REGIONAL TOURISM FORUM MARCH 2022

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Introduction

Tourism Australia and Australian Regional Tourism (ART) partnered to deliver a forum for Regional Tourism Organisations (RTOs) in Melbourne on the back of the 2022 Destinations Australia conference.

Approximately 80 delegates attended the forum representing a wide range of regional tourism organisations (RTOs) from across Australia, including state tourism organisations (STOs) with approximately 10 delegates joining via zoom.

During the forum, ART hosted a workshop to identify and discuss the agreed national regional tourism priorities, while also achieving the following:

- Identify a coordinated approach to seek solutions to shared challenges.

- Creating connections and the sharing of ideas across regions that would not necessarily get to meet and spend quality time together.

- To open up conversations between the regions and various stakeholders including Tourism Australia and ART.

- To be a catalyst for a positive voice and lay the foundations of potentially a new way of engaging RTOs moving forward.

Prior to the meeting, ART distributed a survey to attendees to receive further feedback on the current challenges being experienced in the regions. This enabled the in-person workshop to be focused on collaborative solutions.

Top Six National Regional Tourism Priorities

The top six national tourism priorities are put together by industry at the Australian Regional Tourism Convention each year. They are then refined by the regional STO working group to form a united voice for regional tourism advocacy, and to enable a collaborative approach to industry development.

These top six regional tourism priorities were sense checked in the RTO pre-meeting survey and then workshopped at the forum to seek a collaborative set of recommendations to address.

Skills and Workforce
Address the skills and workforce shortages and create career pathways

Experience Development
Support development of new regional products and experiences incl. agritourism

Reliable and Useful Data
Improve the availability accuracy, relevance and useability of tourism data

Strategic Advice
Invest in The Tourism Hub to create a single source of information for research, grants and opportunities

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Enabling Infrastructure
Ensure better access to regions and supply of digital infrastructure

Regional Dispersal
Provide for better regional dispersal of interstate and international markets

Summary of RTO survey results

40 regions across Australia completed the preliminary survey. From the survey responses it was evident that most RTOs are taking on diverse responsibilities across the regions with over 83% of RTOs indicating that they were responsible for both marketing and product and industry development within their region. These RTOs are expected to deliver a wide range of services and support to industry with varying budgets.

Responses showed that 40% of RTOs indicated their total operating budget was $800,000 to $1 million per annum, while 12% indicated their annual budget to deliver marketing and industry support was $600,000 to $800,000. Nearly 40% of RTOs must work with a budget of $200,000 to $600,000 per year while 6% indicated they have less than $200,000 to service and support their local tourism and visitor economy.

In terms of key challenges in the regions, 8 out of 10 respondents indicated skills and workforce shortages continue to be the key focus, reinforcing the conversations being held across the country both at Government and operator level.

Quality visitor infrastructure and access to affordable housing options rounded out the top three challenges for RTOs. Regions continue to call for more supply of affordable housing in the regions to be able to attract and retain staff.

While the development of Agritourism in regions continues to gain momentum at a government level, 73% of respondents indicated that it was a high priority focus area to drive future growth. 32% of respondents indicated that it was in the top three priority focus areas and 41% nominating it in the top five.

It was interesting to note that while the majority of respondents indicated Agritourism was in the top three to five areas of priority this did not translate to taking the step towards creating a targeted Agritourism Development Strategy for the region. While 17% said 'yes they had a plan' and 37% responded 'no, but planning to develop one', a total of 45% respondents indicated that 'no they did not have one and weren't planning to in the immediate future'. Agritourism holds appeal for many RTOs but a planned approach to getting buy-in from regional stakeholders, and taking the next steps in planning and executing opportunities in this space will require a concerted, consistent approach from organisations such as ART.

The regional tourism workshop provided the opportunity for attendees to discuss and seek solutions to these challenges that could be achieved collaboratively.

Key recommendations

The key recommendations from the workshop include:

Enabling Infrastructure: ensure better access to regions and supply of digital infrastructure. Critical to regions becoming more accessible, competitive and attractive.

RTOs report being uninformed in relation to the timing of major regional grants being released. Poor lead-in times is restricting the ability of the regions to better plan and for RTOs to provide informed support to their regions. Access to quality communications in regional and remote areas is problematic, reduces destination attractiveness while also restricting the ability of operators to develop high quality products. RTOs expressed frustration around projects being approved under commonwealth grant funding being politically motivated and not aligned to state and regional strategies.

Recommendations:

- Enable industry to develop a consolidated regional infrastructure master plan that could assist with grant funding applications. This will identify agreed priority regional infrastructure needs (including roads, transport links and digital infrastructure) across each state, along with enabling industry input into priority projects.
- Include STO representatives on selection panels to assess grant funding applications to enable cross government collaboration. This will ensure approved projects align with national, state and regional tourism strategies.
- Enable industry to create investment attraction toolkits to assist regions in attracting government grant funding for infrastructure projects.

Provide Strategic Advice: provide regionally focused advice across all stakeholder groups (Austrade, TA, STOs, LGAs and operators).

RTOs service large regional areas including some with up to 50 LGA areas. They are required to provide support and advice to a large number of stakeholders often with very few resources to support them. RTOs are struggling to collate all of the industry information sources (TA, STOs, business commissions, government grant websites, Tourism Council eDM's etc.) to share with stakeholder groups. Too many communications sources is resulting in missed information and opportunities.

Recommendations:

- More collaboration building between RTOs. Facilitate regular RTO meetings in regional locations periodically throughout the year with a focus on building skills, knowledge and confidence within the area of regional collaborations.
- A different framework to deliver regional information. Invest in The Tourism Hub functionality to expand the information provided and usability of the site to enable one single source of trusted industry information. This will require a commitment from government to utilise the platform and upload content.

Reliable and Useful Data: improve the accuracy, relevance, and useability of tourism data to better equip regional destinations in attracting investment and planning for the future.

Current Commonwealth Government investment in tourism research has left a void in the tourism data required for planning and investment resulting in many states and regions paying to access the same data. Accessible data is not granular enough, sophisticated or timely enough to enable informed planning. Access to other critical data sources is expensive, not allowing for a fair and equitable source of data that all RTOs can access.

Recommendations:

- Facilitate a regional data dashboard linked to The Tourism Hub with access to more timely and granular data that is sophisticated, multi-sourced, regionally focused and provides insights for different levels of stakeholders, with specific insights to attract investment. Big data opportunities need to be explored.
- Develop a toolkit to educate different stakeholder groups on how to interpret and use data effectively so they can make more informed decisions.
- Explore big data opportunities and allow for more transparency in the available data.

Regional Dispersal: provide for better dispersal of interstate and growing international markets into regional destinations.

RTOs report the barriers to regional dispersal include a lack of access in both quality roads and affordable regional airfares, limited education in regions to develop quality export-ready products, limited cross-border collaboration and limited communications in remote areas. Limited mobile coverage is a barrier for international travellers visiting regions.

Recommendations:

- Enable industry to develop a national regional dispersal strategy that is linked to the THRIVE 2030 strategy.
- Enable industry to develop export-ready educational toolkits targeted to various audiences (operators, local councils).
- Facilitate the development of more cross-border itineraries between states. Start working with key stakeholders such as RTOs and key operators to build capability within collaboration, innovation and product/experience design.
- Invest in mobile towers to improve connectivity in regional areas, with priority for nationally significant experiences.

Skills and Workforce shortages: address the skills and workforce shortages that are restricting industry productivity, talent attraction and growth.

Skills and workforce shortages is the key challenge in regions prohibiting growth and it is widely acknowledged that in regional Australia, this is closely linked to the housing crisis and lack of affordable rental accommodation to support front line and seasonal workers.

Recommendations:

- Develop a national regional housing policy that will seek to open more affordable regional housing options.
- Invest in a national skills and workforce strategy to provide incentives to get frontline workers, including retirees, back into the regional workforce.
- Stronger linkage of government educational courses to industry, and mentors, to better equip students entering the workforce.
- Enable industry led capacity building programs that are affordable with online options for remote communities. There needs to be a focus on designing businesses that can attract diverse talent and provide real ongoing learning and development opportunities for staff.
- National approach to changing the perception of the hospitality industry to promote robust career pathways in tourism for people of all ages, not just youth. Change the perception of hospitality being a gap filler for young people on their way to a professional career.
- Expand the working holiday visa to workers of all ages to fill gaps while reducing red tape.

Product and Experience development: support the development of new regional product and experiences, such as agritourism, that will give visitors more reasons to travel regionally.

RTOs report planning barriers and red tape prohibit investment and new developments. Many smaller operators lack an awareness of evolving visitor expectations, target markets and the skills required for business planning.

Recommendations:

- Enable industry to design and deliver targeted and specialised training programs that compliment current government educational programs.
- Learning and development must reflect the changing nature of the industry and consumer expectations, and be accessible to regions through the use of personalised online learning so that remote locations are not disadvantaged.
- Establish a regional leadership program that will provide mentoring of new products and experiences.