

INQUIRY INTO TOURISM IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES

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Submission to NSW State Government

The Chair,
The Hon. Natasha Maclaren-Jones, MLC
Parliament House
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Via Email

INQUIRY INTO TOURISM IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Dear The Honourable Natasha Maclaren – Jones, MLC

On behalf of Griffith City Council, I am delighted to be able to make a written submission on this very important and very often misunderstood part of both our Local, State and Federal economy.

NSW's tourism industry generates \$26.2 Billion March 2013 (*National Visitor Survey - NVS*); this includes the International market, with significant employment benefits for the State.

What defines sustainable tourism?

Various definitions of sustainable tourism have been promulgated by various tourism organisations and institutions, some of which portrayed it as a niche segment within the overall tourism market—mistakenly confusing it with ecotourism. The overarching objective for sustainable tourism is to make all tourism sustainable, whether it is small-scale ecotourism or high-volume hotels or tour operators.

Sustainable tourism is based on the principles for sustainable development, and is simply defined by the World Tourism Organisation (WTO) as tourism that:

“Meets the present needs of tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems.”
(World Tourism Organisation, 2003)

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The terms 'sustainable tourism', 'nature-based tourism' and 'ecotourism' are often used interchangeably however they are not the same. Sustainable tourism is concerned with making the entire tourism industry sustainable, whilst the latter two are segments of the broader tourism market that primarily offer experiences in a relatively natural setting.

What Can Local Government Do?

Besides the apparent economic impact, tourism can also be a catalyst for community development, bringing environmental, social and cultural benefits as well.

As a dynamic and growing sector of the economy, tourism provides opportunities and presents challenges, particularly for Local Government, as the provider and manager of infrastructure and services so often utilised by visitors as well as residents. As the guardian of the 'showroom', Local Government often plays an important role in the overall visitor experience; therefore it is important to understand the issues this presents.

Local Government, through the provision of infrastructure and services, often used by visitors as well as residents, has an important role to play in helping the tourism industry attain this goal. The adoption of a sustainability framework in Council practice: from essential services, such as waste management, to higher level strategic direction, eg. Planning policy that supports sustainable tourism development can make a significant difference to the localised impacts of tourism.

Local Government can play a significant role in shaping debates, balancing interests and making decisions that give sustainable development its meaning. Local Government can empower these debates by:

- Collecting, collating and providing information that inform discussions;
- Engaging stakeholders, including residents and 'radicals' and encouraging their input.
- Encouraging the development of collective rather than individualistic interpretations of what constitutes sustainable development; and
- Shaping the forum, communication media and context for sustainability debates.

Within this context, community participation and engagement are seen as vital dimensions in determining the characteristics of tourism and its role in sustainable development.

An important characteristic of successful destinations is the way in which stakeholders work together to improve destination development, management and performance.

These social relations, structures and processes of communication influence ways of debating issues, decision-making and implementation. As a corollary, where diverse groups and individuals are engaged in constructive and informed dialogue, innovation and partnership-building are more likely to emerge.

How can Council play a more supportive role in Tourism? We can achieve this by:

- Increased dedication of funding, from within Council but also from Commonwealth and State agencies, particularly in upgrading infrastructure.
- Increasing the understanding of the benefits that tourism provides amongst local businesses and elected members.
- Having a more supportive stance toward tourism-related projects and initiatives, such as destination marketing.
- Working more closely with local and regional authorities that have a tourism focus.

What is holding back Local Government?

The biggest barrier to achieving the above, relates to funding, notably the competition within Council budgets for the range of services provided. Reasons for this is due to the current system in NSW for rate pegging, as well as the lack of State or Commonwealth support is a major constraint.

All too often a Tourism budget can be sacrificed as councils try to balance the need for fiscal outcomes and community needs. As we see all too often some sections of the community who are not in step with Tourism, question why Councils allocate money to this. This is always at times when other essential services are being increased, for example general rates, water and refuse collections charges.

Another barrier is the community not thinking they are in the Tourism space because they have a misconception of what a Tourist is. This is also exacerbated by the Tourism Industry continuing to refer to "Tourist" instead of the more widely understood concept of the "Visitor and the visitor economy"!

Other barriers identified included the size of Council areas or lack of focal points making it difficult to know where to allocate resources: both these may suggest the absence of a strategic approach to tourism. The perceptions that tourism may diminish resident's quality of life influence of local politics and parochialism that may undermine regional efforts that are also cited as barriers. It was also noted that in certain aspects of tourism, Visitor Information Centres being one example, the regulatory standards are being raised, yet there is no additional funding to help Councils meet these obligations.

What needs to be done?

In recognition of the value of the Visitor Economy to our villages, town's, cities and regions there needs to be some radical thinking of how funds find their way to a Council. This also needs to be more than just through the more traditional ways such as Grants. Here at Griffith City Council we would like to suggest in recognition of those Councils and Regions that fund Tourism thorough maintaining a Visitor Information Centre they receive some formal funding to offset this arrangement.

Other opportunities can be with an increase in direct funding from higher levels of government, to regionally-calculated levies, developer contributions. Other solutions that have been raised included the need for capacity building for local communities, particularly through additional training, provided through the LGA, for elected members and staff to better understand tourism. It is also important to stress the need for the provision of dedicated 'tourism development officers' for each region, to work with the regional marketing managers in building and improving the physical infrastructure for tourism.

Finally we believe the best way forward is for a steering committee to be made up from the Operators, Local and State Government to work through this very complex issue once the findings of this enquiry are tabled.

We here at Griffith City Council would be very happy to be a part of assisting to find a new solution to an old age problem that has vexed all forms of Government and Operators alike.

Once again congratulations on this initiative and we appreciate having had the chance to have our say.

Should you wish to discuss this or anything I have raised in our submission, please feel free to contact me on

Yours Sincerely,

Greg Lawrence
Manager Tourism & Economic Development