

30 August 2025

Re: Inquiry on Algal Blooms in SA - Tourism can help communities impacted by the algal bloom and future climate-induced crises we face

Dear Committee members

I wish to make a submission through the Australian People's Tribunal to the Senate Inquiry on Algal Blooms in SA. I am an academic with expertise in Tourism Management, particularly focused on what is known as the "host communities" of tourism. I also live in a metropolitan Adelaide coastal suburb and have been personally very negatively impacted by the algal bloom.

I would like to submit tourism can play a role in recovery and resilience in the face of the harmful algal bloom (HAB) currently devastating the communities and marine ecology of South Australia (as well as future disasters and crises we face). The Harmful Algal Bloom (HAB) is affecting some of the key coastal areas in South Australia. SA Tourism has noted: "This has had a serious impact on marine life and the industries that rely on it — especially fishing, aquaculture and tourism." We might consider how can tourism activities support community recovery and long-term well-being as we face a crisis challenged future, particularly with climate change? I specifically want to address particular forms of tourism that can be harnessed in this way.

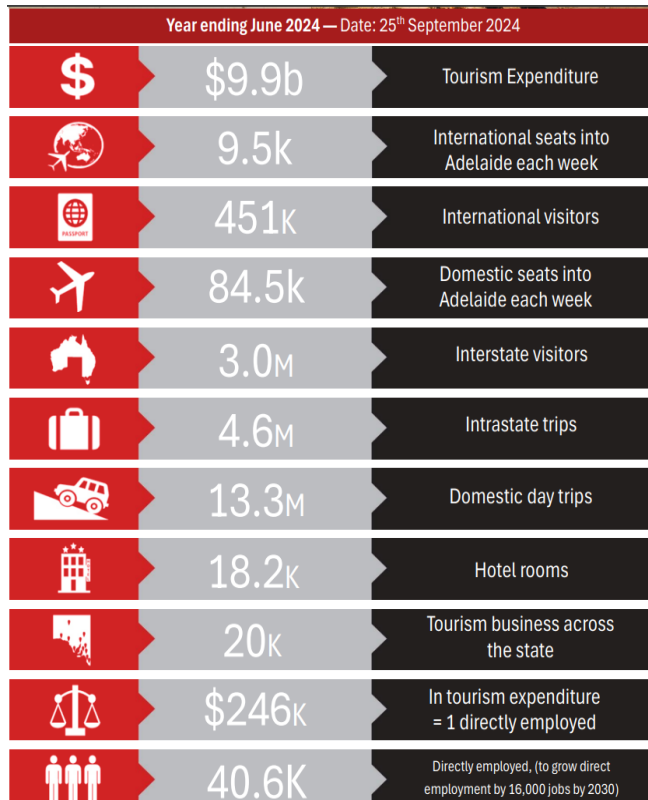
Firstly, I want to point out there is more to tourism than the narrow focus we currently have on its market aspects and particular focus on attracting international tourists. The current tourism industry practice is to focus on the promotion and growth of international tourists' visitation and to spend the majority of funds on marketing to these markets. Tourism has much greater potential than is widely recognised; in addition to its economic value, there is also potential social & ecological value. Niches such as school exchanges, accessible tourism, social tourism, volunteer tourism, citizen science in tourism, ecotourism and regenerative tourism are particularly vital in their social and ecological benefits. Additionally, I argue that we could centre local communities in our planning and management of tourism. Even more importantly, as we face multiple crises, we will find that domestic and particularly interstate tourists will prove more reliable and resilient as we confront downturns and difficulties.

I note the SA Tourism Industry Council (TICSA) undertook a survey into Harmful Algal Bloom Tourism Industry Impacts in first half of July 2025 with 97 responses from tourism operators. Tourism Operators reported:

- Reduced bookings & loss of revenue
- Access problems due to closures of foreshore, jetties, boat ramps
- Water quality & health concerns
- Media & messaging damage
- Operational disruptions
- Psychological impacts

The report from TICSa emphasised the need to rebuild confidence in coastal and marine destinations. This is particularly important to communities as the upcoming spring and summer seasons will be vital for their recovery to prosperity.

I note that tourism statistics indicate the value and potential of daytripper, interstate and intrastate tourism markets to South Australian tourism (see chart below that reports on 2024).



It is in this context that I note South Australia Tourism has launched its “Coast is Calling” campaign. This consists of a two-part strategy: a marketing campaign and a voucher programme to promote clarity and certainty for coastal visitation. The aim is to help coastal tourism regions impacted by the algal bloom by encouraging demand through a travel voucher program and to specifically call on South Australians to travel to support impacted communities. The voucher program will offer 20,000 vouchers for accommodation and experiences valued at \$100 to \$500 allocated by ballot from 24 September for the upcoming Spring school holidays. Certain impacted tourism operators have been invited to submit expressions of interest by the 29 August. This is a major attempt at keeping coastal visitation going in the midst of the crisis and also to try to avoid any further degradation to the SA brand as a clean and green destination, particularly featuring beautiful coastal and marine experiences.

Importantly, funds are allocated from the \$28 million algal bloom support package funded by the SA and Australian governments to date. There are important debates to be had about this use of public funds, including who they benefit and how. This needs to be weighed against the other demands on this small pool of money, including community welfare, ecological restoration work and long-term management of this and other crises.

If public funds are to be used for tourism, I would ask: could we have better prioritisation of tourism that is in support of the public good? Specifically, can tourism authorities be commissioned to support forms of tourism that support local community wellbeing and resilience and that deliver to our South Australian tourists access to affordable and restorative holidays for their family's health and wellbeing?

There are examples of the promotion and subsidy of holidays in the aftermath of crises. This includes:

- The January 2020 #bookthemout campaign by SA Tourism to revive tourism to the Adelaide Hills & Kangaroo Island after the bushfires;
- In 2021, during Covid pandemic, there was a campaign promoting holidaying domestically with hastags #bookthemout and #holidayherethisyear;
- And in 2023, another similar promotion to visit the Riverland after the Murray River floods.

In recalibrating tourism, we require a good balance between community needs, businesses' interests and environmental health as we deal with this catastrophe and others to come. It will be vital to have citizen input into tourism decision-making and even citizen-led decision-making, based on a commitment to the long-term public good as a guiding principle. Tourism may have a significant role in this.

One of the good news stories from this HAB is the way that citizen scientists have mobilised and recorded the marine animal deaths (more than 32,000 dead animals from 480 species- a fraction of the actual dead). It was surfers and fisherpeople (some of whom may have been on daytrips or holidays) who first recorded the marine deaths and alerted authorities. This spotlights new ways to think about the role that tourists can play for our local communities. New and alternative tourism forms that seek to support social and ecological well-being could be harnessed in such times of crisis, including citizen science, regenerative tourism, community exchanges, ecotourism, First Nations tourism, community festivals, school fieldtrips, etc.

However, we must acknowledge the context of ongoing community grief, uncertainty and rising anger. The SA Tourism voucher scheme may be resented by local communities who are continuing to find it hard to enjoy their coastal environments for their rest, play and leisure as the algal bloom impacts their physical and mental health. We must be sensitive to this and ensure policies and initiatives are done in consultation with communities and also seek to secure their benefits and well-being simultaneously. Any push for business as usual while communities are struggling may not be well received. Can alliances be made through tourism to cope together? Can South Australian communities, tourism authorities and governments at all levels come together in an understanding that daytripper, interstate and intrastate tourism markets are a source of resilience, support and connection in the face of challenges and crises?

I want to make a clear statement that climate change is one of the key roots of these recent crises (bushfires, floods, droughts, pandemics and the algal bloom). The Australian

government continues to support the extraction and export of fossil fuels despite clear calls for decades to wind back such activities to reduce emissions and keep us from catastrophe. There is evidently little sense of shame at the hypocrisy of bidding to host COP 31 in Adelaide in 2026. If we secure the hosting rights, a huge spotlight will be on our country - its policies and leadership. The algal bloom is unlikely to be fully resolved by that time and will serve as a spotlight illuminating our government's failure to meaningfully play a responsible role. (Additionally, there are the other failures and hypocrisies that also play a part including specifically biodiversity protections and commitments).

Finally, I close with the point that we would be wise to rethink tourism as a tool for our communities' futures because the era of polycrisis has arrived and we will find that our reliance on international tourists' visitation will become increasingly difficult. As I have argued here, viewing tourism as a tool for building inter-community solidarity and well-being has long-term social and ecological benefits, as well as the economic benefits that are usually promoted. There is the common adage to never waste a good crisis. The algal bloom has been the most awful of crises, but it could show us a way to reevaluate tourism and to shape it as a tool in our toolkit for intercommunity solidarity, resilience and regeneration that will better serve us in the long-term.

Dr Freya Higgins-Desbiolles, PhD

Adjunct, Business Unit, University of South Australia

Adjunct Professor, Centre for Research and Innovation in Tourism, Taylor's University, Malaysia

Adjunct Associate Professor, Recreation and Leisure Studies, University of Waterloo, Canada

Member of Panel of Experts, Climate Justice and Tourism Initiative, Griffith Institute for Tourism, Griffith University, Australia

Supporting References

Bigby, B.C., Smith, J. & Higgins-Desbiolles, F. (2024). Climate Justice in Tourism: An introductory guide. Travel Foundation. <https://www.thetravelfoundation.org.uk/climatejustice/>

Boluk, K., Higgins-Desbiolles, F. & Akhoundoghli, M., Eds. (2024). *The Elgar Companion to Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Higgins-Desbiolles, F. (2024). The end of tourism? Contemplations of collapse. *Journal of Tourism Futures*, 10(3), 476–485, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JTF-11-2023-0259>.

Higgins-Desbiolles, F. & Chew Bigby, B., Eds. (2022). *The Local Turn in Tourism: Empowering Communities*. Bristol: Channel View.

Rastegar, R., Higgins-Desbiolles, F. & Ruhanen, L. (2024). *Tourism, Global Crises and Justice: Tourism transition to a more just and sustainable future*. Routledge.

TICSA (2025). <https://ticsa.com.au/media-release/financial-impact-of-harmful-algal-bloom-on-south-australian-tourism-businesses/>

Tourism SA (2024). <https://tourism.sa.gov.au/media/rwxdmvcl/south-australian-tourism-domestic-and-international-performance-jun-2024.pdf>