

TRANSCRIPT

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into heritage tourism and ecotourism in Victoria

Tasmania — 13 February 2014

Members

Mr T. Bull

Mr J. Pandazopoulos

Ms J. Duncan

Ms L. Wreford

Mr D. Koch

Chair: Mr D. Koch

Deputy Chair: Mr J. Pandazopoulos

Staff

Executive Officer: Dr G. Gardiner

Research Officer: Dr K. Butler

Witnesses

Ms G. Parssey, Manager, Tourism Product and Planning, Tourism Tasmania

The CHAIR — It now gives me pleasure to welcome Tourism Tasmania, through Gill Parssey, Manager, Tourism Product and Planning. Thank you, Gill, if you would like to step forward.

Ms PARSSEY — Thank you.

The CHAIR — In welcoming you, Gill, can I also indicate that all evidence taken at this meeting is protected by parliamentary privilege in accordance with the reciprocal provisions in defamation statutes in Australian jurisdictions, as if you were giving evidence in Victoria, and as provided by the Victorian Defamation Act 2005, section 27, the Constitution Act 1975 and the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003. Any comments you make outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. Any reporting of these proceedings enjoys qualified privilege for fair and accurate reporting as if the proceedings were in Victoria. All evidence given today is being recorded and as a witness you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript in the next few weeks. Thank you so much for joining us and we look forward to your presentation. I understand at this stage we probably have a duration of 20 to 25 minutes. If we could put some questions 10 minutes at the back end of that 25 minutes we would appreciate it, or would you prefer to take questions on the way through?

Ms PARSSEY — Questions on the way through, I think.

The CHAIR — Okay. Thanks, Gill.

Ms PARSSEY — Kelly gave me some areas that you might like to cover off. I am not really sure of the purpose of the inquiry but I assume it is to develop or to look to develop further ecotourism.

The CHAIR — Are you aware of the reference that we have?

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — Basically we are looking at best practice ecotourism and heritage tourism. The parliamentary inquiry is for all political parties. We are trying to develop a consensus report that might lead to new government policy or a new direction in that area.

The CHAIR — We will report accordingly to the parliament late in August with some recommendations, Gill.

Ms PARSSEY — Yes. From our perspective I think there is not much that you would not know, I would imagine, would be commonsense to most people. It is really making available natural and protected areas for appropriate ecotourism development. It is about planning schemes, that is probably where we focus most of our undertakings so we can open up areas in the future for ecotourism development. That is probably the facilitation role of government and one that we have not been able to nail yet, I suppose you could say. That is the area that the government works mostly in. The other area is accreditation. We fund our accreditation organisations—the Tourism Industry of Tasmania—to ensure that as many operators as possible are accredited. Whether that is ecotourism accreditation or not is not something we focus on. Obviously if it is an ecotourism product it will be nice for them to be ecotourism accredited but we do not pursue that.

The only enforcement we have, or the only enforcement mechanism we have, in terms of quality control, whether that be ecotourism or other products, is the use of CBS licences throughout the parks areas which are monitored by DIER and Parks and also signage. If you are a tourism business in Tasmania you have to have accreditation in order to get signage on state owned land. We have no enforcement mechanism to ensure that we have a benchmark for best practice. The only way we can actively pursue that, I suppose, is through the awards programs, the Tourism Awards Program. Tasmania generally—and has over the last five years—has hit well above its weight. Our organisation, Tourism Tasmania, puts a lot of effort, money and time into preparing our industry for tourism awards at state and national level.

In terms of best practice, as I say, there is no current benchmark. We do not go out there and say, 'This is what we're looking for.' If we have a tourism product that we think has potential in that regard we would spend time with them, offer resources to them, but there is no actual program we run to, if you like, unveil potential ecotourism opportunities. Having said that our stand-out product is Pennicott Journeys. Did you have a chance to experience that?

The CHAIR — No.

Ms PARSSEY — It is owned by a gentleman called Rob Pennicott and, to be honest, it is all credit to him. I think the Victorian government has had some dealings with Rob. They took him over to Victoria, as far as we know.

The CHAIR — Kelly and Greg might be across that.

Ms WREFORD — I have heard that twice now.

Ms PARSSEY — Flew him around in a helicopter and tried to steal him. That went down well here, I can assure you. He literally had a vision, he had a really close connection to Bruny Island and to the sea. He was a fisherman. He wanted to start this business. It is pure passion, drive, hard work, energy. It is nothing that is kind of written in a book, if you know what I mean. It is nothing that we provided him with or that he was provided with in any way that developed that product. It is cultural. The reason they have won two national awards four nights ago is cultural. It is purely the culture of that business. It is the ethos, it is the way he employs his staff and it is that close connection with the environment that he works in.

The CHAIR — Gill, the committee has heard about the need for the Australian tourism industry to become China Ready. What steps do you think governments need to take to support tourism industry organisations and operators to engage with Chinese tourism?

Ms PARSSEY — Fundamentally—and this is an area that is not done well in any state, and definitely not federally—there needs to be a program, and however that looks no-one has the exact answer on but it has to be tourism and hospitality combined. China Ready is absolutely about the food and then it is about culture. It is more about the food than it is about anything else. If you do not have the hospitality industry in tandem with any work you do on China Ready it is not going to be successful because it is intrinsic to the satisfaction, meeting the needs of the Chinese market. Others are community involvement because of perceptions about Asian tourists and about some of the cultural aspects of the way they queue food or the way they approach their dining experience, shall we say, some of those things—the staff and sometimes the community that are in the premises as well or whatever react badly to the way that they go about things. Staff education, skills, training et cetera is critical. It is not good enough to train the businesses, it has to be cultural training at a much broader level with staff and the community.

The CHAIR — You say getting the hospitality area right first, even before interpretation and signage, et cetera.

Ms PARSSEY — Everything. Nothing else will work unless you have that cultural training of staff, and the food, the delivery of the food, the costing of the food—

The CHAIR — The cultural relevance—

Ms PARSSEY — Yes.

Ms WREFORD — What about signage? How important is having signage?

Ms PARSSEY — We have not found any evidence that that is critical. We think tokenistic kind of efforts in terms of signs dotted around the place in Japanese or Chinese make little difference. What does make a difference is signage on the buffets and the hotel rooms, really simple stuff, not overt but says, 'This is soy milk,' or whatever. Those things are well received, that is all they expect. They are very well travelled, they are highly educated. These people do not need to be treated as children, they want recognition of some things on the menu or some things in the room need a little bit of explanation, that is all.

In terms of interpretation though that is when it gets really messy because our interpretation, especially in Tasmania, if you look at our source markets which are mainly UK, Europe et cetera, the markets you would imagine would come to Tasmania, the interpretation that we use is obviously about settlement, indigenous et cetera. That does not have the same resonance with the Chinese market. You really need to look at your interpretation plan very separately from what you might—

Ms WREFORD — How China ready are you here?

Ms PARSSEY—In Tasmania? We are no less China ready than any other state. We are probably better off because we have missed the whole shopping tourism. That has really permeated through New South Wales, southern Queensland and to some extent Victoria, but not to the same extent. We have missed that boat, we are not starting from that viewpoint. Our industry is not hostile, they are not jaded, we are probably better off, but we are no less ready than any other states. No state is ready, honestly.

Ms WREFORD—What do you consider are the most important aspects for successfully marketing nature based tourist destinations and how do you measure success?

Ms PARSSEY—Our success is always pretty simple. It is bums on seats. There is not any other market success.

Ms WREFORD—How do you do that? What is the key?

Ms PARSSEY—The key for us is obviously length of stay, yield, expenditure and numbers of visitors.

Ms WREFORD—I am talking about marketing. How do you market?

Ms PARSSEY—Well, Tasmania has a clear advantage, 40 per cent of our state is either in national park or reserve. All our research shows us that we own that space across Australia. That is what we use. That is our key attribute. The other attributes are food, wine, those things, but they are much less important than our heritage and our environment. That is the expectation. Quite simply—and I am talking about our interstate market now, not our international necessarily—our interstate market expect to arrive in Tasmania and for it to be a highly engaging, authentic, environmental experience with our coastline and our rain forests et cetera. We do deliver that. All our research shows that we deliver it. It is probably keeping those areas, having enough development that allows people to access those areas but obviously with a small footprint. Does that answer the question?

The CHAIR—You have basically told us what the consumer thinks of Tasmania. You are building a whole experience around what the market thinks of Tasmania. Part of our role would be strengthening product, but is part of your role also about identifying product gaps?

Ms PARSSEY—Definitely.

The CHAIR—I am interested in how you identify product gaps, both in cultural and eco and nature based tourism, and how you deal with that in government.

Ms PARSSEY—That is a loaded question. Our organisation—I cannot remember the numbers, it has changed so much over time. Up until about two years ago we had 90 something people. About 60 of those were undertaking marketing roles, about 30 product development, those sorts of things. We now have three people undertaking development. Our development role is policy, planning at a federal level, intervening if there is legislation or coastal acts or whatever that are going to affect tourism development. We are very reactive. It is really what is next, what can we influence. We do not have a huge role in product development and we do not have the resources to look at product gaps. What we do know is that we have the research, we know what the consumers want. We work through our regional tourism organisations on destination management plans.

Those destination management plans and the regional tourism organisations are funded by Tourism Tasmania. Those destination management plans drive what gaps, what opportunities there might be. A lot of it is about infrastructure, and the federal government is obviously trying to get those funds and grants that we can to develop the right infrastructure to move visitors around.

The CHAIR—It is at the regional level, through the infrastructure, the development plans, they are identified—

Ms PARSSEY—Yes. They are identified. It might be St Helens jetty or whatever the case may be. It is certainly not as simplistic as that but if that was the case those are the types of things that we identify, and then when we have the chance to speak at a federal level we obviously request assistance from those funds. We do have the opportunity with the forestry agreement but again that is under review, as you would well know. Essentially we have leveraged federal grant programs. We have basically directed our resources, the few resources we have, to helping our industry apply for grants across the federal sphere. When we do that we do skew it, I suppose, to the types of products that we understand the consumer wants. We are not identifying

product gaps essentially but what we are doing is saying, 'Okay, we are going to provide a consultant to help these people to complete their application for a grant,' and then we would help those that we believe are likely to resonate with our consumers. If somebody wanted to build a theme park, we would not help them, we would help someone that wants to develop ecotourism.

The CHAIR — A lot of people say tourism but it is a much narrower thing, what is tourism, compared to what someone else calls tourism.

Ms PARSSEY — Yes, we are very narrow on that.

The CHAIR — You try to guide that—

Ms PARSSEY — Yes, everyone wants to be in tourism when there is a grant available, and 1,000 wineries pop up, that is not tourism. That is not about driving tourism. Our job as a destination marketing organisation is to drive the conversion. It is the awareness and the conversion to the state. Those things, like wineries or whatever, are ancillary to the delivery of tourism. We are focused absolutely on accommodation, attractions and potentially new development.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — You said you have gone from 30 staff for product development down to about three. Has that been devolved—

Ms PARSSEY — Yes, that got devolved, in essence, to the regional tourism organisations, but they do not have the resources to do it, and basically there is no-one doing it.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — No-one doing it.

Ms PARSSEY — The TICT would like to do it but again they do not have any staff. We really have not had any product development for about two years, but that is not to say we do not try. At the moment we have an Aboriginal product that I think has great potential. This is the first one we have had for a number of years that we believe has a huge amount of potential. When those things come up and we hear about them, we direct the little resources we have, the three people, straight on to that.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — Is there an Aboriginal tourism strategy?

Ms PARSSEY — No, not for Aboriginal tourism because we have so many issues in and around identification of who is in the Aboriginal community. There were nine nations in Tasmania. There is a whole raft of issues that we have to work through. It is not simple. There is certainly a desire to have a tourism product of some significance. If there is a product that we believe can make a difference that is where we direct all our resources to.

The CHAIR — Gill, have all heritage listing at Port Arthur and other convict sites had an impact on demand for heritage tourism experiences or not at all?

Ms PARSSEY — No, that has become an issue because at the federal level—I am not sure of the department that pushed the listing or pushed all 11 sites to apply for the listing. Once it was achieved they did apply a secretariat resource but it is a part-time resource, and 11 sites are quite geographically disparate. It has been, I would have to say, an unqualified failure.

Ms WREFORD — How so?

Ms PARSSEY — They simply cannot resource these sites to act in a cohesive manner to market them as UNESCO sites of some significance, and also they are highly linked.

Ms WREFORD — You do not think that they being listed world heritage has made any difference at all to the visitor numbers?

Ms PARSSEY — No.

Ms WREFORD — Okay.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — You do not try to leverage as a state—you have three world heritage listings.

Ms PARSSEY — Yes, five.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — Five, is it?

Ms PARSSEY — Yes. Five of the 11 sites are in Tasmania.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — Of that I am also talking about other wilderness—

Ms PARSSEY — No, that world heritage, absolutely. That is a key—

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — You do leverage off the natural world heritage.

Ms PARSSEY — Yes, absolutely, because that is an expectation of our customers. They think the whole of Tasmania is a big green blob and in that blob there is rain forest around the corner from your house basically, which is good, it is just how we like it. That is probably thanks to Bob. Yes, we absolutely leverage that but in terms of the heritage sites, the convict heritage sites, you have two that are publicly owned that are resourced, one that is publicly owned but their core business is not tourism, and then two that are privately owned and they really are basically on the seat of their pants. How do you get a group to work together when they are trying to feed their sheep and do what they have to do, and they are trying to run a massive site.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — It is because it is disjointed over 11 sites is why it is not working, you are saying?

Ms PARSSEY — It is disjointed in the fact that it is unequal. You have Port Arthur historic site and it has capacity, then you have a little farm in northern Tasmania that is literally trying to keep their head above water. Their asset is amazing but they cannot upkeep it. Not only can they not keep the buildings, they cannot put the time and effort into marketing the business. What has happened is over the last how many years since it was listed is that there is a little tiny bit of money that is given to Heritage Tasmania and they literally try and keep it moving. We have not been able to develop interpretation, we have not been able to develop an opportunity where they can tell their stories because they are, as I said, highly linked. We have not been able to achieve anything essentially.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — You said when you started off that planning is an essential part, particularly for trying to find some new product. What about planning around the image—how valuable it is—of Tasmania, the architectural and the heritage landscape in Hobart and in so many towns.

Ms PARSSEY — Critical.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — How important is that?

Ms PARSSEY — The heritage and the environment are the two attributes that are an expectation of our source markets.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — You talked to us a little bit about how the planning system, is it working well enough to preserve those heritage buildings, heritage landscapes, heritage towns.

Ms PARSSEY — We do have a lot to do with the Tasmanian Planning Commission, they do an amazing job, but their role is the overlay, if you like, and Heritage Tasmania has no money. Basically there is no chance that any heritage listed buildings are going to be destroyed or not preserved or not taken care of but there is no money to make sure that they continue to evolve, that type of thing. It is critical to our product offering and it is not going to be something that is going to get thrown out but we do not have any resources to leverage it.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — Where the consumer is at, if they are thinking about a nature based, green destination, their expectations on the industry and operators, around sustainability standards, those type of things. Are we seeing that they are responding to that? Are they wanting to see sustainability practices?

Ms PARSSEY — We would like to think so but the research tells us no—the decision-making processes in and around the cost and location. In a perfect world we would like people to choose products that are more

sustainable and had a higher rating and are certainly ecotourism accredited, but we are not seeing any evidence that that is occurring. There is always going to be a target market for people that want to go to a low impact, highly credentialed ecotourism business but we are not seeing that converting into greater sales or not. People talk the talk but when it comes to walking the walk—the thing is that no developer worth their salt is going to develop a product in Tasmania that does not have those credentials from here on in, so to speak, but it is not part of the consumer decision-making process by and large, is our experience.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — The focus is really on China, whatever development takes place, if they build those things up-front.

Ms PARSEY — They are, because the legislation says they have to, and there are lots of innovative products that have a really low footprint, and they are taking everything out when they leave, and they are working really well in terms of Bay of Fires walk, Cradle Huts walk, those sorts of businesses. That is intrinsic to their business and if you did not do that they would not get any customers type of thing, and they are doing it because it is smart business practice to do it. If a customer went on one of those trips and that was not happening, well then that would be a complete disconnect with the product promise, but at the same time any new development, including this Aboriginal product that we hope will be successful, just assumes that that is going to have to be built into it, low impact removal of waste and rubbish at a higher standard than the council or whoever is asking for. It is how people think they are going to have to do it, otherwise the consumer is going to get there and go, 'Well, that's not quite right.' That is the consumer that wanted to go to that product. Overall, visitors to Tasmania are not choosing a product over the other base line, its eco credentials, even its accreditation, to be honest.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — Feedback from those in the industry and/or government policy, those are licensed to operate in the natural reserve system, accommodation providers, how essential is that in delivering the experience?

Ms PARSEY — Critical.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — Talk to us about that. What barriers?

Ms PARSEY — Industry are having?

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — Yes. To work well is there a certain regulatory environment around their standards, around the sustainability standard points or whatever?

Ms PARSEY — No. The only impediment is access to them. First of all, if you were a developer and you wanted to develop an ecotourism product, you cannot go to a central source and say, 'This is the overlay.' There might be, grades 1 to 5. You can develop something—5 is a no go area or whatever. It has all been talked about but nothing has been developed as yet. You cannot intuitively go to a map and say, 'Okay, I want to invest in Tasmania, I want to develop an ecotourism product. I've got a pretty good idea of where I want it to be because of the landscape or the type of product I want to develop,' and there is nothing to tell them immediately what kind of rating, if you like, or what kind of access they could get to those natural areas. Also there are 29 councils. That has been a huge impediment but there is now a statewide planning overlay that has been finalised.

The impediment would be, 'We don't know where we can go. We don't know how big we can make it. We don't know who's going to object,' and the objections come thick and fast basically, and mainly the objections are from council. It is the council that is usually the biggest impediment. Any product that we have had put forward that has the credentials and it has absolutely been of the highest benchmark has not had a lot of objections. It is probably the ones that are not well thought through that are—

The CHAIR — Local government restructure.

Ms PARSEY — Yes. The objections do not come from outside.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — You are saying basically proposals that are well thought through that build those practices in early on get the least resistance?

Ms PARSSEY — Yes. If there is any resistance at all, almost 100 per cent of the time it is from bureaucrats on council.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — Yes. You are really saying there is no agency and you have to go straight to council, not getting feedback, there is no guidance or assistance.

Ms PARSSEY — No. The best scenario, which we have put forward a number of times, would be that there is a panel, between Parks, Tourism, whatever local council is relevant and any other authority, like the Salamanca business authority, whatever that is called, but whoever had a stake in it would read the proposal first, it is obviously confidential, they would come to the table and then the idea is to strip our transparency and you do not have a bureaucrat signing letters and things, you know, it is a faceless person or whatever. Stuart would be one of those people that we would propose would be on this group.

We had a gentleman who developed Tasmanian Air Adventures, which was a seaplane business. In his example he would come and say, 'This is what I'm outlining, this is what I'm thinking,' and then that opportunity would be there for Stuart or myself or someone else to say, 'Well, these are the areas that you would find that we would object on, or that would be more problematic than others,' et cetera, then that person stays—you know, is face to face and has put a line in the sand, because what we have found with that example is that there were people writing letters from the council but he could not identify them, he could not talk to the same people. We did a case study on it and it cost him \$300,000 in 12 months from one staff member at the council who then said, 'I don't know what I was worried about,' or something. That was his throwaway line when it finally went through. That is an example of where people are not—

Ms WREFORD — (indistinct) doesn't it?

Ms PARSSEY — Yes. We have argued that, 'As a public servant you need to be held accountable, personally responsible, if there's absolutely no reason to knock back their proposal.'

Ms WREFORD — I like your thinking.

Ms PARSSEY — That is what we have put forward to the government that we are in a caretaker mode. It has not got any further but that is what we have put forward, and there has been a lot of enthusiasm for it. If Stuart was the person that was ultimately going to say no, which it would be at his level, that he has the person in front of him and has to speak to that person and say, 'This is what I'm thinking,' plus he has the other people around the room holding him accountable. That is the proposal we have put forward.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — With licensed tour operators—I think Stuart told us there were about 160, I think, licensed across the state—like all businesses they have a turnover and failure rate, the five-year licences over here, what are they saying about what is a reasonable licence period, about the failure rate of those businesses, how you try to create a sustainable—

Ms PARSSEY — Are you talking about the tour operators that start up Eye See Tours or something with a 12-seater bus?

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — Or whatever. Those that need access to the parks system to do their canoeing tours or, you know.

Ms PARSSEY — We have had no feedback. As far as we aware, five years is all right.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — Seems to be okay.

Ms PARSSEY — The failure rate is under three, so they would well and truly know. Our issue is kind of finding that marriage between the type of products we are looking for, which is what you were asking before, and the fact that there are no barriers to entry for tourism which has always been a huge issue. All you have to do at the moment with DIER, which is our transport people, is turn up and say, 'I want to have this bus thing,' and they do not know anything about tourism. They say, 'Okay, you meet the requirements in terms of the licence, you have a clean record,' and all that type of thing. They give them a licence and they stick up a little sign and off they trot and there is absolutely no way for us to engage with them. That is now being changed. If you are a taxi driver you can take the signage off your taxi and call yourself a tour owner or something. We are obviously fighting that tooth and nail. Those are the things that happen where this government department

thinks it is about the bus, and the safety of the bus, which of course it is, and we are saying, 'No, it's much more than that. You can't put a customer in a dirty old taxi and drive them around and call that a tour.'

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — I was much more thinking rather than someone that drives and does a tour, someone that is providing an experience—canoeing, abseiling, walking groups or a park system doing an interpretation as LPOs.

Ms PARSSEY — What do you mean? What is their success rate, do you mean?

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — What feedback are they providing? How are they engaging with government? Our people, for example, have been arguing about longer-term leases, 'How can I run a sustainable business that has environmentally sustainable practices as well when I'm on a three by three-year licence. I don't develop any goodwill. There is no incentive to invest in good quality assets or ability to keep highly-trained staff that will interpret the story well.'

Ms PARSSEY — We have not had any of that feedback, to be honest. To be fair, we do not talk to the little ones, not because we would not, but they do not come to Tourism Tasmania. They do not see it as relevant. The ones that do come, I have never had anyone cite that as an issue. My understanding is if they are running a good business there has never been an impediment to increasing or extending their licence, as far as we know. No, I have never had any feedback that there is an issue. The state government is doing a review of red tape and it has been quite extensive, and what they have found is that most of it is urban myth, honestly. It gets perpetuated and perpetuated, but when you look at the standards from the planning commission, Tasmania is well ahead of many states in terms of approvals and response times and things like that.

In terms of tourism operators and any impediments for them, we do not get that feedback. The impediment for them is they do not make enough money. Apart from that I have hardly ever heard, except for the big ones starting up, like James Bailey or the seaplane—they do not talk about red tape being an impediment. In fact we do not think there is enough red tape because any odd bod can start a tourism business. No, we do not get complaints about red tape.

The CHAIR — Gill, on behalf of the committee can I thank you very much for making your time available today and bringing your knowledge to the table. We really do appreciate your presentation.

Ms PARSSEY — Thanks, David.

The CHAIR — Thank you, we really appreciate it.

Ms PARSSEY — My pleasure, thank you.

Witness withdrew.