

## Inquiry into the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Tourism and Events Sectors

Mr Michael Leaney

**Organisation Name:**

**Your position or role:**

### YOUR SUBMISSION

**Submission:**

I have been in the tourism industry for over 35 years having trained at William Angliss College in the mid 1980s having undertaken a Diploma of Hospitality Management. I worked in several international hotels in Melbourne and in tourism publishing before moving to Walhalla in 1998 to build and develop Walhalla's Star Hotel. I built the hotel as a replica of the original gold-era Star Hotel [destroyed by fire in 1951] on the outside but as a modern boutique accommodation hotel on the inside. In 2000 the hotel won the Victorian Tourism Award for "Best Tourism Development Project". Over the past twenty two years of operation I have been the hands on proprietor undertaking all kinds of duties within the hotel. I have also been involved with the development of the marketing of the hotel and the region and worked closely with Tourism Victoria and Destination Gippsland in their early days. I was President of the Walhalla & Mountain Rivers Tourism Association from 1997 through to 2016. During this time Walhalla hit well above its weight in marketing and promotion using quirky and fun ideas to get to the marketplace.

However, over the past 22 years I have noted a steady change in how tourism is approached and how the industry on the ground is supported.

Twenty years ago, Tourism Victoria had a direct involvement with product and was happy to work with industry on the ground. Now it is very selective. You have to be in the right clique to me even spoken to by Visit Victoria which I think sees the industry on the ground as a bit of a nuisance. Anyone who makes a complaint or is critical is quickly sidelined. Barriers have been put in place to under the guise of "structure" to filter out any ability for industry [apart from a select few] to have any involvement directly with Visit Victoria. This structure includes the Regional Tourism Boards who also filter their group of "selected" products to remove any form of critical opinion. The corporatisation of Visit Victoria and the structure that have in place to protect them is all about ensuring their own self worth rather than growing the industry on the ground.

It is noticeable the decline in government investment in product owned by the state. Apart from a few pet projects, by and large, there is a story of neglect within the state. For example, in my local area, the Baw Baw National Park has been allowed to degenerate into a weed infested forest with many of the facilities in poor condition at best or unusable at worst. The local Parks Victoria depot and office was closed and there is no longer a ranger regularly present or known to the area. If there is problem, we have no idea who to contact. Tracks are closed due to fallen trees, the Australian Alps Walking Track is closed due to repairs that are needed to the Poverty Point Bridge. Most of the money within Parks Victoria is squandered on the bureaucracy while on the grounds works are virtually non-existent. As a tourism operator in the region, it's hard to recommend that a guest go for bushwalking knowing that the state of the local tracks is so poor. By contrasts, money would appear to be poured into Wilsons Promontory NP. In Gippsland the impression is that there is only one worthy national park that Parks Victoria supports and all the others are just an inconvenience. This focus is then backed up by the RTB which this creates a self-fulfilling cycle: one location gets promoted, one location advocated for, one location is seen as important, one location is funded.

By contrast, we see money splashed onto projects with little benefit that actually create problems. A good example is the "Great Outdoors Program". DELWP has received millions of dollars to redevelop and expand camping sites leading to increased use, which is great, however there are no resources to manage these sites.

They get overrun on peak periods, there is no patrolling of these sites leading to poor behaviour and garbage collection is non-existent pushing the cost onto ratepayers of the local community. In Walhalla's example. We have seen several hundred thousands of dollars spent on camping sites in nearby Coopers Creek and Thomson while the campgrounds within the township, which are owned by the shire and DELWP [with a C of M] are not eligible for funding. As a consequence these "in town" locations are in a very poor condition, are not fit for purpose and are an embarrassment. The town-based camping sites have the ability to contribute to the local economy yet these important sites are simply ignored. Despite DELWP having ample resources in personnel, there are demarcation disputes between various government agencies which leads to a pretty poor outcome for the industry as a whole.

In the past 22 years I have seen government neglect their assets and has the expectation that the private sector will carry the burden. Volunteer Committees of Management are in place for key tourism assets in the region, however their performance is mediocre at best, negligent at worst. DELWP sets up these committees to live in a band of mediocrity which means bureaucrats get an easy life. The committees cannot fail because that would mean more work, and they cannot succeed either because this too would mean more work. Therefore the "happy space" is the do-nothing middle. Tourism products locally that should be thriving and progressing such as the Long Tunnel Extended Mine or Chinese Gardens Campground have been constrained by a lack of funding support, a lack of vision and an attitude of mediocrity that has done nothing to grow the tourism industry locally. These key state-owned tourism assets should be the drivers of the local visitor economy, sadly in large part they are actually the brakes. Much of this problem stems from the bureaucracy that is above these boards that simply do not want them to have growth. As a consequence the entire visitor economy suffers.

Ongoing tourism development and industry resilience within Victoria needs to be much more than just marketing. There needs to be good industry support, proper investment in government assets and ongoing funding for maintenance. There must be a re-affirmation of the grass roots industry.

I have no doubt that there will be punishments for my business for this submission, but it needs to be said if we are fair-dinkum about addressing the problems within tourism.

## **FILE ATTACHMENTS**

**File1:**

**File2:**

**File3:**

[Redacted]

**Signature:**

Michael Leaney