

The Role of Tourism Bureaux in the Development of Tourist Attractions in Australia: A Case Study of Hervey Bay, Queensland

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Abstract: Tourism in Australia is now a \$50 billion a year growth industry, which already exceeds the combined value of the agriculture, forest and fisheries industries. It is estimated that over 5 million people from all over the world visit Australia each year, to eat, play, and of course enjoy the lifestyle there. The setting chosen for this study is a quite distinctive tourism environment, Hervey Bay – Fraser Island, Queensland, Australia. According to Garrod et al (2002), the visitor information service sector has tended to receive relatively little attention in the tourism literature (with some exceptions, Swarbrooke, 1995; Sarina, 1999, Jenkins, 2001), and while some studies exist on Visitor Information Centres and their impact on business and economic development (Tierney, 1993; Sarina, 1999), little research has been carried out on their relationship with the actual tourism provider (Jenkins, 2001). This study looks at the issues that influence tourist visitor information centres from Hervey Bay local operator's perspectives.

Keywords: Visitor Information Centres, Tourism Operators, Hervey Bay, Australia

Introduction and Background

Bitner (1992, p68) emphasises the latitude still available to tourism researchers for theory building, empirical testing, measure and method development, and application studies. This study looks at the issues that influence tourist attraction from an operator's perspective and at their managerial implications. Tourism information centres and operators need to understand that the consumers of the 21st Century purchase *convenience* that will free up more time for leisure. That convenience may be in the form of a self-charter holiday or a group holiday, but can also be in the form of relevant, courteous and up-to-date information obtained from a visitor information centre (Sarina, 1999): "It matters not whether a company creates something you can touch or something you can only experience, what counts most is the service built into that something" (Baker & Fesenmaier, 1997; Neat, et al, 1999).

The City of Hervey Bay, Queensland, attracts some 1.2 million visitors every year (Tourism Queensland, 2002). The main purpose of visits to the region is for holidays (61%). The most common travel parties among the sample of visitors to the region are adult couples (37%), family groups with children (22%) and people travelling alone (17%). The most common size of travel party into the region is two people (46%) with minorities travelling alone (17%) or in a group

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of three people (15%). The majority are domestic visitors (75%), but an increasingly significant proportion of international visitors are being attracted. The key activities of visitors to the Hervey Bay Region include visiting the beaches (63%), visiting Fraser Island (a World Heritage Environment (45%)), visiting licensed clubs (32%), self-drive touring (30%), visiting the Hervey Bay Boat Harbour Marina (27%), visiting the City of Maryborough (27%), going on a non-charter fishing trip (25%), and for 26% visiting local markets (Fraser Coast and South Burnett Visitor Survey, July, 2001).

Visiting Fraser Island is a particularly important reason for international visitors (55%), while Australian visitors are more likely to be visiting people in the area. An increasing trend also is for international backpackers to seek employment while in the region, thus offering assistance in areas of labour shortage such as in the local agriculture industries. The most common source markets for tourists to the region include southeastern Queensland outside the Brisbane Metropolitan Area (21%), metropolitan Brisbane (20%), the British Isles (11%) and New South Wales outside Sydney (11%). All age ranges under 65 years are represented and the most common household types are families with school age children (41%) and young singles (22%). The full range of income groups up to \$100,000 per annum is also represented.

The most common accommodation types sought by visitors are staying with friends or relatives (20%), caravans in a caravan park (18%), camping in parks (14%), motels (14%) and youth/backpacker hostels (12%). International visitors are highly reliant on youth or backpacker hostels (47%), and Australians on friends and relatives (25%), caravans in parks (22%), and motels. Over 70 percent of all visitors either travelled alone to Hervey Bay or were with friends in groups of 2-5 people. Over 40 percent of international visitors came by bus, with 29% in private cars (up from 13 percent in 2000), 23% by train, and the remainder (7%) by plane. This is in contrast to the domestic visitor pattern, which involves private cars (64%), bus (13%), or train (8%).

The key sources of visitor information about the Fraser Coast accessed *before leaving home* include the advice of friends or relatives (40%), previous experience of the area (30%), maps (27%), travel guides or books (22%), travel brochures (21%), the Internet (17%) and travel agents (11%). Overseas visitors rely more heavily on travel guides and books (50%), the Internet (41%), brochures (39%), and travel agents (31%), while Australian visitors rely more heavily on previous experience of the area (37%). The key sources of information for visitors *once in the area* include the advice of friends or relatives (34%), maps (28%), previous experience (26%), brochures (25%), **Visitor Information Centres (19%)**, and travel guidebooks (16%). It is the role of the Visitor Information Centre (VIC) in this provision of information, especially with respect to attractions, that forms the core of this paper.

The Role of Visitor Information Centres in Visitation to Tourism Attractions

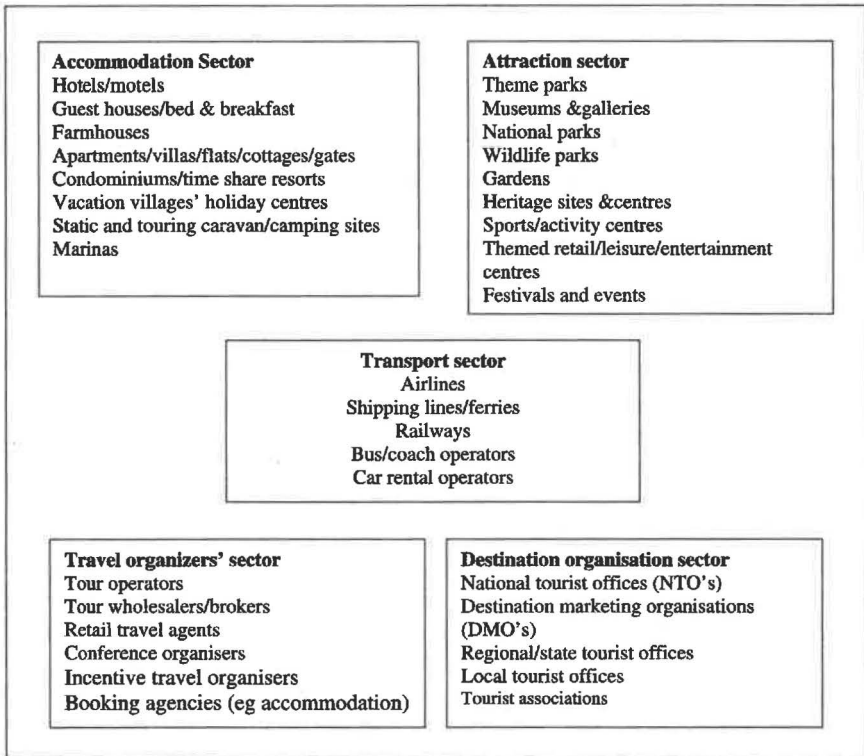
This study describes a type of organisation that is important to the development of local tourism service sectors in general, and particularly in Australia (Tierney, 1993; Sarina, 1999). It also goes some way towards meeting an urgent need for better statistics about the tourism industry's performance at the local and regional level. Local tourism operators on the Fraser Coast were contacted, during 2001, in two waves of surveys, seeking a reliable indication of the attractions visited in Queensland, and the numbers and revenues for a wide range of accommodation from hotels and motels, to farm stays and houseboats. A more comprehensive survey than the ABS accommodation surveys at a local level, the study particularly concentrated on the standard of services provided by the local Tourism Bureau, and the economic benefits for the community resulting from its operation. It also evaluated the value of visits to the industry and the local community. A total of 241 surveys were distributed across tourism businesses in Hervey Bay, Queensland in October 2002, and 58 surveys were returned (24%). This paper reports on the results.

Visitor Information Centres

Visitor Information Centres are part of the Destination Organisation Sector of tourism, as defined by Middleton & Clarke (2001, see Figure 1). The main characteristic of Australia's attraction and activity sectors are the large diversity of businesses. Such diversity stems from the attraction - or activity type, business size, management style, attitude towards the environment, location, and operating time (Becken & Simmons, 2002). The role of the VIC over the years has increasingly changed from that of providing information, to that of a business bureau and research organisation. This change has not come easily because of the actions of stakeholders, customers' expectations and the changing environment (Jenkins, 2001). Queensland for example currently has in place a network of approximately 116 Visitor Information Centres (VIC's) and information providers, organised into regions under the government department, Tourism Queensland. Each of these VIC's interacts with local attractions in unique, though usually predictable ways.

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Figure 1: The five main sectors of the travel and tourism industry, adapted from Middleton & Clarke (2001)



Source: Swarbrooke, John (2002).

Visitor Information Centres lead tourists to a mixture of history, colour and controversy in a much more direct way than say, travel agents. They provide localised information to help tourists make more of their visits. They ensure that there is somewhere for visitors to go to when they need information and direction during their visitation or around a region. Visitor centres make it possible for motel and tourist operators to disseminate information about their services, this is often the case with countryside attractions, and they can also help in revamping dying towns. The importance of tourism to the Australian economy and the number of visitors both international and domestic that travel each year around the country makes the VIC's necessary. The VIC's are brokers also, in the same way as travel agents, but do not generally charge for their services. They also have an 'impressing the visitor' and an advertising function for a specific locality that a travel agent does not (Jenkins, 2001).

Methodology

This research was undertaken to explore the role that visitor information centre's play in regional tourism development by reference to a case study of Hervey Bay, Queensland. A total of 241 questionnaire surveys were distributed to tourism businesses (operators) in Hervey Bay in October 2001. Fifty-eight surveys were returned (24%). This section outlines the questions asked and the overall responses received from respondents.

The findings of this study support the view that visitor information centres are an important part of the information and decision making system for visitors to a local area. The overwhelming majority of respondents (81%) saw benefit in attending regular Tourism Bureau organised social functions with other tourism operators, 68 percent had visited the Visitor Information Centre recently, and 60 percent were happy with assistance they had received from the Bureau in the past (Table 1).

Table 1: Questions Asked and Overall Responses

| Question | Yes % | No % | N/A % |
|--|-------|------|-------|
| Do you see a benefit in attending regular Bureau organised social functions with other tourism operators | 81 | 19 | - |
| Have you been into the Visitor Information Centre recently | 68 | 32 | - |
| If so, were you happy with the experience (If not, please comment below) | 60 | 6 | 34 |
| Are you in favour of meeting with the Bureau and other operators with similar businesses to plan some joint marketing strategies | 80 | 12 | 8 |
| Would you be interested in workshops or seminars focusing on the tourism industry | 54 | 40 | 6 |
| Would you support the idea of the Information Centre at Urraween Road selling accommodation to walk in visitors | 67 | 24 | 9 |
| Would you support the idea of the Information Centre selling tours to walk in visitors | 59 | 36 | 5 |
| Are you happy with assistance you have received from the Bureau in the past | 79 | 12 | 9 |
| Do you think the Bureau can be of assistance to your business now our energies will be focused on promotions within Hervey Bay | 87 | 3 | 10 |

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When asked whether or not a local tourism bureau can be of assistance to business if its energies are focused on promotions *within* a particular city or region, again the overwhelming majority said yes. This has a lot to do with the existence in Queensland of another tier of tourism marketing for interstate and international visitors, that of the Regional Tourism Board (in this case the Fraser Coast and South Burnett Regional Tourism Board), but also indicates that one of the pressures local operators feel most strongly is the problem of informing visitors to their area. Given that most visitors to Hervey Bay come by private vehicle, the existence of the Hervey Bay Tourism Bureau's office on the major entry route to the city is of critical importance to such information flows.

When asked if they were in favour of meeting with the Bureau and other operators with similar businesses to plan some joint marketing strategies (80%), and whether or not they were interested in workshops or seminars focusing on the tourism industry (54%), respondents from Hervey Bay again supported the emerging coordination role of local VIC's. Respondents were less enthusiastic about the concept of a local information centre selling accommodation (67%) and tours to walk in visitors (59%). This mainly reflects concern over 'unfair' competition with other outlets on the basis of assumed lower costs, and is common throughout Australia until it actually happens and the operators recognise that it was an unfounded fear. Table 2 shows that all respondents by no means hold this concern.

Table 2: Selling Accommodation and Tours, Response by Individual Categories of Operator

| Category of Respondent | Book Accommodation Bookings? | | Book Tours? | |
|------------------------|------------------------------|------|-------------|------|
| | YES % | NO % | YES % | NO % |
| Apartment Complex | 60 | 40 | 40 | 60 |
| Bed & Breakfast | 67 | 33 | 33 | 67 |
| Backpacker | 67 | 33 | 67 | 33 |
| Caravan Park | 20 | 80 | 20 | 80 |
| Hotel | - | 100 | - | 100 |
| Motel | 60 | 40 | 20 | 80 |
| Resort | 67 | 33 | 50 | 50 |
| 4WD Vehicles | 60 | 40 | 60 | 40 |
| Attractions | 75 | 25 | 80 | 20 |
| Fishing | 67 | 33 | 67 | 33 |
| Flights | 100 | - | 100 | - |
| Hire/Charter | 100 | - | 100 | - |
| Whale Tour | 50 | 50 | 50 | 50 |
| General Booking Office | - | 100 | - | 100 |
| Other Booking Office | 78 | 22 | 78 | 22 |
| Professional Service | 100 | - | 100 | - |
| Restaurant | 50 | 50 | 50 | 50 |
| Retail | 50 | 50 | 50 | 50 |

The majority of accommodation houses, except Caravan Parks and Hotels, do not seem to have a particular problem with the Hervey Bay Visitor Information Centre (Hervey Bay Tourism Bureau) taking bookings for them. This is probably because a very wide range of establishments already perform this service, including travel agents. However, when it comes to booking *tours*, which can be a significant part of their business for some accommodation houses, the reverse is generally true. For all other respondents except for those who work in existing Booking Offices, there appears to be no real concern about VIC's providing a booking service for either accommodation or tours. Attractions, flight operators and hire places appear to be particularly supportive of this practice.

The comments provided by *Caravan Park Operators* encapsulate the *no* position very well. Of particular interest were the following:

"In relation to tour bookings, a very definite NO. This is a large part of our business. The Bureau would be competing unfairly for this business with private enterprise. The Bureau is subsidised by council and therefore the ratepayers. This private business is not subsidised by anybody".

"The information centre is just that. The selling of accommodation or tours would not benefit the Hervey Bay community at all, in fact it would be detrimental to our industry. Your role is to expose the tourist to a broad cross section of accurate information as possible with the objective to maximise their stay and having them leave with the view to return".

"I guess you will be doing this to derive income (i.e. commission). This may have an affect on me as I obviously book tours for people and provide accommodation. If my income were to drop as a result of you doing this, then I would have to question the value of our firm being a member of the Bureau".

On the other hand, *Attractions and Hire Operators* had this to say on the *yes* side:

"Flyers given out by the Bureau of day trips, things to do and see to keep tourists in the Bay a day longer are important. Tourists don't like to think, they like things organised. Day 1, Day 2, Day 3 etc. with suggestions of what they could do to fill in each day, incorporating attractions etc".

"The Hervey Bay Historical Museum, which is the only one of its kind in the Bay is mainly patronised by holiday visitors who have got brochures from the tourism bureau, other information centres, caravan parks, motels etc. or hear about it by word of mouth or the free write ups inserted in the local paper. We are appreciative and happy with that".

"I think it would be a great idea for the tourism bureau to sell tours as you have the first contact with the tourists".

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“Often during the whale watch period other agents take our brochure from its position on their racks and place it where it can’t be seen and I’m hoping our involvement with the Bureau in the whale watch season will help that situation. The package should appeal to people with young children and those who’ve already been to Fraser Island. Some of my better agents won’t support it because of the 10% only commission but if we make it more the price won’t be attractive. If you have any new volunteers we would love to see them on board any time”.

“Being a very small operator and very limited budget it’s hard for me to get my product out and known, also split season 9 months at Kingfisher and 3 months whale watching. I guess I am looking for very cost effective ways of marketing and building direct bookings (I try to limit commission paid to 15% only; I’m not going to compete with operators who give 20-25% and agents who want the same)”.

“My personal opinion is that one of the first things we noticed about Hervey Bay (when we moved here four years ago) was that there was a wide range of shopfronts displaying the (i) information sign, but no central tourist office. In other words, it appeared that tourism information was de-centralised. This was not efficient or convenient for us, the new visitor, because during our travels throughout NSW, Victoria, SA etc, we had come to expect that every town had a signature central tourist information centre. So the more this becomes the case in Hervey Bay, the more the average tourist’s expectations are met, I believe. Also, when travelling in the UK, we always used the tourist information centre to arrange our accommodation every afternoon. It was great and painless. If this was available at the Hervey Bay office, that would also contribute to perhaps many overseas tourists’ expectations being met. I am not the owner of a local accommodation business, so I don’t know how this would impact on the motel/resort manager”.

“Selling tours and accommodation should perhaps see the creation of a paid position to ensure optimum results”.

Discussion

Government interest in tourism in Australia is of course high as a result of it being one of the country’s fastest growing industries. Federal and State interest is expressed though the Australian Tourist Commission and its State counterparts. At the State level government involvement is organised through regional tourist organisations, for example in Queensland there are 11 regions. Each of these regional organisations receives centralised support and finance, and functions primarily as a regional marketing body. This enables significantly enhanced purchasing power for each of the regions with respect to Australia’s markets, according to their desire for exposure.

However, this direct financial and organisational support does not extend to local tourism organisations, such as Visitor Information Centres. Consequently, they

have little or no role in marketing their area. This has been the most difficult problem for VIC's to solve in their long history. Generally set up, if they are public entities, by local government in a quasi-governmental manner (administrative and some budgetary support), it is often assumed that a VIC can and should market its area by the local tourist operators, the public, and the sponsoring local government, but that somehow that marketing should be paid for by the organisation itself. Any attempt to supplement income in order to do this is strongly resisted if it is likely to involve selling tourism product in direct competition with the operators themselves, or if membership fees are set 'too high'. Since marketing is a very expensive process, these restrictions can mean the demise of the local organisation unless it has a very understanding and wealthy sponsor, or delegated power to take commission from sales of local product, or support from local operators for increased fees. As we have seen from the data revealed by this study, those attitudes and outcomes are also to be found in the Hervey Bay context.

Nevertheless the local operators were in favour of meeting with the Bureau and other operators with similar businesses to plan some joint marketing strategies. In other words, there is a shortfall in what the operators thought that the regional tourism board and the State Government could achieve, and that therefore the Bureau could be of assistance to their businesses. However, most saw a benefit in attending regular Bureau organised social functions with other tourism operators, which indicates that a socialising function is also most important. This points up the essential problem that VIC's face, they are controlled by ad hoc organisations, sponsored by local government, and expected to make a real impact on the tourism performance of an area without the organisation or means to do so. In the end perhaps the only uncontested function they have other than the distribution of operator brochures to actual visitors is to provide a forum for socialising between operators.

Conclusions

Tourism in Australia is now a \$50 billion a year growth industry, which already exceeds the combined value of the agriculture, forest and fisheries industries. It is estimated that over 5 million people from all over the world visit Australia each year, to eat, play, and of course enjoy the lifestyle there. At the local government level the visitor information centre has a vital role to play as an intermediary between the visitor and the local tourism industry. This research has shown that the expectations of performance are high but the outcomes are constrained. The formal marketing system does not include VIC's, and neither does the formal financing of tourism organisation networks by State or Federal governments. However, the study shows that local tourism operators are interested in the VIC and recognise its importance to local tourism.

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