through the local planning scheme with the co-operation and support of organisations like the National Trust.
- Visitors need to be educated about the cultural values of the landscape including historic, scientific and aesthetic aspects: this could be achieved through preparation and distribution of suitable material at local visitor centre and opportunities to celebrate listings.
- Visitors also need to be informed of activities available in rural areas, including scenic drives, major views, local cycle trails and walks, as well as commercial sites such as tourist farms and regional food outlets.

Compiled by:
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on behalf of the Landscape Committee of the National Trust of Australia
(Victoria)

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