

**THE FINANCIAL VIABILITY OF
HERITAGE TOURISM
ATTRACTIONS: THREE CASES
FROM RURAL AUSTRALIA**

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Abstract

Heritage tourism (whether historic, cultural or natural) is widely seen as one of the mainstays of rural tourism. Most research on heritage tourism has focussed on issues such as the protection of the physical fabric at heritage attractions, balancing authenticity and accessibility in interpretation and the meaning of heritage for people. However the issue of the viability and sustainability of heritage tourism operations as businesses has in contrast hardly been considered.

This paper addresses this issue by focussing on three rural heritage tourism attractions which have experienced financial problems. They are:

1. The Toolangi Forest Discovery Centre. A government run attraction presenting the story of forestry.
2. Coal Creek Heritage Village. A community run recreation of a 1880s farming and mining community.
3. Seal Rocks Sea Life Centre. A privately operated attraction which allows observation of nearby seal colonies.

All three are between 60 to 90 miles of Melbourne, Australia.

In addition to examining the nature and causes of their difficulties, the paper explores two factors which may limit research into the financial viability of attractions. The first is that problems may be manifested in many different ways, of which bankruptcy and closure are only the most extreme. The second is the difficulty of gaining useful objective information from and regarding businesses in trouble.

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THE FINANCIAL VIABILITY OF HERITAGE TOURISM ATTRACTIONS: THREE CASES FROM RURAL AUSTRALIA

INTRODUCTION

In 1999, the Australian Heritage Commission and the Tourism Council of Australia (AHC & TCA) published their *Draft heritage tourism guidelines: best practice for people involved in tourism and heritage places*. The Guidelines were, 'designed as a reference for tourism operators', but were also intended to, 'be useful for heritage managers and others who work with the tourism industry'. Their purpose was twofold, to outline to those involved in heritage tourism both, 'the principles of heritage tourism and sustainable business practice' (AHC & TCA 1999, 1).

This is an interesting and unusual combination. Most research on heritage tourism is focussed on issues such as the protection of the physical fabric at heritage attractions, balancing authenticity and accessibility in interpretation and the meaning of heritage for people. These are essentially what the AHC & TCA mean by principles of heritage tourism. However the issue of the viability of heritage tourism operations as businesses is in contrast hardly considered. In most cases consideration of this issue is limited to some generalisations regarding good business practices, such as the importance of understanding the market, having a business plan, adequate capital resources and a good location (Walsh-Heron & Stevens 1990; Johnson & Thomas 1995; McKercher 1998, 5-10 & 2001, 521, 565-8; Yale 1998, 3-15; Swarbrooke 1999, 113-120).

Such an imbalance is hardly surprising. By the very nature of heritage tourism, the interest of managers and researchers will often be focussed on the natural, historic or cultural aspects of the attraction. Furthermore heritage tourism is often not or only semi commercial. Most heritage tourism attractions are publicly owned. Others are owned and operated by people with strong non-commercial motives, such as the maximum enjoyment of their lifestyle or special interest. As heritage tourism operations which operate primarily as profit-making businesses are rare, so then is research on business viability. As McKercher argued (for ecotourism specifically, but it could easily be applied to all heritage tourism),

Ecotourism and business? The two words seem to be an oxymoron. Many people view ecotourism as an ideologically or philosophically pure construct that should not be sullied by sordid business considerations. Tourism business is often regarded as being interested only in profit and of showing no respect for host communities or environments. How can ecotourism and business be linked? (McKercher 2001, 521)

However, the AHC & TCA Guidelines are underpinned by an understanding that heritage tourism is the foundation of the tourism industry in Australia (AHC & TCA 1999, 3-5). For that reason the Guidelines have given a greater emphasis to business sustainability. Unfortunately the execution has not matched the intention, primarily because of the great dearth of relevant research. Under the Guideline of 'sustaining a heritage business', seven 'management approaches to achieve success' are detailed. These are primarily based on the management text, J.P. Kotter, *Leading change* and additionally G.S. Day, *Strategic marketing planning: the pursuit of competitive advantage* and K. Ohmae, *The mind of the strategist: the art of Japanese business* (AHC & TCA 1999, 34-5). As might be expected from the utilisation of such sources, the advice given in the Guidelines is very general and not specifically related to tourism ventures. While the approaches are qualified as an, 'important starting point', there is no advice on how a heritage tourism business (especially a small one) could effectively translate them into reality.¹

The Guidelines are an important step in realising that heritage tourism operations also need to be financially sustainable. However, they are just a starting point. There is a great need for continued and more analytical research and discussion of the business needs of heritage tourism. The purpose of this article is to extend

that process by considering some case studies of heritage tourism operations which have experienced some degree of financial difficulties or failure.

While research into business failure is common in some disciplines (for example Strategic Management and Economic History), its use is not widespread in Tourism Studies. This is partly explained by the difficulties in obtaining information about failed ventures and the strongly 'feelgood' approach which often characterises tourism and hospitality research. It is notable that the AHC & TCA Guidelines are illustrated with 14 case studies of heritage tourism operations, which are all presented as business successes. It is pity that there were not one or two contrasting case studies of failure.

An exception to this trend is the work of Leiper in his study of the financial problems of resort hotels at Coffs Harbour NSW (Leiper 1996). This case study is highly instructive and in dealing with real-life problems easily understandable to a wide audience. However, his case study does not relate to heritage tourism. The case of the financial difficulties besetting the historic theme park, Old Sydney Town, as described in Spearritt and Davidson's recent history of Australian tourism (Spearritt and Davidson, 2000: 266-7) is particularly instructive. More case studies along these lines are required.

In considering financial difficulties amongst heritage tourism operations, this paper is divided into three sections. The first outlines the difficulties in defining business failure and in obtaining information. The second consists of three case studies from rural Australia. The third provides a discussion based on the case studies of some of the major causes of business failure.

DIFFICULTIES WITH DEFINITIONS AND SOURCES

Any discussion of financial viability is constrained by two significant factors. The first is that failure (and indeed success) is hard to define. This is especially so in heritage tourism, which has a high degree of public ownership and non-commercial activity. Failure may not be just bankruptcy, it may come in many different forms. The second is that information may be hard to obtain. Operators may not wish to discuss their problems or their accounts may be highly unreliable as they try to apportion blame to others. Failure is rarely absolute and any definition has to take account of that. For the purposes of this paper, failure is defined as, 'sustained inability to meet financial objectives'. In such cases, heritage tourism operators may react to this sustained failure in a wide variety of ways. Some of these are detailed in Table 1.

This wide variety of actions may mask financial difficulties. It is not simply the case that a heritage tourism operation in trouble will simply close. Instead it may continue to operate for years, even indefinitely, through a combination of these strategies. Again it is important to realise that many heritage tourism operations are not run on commercial lines. Many are publicly owned and there may be strong public pressure for their continuance, irrespective of the financial situation. That pressure may be sentimental, but it is also often based on the revenue externalities which flow from heritage tourism to nearby businesses. Even privately owned heritage tourism operations are usually guided by more than commercial considerations, for often they reflect the owners' strong special interests.

The reactions listed in Table 1 are good symptoms or indicators of financial difficulties. Often they may be the only outside signs of problems. One of the great difficulties in research in this area, is that most operators will be loath to publicise the existence and scale of their financial difficulties. It may also be in their interests to obscure the nature, extent and causes of their problems. In the initial stages of this research, the managers of a number of tourist attractions were contacted and asked if they were willing to be interviewed. Their responses fell into two categories. The first was that they did not wish to discuss their difficulties publicly. The second was that they had had difficulties in the past, but these had now been overcome by new staff or management.

Table 1: Reactions to Sustained Failure to Meet Financial Objectives

1. Bankruptcy, mortgagee's sale, closure.
2. Sale as going concern.
3. Capital injection, either from owners' reserves or by attraction of new partners etc.
4. Seeking reduced rent, royalties etc
5. Reducing employee numbers
6. Reducing opening hours or operating only at weekends or in high tourism seasons
7. Seeking government grants, including conversion of seeding or one-off grants to a repeated subsidy
8. Greater emphasis on increasing returns from commercial activities, such as cafe, restaurant, gift-shop etc. Possibly sub-letting of space to outside operators.
9. Postponement or dropping of projected later stages.
10. Changes in admission prices. Usually increases, but sometimes reductions.
11. Refocussing of attraction/site themes in order to make them more appealing. This may include name changes.
12. Hiring of management consultants either as managers or advisers.
13. Unscheduled revision of business, strategic or marketing plan.

Unless they are extremely lucky and find a case where they have both an operator who is willing to talk frankly and high confidence in the reliability of the information they are receiving, researchers are likely to struggle to fashion high quality case studies of failure in heritage tourism operations. However, there is an alternative approach. That is to rely on publicly available information sources. These include (but are not limited to) media reports, minutes of public meetings, publicly released annual reports, consultant reports, strategic and marketing plans and court records.

The advantage of using sources which are on the public record is that they have already been subjected to public scrutiny and researchers may have some confidence in their reliability. In the case of Seal Rocks (considered below) media reports contained comments from a wide range of people, some of which was contradictory. Those who publicly aired their opinions included three government ministers, the local member of parliament, the local council, the State Department of Natural Resources and Environment, the Environment Protection Authority, three community groups, the three partners in the attraction, the Managing Director, the Centre Manager, the Chairman of the Board, other directors and employees (*Age* 18/1/1995, 21/8/1996, 26/11/1996, 19/9/1997, 25/5/1998, 6/7/1998, 7/7/1998 & 21/5/2000).

In this paper the primary sources for the case studies are documents in the public arena. In one case, the source is a long-running media interchange between differing parties, very much as described in the above example. Selection of the case studies was very much based on the availability of sources. Unfortunately, some potentially interesting cases have not been included, for even though their difficulties are widely known and discussed within the local tourism industry, there is little publicly available information.²

TOOLANGI FOREST DISCOVERY CENTRE

The Toolangi Forest Discovery Centre was established by the Forest Service of the Victorian Department of Natural Resources and Environment in 1994. Toolangi is a small timber town in the mountains 60 miles north-east of Melbourne. The Centre's aim is to provide,

high quality and innovative education and information ...[to] schools, special interest groups and the public, with accurate, balanced and comprehensive information about all aspects of the biology and management of Victoria's native forests (DNRE 1999, 1).

In essence this is a forestry or timber industry centre rather than a forest centre. It provides an industrial tourism or industrial heritage experience for visitors. The building design highlights local timbers and nearly all its displays relate to the historical development of forestry and timber-cutting. It is located adjacent to a DNRE forestry depot and the Toolangi State Forest. The Centre was intended as the major forestry interpretative and visitor centre for Victoria.

Visitor numbers peaked in 1997/8 with 10,000 student visits and 20,000 general public visits. However, while it was planned that the Centre would become self-sufficient in funding, this did not occur. In 1998/9 budget cuts were made to the Forest Service. The education programme for students was continued, but services and opening hours for the general public were drastically cut (DNRE 1999, 1).

The Forest Service cast round for ways to make the Centre viable. A 1997 regional tourism strategy recommended that it might be privatised and converted into a timber display and retail centre (KPMG 1997, 44).³ In 1998 a private operator took over the Centre, aiming to establish a gallery and coffee shop, but abandoned these plans after three months. Another proposal has been its development as a conference centre. As an alternative to commercial developments, the Forest Service has considered corporate sponsorship (DNRE 1999, 1). What appears to have not been considered is the changing of its forestry/timber theme.

COAL CREEK HISTORICAL VILLAGE

In the 1960s and 1970s there was a widespread trend towards the development of recreated historic settlements as tourist attractions in regional Australia.⁴ In recent years many have experienced financial difficulties due to declining visitor numbers. It has been recently argued that apart from Sovereign Hill at Ballarat, no historic settlement is financially viable and they only continue to operate via subsidies (Spearritt and Davidson 2000, 266).⁵

Coal Creek Historical Village was established in 1970. It is a 40 acre historical recreation of a farming and coal-mining settlement of the 1880s, located at Korumburra, 90 miles south-east of Melbourne. Despite the excellence of its buildings and displays, it has been unable to attract anywhere near the visitors and revenue of Sovereign Hill.⁶ As a result it has been subject to many organisational changes as the local community and council search for a winning formula. The focus in this paper is on its recent difficulties.

In 2000 the local council (Shire of South Gippsland) was informed that the budget of Coal Creek had blown out by \$400,000. It was decided to seek a private operator, a move seen as designed to postpone any real decision until after upcoming council elections (*South Gippsland Sentinel-Times* 25/1/2000).

Some councillors called for its closure. Cr. Yvonne Thunder argued,

We've gone down this track how many times? Every effort we've made, it hasn't been effective. How can you justify the spending beyond these walls to the people out there? We've tried, we've failed, let us be honest enough with the people whose money we're spending. Have we got the courage? I have. I'm sick of it (*South Gippsland Sentinel-Times* 25/1/2000).

Cr. Max Speedy agreed, stating that he had,

a great deal of difficulty subsidising a service for the tourists who are not our ratepayers. Council believes it has done everything possible to make Coal Creek work as a tourist attraction ... but the paying public wants theme parks, aquariums and the like. It's a national trend (*South Gippsland Sentinel-Times* 25/1/2000).

A counter view came from Cr. Mike Wrigley,

This is not just a Korumburra facility ... primarily Korumburra does benefit, but that benefit does [also] flow on to South Gippsland and the wider region, and you can't put a dollar figure on that (*South Gippsland Sentinel-Times* 25/1/2000).

The future of Coal Creek became a major local government election issue. The result favoured the supporters of the historical village. Later in the year the council passed control of Coal Creek to the Friends of Coal Creek, an 80 strong community group, which was already running it as an interim measure. Under its new business plan, admission prices were dropped and a target of at least 21,000 visitors per year was set, 'a relatively conservative aim in comparison to other years' (*South Gippsland Sentinel-Times* 26/9/2000). The council subsidy was set at \$100,000 per year. To the chagrin of the local newspaper and tourism researchers, the council had learnt a lesson and discussed the changes in camera (*South Gippsland Sentinel-Times* 26/9/2000).

SEAL ROCKS SEA LIFE CENTRE

Seal Rocks was opened in 1998. It is a privately run centre on crown land. It is located on Philip Island, a well-developed coastal tourism destination, 90 miles south-east of Melbourne. Its first stage was a purpose-built centre at a cost of \$17 million. It provides interpretation about nearby seal colonies and other marine life. Video footage of seals on nearby islands is screened in the centre. A proposed second stage is for a seal viewing tower and restaurant, one and a half miles offshore, linked to the main centre by an undersea railway. Its cost is estimated at about \$52 million (*Age* 21/8/1996 & 25/5/1998).

At its opening Seal Rocks was promoted not only as, 'the zoo of the future', but also as the future of tourism attractions. Its operators proclaimed that they expected to eventually apply their formula to other attractions, such as the nearby Penguin Parade (*Age* 25/5/1998 & 6/7/1998). For its supporters it was seen as the flagship for a strong push for the privatisation and greater development of visitor facilities in National Parks and other publicly owned areas (for a discussion of privatisation see Charters et al 1996). The then Minister for Conservation and Environment, Mark Birrell proclaimed, 'the Government has not got the money to do justice to this tremendous natural attraction, but we believe a private operator could turn it into Victoria's most important eco-tourism development while still managing it in an environmentally-sensitive manner' (*Age* 18/1/1995).

However, others voiced their concerns. The Victorian National Parks Association warned that, 'once there is a long lease to a private developer it becomes very difficult to change things if there are problems' (*Age* 18/1/1995). Further criticism came when the Planning Minister exempted the project from the normal planning process (*Age* 26/11/1996).

Financial problems became apparent soon after the centre opened. Visitor numbers and revenue were below budget. A loss of \$4 million was recorded in its first year and \$2 million in the second (*Age* 6/7/1998, 7/7/1998 & 21/5/2000). The operator requested a reduction in rent by \$360,000 per year from the Victorian State Government (*Age* 21/6/2000). When it refused the dispute escalated, at one stage the operator threatened to bulldoze the centre and eventually both parties commenced legal action (*Age* 21/5/2000 & 21/6/2000, *Australian Financial Review* 12/5/2000).

The operators of Seal Rocks had been caught by a change of government. They had developed and opened the attraction with the strong support of the conservative Liberal/National Government. However, in 1999 they had been surprisingly defeated and replaced by a minority Labor Government supported by three independents. One of the factors in the Liberal/National defeat was their extensive programme of privatisation in tourism and transport. A particularly controversial element of this programme was that the details of these privatisation agreements were secret. Upon coming to power, the Labor Government, promised that it would honour all such contracts, *if they were in writing*. When the management of Seal Rocks claimed that they had a verbal agreement for rent reduction with the previous premier, the Labor Government refused to recognise it (*Age* 21/5/2000, *Australian Financial Review* 12/5/2000).⁷

PATTERNS

What patterns may be discerned from these three case studies? Are they the normal problems of any small business, as suggested by the literature? Or are there difficulties specific to tourism attractions, particularly heritage or rural attractions? In considering such questions we must be mindful of the difficulties of gaining comprehensive and reliable information about businesses with financial problems.

None of the case studies seems greatly troubled by the common business problems on which the literature concentrates. As regards business plans (McKercher 1998 & 2001), all have detailed business plans. A lack of expertise in attractions (Swarbrooke 1999, 113) does not seem an issue, for all either have experienced managers or have engaged specialist consultants. Appropriate visitor facilities (Yale 1998, 5-15) are likewise not a problem.

There are two areas in which all three seem to have problems and it is noticeable that these difficulties are hardly dealt with in the literature. The first is that all had visitor numbers well below their original forecasts. This suggests problems with the initial market research. The second is that all three may have suffered from too many competing objectives.

Market research for new tourism attractions is a field fraught with difficulties.⁸ Data regarding new products is notoriously unreliable, respondents may act quite differently when the product actually comes on the market. The pre-release support amongst focus groups for 'New Coke' was a good example of this problem (Pendergrast 1994, 354-5). These difficulties are exacerbated for tourism attractions, for which mock prototypes cannot be created for testing purposes. As such responses may be based on subjective interpretations of quite vague descriptions.

One common source which is greatly relied upon is the record of nearby or similar attractions. The argument is that the new attraction should be able to get similar numbers. Even greater reliance is placed on such figures if the new attraction is seen as complementary to a nearby existing attraction. This was certainly the case for Seal Rocks, where it was believed that there would be a strong spillover of tourists from the Phillip Island Penguin Parade (the second most popular attraction in rural Victoria), two miles along the coast and the Phillip Island Koala Park, ten miles away. The management of Seal Rocks budgeted for a profit on the basis that 70% of visitors to the Penguin Parade would also come to their attraction (*Age* 25/5/1998). Similar logic may have applied for the other two attractions. Toolangi would have been looking to draw visitors from the Healesville Sanctuary (a zoo containing only Australian animals and the third most popular attraction in rural Victoria), ten miles distant and surrounding National Parks. Coal Creek may have hoped to gain visitors from Phillip Island and other popular coastal resorts, between 20 to 40 miles distant.

However, nearby tourist attractions may not be complementary. Tourists may find that they have diminishing marginal returns from visiting tourist attractions. Like boxes of chocolates, one may be highly satisfactory, but two or three unpleasant. Having visited the penguins and the koalas, the Phillip Island tourist may be loathe to continue wildlife watching. A tourist, having visited the attractively forested

Healesville Sanctuary, may have little interest in driving on to a forestry centre. It may also be that attractions may be too different to be complementary. Tourists at coastal resorts are primarily interested in swimming, sunbathing and fishing, they may not be interested in a half hour drive inland to visit a historical attraction, especially on a hot summer day.

The problem is compounded by travel connection difficulties. Driving from Melbourne to Healesville, it is a right turn in town for the Sanctuary, but a left turn to Toolangi. Indeed, Toolangi is not signposted in Healesville, the rationale being that they are in separate local government areas. There is no direct route from Phillip Island to Coal Creek and possible indirect routes are steep and narrow. Seal Rocks, quite simply, is the farthest attraction from the bridge linking Phillip Island to the mainland. For new attractions trying to pull in passing traffic these are significant limitations.

The second major problem is that the operators of all three attractions have multiple competing objectives. They are not just trying to run commercial tourism attractions, they are also seeking other achievements. Difficulties may occur when these other objectives either influence the operators to make decisions which are not commercially based or simply distract them from concentrating on running a business. Problems may be exacerbated by stakeholders or shareholders who are demanding financial viability and other objectives, or perhaps even worse, continually shifting between them.

Toolangi was established as an education centre to promote the forestry industry. Should it be judged as a public relations exercise or as a viable tourist attraction? The two may conflict. Forestry is probably not very attractive to tourists. However, if attempts are made to attract more visitors by developing an emphasis on say forests, then the initial educational objective is diluted.

Seal Rocks was intended to be a profitable commercial venture. However, it was also intended as a prototype of a 'new' style of privatised attractions on public land. This secondary aim may have affected management decisions. It certainly gained its operators political enemies.

Numerous attractions follow the Coal Creek model. Originally intended as a way of preserving the past and educating visitors, somewhere along the way expectations were raised that it would be financially viable. In addition confusion has arisen as to whether or not its indirect benefits to the town or the local region should be taken account of.

CONCLUSION

In recent times, heritage tourism attractions have gained much attention as potential generators of economic benefits for struggling rural areas. Such enthusiasm needs to be tempered with business realities. Shareholders and stakeholders need to consider what their objectives are and what levels of losses and subsidies they are willing to accept. Unfortunately, little attention has been focussed on research into how and why these attractions succeed or fail.

In this paper three attractions are examined. All had suffered financial difficulties. Two main themes emerged from this analysis. The first was the difficulty of researching such cases. Most case studies are of successes. Failures do not wish to talk and will often try to limit access to relevant data. This examination was limited by large gaps in the available information. However, such limitations should not stop research into this field. The second was that while the literature argues that heritage tourism attractions primarily suffer from the typical problems of small businesses, this analysis showed that there were mainly problems intrinsic to the nature of such attractions. In particular, market research was limited by the novel and unique character of new attractions and the operators of these attraction often tried to fulfil a number of competing and even conflicting objectives.

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¹ Part of the problem is the overuse of jargon and vague phrasing. Some examples include, 'business strategies should reflect a blend of top-down corporate and financial concerns ... combined with a bottom-up understanding of the resources being used, the specific product being offered and the market opportunities available', and, 'examine the market and commercial realities of gaining access to the resource' (AHC & TCA, 1999, 34). There seems to be little realisation that many heritage tourism operations are not commercial and that their operators are unlikely to have substantial formal management training.

² An example of such a case with almost no publicly available information is the attempt to establish the Bushrangers Hall of Fame at Benalla, 150 miles north of Melbourne.

³ High quality hardwood timber is in demand for housing (especially flooring) and to a lesser extent furniture. However, a number of such privately-owned centres already exist in Melbourne.

⁴ These attractions are termed variously 'pioneer settlements', 'historic theme parks' or 'open-air museums'. They are also common in the USA and Canada and even in countries such as Bulgaria.

⁵ This is a good example of the difficulties of accessing information regarding viability. The evidence in Davidson and Spearritt is primarily anecdotal, yet their conclusion tallies with the widely-held views amongst tourism operators which I am aware of. In short they are almost certainly correct, but their claim is unverifiable.

⁶ For a discussion of Sovereign Hill see Frost 2000, 4-5. Sovereign Hill is the most popular tourist attraction in rural Victoria.

⁷ Again there is the problem of accessing information. If there had not been a change of government, these details of financial difficulties may not have become public.

⁸ This section is primarily based on my experiences in tourism market research as the Project Manager for the Australian Centre for Tourism and Hospitality.

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