

TRANSCRIPT

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into heritage tourism and ecotourism in Victoria

Lakes Entrance — 5 December 2013

Members

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Mr T. Robinson, chief executive officer, Destination Gippsland.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Welcome, Terry. Thank you for your submission and your willingness to be here. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and is further subject to provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003. Any comments you make outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. You are aware that all evidence given today is being recorded. As a witness, you will be provided in the next couple of weeks with a proof version of the transcript with instructions. I ask you to make your presentation. We have allocated half an hour, so maybe up to half the time will be on your presentation and the rest of the time on questions and answers.

Mr ROBINSON — Thanks for that and for the opportunity. What I will do this morning is step people through the submission we have made and expand on some of those points, but I am happy to take questions as we go. It is fine with me if we pick out some points that are of particular interest.

To give just a very brief explanation, Destination Gippsland is the regional tourism board for the region under the new model. We have been going for five years, supported by Tourism Victoria, Parks Victoria and also the six local governments. It is a public company supported by government but then our programs are very much targeted to industry. Some of our views are putting forward a government point of view, if you like, as well as an industry point of view. Our role covers more than the old marketing that campaign committees used to do. We are active in advocacy, destination planning, industry development and product development as well as having the traditional marketing role.

Our approach to the inquiry was very much focused, I suppose, on our strength, which is the natural environment. We have promoted the region inspired by Gippsland the brand. We believe we will live and breathe that, and that comes out in a marketing sense, but we have to make sure that the policy, experience, standards and potentially new investment also fit with that focus on the natural environment and that brand.

From a state point of view and for the purpose of the inquiry, the first point is around the vision. It is not clear that there is an articulated vision for the ecotourism sector in Victoria. It needs to be between industry, the community and government. There are various elements scattered around there, but it is not something that is a common objective. I think a few years ago the nature-based tourism strategy was a really strong attempt to bring some vision, some forward thinking and also nominating priorities. Tourism Victoria and Parks Victoria was a good combination. That seems to have dropped off the radar. The recently released Victorian regional tourism strategy does not necessarily articulate a vision for the ecotourism sector. It is something we feel needs some work to collaborate between industry and government, because at the moment I suggest it is an uncoordinated future.

There are plenty of issues and you have no doubt heard them today and through the inquiry. I think the starting point is what is the common vision. On the regulatory environment, you have probably heard from operators such as Peter Johnstone about the complexity of being either a tour operator or a potential investor. There is a lot of red tape in terms of working in and around Crown land. That is a key one.

I want to touch a little bit on public land management. The points here are probably aimed at government departments and the tension between the likes of Parks Victoria and the Department of Environment and Primary Industries in setting policy but also carrying out the work of that. There was a recent study into parks and camping accommodation — the regulatory impact statement. In terms of funding and setting prices, there is a policy side that DEPI is involved with, but Parks Victoria actually have to carry it out. It seems to be a constraint that we have some national parks — and I will use Wilsons Promontory as an example — where there is commercial activity managed by Parks Victoria, and DEPI is potentially setting new prices without necessarily the support of Parks Victoria. Where is the flexibility? Is Parks Victoria in tourism or not, and if it is, does it do it in a commercial way in terms of commissions, flexible prices, encouraging off-peak — all those things? I think there is a disconnect between the policy and the actual operations of some of our prime national parks and the commercial success or otherwise of them.

That RIS process also touches on funding. Ecotourism and the need to improve infrastructure and to improve the experience is crucial. I do not know if the RIS is necessarily addressing that in its full ability in terms of nominating a fixed price and assuming visitors will keep coming and then there is no plan for how the money will be spent. This is all in that context of: if the vision is saying ecotourism becomes a key part of what Victoria's tourism industry can pursue, it is not sitting in the regional tourism strategy at the moment in a defined sense. There is not a nature-based tourism strategy that is alive, so to speak. We have some funding

processes and prices that will not necessarily relate to specific areas. Popular areas that raise the money will not necessarily get that money to reinvest in them. Do we need to start to pick some winners, I suppose, or reward areas that can in fact generate their own revenue and then have systems to reinvest in the product? That is just touching on the public land side, and that is just between DEPI and Parks Victoria, without looking at how local government and the industry fit with licensed tour operators. It is a very complicated area.

The fourth area is the coordination and management of the sector. This is where I think there is opportunity for some leadership from both a government point of view through Tourism Victoria and also the industry. The Victoria Tourism Industry Council have a role to play. They are starting to get into this space at the moment in terms of some policy groups and being the united voice for industry, but there are a lot of organisations and a lot of not just regulations but accreditation standards or licences, and it is not necessarily getting the focus it deserves and the management of that. I think there is tremendous opportunity for Tourism Victoria to play a more active role, rather than on the marketing side, and I think for VTIC to also coordinate and unite the industry elements as well.

I know the subject of definitions and terminology has been touched on by Peter in terms of just getting some understanding of what this area — ecotourism, nature-based tourism, adventure tourism et cetera — is. I think people need to understand what each term means but also the overall benefit that it provides to the community, business and the environment.

I know that point 6 has been touched on. On benchmarks and service standards, if we want to be the best, we obviously need the planning, as I have touched on, we need the funding models to support it and we need clear, defined roles between who is doing what. If government through Parks Victoria is involved, it needs to compete, if you like, and be part of the commercial side. In tourism in general — and ecotourism is an example of it — there are very loose standards and very loose accreditation, and in some ways accreditation is not taken that seriously by both the accrediting bodies and the consumer. It is not at a point where the consumer makes decisions on where they go, who they travel with and with which tour operator based on accreditation. It has very low consumer awareness.

The ecotourism side has a number of elements, logos and accreditation, but again it has no resonance for the consumer, and I think in most cases people in the industry have seen accreditation as a sort of bureaucratic hurdle to get to where they want to go to rather than something that actually lifts standards and separates their sector from others. Accreditation processes do not necessarily focus on quality. They are more around accrediting the business rather than the experience, if you know what I mean. If they are putting the paperwork through and ticking the right boxes, they get accredited, but how does that separate someone with 20 years experience who knows the product from someone who has just followed the bureaucratic steps? Even at that standard, it is then about how the sector communicates that accreditation so that it is meaningful and people make decisions and go with those that have the highest level of service. When they are at that level they are benefiting the environment and they understand the complexities and sensitivities, and everyone wins.

There is a lot more that can be done with accreditation. It seems to go through cycles of being important to government and industry bodies, and then it sort of drops off until they can agree on which accreditation it is. Is it T-QUAL, is it ATAP or is it star systems? In the end the consumer is looking at TripAdvisor and other things to make decisions, but that is not good for the industry.

Private sector involvement is starting to move in the right direction in terms of the recommendations in the Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission report, allowing for longer term leases and at least opening up the potential for investment in national parks. We support that. Obviously it needs to be appropriate and sensitive, but there are plenty of examples around Australia and internationally that show that it can be done. Victoria has a little time and activity to catch up on, but it is starting to move in the right area. There is not a lot to show for it in the first instance, but it is a sign that the private sector does have a significant role to play. I have just been part of the Australian Tourism Awards judging process, and looking at what other states do in these categories is always a learning experience in terms of how they have overcome it. Whether it be WA, the Northern Territory or Queensland, there are states that do it well.

In terms of having a regulatory environment, it is about having a partnership between the state and the private sector — understanding roles and responsibilities and setting it up so that the private sector, whether it be through licensed tour arrangements or otherwise, has some exclusivity or some incentive to invest — so that the

partnership does work and it is understood by the community that this is a good thing for that regional part of the state. It can be done; I just think Victoria is behind on that. Again having the vision and an understanding of the roles and what everyone can do, rather than what they cannot do, is crucial.

Lastly it always comes down to funding. If we are serious about this, there needs to be greater funding for the sector in terms of development. The marketing side is crucial as well. We have a lot of competition, but it is about funding in terms of where the new infrastructure and investments will come from. If they need a partnership with the state to set up some infrastructure services — power, sewerage et cetera — to allow a private sector investor to come along, then we need to be able to invest and make some decisions on where the prime areas are. The concern is that under current Tourism Victoria funding models and others it is very even across the state, rather than picking areas that have a particular strength and then supporting them to achieve. I will leave it there. I am happy to take questions.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Thanks, Terry. Lorraine will begin.

Ms WREFORD — I would like to take up the last point you were talking about, which was infrastructure in the area. What is your vision for tourism in the Gippsland region, and in your view what are the key infrastructure projects that would support the growth of the industry? I am not asking where the money is coming from; I just want to know what you think the area needs to get a better product and better outcomes.

Mr ROBINSON — There are a range of projects that are out there that we support. Gippsland needs an iconic, international-standard walk, such as the coastal wilderness walk in Croajingolong. There are some regulatory and planning issues, but really it will need some investment in the walk itself plus some sensitive accommodation along the route that can then be sold and packaged, as well as some infrastructure and design. The coastal wilderness walk is a key one.

In and around the Gippsland Lakes there is a lot that can be done to improve boating access, whether it be ramps, pump stations, fuelling stations et cetera. There is not just one element here, but the lakes as a boating hub have a lot of opportunities for improvement. An infrastructure base will drive that. Even at Wilsons Promontory — and I will come back to that because it is on the international radar at the moment — where is the high-standard accommodation and where is the dining capability in a world-class facility? They are some areas.

Ms WREFORD — I hear you, but do you have any ideas about where you would like high-standard accommodation?

Mr ROBINSON — I would love it at Tidal River. This is the thing: where there is already a built environment within national parks, there are opportunities to keep investing in it and improving it. I use Tidal River as an example. There is a township there, there are cabins and there is roofed accommodation. There is a footprint that can be continually improved, and that is one example. It is the same at places like Point Hicks Lighthouse and Cape Conran. There are areas that have accommodation, but let us not assume that that will be the standard forever. It is about the walking tracks, but a combination becomes crucial to it.

Mr BULL — Thanks for your comments. They are all very relevant. One of the areas you touched on in your submission — and we have heard this from presenters in other areas of the state as well as here — is the confusion that exists around the ecotourism terminology and definitions. I note that your submission says we need some clarity around that. What are your views in relation to this whole ecotourism banner, adventure tourism and nature-based tourism? What is your definition of ecotourism and the reasons for it?

Mr ROBINSON — That is a good question.

Mr BULL — Bearing in mind that there is probably no right or wrong answer, because a lot of people tend to have different points of view in relation to this, as someone in your position, in an area where all those sorts of things are occurring, what is your general take on it?

Mr ROBINSON — There are different opinions on it. We start with probably the broader nature-based term — that is, tourism relating to the natural environment. That is our general view of the strength of Gippsland, whether it be land or water based. The ecotourism side then starts to define that a little more by focusing on the ecology and specific environments and understanding and interpreting those. Again that is a

broad term. Adventure starts to get into more of the specifics of particular activities that you directly experience and partake in. In my mind it goes from nature-based tourism to ecotourism to the specifics within adventure tourism. That is where, if a region is known for that, it can take advantage of particular strengths, whether it be kayaking, boat tours, walking, cycling or whatever it may be. For me being nature based is the starting point, and then you drill down to more commercial things around ecotourism. At a national level, there is the award for ecotourism operators — that is, operators and activities based on the environment but very clearly looking at commercial tourism outcomes.

Ms DUNCAN — Terry, you talked about elements that you would like to see in national parks, and you used Tidal River as an example. Can you give us some examples of best practice developments around the world in national parks?

Mr ROBINSON — If we look internationally, there is Yosemite, which is a bigger scale park and where there are different levels of commercial activity and an ability to control entry into an area that is a national park. Within Australia, in and around Cradle Mountain — —

Ms DUNCAN — Within the park?

Mr ROBINSON — In the park. There is accommodation in the lodge adjacent, but within the park there are some quite innovative partnerships with tour operators in terms of what they can do, whether it be canyoning and rafting or other activities.

Ms DUNCAN — I think you are talking about large-scale accommodation. Is that what you are referring to?

Mr ROBINSON — Not necessarily large scale. Accommodation needs to be appropriate to the market and to the environment. That is the thing with Gippsland — the national parks are so big, and adjacent, private sector accommodation is a long way from the experience. Cradle Mountain is a more compact area. There is the example of the coastal wilderness walk that we are supporting in East Gippsland, whether it be the overland track or some New Zealand options where there are huts and cabins along the way, which are part of the experience. It is not just about building accommodation and visitors will come; it needs to be considered as part of the environment. We are not advocating for inappropriate or large-scale development for the sake of it; it needs to be consistent with each particular area. There are not enough services and accommodation within the national parks for the demand they are getting currently.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Terry, a lot of the discussion has been around ecotourism and your view, which I agree with, about broadening the definition rather than narrowing it. Your submission talks about heritage tourism. Is there anything you want to say before we wind up about Gippsland's heritage tourism? Is there anything on Indigenous tourism in the area — opportunities and barriers?

Mr ROBINSON — Yes, it is an important one. Part of our role is around developing products, and part of that is Indigenous tourism. Gippsland is very rich in Indigenous heritage, but it is not known for it. It is not like there is one centre, such as at Hall's Gap. We have the Bataluk trail and some elements of sites where people can self-guide and interpret as well as the centre in Bairnsdale. This is an area of enormous potential for the international audience as well as the domestic audience. Destination Gippsland as well as other stakeholders need to invest more.

There are a few projects on the radar in terms of a significant interpretive centre, but also just making Indigenous sites far more accessible and understandable. Is it an app? Is it a brochure, or is it some signage that enables someone to interpret a canoe tree or a particular site that people are being encouraged to visit? It is one of the areas where there is a lot to do. There is a lot of potential. We have not got there yet, but the determination is that we will. Some of it comes back to funding — who is going to do it, how are we going to resource it — as well as the relationships with the Indigenous community particularly with the opportunities around native title and shared land management. I know there are things happening, but they are not yet at a level where you would promote them with confidence. We have to make sure the product is right and that the right stakeholders are consistently moving them forward. At the moment it is not coordinated, and that is a challenge for us.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — If you look at Ballarat, Bendigo or Portland, you see they are heritage towns, yet there are a lot of other towns with similar histories in terms of age. In trying to broaden the concept of heritage

towns — what a heritage town in Gippsland is — as part of and abutting the nature-based experience, which is predominantly what Gippsland is known for, is there anything in that space we could be looking at and doing? It seems to us that in other countries around the world with similar development histories or in countries that may be just 100 years older than us, there is a stronger focus on their towns as part of their heritage. The dichotomy we have as Australians in a 200-plus-year-old country is that we think we have no history, yet we are finding all these people, often older people, focusing on the heritage aspects of their areas and looking at how that can be commercialised into a tourism opportunity. Do you have any comments around that?

Mr ROBINSON — Yes, you are right. We promote touring and villages, and when people come to a village or a small town in Gippsland, apart from the obvious, ‘What is there to see and do?’, there is that story of the town. What can they learn about it? That is where some towns and villages do it much better than others. A place like Walhalla is really prominent for its history; it has preserved its look and feel, and it is adjacent to a whole lot of nature-based experiences. That is an example of tourism and heritage tourism keeping the town alive. There are other towns like Port Albert, with its rich history in terms of being the key trading port and its maritime sector, that have a lot of potential to tell their story more than they have. You can still be based in and around that area and enjoy the water and the various lakes and the Prom, but the story of Port Albert is largely unknown to people in Melbourne, let alone further afield. These are just some examples.

But throughout East Gippsland the timber industry and the pioneering stories are part of what can be not just promoted but understood better in terms of the experience. That is where it is not just the obvious, ‘Where is the beach?’, ‘Where is the park?’ or ‘Where is the built attraction?’, but it is also understanding the stories of the towns, which make them unique. I agree that there are a lot of towns people can visit, and what separates them from the others is often their particular heritage.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — One of the things we are toying around with and trying to look at best practice for is that in the consumer’s mind — and I think we are all part of this — we have created a separation between the natural landscape and the built form. Other countries around the world like North America have their heritage as their starting point. People have been living on that land for thousands of years, and in the areas we consider to be sensitive areas there has been human development, disturbance and now some built forms from colonial settlement. Should our starting point be heritage, where ecology and environment are part of it, the Indigenous history is part of it and then the built form from colonial development is part of it? I am throwing this at you, but if we take a step back to where our story begins rather than simply going in and creating in effect two experiences, the more we go into this the more it shows how much more integrated both of these areas are.

Mr ROBINSON — They are not mutually exclusive. Again it is just looking at it with a slightly wider lens. You need to consider both elements, and for some villages or some areas, one or the other is potentially stronger, but do not rule out both of them being a part of the story, because I agree that we need to make sure that history — the heritage — can then be interpreted for the visitor.

It all comes back to the tourism element. What is the visitor going to get out of it? What experience? How are they going to understand it? Then, is the product there? Does the local community understand and respect it themselves? That is a challenge in its own right at times. People are not necessarily aware of what went on in that area hundreds, if not thousands, of years ago. It is an education process for the visitor but also for communities to really understand what their points of difference are and what their strengths are, and then how to build on that. How do you build momentum either in product or interpretation or tour guiding or whatever it might be to bring that element out?

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Okay. There are no other questions. Thanks very much, Terry, for your presentation. A transcript of the evidence will be sent to you in the next couple of weeks.

Witness withdrew.