



Submission no. 46



RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO RURAL AND REGIONAL TOURISM

Submission from –

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INTRODUCTION

Bordered by the Murray, Ovens and Goulburn rivers, our region *Sun Country* is just that – a region blessed with copious amounts of sunshine during all seasons making it one of the best year round holiday destinations in Australia.

What ever it is you like to do you will find an attraction or activity to suit. Golf, water sports, fine food and wine and nature at its best, it's all here just waiting to be discovered and explored.

Tourism services in this area are provided by Moira Tourism, which operates independently from shire councils and includes towns in Moira, Corowa and Berrigan Shires. The destination website address is www.suncountryonthemurray.com.au for more information about the highlights and features in the region.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

1. The economic benefits of tourism in regional areas, including tracking the flow-on benefits through other regional businesses and industry.

RESPONSE

- ◆ Based on the 2004 Bureau of Tourism Research National Visitor Survey, the Central Murray Tourism region has been attracting increasing numbers of overnight visitors with 1.6 million overnight trips in 2004, an increase of 17% since 2000. Overnight visitor expenditure has been growing with \$568 million spent in the region in 2004, an increase of 24% since 2000. Average expenditure per person by overnight visitors to the region totalled \$351 in 2004.
- ◆ Based on this most recent data, the area covered by Moira Tourism attracts 1.25 million visitor nights and direct expenditure by visitors of \$148 million per annum.
- ◆ We would like to see better public awareness about the economic value of tourism in our community. We do not feel that this is clearly understood by many, including many who actually benefit indirectly from tourism. This could require better and more up to date research data.
- ◆ There is no doubt that tourism has a substantial impact on the economic viability of this region. This was especially evident during the 2003 drought which severely effected farmers. Throughout this time tourism continued to flourish and keep the townships alive through the difficult period.
- ◆ Maintaining strong levels of visitation to our towns has been more difficult during the current drought. We have noted that there is increased media interest in the bad news stories of the drought. Stories and images carried by the media have often been misleading and sensationalised with regard to river levels and associated environs. This would inevitably deter people from visiting regions that have been known for their water attractions and appeal.

2. Potential impediments to the sustained growth of regional tourism, economic activity and jobs.

RESPONSE

- ◆ We are concerned that marketing campaigns repeatedly focus on well-known product in Victoria and that the impression of the state of Victoria is becoming "same old same old".
- ◆ We feel that Parks Victoria is under resourced and there is a failure to see their role in tourism in our region. Within our region we have Australia's largest red-gum forest with huge significance in regard to wildlife and both Aboriginal and European heritage. The recent closing of the Dharnya Centre, currently the only interpretive centre for the forest, highlights the under utilisation of the tourist potential of the Barmah Forest.

The impact of the closure of the Dharnya Centre also has impact on the private operators who work in that area. We have lost bookings because of programs we use to run in conjunction with them. It is not just the closure of the Centre but how it was done (nobody was notified until after the fact) and the lack of communication since.

The lack of resources in the Park is also limiting our opportunities - now only four pit toilets - two in the day visitor's area and two in the camping area. There is no shelter for hot or inclement weather.

- ◆ Lack of necessary infrastructure to be able to properly service visitor requirements. Our major visitor information centres are extremely outdated and at present are not able to cope with the modern demands of visitors to our region. We have no education and interpretation aspects in our centres and this impacts on our potential to promote our tourism products and region strengths.
- ◆ We are also concerned about possible reductions in water allocations. Our golf courses are a key attraction for our region, bringing thousands of visitors. If these operations are compromised, visitation would inevitably be reduced and employment of many locals could be threatened.

The water reductions not only impede the golf courses. Boat cruises are unable to operate. ie. Boat at Cobram has been out of service since before Easter and Kingfisher Cruises have been out since early May. It is not yet known when these businesses will come back into service, but in the meantime there has been no income and no support.

3. The effectiveness, at a National, State and local level, of current programs to promote and enhance tourism in regional Victoria.

RESPONSE

- ◆ The two current State Tourism Organisation (STO) programs that are relevant to Moira Tourism are the Murray Campaign Committee and the Capital and Country Touring Route.
- ◆ The Capital & Country Touring Route received \$40,000 from Tourism Victoria under Commonwealth Games funding in 2005/2006. In 2006/2007 a further \$10,000 was received to market this touring product. The situation in 2007/2008 is that funding will be going to Sydney Melbourne Touring which Capital & Country Touring Route will now sit under.

Our concern here is that in 2005/2006 we were encouraged to get the touring route up and running and now that it has been developed, Tourism Victoria have changed focus and decided to include it as one of three routes in Sydney Melbourne Touring. This change of direction and identity may make it difficult to maintain industry interest in this program. The concern is that the focus from the STOs is short term and not operator/industry focussed.

- ◆ Murray Campaign Committee is unique as it must try and work with two STOs – Tourism NSW and Tourism Victoria. Instead of it being a partnership, it is a constant compromise of trying to fulfil differing state objectives and styles. Murray Campaign Committee has to complete a Victorian funding application under the RMP and then develop a separate plan for TNSW.

The Murray Campaign Committee is required to work with two MOU's - one with each STO. What should be a great opportunity to maximise funding becomes watered down by the process of approval by differing stakeholders.

In this instance the Murray Campaign Committee also needs to be able to deal with those who have the power to make decisions within the STO and this doesn't always happen. Such "cross border" difficulties are constantly faced by those who live along the Murray and can only be eased by the state authorities on both sides of the river understanding the problems and being more flexible in their requirements.

- ◆ The role of the Murray Campaign Committee has been solely defined as a marketing one. It is the only regional body in the area and it should have been better resourced to respond to challenges like the current drought situation.
- ◆ The STOs do not really understand the regional issues and tend to work in isolation of other departments.

4. Initiatives to increase both international and domestic visitor nights in regional Victoria.

RESPONSE

- ◆ Regional Victoria is essentially a self-drive market. We need to be able to look at other ways of connecting with the international consumer to inform them that driving is a very easy travel option in Australia.
- ◆ Our region does not have an adequate airport or one that is close enough. This limits our capabilities and product development opportunities.
- ◆ We need to have the flexibility to look at packaging product and themed-based experiences for visitors. This might involve looking beyond our campaign committee regions, which is not a common practice at this point.

5. The efficacy of existing mechanisms at a National, State and local level to address the impact on regional tourism of natural events such as bushfires, flood and drought, and effective measures to drive long term economic recovery.

RESPONSE

- ◆ The drought is a huge issue for tourism in our area. As a group (Murray Managers) we asked Tourism Victoria for help with this issue in December 2006. The response was less than satisfactory and while we understand that it is a huge and complex issue to deal with, it needed immediate attention. We know that a task force is now being developed but more than six months down the track is an unacceptable time frame.

6. Opportunities to leverage private investment and commercial activity in regional tourism infrastructure, including ecotourism.

RESPONSE

- ◆ Opportunities to leverage private investment and commercial activity in regional tourism infrastructure need to be explored more by STOs, to ensure that we can continue to meet visitor expectations.
 - ◆ Our region could benefit from Parks Victoria becoming more actively engaged in the development of commercial ecotourism operations.
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