

Investment strategy unbalanced

COMMENT
BY KERRIE ALLEN

DATA just released by Tourism Research Australia (TRA) shows outdoor nature activities are far more popular, and generate higher economic returns, than outdoor sports.

In the year to September 2022, the number of domestic tourism visits for nature-based activities in Australia grew 13 per cent, and attracted spending of \$52 billion, almost double the \$29.5 billion expenditure from domestic tourism relating to outdoor sports. The number of nature-lovers who spent at least one night away (where the money flows), grew by 16 per cent, spending \$47 billion (compared to sport-loving over-nighters who spent \$27 billion.)

Outdoor sport activities are defined as fishing, golf, scuba diving, snorkeling, water activities (sailing/kayaking/windsurfing), snow sports, cycling, swimming and 'other'.

Outdoor nature activities are defined as going to the beach, visiting national/state parks, or public gardens, going whale or dolphin watching, visiting farms or the reef, bushwalking/rainforest walks and birdwatching.

Domestic tourists who birdwatched totalled 795,000, (almost double the number who visited the Great Barrier Reef), who bestowed \$522 million on our economy. Bushwalking/rainforest walks, and visits to national/state parks, were also popular with domestic tourists who spent \$22 billion, and \$20 billion respectively.

But domestic tourism is only part of the equation.

Pre-COVID, international tourism was also an economic boon, and predictions are it soon will be again. Pre-COVID, three times as many international tourists (6.6 million), relished an outdoor nature activity as opposed to outdoor sport. Almost one in 10 birdwatched and spent a staggering \$2.6 billion, or eight per cent of our total international tourism revenue. The number of international tourists who birdwatched here, was more than double those who fished. There were 3.8 million visits to our national/state parks, compared to just 449,000 for an organised sporting event.

By contrast, a record year for the Australian Open (2020): brought just 812,000 domestic and international tourists who generated just \$388 million.

Similarly, the F1 Grand Prix: Around 420,000 attendees generating just \$75 million - and this is without accounting for what the government spent to host the events (in the case of F1, apparently more than the resultant revenue generated).

None of this should be a surprise.

Studies published over a decade ago by Tourism Australia clearly show Australia's landscapes and wildlife are our top attraction for tourists (Consumer Demand Project).

Which states are winning?

TRA data shows in 2021, NSW and QLD received the lions' share of the lucrative domestic overnight

nature market, with \$7.3 billion and \$8.8 billion respectively. Victoria received just \$4.4 billion.

With some exceptions like the Great Ocean Road and Phillip Island Nature Parks, Victoria does not appear to have realised the value in our wildlife and environments. It seems we prefer to chop it and shoot it, than protect it and benefit from the tourism dollars it can bring.

Despite our love of construction, Victoria hasn't erected a single wildlife land-bridge overpass which are proven to keep wildlife (and drivers) safe along busy roads. These structures are known to reduce

wildlife-vehicle collisions by 80 per cent. Hundreds have been built overseas.

In Victoria, hunters (who represent less than one per cent of our population) are allowed to shoot our wildlife for fun in over 50 per cent of our public environments. Hunting has been repeatedly shown to deter tourism. Recreational shooting of our native ducks (banned in NSW, QLD and WA) has been allowed to persist in Victoria - at so many public waterways that authorities have been unable to estimate their number let alone patrol them. This is despite continued alarming long-term declines in duck populations, and collateral damage to threatened species unique to our country.

The state government has afforded hunters and shooters around \$70 million of taxpayer money since 2014, hundreds of millions to support the horse and car racing industry, and is about to inject \$2.7 billion into the Commonwealth Games, for a predicted return of \$3 billion (net 300k).

Nothing against sport - it's great. But it appears our investment strategy is unbalanced, and we are missing a glaring opportunity.

Victoria is home to stunning natural habitats and wildlife. By protecting them, not only would we be in sync with the federal government's commitment to halt extinctions, but we could better tap into the significant financial rewards on offer from nature, particularly for our regions.

The fight for tourists is increasingly competitive. Yet our unique differentiators - our native wildlife and environments - can place us at the forefront of the race, with little if any investment as the assets are already here. All we need do, is look after them. Perhaps a good start is to stop killing our native wildlife and start constructing land-bridge overpasses which incidentally would also provide regional construction jobs.

Kerrie's family has lived in regional Victoria across generations. With a love of the bush and a penchant for the economic factors influencing it, she takes a keen interest in trends locally and abroad. Kerrie is a long-time member of and a spokesperson for not-for-profit group Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting Inc.



Great Egret
Picture Dorith Callander

"Almost one in ten birdwatched and spent a staggering \$2.6 billion, or 8 per cent of our total international tourism revenue"