

## **INQUIRY INTO OPPORTUNITIES AND METHODS FOR STIMULATING THE TOURISM INDUSTRY IN NORTHERN AUSTRALIA**

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*The East Kimberley Marketing Group (EKMG) Inc was formed as a result of industry forums held in late 2013 which clearly identified the requirement to work together in a coordinated manner to better market the East Kimberley region. Regular meeting of the EKMG have focused on the plateauing of our visitor numbers and what could be done about our lagging tourism industry.*

*In consultation with Tourism WA, it was decided that the EKMG focus on two key areas:*

- 1. Improved air access.*
- 2. Market awareness – enhancing length of stay.*

*The EKMG Management Committee is made up of tourism operators within the region and our Constitution states that we must also have a representative from the Shire of Wyndham East Kimberley, Shire of Halls Creek, Australia's North West Tourism, Kununurra Visitor Centre and the East Kimberley Chamber of Commerce & Industry.*

*Our major focus over the past 2.5yrs has been to commence direct flights from Melbourne to Kununurra in order to open up the Kimberley region to the east coast of Australia. Recently, a proposal was received from an airline to assist us with reaching this goal however, funding is required to see it to fruition.*

*Please find following our comments regarding opportunities and methods for, and impediments and challenges to stimulating the tourism industry in Northern Australia:*

**Domestic and international tourism comprising: recreations, environmental, cultural, educational and industrial tourism.**

*There is huge potential in our region however, there are significant limitations to the viability of such (eg. land access and tenure, the ability for small to medium enterprise to get through the red-tape, access to resources (such as telecommunications) and infrastructure).*

**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.**

*On a local level, we believe that the Visitor Centre Model needs to be reviewed.*

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*The Kununurra Visitor Centre sees between 85,000 to 100,000 people per annum and relies on tour sales commissions, membership and moving away from its core business of 'visitor servicing' in order to keep its doors open (ie. production of a local phone book, management of a Museum, Local Coordinator role for a large-scale community event). Whilst most other visitor centres across the state are 'Shire-run', the Kununurra Visitor Centre is not and as such, needs to be creative in the ways that it can service the 10's of thousands of visitors coming to the Kimberley region each year, many of whom just require 'information' and not the purchase of tourism product which provides much needed income for the Centre. Creating a visitor centre that is attached to venues that can provide it with steady income such as a coffee shop/restaurant, museum/hall of fame, cultural interpretive centre, conference facilities etc would be of significant benefit to gateway visitor centres.*

*The Kimberley region is of great interest to domestic and international visitors due to its rich cultural history, pioneering pastoral enterprises, minerals and resources (gold, diamonds and pearls), agricultural history (Ord River Irrigation Project), aquaculture (prawn farming, barramundi, pearling) on a scale not before seen in Australia along with conservation and eco-tourism (World Heritage Listed Purnululu National Park, RAMSAR wetlands, Kimberley Science & Conservation Project, North Kimberley Marine Park etc).*

*Being only 40km from the Northern Territory border, the Kununurra Visitor Centre is not only a gateway to Western Australia, but a gateway to the Northern Territory as well.*

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Improved visitor servicing model and infrastructure for the northern gateway to Western Australia.

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

*Mostly considered as a 'bucket list' destination, the Kimberley region is viewed as somewhere that is expensive to visit, hard to get to and requiring a lot of time to do and this can mainly be attributed to access.*

*Significantly, for the East Kimberley region, the cost to potential visitors, residents and businesses in both time and money is substantial when trying to keep employees, do business on the east coast or encourage tourism growth from the eastern states of Australia. Access to/from the Kimberley is a major issue.*

*The East Kimberley region is rich in its appeal to visitors and has an abundance of natural icons including (but not limited to) the World Heritage Listed Purnululu National Park (Bungle Bungle), Lake Argyle & the Ord River, Mitchell Plateau and multi-tiered Mitchell Falls, Gibb River Road, El Questro Wilderness Park, Home Valley Station, Berkeley River Resort and Wolfe Creek Crater. Together with these icons come an array of adventure tourism opportunities such as cruising waterways, hiking gorges, swimming in freshwater springs, chasing an elusive Barramundi, scenic flying as well as staying overnight at places ranging from camping out under the stars to five star resorts.*

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*To use a comparison, Ayers Rock (Connellan) airport in Central Australia sees 200,000-300,000 people annually and the Kununurra Airport sees around 42,400 arrivals annually yet, the Kimberley region appeal to visitors and the icons on offer are significant.*

*Direct flight option from east coast hubs such as Melbourne to Kununurra would open up the true Kimberley region significantly to potential visitors and would also increase the liveability of the region for locals which would assist with staff retention.*

*Together with financial assistance from local tour operators, the Kimberley Development Commission (Royalties for Regions), Tourism WA and the Shire of Wyndham East Kimberley, survey work was undertaken towards the end of 2015. Entitled 'Market Potential for Direct Flights to Kununurra from Melbourne' (attached as Appendix One) and including additional research into the 'travel habits of Kununurra residents and past visitors to the region', we have summarised some key points below:*

*Research into the **Market Potential for Direct Flights to Kununurra from Melbourne**. Survey respondents 632 Melbourne residents aged 24-65 with a combined household income of \$100K+. Responses:*

- 93% of respondents are aware of the Kimberley region.
- 44% are aware of the East Kimberley towns of Kununurra, Wyndham, Halls Creek.
- 61% are aware of the tourism icons located within our region – Bungle Bungle, Lake Argyle, Mitchell Falls, El Questro and the Gibb River Road.
- The top two barriers to travelling to the East Kimberley are expense and distance/time taken to get here.
- A direct flight option from Melbourne to Kununurra would increase travel to the region by a minimum of 14%.

*Research into the **travel habits of Kununurra residents and past visitors to the region**. Survey respondents 186 past visitors to the region and 623 residents. Responses:*

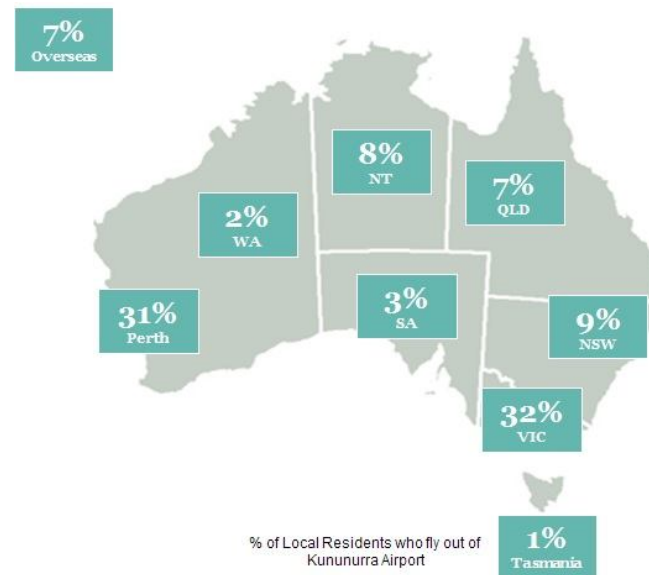
186 past visitors:

- 41% visited for holiday/leisure.
- 40% visited friends and relatives.
- 30% travelled for business reasons.
- 28% departed from Melbourne.
- 23% departed from Perth.
- 89% are likely/very likely to return to Kununurra.

623 residents:

- 85% fly out of Kununurra 2+ times per year (19% fly out 6+ times per year).
  - 51% fly out to visit friends and relatives.
  - 28% fly out for holiday/leisure purposes.
  - 17% fly out of Kununurra for business purposes.
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*Destination of residents who depart Kununurra airport:*



- *There is a clear move in preference from the current travel options to direct flights, which may improve conversion, given the key barriers are time and cost.*
- *If Kununurra to Melbourne is introduced, there is potential demand for 21, 674 flights by local residents.*
- *Direct flights present the opportunity to significantly grow first-time visits to the region.*

### **RECOMMENDATION**

The single biggest issue for tourism growth in the East Kimberley is access. Whilst it might be appealing to be a bucket list destination, this also confirms that in the eye of the potential visitor, they would be lucky to get here once in their lifetime.

In order to stimulate the tourism industry in the Kimberley region of northern Australia and create tourism opportunities and attract investment, substantial emphasis should be placed on improving access in and out of the region. This will not only drive tourism but it will also enhance liveability of the region and aide with employee retention and overall growth of the region.

Our distance from the south-east corner of Australia means that we are virtually considered as far away as Asia or the America's which are often more easily accessed through time to travel, multiple and/or direct travel options which save time and are often far more affordable.