



**Blackall-Tambo**  
Regional Council



**SUBMISSION**

**Inquiry into developing Queensland's rural and regional communities through grey nomad tourism**

By the

**PARLIAMENTARY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE**

From the

**BLACKALL-TAMBO REGIONAL COUNCIL**

The inquiry Issues Paper poses a series of eight questions based on the key areas of the Inquiry Terms of Reference.

**General Comments**

Regions such as the Statistical Divisions of North West, Central West and South West are facing negative economic growth and population loss as outlined in data from the last Census.

In addition, the Regional Profile on Blackall Tambo available from the Queensland Office of Economic and Statistical Research includes a Social Index of Disadvantage. This is based on data from the 2006 Census and is based on number of low income earners, levels of educational attainment, levels of unemployment and numbers of dwellings without a motor vehicle. The following table shows the quite high level of Social and Economic Disadvantage experienced by residents of the Council area:

	Quintile One Most disadvantaged	Quintile Two	Quintile Three	Quintile Four	Quintile Five Least disadvantaged
Blackall-Tambo	74	0	2.3	7.2	15.8
Qld as a whole	20	20	20	20	20

The need for more economic growth in regions such as Blackall-Tambo is thus clear as a way to address this high level of Social and Economic Disadvantage.

This OESR Regional Profile also shows that the only sectors which sell goods or services outside the region are the grazing sector and tourism.

Transport is a big sector but this is linked to air and bus transport, cattle transport and general freight. This sector, while a key enabling sector for the grazing industry, is not an exporter of services in its own right.

Other sectors such as retail and Government services, especially health and education, are key employers but these other sectors are significantly lined to grazing and tourism.

Mining in neighbouring areas may have a positive economic impact, indeed several families currently have one member working in mines in the Emerald region. The future impact of significant coal mining in the Alpha area is as yet unclear. The impacts of mining may have negative impacts on the grey nomad market. These travellers may elect to by-pass those towns affected by the influences of mines choosing to take their travellers into more secluded safe and quieter communities.

The Council thus sees growing Tourism as a key way to achieve the economic growth needed to address this level of Social and Economic disadvantage.

Grey nomad tourism is currently a key element of the Blackall-Tambo region's tourism market. However, there may be future opportunities in, for example, bus tours or fly-in short stay packages, especially those linked to the history and heritage or arts and culture of the region and the significant aboriginal rock art in the sandstone ridges to the North East of the region.

A systematic whole of government approach to the grey nomad tourism sector, especially for Western Qld, is thus of key importance.

Queensland Tourism has undertaken a study of drive tourism but the main focus on this was on the coastal regions. This is not surprising as the coastal region is by far the biggest part of the Queensland drive tourism market. However, for Western Qld, grey nomad drive tourism is almost the entire tourism market for this region and a key part of the regions economy.

There is an additional issue in that the business development programs of both the Commonwealth and the Qld Governments do not work well in Western Qld because;

- There are few professionals with the skills to be workshop presenters
- There are few consultants able to assist companies with programs
- Many of the programs are aimed at larger businesses than exist in these regions
- Many are aimed at more sophisticated businesses eg manufacturers, companies exporting services, than exist in these regions.

There is therefore less government assistance for smaller businesses wishing to grow.

The limited number of bank branches, accountants, solicitors and management consultants also means that there is a much lower level of people with high level business skills available. One commentator has suggested that the demise of Chambers of Commerce and service clubs in smaller towns is due to the closure of bank branches and the loss of bank managers.

Consideration must also be given to the fact that the grey nomad market may only have a 20 year span given that most grey nomads are from the baby boomer generation. This generation is from the free spirited generation who through their teenage years travelled around the countryside in a "combivan" or panel van. Hence the grey nomads are once again living this sense of free spirit that was once part of their youth. Could it be that the grey nomads are reliving this teenage adolescent spirit of adventure?

## **Specific Issues for Comment:**

### **1. What economic contribution do grey nomads make to rural and regional areas of Queensland?**

There is a range of evidence that the grey nomad sector is growing significantly. The Caravan and Motorhome club of Qld is gaining some 700 new members each month. The caravan etc building sector is recording steady growth. This suggests that there is real potential if the required infrastructure can be provided and the regions marketed appropriately.

There is of course the issue of what happens when the 'baby boomer' demographic passes. However, the likely growth of adventure and cultural tourism could fill this gap if properly approached.

The BTRC is not aware of any detailed analysis of this contribution. There is a real problem with the collection of statistics as many of the grey nomads stay in informal camp sites eg truck stops and bush camp sites and so are not surveyed by the normal data collection systems which are based on commercial accommodation venues.

There is however significant anecdotal evidence. For example, shopkeepers, pharmacists, petrol stations and hoteliers report higher levels of patronage during the winter months. Some hotels bring in backpackers for extra staff during the travel season.

Grey nomads are clearly a major client group for caravan parks. However, the cabins in these parks are also used by travelling tradesmen etc, not wishing to pay the higher costs of motels. The hotels also are often used by travelling tradesmen etc as this accommodation is lower priced. The lack of building trades people in Western Qld means that larger building projects often require tradespeople to come from Toowoomba etc.

The motels client base is more buyers for cattle sales, commercial travelers and public servants en route to say Mt Isa or Darwin.

Economic impacts of the market can be influenced or affected by environmental elements such as weather seasons and forces of major disasters such as floods. The seasonal market for grey nomads is between April until September, and most of these travelers are escaping the cold weather of the southern states.

Other influences to the markets include the global financial crisis where the value of superannuation pools no longer hold the same value as previous years. This may affect the long term plans of grey nomads and length of travelling periods may be somewhat reduced.

The length of stays in the region can vary from passing through en-route to a destination or extended stays up to three months in one location. It is known at a neighbouring town that some grey nomads stay up to three months camping alongside the river bank, even settling in to the extent where they are known to have their own vegetables growing. Some of these campers are return visitors often coming for events such as fishing competitions. It is also known that some of the women bring sewing machines and integrate into the local cultural groups and patch working groups.

## **2. Are the available statistics on grey nomads in Queensland useful, current and accessible?**

The various Visitor Information Centers collect number of people calling, writing or visiting their centers for information.

The challenge in collecting other statistics includes;

- The number of travelers who stay in informal campsites and so are hard to survey.
- The size of the regions for which statistics are collected. Tourism Qld has an Outback Region. This is understandable, given the low population density of much of outback Qld. However, this Outback Region extends from the Gulf of Carpentaria to through Western Qld to the Western Darling Downs. There is considerable diversity in this large region.
- That most of the businesses involved in Western Qld are small businesses with limited capacity to collect data and fill in complex survey forms
- The small size of towns in Western Qld means that getting reliable sample sizes from a traditional statistics perspective is hard.

The Tourism Qld Regional Snapshots for the year ending December 2009 were published in April 2010. This showed a significant decline in visitors to the Outback region. However, visitor numbers collected by the Blackall Visitor Information Centre (VIC), which does collect reliable figures as it is required to do to retain its registration as a VIC, shows a continuous rise in visitors. The numbers of people visiting or contacting the Blackall VIC for the last three years were 2007, 13,137; 2008 13,564; 2009 14,539. The reason behind this apparent discrepancy is unclear, other than to cite the diversity in this region.

The Blackall visitor information centre also collects data regarding the number of campers staying along the river bank. In 2007 there were 1119 overnight stays recorded which is 8% of the recorded number of visitors through the VIC. In 2008 there were 1729 campers staying along the river bank which is 13% of recorded visitors and in 2009 2194 camped along the riverbank being 15% of visitors through the VIC. There this indicates a strong growth in an area for free accommodation or roadside stops.

Visitor expenditure data for Qld in 2009 was released by Tourism Qld in 1 April 2010. However, this was only for the coastal regions. Again, that data is not available for Western Qld is probably due to a resources issue, a sampling and data collection issue and that Western Qld is such a small proportion of the whole Qld tourism sector.

It may well be that there is a case for the Outback Qld Tourism Association developing a local survey program to be run by Councils. The survey methodology could be developed by the survey professionals at Tourism Qld.

The collection of data from online sources maybe a consideration for the future, which maybe as simple as recording the number of hits that local tourism sites or features of a site are receiving.

The lack of such data has several key outcomes;

- Current Tourism Qld data suggests that drive tourism is in decline. This may well affect the willingness of banks to lend money to tourism businesses

- Tourism businesses may be reluctant to expand without data to provide assurances of potential growth
  - The three levels of government may unintentionally allocate inadequate resources to regions where data incorrectly suggests there is not growth potential.
3. What are the public infrastructure requirements of grey nomads including health, waste disposal sites and signage?

Key public infrastructure for grey nomads includes;

- The roads. The traffic on the Warrego and Landsborough Highways is growing and is probably in excess of that which was used to determine the quality of construction of these highways. The growth of the mining sector and the increasing use of road trains for cattle and sheep transport as a grazing management tool means the roads are increasingly crowded. The other roads in the region, both sealed and unsealed, are also suffering increased pressure.
- Mobile telephone reception is an issue for people using remote roads.
- Access to television services is an issue that is likely to become more important as digital TV is rolled out and analogue broadcasts cease. Currently, Councils in many areas, including Blackall and Tambo, re-broadcast analogue TV signals. It would appear that the Commonwealth will offer limited assistance for Councils to adapt to digital TV in that no town west of the Great Divide in Qld will be assisted to re-equip for re-broadcasting digital TV. Assistance will be provided for households to install a satellite dish. This leaves drive tourists needing to have a satellite antenna once analogue signals cease unless regional Councils can find the significant sums to re-equip for digital re-broadcasting.
- Wireless internet access is another issue. This is adequate within a few kilometres of towns. Anecdotal evidence is that many grey nomads use the internet for trip planning and emails and social media such as blogs, Facebook etc as a way to keep in touch with friends and family.
- Waste disposal sites are an issue however the valuable program of the Caravan and Motorhome Club and the Qld Government to assist Councils to install grey water dump sites seems to be effective. Many regional towns are keen to be able to portray themselves as 'RV Friendly Towns.'
- Access to health services is important but there is no evidence of any particular problems. Indeed, informal feedback from the Tambo Primary Health Care Centre is that visitors are surprised at the high quality of the service that is available. Most grey nomads take care to ensure prescriptions are secured ahead and filled so that they have supply of pharmaceuticals. Most prescriptions are readily available and if not it only takes overnight to bring in the required drugs from say Toowoomba.
- The health issues facing older persons travelling makes the concept of a national health information database attractive.
- Signage is an issue and an extra burden on Councils. The small size of businesses means that they are often not able to contribute and the lack of service clubs eg Rotary etc means they the resources of businesses cannot be mobilised to assist. The Qld Government program to

assist with minor tourist infrastructure was welcome but underfunded. Advice was that only about half of applications could be funded.

- Artesian spa facilities in public swimming pools have been a positive attraction for grey nomad tourists. Some come to Blackall for weeks or even months during the winter for the spa facilities, linked of course with the other amenities in the town.
- Lifestyle attributes are another influence that attracts grey nomads. The feeling of safety in the region allows them to securely camp alongside roadside stops and open spaces.

#### **4. Is the current infrastructure for grey nomads adequate? What additional infrastructure is required?**

Other key aspects of infrastructure include;

- Campsites, caravan parks etc, which are covered in Point Five, below.
- Low cost or high value attractions and other factors to encourage travellers to stay longer in each town. This includes encouraging travellers to leave the main highways and visit the smaller towns. This is a complex and a multi-factorial issue. This includes;
  - Artesian spas
  - Utilising the bowls, golf and other facilities better
  - Making the Matilda Highway an arts, events, birdwatching etc trail
  - Building on the existing strong arts groups in most towns to offer workshops in various arts and crafts, depending on local expertise.
  - It may be possible to have visiting travellers run workshops if they have particular skills.
  - Having more 'bush experiences' such as bush campsites, self drive and guided day tours, farmstays etc
  - Making more of indigenous culture
  - More information on local history
- This issue is more complex due to the stated unwillingness of many grey nomads to pay for quality tourist attractions. The Manager of the Blackall Woolscour has been told by quite a few grey nomads that their \$14 entry fee is too high. Anecdotal evidence is that many tourists feel that the major attractions at Longreach are too expensive. Yet attractions cannot be provided without appropriate charges. This issue may be somewhat less important as it would seem that there are more travellers now who are not totally reliant on the aged pension and so perhaps more able to afford modest entry etc charges.
- Some travellers may get to the stage of not wanting to be involved with another museum and seeking to be engaged with more natural and lifestyle experiences integrating more with community functions rather than built facilities.

#### **5. What are the major issues relating to the regulation of Queensland's camping and caravan parks?**

This is a complex issue and it is suggested that the current Queensland Government policy on caravan parks and campsites, as on the website of the Department of Environment and Resource Management, is unsatisfactory. There is an issue of 'free' or low cost campsites being made available close to the towns in the region. The concern of the commercial caravan park owners is

understandable. However, it is suggested that the current Queensland Government policy, and many of the caravan park owners, and the caravan park industry association, does not recognise that there are likely to be three market niches within the caravan and motorhome community;

- Those that prefer caravan parks with full amenities.
- Those who are reliant on the aged pension and who cannot afford to regularly use commercial caravan parks, and
- Those who prefer the more open, less crowded and more 'natural' aspect of 'bush camping'.

Many caravans and motorhomes now are being built to be self reliant, with a chemical toilet, a drinking water tank, a grey water tank and solar panels and a large storage battery for electricity. The Caravan and Motorhome Club has a 'Leave no Trace' program linked to this self reliant vehicle concept. Club members are asked to formally sign on to this program to commit to 'bush camping' and 'leaving no trace' by using their built in facilities. This facility of recreational vehicles of course increases the demand for bush camping.

Blackall has a very pleasant area of land adjacent to the Barcoo River, owned by the Council, which is available for camping, with a \$5 per night fee and a limit of three days stay. The only facilities are a rubbish bin and a pit toilet. This causes some concern to owners of the Blackall Caravan Park as on some nights there can be more vehicles on this spot than at the Caravan Park. However, the other businesses in the Blackall shopping area welcome these travellers as they patronise their businesses.

It is suggested that this issue should be an agenda item for the appropriate national Ministerial Council so that a sensible but equitable national policy can be developed that recognises that there are people who prefer to stay on 'free' areas and who often will not stay in a town overnight if they have to pay commercial caravan park fees.

There may well be a market for more 'bush experiences' which include farm visits, farm stays and bush camping by rivers and billabongs. This would be for those who prefer bush camping and for bird watchers and others with an interest in wildflowers etc. An issue that is felt by many to limit this kind of operation is the cost of public liability insurance. Informal advice from Tourism Qld is that a way to deal with the public liability insurance is for the local council to be involved so that their public liability insurance can cover the activity or attraction. However, this may be seen by some Councils as taking an excessive level of risk.

Tourism Qld is developing a Tourism Opportunity Plan for each of the key tourism regions of Qld. This is a welcome initiative. However, many of the areas of opportunity for Western Qld may be the kind of bush experiences as above. It may be useful for Tourism Qld to assist in clarifying this situation.

These bush experiences may be affected by the current Wild Rivers proposal for the Lake Eyre Basin. This is still being developed but does provide for limited new development in High Protection Areas within 2 km of rivers. This is of course where bush camping would be of greatest interest. A staff member of the Department of Environment and Resource Management (DERM) said at a Wild Rivers Forum in Longreach on Tuesday 4 May 2010 that he personally was not in favour of 'unregulated camping' by rivers in the Lake Eyre Basin. However, it is suggested that a an area of say 5 or 10 ha with limited clearing, occasionally mown grass and some levelling of the ground with facilities

limited to a pit toilet and a few picnic tables would have negligible environmental impact. Twenty of such facilities in the whole Lake Eyre Basin, a very large area, would be a valuable tourist attraction and have negligible impact. The conditions of use of such areas could be built into the Local Laws of the relative Councils and the Wild Rivers Rangers envisaged by DERM could issue on the spot fines for vehicles which were not self contained or otherwise in breach of the conditions of use of such campsites. The Wild Rivers concept should not be used to prohibit such limited facilities.

The lack of suitable facilities is having a range of unintended effects;

- Many travellers are using truck stops for overnight stays, limiting the capacity of large road train vehicles from using these facilities for the rest stops as required by safety rules.
- Some travellers are using areas not set aside for camping, and so not properly set up or managed, and are causing damage to these spots.

#### **6. What is the best method of marketing Queensland's rural and regional communities to grey nomad tourists?**

The marketing of the Western Qld region, and thus of Blackall and Tambo, is by the Outback Qld Tourism Association (OQTA), by individual Councils and individual businesses.

The OQTA is in the process of rebuilding its infrastructure after a move of its head quarters back from Brisbane back to the West. The headquarters of the OQTA is now Longreach and there have been three regional managers appointed, who live in those regions. This new system is still settling down but gives every indication of working well.

However, there is a problem with OQTA in that few of its private sector members are large enough businesses to be able to take an active part in the management of the Association. Therefore, there is still a larger role for Councils in supporting this Association than is the case in, for example, similar tourism associations in the Coastal areas. At the same time, Councils in more regional areas have limited resources to allocate to tourism. OQTA therefore has problems in getting people to be involved in Boards of Directors, committees etc.

It is suggested that there is not a consensus within the various Council tourism groups of the relative benefits of the different kinds of marketing eg brochures, magazine advertising, the Internet etc. Therefore it is hard to get a joint marketing strategy. A key issue here is the limited funding for advertising and promotion and the perspective of some tourism businesses of what to advertise and how to advertise. For example is it more effective to advertise the Matilda Highway or individual towns along the Highway?

There may be a role for Tourism Qld to assist in identifying the way that key target markets look for information and why they choose different kinds of holiday locations.

Tourism Qld's research suggests that the internet is a key way by which most people find tourism information.

If so, there is scope for Councils to work together to better use the internet. However, the lack of genuine unity between regions and sub-regions hinders this joint action.



It is suggested that, given the limited funds for promotion in Western Qld and the significant volume of advertising in general that;

- Collaborative action is needed to make the best use of these limited funds
- Highly targeted promotion is needed. However, it may be that there is inadequate knowledge as to exactly how the target markets look for information, or if this is known, it is not well known by the groups making promotion decisions.

Collaborative marketing and promotion is suggested as being important because;

- People are more likely to look at the whole experience of the West rather than the attractions of a particular town
- Having one major brand may be better than multiple town brands. It is not suggested that this means each town has to be the same or that each town or region cannot have a speciality aspect to its tourism offer.
- Good internet sites are hard to design and pooled resources are more likely to be able to afford the quality assistance to get good internet marketing
- As events are an important part of tourism, having sequenced events so that travellers can go to a series of events as they travel along the Matilda Highway would maximise patronage of these events.

Other marketing issues include;

- The need to re-activate the website [www.matildahighway.com.au](http://www.matildahighway.com.au). As of 25 May 2010 this site has been 'parked'. The Matilda Highway could simply be linked to the existing Outback Qld website, another website is not needed. Some have expressed concern that the Matilda Highway concept encourages a simple drive up the Warrego Highway and discourages side trips to smaller towns not on the main highway. However, sensible marketing could deal with this. There is a case for developing and promoting day trips out from towns to encourage people to stay another night. Smaller regional towns could be included in this concept.
- The existing Outback Qld website needs to be upgraded and links added to the websites of each Council and attraction in the region.

#### **7. How successful have existing programs been in utilising the skills of grey nomads in rural and regional Queensland.**

Existing programs are quite limited. The Barcaldine grey nomad volunteer programs appears to have been successful and Blackall-Tambo Council tourism staff are keen to see if this can be replicated in their region. There are several community owned and run tourist attractions in Blackall and Tambo that could use grey nomad help with maintenance.

The Harvest Trail of Centrelink, used to highlight the employment available in harvesting fruit and vegetables, is not directly relevant as the West does not have a horticulture industry.

There are a number of private groups promoting the availability of casual and part time paid work in regional Australia, such as Workabout Australia. The effectiveness of such programs is not known.

Hotels and other tourism businesses that use backpackers as temporary staff during the winter tourism season seem to have no trouble finding backpackers.

Blackall was able to attract the skills of a grey nomad for a temporary 12 month position and continue to use these skills on an ongoing part-time remote basis.

**8. What can the government do to encourage grey nomads to use their skills by undertaking work in rural and regional areas?**

The private sector seems to be providing a range of ways to promote the paid work available.

It may be that the industrial relations system needs to be reviewed so that it encourages the development of short term jobs, casual jobs etc. This is likely to have wider application as the intergenerational effect of retiring baby boomers and a low number of new labour market entrants shrink the national labour pool.

There may be gaps in promoting the availability of projects for volunteers. For example;

- A jobs board located at the Visitor Information Centres, caravan parks or riverbanks.
- A central online jobs link for grey nomads, as is done with Centrelink's Harvest Trail.
- The tourism jobs element of the Australian College of Outback Tourism website, the Outback Qld website or individual Council tourism sites may all be appropriate.