

## **INQUIRY INTO TOURISM IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES**

**Organisation:** Tumbarumba Shire Council

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## **Tourism in Tumbarumba Shire**

Rural tourism is about community and economic development. Rural tourism is also about small locally owned businesses that support families. Tumbarumba Shire Council places a high level of importance on the growth of sustainable tourism in the region. It recognizes that small rural communities can become successful for being exactly who they are.

We are aware that there is a ready market of interested visitors for small towns that are prepared to grow a tourism sector. We are aware that in the past five years there have been some big changes in domestic tourism in that visitors are indicating more and more that they want to experience local food, local attractions and connection to the lifestyles of local people. This has led to new trends – the Slow Food movement, authentic tourism, geotourism, agritourism, heritage tourism and more. Small rural communities can take advantage of these trends without risk of losing their identity.

Geotourism is all about preserving local culture. Heritage tourism is getting visitors looking for historic buildings, museums and traditional crafts. Authentic tourism attracts visitors who like to see things just the way they are, authentic country experiences including local events. The Slow Food Movement is getting people off the highways and into small town restaurants, where local cafes serve up their own specialties. Tumbarumba Shire has a solid product base in these categories.

Tourism can provide employment opportunities in small communities. Specifically tourism can provide opportunities for school leavers and other young people to learn hospitality skills which can be used in many different businesses and locations throughout their lives. Learning hands on “mobile” skills is especially important for all demographic groups in regional communities, as although distance education and online learning may be available, the limits of public transport and distance make attendance at practical learning sessions very difficult. Distance isolation is a real challenge for Tumbarumba Shire school leavers.

Tourism provides social capital for small and isolated communities. New connections with people from different ethnic and economic backgrounds, new ideas, and customer demand resulting in improved businesses services, all benefit the community. Tumbarumba has an influx of temporary workers for fruit picking in the summer and these workers come from a variety of socio economic backgrounds which contrast with and add flavour to the culture of the local community. Community identity and pride can be generated through tourism. A positive sense of community identity can be reinforced and tourism can encourage local communities to maintain their traditions and identity.

The economic benefits of tourism are well documented, and take a number of forms such as direct employment or in supporting industries; increased spending in the community generated from visitors or tourism businesses can directly and indirectly promote the viability of local businesses. Economic diversification is, for many communities, an insurance policy against hard times. By offering an additional means of income, tourism can support a community when a traditional industry is under financial pressure, particularly where that community relies heavily on a single industry. Recently Tumbarumba has been impacted by a large number of redundancies in the timber industry, and there is a general recognition that tourism is an increasingly important component of our economic mix.

Infrastructure including roads, parks, and other public spaces can be developed and improved both for visitors and local residents through increased tourism activity in a region. For example, Tumbarumba Shire Council has upgraded a number of camping and picnic areas and carried out improvements to heritage attractions. There has been considerable improvement to the main street of the town of Tumbarumba which is regarded as very attractive by visitors and has engendered an amount of community pride.

Tourism has environmental benefits. Tourism, particularly ecotourism, can place a greater focus on the conservation of natural resources through the recognition of their importance to visitor experiences and their economic value to the local community. Tumbarumba Shire is fortunate to include a large part of Kosciuszko National Park and state forest areas, as well as the Upper Murray River area. These natural resources provide a background for experiences offered as part of visitors' enjoyment of two touring routes, the Snowy Valleys Way and the Kosciuszko Alpine Way.

### **How can we increase visitation?**

We have in place a well recognised wine industry, an embryonic food produce industry, stunning natural attractions, attractive towns, heritage and authentic attractions, a calendar of diverse events, food and accommodation providers and a supportive Council. However growth is fairly static as although the Snowy Mountains as destination has a high recognition, there is poor conversion to visitation particularly in the non snow period. Tumbarumba Shire Council recommends three significant changes to government policy that would accelerate growth.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **1. Changes to DNSW funding criteria**

Rural shire councils do not usually have competitive marketing resources or expertise. Tumbarumba Shire Council considers the imposition of a tourism levy on its ratepayers unacceptable. Instead, Tumbarumba Shire is marketed as part of the Snowy Mountains region, through the Regional Tourism Organisation (RTO), Tourism Snowy Mountains. The four LGAs, (Tumbarumba, Cooma-Monaro, Snowy River and Tumut) and Snowy Hydro as major stakeholders in the region, have agreed to provide administrative funding for the RTO for a four year period; each stakeholder contributes \$20,000 annually. However, marketing campaigns by Tourism Snowy Mountains have been strongly influenced by the snow resorts which have access to large marketing resources. The resorts, in particular Perisher, and Kosciuszko Thredbo, both owned by multinational companies, can influence the strategic direction of the board of Tourism Snowy Mountains because they have the money available to apply for matched Destination New South Wales (DNSW) funds under the current criteria of a minimum of \$50,000 up front. They have been able to use DNSW funding for the Snow Australia campaign which more correctly belongs under Tourism Australia.

The small businesses in the LGAs cannot possibly provide this amount unless they collaborate, but they need education and networking functions and workshops to facilitate this. The amount is still too large; \$20,000 would be a more reachable figure.

## **2. Administrative funding support for RTOs.**

Despite the contributions from the major stakeholders, Tourism Snowy Mountains is under resourced, as are most RTOs in NSW. The recommendation of the final Visitor Economy Taskforce (VET) Report to allocate a level of funding directly to destinations which have a viable Destination Management Plan removed the requirement that all funding must go through the RTO network; some funding is still only available through RTOs but it is uncertain whether this will continue beyond the end of June 2014. This implies a significant lack of support for RTOs, without providing regions with an alternative structure. An adequately resourced RTO has the ability to provide networking forums, arrange timely, convenient and locally appropriate workshops, understand the “identity” of its region, knows how to put together marketing campaigns that work for its members, and in general take care to ensure a sustainable tourism strategy for the small communities that make up the region.

The indications from the VET Report and lack of DNSW representation in regional areas are that regional NSW is viewed as an amorphous blob, with the focus from DNSW being very much on Sydney and the wider Sydney area, and only recognising “winners”. This is in stark contrast to Tourism Victoria’s approach: “You’ll love every piece of Victoria”. Destination NSW does not have a strong brand or even a clear marketing strategy for regional NSW. We would like every little bit of New South Wales including Tumbarumba Shire to feel it has something to contribute to the diversity of visitor experiences. A well resourced but autonomous RTO can deliver effective marketing of existing product and stimulate further business investment in local tourism.

## **3. Opportunity for development of Rail Trails**

The development of rail trails in New South Wales is impeded by the fact that rails remain on many closed lines in the state, because an act of parliament is required for the lines to be officially closed, thus allowing the land to be used for other purposes

The development of a multi use rail trail is strongly supported by our local tourism industry. Operators have noted the popularity of the rail trails in Victoria and see a Tumbarumba Rail Trail as not only providing community benefits but as the ideal activity for our visitors who are seeking outdoor recreational opportunities in a scenic natural environment. A Tumbarumba Rail Trail has the potential to link up a number of food and wine producers to provide a farmers’ market experience. The popularity of farmers’ markets is increasing and becoming a key driver of economic development in regional areas. Activities such as visits to cellar doors, fruit picking and agricultural farm accommodation can provide important supplemental activities for our local producers.