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RURAL TOURISM: A CASE OF LIFESTYLE-LED OPPORTUNITIES

D. J. WALMSLEY

School of Human and Environmental Studies
University of New England
Armidale
NSW 2351

Email: dwalmsle@metz.une.edu.au

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ABSTRACT

Tourism is often seen as a panacea for the ills of declining rural communities. The paper argues that there is an element of blind optimism in this view although a shift of focus from production to consumption within advanced economies like Australia's will undoubtedly provide opportunities for the development of the leisure, recreation and tourism industries, both in metropolitan areas and in rural areas. The paper suggests that an increased focus on lifestyle will come to characterise Australia. Some rural communities will be able to capitalise on this, both for temporary visitors and for in-migration, but many will not. The well established concepts of threshold and range, when coupled with the idea of specialisation, will have a big influence on which places 'win' and which 'lose' in any lifestyle-led and leisure-orientated society. 'Place marketing' will become increasingly important for towns competing against each other for 'the leisure and lifestyle dollar'.

KEY WORDS *Rural communities; tourism; recreation; leisure; lifestyle; Australia; consumption; place promotion; societal change*

Introduction

Rural Australia is going through a time of major change (Pritchard & McManus 2000). The future of country towns, in particular, is attracting a good deal of attention (Rogers & Collins 2001). Economic restructuring, demographic change (especially out-migration and ageing) and the loss of social capital are widely acknowledged to be major problems. Given this situation, it is not surprising that the condition of rural Australia is the focus of attention in both politics and the media. In the political arena, the party political manoeuvring prior to the November 2001 federal election was to be seen in tax back-flips and seemingly endless changes to telecommunications policy in rural Australia. In the print media, even the quality media, living conditions in rural Australia are often described in somewhat emotive terms, with metaphors of illness, war and death:

> It's a battle for survival waged with theatre, toilet blocks and pretty streetscapes. Ailing small towns are moving beyond the Big Thing in a desperate effort to reinvent themselves, despite the critics who say a merciful death makes more sense. (van Tiggelen 2001, p.22)

There are obviously dangers in this sort of commentary, not least that of stereotyping all of rural Australia as 'a problem'. For example, although celebrated success stories are widely reported in the print media and on television, like the Harrow Sound and Light Show which features re-enactment of bushranger stories in a small Victorian town, the general tone of commentary is often either pessimistic or one of comic curiosity that highlights unusual if not bizarre events (eg. Mortlake's World Eel-Skinning Championship) (see van Tiggelen 2001).

This paper aims to rectify this imbalance in commentary by providing an overview of the nature and prospects for rural tourism. The paper argues that leisure, recreation and

tourism are really different perspectives on a single form of behaviour that will become increasingly important as society moves from a concern with production to a concern with consumption. After establishing the significance of leisure, recreation and tourism, the paper examines likely geographical impacts of changes in society that are centred on consumption-orientated lifestyle-led activities.

Tourism and rural Australia

What Australian rural communities seem to be seeking most of all is sustainable economic growth. Very often this is thought to lie in the field of tourism (Butler *et al.* 1998). So common are pleas for the development of rural tourism that some authorities have suggested that tourism is often viewed as a 'panacea' for rural ills (see Sorensen 1990). On many occasions tourism is not seen as something attractive in its own right but as a 'last resort' in rejuvenating communities that are looking for 'an alternative economic base ... to help maintain their attractiveness as places to live' (Murphy & Murphy 2001, p.162). In this sense, 'tourism' is very much a 'white knight', something that comes from away to save the day for the oppressed and the marginalised. Despite the widespread adoption of such a view, some authorities have cautioned against this sort of blind faith in tourist development, not least consultants in the field of regional tourism development who have warned against a cargo cult mentality:

> Across Australia there are many well meaning regional communities who believe that by building a tourist attraction, magically the public will hear about it and come in great numbers, time and time again. (White 2000, p.19)

The appeal of tourism in many areas of Australia is the employment that it generates (Murphy & Murphy 2001, p.163). This can lead to important local multiplier effects (Commonwealth Department of Tourism 1994). In the words of Jenkins (1997, p.181):

> Many industries including tourism appear to offer considerable potential to diversify the economic base of rural areas and to stem the flow of labour and capital (and thus community services and infrastructure) away from rural economies.

This sort of economic benefit has been explored by the Bureau of Tourism Research in its research monographs. The pattern that emerges in these investigations is one of considerable variation from place to place. In rural New South Wales, for example, expenditure per visit by international visitors in 1997 varied from $122 on the Lower North Coast to $628 in New England. In rural Queensland, the variation was even more striking, with the highest figure being $775 in Far North Queensland and the lowest figure being $73 in the Outback (Tulpule 1999). Obviously these figures are affected by the length of stay of visitors, itself an influence on the sort of tourist activity that visitors are likely to participate in and thus the sort of benefit that might be derived by host communities. Nevertheless, variation is also evident in expenditure *per night* by international visitors. Again, New South Wales and Queensland serve as useful examples. In non-metropolitan New South Wales expenditure per night by international visitors in 1997 ranged from $66 in the Snowy Mountains and the Southern Tablelands and $65 in the Illawarra to $34 in Orana and the Far West, $32 in

the Murray and $30 on the Upper North Coast. The variation in non-metropolitan Queensland was again more striking: the highest figures were $123 per night on the Great Barrier Reef South, $119 in the Whitsundays, and $118 on the Gold Coast while the lowest figures were $15 in Bundaberg and $13 in the Outback (Tulpule 1999). International tourism is of course only part of the picture, nationally accounting for about one-quarter of tourism numbers although the local impact can be very much greater in some locations (Faulkner & Walmsley 1998). Once domestic tourism is added to the picture, estimates suggest that, nationally, up to 513 000 people are employed in tourism (Johnson *et al.* 2001). Such figures are, predictably, open to criticism. Lieper (1999), for instance, has provided a detailed conceptual critique of the way in which employment figures can be exaggerated and he has suggested that the total number employed in the tourism industry in Australia might be closer to 200 000. Despite this controversy, there can be no doubt that tourism plays an important role in some local economies. The importance of tourism to a local economy seems to be inversely proportional to the size of place in question, a fact that is important in a rural Australia that is characterised by many small settlements. A study by the Bureau of Tourism Research showed that, in 1998, annual expenditure by visitors on the South Coast of New South Wales amounted to $6200 per resident in the region. In Katherine in the Northern Territory the figure was $4200 per resident in the region. By way of contrast, the figures per resident in Geelong ($2200) and Perth ($1900) were very much lower (Johnson *et al.* 2001). Of course, the total number of visitors to Perth was very much greater than the total number of visitors to the South Coast. What the figures demonstrate is the *relative* salience of tourism in the two regional economies, not its absolute size. Approximately 14 per cent of the South Coast's employment is in the tourist industry compared to just over four per cent in Perth (Johnson *et al.* 2001).

This is not to say that tourism is an unqualified benefit for small rural communities (Jenkins *et al*. 1998). One adverse effect of tourism development can occur if a place is so successful in tourism promotion that it faces being 'swamped by visitors who will change, both consciously and unconsciously, the style and feel of the host community' (Murphy & Murphy 2001, p.164). Even at a less extreme level, there can be resentment towards visitors and the elision, by locals, of the word 'tourist' into the word 'terrorist', implying an unwelcome intrusion into local life. To some extent, this can be countered by the fact that much tourism is seasonal in nature and often concentrates on the domestic school holiday market, as has been the case for a long time on the Mid North Coast of New South Wales (Walmsley & Jenkins 1992). Thus disruption and inconvenience to local communities can be relatively short-lived. Although at times strident, opposition to tourism in rural Australia tends to be overcome by concerns for investment and employment opportunities. In this context, calls are often made for government involvement in the development of the tourist industry. In rural Australia, such calls are made complex by the existence of three tiers of government. Nonetheless, the scope for government involvement has been of concern for some time (see Jenkins 1993). Under the Australian federal system of government, it is the Commonwealth Government that has financial dominance and yet the States that have jurisdiction over land use (Walmsley & Sorensen 1993). This sort of tension has militated against coherent development of policy in relation to tourism. Certainly the now defunct Commonwealth Department of Tourism tried to foster rural tourism through its Regional Tourism Development Program and its Rural Tourism Program. However, for the most part, the Commonwealth's focus has been on empowering local communities and providing infrastructure, not least the recent

concern for telecommunications in the bush (Jenkins 1997). In this way, rural tourism is treated in the same way as regional development generally, with much of the incentive for development being left to local entrepreneurship and initiative (Sorensen & Epps 1996).

It is very difficult to assess the success or otherwise of government, community and local initiatives in the field of tourism promotion because of many factors: a lack of commitment to monitoring outcomes; the long term nature of some goals; the tiny direct effects from some policies; the labyrinthine nature of multiplier effects; and the susceptibility of much of rural Australia to uncontrollable outside influences (see Jenkins 1997; Hall & Jenkins 1998). Additionally, evaluation of rural tourism initiatives and prospects often fails to take stock of the changing nature of society and what that means for the future character of 'tourism' (Walmsley 2001).

The changing nature of society

There have been many attempts over the years to distinguish between 'leisure', 'recreation' and 'tourism' (see Walmsley & Lewis 1994). In general terms, 'leisure' is seen as what fills the time left over after work and essential personal care (eg. eating and sleeping), 'recreation' is what fills leisure time (often with an emphasis on 'outdoor recreation' away from the home), and 'tourism' involves trips and overnight stays, usually at places a certain distance from home base. It is the contention of this paper that such attempts to distinguish three forms of behaviour are ultimately doomed and that, in the contemporary world, the three forms of behaviour are best viewed as parts of the same whole. This claim is made all the more significant by the contention that society is shifting from a focus on production to a focus on consumption which will render the overall field of leisure, recreation and tourism central to the character of society. This is an argument that has been around for some time (Fagence 1991; Commonwealth department of Tourism 1993). It has attracted a good deal of attention in urban geography but has been somewhat less commented upon in rural geography, despite work on post-productivist landscapes (Walmsley 2001).

The notion that society is changing and becoming more concerned with consumption than with production is one that is common in much writing on postmodernism (Rojek 2000). In much of this literature on mobile, flexible and consumption-orientated economic activity, 'the tourist' has become almost an emblem of postmodern society (Bauman 1997). Featherstone (1990) has outlined the main features of this shift to consumption. In particular, he has identified three examples of the way in which consumption is coming to dominate society. First, there is what might be termed the 'production of consumption' perspective on societal change. This highlights the increasing commodification of everyday life and the way in which the advertising industry is 'manipulating' society by influencing consumption patterns. In the field of 'leisure', 'recreation' and 'tourism', the force of Featherstone's argument is to be seen in the appeal of material culture and the seduction of advertising that manifests itself, ultimately, in high debt levels. Second, Featherstone discusses consumption as a symbol. According to this view, commodities are increasingly used to signify status and to mediate social relationships. In other words, consumption patterns can be used to display and sustain difference. In a sense, this argument is not new. It resonates with Veblen's (1899) argument about leisure and conspicuous consumption. There is however an important difference. Today, in the field of 'leisure', 'recreation' and

tourism', some goods and activities become 'markers' but of lifestyle and identity, not of social status in the socio-economic sense that Veblen was concerned with. Thus, a trip along the Birdsville Track or the Canning Stock Route is becoming a marker of 'Australianness'. Backpacking along Australia's east coast is in some senses a hedonistic rite of passage for a 'twentysomething' generation. And pilgrimages to Tamworth or Gympie credential individuals as members of the country music fraternity. Thirdly, Featherstone discusses consumption as a form of indulgence and social experimentation. The central tenet of this view is that we live in an age of affluence where excess resources (over and above the basic needs of life) foster a carnivalesque atmosphere where people are able to experiment with different lifestyles and experiences and therefore different consumption patterns.

An underlying characteristic of the 'consumption society' is that tourists are not motivated to travel by specific destination attributes but in order to fulfill psychological needs such as self-actualisation and social interaction (Waitt 1997). The same can be said of leisure and recreation. This is a fundamental point that runs counter to much of traditional thinking in the tourism industry where the building and advertising of attractions (as in 'The Big ...' spectacles) haVE been seen as the way to go. Recognition that it is culture, in its broadest sense, that makes places interesting is a key pre-requisite for successful tourism promotion. Culture is in fact becoming more central to tourism (Kong 2000) and the business of culture is becoming a critical part of the contemporary economy (Brown *et al.* 2000, p.450). In the words of Scott (1997, p.323),

> capitalism itself is moving into a place in which the cultural forms and meanings of its outputs become critical ... and in which the realm of human culture as a whole is increasingly subject to commodification.

Interest in what might be termed 'the cultural economy' is growing (Lash & Urry 1994) as is governmental awareness of the importance of cultural tourism (Foo & Rossetto 1998). The cultural economy and cultural tourism generally are very much linked to the image of a place. The character of places is therefore becoming increasingly important. This fact runs counter to the argument that is common in the literature on the 'Information Age' suggesting 'the end of geography' (O'Brien 1992) and 'the death of distance' (Cairncross 1998) in the so-called 'weightless economy' (Pratt 2000). Improvements in telecommunications might have helped overcome the friction of *distance* but this has served to make the characteristics of *places* all the more important (Walmsley 2000). In short, there are fundamental changes at work in society. Eckersley (2000) has even suggested that the *Weltanschauung*, or world view on which society is founded, is changing in Australia. Although this is a hard issue to address because it concerns the taken-for-granted world that is transparent and therefore largely invisible, Eckersley suggests that there is a questioning of the centrality of wealth creation as the overarching aim of contemporary life. This, in Eckersley's eyes, is prompted by recognition of the fact that economic growth is not perceived as improving the quality of life in already rich countries. In fact it may be that external factors such as economic conditions account for only about 15% of differences in well-being, implying that the overwhelmingly important considerations are internal to the individual. This means that the very psychological needs that lie behind activity in the fields of 'leisure', 'recreation' and 'tourism', might be at the

heart of the changing nature of society generally. If wealth creation is to become less important, it is likely that lifestyle rather than social status will become one of the key determinants of the shape of society. Already there is recognition of the importance of lifestyle and identity in the geography of contemporary society, notably in relation to landscapes of consumption and groups such as the aged and teenagers (Pawson *et al.* 1996). It is therefore appropriate to consider lifestyle and tourism in more detail.

Lifestyle

The nature of 'tourism' has changed over time. In recent years, it has become accepted that a new sort of tourist is emerging, commonly labelled the 'post-tourist' (Urry 1990). These are people who are reflexively aware of their participation and identity. To these people, the activity that is described as 'tourism' is a marker of who they are. It is central to their self image, identity and lifestyle. There is, predictably, an extensive literature on leisure-recreation-tourism and lifestyle (see Veal 2000). One of the problems encountered in exploring this field is the lack of consensus on how to define 'lifestyle'. Veal (2000) observes that there are over 30 different definitions in use and that, overall, a good definition needs to include activities and behaviour, values and attitudes, group belonging, and an element of choice (although some lifestyles can be enforced to a degree, rather than chosen, as in the case of the frail aged and the poor). Despite the lack of clarity over definitions in some of the literature, it is the contention of this paper that lifestyle-led consumption-orientated leisure time activity will become one of the hallmarks of society in the forseeable future and that the 'leisure and lifestyle dollar' will become an increasingly salient determinant of economic prosperity in rural Australia. It is already so for some communities.

It is important to understand why the phenomenon of 'leisure, recreation and tourism' will underpin emerging lifestyles. Leisure is, above all, 'a social construction that is composed of elements of a particular culture and historical period' (Kelly 1997, 403). In other words, there is no hard and fast interpretation of what constitutes leisure. Rather, definition of leisure is inevitably conditional and will vary over time and between cultures. Any view of the future of leisure, recreation and tourism in rural Australia needs to recognise this situation. Leisure is partly social and partly existential. It is social in the sense that it is influenced by gender, by money, by age, and by education, as well as by psychological needs and desires. In short, it reflects in part the structure of society. Even seemingly solitary activities are social to the extent that they rely on learned symbols like language (Kelly 1997, p.404). Leisure is also existential in the sense that its participants are always in a state of becoming. In other words, what people do in their leisure time has consequences for what they become. People's leisure and tourism activities are purposeful and meaningful and carried out in powerful social contexts (Kelly 1997). Given all this, leisure can be seen in a variety of ways that encompass action in society, a key dimension of a dynamic life, a metaphorical and conceptual social space set aside for action, a quality experience, and a set of symbols constructed in such a way as to facilitate orientation within and interpretation of a person's place in society (Kelly 1997, p.405).

Several leisure-orientated lifestyle groups can be identified in Australia: YUPPIES, DINKS, empty nesters, punks and 'the North Shore set' are examples noted by Veal (2000). To these could be added many others such as 'westies', 'bushies' and 'surfies'.

What distinguishes each of these groups is the image that it presents both to itself and to the outside world. In this context, it needs to be stressed that membership of a lifestyle group is not like membership of a social class which is, after all, something over which an individual initially has little control and something which changes only slowly. Rather, a lifestyle orientation leaves open the possibility of multiple identities as well as the prospect of transitory engagement with some groups, perhaps on an experimental basis ('tasting' different lifestyles) and perhaps in the sense of 'communities of limited liabilities' where individuals participate as and when it suits them (Flanagan 1993). Perhaps the most obvious illustration of this multiple identity is to be seen in the emerging cohort of aged in Australia. This is a group that will increase in size as the 'baby boomers' reach retirement. It is a group that is fitter, wealthier, more mobile and less constrained than previous cohorts of the aged. It is therefore a group that might be a potential source of visitors to rural Australia, particularly if the individuals in question can be lured into 'ski-ing' ('spending kids' inheritance' by travelling around). However, it is unwise to view the aged as a single group because such is the variety within the cohort, and so varied are their interests, that aged Australians are likely to be excellent examples of individuals with multiple identities.

What all lifestyle groups have in common is a search for meaning. Support for this view comes from a recent survey of 1200 Australians conducted by the Australian Council for the Arts (2000) which discovered that 93% placed a high or fairly high value on learning about new things while 89% seek intellectual stimulation and 88% value the possession of a creative skill. In other words, as has been argued already, individuals are curious beings who use their encounters with the world to help define who they are. At the moment, most people seek the realization of the self and of identity through lifestyles grounded in consumption practices, particularly in relation to material goods (Gottdiener 2000, p.16). This is true of all advanced western societies and has major consequences. For instance, Ritzer (1999, p.37) observed that:

> Within a few decades, the U.S. has gone from a society that emphasized personal savings to one that focusses on debt. Banks have, to a large degree, shifted from the business of inducing people to save to luring them into debt.

Much the same can be said of Australia. This has led many to question whether the burden of personal debt can be sustained. Ritzer in fact argues that many people only work in order to keep up their debt repayments. It may be of course that a preoccupation with debt will be only a temporary phenomenon and that increasingly people will turn to lifestyle choices that do not incur high costs. The scope for different lifestyles to emerge is considerable. For example, Gottdiener (2000, p.21) has observed, echoing the theme of this paper, that

> There is a growing emphasis in society on lifestyles and personal interests as a marker of who one is and as a means to connect with others. Now people increasingly relate to each other through commonly held consumption practices such as their preferences in sport, vacations, music, films, restaurants, and not the least, modes of shopping itself.

The shift to lifestyle as the core of society is fundamental in its consequences. It is closely linked to the rise of 'identity politics' (Giddens 2000) and to Maffesoli's (1996) comments on 'neotribalism' and the way in which group affiliation might become important again as the overarching influence of social institutions begins to wane (see Walmsley 2000). However, there is no simple nexus between lifestyle-led identity and leisure-orientated consumption, just as there is no one geographical pattern of success and failure that will result from the changing nature of Australian society.

Geographical impacts

Much of the argument so far in this paper has been general in the sense that it applies to society as a whole. It is important to recognise, however, that not all areas will benefit from the changes that are occurring in Australian society. The development of rural leisure, recreation and tourism is certainly no panacea for troubled areas. Some areas will 'win' and others will 'lose'. The key question is what preconditions might be necessary for success.

Some things are self-evident. Success cannot be imposed from outside. Local involvement in the 'commodification dynamic' is essential and yet little is known about how this process can be best encouraged (Kneafsey 2001). Of course not all locals are likely to be equally enthusiastic or equally able to participate in the development of tourist initiatives. Malam's (2000) study of Murrurundi in the Upper Hunter showed that it was often individuals with less than five years residence who took the lead in activities like bed and breakfast accommodation, backpacker facilities and trail rides. Of course, in the sense of requiring local involvement, rural tourism is no different from the prevailing orthodoxy in regional development issues generally, exemplified by the Centre for Small Town Development and its messages that rural communities have to take control themselves and that 'success is an inside job' (van Tiggelen 2001, p.25). But is local talent enough? Sadly, it is a necessary but not a sufficient precondition for success.

Some places will prosper because of the image that they already have in Australia. This is particularly the case with lifestyle-led migration such as that to Coffs Harbour and Ballina on the North coast of New South Wales (Walmsley *et al.* 1998). Similarly, Curry *et al.* (2001) have documented the way in which the Denmark area on the south coast of Western Australia is becoming increasingly differentiated as rural space is commodified to accommodate a lifestyle-orientated tourism industry. Other places will prosper because of classic locational advantages. One of the world's most celebrated examples of this is to be seen in the way in which cheap land near to good transport and high volumes of passing travellers made an area of rural Florida outside Orlando ideal for the development of Disney World (Murphy & Murphy 2001, p.165).

Of course not all attractions in the field of leisure, recreation and tourism are planned wholistically and with such methodical detail as Disney World. Sometimes an essentially serendipitous process can produce an attractive character for a place. In this regard it is interesting to note an increasing awareness of the importance of 'microgeographies'. These are being researched in urban areas, as in Bridge and Dowling's (2001) study of microgeographies of retailing and restaurant strips in inner Sydney, but as yet such studies have not been extended to rural Australia.

Much of the emphasis to date in rural tourism in Australia has been on the 'supply side' in the sense of farmers looking to diversify and generate off-farm income (see Lawrence and Gray 2000). More thought needs to be given to the 'demand side' and the way in which the changing nature of society and the advent of lifestyle-led consumption-orientated behavioural patterns will influence who does what where. This argument extends one recently advanced by Jenkins *et al.* (1997, p.136):

> There is frequent concern that rural tourism should not be allowed to develop as the inevitable outcome of powerful and inexorable outside forces. These forces include the shifting and increasingly global pressures for economic restructuring and the commodification of the countryside by external tourism interests as a retailed experience for tourist consumers. A new concern is emerging in the theory and practice of rural tourism which invests considerable importance in the economic well-being and cultural integrity of rural communities and in rural environmental stewardship.

Permitting local ownership of initiatives and encouraging environmental stewardship should be prerequisites for rural tourism development. However, the fact remains that not all places will be able to sustain a tourist industry in an economic, socio-cultural and environmental sense. Specifically in relation to economic considerations, there is a need to revisit some of the traditional concepts of location theory, notably the ideas of range, threshold and specialisation. Places within day-trip distance of major population centres have the advantage of accessibility. This means that the *range* to which people are prepared to travel will have a major influence on the total demand for an activity and thus a major bearing on its financial viability. The maximum likely distance that people are prepared to travel for a day-trip is obviously affected by cultural considerations as well as by the ease of travel (eg. road quality). In essence, it is cognitive distance rather than actual distance that is important. In this regard, it is important to note the finding that, on the North Coast of New South Wales, the cognitive limit of day-trip visits might be about 160 km (Walmsley & Jenkins 1999). If this figure were to obtain more generally, places within 160km of Sydney and other large cities obviously have great potential for attracting the leisure and lifestyle dollar. Beyond that point, the market size decreases. At the extreme, in many areas of rural Australia, the population density might be such that the market within 160km is so small as to make reliance on the day-trip market unworkable. In short – and in the terminology of location theory – the actual demand is below the *threshold* at which a service can be viably offered. In such cases, places have to rely on their attractiveness, either in a natural sense (eg. Uluru), or in terms of built phenomena (eg. the Stockman's Hall of Fame), or as a result of a specific promotion (eg. the Hunter Valley wineries targeting high status areas of Sydney that lie beyond, but not far beyond, the 160km range). Alternatively, they can hope to intercept passing travellers, either those en route to specific locations or those 'touring'. With the retirement of mobile baby boomers – the so-called 'grey nomads', the size of this transient population must not be underestimated. However the challenge is to find a niche. Hypothetically, the nation's best stamp collection could be displayed at a rural location thereby enticing visits from stamp collectors all over Australia. Of course, if there were stamp collections on display in many country towns, the displays would have no uniqueness and diminished appeal. The example of the stamp collection is

also useful in another sense. It serves to highlight the potentially footloose nature of many attractions. This is important because it emphasises the importance of place promotion.

Given the change in society to a lifestyle-led consumption-orientated character, it is important to recognise that the market for leisure, recreation and tourism activities is crowded and will become increasingly so. The buyer (the visitor) is in a dominant position in this market. Therefore places are forced into competing with each other to ensure that their position in the market is known to potential visitors (see Zube and Galante 1994). Although important, place promotion in Australia has generally been focussed on inter-state rivalry and, especially, competition for investment between the capital cities (Dennis 2001). Rural place promotion, by comparison, is poorly developed. Waitt (1997), for instance, has argued that representations of Australian landscapes have helped maintain a myth of Australian identity originating in oppressive colonial and patriarchal relations, illustrated by mateship, egalitarianism, and 'the bush'. In Waitt's view, the Australian Tourist Commission emphasises the two themes of paradise and adventure. While both of these have relevance to rural Australia, they are so general as to provide little guidance to individual places.

Much can possibly be learned from overseas. For instance, the town of Sheffield in northern Tasmania followed the example of Chemainus in British Columbia and used murals to attract visitors, over 130 000 a year in Sheffield's case (Montgomery 2000). Capitalising on film sets can also be rewarding. The Yorkshire village of Goathland, with a population of about 200, attracts over one million day visitors a year because of its role as the setting of 'Aidensfield' in the television series *Heartbeat*. Barwon Heads in Victoria (the 'Pearl Bay' of *Sea Change*) is an Australian example of this phenomenon (Beeton 2001).

The challenge facing much of regional Australia is to market the 'post-rural' (in the sense of 'post-agricultural') in such a way as to attract visitors. Geography as a discipline is currently in the midst of a reinterpretation of 'the rural' to encompass new, emergent rural identities. For an overwhelmingly urban population, the Australian rural is 'the other', something that is symbolically distanced from everyday life (Hopkins 1998, p.65). It is something worthy of the 'tourist gaze' (Urry 1990). Promoting places is not of course an end in itself but rather an undertaking that is designed to alter attitudes and behaviours. It is an activity that is becoming increasingly significant in rural tourism for several reasons: first, the changing nature of society makes the area of leisure, recreation and tourism central to future prosperity; secondly, the emergence of an integrated global economy means that distinctive places can now have a potentially huge international market; thirdly, advances in telecommunications are opening up new means of place promotion (eg. Web home pages); and finally, global economic restructuring is closing off many of the other options formerly open to rural Australia. Hopkins (1997, p.67) summed up the situation very well: 'In a consumption-oriented society, places – as with almost all merchandise, services and experiences for sale on the market – are "commodified"; they are themselves consumable products'. It is important that this message is heeded.

Conclusion

The challenges facing rural Australia are enormous. To date, rural tourism promotion has often been viewed as a reactive strategy designed to diversify cash flows. A proactive approach that recognises the salience of leisure, recreation and tourism in a lifestyle-led consumption-orientated society presents considerable potential for enhancing the well-being of communities in rural Australia, particularly those within day-trip travel of metropolitan centres and those able to identify and fill a niche in the leisure, recreation and tourism market.

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