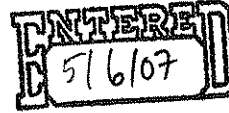




East Gippsland Regional Business & Tourism Association
Phone 0419 09 99 68 email: egrbta@telstra.com
P.O. Box 866, BAIRNSDALE, Vic 3875 ABN: 34 582 573 173
Office: 34 Leighton Bay Drive, Metung 3904



Inquiry into Rural and Regional Tourism

Submission no. 55

Submission from the:

East Gippsland Regional Business and Tourism Authority
P.O. Box 866, Bairnsdale, Vic., 3875.

Contacts: Executive Officer, Pauline Hitchins, 0419 09 99 68
Chairman, Geoff Brooks, 0407 306 592

Signed:

Pauline Hitchins on behalf of the Authority

SUMMARY

East Gippsland suffers from the tyranny of distance from many of its markets as well as within its borders.

- With around 75 per cent of the shire parks and reserves, government policy and funding is integral to its development as a tourist destination.
- This, the sparse population, large distances and unusual terrain impacts on the quality of infrastructure (roads, telecommunications etc)
- Changes to traditional industries have not seen effective transition to tourism replacement jobs.
- Funding for rural events is not proportional to that provided in Melbourne.
- East Gippsland needs support to promote the region to neighbouring areas and to work with neighbouring regions including NSW/ACT to promote touring routes.
- East Gippsland has huge untapped potential as a tourist destination.

BACKGROUND

East Gippsland is a unique and stunning region of Victoria which offers an unparalleled range of attractions from the surf, lakes and rivers to hills and high country mountains.

It is comparatively remote being in the state's far east, and is quite sparsely populated. The second largest local government area in Victoria, it covers 14 per cent of the state but has a population of little more than 40,000 (0.8 per cent of the state's population).

Some parts are difficult to access and large areas (around 75 per cent of the shire) are Government controlled parks and reserves so that rate revenue is quite low and Government policy and funding therefore play a critical role in the region.

With East Gippsland a popular sea-change destination, a significant sector of the tourism industry are small operators supplementing semi-retirement plans with B&B or small business. This leads to a greater requirement for support to develop customer focused service and ensure standards of excellence are established and maintained by operators.

As traditional industries across East Gippsland decline – often through Government policy (logging, fishing) – the promised replacement employment sector is always tourism. However it appears delays in implementing programs have seen significant skills leave the region.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Infrastructure is vital to service tourists, from roads and telecommunications to accommodation, wayside stops and interpretation.

Large expanses of parks and other public land in East Gippsland means reliance on government to provide or facilitate this.

With distance a major factor in reaching the extremities of East Gippsland, there are many significant roads which remain unsealed or in poor condition despite the best efforts of authorities.

Local airports at Bairnsdale, Orbost (Marlo), Mallacoota and Lakes Entrance provide some aviation services but a regular commercial air service would be a boost to the area to help overcome its relative remoteness from the capitals and attract higher quality visitors/investment. There appears to be a growing demand for high-end accommodation but it requires a similar level of service from transport, restaurant and other providers to complete the 'service'.

Because Bairnsdale is not used as a normal commercial destination, during the snow season skiers traveling by plane are diverted to Albury when they cannot land at Dinner Plain and then transported by road. If pilots used the Bairnsdale airport for regular flights, these passengers could be diverted to Bairnsdale for a safer road trip.

Mobile phone and wireless coverage are patchy, with the much promoted Next G service not available in a several areas, even those currently covered by CDMA, including a large section of the township of Omeo, the major high country business centre.

The relevant government departments do not appear to be funded sufficiently for Tourism to be a priority and for potential attractions to be developed and interpreted for the visitor.

The new Wilderness Retreats at Cape Conran providing accommodation in contemporary and comfortable safari-style tents are an excellent innovation. They provide the "close to nature" experience of bush camping with modern comforts in a sustainable way, with proper management of and minimum impact on the natural resources.

These and other developments to provide access to the spectacular natural scenery across the region may well be developed by private enterprise or Public Private Partnerships and relevant departments should be completing background and preparatory work on suitable projects. This will also encourage investment rather than deter those who have found the red tape and bureaucracy too great a stumbling block to pursue ideas and developments.

The attraction of the lakes and rivers in East Gippsland brings many recreational fishing and boating enthusiasts to the region. Authorities rightly funnel boating and vehicular traffic to key areas where facilities are located, but these are over-stressed during peak periods frustrating locals and visitors alike. An increase in boat ramps, mooring facilities and boat service facilities is required to continue to attract this business.

Safe and reliable access to the surf is an issue at both Mallacoota and Lakes Entrance. The new facility mooted for Mallacoota has undergone many delays and should be facilitated as a matter of urgency. The entrance at Lakes Entrance is vital to the local economy both for commercial fishermen and recreational boats – the ongoing failure to resolve the issue in this day and age seems to reflect a lack of recognition of its significance. The iconic fishing industry itself is a tourist attraction and helps maintain the vitality of the town.

EVENTS

Key events help attract visitors and encourage repeat visitation to the region. In comparison to the funding for events in Melbourne, Regional Event funding is miniscule. While the total pool is a reasonable amount, the distribution provides very small amounts for each event and is inadequate to develop and grow significant regional events.

Additionally, the Commonwealth Games did not live up to promises in terms of flow-on to regional centres and there appears to have been a reduction in visitors to regional areas as families 'recover' from the expense of such a major event.

REPLACEMENT SECTORS

As traditional industries across East Gippsland decline – often through Government policy (logging, fishing) – the promised replacement employment sector is always tourism but little action has been seen.

Delayed or ineffective redeployment programs have meant those skilled in logging and bush skills have left the area and are no longer available to provide assistance in management, development of walking tracks and other facilities etc.

PROMOTIONS

Because priority seems to have been given to resourcing regions more accessible to Melbourne in recent years, East Gippsland still struggles with awareness and understanding of its assets.

With tourism so vitally important to the region's economy, it is imperative that funding is provided to ensure every opportunity can be taken to promote East Gippsland.

Much of Tourism Vic/Destination Gippsland advertising is directed interstate while a large section of our market is intrastate and includes neighbouring regions (ie the rest of Gippsland) and it is important resources are available to also target these areas.

Entry to the region is from several directions. The Great Alpine Road traverses the region north-south while the Sydney-Melbourne touring route is an important access route. Travellers from Canberra also have easy access to East Gippsland.

These interstate links and partnerships are therefore important in developing and promoting our tourism products and it is important that Government policy supports this.

CONCLUSION

East Gippsland is a largely untapped tourism destination with huge potential to add to Victoria's tourism income through creative developments. The region offers such a wide range of natural attractions for the tourist from its extensive coast, its unique network of lakes, rivers and streams, parks and reserves covering bushland, hills and high country and mountains, it has the potential to rival successful destinations such as Tasmania and New Zealand. Government policy and support programs must recognize this potential and help support the sensitive and sustainable development of this rich resource.