How Shires and Regions in Victoria can increase Revenue and Yield from Nature Based Tourism

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The aim of the study tour was to compare our scenic, nature based site, the 12 Apostles in south-west Victoria, to some similar areas in the world with large tourist numbers. I studied how these areas take on and develop the sites, local areas and regions for tourism.

In western Victoria, the Corangamite Shire has the iconic 12 Apostles located along the Great Ocean Road, near Port Campbell, which attracts around 2.6 million visitors per annum (very hard to get an accurate figure). From the outside looking in, this may seem a wonderful opportunity to generate large amounts of revenue and develop a vibrant sustainable tourism system that the local economy and region could grow and thrive on. This currently isn't the case. The significant growth in visitation to the region over the last 10 years has **not** translated to an equivalent rise in visitor expenditure. There has been a dramatic increase in day visitors who arrive, look and leave, then spend very little for their experience.

I visited:

- America – The Grand Canyon and towns in close proximity.
- Canada –Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump.
- England – Stonehenge and Avebury pre historic site.
- Northern Island – Giant's Causeway and Carrick-A-Rede Bridge.
- Ireland – Cliffs of Moher, Newgrange stone age monument.

What did I look for?

Short and long term solutions for capturing the economic benefit from tourism. I looked into any form of income revenue that was available and aimed to find where it came from and where it went to. I spoke to stakeholders ranging from tourism organisations, government, site management, local business and private enterprise. I sought to find how they attract the tourist and extract revenue from them. The economic impact of the visitor economy plus the management and development plans were of interest. I found that visitor experience and satisfaction is a key to growth and retention.

I looked into fees and charges, parking, entry fees and any other revenue streams. Regional dispersal of the visitor was an important part of the study. Sustainability and Environment was very important at all sites visited.

Key findings

Nature based tourism is growing at a fast rate worldwide, but many of these sensitive areas are not coping well with the mass of visitors entering their sites and local areas. Mass tourism has implications for the sustainability of these sites both in the short and long term. Environmental planning and awareness needs to be adapted as early as possible to ensure the sites are preserved and enhanced for tourism into the future. If the environmental planning isn't done at the start of any physical changes or development, then the long term viability could be placed in jeopardy. An example of this could be Philip Island in Victoria, Australia. It relies on penguins to come in from the ocean every evening for the "Visitor Experience". If the penguins are to start disappearing due to tourism impeding on their environment, then eventually that industry may be jeopardized because it relies on the penguin.

Planning ahead for long term growth in numbers seems to be the key to successful operations. Stonehenge is a good example of this. They got it wrong the first time with inadequacies in multiple areas like parking, amenities, and congestion that couldn't cope with growth in numbers and the sustainability if the site. They then started at a Greenfield site 2km away and built their parking, amenities and visitor centre to accommodate the growth and protection of the site. Unfortunately now the road systems to the site are not allowing the visitor or the local people, good flowing vehicle access. This is now Stonehenge's limiting factor.

If tourism visitor numbers keep increasing at a site then very quickly the limiting factors are exposed. If the sites are set up well for the visitor with things like good interpretation, amenities, parking, access, and local input then the surrounding communities seem to be proud to be part of it.

The nearby towns to the major tourism sites were tidy and appealing in most cases and were all keen to attract people by being this way. Competition to attract the tourist was very evident

between businesses and towns. Things like events, free days to sites, age related child free passes, town discount cards, free shuttle services, and promotions were very evident.

The visitor experience

For nature based sites visitor experience was very important. People enjoy the sights but also then want an experience. This is where the local areas can tap into tourism revenue by providing specific things to do. Off season can be a target for locals by providing things to do that are weather related. Outside events are no good in winter, so undercover locations are often targeted by school groups or bus line companies. Many nearby towns and communities were making "off peak "seasonal times their target, by providing all weather accessibility to a visitor experience.

Some councils were giving local communities the opportunity to work toward improving their towns and grow tourism business at their pace but not to the detriment of living there. A sense of pride and ownership was felt by the locals and this flowed on to the visitor.

Accommodation

If there is the volume and range of accommodation in an area, then this definitely has a direct effect on visitor night stay and the yield in the local economy/region. With accommodation come food outlets. The volume and variety of the food are important if visitor numbers are high and satisfaction rates are to be retained or improved.

The internet

The tourist begins their journey at the website. Over the last 10-20 years the internet has played a huge role in changing the tourism world. Marketing is reaching more people than ever before. We have underestimated the role the internet has played on mass tourism in particular. Online ticketing for travel, safety, accommodation, sites, destination planning, directions etc. is all at the tourist's fingertips. The internet cannot give the visitor the experience; it can only direct it toward an experience. The internet is making competition greater to bring the visitor to a destination.

The personal/welcoming touch

The personal touch was surprising at both small and large nature based sites. At some of the **large** mass tourism sites where "capacity management" was the key focus by the operations groups, there was still a friendly welcoming feeling delivered.

Visitor centres and interpretation

The sites with single, large visitor centres had a huge amount of interpretation to try and extend the visitor experience for as long as possible and increase the length of stay. In inclement weather this was particularly helpful.

Some sites had interpretation spread out along the viewing site areas and right along the trails leading to and from the main site area. This gave an extended visitor experience after seeing the main site.

Local information
The more face to face contact by a visitor to a person with local/regional information was resulting in increased visitor knowledge of more sites to visit and things to do. If an area was reliant on a local town information centre to do this, then sadly it is very limited. Some whole communities I visited were proud of their ability to direct tourists to the other sites and areas around them and this was great for longer visitor stay in the area.

Good local roads are vital
Public transport is very limited to major nature based tourism sites throughout the world. At most large nature based, world class sites I visited, the country road networks deteriorated the nearer I was to the site. They would start off from a capital city with major motorways/freeways but end up on congested, narrow, and often poorly surfaced roads. With mass tourism, this had a huge affect on firstly the local and secondly the visitor.

Council/Tourist Information Centres
In every country I visited, without exception, the shires were reviewing the running of these centres. Some were closing down or outsourcing their Tourist Information Centres. This was due mainly to economics. Private enterprise and corporations were entering this market and often incorporating it with other tourism ventures.

Recommendations

Nature based tourism sites, with mass tourism, need to put in place or review, their long term sustainability plan. Independent reviews of these plans need to be done on a minimum bi-annual basis. As we head toward the year 2030, we will see the mass tourism trends going much higher and put unbearable strain on these already over-visited and semi unsustainable nature based sites.

Local government and tourism organisations need to trust and allow local communities to have input and direction in the growth and strategies formed for tourism. The feeling of ownership is important to locals. Simple things like welcoming signs, a sense of arrival, good parking and tidy towns are where local government can help tourism communities. Facilitation is still important in many of the following areas.

A collective survey
A survey of council owned/run, Tourist Information Centres, could be done in Victoria to establish the future direction of these facilities. The internet is accelerating change in this area.

Changing planning schemes

Planning schemes may require changing to encourage development in tourism locations that will give potential developers confidence that local councils are welcoming and looking to the future. It also preselects areas and gives some development control by councils. Accommodation and hospitality are major keys to the tourism industry.

Road systems

Upgrades around and into major tourism locations need to keep pace with the growing number of visitors. If we are continually promoting tourism, then growth in visitor numbers will keep rising and the roads leading to the sites will eventually not handle the traffic numbers.

Accurate data

Tourism data information in Victoria and Australia seems to vary significantly, depending on which organisation it is obtained from. A state or national data system could be implemented so some level of consistency could occur. The number of visitations to the 12 Apostles varies by over 100% from one source to another. This isn't good for anyone wanting to do planning or projections into the future.

Knowledge sharing

Local information centres, community members and businesses, tourism organisations, accommodation, transport groups, local government, and marketing people need to regularly visit each other's area and see what they have to offer. This will enable accurate promotion and give some direction for future growth. Marketing the areas is important. No one can do it alone. The internet can play a big role in this exchange of information.

Make people pay

The price of entering major nature based tourism sites is too low. If a site is world class and recognised all around the world, then by making it highly priced goes well with its recognition. If visitor numbers are continually on the increase, then this could even help with sustainability by slowing down the rate of visitations. The raising of an entry price raises the worth of the site. Good income streams will give sustainability a chance for the future.

Waste management

Research into environmental waste systems in the mass tourism areas could be done. Some sites are doing it well. Solar panelled recycle bins with compactors and internet linked capacity recognition is already used at some sites.

Stakeholders

Tourism Development is often stifled by the stakeholders being in disagreement for one reason or another. This seems to be a universal problem. There is no easy answer for this. Leadership and transparency is a key. Change and a fear of change can be overcome if all parties know

where they are heading and know the projected outcomes of the decisions made well in advance. Sadly the change is eventually driven by necessity and this is very evident where there is mass tourism.

Public land

Public land needs to be used more in the development of major tourism sites. State and Federal governments need to fund major infrastructure improvements on public land. There are good examples of this all over the world. The lack of facilities at the 12 Apostles is clearly evident. Tourism boards should be holding Parks Victoria and government to account. The current level of facilities there is totally inadequate.

Research use

Website: I am currently looking to set up a website for accessibility to this report.
Electronic version: Copies may be emailed on request.
Public speaking: I am available to speak and present at any event required and have already booked times for many local organisations.