

Submission no. 16  
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ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE  
INQUIRY INTO HERITAGE TOURISM AND ECOTOURISM IN VICTORIA.

Submission from the Heritage Council of Victoria

**TERMS OF REFERENCE**

1. Examining the current scope of ecotourism and heritage tourism in Victoria, including the extent to which the current arrangements maximise the benefits to the local industry;
2. Examining best practice in ecotourism and heritage tourism;
3. Examining the potential for the development of ecotourism and heritage tourism in Victoria;
4. Determining the environmental and heritage issues associated with large scale tourism; and
5. Determining whether the local industry is sufficiently advanced to manage increased tourism and any obstacles to this.

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The value of heritage is in the capacity it holds to tell stories that explain to us our own transitory moment of history, instill connections to our past that ground us in our own time, and enrich the physical, visual and emotive experiences of residents and visitors who live or travel amongst it.

The different urban and natural landscapes across Victoria tell stories of ancient ecology and geology, thousands of years of Indigenous usage, and 200 years of social, political, urban, ecological and agricultural transformations. This history is tangible, in the form of buildings, objects, street- and townscapes and the physical features of the land. It is also intangible in the form of the many languages and cultures that are multicultural Victoria; the skills, traditions and crafts that are passed on from generation to generation; and the social and religious practices that fill our lives.

Heritage, weaving and intersecting as it does through time and space, means it cannot be compartmentalized or segregated from other aspects of the Victorian experience. Despite various surveys and studies recognizing the worth of heritage in attracting tourists and enriching the visitor experience, there have been minimal practical steps taken to build on and enhance this rich resource.

The Victorian Heritage Register, which recognises places and objects of State Significance, is a goldmine of information but this is largely of a technical nature rather than a source of storytelling about our history.

Resources to interpret and enrich the Register, making it more accessible through online media and linking it to local tourism experiences, would be well rewarded.

Heritage which is well-cared for helps enrich the visitor experience and boosts visitor and business confidence in a town.

A key deterrent is the cost of promotion through the traditional avenues, which do not facilitate promotion of heritage streetscapes and small scale, often volunteer run, heritage sites. Nor does the current Tourism Victoria campaign facilitate the promotion of themes across multiple pieces of the state's 'jigsaw'.

## **1 - CURRENT SCOPE**

Many local and overseas studies have recognized the value of heritage in 'contributing to the quality of the landscape and its enjoyment by the public'.

While often the backdrop for the visitor experience, heritage enhances streetscapes and provides many unique destinations and encourages extended stays by visitors.

In the Market Overview for "Victoria's Arts, Theatre and Cultural Heritage Tourism Action Plan", Tourism Victoria acknowledges the value of Cultural Tourism, with cultural visitors staying twice as long as others.

Although the Plan lists Heritage Victoria as a partner, there was no developed partnership and Heritage Victoria is not included in any of the Plan's Actions.

In fact, Tourism Victoria's highly successful 'Every part of Victoria' - or jigsaw - campaign, is not conducive to helping visitors explore the state's history and heritage.

Firstly, it defines only two or three key attractors for each region, and history and heritage are only recognized in a couple of the 10 regional areas.

Secondly, all of Victoria is rich in history and scattered with heritage attractions, with key themes such as exploration, squatters, the gold rush, and the agricultural and industrial development common across the state or overlapping several regions.

The competing promotions of the 'pieces' of Victoria in the 'jigsaw' campaign, often work against the promotion of heritage and the opportunity to link attractions across regions through themes and stories.

For example, the history and heritage of the Victorian Gold Rush belongs to at least six tourism regions: Grampians, Daylesford and Macedon Ranges, Goldfield (Ballarat, Bendigo), Gippsland, Victoria's High Country and the Murray. Tourism Victoria website identifies the State's gold story with only one of these regions, the Goldfields. This lessens the ability to maximise benefits from Victoria's extraordinary widespread gold history and cultural heritage.

The Heritage Council's award-winning iPhone app has made available some of these stories (but due to costs is currently only available for iPhone users). It provides access to the Statements of Significance and a few specially developed tours.

However, it only includes places on the Victorian Heritage Register (ie of state significance) and the Register has never been adequately resourced to enable

interpretation and story telling about all the places that will more fully enhance this resource.

## **2 - BEST PRACTICE**

The key heritage attractions in their own right in Victoria are run by the National Trust (Old Melbourne Gaol, Como and Ripponlea and other regional properties) and Parks Victoria (Werribee Park).

There are several committee/private run ventures, 'villages' such as the successful Sovereign Hill and the less well known Coal Creek and Old Gippstown; Bendigo Trust runs a number of attractions in Bendigo such as the Trams and Chinese Joss House and there are other locally run 'houses' such as Buda.

The successful sites rely strongly on presenting the stories of the people behind the places. Old Melbourne Gaol has a series of 'education programs' that extend into re-enactments for a wide range of audiences. Werribee Park has an audio tour based on the lives of its founders.

Each of the historic houses generally has tour guides well-versed in the history of the property, and stories of the early families who occupied them. This facilitates another necessity - to cater for a variety of levels of interest, ranging from social history to the technical aspects of the historic building, and to be flexible in tailoring tours to suit the interests of participants.

Ongoing promotion is also essential: Como was extremely popular with Asian visitors for many years but the promotional spend in these markets dropped dramatically in the early 2000s and visitation soon followed a similar trend.

However, a large part of 'Heritage' Tourism is not major products but the general setting enabling visitors to experience Melbourne or regional centres. Because of this, there are few opportunities to join the traditional marketing campaigns and the state and national tourism bodies do not facilitate promotion of these ancillary attractions.

Even some of the smaller regional open properties - attractions in their own right - do not have the resources to promote within traditional systems or to promote the related attractions in their town.

The staging of events in heritage settings seems to have been more widely adopted than other opportunities, but without always acknowledging how much more successful the event - eg garden festival, book fair - can be in such a setting.

## **3 - POTENTIAL**

Heritage tourism can help revitalize regional Victoria, adding richness to the visitor experience across the state.

And in turn, the tourists and the funds they bring can help revitalize and maintain our heritage buildings, providing a sustainable future for these places.

There is a recognized cycle of improving key heritage buildings and streetscapes, which leads to successful businesses, attracting both visitors and new residents whose patronage then ensures the success of the local businesses.

Studies such as those by Dr Peter Brain of the National Institute of Economic and Industry Research (NIEIR) for the Shire of Mount Alexander have demonstrated the potential of extant heritage as a strong positive contributor to regional economic growth both for tourism and local business.

There is an endless range of businesses that have been housed in heritage buildings from cafés, restaurants and bakeries, retail outlets of all sorts, and many local service providers such as accountants and solicitors.

A vibrant and successful street based on heritage buildings, with many aimed at the dining and shopping experiences also sought by the visitor, has far more appeal than a modern, less homogenous equivalent.

But the heritage experience can be even further enhanced with interpretation and story telling. This can encompass self-guided trails, interpretive signs, tour guides and online resources such as Heritage Victoria's iPhone App and downloadable walking tours, as well as guided tours.

"Telling the story" was identified as an opportunity by the National Tourism and Heritage Taskforce in 2003. A 2004-5 report to the Heritage and Tourism section of the then Commonwealth Department of the Environment and Heritage, aimed 'to develop a national heritage and tourism thematic framework' and looked at several case studies.

Although little appears to have resulted from this work, it did illustrate the potential to integrate heritage more effectively in tourism, using thematic interpretation, integrating local stories into state and national themes.

This, as with similar proposals, noted that as people understand and ascribe to the values of heritage significance, they are more likely to care about heritage.

Early Melbourne grew at an outstanding rate with the influx of gold seekers and expenditure of their finds. This is just one of the stories still written in the buildings of the city. The development of community facilities, the growth of numerous industries, and post-war migration are other themes to be found in the city and its suburbs.

Victoria adopted the *Framework of Historical Themes* in 2010 and this is gradually being incorporated into assessments and Conservation Management Plans and other documents relating to heritage places, further facilitating the development of 'story telling' to enhance visitor appeal.

The Sapphire Coast region in NSW has developed a range of 'story' touring routes which link natural and indigenous sites to enhance visitor experience and encourage longer stays.

Another example is the 'The Botanists Way' along the scenic Bells Line of Road for visitors to experience the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area through the eyes of early and contemporary botanists.

Tasmania also has a strongly developed thematic interpretation basis for its state's tourism.

These examples demonstrate the potential of developing and promoting heritage themes and stories to encourage visitation and provide a richer and more rewarding visitor experience.

This submission also endorses the submission by Heritage Council member Keir Reeves, which notes "The best-fit tourism policy for Victoria for the foreseeable future must combine ecotourism and cultural heritage tourism offerings in new ways that consolidate or develop existing tourism products. Secondly it is important to develop new tourism strategies and offerings that act as drivers of regional development throughout the state."

There is also potential in World Heritage Listings proposed for the Great Ocean Road and the Mount Alexander Diggings. World Heritage Listing has proven a considerable driver of visitation by cultural and heritage tourists overseas.

#### **4 - HERITAGE ISSUES**

Although large numbers of visitors can pose a challenge to the management of heritage a place, it is just as true that locking it up will quickly lead to deterioration.

Most visitor needs can be accommodated by minor alterations or by constructing sympathetic additional facilities nearby.

The National Trust of Victoria restored several buildings in recent decades but had no occupant or use. These soon fell into disrepair and had to undergo further expensive restoration before they were usable.

Heritage buildings are not cheap to maintain, but with a viable use - so often linked to tourism - ongoing preventive maintenance plans can be implemented and will help ensure a long life.

If visitor volume becomes an issue, strategies can and have been implemented to control access, limit numbers for certain periods, or divert visitors to equivalent sites.

However, another key issue can be that heritage falls victim to its own success. Numerous heritage towns are evidence that sympathetic planning is vital to prevent over-development, which can remove the very features which attract visitors and residents.

Given the opportunity to explore any part of a historic town, the main desire of many visitors is simply to stroll through the streets and 'soak up the ambience'.

Too much development and modernization can spoil that experience but there are ample opportunities to enhance and enrich that experience.

#### **5 - CAPACITY**

Towns and centres across the state are working to retain and increase visitation. Numerous tourism groups and government agencies provide guidance and training for operators to advance their business knowledge and skills and improve their professionalism.

Utilising the backdrop of heritage to enrich the visitor experience will help extend the length of time visitors stay and encourage repeat visitation.

Heritage and themed 'story telling' can also provide a basis for off-peak visitation and improve the viability of businesses.

Most towns have reasonable capacity for visitor numbers, and success in increasing them will soon encourage operators to develop further facilities – where appropriate in heritage buildings to further enrich the visitors' stay and enhance their links to the history of the area.

The increased use of online and mobile resources (websites, blogs, mobile apps etc) is an opportunity that may overcome some of the promotional constraints previously experienced. But there is still a need to research and refine the information available to make it more appealing and relevant to visitors.

Historic heritage information presented online should serve the twin purposes of identifying and informing on Victoria's varied landscapes. At the moment, State marketing does not do this. For example, the *History and Heritage* page of 'Visit Victoria' has as its headline photo an image of Cooks' Cottage, a building that has little relevance to the State's history.

What follows fails to capture the significance and story of the physical and cultural heritage of Melbourne. The heritage and history of regional Victoria is treated much the same way.

There is no doubt that the profile of heritage tourism could be greatly improved by investment in the creation of a Victorian heritage tourism portal, a one-stop shop for travellers to discover and learn about Victoria's varied landscapes.

## **CONCLUSION**

**It is time to look at Heritage seriously as a tourism driver: numerous studies have revealed its potential but these opportunities have not been fulfilled.**

The heritage stories of Melbourne and regional Victoria provide a rich resource to engage the visitor and encourage them to further explore the area.

As people understand our heritage places, and the stories to be told through the fabric of the buildings, street-, town- and landscapes and the lives of those associated with them, they will learn greater respect for our heritage, come to appreciate and enjoy it, and help, in turn, to preserve it for future generations.

All levels of government can assist by recognizing the multiplier effect of supporting heritage projects and their potential value to the local economy through tourism.

Providing funding to maintain and develop both the physical resources and the knowledge resource housed within the Victorian Heritage Register will enhance the tourism opportunities of heritage and provide valuable returns.