

TRANSCRIPT

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into heritage tourism and ecotourism in Victoria

Melbourne — 25 November 2013

Members

Mr T. Bull
Ms J. Duncan
Mr D. Koch

Mr J. Pandazopoulos
Ms L. Wreford

Chair: Mr D. Koch
Deputy Chair: Mr J. Pandazopoulos

Staff

Executive Officer: Dr G. Gardiner
Research Officer: Dr K. Butler

Witnesses

Ms L. Gervasoni, Victorian committee member, and
Mr I. Wight, Victorian representative, Australia International Council on Monuments and Sites.

The CHAIR — Welcome, Lisa and Ian. As you are aware, we have allowed half an hour for your appearance, with 15 minutes for your presentation and 15 minutes for questions.

Mr WIGHT — We were told 10 and 20, so we will try to be fairly brief, if we can.

The CHAIR — I will leave it to your judgement.

Mr WIGHT — We understand that it is really for you to ask questions, rather than for us to present. We have already given you a submission. However, in that regard, perhaps this is the time to apologise. When I looked at the submission before coming here today, I realised that the extensive references which should have been attached to that submission did not actually get to you, so today I have sent to Dr Butler a revised version of the submission which has all the references in it. It was meant to be a guide for you, or perhaps more for your researchers and an important part of the submission, so I apologise. All I can say is that although we are an association of professional practitioners, all this work is done on a voluntary basis and that just slipped between the cracks.

I guess the connection between heritage and tourism, particularly in country areas, is so obvious that we almost find it hard to justify, particularly in rural and regional Victoria. In the big cities you have competition from the arts and sport. You get the top sports teams, get the musicals, you get the operas — all that stuff. Out in the country, the heritage fabric, which sort of contains whatever other activities go on, seems to be very much part and parcel of the attractions of the countryside and therefore a very important element of tourism in regional and rural Victoria.

The CHAIR — My apologies for not indicating at the start that all evidence taken in the hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and is further subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003. Any comments you make outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded, and as witnesses you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript within the next couple of weeks. Again, my apologies for running over the top of your presentation. I just wanted to put it so that you are aware of it during your presentation.

Mr WIGHT — That is okay. The first part of our submission has a fair bit of data generally to convince you of that connection.

On the other side, we believe we have an extraordinarily large and very well-documented resource, which we have not gone into in so much detail. It is the fact that Heritage Victoria has a database of some 150 000 places which have been recorded in municipal heritage studies across the state. There are only about a couple of municipalities that have not had a comprehensive municipal heritage study carried out. All that data is available there to be picked up and interwoven into whichever tourism theme you might want to develop.

Although we have this amazing resource, we feel that it is not particularly well interpreted and it is not so central to most of the tourism message. Food and wine seem to go very well but heritage seems to be there just as a background. By way of illustration, I have always been slightly annoyed by the fame that the Beechworth Bakery has attracted and the accolades for the entrepreneurial skills of those who run it. You have to remember that it is called the Beechworth Bakery and it would not have been anywhere but for the efforts of the pioneers in heritage conservation in the early 1970s who bought buildings, went to live there at weekends, restored buildings and preserved — really saved — Beechworth for what it is today.

So very quickly, what would we like to do about this problem where heritage does not seem to be central or well integrated with the other themes in the tourist message? I picked up from the Yarra Ranges submission too that they felt there were other really important things in their shire that they would like to see projected, and the very isolated or specialist Jigsaw method of promoting a region seems to be too exclusive to a single theme, whereas we would like to see a much more comprehensive understanding of heritage across the state and see that promoted properly.

To that end I suppose my priority, from the recommendations, would be a heritage tourism strategy, and I think that would reveal some of the real gaps in the way the tourist message is put together and developed. If it were across the whole state, it would take account of all these other themes and see how they could be better woven together. Not that I think the Jigsaw thing is a bad idea — I think it has suited us very well in the past — but I think it needs another look in terms of the role of heritage.

Ms GERVASONI — Building on what Ian just said, the cultural tourism market is actually quite a well-educated and engaged market. They are able to visit a Jigsaw campaign area that does not have heritage as its key element and actually relate to it and understand the heritage offer that is there. So it is about providing a product and knowledge so that that culturally-engaged tourist can have a better experience across the whole of the state, and it is about building upon the information that exists in heritage studies and modern technologies so that that can be easily accessible to a visitor. That way they can find out more information about what they are actually visiting without it being visually obtrusive by large format signs and elements like that. It is about working smarter than we have in the past and using that to improve the heritage and the tourism offer.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Ian. Is there anything further you would like to offer? Or would you like to us to pose a question?

Mr WIGHT — Yes, there is an element in the heritage profession which is a bit under utilised, particularly in the tourism area, and these are specialists in interpretation. These are the people who work out what your experience is going to be when you go into a museum. These same skills are available to work out how you will enjoy or interact with heritage in the whole region.

By way of demonstration, some of you may be familiar with the heritage council app, which provides details of all the places on the heritage register, and there is a particularly nice function of this app where you press the button for 'Heritage near me', and here we are in Parliament House, and we can press that button and we get a picture of Parliament House, we get its history, its architecture and all the rest of it. The base data exists in Victoria to make that applicable right across the state for all the heritage of local significance. Imagine if you drove into a country town, you could pick up your iPhone or your Smartphone, press the button and walk down the street and know all about that town. It would be fantastic.

Mr BULL — What is the name of that app, Ian?

Mr WIGHT — I have it on my own phone, but the problem I have with my own phone is that since the IOS 7 update it will not work in finding places that are heritage places near me. That function had to be rebuilt, thanks to Apple. It was a rather disastrous update, that one.

The CHAIR — Ian, thank you very much for bringing that app to our attention because it is a very worthwhile tool.

Mr WIGHT — Just google Heritage Victoria or look in the app store for Heritage Victoria.

Ms WREFORD — Actually, there is another app that I have on my phone called 'Field Trip' that works all over the world, and it is amazing because wherever you are it seems to know a lot about all sorts of things. Your submission argues that a broader and more sophisticated approach needs to be taken towards the creation of heritage experiences within the tourism industry. Can you provide some examples of what you consider to be best practice in the area of heritage tourism? And I know we were talking a little about apps, but are there any other new technologies that we need to be aware of or that you think would be helpful within heritage tourism?

Ms GERVASONI — I have been reading a few of the other submissions, so I am going to choose an overseas example, and that is the Cornwall world heritage area because it has been mentioned in some of the local government submissions. The Cornwall world heritage area, being a world heritage site, knows its key themes and its significance quite well, but they are aware that they are relatively isolated so they have actually worked with the local tourism industry to make sure that there is a quality product. They actually run days for tourism operators, so they understand those heritage values. So when you are staying at a bed and breakfast or buying a pint at the local pub, if you ask a question, the people who you are dealing with can answer it quite well. It therefore provides quite a seamless level of interpretation.

They also interact quite well with themed days. The Cornish mining industry does bear a close relationship to Victoria's, with the Cornish influence on our goldfields, but they have days where they use things like steam coming through the boiler houses to recreate the experience of when those places were operating. It is actually providing both an experience as well as ensuring that people understand the significance of what they are looking at. I have forgotten the second part of the question.

Ms WREFORD — It was just about the new technologies. I hate to say it, but our mobile phones do not actually work everywhere, as much as we would like them to, so sometimes if an app goes down or your phone coverage is not good, you do not have that app. So are there other technologies you are aware of that could be good?

Ms GERVASONI — There are a range of technologies available, and it is also important to note that each generation has a different way of finding information, so you need to ensure that you have a range of opportunities. There are people who will want to get a brochure in the mail, there are people who will look at things like TripAdvisor or use Flippa or Instagram to see what is around. I think Ian has another example, which is a Goldfields cycling video on YouTube, so people will look for information in those places as well. With your phone, Near Field communication generally should work even if there is no signal, because it works off — —

Mr WIGHT — Being broadcast locally.

Ms GERVASONI — Yes. When you see those little black — —

Ms WREFORD — QR codes.

Ms GERVASONI — Yes. So there are a range of opportunities, and there is a role for your normal interpretation signage, but it is important to look at what the values of a place are. I will use the Royal Botanic Gardens as a good example. Because there is actually a landscape view and people want to look at the gardens, a lot of their signage is quite low level. It is still easily read, but it is discreet, well themed and well thought out, so you actually have an experience across the site. Again that is why understanding the stories that are to be told is the best place to start in terms of how to make sure you are telling that story.

Mr BULL — Ian or Lisa, I want to pick your brains for a minute on the heritage classification and the ongoing dilemma we have around the criteria that are put on development. A lot of governments, whether it be state, local or federal, often see a heritage listing as, I guess, an impediment to the development of a particular site. I will give one example in my little patch up in Bairnsdale, which I am sure is duplicated 1000 times around the country. We have an old, heritage-listed water tower in the middle of town that is an eyesore. Our local government wants to develop it and tell the story of the history of the water tower in the town with a nice little cafe and information centre. It cannot do that because it would be modifying the appearance of the structure too greatly.

I notice that in your submission you spoke about how we must tell the story better with some of these sites and locations. I am interested in your thoughts about whether we have the balance right in the criteria we apply to heritage listing, or is it too much of an impediment in relation to commercial development? As the decades roll by, we will have more and more locations, buildings and sites receiving that listing. The maintenance bills for whichever agency whose control they come under will grow and grow with the increased number of sites, and it is an expense to stop them falling into a dilapidated state. Do you think we have that structure right? I am interested in your views on that scenario.

Mr WIGHT — I will start by saying that it is fortunate that we have managed to keep the management of places and the listing of places as two completely separate activities in Victoria. It has got a bit confused in some other states. What we try to do in heritage studies and in compiling information about the significance of places is concentrate purely on the significance of the place and not think too much about what its future may be or about the condition. If the condition is so bad that it has diminished the significance of the place, if it really is a wreck, you might just say, 'It's no longer what it's supposed to be, so we won't list it'. If it is quite damaged and dates from, say, the 1850s, it will certainly get listed and may even go onto the schedules of the planning scheme. The next stage is the permit process, and that is when these questions are looked at carefully. Because we have kept those two functions separate, we need to look at the permit process to balance all the other factors and say, 'I'm afraid we just can't afford to maintain this anymore. We're just going to have to record it and let it get demolished'. There may be another solution, but it is important to keep those two things separate.

In terms of your particular example of the water tower, I am trying to picture it. I sail down on the lakes quite a bit, and I stock up in Bairnsdale.

Mr BULL — We probably bump into each other on the water, then.

Ms GERVASONI — I actually saw a picture of it on Flickr yesterday. It is your typical concrete water tank with a bolt at the top.

Mr WIGHT — The level of adaptation that is required to have the information centre in the tank itself may be acceptable or not acceptable, and I think an awful lot depends on the astuteness of the design and how it is handled. I see some quite strong adaptations that are quite brilliant in concept and work very well. Maybe you should interpret it — maybe you do need your information centre — but maybe it should not be inside the tower, or maybe the proposal was not particularly well handled. I do not know the circumstances, so it is something I cannot make a judgement about.

Mr BULL — It was just an example of what is a wider problem.

Mr WIGHT — The other thing I would say strongly — and certainly ICOMOS would be 100 per cent behind the concept — is that every heritage place must have a life, and to have a life it must have a use. If a place is not being used, not being occupied and not being cleaned and looked after, it gets a bit like my boat when I do not get to sail it enough and it is covered with horrible green crawly things.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — I am sorry I missed your presentation, so you may have covered this, but I want your views. A lot of focus is on built heritage simply because of the cost of maintaining the asset, yet we have a lot of heritage that is place heritage, where often there is nothing of the history of that site still on that site, or maybe it has been modified, but it is still significant in terms of, say, state history. Some comments we have heard ask whether it is time that we recognise turning points where there was conflict in the settlement process. Some of the sites are important to the Indigenous community, which they refer to as massacre sites, or we can be politically correct and call them conflict sites. There are others who have mentioned riots against Chinese miners. We built the state on gold, and there are a number of sorry stories as part of that history. There are particular sites — Buffalo River et cetera. What are your comments on that? Should we be looking at some of those sites? Should we be trying to interpret them as part of our heritage, or are they just areas we should continue to put aside because they have been politically hard in the past?

Mr WIGHT — Dark history as well as happy history — it is all history. It is an area that is neglected, maybe in terms of conservation. From an ICOMOS point of view, you may have heard of the Burra Charter. It is a widely respected charter that guides professional practice in the heritage field, and it was devised by Australia ICOMOS, this branch of ICOMOS. It has recently gone through a review, and a new form of the Burra Charter was adopted last month in Canberra at the annual ICOMOS conference. The main function of that review was to take out a lot of references to fabric in the Burra Charter and perhaps include aspects of fabric in the explanatory notes. The reason for that is to make the charter much more applicable to Indigenous sites, where there are not necessarily bits of fabric you are celebrating — that it is just a natural place but nevertheless significant and which has significant features, or it may be a process or another intangible aspect of heritage. There has been quite a significant review in order to expand the kind of heritage that would be more easily applicable. It was previously quite applicable under the charter, but it was about making it clearer that these places would be properly assessed under the charter.

Ms GERVASONI — ICOMOS is also very supportive of working with Indigenous communities to ask, ‘How do you tell that story, and is it appropriate to tell?’, and to work that out. I can think of three key opportunities where you can blend the range of history offerings in key tourism areas. Obviously the Great Ocean Road is a great natural environment, but you have places like Massacre Bay, where you can talk about dealing with the Indigenous community. You can finish off in Warrnambool with the Hopkins River mouth, which is a site that proves how early Indigenous settlement was in Victoria. Plus there is the more traditional built heritage along the way.

It is similar with the Macedon Ranges and spa country. You have the Indigenous creation stories and the different volcanoes throwing fire at each other. At one of them, Mount Franklin, you also have the early protectorate there, so there are opportunities to look at the impact of settlement and the gold rushes on Indigenous communities. The third one has just popped out of my head, but it is about making sure you work with local communities, being respectful to the story and also showing that there is a continuum. You do not just have something in a neat little box; there are a range of aspects to any tourism place.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — Regarding where heritage should sit, I am interested that the starting point for a number of jurisdictions around the world is heritage. Then part of it is the natural environment and part of it is built form. For us it seems we started off with heritage high up there in the 1970s — we started with heritage and environment — but maybe it is the Aussie way of doing things that we like simplifying things, so we dropped a whole lot of stuff. Heritage has gone, so the focus in, say, our parks system is on the ecology of the park and less so on the activities that were part of the settlement or the built form in the park. That is why we are finding it difficult to come to terms with what we do with those assets. I am interested in your feedback on that. Heritage, at least in Victoria, is split. Basically it sits with the planning minister and that department. Should it be somewhere else? Where should it be?

Mr WIGHT — I would think the planning ministry is probably the right place for heritage management for private owners, because, after all, it is a land management control you are operating if you manage things in the heritage overlay. Probably the planning ministry is the right place for it to sit. A few weeks ago I was reflecting on the obituary for Alan Hunt. Certainly they were Hamer's ideas, but I was thinking about what we inherited from that remarkable Minister for Planning — the green wedges of Melbourne, the heritage legislation and the protections under the planning scheme. It was quite an amazing time in the early to mid-1970s and into the late 1970s.

Ms GERVASONI — Ian is probably less able to say this, but the last heritage strategy and the changes to the Heritage Act to allow objects and collections to be included in the Victorian heritage register have helped to cross the divide between the two different branches of heritage professionals: those who tend to deal with landscapes and the physical place and those who are more in the museum sector and deal with objects and collections. We now use the same framework of themes so that we can tell the story across those. There is the opportunity to encourage those sectors to work together and to realise that the previous Victorian heritage strategy did a lot in working with volunteer historical societies and collectors to upskill them and help them understand the value of their collections. There is still some work to go to help those communities to have a role in telling their heritage story and, I suppose, to value-add to the tourism experience.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Ian and Lisa, for your presentation.

Witnesses withdrew.