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19th April 2018

Dear Carolyn,

Thank you for the opportunity for Australian Regional Tourism (ART) to provide input into the Murray-Darling Basin Royal Commission

We have reviewed the Issues Paper. It is quite a technical document, and we note that submissions were encouraged to respond to its Terms of Reference questions. This limits our ability to provide comment, but we have done our best to work within this tight framework.

This submission is made on behalf of the members of ART, who include State and Territory Tourism Organisations, Regional Tourism Organisations, local government and private sector involved in regional tourism. A number of our members are based within the Murray Darling Basin.

Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute.

Kind regards

Simon McArthur

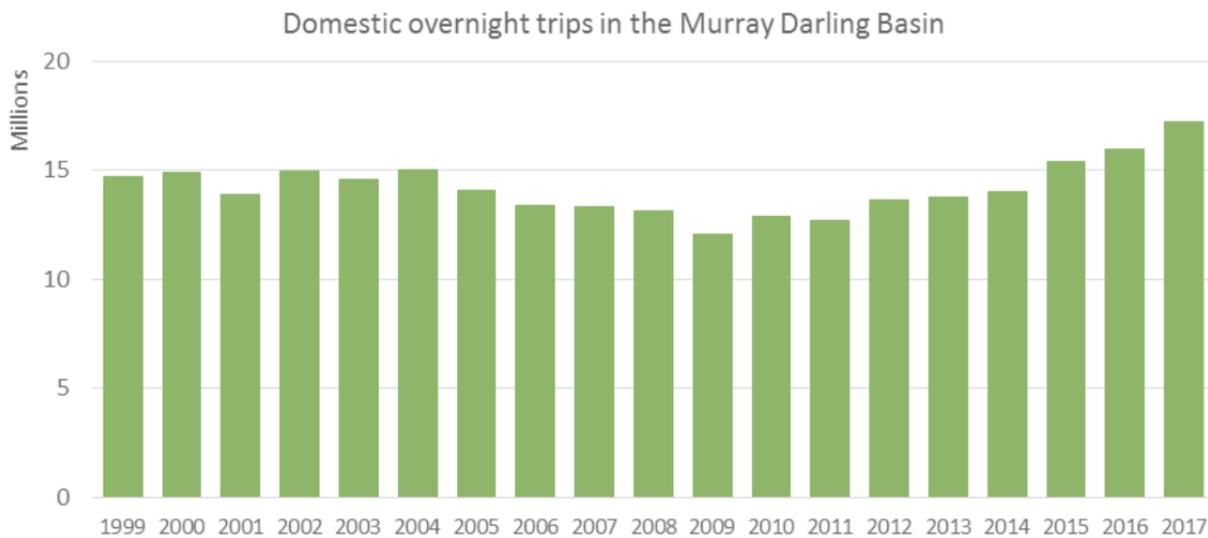
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Australian Regional Tourism

1. Environmental and ecological health of the Murray-Darling Basin

Regional tourism is a key stakeholder in the health and management of the Murray Darling Basin.

Visitor numbers to the Basin have grown strongly over the last five years, and are now above levels recorded prior to the millennium drought (see below).



Source: Tourism Research Australia

In 2016–17 domestic tourists made more than 17 million visits to the Basin, stayed for more than 50 million nights and spent more than \$6.5 billion (Tourism Research Australia). The number of international visitors to the Basin also grew strongly over the last five years. Total expenditure by international visitors added a further \$900 million to the Basin economy during 2016–17, and contributed to the turnover of an estimated 31,000 tourism related businesses in the region. Tourism is a strong source of future growth in the Basin, with a key focus being the Murray River itself (Murray Regional Tourism Strategic Plan 2015 - 2020).

There are many tourism operators directly reliant on river flow and a naturally functioning system, particularly nature tourism, ecotourism and Aboriginal tourism operators. For example, the award-winning Murray River Walk (one of the Great Walks of Australia) is a multi-day walk operation that provides accommodation on a house boat each night. The operation attracts international high yield markets that inject economic benefits directly into the regional economy of South Australia’s Riverland region. There are many more larger operators that also rely directly on the system, including accommodation (particularly camping and caravan park operators), tour operators (such as river cruises, paddle steamers and fishing operators), food and beverage operators and special events (such as the Riverboats Music Festival, Massive Murray Paddle and Deniliquin Fishing Classic).

A thriving tourism industry in the Basin is critically dependent on the health and attractiveness of its rivers, lakes and wetlands. Many visitors are attracted to the region largely because of the Murray River and the recreational opportunities it supports (Tourism Research Australia 2010). Tourism operators, local governments and managers of water systems have identified water clarity, quality and accessibility as important factors that influence the enjoyment visitors derive from water-based activities.



Some of our regional tourism members have advised that they believe there has been a net reduction in environmental values. For example, they report deteriorating water quality and reduced sightings of larger birds and mammals in areas where operators have relied on seeing them, and the reduction in watering of some flood plain areas has stressed habitat and reduced wildlife.

While we do not claim that tourism can replace industries such as agriculture and timber, it does play a vital role in supporting and complementing these base industries, providing alternative types of employment (and thereby retaining young people in the region) diversifying the social environment via visitors from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Vibrant communities are vital in attracting tourists and if the local economy is adversely impacted by water allocations for agriculture, then the towns will not only suffer but will be less able to support a visitor economy.

The natural integrity of the system must be maintained. So, the starting point for sound catchment management should be to maximise natural flow levels, while managing flood levels and subsequent impacts on infrastructure and facilities. Of course, how much we take out, and when is the technical component that is beyond a tourism organisation to comment on.

Our position is that there must be a balance between supporting a healthy environment that underpins a strong nature based experience and the need to ensure communities can still thrive and maintain a strong economic base that allows for populations to be steady (preferably grow) in regional locations and retain adequate tourism infrastructure.

2. Recovery of 450GL for enhanced environmental outcomes

We have been unable to find sufficient evidence to confirm that 'efficiency measures' will be enough to recover the 450GL for enhanced environmental outcomes. We support additional regional infrastructure that will facilitate water efficiencies.

3. Darling River and Menindee Lakes

Consideration of tourism needs does not appear to have been taken into account. The Menindee Lakes are a significant tourism and recreation site. For example, in the Menindee area:

- The remnants of the Old Kinchega Homestead and the historic Kinchega Woolshed, near Emu Lake, are cultural tourism attractions critical to the local visitor economy.
- Maidens Menindee Hotel is the second oldest pub in NSW. Still offering comfortable accommodation and restaurant meals.

Therefore, caution should be exercised before releasing water from the Menindee Lakes downstream to counteract ongoing dry conditions, as it will adversely impact on important tourism attractions thus causing distress to already vulnerable communities.