



Sustainable Tourism - Enhancing the River Red Gum Forests Region

**Submission to the
River Red Gum Forests Investigation
Victorian Environmental Assessment Council
By Tourism Alliance Victoria
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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
TOURISM ALLIANCE VICTORIA.....	1
ECONOMIC OUTCOMES: VALUE OF TOURISM TO RIVER RED GUM FOREST INVESTIGATION AREA	2
SUSTAINABLE TOURISM PRACTICES.....	2
A COMPLETE APPROACH WITH GOVERNMENT PARTNERSHIPS	3
PROACTIVE LAND MANAGEMENT.....	5
Quality Camping Experiences	5
Quality Boating Experiences.....	6
Quality Four Wheel Drive And Motorbike Experiences	7
Quality Horse Riding/Cycling Experiences	7
PUBLIC LAND TOUR OPERATOR AND ACTIVITY PROVIDER LICENCING.....	8
Licencing For Long Term Environmental and Business Wins	8
UNIQUE VICTORIAN WILDERNESS EXPERIENCES	9
EDUCATION AND CONSERVATION PROGRAM.....	9
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	10
SOURCE DOCUMENTATION.....	10
CONTACT DETAILS	10

INTRODUCTION

In providing a submission to the River Red Gum Forests Investigation, Tourism Alliance Victoria seeks to highlight:

- the critical role tourism plays in the Victorian economy generally and to the study region specifically;
- tourism's importance to regional Victoria and its part in conserving Victoria's unique natural and heritage environment;
- tourism's capacity to support community goals through cultural and heritage preservation, services and infrastructure improvements and community engagement.

TOURISM ALLIANCE VICTORIA

Why are we interested in responding?

Tourism Alliance Victoria is the peak industry body advocating for and supporting the development of a professional and sustainable tourism industry across Victoria. The organisation represents the interests of our 760 strong member network which is made up of tourism attractions, tour operators, adventure and nature based tourism businesses, local and regional tourism organisations and visitor information centres.

Tourism Alliance Victoria work actively with our industry partners- Accommodation Getaways Victoria, Regional Victorian Conference Group and the Young Tourism Network. Combined we reach over 3000 Victorian businesses.

In working directly with businesses Tourism Alliance seeks to ensure businesses linked to nature and adventure based activities are working co-operatively with land managers to support the experience and products on offer as well as communicate and educate visitors on the cultural, heritage and environmental aspects of specific areas.

Whilst Tourism Alliance Victoria has a broad membership the following activities identify where the organisation has been active in areas which are related to tourism and public land management. Items of note include:

- Supporting the development of business operating standards and the development of the adventure activity standards to support business systems and processes.
- Drawing government attention to the issues in relation to public land tour operator and activity provider licensing reforms.
- Working with business and tourism community groups in the Otways Hinterland with a focus on community capacity building as part of the New Future for the Otways project program.

ECONOMIC OUTCOMES: VALUE OF TOURISM TO RIVER RED GUM FOREST INVESTIGATION AREA

Tourism's value to communities is often understated as tourism is more a system than a production point of industry. As a system, new money brought into an area flows through many points based on the purchase of goods and services by visitors. In addition the services purchased or infrastructure enjoyed by the visitor can equally be of value to the host community.

Tourism in Victoria is a \$10.9 billion dollar industry.¹ The use of public land contributes at least \$3.5 billion annually to the Victorian economy.² Tourism is valuable to the River Red Gum Forests Investigation Region and must be seen as one industry that can provide both economic and conservation benefits.

Tourism heightens the appreciation and need for conservation of Victoria's natural environments. The Investigation Region incorporates a number of sites offering nature and adventure based tourism experiences. 77% of all international visitors to the State participate in nature based activities while 39% participate in adventure based activities.³

The River Red Gum Forests Investigation Region incorporates the Murray Tourism Region which generates \$696 million from domestic overnight visitors, \$229 million from domestic day trip visitors and \$51 million from international visitors.⁴

Tourism employs 159,000 Victorians. Tourism in regional Victoria generates 61,000 jobs with 7059 people are employed in the tourism industry within the Murray Tourism Region⁵

In Victoria tourism generates some \$650 million in tax revenue for the State Government. This revenue base for government has the capacity to grow but like all businesses there is a need to make significant and appropriate investment to ensure that both assets and their management are able to support world class experiences.

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM PRACTICES

Economic indicators are the most common form of evaluating the benefits of tourism. However more and more government agencies and communities are exploring the diversity of benefits and challenges tourism brings through exploring measures other than visitor nights, visitor spend and employment.

The River Red Gums Forests Investigation Discussion Paper highlights a number of practices associated with tourism and outdoor recreation which are not sustainable in the long term.

Tourism sustainability is dependent on the effective integration of three aspects: economic, environmental and social. Often referred to as the triple bottom line, quality tourism businesses have a distinct focus on these three aspects within their day to day operations⁶.

¹ Tourism Victoria, The 10 Year Tourism and Events Industry Strategy, October 2006

² Department of Sustainability and the Environment, Our Environment Our Future, April 2005

³ Tourism Victoria, Adventure Tourism and Nature Based Tourism Market Profiles, Year Ending Dec 2005

⁴ Victorian Environmental Assessment Council; River Red Gum Forest Investigation Discussion Paper, Carlton; Blue Star Print; 2006; pp180

⁵ Tourism Task Force, Victorian Tourism Employment Statistics, 2005

⁶ Tourism Queensland, Queensland Tourism Strategy, November 2006

For this investigation it is important that business practices for the future are the focus of what is, and could be, rather than highlighting what has been that needs to change.

The Discussion Paper highlights the negative impacts associated with Camping, Boating, Four Wheel Drives and Motor Bikes and Horse Riding. The extent and breadth of the impacts described and associated issues around seasonality are not clear.

Tourism Alliance Victoria urges VEAC to consider highlighting good practice or appropriate use with respect to tourism and outdoor recreation across a range of activity types within the Draft Proposals Paper to be released in mid 2007.

Tourism Alliance's experience suggests that more and more communities recognise the value of tourism but not at any cost. They seek tourism on their own terms. Communities want to preserve their culture and their heritage, they want to improve services and infrastructure, they want improvements to quality of life and seek to have community involvement, and they want to retain their amenity. All of these aspects are possible through the consideration of sustainable tourism practices.

In areas of environmental significance, for sustainable tourism to flourish it is crucial that natural assets are protected, usage and impacts are managed, individuals are educated and informed and that strong partnerships exist between land management agencies, tourism businesses and the community.

The Great Barrier Reef has numerous examples where commercially successful tourism activity is contributing significantly to the conservation goals of the reef.

For communities a vibrant tourism industry brings employment and the capacity to spread the benefit through the community.

For the businesses a professional and sustainable approach founded on quality experiences and the principles of ecotourism will ensure the sustainability of the experience and the business through increased visitor expenditure and increased business profitability.

For this investigation public land and public land management can be the catalyst to supporting tourism and recreation opportunities through combining appropriate proactive land management with responsible use.

TOURISM ALLIANCE VICTORIA IS SEEKING:

- # The inclusion of best practice examples with respect to sustainable tourism and outdoor recreation activities on public land be highlighted within the Draft Proposals Paper.
- # An opportunity to discuss with VEAC examples of sustainable tourism practices.

A COMPLETE APPROACH WITH GOVERNMENT PARTNERSHIPS

Tourism is an industry which is dependent on an effective partnership with all levels of government.

By its nature, successful and sustainable tourism affects operations and functions across Government including: Infrastructure, Training and Education, Environment, Forestry, Parks, Local Government, Communities, Transport, Planning, Regional Development, Multicultural Affairs, Ports, Arts, Police & Emergency Services, Sport &

Recreation, Energy Industries, Information & Communication Technology and Small Business.

The systematic nature of tourism requires a whole of Government approach with clear collaboration between Government Departments and Agencies over time.

In October 2006 the State Government released its 10 Year Tourism and Events Strategy. The strategy highlights the need for strengthening the partnership between government and industry, the value of regional destination development and the opportunity for tourism through the Aboriginal Land and Economic Development Program.⁷

The protection and management of indigenous cultural heritage also provides tourism opportunities. Victoria's Aboriginal Tourism Development Plan 2006-2009 highlights the potential growth of the cultural heritage segment.⁸

Local Government is a key agent in sustainable tourism management in its role as land steward. Through a variety of direct and indirect roles, local Government in Victoria invests over \$31 million into tourism.

In Victoria, the capacity of local government to sustainably manage tourism may be limited by isolation, access to resources, relationships with industry and other levels of government, training and skills of key staff and communication within council.

It is critical that the implications for neighbouring local government areas from a planning, land use, service support and access perspectives are given full consideration as part of the Draft Proposal Paper.

TOURISM ALLIANCE VICTORIA IS SEEKING:

- ⊕ The Draft Proposals Paper to explore the tourism development opportunities flowing from the State Government 10 Year Tourism and Events Industry Strategy.
- ⊕ That any management plan(s) for the River Red Gums Forests Investigation Area integrates both State and Local Government responsibilities.
- ⊕ State Government support to further develop partnerships based on mutual respect and understanding with Local Government, particularly regarding Sustainable Tourism Destination Planning and Development.
- ⊕ State Government support to further leverage their partnership with Tourism Alliance in assisting Local Government to understand the value of tourism to their local community.
- ⊕ State Government support to encourage ongoing investment in sustainable local level tourism and events.

⁷ Tourism Victoria, The 10 Year Tourism and Events Industry Strategy, October 2006

⁸ Tourism Victoria, Victoria's Aboriginal Tourism Development Plan 2006-2009, 2006

PROACTIVE LAND MANAGEMENT

To be successful the consideration of any change to the public land categories within the Investigation Areas must be done with proper consideration for the resourcing to make these changes deliver the goals sought.

Proper resourcing for infrastructure needs, conservation programs, people management (information and enforcement) and broader community education are seen as essential.

The tourism business experience in relation to land management strategies does vary across the State. Key concerns are raised where:

- management strategies such as booking systems for high use activity sites or campsites are not enforced.
- there is limited or no enforcement of licensed tourism businesses due to limited resourcing on the ground.

The result is that those businesses that are compliant are disadvantaged.

Tourism Alliance does not support the introduction of licensing or management systems unless these requirements add tangible value to the visitor experience and there is the capacity to ensure the enforcement of these requirements.

Additionally the provision of safe and appropriate sites on public land for tourism and recreation requires a proactive management approach. The aim is to minimise environmental impacts while ensuring visitors are welcomed and encouraged to act responsibly and with sensitivity to the local environment.

TOURISM ALLIANCE VICTORIA IS SEEKING:

- ⊕ Appropriate levels of Government resourcing to underpin effective proactive land management at significant sites within the Investigation Area.

Quality Camping Experiences

The River Red Gums Forests Investigation Region provides the opportunity for some unique camping experiences. Currently there are no fees, bookings or access controls. However, without the introduction and capacity to monitor and enforce usage activity, the environmental quality, the value of the experience and satisfaction of campers will decline.

Generally members of Tourism Alliance agreed with the comments made in the Discussion Paper regarding issues around camping. Some comments included:

"Dumping of rubbish is a problem."

"There isn't enough control [of campers] from DSE or Parks. They [campers] don't know if there are Total Fire Ban Days and campfires are not put out properly..."

"... [we] agree there are issues which require proper investigation. ...[however, we] believe the majority of visitors to our region are responsible, and behave accordingly."

Management of camping areas may include the rehabilitation of degraded sites. For example the demonstration site of the Tenbury-Reserve at Swan Reach was improved and managed by the River Murray Sustainable Recreation Committee. Environmental practices to negate the impacts of erosion, litter, fires, pets and indiscriminate camping included revegetation, formalisation and reduction of the road and delineation of appropriate camping sites.

The introduction of a booking system for camping during peak season may be required to manage camp site layouts, protect sensitive areas, provide a point of contact with campers to allow for transfer of information regarding responsible camping, track camping numbers and seasonality to assist with management and resource allocations, contribute to land management costs and provide broader access through capping stay periods.

New South Wales' Mungo National Park provides an example of a booking system for its campground and shearers quarters. Similarly, a number of public land areas of Victoria currently apply camping fees.

Further management is required through the provision of onsite visitor facilities including sustainable pit toilets such as those in the Grampians National Park; designated camping areas and designated walking tracks for campers, provision of rubbish removal options during peak periods and the provision of purchasable firewood for campers during peak season. Sites could be rotated to allow rehabilitation in degraded areas. Interpretive signage is required to highlight key environmental values of the area. Installing boardwalks offers cover over environmentally sensitive areas.

TOURISM ALLIANCE VICTORIA IS SEEKING:

- # Designated camping areas for licensed tour operators
- # For specific sites the introduction of a campsite booking system during peak periods, the capacity to enforce camping regulations and enhanced visitor facilities.

Quality Boating Experiences

Given the role of the Murray River in the Investigation Area, boating is an important part of the River experience. However, like other associated activities it needs to be managed in order for it to be sustainable. The difficulty of planning, implementation and enforcement of management strategies is compounded by the cross border issues associated with the Murray River.

Members of Tourism Alliance stated that:

"Water associated activities are obviously a huge tourist attraction in our area"

"Jet skis...are only a problem at certain busy times of the year"

Often the lack of facilities can lead to problems such as excessive vegetation and erosion. A successful example of the benefit of redevelopment is Fred's Landing at Taillem Bend on the Murray River. Over a 17 month period, facilities such as a new boat ramp and delineated car parks were upgraded to reduce damage to the site. The changes have resulted in positive environmental practices and affirmative feedback from site users and the wider community.

TOURISM ALLIANCE VICTORIA IS SEEKING:

- # Co-ordination between Victorian and New South Wales State Government agencies for uniform and enforceable management practices.
- # Designation of particular zones for different activities, such as ski club and wakeboarding areas, giving consideration to residents or non-boating holiday makers inclusive of boat ramps.

Quality Four Wheel Drive And Motorbike Experiences

Four wheel drive and motorbike experiences are an integral component of nature based and adventure based tourism. However it is important that any associated impacts are minimised.

Members of Tourism Alliance surveyed commented:

"No visible damage in our area. Noise and dust pollution in busy holiday periods from trail bikes would be the biggest problem."

"..Very little designated tracks for users therefore creating damage to the riverine environment and disturbance to wildlife."

In these circumstances often it is not the licensed Tour Operator who is conducting tours under direct instruction where the focus for land managers needs to be, but on the recreational activities of the general public.

A positive and sustainable 4WD tour operator in Victoria is the Grampians Personalised Tours and Adventures Company. This operator specifies their risk management strategies for 4WD Tours including ensuring all trips comply with the Grampians National Park Management Plan; drivers are trained in interpretation and have suitable knowledge of the National Park, fauna and flora; all trips are to be done on approved tracks/ roads/ areas and assessing the suitability of weather conditions for the trip. Minimal impact practices are employed to reduce the impact on the environment.

TOURISM ALLIANCE VICTORIA IS SEEKING:

- ⊕ Clear communication and enforcement of any activity guidelines including access limitations based on rainfall or flooding.
- ⊕ Designation of particular zones for different activities focusing both on what you can do and what you cannot do in particular locations.
- ⊕ Designated trails for complimentary activity types.

Quality Horse Riding/Cycling Experiences

Several members of Tourism Alliance remarked that there was not enough horse-riding in their region to create a significant problem.

There are opportunities to broaden these experiences by capitalising on infrastructure that already exists and investing in further infrastructure.

One example is the Murray to the Mountains Rail Trail for cyclists and walkers. This trail is expected to contribute \$0.5 million per annum to the local community with a multiplying effect of up to \$1.9 million per annum. Furthermore, this type of experience promotes a better understanding of the cultural, natural and historical values of the area, as well as creating environmentally sustainable links between rural towns.

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PUBLIC LAND TOUR OPERATOR AND ACTIVITY PROVIDER LICENCING

In Victoria, the Public Land Tour Operator and Activity Provider Licensing Program is integral to the management of the relationship between businesses and the natural environment.

The provision of licensing to commercial businesses presents a number of opportunities. Licensing ensures that users of public land are capable of managing the environment they are entering, are able to take responsibility for the safety of people in their care and make a contribution to the maintenance and development of facilities they are using. Licensing allows for accountability for actions and standards and allows monitoring and regulation of use.

While a number of licensed businesses currently operate within the River Red Gums Forest Investigation Area, Tourism Alliance Victoria considers that **all** commercial operators require a licence.

In general terms the licensing requirements permit trade on public land while including caveats associated with environmental protection and good business practices.

Licensed tour operators are a pivotal player in both education and conservation. For example, Wildscape Safaris, an accredited operator based in Tropical North Queensland has been actively involved in regenerating a section of the Barron River on the Atherton Tablelands. It also conducts research and monitoring of platypus behaviour.

There is an opportunity to increase the value and yield of public land within the Investigation region through the management and designation of areas for the provision of licensed tour operators. Licensed tour operators provide a higher yielding experience within a controlled environment. They have the ability to contribute to land management through assistance with site protection, cleanliness and other sustainable practices. Examples are provided throughout this submission.

Licensing For Long Term Environmental and Business Wins

Tourism Alliance has played an active role in the licence reform process and has been working closely with Department of Sustainability and Parks Victoria to better inform State Government of industry views on this important issue.

The reform of Public Land Tour Operator and Activity Provider Licences involves issues such as conditions, terms, enforcement & compliance which in turn support good practice and the capacity to grow tourism experiences for the longer term sustainability and market development of nature based tourism.

A three year consultation and review process has taken place and it is time to progress the unified responses received by government.

TOURISM ALLIANCE VICTORIA IS SEEKING:

- # The State Government provide 10 year public land licences that support a stable business climate for long-term business investment, growth and profitability. Strong, overt and well-publicised enforcement that will encourage compliance, professionalism and long term investment.
- # That legislation implements these reforms be passed in the autumn 2007 session of State parliament.

UNIQUE VICTORIAN WILDERNESS EXPERIENCES

Victoria has the potential for a competitive advantage based on its wilderness and adventure based activities. The Government recently launched the Adventure Tourism Brochure which was a critical step towards unearthing the diversity and depth of product in Victoria. However, the capacity to attract high yielding customers is severely limited by a lack of quality investment in wilderness based accommodation experiences. The private sector is ripe, the restrictions in Victoria result in investment in other states of Australia and New Zealand.

TOURISM ALLIANCE VICTORIA IS SEEKING:

- ⊕ Proceed with urgency the Land Bank project which seeks to identify a limited number of suitable investment locations for unique high quality nature based accommodation investments;
- ⊕ A whole of Government approach to the provision of suitable investment locations;
- ⊕ The capacity to capitalise on existing natural assets and nature based accommodation through the encouragement of high yielding consumers.

EDUCATION AND CONSERVATION PROGRAM

A comprehensive and wide-reaching education program is needed to inform the public on how to use the River Red Gum Forest Investigation Area responsibly. The focus of the program requires the transfer of knowledge and skills regarding sustainable practices and behaviours. The key message is responsible use by all communicated by signage, codes of conduct, fact sheets and interpretive talks among many options. Critical to achieving these goals is the role of licensed tour operators. Through such programs, tourism becomes a genuine contributor to conservation and education.

Success of such programs is reliant on building strong partnerships between all stakeholders in the River Red Gum Forest Investigation Area. For example, Eco-Adventure Tours runs Night Walks where survey sheets are provided to land management authorities quarterly and significant observations immediately.

TOURISM ALLIANCE VICTORIA IS SEEKING:

- ⊕ The inclusion in the Draft Proposals Paper of a co-ordinated education and communication program for the River Red Gums Forest Investigation Area encouraging responsible use by all users across all industries.

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Grampians Personalised Tours and Adventures
Greater Shepparton Visitor Information Centre
Highland Explorer
Hodgson House Bed & Breakfast
Kingfisher Cruises
Mildura Tourism
Moirra Tourism
Tokemata Retreat
Yarrawonga-Mulwala Tourism Inc

SOURCE DOCUMENTATION

For further information on these issues, please see Tourism Alliance Victoria's Representation Papers available online at www.tourismalliance.com.au

Public Land Tour Operator & Activity Provider Licence Reform
Position Paper July 2005

The Right Person for the Job – Skills for Yield in Victoria's Tourism Sector
Submission to House of Representatives Committee Inquiry into Workplace Challenges
in the Australian Tourism Sector August 2006

Energy & Communications Infrastructure
Position Paper July 2005

Victoria's Tourism & Events Industry: Building a 10-Year Government Strategy
Response Discussion Paper July 2005

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