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## TASMANIAN TOURISM – WHAT FUTURE?

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Tourism has long been one of Tasmania's major industries but we are now experiencing an explosive growth in visitor numbers. It may not be quite as dramatic as in some overseas destinations but signs are emerging of its potential to overwhelm many aspects of Tasmania important to locals and visitors alike.

In 1997 Tasmania received less than half a million visitors. Current numbers are 1.26 million per annum (Tourism Tasmania figure for year ending March 2017) and current government policy is to increase this to 1.5 million by 2020, but has there been adequate consideration of the implications? Should Tasmania continue down the path of mass-market tourism with ever increasing visitor numbers, or can we acknowledge that we are a niche market and quality, not quantity, is the future?

There is a growing trend of revolt against excessive visitor numbers in popular destinations overseas. A quick internet search will identify protests or dissatisfaction in Venice, Iceland, the Isle of Skye and many other iconic locations. Concerns include over-crowding, exclusion of locals, rising prices, and conversion of entire neighbourhoods to cafés/restaurants and/or tourist accommodation. Tasmania is not yet in open revolt but locals "in the know" are increasingly timing their visits to popular destinations to avoid the busiest periods.

But ever-increasing visitor numbers not only spoil Tasmania for Tasmanians, they undermine the fundamental reasons why many visitors come here. It is apparent to any regular visitor that Cradle Mountain, Freycinet and kunanyi (Mount Wellington) all have more visitors than they can cope with at peak periods. There is some scope for increasing visitor numbers by improving infrastructure, such as the current upgrade to the shuttle bus service at Cradle and the proposal for something similar at Freycinet. But this "engineering" approach to increasing visitor throughput comes at the cost of an increasingly crowded visitor experience. It may satisfy those visitors who simply want to snap a selfie and tick it off their bucket list, but is this the sort of experience Tasmania should be providing?

The most alarming example of the "engineering" approach is the proposed cable car on kunanyi. Despite the road and the television transmitters, the Pinnacle and surrounding area remain in a remarkably natural condition for somewhere so close to a major city. A visitor who arrives at the Pinnacle by road still gets a sense of being on a mountain. A cable car and associated infrastructure at the Pinnacle will transform the experience into something more akin to a visit to a theme park.

Another contentious current issue in Hobart is the proposals for high-rise hotels. Additional visitors require somewhere to sleep; i.e. hotel beds. A lot of additional visitors will require a lot of additional beds. Most visitors to Tasmania will want to spend at least some nights in Hobart and most will want to stay in or near the CBD. A thirty storey tower will provide

around ten times more beds than a three storey hotel on the same footprint. Many otherwise-sensible people advocate for additional tourist numbers in the same breath as stating that it is important not to spoil Hobart's heritage with high-rise developments – don't they realise this is doublespeak worthy of George Orwell's 1984!

We need to focus on what really attracts visitors to Tasmania. Surveys consistently identify wilderness, nature and heritage among visitors' top priorities. It follows that the preservation of these must be Tasmania's top priority, but a degree of intimacy is required to appreciate wilderness and nature. In a crowded artificial location the experience becomes merely viewing scenery. There are plenty of places around the world with more spectacular scenery than Tasmania but very few that offer better opportunities to experience wild nature and, unlike most of the rest of the country, we have not yet totally ruined our colonial built heritage.

Others have put this more eloquently: "Tasmania is real in a fake world" (Gerard Castles), "different is what Tasmania does best" and "Tasmania can be a shining beacon in a dull, uniform and largely artificial world" (Olegas Truchanas).

Even tourism industry heavyweights are raising concerns about high-rise hotels in Hobart wrecking Tasmania's brand and whether we would be better off without "booze cruise" passengers. There are signs of a change of emphasis in the Liberals' 43 point plan for Tasmania's future – to increase average spend per visitor and to attract more visitors to regional areas – but nobody is prepared to openly question the 1.5 million visitor target.

Do we want to preserve Tasmania's unique qualities for both Tasmanians and visitors or do we want largely unregulated expansion to cater for mass-market tourism, which is happening by default at the moment, despite attempts to spread the tourism load in both time and space, and T21 (the official Tasmanian Visitor Economy Strategy) paying lip-service to "enhancing Tasmania's brand"?

We need consensus on the sort of tourism industry we want. If we can agree that we are a niche market the industry will need to be actively managed to achieve this – it will not be achieved by the current *laissez faire* approach. And a smaller industry which avoids killing the goose that laid the golden egg might even be more profitable in the long run than maximising visitor numbers.

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