

TRANSCRIPT

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into heritage tourism and ecotourism in Victoria

Halls Gap — 18 March 2014

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Ms J. Bourke, Executive Director, Wimmera Development Association.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — I formally welcome Jo Bourke, executive director of Wimmera Development Association. Just as a formality, Jo, all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and 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 is being recorded today. Thank you very much for joining us, and I ask you to present.

Ms BOURKE — Wimmera Development Association works with the five municipalities in the Wimmera Southern Mallee area, covering West Wimmera, Hindmarsh, Yarriambiack, Horsham and Northern Grampians. We deliver a range of economic and community development initiatives, primarily regional-scale stuff, but we also work with councils on business development initiatives. As an organisation, we are actively in the space of tourism. We are not a tourism organisation, but we support the tourism groups within the region as part of the economic development processes in the region.

The tourism activities in the region are fairly well structured. Most small towns or communities have a town development group or a tourism group, and even the small town groups take on a town amenity or tourism aspect to the work that they do. Those groups are generally aggregated at a council level, so all of the councils across the region have a tourism association. Even though it is a small part of the economy, both councils and communities believe there is the potential for growth in the tourism sector. In the region we have two larger regional groups, Grampians Tourism, but the smaller municipalities to the west of here have formed a Wimmera-Mallee tourism association. That is in response to the opportunities that they see to promote heritage tourism, primarily ecotourism based on Little Desert and Big Desert. Most of that discussion is based on touring routes, from the smaller scale to what we are talking about here in the Grampians or that Great Ocean Road-type thing. Those groups are active in working with their businesses, but one of the key issues that we have in this region is that businesses working in the tourism area are either small family-based activities or community based. We have a number of, for example, community museum, heritage-type activities dotted across the region that are run by community groups. We have a lot of volunteer input and not a lot of business activity, if you like, around that.

Grampians Tourism is a very professional group of people and organisations that come together mainly around the Grampians asset. The councils involved in Grampians Tourism are very committed to working with that organisation. Similarly with Wimmera-Mallee tourism, at a totally different scale; probably the comment is around being able to access public funding. Grampians Tourism is part of the network of tourism associations across the region. Wimmera-Mallee tourism is not; it is more a regional response to collaboration. They would only access government funding on a project basis, through the Regional Growth Fund, for example, or some business development funding to support businesses to go online — that type of thing.

I think Horsham council would have given you a good overview of the Grampians Peaks Trail and the ring-road. They are very strongly supported by the region and seen as a strategic response to developing the assets here. We have been involved, as Wimmera Development Association, in discussions with both of those projects and in the development of them, and we are really keen to see further commitment to them. I understand that it would be a staged approach. They are significant projects. There is regional commitment to follow through — for example, with the ring-road councils are already planning around their infrastructure investment in roads to support the implementation of the Grampians Way as a regional structure.

We have a lot of advantages in the region with where we are located. We are on a major highway route; we have significant passing traffic. We have a very strong international reputation with the Grampians and things like Mount Arapiles, with the rockclimbing, but a lot of the tourism product outside of the Grampians is largely unknown. In the historic structure of tourism in Victoria and the way that investment has been prioritised to major assets, it makes sense. However, I think it is probably time for a review in particular of the less commercialised areas and some analysis on how they could actually add value to extend people's stay but also diversify the product that is available.

I think Indigenous heritage is a real opportunity and it is underdeveloped right across the state, but in this region particularly. In part that goes to the issues around the structure of Indigenous communities and the priorities that they put on tourism. I think also the skills in the Indigenous community to actually plan and deliver on tourism and business initiatives need to be more strongly supported.

I mentioned agricultural heritage. My thinking about that is that we are moving into a time when food security and the value of agriculture is increasing, and I think people are becoming more interested in where their food comes from, how it is produced and the history of that. Potentially for the broader Wimmera Southern Mallee area that provides an opportunity down the track.

Regarding online marketing, there has been a focus on training and development for small business in the tourism sector, and I think Grampians Tourism has done great work in working with the Grampians businesses to get them online. I hope you are hearing a lot about the lack of mobile phone access and broadband, which has absolutely hamstrung businesses. The expectation now from businesses is that they have access to what they see as basics services, but they do not. The way that visitors, particularly international visitors, plan their trip as they go is severely hamstrung by the lack of access in the region. The impact on local businesses in being able to communicate online is a constant, and the recent fires demonstrated a level of frustration within local business that needs to be addressed.

I think people at the moment are focused on the emergency response, but the long-term business and safety aspects have been acknowledged and recognised for years, and we need to be doing something about it. There have been very strong regional submissions to the federal government black spot program, but the reality is that that funding will not start being available until 2015 at best, and we really need a response in this area prior to the next fire season.

Regarding the issue around parks maintenance and funding available for that, one of the issues in the development of the peaks trail is around people booking sites. In investigating these sorts of developments internationally, all of it is done online. Once a visitor gets into the Grampians out of Halls Gap, they do not have that access, so that is an ongoing issue. We need to get smart about how we are going to do that. There is a level of funding that needs to come from user-pays, but equally we need to recognise that parks are not just tourist destinations. They provide a whole range of other services to us, including environmental services. We have major water supplies in the Grampians that are providing water for, I think, 20 per cent of the state, and the environmental value of that to the whole community goes beyond the immediate user.

There is no easy answer, and it is probably a mixture of a whole range of things, but to focus on just user-pays, I think, is wrong. We need to start valuing our public parks in a different way, as the green bits that are left in our environment and the value we get from them as a community. To me, a general contribution from the whole community needs to be considered as part of the funding.

Whenever there is an emergency, the response and asset renewal issue comes to the fore. I think we have enough information now that our planning and asset renewal discussions should include immediate response plans. I do not think that has always been part of Parks Victoria. We have had assets after fires take months to get back online, impacting on businesses and impacting on erosion control in the parks. It was impacting on things like water quality when we saw the fires around Lake Bellfield. We need to get smarter about how we respond and how we invest our money in those immediate responses.

In summary, the Grampians are the jewel in the crown, but in the greater region we have a great opportunity for tourism development, particularly in heritage and ecotourism. There needs to be support for small businesses, getting them online, and some more strategic planning in support of those assets outside of the major recognised tourism assets. Things like the heritage trails and touring loops are a major advantage that Victoria has compared to others states, but we are not taking advantage of them.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Thanks for that comprehensive and broad view. Nature-based tourism is obviously one of our strengths, but it is high visitation and low yield, so the purpose of the inquiry is about what we can learn from around the world to increase the economic benefit without impacting negatively on the environment. What are the incremental things that can be done from small to big? We can overlay that with the question: what is the role of the private sector? If we leave it all to the private sector, it can follow a different development path than if it is a joint area.

Regarding the area of heritage, cultural tourism is the biggest part of tourism and heritage is a component of that. What can we learn from other destinations in the world? One of the problems we are seeing is that environment and heritage sit as two different spots in Australia, whereas in Europe and North America, which are a bit older than us, maybe their starting point is heritage. The natural landscape is part of it, and then there

are the Indigenous people and everything that came after that — agriculture and European settlement and all that — so how do we balance all those sorts of things to get in a visitor's mind both heritage and environment? They are the issues we are tackling.

I am interested in all the other towns that are dependent on the traffic that comes out here — traffic going to Adelaide and vice versa — and in who is prepared to be more adventurous. In your submission you make reference to their heritage, agricultural heritage et cetera. What is it that can be done for a lot of these small groups? I find it interesting that Heritage Victoria has a heritage app. If you press on here, the Grampians National Park is not part of heritage, but there are a whole lot of small towns and interesting buildings all around the region, which is interesting. It just shows the disjunction between a heritage-protected asset versus something else that someone else considers to be heritage. There are apps for these sorts of things, but they are not necessarily linked to tourism.

Ms BOURKE — That is right. It goes to the definition.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — How do we bridge that gap? Are there things we need to do to support those smaller groups, apart from just collecting more and more things? Our interest is much more in the interpretation. Apart from the visitor experience of physically walking into a place, how do we improve the visitor experience through interpretation? What are the sorts of things that they might be asking for to help them become more linked into tourism?

Ms BOURKE — I think it is about the linkages and connecting things up. For example, there are probably five or six agricultural-based museums around the Wimmera Southern Mallee, and they do not work together. The Wimmera Mallee Tourism Association is attempting to get some coordination amongst them. When you talk about the economic impact, none of those organisations would make money. They are based on volunteer effort, and they fundraise to cover their operating costs. The income that is generated from the business is minuscule, but it is about the commitment of those communities to preserving their heritage but also to attracting new people to their communities.

Just like the parks, these museums have other functions as well. There is one that is just building a men's shed to attach to it. As well as promoting and attracting tourists, it is a community activity around preserving the local heritage and artefacts. That is one of the challenges in talking about tourism as a separate activity. In ecotourism and heritage tourism it is sort of meshed in with a whole range of other activities in the region. I think it is important for us to connect things a bit better or improve the connections. A lot of that is online and providing information so that we do have increased opportunity to promote. It is small scale. We are not talking about 100 new visitors; it might be 10 new visitors. It is on that sort of scale.

Ms DUNCAN — Thank you for the presentation, Jo. You talk about agricultural heritage. Can you describe the current offerings in that area and what the possibilities are for expanding in this particular area?

Ms BOURKE — Okay. As well as the museums I was talking about, which showcase machinery and the history of things like the water supply and the development of the grains — primarily it is grains agriculture — there are also things like some farm stays. They tend to come and go. They are seen as potentially a diversification of on-farm income. Depending on the seasonal conditions, people get a bit more serious about promoting those things.

I think with the strategic planning that is proposed in the Wartook Valley that will be an integral part of that discussion as well — that is, how to bring together other ecotourism in the parks with the adjacent land use as well. That is probably as basic as it is.

Ms DUNCAN — You also talked about many of the areas for tourism in this area as being underdeveloped and underpromoted.

Ms BOURKE — Yes.

Ms DUNCAN — If you could have a magic wand, what would you like to see happen? What is something that this committee could recommend as an example of how we could assist in promoting this in a better way?

Ms BOURKE — I think it is multifaceted. I mentioned the shift in how we value parks. I think that is a really important one, because they need to be funded and more generally acknowledged in the community as real assets. By doing that I think it actually promotes the domestic tourism a bit more effectively. Improving the online capability of small business and the infrastructure — and you will get sick of hearing that — would go a long way towards building the connectedness. By doing that it gives us a chance to lift the professionalism of some of our small businesses. They get so focused down on the day to day without seeing the need, often, to do some strategic promotion and build their skills, particularly in the online area. But once they do that, they get to see what other people are doing as well and learn from that. That builds its own momentum. Of assistance would be investment in some of that online support and some basic revaluing of parks.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Okay, Jo, thanks very much. We might leave it there and have a 10-minute break. We very much appreciate your taking the time to appear before us today. You will get a transcript of today's evidence with some instructions for you in the next couple of weeks. Thank you.

Ms BOURKE — No problem. Thank you.

Witness withdrew.