

The Future of Indigenous Tourism in Southern NSW

Background

The question needs to be asked and others may know, who is telling the story of what tourism in Southern NSW should be like over the next thirty years. Who are the storytellers, who is determining the mix of stories, who is managing the process, who is analysing and forecasting the best mix of product and product delivery, and who is anticipating and managing the impact that this story will/is having on the identity of everyone who lives in this region?

This paper proposes that Southern NSW, as an emerging tourism destination, could be elevated to a special place as a sustainable world class and iconic tourism experience when indigenous tourism becomes its centrepiece.

The conceptualisation of a vibrant indigenous tourism industry occurs in a context that needs to be understood and managed. There is a black history that has largely been untold in this country and the most exciting black history has been here in NSW because colonialism came here first.

This untold story is an enormous opportunity for at least two reasons:

- There are ripper yarns everywhere which can be product 'gold' for the industry. How widely known is the story of the snow people, The Ngarigo people?
- If told properly, the entire state and national identity can be raised to a new level of pride because 'who we are' and 'why we are who we are' becomes clearer.

There is a need to let everyone know the true extent of the hardships experienced by our Aboriginal ancestors for they are truly devastating in their impact, their pervasiveness and their intrusion into the present through intergenerational trauma. There are also struggles and trauma with non-indigenous new arrivals during the colonial period which need to be aired. They are not anywhere near the scale of devastation that Aboriginal people experienced, but they are just as intense for the people who experienced them. There is also the special case of "blackbirding" which relates to the importation of South Sea Islanders into Australia as indentured labour and in many cases slaves. The very first of these were imported into Southern NSW to work on Ngarigo country.

These are massive stories which we are telling very poorly. They are opportunities, catalysts for true reconciliation, appreciation and mutual respect. Colonialism is a storyline which many international travellers will identify with because of their own colonial past. The storytellers who tell the stories are on a world-wide winner if they do their job properly. We are talking about themed storylines through this period designed to describe the dramas of the day and elicit a better understanding, a deeper compassion and a hopeful future in the listeners.

The effective retelling of our black history in Southern NSW will also clean up many misconceptions of our white history. It will help kill off a substantial underlying sentiment of guilt, defensiveness, shame and helplessness concerning what happened to Aboriginal Australia which exists now. The sentiment needs to be shifted to one of understanding, identification with the hardships suffered and compassion. White Australia must be "let off the hook" if we are to remove stereotypic beliefs like "get over it and the past is in the past".

These roadblocks can be removed by good storytelling. The collective guilt has always been misplaced. It has never been the colonial immigrants that have been the problem, even though they have often unwittingly been the instrument of suffering for Aboriginal people as well as themselves.

It has been the decisionmakers in Britain and their colonial administrators that created the policies that led to the devastation of Aboriginal people, the theft of land the decimation of dignity.

These storylines underpin contemporary indigenous stories which should also be at the heart of an invigorated indigenous and generic tourism industry in Southern NSW.

The Approach

Tourism as an industry is like an orchestra, it requires the right players, the right instruments, the right music and the right conducting to create a vibration where lead performers can perform with excellence. There can be solo performances, ensembles, section performances and full orchestras. Cooperation and focus can create phenomenal music.

Tours, events and places to visit are dependent on accommodation, food, transport and other infrastructure to thrive. If these are not in place, the brilliance of the music will not be heard.

Indigenous tourism is akin to the solo, ensemble and section performances, it needs the backing of the full orchestra to thrive and the orchestra needs the qualities that indigenous participation brings to make the music truly phenomenal and ensure Southern NSW becomes the iconic destination in Australia.

Indigenous tourism is a star performer yet to be truly discovered. It has unique properties which make its presence compelling. It is ancient, the oldest continuous culture on the planet. With this comes experience which is not available anywhere else on the planet. It has a unique worldview which is sophisticated in its wisdom and mesmerising in its presentation. It is different and 'point of difference' is crucial for successful tourism.

How indigenous tourism is positioned within the broader Southern NSW tourism industry needs to consider several issues:

1 We are one people

Everyone in this country has access to the beauty of our land, its vastness and its diversity. We have unique landscapes, seascapes, flora and fauna which the general population identifies with and shares in. What the general population does not fully appreciate, does not fully share in and does not fully benefit from is our Aboriginal people, us mob!

We have the oldest human story on the planet. This is no fluke. It is because of our values, our thinking processes and spirit. We have a connection to country which is all encompassing, it is experienced through our minds our bodies, our senses and our spirit. It is still here, it is a living and evolving story. It can be shared.

All newcomers to this continent, whether they realise it or not, are part of the same human story. They are welcome to join us, to join our story. From a tourism point of view, it is the best story to tell. It is a far better story to tell than a purely contemporary story of Southern NSW with a little bit of colonialism and pre-contact remnant rituals thrown in.

To utilise the full human story will require a conscious shift from an "Us and Them" mentality to an "Our" mentality. It is a question of redefining our national identity to be inclusive of our true roots which go back 60000+ years.

The feeling of We or Our is much better than the feeling of "Us and Them" and tourism is a feel-good industry. It is also the Ngarigo way!

If the canvas is an inclusive 60000+-year story, then we must all be equal players in the story telling business, we must all own it, it is ours and then we will thrive.

2 *The Story-tellers*

The question then becomes who are the best story tellers to present the stories in their most powerful form. What protocols need to be in place to ensure the integrity of stories, respect for the people and places the stories are about. This becomes clearer when we start to theme and dream of the stories we want to tell.

Key questions are:

- What does it look like when Southern NSW is at its most story telling peak?
- What do we want to present to the world, to the market, to ourselves about who WE, not Us and Them, are?

From a storytelling point of view, we have three broad time frames to work with:

- the first 60000+ years (pre-contact)
- the colonial period 1788 - 1970
- contemporary Australia and the next 40000 years

The first 60000+ years are the domain of Aboriginal Australia. There needs to be an active engagement of the Traditional Owners, Elders, historical Aboriginal people and communities in each indigenous country in Southern NSW. It is crucial for authenticity, the quality of the stories and the ownership of the process that all communities are involved in the three timeframes.

The second timeframe is full of black and white fella stories, some are well known, most are not. The Man from Snowy River for example has a black and white aspect to it. It is a huge growth opportunity for storytelling, particularly from an indigenous perspective. The frontier wars as another example were a time of tragedy and trauma and they were also a time of heroes on both sides. The stories can be told in a way that informs every one of our true history but are ultimately uplifting.

The emotion of compassion is far superior to empathy or sympathy when we tell stories. Stories of woe and hardship can leave us depleted, shamed, sad, even broken if told badly, but they can leave us passionate and motivated to uplift the human spirit if told with compassion and a clear direction on how we can all be a part of a better future. This is storytelling at its best.

The blackbirding story is worth a special mention because of its uniqueness, its strong link with Aboriginal people on the mainland and in the Torres Straits, its strong association with Southern NSW (as the very first port of call) and its high ripper yarn value. THERE WERE TWO MAIN FORMS OF SLAVERY IN AUSTRALIA, BOTH STARTED IN NSW.

The third timeframe needs to consider how contemporary Aboriginal people are presenting themselves and what they are saying about themselves. This applies to indigenous specific tourism and the placement of Aboriginal people in generic tourism ventures. Each Aboriginal individual is a potentially powerful drawcard for any tourism business and this is something to invest in.

What contemporary indigenous products look like, who is working with them, who is doing the talking, who is in the lead role, who if any are the partners and who are the beneficiaries all need

consideration. The current situation with Aboriginal art is a valuable reminder that all indigenous products need to be managed and protected for the benefit of Aboriginal people.

The Southern NSW tourism industry can play the role of an influencer, a patron of good and uplifting stories which bring the WE together and let the “Us and Them” fade into the background.

This is a twenty-year Vision which needs to start immediately.

3 *Indigenous tourism by sector*

Key sectors for a strong presence of Aboriginal people to differentiate us and makes Southern NSW special include:

- Accommodation
- Tours
- Food
- Events
- Shows
- Culture
- Transport

Specific targets and specific strategies on the how and when need to be formulated. For example, what does it look like when the accommodation industry has 10% Aboriginal people in the workforce; what does it look like for 1 to 5-star levels of accommodation and what does it look like for large and small operations?

Specific targets and strategies also apply to food, restaurants, catering, tours, shows and events with benchmarks being set for each industry component.

4 *Indigenous Tours, Events, Shows, Food, Culture*

Tourism experiences with a significant cultural component raise a series of questions:

- What does it look like when each tourism region has a minimum of 5 exceptional indigenous experiences?
- What does that look like on Ngarigo country?
- What is the mix of pre-contact, colonial and contemporary stories?
- Who is telling them, what is included, what is excluded?
- Where are they located?
- Are they in partnership, if so, with whom?
- How are they positioned within the local tourism environment?
- Are they being packaged and promoted properly?
- Are they embraced by the local tourism community?
- Are they well supported by the local Visitor Information Centre/s?
- Who has been training/educating the local community on what the products are and how to leverage of them?
- How are the Aboriginal businesses themselves operating?
- Where are their strengths and where are the areas which need support?
- What is the indigenous tourism sustainability strategy within the local Regional Tourism Authority?

5 *Indigifying of the environment*

What is the current environment in Southern NSW saying about the way we respect, appreciate and believe in Aboriginal tourism? This is an important part of the overall strategy to place indigenous tourism on the centre stage.

It is completely clear that when you rebrand the environment you get a shift in perception. Coca Cola brands itself as young and healthy fun-loving, yet it rots your teeth.

If you go somewhere where they have created a much more respectful environment, what are they doing? What can we learn from them? We only must go to New Zealand to get some good ideas on this.

Ideas that have been thrown around in the past include:

- Road signage which identifies the indigenous country you are entering
- Use of indigenous language on media, signage, product and branding materials
- Caring for Country and local council clean ups which have a linkage between traditional Aboriginal values and a clean environment.
- Awareness raising of the concept 'respect the environment' be branded and lead by Aboriginal people.
- VICs are educated about local Aboriginal culture, combined with other colonial and contemporary stories – the ripper yarn concept.
- Static displays of Aboriginal culture in empty shop front windows, welcome to country signage, static audio displays, static voice overs of photo art
- Feel good stories of the WE, how we have transformed ourselves from the "Us and Them" to the WE

6 *The special case of Australian South Sea Islander tourism.*

There needs to be a clarity of thinking on how indigenous tourism addresses the issue of blackbirding and its legacy. Australian South Sea Islander descendants are closely aligned with Aboriginal people through marriage, mutual interests and by being categorised by colonial administrators into a general blackfella pool along with indigenous Australians.

Nevertheless, many Australian South Sea Islander descendants also identify as a separate people with a separate story who have experienced a similar level of trauma to Aboriginal people and want to be recognised as such. Separate recognition has been and continues to be a struggle, although the Australian government officially recognises Australia South Sea Islanders as the third First Nations people of Australia, a fact which is not widely known.

From a Southern NSW indigenous tourism point of view, are Australian South Sea Islanders in or are they out? If they are included, is the blackbirding story given equal status with the Aboriginal stories or a lesser status? If they are not included and are viewed as part of the general history of Southern NSW, how should it be treated by the indigenous tourism movement. From a Ngarigo Nation point of view, South Sea Islanders should be included in the story because they were brought to Australia specifically to be slaves on Ngarigo country. It is a special story but does not have the same weight as our own history.

Managing Body

The practicality of implementing this Vision requires ongoing discussion and development. It is a vision which pertains to the tourism industry itself and across government portfolios. It requires a 'think tank' to be established in Southern NSW where the Vision is nurtured, championed and its implementation overseen. Membership could consist of both indigenous and non-indigenous people because it is a WE vision. People of vision, good connections with the tourism industry and patience are required. It should be chaired by an Aboriginal person and owned by Aboriginal people. It could also have some of the responsibilities of a Southern NSW Indigenous Tourist Operators Council along the lines of WAITOC. Ngarigo Nation is willing to facilitate this process for the benefit of all parties.

Language

Aboriginal language draws us into the story of our own country and our own unique regionality.

We have started with welcome to country, we need to let everyone know what being on country means. This is done by stories, by behaviours and protocols. Language will deepen the experience.

Speaking or partially speaking in another language, being aware of the concepts and thinking contained within feels good. It is good for tourism and is certainly useful for cultural understanding and appreciation. More indigenous languages should be taught in school. They should be situational and reflect Aboriginal countries, history, customs and philosophies throughout the State.

Storytelling Training

Every worker in the tourism industry is a story teller, whether they are aware of it nor not, a story can be told by saying nothing, by body language, by service and by attitude and friendliness. People in successful businesses tell fantastic stories about who they are, what they are doing and how they are doing it. Every person in the industry needs to be assisted to maximise their story. This applies to Aboriginal people as well.

Personal stories relate to identity, personal pride, knowing who you really are and confidence as a worker, a person and an ambassador for Southern NSW. This could be packaged into a program for TAFEs and other VET sector trainers, larger businesses like Accor and could incorporate Aboriginal people as the facilitators for all tourism workers. It could also have a train the train component to it.

Conclusion

Maintaining the WHY

The key element to generate the momentum and energy to get the Vision over the line is maintaining a public Awareness of why we are doing it.

The Why is- Southern NSW tourism will be better, it will lead to more jobs for everyone, more feel goods across the whole community, better understanding and appreciation of who all Australians are when we see ourselves as a people with a 60000+ year history, not just a 230-year history.

The Why is the benchmark from which we measure success. It needs to be there for the long haul, across elected governments, across bureaucratic rotations and across charismatic individuals. It must be driven by Aboriginal people, joined by non-Aboriginal people of good will who are consciously working for a We vision in Southern NSW tourism. This puts Aboriginal tourism into the heart of the overall industry, recognised as the unique opportunity that it is to raise the entire industry to a new and extremely competitive level. When this vision gains momentum, the rest will

follow. Without this vision, we will end up with a series of uncoordinated initiatives with little sustained impact.

The when is now and Ngarigo Nations is ready to assist.

Building the Brand

Building a brand with indigenous people and culture penetrating and permeating all aspects of our industry as an “of course we are embracing our Aboriginal brothers and sisters, they are a central part of who we are as Southern New South Welsh persons, the way we live our lives, tell our stories and welcome other people to our fabulous State”.

If you are interested, let us know, send your thoughts to Better Tourism at Ngarigation@gmail.com