

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMITTEE

Inquiry into rural and regional tourism

Mildura — 31 July 2007

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**Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee**

The CHAIR — Welcome to the Rural and Regional Committee's inquiry. This is an all-party parliamentary committee conducting an inquiry into rural and regional tourism. All evidence that is taken here today is protected by parliamentary privilege. Anything you say in here is protected; anything you say outside this building is not protected by parliamentary privilege, which is afforded to you by the Constitution Act of 1975, the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003 and the Defamation Act of 2005.

Before you start your evidence, if you could please just state your full name and address and also the organisation which you are associated with. In a couple of weeks we will give you a copy of this evidence, which you can have a look at and make alterations, but not substantial alterations.

Ms HEALY — Yes, I read the note on that. My name is Helen Healy, and I am from Helen Healy Organisation. The office is at 41 Deakin Avenue, Mildura. I organise most of the major arts events in regional Victoria and other events as well. In your folders you have an overview of what we have been working on in the last 12 months. Currently we manage the Murray River International Music Festival, which extends the length of the Murray and runs along all the boundaries of the Murray River through South Australia. We work closely with Tourism New South Wales, Tourism Victoria and the South Australian Tourism Commission on that one.

I manage the Mildura Wentworth Arts Festival, which has major festival status from Arts Victoria. Also, just put in the mail today is our business plan, and we are applying for triennial funding for that festival.

I do the Mildura Writers' Festival, which finished just last weekend. I do the Murray Darling Palimpsest, which is a major arts and science event that brings together art centres and arts organisations along the entire length of the Murray-Darling Basin and the rivers. I do the Mildura Jazz, Food and Wine Festival. We have just taken that on this year, and we will present our first one in November this year.

I have been working for the last 18 months on the Mungo Festival, which is celebrating 25 years of world heritage at the Mungo site and is looking to not only celebrate 25 years of world heritage listing but also 40 000 years of indigenous culture. The aim of that was to highlight the Mungo National Park and its — 'accessibility', I was going to say, but accessibility is a problem. Our core goal there was to increase indigenous employment around that site as a major tourism destination.

I have also managed for seven years the Australian Alternative Varieties Wine Show, which is a show focusing on the making, growing and marketing of alternative variety wines in Australia. That came out of a response from Tesco's in the UK, where the wine buyers were saying that wines from Australia were boring because we had three big reds and three big whites. We developed a show to focus on some of the strengths and alternative varieties in Australia, and we have particularly focused on the wines of this region.

Pinot grigio does well here, viognier does well here, and nebbiolo and tempranillo all do well in this environment, so we match wines from similar environments like the wines of Italy, Spain, Russia, South America et cetera. Up until a few weeks ago I also managed the Mildura Murray-Darling Wine Industry Association. I spent 18 months getting that up to speed, and now it has a full-time coordinator.

Upcoming events we will be managing include an arts festival in Swan Hill. We are in preliminary stages with the Swan Hill community to introduce a major arts festival into that region, and also a rain walk. There is a group of people down around the Wyperfeld National Park who are very keen to instigate an event that works with the land-holders, the national parks and the traditional owners to bring metropolitan audiences out.

The long-term and the 10-year plan is to develop it as a kind of Kokoda Trail of Australia, on the same level. In traditional times when there was a prolonged drought, the indigenous people from around this area — the Latje Latje, the Barkindji and the Ngiyampaa — would come down and

meet around this area where we are going to go, which is called the Pine Plains area. They would meet with the Grampians mob, the Berengi Gadgin people, and they would do exchanges of artefacts, tools and things, but also they would walk the Wimmera River, 67 kilometres of it, to make the rains come.

I have a bit of a reputation with trying to make it rain. I did the Ouyen Rain Dance in 2003. Also, I am banned from organising any other events except Mungo National Park, because every time we do, it pours — which is a plus for them. If they need some rain, they just call me to organise an event up there.

The CHAIR — Were you in your birthday suit?

Ms HEALY — Part of it was actually that no-one was allowed on site in clothes. But we all had our elastic-sided boots and our hats and our sunscreen on. We did that, yes. Even the media had to get their gear off although we did supply commemorative sarongs for women who perhaps had body image problems. You either had to be in your birthday suit or wear the sarongs. It was interesting that most of them came off because we provided a safe and really wonderful environment for those women. It was a fabulous event.

Another event coming up is the inaugural event of the Mildura Sun Festival in October this year. We are involved in various other things. We do a lot of food and wine promotion and are called on to represent food and wine in this region. For instance, when the toxic waste dump was a very real problem for us I organised food and wine producers of the region to do a promotion in Parliament House; a lot of you dropped by and saw what a wonderful food and wine region we are.

I guess the focus of this is to tell you about the impact of tourism on the region and some of the impediments to us doing what we need to do and the effectiveness of current programs. I will go over a few of those with you.

We have fabulous support from Arts Victoria. Our program manager there is Claire Hatch, and the general manager of innovation and program is Tony Grybowski; Tony came up to our writers festival recently. They have been getting more involved in coming to see what we do. We find that Arts Victoria, Regional Arts Victoria and Tourism Victoria with the Country Victoria Event program are more and more interested in coming to visit some of our events to see what we actually do.

Also through Arts Victoria we have had — I guess at my instigation — a lot more access to professional development. Last week I attended a fabulous sponsorship and marketing forum at Melbourne University, and Arts Victoria has given us a component. It has recognised that we have major festivals and have all sorts of difficulties with being so isolated. Not only does that impede, say, audiences and artists coming here but approximately 35 per cent of our budget for any of our festivals is used on travel and accommodation, which city-based festivals do not have to pay because most of their artists can pop in and out for their performances.

Sponsorship is also a real issue for us. I really do not want to ask local businesses for sponsorship, especially when I am going across so many events, because there are issues with the downturn of the citrus industry, the table grape industry and the wine industry. Arts Victoria has recognised that a component of us developing what we do is professional development. So it has facilitated me to go to these professional development forums.

It is also working with us and the Australian Business Arts Foundation, and it is sending up to us a person who is an expert in governance and board training. They are coming up in September to do some board training with not only my boards to do with a number of arts events but also with the Mildura Arts Centre board.

We get great support from Tourism Victoria. We have just had two successful funding applications for the jazz festival and for the Mildura Wentworth Arts Festival. Brendan Downey

and his team in the events unit of Tourism Victoria are really supportive of what we do and give us a lot of guidance. One of the key weaknesses we have across events is collecting data, which is more and more important. It helps us to get funding and helps us to be more accountable to our sponsors and so on. Brendan is very good, as is Arts Victoria, with assisting us on that.

We also work closely with the Country Victoria Events program and Nick Hunt, who I think is still in that position. In the past they have certainly supported most of our festivals, particularly the food and wine festivals. We also get a lot of support from national funding bodies — Festivals Australia, Playing Australia and the Australia Council. Regional Arts Victoria is very supportive and works closely with us to devise events which could perhaps go into other areas around the state. That has been really helpful.

The local industry works well together. Mildura Tourism, the Mildura Arts Centre and the Mildura Rural City Council are very supportive of our events. We have also created synergies with other national bodies, like the Melbourne International Comedy Festival — through Raw Comedy we bring groups from there up here — and the Australian Film Commission; we work closely with its Big Screen film festival and bring people out to various events.

I guess a major problem facing us with attracting tourism into the region would probably be that we need to encourage the media to address the water situation with the Murray River more positively and at a more sustained level. We need great assistance there because when we go out to talk to people who are maybe coming into the area or go to consumer shows — we go to, say, the Picnic at Hanging Rock every year and promote a lot of our festivals — and when people come into the area they are quite surprised to see water in the Murray.

We need a lot of assistance to dispel those myths. In the areas where there are weirs we have weir pools and it is all looking good. So when the *Herald Sun* publishes on the front page a horse crossing a dry river, that is of no help to us at all and it is not really the reality of our situation in the major areas along the Murray River.

We have access to some pretty good drought funding, but it does not really tap into the arts. Not only do the arts in any community make you feel good — it is all about inspiring and uplifting people — but our artists actually interpret who we are. That can go a long way towards supporting regional people in times of hardship.

The other thing I guess is transport and accessibility. There are a number of flights here from Melbourne; we are fairly well serviced by Melbourne, but it would also be good to have a wider range of flights from Sydney. I know that another airline is looking to come into the region. Anything that we can do to support more flights, bigger planes, and particularly better access from Adelaide and Sydney would be really beneficial.

Probably my last point is that recently Robyn Archer — a very high-profile artistic director — has come on board. She is mentoring me with my arts events. We have actually applied for a fellowship to the Australia Council of the Arts to cement that relationship. With her guidance we are seeing that when we bring tourists into the region, we need to not only bring them for the event that we are doing but to package up the event and work with hospitality and restaurants, work with accommodation houses, work with tour companies, work with the houseboat people, and also work strongly with Mungo.

Even though Mungo is in another state, we would like government organisations to see that — for instance, Tourism Victoria uses Mungo National Park far more in its campaigns than, say, Tourism New South Wales does, although it is waking up to that now — we have cross-border issues.

If I am doing an event in Mungo it is very hard for me to get funding for it, even though everybody comes through Mildura, they stay in Mildura, they use tour companies out of Mildura, and they go to restaurants in Mildura. We package them up and say, ‘When you come to Mildura,

go on a houseboat, go to Stefano's, go to Trentham, take a Harry Nanya tour and go out to Mungo'.

The key to us getting international tourism into this region is not what is in Mildura or in northern Victoria; it is Mungo. It would be really good to see the two state governments working quite closely on developing Mungo and opening up to the fact that people come through Mildura. That is where the airport is, that is why we need to develop the airport, this is where the major events are, this is where we have a cosmopolitan, really well-developed tourism industry — but we need to work more closely together.

The CHAIR — That's a great presentation. Wendy, would you like to kick off with some questions?

Ms LOVELL — Yes. Helen, you painted a really rosy picture. But what we are here for is to really get to know how we could improve things for you. You talked about a few things like media coverage and so on, but what can the government do to improve things for this region tourism-wise?

Ms HEALY — I think I outlined that pretty well. For instance, the Mildura-Wentworth Arts Festival is one of only two festivals in regional Victoria with major festival status, so I think it has really acknowledged the entrepreneurial, pioneering and hard work that a lot of people have done for 14 years across that. What could they do? They could always give us more money, but we have to prove our worth in that regard. I do not know.

Ms LOVELL — If you were minister for a day, what would you do? What would be the first thing you would change?

Ms HEALY — If I were Minister for What, for a day?

Ms LOVELL — Minister for tourism for the day.

Ms HEALY — One of the issues we have is that a lot of people think Victoria stops 1½ hours out of Melbourne. I would put some marketing money into saying that Mildura is only one hour out of Melbourne. You have to fly, but it is still only 1 hour out of Melbourne. I guess getting rid of the myth that Victoria stops at Bendigo and Ballarat.

Ms LOVELL — So more money into marketing regional Victoria?

Ms HEALY — Yes. I think one of the ways to do that is to work closely with Tourism New South Wales because Mungo is a key way that we can bring people into this region, particularly international visitors, so to work closely across the borders; I would perhaps work on that. If I was a minister for a day I would make sure that I was working very closely with the ministers in New South Wales and in South Australia to ensure the viability of the Murray Campaign Committee because that is a key way that we here can develop tourism into our events. They are a couple of ways.

Ms DARVENIZA — Thank you very much for the presentation, Helen. It was really very good, and congratulations on the work you do here.

Ms HEALY — Thank you.

Ms DARVENIZA — I have been involved as a member of the government on a range of festivals and the opening of your arts festival as well as the opera — —

Ms HEALY — By the lock, yes.

Ms DARVENIZA — By the lock, which was a roaring success.

Ms HEALY — Absolutely.

Ms DARVENIZA — It is great to see the handouts that you have given us. It refreshes our memory about so many of the things you do here, and that you do so well here. Can you just talk to me a little bit more about the access to professional development and how that is assisted, and whether or not there are ways in which that could be improved upon at all?

Ms HEALY — Sure. Broadly what was happening with festivals in this region before I came on board was that outside people were brought in to manage them. Then I started my business here, and a lot of festival organisers have seen that it is good to have a person who is here all the time, and instead of employing different festival directors, they should get good artistic directors — for instance, Robyn Archer worked on the arts festival; I have got Paul Kane, a professor of Australian literature from Vassar College in New York as the artistic director for the writers festival. We have great artistic directors, and I keep the ball rolling here.

It has only been made evident in the last couple of years that professional development is really important, but it is also important to have somebody there who is going to deliver it out through the boards and subcommittees that I deal with. It is only something that has really occurred in the last 18 months. Arts Victoria has been very good at facilitating it. Before, because it was such an isolated area and it was quite expensive to get to Melbourne for professional development — you have air fares and per diems — —

Ms DARVENIZA — Accommodation.

Ms HEALY — Accommodation et cetera. We need support in that area, but we get access through Arts Victoria and it supports us financially to a certain extent to go, say, to networking days with other festival directors of other festivals, and that is something that is really beneficial, and we could possibly do with a lot more. I think it is probably important from a tourism perspective to supply some funds for more of that, to go and network with the people who are doing similar things. People in Melbourne or Sydney or Adelaide get to do that all the time, and to go to each other's events.

Ms DARVENIZA — Do you work fairly closely with Adelaide? I know in Mildura you see yourself as being closer to Adelaide than you are to Melbourne. You do not have the access with flights and things, but if you have to get into your car and drive — —

Ms HEALY — Sure.

Ms DARVENIZA — I know a lot of people from Adelaide come here.

Ms HEALY — Yes. It is one of our target markets for tourism and for events.

Ms DARVENIZA — How has that been? How have you found working with the South Australian government — I assume you work with it — and its tourist authority?

Ms HEALY — Interesting. I managed the Murray Campaign Committee for the first two years of its life. I think South Australia has dropped out of the Murray Campaign Committee now. The longer you are here the more you establish these networks because the person who is now in charge of country events in the South Australian Tourism Commission was formerly the marketing manager for Broken Hill tourism, and I work quite closely with Broken Hill as well.

Getting into South Australia can be difficult because they are even worse than Victoria in thinking that South Australia does not exist outside of the Clare Valley and the Barossa Valley. Once you get over to the Riverland and this area it is a great target market for us, because a lot of people from the Riverland come here for medical reasons, they come here for the airport, education et cetera. But through Robyn Archer's involvement, everything was fast-tracked because it was more a private individual rather than government-to-government.

Ms DARVENIZA — Right.

Ms HEALY — We have very strong connections now into the Adelaide festival and in fact we are bringing WOMADelaide to Mildura next March.

Ms DARVENIZA — That is a fantastic festival. I have been to many WOMADelaides in my time.

Ms HEALY — They wanted to call it WOMildura, but I said no.

Ms TIERNEY — Helen, I was interested in finding out from your perspective how you have seen the tourism patterns change in Mildura over the last six years, taking into account the time of year that people come, whether the special events that you organise punctuated throughout the calendar has assisted, whether the type of tourist has changed from probably more families at Christmas time and school holidays versus those who come in the cooler months now, and the length of time that people tend to spend here.

Ms HEALY — Yes.

Ms TIERNEY — Or are we shifting to a more multi-layered tourism industry where a variety of families and singles and couples are coming at different times of the year for different reasons?

Ms HEALY — I might have a slanted view on that because most of my events are to do with the arts. Tim would have a totally different perspective on how things have changed with the houseboat market. We do a lot of advertising through the *Australian Book Review* for the writers festivals and through the *Monthly* magazine, for instance, for the arts festivals and the Murray River festival. We do the bulk of our marketing in regions, like the Riverland, Broken Hill, Swan Hill, Echuca, Ballarat and Bendigo and then we move out from there to Melbourne and into Adelaide and sometimes into Sydney. We have just finished a three-year marketing plan, and certainly it is about going out more consistently and using further creative means.

Who comes and how has it changed? My market is really the socially aware — I am trying to think what the demographics are for tourism. For my arts events we have very wonderful names for them all. My market is really arty-marty; people who will go to a decent arts event. My market is pop art; people who go to popular events. I did Kate Ceberano out in a desert environment and 3000 people came. Then we have got seen-and-be-seen-Tina, who would go to Opera by the Lock because it is a grand social occasion. We had almost 3000 people at that event too.

But then we have this niche kind of market of people who are really interested — and this is why we want to package more and more — and who not only increase the length of stay but also are interested in experiential tourism. But if we tie it around an event — next year we have Opera by the Lock and we are going to put a very edgy piece of work on the Friday night and another comedy event on the Saturday — we will say, ‘Come on Thursday, go home on Monday night; make it a long weekend; go to Stefano’s for dinner; stay in a decent hotel; go out to Mungo; come to this event’, and we will package it with an airline, although since Qantas left, the airlines have been a little harder to access. There is a new airline coming and so we are working on that company and introducing it into the region by becoming a major sponsor for arts.

Ms DARVENIZA — As a sponsor, you mean?

Ms HEALY — Since Qantas moved its headquarters out of Mildura it has become very difficult to get — —

Ms DARVENIZA — I see what you mean.

Ms HEALY — The involvement in local sponsorship probably reduced by about 80 per cent once it left. Have my markets changed? No, I think they are fairly similar; they are just growing. One of my target markets is happy families. Kate Ceberano in the desert is a happy family event because I market it by saying that the kids can spend all night — have any of you ever been to that event?

Ms DARVENIZA — No.

Ms HEALY — You must. The kids can spend all night in this massive sandhill and we supply little sand boards for them to come down. They play all night on there. We have it kid-friendly. The kids all get little tags with the sponsor's name, but on the back is their mum's name and mobile phone number because they get lost all night. For the other market, they bring out their tables, their candelabras, their wine and their picnic baskets, and it is a very safe, family event.

The CHAIR — Did you have it out at the snowdrift?

Ms HEALY — Is that what you call it; the sandhills out beyond Wentworth?

The CHAIR — No. I thought it might be down in the Wyperfeld area.

Ms HEALY — No.

Mr VOGELS — Helen, does your community down here welcome tourism? Sometimes we go to regional centres and we are not really sure whether people welcome tourism at all. Mildura is obviously very interested in tourism. If you are marketing these things, do you also have the accommodation to put up the people when they do turn up?

Ms HEALY — We currently have 47 accommodation houses. There are 47 plus the houseboats and a lot of niche accommodation. I think it is 47 motels. We have a lot of accommodation. It is only, probably, at two particular times of the year — for example, Easter — that it is quite difficult to get a room in Mildura, but most of the time it is fine. Sorry, what was your question?

Mr VOGELS — Is your community — —

Ms HEALY — Does it embrace tourism?

Mr VOGELS — Yes.

Ms HEALY — Mildura Tourism has conducted over the last two years a thing called Tourism Week, where they are talking and working with the local community about what tourism does. Again, I have a slanted observation on that because I am so much in the middle of it, but I do think that the local petrol station realises that it contributes to the economy. People are in town and in the local supermarkets. Our local service providers get more catering jobs, more sound and IT jobs; more venues get business. I think across the board they do — for instance, I have been to Tamworth a few times and you cannot move. There is a little bit of a perception about country music, which is an event that brings lots of people in. Whether or not they spend as much on events as I do is questionable, too. But I think on the whole the general community realises that it is a tourism kind of town.

Mr VOGELS — And it brings a lot of money in.

Ms HEALY — Yes, it does. We recently had grants from the Mildura Rural City Council handed down across the events from the events funding, and when you add up the economic benefit of the events that are held in Mildura, it is millions and millions.

Mr NORTHE — Well done, Helen. Congratulations, and keep up the good work you are obviously doing in Mildura. Reverting back to the aviation industry, I think there are plenty of opportunities for regional areas to market themselves by way of aviation rather than road transport. To give you an example, if I am standing at Tullamarine and I have got the option of taking a \$1 airfare to Queensland whereas it might cost me \$300 to come to Mildura, how do we overcome that, and what can the government do to possibly assist in that regard?

Ms HEALY — I do not know enough about how they can discount so radically. I guess it is about us promoting ourselves more effectively and also about the government supporting us with that marketing, particularly with the issues that we face. But we can certainly match Queensland in sunshine hours. When people come to my events, what they talk about is the conviviality. They are amazed that a place like this exists in regional Australia that has such a beautiful mix of cosmopolitan and a downtown, friendly kind of atmosphere. I guess it is a case of us working more closely with the airlines to do promotions like that. I am not sure what influence the government can have on that; I think it is more up to us.

The CHAIR — Helen, do you think that we can sell the indigenous story around the Wyperfeld and talk about the Latje Latje and about going down and meeting the tribes from below the Sunset. Do you think that we can actually sell that on a commercial basis to city people to make it financial?

Ms HEALY — Absolutely. Another project I did early on for Tourism Victoria was the Aboriginal cultural trail drive map. I worked closely with businesses in this area as far out as South Australia, Broken Hill, Robinvale, Swan Hill and Echuca. But that always comes back to the fact that it has to be managed by the indigenous people, and they need support, whether it is from the Koori Business Network or the Koori Heritage Trust, to ensure the sustainability of their businesses. It cannot operate any other way.

We have the very successful Harry Nanya Tours here in Mildura. Graham Clark has just bought the business. He owns the business outright now. It is fabulous to work with him. It has been a long teething experience for him to get it up to the level that it is right now. Down around the Wimmera area I have been working closely with the Berengi Gadgin lands council, which is down around Horsham. Sometimes there probably needs to be a bit more leniency with parks and working more closely I do not have a lot of experience yet in the Wimmera with parks and the different groups there, but a little bit of feedback is a just little bit sensitive. Whereas parks and the three traditional tribal groups of the Willandra world heritage area work fabulously together. It is actually an international showcase for how well they work together.

The CHAIR — Are you keeping accurate data from the events that you run as to where your market is coming from, the amount of money they are possibly spending, where they spend it, why they are here? Are you keeping that type of data?

Ms HEALY — It is something that we are really developing now. It is something that Mildura has not been so great on in the past. Certainly over the suite of events I do it is just something that we are growing all the time. Probably one message you can take back to government is that it could have standard reporting on audiences and participation, where they come from, how much they spend and how much they were involved et cetera. That would make my life much easier because all the different funding bodies have different templates, and they are just that much different that it is quite a rocket-science experience to interpret the data. But we certainly collect pretty good data, and we are getting much better at it. It is certainly a focus I have because I know it is the key to getting funding. It is the key to supporting a whole range of organisations to improve tourism into the area and improve the funding of our events and our endeavours.

The CHAIR — Helen, just one more question to finish. I am interested in your own dynamic. You are obviously private and you are in to make a dollar.

Ms HEALY — Yes.

The CHAIR — You seem to have a finger in a lot of different pies, and you seem to have a lot of strings to your bow. Do you think that is the way to go? You seem to be making a lot of events happen, simply because you understand where the market is. You understand where the opportunities are.

Ms HEALY — I think it is a really good model. When I first came to town I had a different business. It was a graphic design and an advertising business, but it grew into this. Around the time that Stef and I sort of took off we got the kind of market we could never have paid for. A lot of the events we have started have been from a core group of people who were kind of visionary, kind of entrepreneurial, but I had the nuts-and-bolts experience to make them happen.

When we first started we tried to urge the Mildura Rural City Council to subsidise a festival office that would, through funding from the different festivals, fund the rental, the communications and wine receptions. It was open all year round, and different events could move in and run their events. That never came to bear. My business grew, and I now have a festival office in the CBD. It is open 9 to 5. I have three full-time staff plus various contractors, and it works really well for all my events. It has been a godsend for a lot of events that were trying to find a donation of an office here and a donation of a computer here. They would run for three or four months of the year and then shut down, so reports were not done and a lot of statistics were not kept over the time. It is actually a really good model. And it is either that or a festival office supported by government or local government or this model here.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Helen. That was great. It was really very enlightening, and we thank you for coming along this morning

Witness withdrew.