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Comments:

We run an environmentally sustainable tourism accommodation business just out of Dimboola and very close to the Little Desert National Park in the Wimmera for the last three years. La Vergne has also worked previously for the local council as a tourism officer and has an honours degree in ecotourism. She is currently undertaking her PhD studies with the University of Ballarat - Water in Drylands Co-operative Research Program on valuing water in tourism. Paul has run a tour guiding business for a number of years, is a bush survival specialist and has previously been involved in running ski resorts in Japan.

As a consequence of the ongoing drought conditions in our region over many years, we have been forced to re-position our business to become environmentally sustainable - partly to attract a niche market of consumers who are interested in staying in sustainable accommodation. We have achieved 4 green stars in our rating with AAA Tourism (the rating agency) and have been carbon neutral since November 2006 (for all our guests from the moment they leave home until they return). We have had no support or encouragement to do any of this by any level of government. Indeed, it costs us extra to be rated as green stars over the ordinary star rating system. We believe that all tourism businesses should be encouraged to be environmentally sustainable and those who are not should be penalised financially - not the other way around.

We run a business in an area severely affected by drought - our business is located near the Heritage Wimmera River, which is now just a series of ponds - this has made promoting one of our principal attractions very difficult. Again we receive no assistance in any form from any level of government for drought relief because our business relies largely on visitors from cities and not local agriculture.

In terms of marketing of our region - we are located in the "Grampians" region - yet we are located over 100 kilometres from Halls Gap. We frequently get accommodation enquires asking about our proximity to Halls Gap because people like the sound of what we offer but are disappointed to find we are over 1.5 hours away. The name of the region as "The Grampians" makes it difficult for any marketing for locations outside the immediate vicinity of Halls Gap and the National Park.

We have seen no benefits from any efforts to address the impact of natural events such as bushfires - again because we are listed in the Grampians region people thought that we must have been burnt out too and all the marketing campaigns focussed as usual on Halls Gap.

It has been almost impossible to value add to our business as insurance premiums are so high, the rate of return is usually negative for too long a period of time.

We believe the current jigsaw works well for well-established places and areas but fails to develop new product, areas or regions. To be quite honest trained monekys can market areas like the Great Ocean Road, The Grampians (as in the national park) etc - it takes real marketing talent to marketing smaller areas like the Little Desert - hence it is virtually completely ignored by Tourism Victoria. We are not the only region that has this problem.

In terms of flow on benefits of tourism - we have found that few people (in small towns) really understand the value of having tourists visit - they fail to see that they buy petrol, food and drinks, newspapers and magazines, groceries etc and they fail to see that tourism businesses also spend a lot of the money they earn in the town as well. An effective education program would be useful.

We note that public hearings will be held in Melbourne on Monday, 4 June - it might have been useful to have some of those in regional areas so that small tourism operators could attend - after there is no regional toruism located in Melbourne.