TR A N S C R I P T

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into heritage tourism and ecotourism in Victoria

Lakes Entrance — 5 December 2013

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Mr M. Richardson, executive officer, Gippsland Lakes Ministerial Advisory Committee.
The DEPUTY CHAIR — I welcome Martin Richardson, the executive officer of the Gippsland Lakes Ministerial Advisory Committee. We thank you for joining us today and also for meeting with us yesterday. I ask you to present to us and then take some questions later on, if that is okay.

Overheads shown.

Mr RICHARDSON — Thank you very much. As you mentioned, my name is Martin Richardson, and I am the executive officer of the Gippsland Lakes Ministerial Advisory Committee. I have qualifications in geography and urban and regional planning and 25 years experience in local and state government in three states, mainly in the fields of strategic planning and policy, community engagement, investment attraction and tourism. Thank you for the opportunity to present today.

I would like to talk briefly about the role of the committee. Our role, as mandated by the coalition government in 2012, was to prepare and implement the Gippsland Lakes Environmental Strategy, which we have done. Primarily our role is to provide advice to the Minister for Environment and Climate Change, Ryan Smith, and the Minister for Regional and Rural Development and Deputy Premier, Peter Ryan, on the health of the lakes and related issues in relation to the environment, planning and management. An important role also for my committee is to advocate for healthy lakes, and I guess that is the primary reason we are here today.

We have strong working relationships with government agencies, with the development, tourism and fishing sectors, and with environmental groups and the wider community, and I believe we are well placed to provide input on matters relating to the development and protection of the lakes. In a sense, my presentation today is a case study on the potential for ecotourism and heritage tourism at the Gippsland Lakes.

The Gippsland Lakes environment is an internationally significant set of Ramsar wetlands protected under the Ramsar Convention. It is obviously a very important regional tourism asset both for our Gippsland region and, I would suggest, for the state of Victoria. There are very strong cultural values, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and it is a very important economic driver for the state in relation to lifestyle and recreation. The development industry opportunities and tourism-related opportunities that come from the offer that the lakes provide are very important.

The Gippsland Lakes Environmental Strategy takes a quite broad view of the environment. We take the view that a healthy environment for the Gippsland Lakes is intricately related to the economic, social and cultural wellbeing of the community. To the extent that the environment supports human activity through tourism, fishing, development and lifestyle, there is a very strong connection that we have emphasised through the Gippsland Lakes Environmental Strategy. I guess what we are saying is that not only is the notion of ecotourism supported by the environment but the environment itself provides opportunities for greater appreciation and protection through the education of the community.

This is by no means an expert history of the Gippsland Lakes, but in fact ecotourism in the Gippsland Lakes has been going on for about 120 years. When the rail line was extended to Sale and the steamship operators began to operate on the lakes, obviously mainly to carry cargo, there was the emergence of what I would say was an ecotourism industry. People came to the lakes from Melbourne to see the natural environment. In fact there was very little else here. There are some wonderful photographs of people in very long black dresses and big black hats aboard steamers travelling around the lakes to see the natural environment. There is a very strong legacy, and I guess that relates also to the cultural aspects of the history of the lakes. You saw a lot of promotion of places around the lakes in the late 19th century, which was really about coming to see what was a unique natural asset. There are many examples in history of people who enjoyed the lakes via the steamships — that slide in fact shows my mother in 1933 — and on the boats that were built and operated around the lakes. Andrea mentioned the maritime history of the lakes, and the opportunity to interpret what is a very extensive history of maritime use of the lakes is being pursued by groups around the lakes at the moment.

Of course the fishing industry on the Gippsland Lakes goes back to about the 1860s. There is a very strong heritage and history related to the fishing industry and the operations of fishermen to this very day. These days the activities around the lakes from a tourism point of view are more of the adventure style, which is probably not ecotourism. Probably in the last 40 or 50 years there has been a massive growth in boating and sailing activity, but of course that has its place in the tourism sector as well.
There are some untapped opportunities that exist back into the ecotourism and cultural tourism area. This slide shows a couple of photographs. The one on the left is the house at the Rotamah Island Bird Observatory, which has recently been supported through funding through the Williamson Foundation and Parks Victoria to be refurbished as a place of scientific endeavour in relation to bird observation. I believe the group operating the bird observatory has a great interest in the future and in developing some of the educational aspects of bird observation into more of an ecotourism enterprise — so not truly scientific — but also to engage perhaps with the wider community in relation to the very large numbers of unique bird species that come to the Gippsland Lakes.

On the bottom right of the slide is a photograph of the Mitchell River silt jetties, which is geomorphologically very significant. It is the longest digitate river delta in the world, with about 7 kilometres of silt deposited into Lake King by the Mitchell River. While I would not suggest we would get a lot of geoscientists coming to the region to explore, members of the community that you take to the site are fascinated by the history and geography of this particular formation, and it is relatively untapped in terms of providing a part of the tourism mix for East Gippsland.

In summary, the issues that we believe affect the potential for ecotourism and development in this region include — and I think Phil mentioned this — quite unpredictable demand. It is very difficult to get a handle on what the latent demand is for ecotourism and heritage tourism. We have a problem with the lack of a captive year-round market, and I think it is pretty obvious that there is really no clear vision as to what we want in terms of ecotourism and heritage tourism in the future. There is really no clear plan to indicate what kinds of activities we want to provide specifically and which ones we perhaps are not that keen on encouraging. I think there is a general concern for the quality of infrastructure to support ecotourism and heritage tourism, and that basically comes down to a lack of financial resources. I think the industry itself would admit that there is perhaps a current lack of industry capacity to explore and develop new products and there is some assistance that might be provided to do that into the future.

In preparation for this submission I conducted a survey in August. We managed to get 132 responses to the survey in which we asked a series of questions about ecotourism and heritage tourism. Of those responses, we had 90 that described themselves as community members, 40 businesses and 10 government — a bit of overlap between those. The respondents were generally individuals or from organisations who have a stake in ecotourism or heritage tourism, whether they were tourism bodies, local business groups or environmental groups. More than 70 per cent of the respondents agreed on the need for, the value of and the benefits from ecotourism in the region. Almost 50 per cent acknowledged that there are risks of environmental damage with the development of ecotourism and heritage tourism, but only 16 per cent believed that substantial ecotourism developments would spoil the lakes. While they acknowledged the risk, most people felt that there was an opportunity to encourage more development without necessarily causing a detriment to the environment.

Some important issues that emerged from the survey were that a lack of investor interest and certainty would be something that would constrain future development. On the other side of it, community opposition, lack of demand or lack of product was not seen as an issue holding back tourism and ecotourism in the region. The need for strong and transparent regulation in relation to new operators and the issue of accreditation were seen quite strongly in the survey as being important. There was seen to be a need for greater capacity and expertise in tourism businesses. Most importantly, one of the things that came out was that there was a need for a can-do attitude by government, and I guess that is in part the reason why this inquiry has been convened — perhaps to see what government might do to support the development of these tourism sectors in Victoria.

On that issue, a consistent message that I have received in the last four or five years around the lakes is that development around the lakes is constrained by the duplication of regulatory roles and the lack of a driving force in government to facilitate sustainable development. I just want to give you one little example of that. It probably speaks for itself, and it is not a criticism of individual agencies, but the public could be forgiven for forming an impression that there are overlapping responsibilities and that there might be a need for better coordination. An important role for our committee is to make recommendations to our ministers for improved coordination of management and regulation, and that plethora of signs at the Johnsonville boat ramp on the Tambo River could probably do with one more which says, ‘Please don’t put any more signs here; we can’t see the view’.
The opportunities that came out of the survey were a real desire to see legitimate, authentic and sensitive tourism experiences, a strong push for nature-based and family-based tourism and not so much for what might be seen as themed tourism, which is probably not really authentic. There is a great opportunity for Indigenous tourism enterprises to grow within the region, and an important aspect of all of this is around environmental education. I should mention that in the cultural heritage area there is an opportunity to use tourism to educate the community in relation to these important aspects of the Gippsland Lakes. I will just mention that a couple of weeks ago we held a forum here in Lakes Entrance and hired some cruise boats. We advertised them to the public for them to go out onto the lakes with scientists, so we took out dolphin researchers, fisheries researchers and algal bloom experts and others and got a really positive response. About 250 people came out on those cruises and felt that it was a really good opportunity for them to understand more about the lakes. A lot of people commented that had they known so much about the science of the lakes, they would have spent more time and effort exploring those aspects.

Another little case study I would like to talk to you about is Raymond Island, just opposite Paynesville in Lake Victoria and Lake King. In 2010 a koala trail was developed by a local volunteer group, and this involved some signage, a 20-minute walk trail and a little information booklet for people to follow and you can see what is probably one of the best opportunities in Australia to view koalas in the wild. This koala trail was installed for less than $5000 through community volunteers and local sponsorship. I have done some estimates, and from talking to the ferry driver and others we would estimate that this attracts somewhere between 50 000 and 100 000 visits per annum to Raymond Island. The ferry takes 700 000 walk-ons every year, and in January, it takes 70 000 walk-on passengers to Raymond Island. A lot of those are local residents going backwards and forwards, but from looking at those figures we would suggest that somewhere between 50 000 and 100 000 people per year go to Raymond Island just to see koalas.

Successful ecotourism and heritage tourism we have summarised back down to four key factors: an agreed plan and guidelines for what kinds of activities we want to promote, the infrastructure to support those products, greater local industry capacity to take up the demand and the most important factor obviously is to maintain the health of the environment that you are trying to promote. In the survey almost everyone said if you do not have a healthy environment around the lakes, then you are not going to be able to market the product.

We did a little word summary from the survey to find out what people’s views were about best practice, and it was interesting. Here you see some names around there — Queensland, Cradle Mountain, Kangaroo Island etcetera, but Tasmania came out consistently in the survey as the best example of good practice in ecotourism and heritage tourism. Luckily I went there for a holiday last year. The sorts of examples that I saw in Tasmania were extremely good quality infrastructure. The walk on the left there down to Geeveston, south of Hobart, is an absolutely brilliant piece of infrastructure, paid for through forestry restructuring admittedly. The bird hides and walks that you see around the national parks are very, very good quality and highly accessible. The camping grounds provide opportunities not only to view wildlife but also to have that interpreted, so almost every Parks & Wildlife Service Tasmania campground that you go to has two or three staff there waiting to talk to you about the experience, to take you on a platypus walk, to give you guided tours — those kinds of things.

On the right is a particularly clever example of, in a sense, a partnership between commercial operators and tourism. On the Tamar River at Launceston there is a seahorse aquaculture facility. It is a commercial enterprise; it exports seahorses across the world. You pay $25 to go in there and look at the seahorses, and I reckon they would do 1000 visitors a day going in to look at and learn about seahorses. It is not a particularly thrilling activity, but kids love it, families love it and you learn something about seahorses. It is a kind of add-on to a commercial enterprise which has turned into an ecotourism exercise.

In summary, there is strong support in the region for sensitive growth of ecotourism and heritage tourism. The issues about regulation and accreditation are important, and I guess it is a little ironic that people say, ‘There’s too much regulation in relation to new development, but by the way, we want to see regulation to make sure it doesn’t spoil the lakes’. There is a real need for authentic, high-quality experiences in the nature-based, family, Indigenous and educational areas. The infrastructure issue is holding us back at the moment. The quality of the infrastructure around the lakes is, I think most people would agree, relatively poor. We need a clear plan to provide guidance and certainty for private investment. There is a need to grow industry capacity and capability. And of course the primary role of my committee is to ensure that we have a healthy natural environment around the lakes. Thank you for listening to me.

5 December 2013 Environment and Natural Resources Committee 191
The DEPUTY CHAIR — Thanks very much, Martin.

Ms DUNCAN — Thanks, Martin. I was most interested in the statistics that came out of your survey. Do you mind flicking back to that page? It brought to my mind that people’s attitude is that, ‘Everybody following me should be accredited and regulated, but I should be able to just maintain what I’m doing’. Is there a sense of that, because they were very strong responses in terms of strong transparent regulation and accreditation?

Mr RICHARDSON — Eighty-five per cent.

Ms DUNCAN — Lack of demand — that is not an issue at Lakes Entrance, is it?

Mr RICHARDSON — I think it is a latent demand. It is pretty hard to address what the demand is, although 100 000 people wanting to look at koalas is probably an indication that people are looking for something to do. I think the accreditation issue comes down to the fact that we do not want to spoil the opportunity by having amateurs, if I can use the term, pretending to be ecotourism experts and guides, and I think Skipper Pete really nailed that one last night.

Ms DUNCAN — How do you stop that? Do you accredit everybody, and if you do, how do you then distinguish between them? We have met with a couple of ecotourism operators who go to extraordinary lengths to present a good product but are then competing with others who do not go through any of that process. It costs them a lot more to do that. How do you reward people for making that effort?

Mr RICHARDSON — I would be inclined to suggest that you do need a base level of accreditation, otherwise there is a risk you will have people not only perhaps spoiling the brand but also giving out the wrong information. Having heard Skipper Pete last night, I think we would have to have a look at simplifying the process. You should not have to do 12 months of study, a TAFE certificate and this, that and the other thing, or whatever it is. I think we need to look at a baseline of accreditation that is fairly simple for people to obtain and really just comes down to a basic level of understanding of the ecological issues they are talking about and an understanding of how they are supposed to give that information in a professional way. I do not imagine you would need to go to great lengths to get the accreditation, but I think we would need to look at simplifying that process.

Ms DUNCAN — You talk about a sustainable development plan for the lakes. In that plan do you look at carrying capacity?

Mr RICHARDSON — Yes.

Ms DUNCAN — Who determines that?

Mr RICHARDSON — That is the project Paul Holton made reference to. It is funded through state government and through the committee, and the shire will project manage it. The aim of the plan is to bring together the land use planning aspects of the lakes — that is, the zoning and development guidelines, which, I am afraid to say as a town planner, are usually around how we find a way to prevent things from happening — and then to look at the opportunities. We will match, in a sense, the need to regulate development with the infrastructure capacity — boat moorings, berths, landing areas, walking trails and those kinds of things — and come up with a plan that sets some guidance in terms of what we need to do to manage development but also what we need to do to facilitate it. For example, boating infrastructure around the lakes is struggling to keep up with growth. Boating registration in the Gippsland region is increasing at about 4 per cent per annum, and there is very little money around for boat ramps, canoe launching areas and those kinds of things.

The aim of the plan is to say, ‘Here’s the opportunity for growth in tourism, lifestyle development and those kinds of things, and here’s the infrastructure you would need to support that’. I suppose it is also about using that plan to put a case to government to say, ‘If you want to see the area grow and drive economic growth in the region, then this is the business case or the investment needed in infrastructure to support that’.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — I have been the tourism minister in the past. Do you think the government should try to pick winner regions and focus resources there, rather than having applications open with contestability everywhere, spreading it thin so that everyone gets a bit of something? Rather, should we be saying, ‘There are two or three areas that will provide the biggest return on investment, so we should focus resources on getting
things right at some localities’, acknowledging that there are opportunities everywhere but that you have to focus somewhere?

Mr RICHARDSON — That might be a leading question, but I am not sure in which direction. Yes, we should.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Thank you for endorsing that.

Mr RICHARDSON — I think there are clear winners. That does not mean you leave everyone else behind. In the Tasmanian case they picked Freycinet, Cradle Mountain and some other sites where they know they are on an absolute winner, but in other areas across the state they support tourism through other means. They provide signage for wine trails and that kind of thing. Unless you are strategic and say, ‘This is where the opportunity is’, you will spread everything far too thinly.

Mr BULL — You just touched on infrastructure, but I did not hear the full answer while I was talking to Skipper Pete. Obviously on the Gippsland Lakes there is an ongoing discussion around general boating infrastructure that is generally based around public needs — berths, boat ramps, day mooring facilities and the like. In relation to specific ecotourism types of infrastructure, as you have touched on, are we talking about a better on-land marine environment museum? Are we talking about actual on-water facilities? What are your comments in that area?

Mr RICHARDSON — Starting with the really ambitious projects, maritime interpretive centres and lakes environmental interpretive centres are projects that a lot of people are working on, but I would have to say that they are the kinds of things that get a bit scary when it comes to feasibility. I do not believe that buildings are the answer. Bricks and mortar are really not how you interpret the environment.

I will give a couple of examples. The Rotamah bird observatory does have some funding to refurbish the building. The facilities over there are just shocking. The boardwalks are falling apart, the signage is not that flash and the paths are not well made. It is just basic cost-effective investment in that sort of infrastructure. When you go to places like Wattle Point and other nice little barbecue areas around the lakes where people can enjoy and interpret the environment, the barbecues are falling apart and the picnic tables are not that flash. It is basic infrastructure. Having worked at the shire in the past, I know that is to do with having to spread everything far too thinly.

In the case of the coastal park, when you go to Bunga Arm, Boole Poole Peninsula and those sorts of places, where you can have some unique wildlife experiences, Parks Victoria does not have the funds for upkeep of the basic infrastructure. There just is not any money for things like a walking path to get across the dunes so that you do not cause erosion, for the updating, improvement and enhancement of interpretive signage or for simple things like picnic tables. That is the level we should attack because the low-impact, family friendly, highly accessible tourism experience people are looking for is one where there are some basic picnic facilities and a nice bit of interpretive signage and where you can walk down a path, or dare I suggest push a wheelchair down a path, so that you can actually get to see the lakes.

Mr BULL — We discussed that yesterday. In relation to your survey results, you said there was strong support from respondents for sensitive ecotourism. What is your definition and interpretation of sensitive?

Mr RICHARDSON — I was interested in Phil’s comment about the definition of ecotourism. I believe ecotourism is defined by the fact that it gives something back. When you have a developer interested in developing a site, whether it is public land or otherwise, the first question would be, ‘What are you going to give back? What is this going to do for the environment as well as for your bank balance?’ In terms of sensitivity, the question was aimed around whether we want to go towards the end experiences. I use the term ‘theme park’. Some people describe some tourism experiences as being ecotourism if you see a dolphin jumping out of the water and catching a fish. That is not ecotourism in my view. In terms of sensitivity, we are talking about developments of a kind that respect the natural environment and do not try to turn it into some type of entertainment or spectacle and, obviously, developments that touch the earth lightly.

There are plenty of examples of that, and again I will go to Tasmania. Freycinet Lodge is a most brilliant piece of sensitive ecotourism. Yes, there was probably a reaction to it — ‘What do we think we’re doing? We’re privatising the parks’, et cetera — but the way those things are designed and the way they are sensitive to the
natural environment mean there is very little impact, and in many cases they give something back, because the investment creates an opportunity to fund revegetation and those kinds of things.

Ms WREFORD — Thank you, Martin, for a very interesting presentation, and I hope you make the slides available to the committee. They would be very helpful.

Mr RICHARDSON — Absolutely. I have some hard and soft copies.

Ms WREFORD — What role can Tourism Victoria play in supporting upskilling within the industry, and do you think that Tourism Victoria’s marketing of the lakes region is well targeted?

Mr RICHARDSON — I am not an expert in the industry upskilling and training area. My anecdotal view is that again it is around sourcing and offering training opportunities. When things come this way from the big city for training people and giving them access to what is happening in other states and to do a bit of mentoring and that kind of thing, I know they are usually taken up quite well.

Ms WREFORD — What you are saying is that bringing the training down here is the way to upskill.

Mr RICHARDSON — Yes. We do not cope that well with having to go to Melbourne for things all the time. Some people do.

Ms WREFORD — I get that.

Mr RICHARDSON — If you want to get to the tourism operators — and there are a couple here in the room — you need to go to them, because they are too busy to go to Melbourne for the day. If you can give them a 2 or 3-hour course or run it over a few weeks down here, then people generally take that up. I suggest that you have to bring the mountain to Mohammed in that sense.

From the point of view of what Tourism Victoria can do, I have found in this role and in my past role at the shire that Tourism Victoria are very supportive of what is going on at the Gippsland Lakes and always have lots of ideas as to how they can help. When you go to Melbourne and look around the visitors centres and those sorts of things, a lot of people ask where the Gippsland Lakes are — ‘Is it like Lake Eildon or something?’. People have no sense whatsoever of what it is that we have here, which sometimes is good. Perhaps there is a need to raise the bar in terms of promoting and marketing what we really do have here. We are talking about an internationally significant wetland system. We are talking about migratory birds that come from Siberia. There is an amazing array of wildlife and experiences. Perhaps it is about having a bit of focus in the marketing effort on the ecotourism aspects. I do not know whether they still promote Puffing Billy or whatever it is, but it is about things you will never see anywhere else. There is not really a wetland system like Gippsland Lakes anywhere that I am aware of.

Ms WREFORD — So it is promoting a unique experience?

Mr RICHARDSON — Yes, and the fact is it is kind of folksy as well — you get to meet a fisherman. When you go to a business on the lake at Metung or wherever, the person who serves you the coffee is usually the owner of the business. The people who take you out on the boat charters are people who know the area. They are not tour guides dressed up in uniforms; they are actually people who know the area. I think that is what people are looking for. It is a bit like that wine experience: you want to meet the winemaker. When you walk along the wharf, you want to see the fishermen, and it is a real experience that you get here.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Thanks very much, Martin. We really appreciate it. I just remind you that a copy of the transcript with instructions will be forwarded to you.

Witness withdrew.