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NORTHERN RDA ALLIANCE (NRDAA)
SUBMISSION TO THE JSCNA INQUIRY
INTO OPPORTUNITIES AND METHODS FOR STIMULATING THE TOURISM INDUSTRY IN NORTHERN
AUSTRALIA

Introduction

The eight Australian Government funded and appointed Regional Development Committees that work across Northern Australia collaborate as the Northern RDA Alliance to:

- provide advice to the Government on cross-regional economic development issues and opportunities;
- facilitate local engagement on economic development priorities; and
- lead and contribute to economic development initiatives to develop sustainable communities.

The NRDAA was actively involved throughout the process of the drafting of the White Paper on Developing Northern Australia and the development of the Northern Australia Infrastructure Facility.

The Northern RDA Alliance has contributed to the successful start of implementing the Northern Australia White Paper outcomes with work on the following initiatives.

- The development of the Inland Queensland Roads Action Plan (IQ-RAP) across Northern Queensland, in partnership with 33 local governments, five RDA Committees and RACQ to identify and prioritise key freight and tourism road investment over a long-term period.
- Undertaking a pilot project to examine the opportunities for complementary high speed broadband systems that will reach out to isolated and remote communities in a cost effective manner that maximises the use of existing infrastructure.

- The development of the Mid and North Western Australia Investment Portfolio prospectus. The overall aim was to produce a unique document that can be used to inform and attract investment from key stakeholders in the public and private sectors from across Australia and potentially overseas. There is now interest to expand this initiative across the whole of Northern Australia.
- Working with CSIRO on identifying energy issues, opportunities and the development of a Northern Australia Energy Strategy to inform policy and attract investment to ensure reliable and affordable supply for all industries, residents and visitors.

The NRDA is investing its resources into providing on-going support to the Australian Government in the implementation of the White Paper and development of new initiatives to ensure the future sustainable economic growth of the north. In this capacity, the NRDA is pleased to make this submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Northern Australia.

We are making our contribution and comments in regard to the three identified topics in the Inquiry and then expand upon a recommendation to encourage greater collaboration in tourism development and marketing in the north.

1. Domestic and international tourism comprising: recreational, environmental, cultural, educational, and industrial tourism.

- (1) Apart from a few larger centres, data collection for tourism in the north is limited with small sample sizes, leading to a lack of reliability and low level of useful detail at the regional and local level to inform planning and investment.

The NRDA recommends that Tourism Research Australia be engaged to work collaboratively with state, regional and local tourism organisations and other stakeholders to enhance the current levels of data collection, surveying and analysis to provide quality tourism intelligence to enhance product development and marketing for both international and domestic markets.

- (2) Currently much of the national and state advertising focus is on profiling the wonders of the Great Barrier Reef, Daintree Rainforest, Kakadu National Park, the Kimberley's, Yulara and Broome. New product development is lagging.

The NRDA recommends that to develop opportunities across more of the north, there needs to be a mix of valuing and promoting the existing products and developing new products and destinations.

A key focus needs to be on expanding tourism business and employment opportunities for Indigenous people in all aspects of the tourism industry.

New product development can be supported by the continuation of the Tourism Demand Driver Infrastructure Fund, but with adjustments to suit a coordinated Northern Australia approach.

Tourism business development support can be continued and expanded upon through the Entrepreneurs' Infrastructure Programme. Although the criteria to access this program should have the threshold lowered for remote Australian where businesses are often smaller and in development.

The NA Tourism Industry Advisory Service being delivered under ASBAS should be expanded across the whole of Northern Australia, not just successful application areas, where some are over serviced and some areas are not serviced at all.

Strengthen and promote Austrade's Major Project Facilitation service for tourism which provides assistance to proponents of significant tourism projects (over \$50 million) to navigate federal government approvals in a streamlined manner. Of the five projects currently receiving assistance, three are located in northern Australia (Queensland). We would also recommend consideration of lowering the threshold for this facilitation support for key catalytic projects that can create significant local employment opportunities.

The NRDA also recommends, as below, more support for local, regional, state and national tourism organisations to focus on tourism in the north.

2. The role of peak bodies, local communities, and all levels of government in developing and promoting tourism opportunities nationally and internationally, including regulations and workforce issues that may inhibit tourism development

There have been a number of policy and regulatory issues and opportunities identified in the White Paper that the NRDA supports, including:

- Establishing new arrangements to grant permits for non-pastoral use that allow additional activities on pastoral leasehold land — this gives leaseholders the option of undertaking aquaculture, horticulture, **tourism** and forestry; and in the case of the Northern Territory, as defined in the Native Title Act (Northern Territory), allows additional activities on up to less than half of all pastoral leasehold land;
- Expanding and streamlining the Seasonal Worker Programme to support seasonal industries, including in agriculture, **tourism** and hospitality and invite northern Australia's **tourism** industry to suggest proposals;
- Expanding the Working Holiday Maker Visa Programme to allow participants to work for longer in high demand areas in northern Australia, with a small number allowed a second year on their visa if they work in northern **tourism** and agriculture;

- Development and implementation of Tourism Employment Plans (TEP's) in the three Northern Australia regions of Broome, the Red Centre and Tropical North Queensland;
- Promoting and assisting Northern Australia tourism operators with the Approved Destination Status Scheme (ADS);
- Building the Brand Australia Program.

The NRDA also recommends:

- *Expanding the TEPs to all other regions in the north with the objectives of linking with closing the gap priorities in employment outcomes for Indigenous people*

National, state, regional and local tourism organisations all have important roles to promote inbound international and/or domestic tourism and in some cases also work on investment attraction, product and skills development. They often achieve much with limited resources. In the case of state, regional and local tourism organisations, they are often competing with each other to attract tourists, events and investment. This creates a challenging environment for encouraging collaboration on developing tourism in the north.

The NRDA recommends:

- *The creation of grants programs to support the not-for-profit tourism organisations in their roles to support product development and skills development. Such funding could be targeted at supporting the development of business cases to attract investment, infrastructure development, marketing, management and service skills development.*
- *The creation and resourcing of a team within Tourism Australia to focus on the development and marketing of Northern Australia in partnership with state and regional tourism organisations;*
- *The formation of a Northern Australia Tourism Advisory Group to provide strategic advice on the development of tourism in the north. Please see below for more details;*
- *Australian Government support for a Northern Australia Tourism Forum to bring key stakeholders together to focus on strategies and actions that can enable the faster development of the tourism industry in the north.*

3. Communications and transport infrastructure (particularly air, sea, road and rail transport and port infrastructure) which may facilitate and grow tourism

Strategic long term investment in infrastructure (including communications and transport infrastructure) could be delivered through a Northern Australia Infrastructure Plan (informed by the Northern Australia Infrastructure Audit and as part of the Australian Infrastructure Plan). A holistic approach to infrastructure investment with a specific focus on relevant industries, including tourism would ensure greater outcomes for the tourism sector.

Communications – High Speed Broadband

Australia is at risk of falling behind world's best practice in regional communications infrastructure and services due to the sole focus on satellite technology in most of rural and remote Australia including most of Northern Australia. Narrowing the digital divide is critical to enabling rural and remote economic development. While existing satellite options provide a baseline service in low population areas there are shortfalls in satellite technology.

The NRDA is concerned that a lack of guaranteed broadband speeds will impede the growth of tourism in the north as it will negatively impact investors, businesses, local governments and visitors.

NRDA has just completed a trial of remote ITC technology that has connected the remote Indigenous communities of Engawala and Atitjere to Vocus (previously Nextgen) fibre via long-distance point-to-point microwave links. The benefit of fibre, which runs north-south along the Stuart Highway servicing the Territory's largest communities, has been shared with some of the Territory's smallest communities. A microwave signal is transmitted from the fibre source approximately 200km to the communities. The trial will test the potential advantages of this wireless service over existing and unsatisfactory satellite services. Initial results are highly promising and a full report will be available by mid-2017.

The NRDA recommends that the above report be presented to the Australian Government for consideration in planning future broadband connectivity and economic development in the north.

Communications - Telephony

Current Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) policy is very much driven by dense populations in metropolitan areas. Discussions on the Universal Service Obligations (USO) need to focus on ensuring all Australians, including those in the north, have secure, reliable access to telephony services at all times. This is an issue of equity, health and safety, economic development and social connectivity. The assumption by many in metropolitan areas that mobile phones will replace landline services any time soon shows there is a high level of ignorance about the remoteness and number of mobile blackspots in Australia. In the Mobile Blackspots Programme some 5,000 blackspots were identified. The majority are still seeking funding to secure mobile towers.

The NRDA recommends:

- *the needs of businesses, local governments, not-for-profits, residents and tourists be carefully considered in regard to communications policy and programs to ensure there is an improvement in telephony services' access and reliability; and*
- *the continuation of the Mobile Blackspots Programme with special recognition that tourism businesses in the north often operate in remote and very remote areas.*

Transport Infrastructure – Roads

Infrastructure Australia's Northern Australia Audit states the "road network in Northern Australia is essential for connecting people and freight with places of residence and economic activity. Servicing a mainly rural population, roads are more often than not a community's lifeline to other residential areas, places of employment or economic activity. The Northern Australia road network is extensive and characterised by long isolated roads and low daily traffic volumes." Within this audit 32 roads in Queensland, 17 roads in the Northern Territory and 23 roads in Western Australia were identified as roads providing "connections and access to areas of economic activity and links to domestic and international markets and population centres." This list however does not include all existing and potential drive tourism routes.

The White Paper on Developing Northern Australia states "Infrastructure is critical in linking the dispersed populations and remote businesses of the north....Where there is difficulty charging users or where there are broader social benefits, infrastructure is often better funded by governments." As a result, the Australian Government has so far committed \$700 million into northern Australia roads across the network of tens of thousands of kilometres covering 3 million km².

The challenge is more investment is required in road infrastructure if we are to achieve the economic and social outcomes that are targeted through the White Paper and especially if we are going to target tourism as a key economic driver.

A partnership including 33 local governments, 5 RDA committees and RACQ has developed a model known as the Inland Queensland Roads Action Plan (IQ-RAP) to identify and prioritise road planning and investment to not only achieve better road and bridge quality where required, but also ensure maximum benefits can be achieved for each tax payer dollar invested. Strategic, long-term, transparent, collaborative planning can lead to more sustainable jobs in each local government area, greater productivity for each business user of the road network, opening up of new drive tourism routes and associated investment into new and expanding tourism opportunities, better safety outcomes with a reduction in road trauma costs and social impacts and more resilient connectivity for communities during severe weather events.

The IQ-RAP was launched on 1st February 2016 as the first of its kind in Australia based on its scale of partnerships and geographic coverage of 19% of Australia. The model could be used across other jurisdictions as a way to approach collaborative planning and prioritisation processes.

In relation to opening up tourism opportunities in Cape York, further investment is required in the Cape York Regional Package to completely seal the Peninsula Development Road to Weipa, accompanied by investment in the region's tourism strategy and support for Indigenous tourism development opportunities.

The NRDA recommends:

- *consideration of the IQ-RAP work as an input to Federal and Queensland regional road planning and programs to create more opportunities for tourism growth;*

- *consideration of the IQ-RAP as a model which can be applied to other jurisdictions in northern Australia planning; and*
- *creation of a funding program targeted at the States/ Territory and regional councils to enable the upgrading of existing and development of new tourism routes to increase the quality and range of drive routes, attract investment into new tourism businesses and grow tourism jobs.*

Transport Infrastructure - Airports and Air Routes

Access and affordability are two key aviation issues in the north requiring strategic, collaborative planning and action.

In regard to international access, regions and local governments often compete, even with neighbours, to achieve international status at their airport. In reality it is not usually commercially viable to have multiple international airports within a 300km radius. Competition is also very strong amongst all airports to attract international and domestic airlines.

Travelling within Northern Australia can be a challenge as flight route options are limited. For example, one based in the north often has to fly via Perth, Darwin or Brisbane to connect with another point in the north. Some remote and very remote towns are serviced by regulated and/or subsidised routes with services limited by government agreements or commercial viability. While these services are predominantly targeted to support residents and service delivery agencies, their importance for investment attraction, business development and improving access for tourists cannot be overlooked. Due to small aircraft and payload, airfares however tend to be considerably higher than the more congested routes that are served by larger aircraft.

The NRDA recommends:

- *a whole of the north, transport inter-connectivity approach be taken to planning aviation and other transport in the north;*
- *strong support of airport developments in the north under NAIF;*
- *the above proposed NATAG could provide guidance on industry needs to grow tourism through aviation infrastructure and services;*
- *the Australian, State and Territory Governments collaborate on air route development in the north; and*
- *financial incentives be provided for the development of new air routes to connect within and to the north.*

Transport Infrastructure – Rail

Rail transport for tourists is limited to only a few key routes in Northern Australia.

The NRDA recommends:

- *supporting the existing tourism rail experiences as important infrastructure and tourism product (the Ghan, the Gulflander, the Savannahlander, Spirit of the Outback, the Inlander); and*
- *considering tourism opportunities in the assessment of the Mount Isa to Tennant Creek rail line feasibility study – as an opportunity to link Queensland and Northern Territory tourism via rail experiences.*

Transport Infrastructure – Sea access and Ports

Cruising is one of the fastest growing tourism sectors in Australia and offers opportunities for growth in the north.

The NRDA recommends:

- *strong support of cruise port developments in the north under NAIF;*
- *the above proposed NATAG could provide guidance on industry needs to grow cruise-based tourism;*
- *the Australian, State and Territory Governments collaborate on sea route development in the north;*
- *financial incentives be provided for the development of new sea routes to connect within and to the north.*

4. The NRDA adds a question about how to lead Northern Australian Tourism Collaboration

The NRDA recommends the formation of a *Northern Australian Tourism Advisory Group*

The idea of an overarching collaborative network approach to developing tourism in the north was first discussed at the Developing Northern Australia Conference in Darwin, in June 2016. Discussions took place informally between some NRDA representatives and some Northern Australia tourism stakeholders.

Further informal discussions were held in the following months in which stakeholders described some of the challenges in developing tourism in the north. As we noted above, State, Regional and Local tourism organisations and individual tourism operators are usually competing for tourists and investment. However, our discussions led to the position that creating a framework and opportunity for a more collaborative approach in the strategic planning and addressing of impediments to tourism growth in the north was not only desirable, but essential.

While no-one is seeking to replace or take over any existing tourism organisations, it was felt that the formation of an industry led advisory body to the Australian Government to guide the delivery of tourism development in Northern Australia would be an effective way to make progress.

The NRDA recommends:

- *the formation of a Northern Australia Tourism Advisory Group (NATAG);*
- *the roles of the NATAG could include*
 - *Providing advice to Australian Government Ministers who have responsibilities for delivery of Northern Australia programs*
 - *Providing advice to Australian and State/ Territory Government Ministers who have responsibilities for tourism development*
 - *Providing a communication network across statutory boundaries to seek engagement and input to policy and program development from all tourism sectors*
 - *Disseminating information and promoting opportunities*
 - *Encouraging and supporting the exploration of new business ideas and links between tourism and other sectors*
 - *Promoting the sustained delivery and implementation of programs that have been recommended in the Northern Australia White Paper*
- *the members of the NATAG could include*
 - *Chair - Independent tourism operator (with significant tourism development experience in the north)*
 - *(6) Tourism Operator/ RTO representatives – 2 Tourism Operators from each State/ Territory who are also on their Regional Tourism Organisation board*
 - *Indigenous tourism representative*
 - *Airport representative*
 - *Airline representative*
 - *Port representative*
 - *Cruise industry representative*
 - *Accommodation industry representative*
 - *Tourism Australia representative x 1*
 - *State/ Territory Tourism Organisation representative x 1 each*
 - *NRDAA representative*
- *the NATAG could be supported by the NRDA as the Secretariat, subject to a funding agreement. Alternatively it could be supported by the Office of Northern Australia.*

5. The NRDA and its 8 RDA Committees are committed to supporting the Australian Government to implement the Northern Australia White Paper

The Northern RDA Alliance and their 8 RDA committees are uniquely positioned to support the Australian Government in developing sustainable communities through economic development. They are hence well positioned to support the formation and operation of a NATAG to bring industry stakeholders together to collaborate and grow the sector.

- RDA Committees often have the role of being the “honest broker” to bring people together on issues across organisational and regional geographic boundaries.
- RDA Committees work collaboratively.
- RDA Committees work in key performance areas as identified by the Australian Government.
- RDA Committees are extremely cost efficient and cost effective for the Australian Government to have an engagement mechanism across the country.
- RDA Committees leverage their extensive networks, partnerships and their base funding to secure funding for initiatives that deliver regional economic development outcomes.
- RDA Committees are made up of volunteers from a diverse range of government, commercial and community backgrounds.
- RDA Committees are well-established and incorporated with governance, policies and procedures in place to operate effectively and responsibly.

Mike Reed
Chair, Northern RDA Alliance



An Australian Government Initiative