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## Facilitating Work and Play among Backpackers in the Great Southern, Western Australia

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### Editors' Box

This case study concerns backpacker tourism, in particular those with working holiday maker visas and the potential to attract them to a region as itinerant labour. The chapter reports work done for a project designed and funded through the Great Southern Development Commission (State government) and the Area Consultative Committee (Federal government). The case study reflects the ability of a region to innovate through the creation and use of research, the clustering of resources and the issue of institutional infrastructure. Importantly, the chapter reports the way in which diverse 'industries' can be linked to provide development blocks that can conceptualise novel solutions to the situations they face.

### Introduction

Assessing a region's 'readiness' for tourism and its potential for attracting visitors is a complex process as has been shown throughout this book. The situation analysed in this chapter is unique in the book because the region's prime 'attraction' for backpackers can be available employment for visitors. The visitors being targeted in this study are backpackers holding working holiday maker visas and while employment is seasonally plentiful, the region lacks other aspects of 'capital' to enable it to effectively attract a significant number of these visitors. This chapter arises from work in a specific, mostly inland area of the Great Southern in Western Australia.

While backpackers tend to travel extensively in Australia's regions (BTAG 2002) their motives for doing so tend to fall into one of two categories. Whereas those regions visited for sightseeing and play type activities tend to be popular with all backpackers, only those of the visitors who hold working holiday visas are likely to venture to rural hubs in order to find employment. Further, very few of those Working Holiday Makers (WHM) stay on in those regions any longer than necessary after finishing work, preferring to rejoin their backpacker peers in established centres for tourist, social and play-type activities as soon as their funds are replenished. However, it appears that there are numerous regions that could benefit significantly by tapping into both aspects of the backpacker phenomenon.

The Great Southern Region of Western Australia has both a number of promising coastal backpacker tourism destinations as well as rural industries suffering from periodically unmet demand for WHMs. The project described below investigates a number of strategies aimed at assisting the region in the sustainable development of its overall backpacker tourism potential followed by an examination of the steps required to increase supply of and demand for WHMs as a rural labour-force in the Great Southern.

The Project was conducted jointly by the Great Southern Development Commission (GSDC), the regional Area Consultative Committee and Murdoch University and arose through initiatives in the Region from employers and the GSDC and discussion with the authors. Our previous research into international backpackers was drawn upon to inform an approach that involved further primary research with relevant regional stakeholders, hostel managers, other agencies and, of course, backpackers.

The outcome has been a series of recommendations to the Great Southern Development Commission that, if implemented, should assist in raising the region's profile among backpackers and WHMs alike and lead to its inclusion in those visitor's itinerary as a desirable destination for work as well as for touristic and play-type activities.

## **Backpackers and Working Holiday Makers in Regional Australia**

### **Backpackers and their Role as Tourism Pioneers in Regional Australia**

Approximately 460,000 backpackers visited Australia in 2002 (BTR 2002). Their presence is of particular importance to regional Australia as backpackers make up more than half of international visitors to regional areas. In many instances they have proven pivotal to the economic survival of struggling rural communities both as a vital labour force and as the consumers of local products and services. Backpackers are the fastest growing segment of inbound tourists and spent twice as much per visitor than is the average for all visitors during their stay in Australia (BTR 2002). Thus their travel and spending patterns inject considerable revenue into regional Australia as they travel more widely, stay longer and spend more than any other segment of Australia's tourism market (BTAG 2002).

Backpackers also have been instrumental in 'discovering' previously neglected areas of regional Australia and in linking an increasing number of regional traveller-centres to the existing network of major backpacker trails throughout Australia. Furthermore, experience shows that within a relatively short time destinations pioneered by this tourism sector tend to also attract more conventional visitors (Westerhausen 2002:183).

This process applies throughout Australia but WA still suffers as a consequence of the eastern states being the main gateway for backpackers. All too often, Western Australia, let alone its regions, remain but an afterthought and are dropped from backpackers' itineraries due to constraints on time or finances. It is therefore advisable to influence backpackers' travel patterns long term by the distinctive branding of individual regions and by supplementing information available from "official" sources with the more trusted kind of information that is passed on by backpackers' informal information system.

### **Working Holiday Makers as a Vital Source of Labour for Australia's Rural Industries**

During 1999-2000, roughly a fifth (79,000) of all backpackers coming to Australia arrived as holders of Working Holiday Visas (Harding & Webster 2002:13). Over the years this segment of the backpacker market has become a sought after form of labour in rural areas as they represent a young, willing and purpose driven labour force (National Farmers Federation 2002). WHMs have been generally prepared to travel to wherever positions are available and remuneration is competitive. They tend to not easily be deterred by basic work and living conditions and in the past many have considered working in rural areas a part of their overall Australian experience. However, while the biggest industry employing WHMs in Australia remains the horticultural Industry (National Farmers Federation 2002), significant changes are taking place as far as competing employment sectors in the city are concerned.

While many respondents professed to want to work in different vocational areas than at home, reality shows that they will quickly accept professional work that is offered at professional rates because of the extra money involved. It has to be remembered that for this group of workers, the holiday-aspect of their trip remains paramount and that the less time is required to supplement their funds the more time remains for their primary purpose - to see Australia. Thus WHMs represent a finite resource whose availability as workers or visitors to an area is by no means guaranteed but requires careful thought and planning as well as competitive wages and conditions.

## Unlocking the Potential – A Backpacker Tourism Strategy for the Great Southern

Presently the Great Southern Region of Western Australia represents an almost unknown destination to the vast majority of backpackers arriving in Australia compared with established WA backpacker tourism magnets such as the Ningaloo Reef and Broome. In order to achieve brand recognition for the region among backpackers it is necessary to utilise various existing tourism icons in order to create an overall tourism image out of the region's unique attractions. This branding of the region has to be part of a coordinated backpacker marketing and communication strategy that establishes the Great Southern as a worthwhile place to visit, on the subcultural map.

In this context it needs to be understood that the movement of backpacker streams and the construction of subcultural itineraries are governed not simply by the convenience of transport or the existence of a physical backpacker infrastructure but also by the social environment at a destination and most importantly the tourist images associated with it. Hardy (1990:541) noted that tourist activity generally is determined both by the setting in which it takes place and by the visitor's own search for novelty and excitement. Schwartz (1991:591) observed that, unlike tourists who primarily form relationships within their group, backpackers depend upon relationships established with others along the road. Given that socialising with other backpackers has gained a pre-eminent position as far as activity-choice is concerned, it is obvious that locations where the opportunity exists to interact with each other are like 'magnets in a flow of charged particles' (Macbeth and Westerhausen 2003:71).

### **Key Components of a Backpacker Specific Regional Tourism Image for the Great Southern**

The specific attractions of a number of destinations popular with backpackers in the Great Southern have been identified as the key ingredients from which to construct a successful regional backpacker tourism product whose image can then be communicated through the formal and informal information sources utilised by backpackers. The three major coastal centres, Denmark, Walpole and Albany, have distinct but complimentary attractions that lend themselves as key components in the creation of a pervasive image for the entire region emphasising the availability of a unique tourism experiences. These need to be seen in light of the proximity to the Stirling Ranges and Perongerups, both of which are important natural areas.

For the purpose of this paper, suffice it to say that in relation to the backpacker market, we have recommended that:

- Denmark should focus on Colour, Art and Music, the Denmark Alternative.
- Walpole should focus on the Tree-Top Walk, its forest and solitude.
- Albany should focus on the coastline, nature and its larger potential for fun, its party context.

Overall the Great Southern is well positioned to attract a far larger share of backpackers visiting Western Australia than is presently the case, provided it's so far fragmented touristic potential acquires a regional focus and is strategically marketed to potential visitors.

### **Let Them Dream - Creating an Image for Brand Recognition of the Region**

International backpackers visiting Australia tend to arrive with a highly flexible itinerary (Murphy 1999) and little more than the most basic information about the country. When questioned about the information sources used on their journey, respondents agreed with the existing literature (Cohen 1973; Riley 1988) that word of mouth remains the premier information source among backpackers in Australia and the World over. Guidebooks such as Lonely Planet and backpacker magazines such as WAX and TNT are supplemented by brochures, flyers on notice boards as well as by information gleaned from the Internet.

The destination image of Australia itself among backpackers provides a useful framework of reference and a convenient starting point from which to develop this image. Murphy's (1999) study indicated that Australia's pivotal image draw cards relate to its natural attractions, the friendliness of its people, a benign climate and the perception of personal safety, a fact that has become particularly important in the wake of the Bali tragedy. Respondents interviewed for this study further indicated that the expectation of an easygoing, relaxed lifestyle, the perception of personal freedom, closeness to nature and the opportunity for physical challenges figured prominently within the destination image held prior to arrival.

The aim of this project was specifically related to the creation of a harvest trail network which itself would contribute to the development of a backpacker relevant image. So, while the region has wider issues of imaging and communications to consider in relation to backpackers, our concerns are with quite specific strategies that are relevant to our main brief. Details of these issues form the basis of the next section but two issues stand out as important background matters. There needs to be backpacker specific information available that is fed into the formal and informal communications channels. Further, what needs to be facilitated is the creation of an overall atmosphere at suitable locations that addresses the social and ludic needs of the subculture.

In the context of planning for this niche market it is important to understand that backpackers follow distinctive trails of their own while on the road, both internationally and in Australia. Dotted along those trails are magnets in a stream of 'charged particles', have emerged as sub-cultural meeting places. These 'gathering places', as Vogt (1976:36) calls them, permit backpackers to socialise with each other after traversing 'native territory' and serve to re-enforce a communal ethos and the creation of an, albeit temporary, social world populated by their peers. Word of mouth (Cohen 1973; Riley 1988) by those who have been there influences their peer's travel decisions. Declared a desirable destination by both Lonely Planet and word of mouth alike, visitor numbers can expand almost exponentially until the destination becomes established as a fully-fledged subcultural centre. Once written up in guidebooks, the numbers of these visitors increase significantly, with many being attracted by the destination's social reputation at least as much as by other factors such as natural beauty or cultural significance – or, as in this case it is hoped, by work opportunities.

As far as the Great Southern is concerned, only Denmark exhibits the right ingredients for a traveller centre of this nature, provided its already existing social assets are communicated appropriately for this market. Thus similar to Byron Bay in north-east New South Wales (Macbeth and Westerhausen 2003:81), Denmark could eventually provide the social and cultural meeting place for backpackers visiting the region and become a magnet in its own right to the stream of charged particles represented by backpackers traversing Australia.

Thus in order to unlock the region's potential it is necessary to utilise various existing tourism icons in order to create an overall tourist image out of the region's unique attractions. This branding of the region has to be part of a coordinated backpacker marketing and communication strategy which not only facilitates those icons' inclusion as "must see" destinations on individual backpacker's itinerary but also establishes the Great Southern as a worthwhile place to visit for touristic as well as play type and social activities on the subcultural map.

This strategy should be facilitated by the establishment of work opportunities for WHMs in the region's rural industries in order to attract not only holidaying backpackers to the Great Southern but also WHMs in search of employment. By creating linkages between established coastal backpacker nodes and a "Harvest Trail" in the Great Southern's rural hinterland it will then be possible to not only gradually expand the range of destinations visited by holidaying backpackers in the Great Southern but conversely also retain some of the funds generated by WHMs through their involvement in regional touristic and play-type activities after their term of employment has ended.

Working holiday makers as a sustainable labour force for the Great Southern

WHMs have proven to be willing and dependable workers throughout Australia. Their youth and fitness makes them a valuable alternative workforce for rural employers who tend to suffer serious labour shortages during peak periods (Harding & Webster 2002). However, inequities between supply and demand for WHMs together with the absence of a critical mass of supportive infrastructure have frequently dogged rural employers' efforts to get this labour-force to materialise, in the right place, at the right time and in sufficient numbers.

However, with planning and co-ordination, many regions that now attract only holidaying backpackers could become attractive to WHMs in search for employment as well. Furthermore, after a region becomes known as desirable destination for its work opportunities as well as its touristic potential, it will be possible to create linkages between those centres of rural employment and the region's already existing backpacker tourism infrastructure for mutual benefit. This is our key strategy in this project.

Thus what begins with the provision of employment opportunities during harvest time should eventually result in the genesis of a sustainable backpacker infrastructure throughout the region that combines the needs of rural employers with the work as well as the travel aspirations of the subculture. By following this strategy, regional areas will reap the benefits from a more dependable supply of agricultural labour for the harvest season but also will be able to keep some of the funds generated by WHMs within the local tourism system after their employment has ceased.

However, while this concept will work well in areas with sufficient infrastructure that already attract large numbers of WHMs year after year, our research indicates that the current lack of a critical mass of jobs and infrastructure in the Great Southern hinterland needs to be overcome prior to being able to establish the region as a viable node on Australia's existing harvest trail. Thus it is necessary to increase demand, facilitate supply and establish an at least rudimentary transport and accommodation infrastructure in the region together with centrally packaging the work available and using a variety of recruitment strategies in order to establish the region as an attractive destination for this mobile labour force in the future.

Facilitating supply of working holiday makers for the region's rural industries

As far as Western Australia is concerned it may be surprising to the reader that the number of WHM positions available rivals that of Victoria (Harding & Webster 2002). However, given that almost two thirds of vacancies occur in the Perth metropolitan region (Harding & Webster 2002), it is easily understandable that WHMs are reluctant to leave the bright lights of the city even where their search of employment has initially been unsuccessful. Thus while ideally suited to fill recurrent gaps in the supply of rural labour throughout regional Western Australia, WHMs require a minimum of security prior to accepting country positions.

It needs also to be remembered that WHMs, while not unionised, do 'bargain' collectively by utilising word of mouth reports of wages and conditions encountered. They represent a finite resource, which requires careful thought and planning as well as competitive wages and conditions in order to attract them to rural areas. Interviewees described the conditions under which they would consider such a vacancy and the recurring themes, not surprisingly, were 'certain' and 'worthwhile'. As foreigners in an unknown land (and on a budget) and aware of horror stories of untrue claims and dishonest hostel owners, they require a number conditions to be in place prior to accepting a vacancy in regional Western Australia. At the minimum this involves the following:

- A confirmed position along with certainty of wages and conditions;
- Certainty regarding nature of work;
- A guaranteed minimum length of employment; and
- Confirmation regarding accommodation and starting times.

It seems advisable for employers in the Great Southern to create 'work packages' of available positions and to consider the conditions mentioned above to be minimum criteria for a serious job offer along with a competitive wage.

### Physical Infrastructure Requirements

While the question of how employment should be organised has been addressed above, a number of further fundamental questions relating to accommodation and transport need to be considered by any region that wants to rely on WHMs as important components of their work force. Thus in all areas of the Great Southern apart from Albany and Denmark there appears to be a shortage of accommodation for seasonal workers and tourists.

There also exists a distinct lack of public transport in the region, to and from the coast and between towns. Given that many WHMs do not have transport it is very difficult to employ them without at least providing a basic transport infrastructure for them. Furthermore, without regular and sufficient linkages between coast and hinterland, nascent local tourism structures inland will not be able to realise their potential.

### Will a Hostel be Economically Sustainable?

While seasons and crops in the region can change from year to year there does not currently seem to be sufficient work available for WHM outside the November to May period to economically support purpose-built accommodation. Where numbers cannot be guaranteed and shortfalls won't be subsidised by employers, a purpose built hostel may not be economically sustainable and justify the large sums involved in its construction. Conversely, the option of solving accommodation shortages for Working Holiday Makers during peak periods utilising existing local resources such as pubs and farmstay type accommodation with local families on an ad hoc basis may also be fraught with difficulties. Carlsen and Getz (2001) noted that operators of rural tourism businesses frequently underestimate the time and effort required to operate as a viable business. It is therefore easy to envisage that even those locals willing to provide rudimentary accommodation for WHM initially may choose to cease operating after one or two seasons unless a subsidy makes the effort of providing accommodation during peak periods worth their while.

### Current and Future Recruitment Strategies

This project arose because employers have continued to express difficulty in sourcing both skilled and unskilled labour during times of peak demand. We suggested five strategies are considered:

- *The use of a Perth harvest recruitment office.* Chief among the employment brokers specialising in rural jobs for Working Holiday Makers appears to be *Workstay*, an organisation that has for almost 20 years been involved in the recruitment of rural labour from overseas visitors. To facilitate the process, Workstay instigated a partnership between their Perth office and a number of local hostel operators who co-ordinate work in their area.
- *Recruitment of Working Holiday Makers via an Internet Website.* Given the Internet proficiency of WHMs and backpackers generally (BTR), an Internet Website would have an important place within an overall scheme of interacting with WHMs both prior to and after their arrival in Australia. This will be particularly the case once the recommended recruitment strategies involving the targeting additional sources of WHMs and the packaging of available work have been implemented.
- *Recruitment of Working Holiday Makers from Interstate.* It seems to be useful to investigate opportunities for strategic labour alliances between local and east coast working hostels, in particular at times where anticipated shortages in WA coincide with the end of harvesting work in the eastern states.

- *Recruitment of Working Holiday Makers from Overseas.* It seems incongruous that there have been no attempts to establish some form of cooperation with overseas organisations such as "Travel active" in the UK and "Australian Backpackers" in Holland. Both organisations and others offer to take care of everything including visas, flights, initial accommodation, travel Insurance etc. - in short anything but a job waiting on arrival.
- *Recruitment of Working Holiday Makers via a National Database.* Ideally of course personal details, including mobile phone numbers, could be collected from every WHM when they enter Australia and then added to a national recruitment database run along the lines outlined above. This could even involve a free website to upload pictures of their journey around Australia. A website of this nature would provide an ideal medium for recruitment as well as showcasing Australia to friends and family through the eyes of the visitor as their journey progresses. However, until such a national database exists, prominent advertising in interstate traveller hubs may fill this gap as far as recruitment is concerned. In addition, it might be feasible to reciprocally collect mobile phone numbers and email addresses of WHMs prior to them leaving an area and swap those with numbers collected from WHM by employers in the eastern states harvest areas.

The actual communication and confirmation of the above information can be achieved in a number of ways and appear to work best in conjunction with each other in order to facilitate its take up by the premier communication system operating among backpackers (Cohen 1973; Riley 1988) and WHMs alike - word of mouth. It is important to remember that while the recruitment of WHMs by its nature occurs within a highly contained environment it needs to be targeted in a number of complimentary ways for greatest success.

## **Conclusions**

The Great Southern Region of Western Australia contains a number of promising coastal backpacker tourism destinations as well as rural industries suffering from periodic labour shortages in the region's hinterland. In order to unlock the region's tourism potential as far as backpackers are concerned it is necessary to utilise various existing tourism icons in order to fashion an overall image out of the region's unique attractions. Once in place, this image or brand can then be communicated down the subcultural grapevine as part of a coordinated backpacker marketing and communication strategy which not only facilitates those icons' incorporation into individual backpacker's travel plans but also establishes the Great Southern as a worthwhile place to visit for touristic as well as play type and social activities on the subcultural map. This policy should be facilitated by the establishment of work opportunities for WHMs in the region's rural industries in order to attract not only holidaying backpackers to the Great Southern but also WHMs in search of employment.

However, while this concept is likely to work well in areas with enough of an existing infrastructure to attract large numbers of WHMs year after year, our research suggests that the current absence of a critical mass of jobs and supportive infrastructure in the Great Southern hinterland needs to be addressed prior to being able to establish the region as a viable node on Australia's existing harvest trail. Therefore it will be necessary to increase demand, facilitate supply and establish an at least rudimentary transport and accommodation infrastructure assisted by centrally packaging the work available and employing a variety of recruitment strategies in order to access this mobile labour force. By combining the previously suggested backpacker tourism strategy with efforts to attract WHMs as a sustainable labour force in the Great Southern it will eventually be possible to create linkages between established coastal backpacker icons and the beginnings of a "Harvest Trail" in the region's rural hinterland and combine "work" and "play" for mutual benefit.

