CAN TOURISM SAVE THE GOLDFIELDS?

David Dunstan

In a recent interview published in the Age the world’s leading travel writer Jan Morris said that tourism corrupts and destroys everything it touches.¹

Tourists and tourism are akin to the stage villain everyone loves to hate and few people really warm to the idea of busloads of sightseers descending in rapid succession on their territory. It is not just that tourists are unpleasant in a way that reminds us of JeanPaul Sartre’s dictum that “hell is other people” (although there is a bit of that in it) it really can be shown that tourism does do unfortunate things to whole environments, to specific places, and to societies generally. Whether one is referring to the systematic erosion of fragile and beautiful cultures in South East Asia or the plagues of northern European tourists who descend every year like conquering hordes on such places as the Costa del Sol the evil is apparent for anyone who has eyes to see. Jan Morris is right: modern tourism does corrupt and destroy everything it touches!

Why then should we be seeking to encourage tourists to come to the central goldfield region of Victoria? Actually, I don’t think we really are but nobody would dare come out in the open and actually say so. Tourism, like motherhood, is one of the great myths of the age. It is something we in the modern corporate state all pay lip service to. Its worship is part of the conventional economic wisdom which we all fall down before.

The argument for tourism is real enough. Interestingly, it is much the same as that for a resumption of gold mining which also threatens the goldfields and its heritage. We live in a country which is perilously dependent on too few export earning industries. Our high general standard of living has, until now, been maintained more by good fortune that anything else. Now that the world is no longer begging to buy our farm products we are looking at a somewhat smaller picture. And as the picture diminishes so too do some issues fade and other come into view.

For some time it has been quite apparent that Victoria has not been enjoying the tourism boom (if that is the right word) that the other states have. Victoria does have certain strategic advantages of population and economic development, and a large metropolitan centre with hotel facilities, but the Penguins aside it has not really managed to fashion pegs on which to hang tourism.

This has not exactly been from want of trying for there has been as much debate, as much bureaucratic in-fighting and as much hard work put into generating tourism in Victoria as anywhere else.

It is also probably fair to say that there has been more actual resistance to the Barnum and Bailey vision of tourism in Victoria than anywhere else. It is partly because of this that Victoria has been so responsive to the idea of cultural tourism. And so it is that the relative lack of success of tourism in Victoria has produced some interesting thinking about the travel industry here, thinking which may offer a benefit to communities right across Australia.

Cultural tourism, which is a term involving a critique of tourism generally, has advantages in offering to individuals communities a choice of just what sort of tourism they may pursue. But this choice may not be available to them unless they also develop a comprehensive commitment to the development of their important cultural assets which in many cases will include heritage assets. But more of this later. For the moment I want to continue to elaborate on the phenomenon of tourism.

Perhaps the biggest danger inherent in tourism as far as the central goldfields region of Victoria is concerned is not its appearance but its prospect and the things that
people will do (or not do) in anticipation of it. In this sense the so-called tourism boom is akin to the so-called mining boom that we heard so much about yesterday. It hasn’t happened yet but a lot of people will get very excited about it and spend a great deal of time, money and energy re-shaping the world in anticipation of its arrival.

But what do we mean by this term re-shaping the world? This is something we are doing all the time, in the central goldfields region of Victoria as elsewhere. The past, which includes the quite recent past, is not something static or fixed, neither is our environment. Indeed, the heritage conservation movement has done its fair share of world-shaping in Central Victoria. There are a great many interest groups in the community who are constantly seeking to shape the world in images of their own conception and according to what they perceive to be their paramount interests. It is a political activity. It effects the environment, our heritage and our quality of life. It occurs as much at the local level as at the centre, and often by default.

One of the most interesting and I believe important books published in recent years is a study of another gold town, Beechworth, by a young Melbourne historian Tom Griffiths whom many of you will know as the field officer with the State Library of Victoria. Now, Tom’s book on Beechworth is not so much a study of that town’s history as a study of changing perceptions of it. It is a study of what Beechworth has meant to different groups and different generations over time. In the early days Beechworth was an administrative centre for the goldfields of the north-east. Later, in decline, it seemed to lose its identity and its citizens sought to redefine the place in other ways. Around the turn of the century it was valued as a country resort in the mountains, in marked contrast to the turbulent go-ahead days of the gold rushes. Like many other Victorian towns which have declined, Beechworth focused attention on its past and on its heritage.

Perhaps the most interesting part of Tom’s book (which is not so much a history as an exercise in the sociology of knowledge about a place) deals with the modern era. Griffiths is very critical of those “outsiders” who have sought to impose what he sees as an alien identity on the town. He is gently critical, as we might expect, of the tourism industry and the shoddy efforts to drum up commercial custom, also the trivialization of historic buildings, monuments and sites which results from this. But Griffiths reserves some of his most caustic criticism for a point of view he associates with the National Trust. He holds the Trust and indirectly the heritage movement responsible for imposing an image on the town which he believes does not fully reflect Beechworth’s experience. Griffiths opposes this imposed identity of an historic town with the perceptions of “locals” whose view he considers to be more sensitive to the town and the district’s past.

Tom Griffiths’ Beechworth is a well written, informative and important book, and quite innovative as far as its methodology is concerned. Would that every town in the central goldfields region of Victoria was blessed with such a comprehensive study. It is also, I believe, a provocative book which may be misleading and perhaps even dangerous in one respect: notably, in its partisan acceptance of one view in this “insider/outsider” debate concerning a place’s significance.

I am sure that similar cultural histories could be written of many other places in Victoria where the roles are reversed. These could show how the perceptions of “outsiders” (and that, after all, includes most of us here today) have often been better informed and more sensitive to the cultural importance of these places that those of the inhabitants themselves. Now I don’t want to unnecessarily belittle the wisdom of locals who are important sources of wisdom but a place’s importance can often only properly be understood in a comparative context. I will have more to say about this “insider/outsider”, “local”/“visitor” dichotomy with direct application to the question of heritage conservation later. My purpose in discussing Tom Griffiths’ book is not to extravagantly praise or to condemn either Tom or his book but to suggest to you that the history of places such as those that exist in the central goldfields is not a simple or even a completely told story, and to point out that their heritage is not the product of an unchanged or unchanging past. Furthermore, we should all realise that we are part of the story now.

All of which brings me back to tourism. Rather than try to understand tourism in the context of the history of the goldfields I think it is possibly more important for us to try to understand the goldfields in the context of the history of tourism. This paradoxical reasoning does have a point. It is to suggest that behaviour and attitudes associated with tourism and travel may have affected the goldfields more that we perhaps realise.

Were not the original gold diggers of the 1850s no more that a mercenary band of tourists, youngsters hell bent on sky-larking, seeing the world, getting rich and getting out? An unkind image but one that is not entirely inappropriate, at least as far as the turbulent years of the 1850s are concerned. But is was in these years that Australia experience what was virtually a second foundation as a consequence of its gold-inspired tourism boom. Gold was the basis for the rapid development of European civilization in this part of the world. And we should remember that such a large scale transplantation of a whole culture was by no means a common ex-perience in the nineteenth century.

Victorian gold followed closely on the Californian goldrushes of 1849. It inspired one of the great mass migrations of modern times, helping to create one of the world’s wealthiest societies in a far-flung corner of the globe. Only California bears direct comparison and prior to this period no society was wealthy enough, or technologically sophisticated enough, to permit large numbers of its population to travel. And so it is that Victoria and its goldfields are appropriately seen as an exciting new world society.

Nineteenth century Victorians were probably more in-
interested in travellers and tourists that we are today. They were, after all, mostly foreign born members of an immigrant society, one that we might well consider to be more cosmopolitan and travelled than our own. Some of the most interesting perceptions of Victorian and goldfields society were penned by famous tourists like the well-known English novelist Anthony Trollope and the American writer Mark Twain. Victorians basked in the reflection of these perceptions and others of their own making which in turn, helped to fuel their own aspirations.

Some of these perceptions were perhaps inaccurate, as Professor Weston Bate indicated earlier in this conference in the case of Trollope's mistaken observation that Ballarat was a city built solely on gold, but others were surprisingly perceptive and provide a rich mine of information and opinion. Beatrice and Sidney Webb, the famous English intellectuals and social reformers visited Bendigo in 1898 and Sidney wrote in his diary:

*We spent three days in Bendigo and Ballarat on our way to Adelaide. These gold mining centres are the only towns of any size in Victoria outside Melbourne - or indeed in Australia outside the capitals and ports. They have each between 30 and 40 thousands inhabitants and though 100 miles apart, are essentially similar in character. Bendigo ... proved to be unexpectedly attractive and charming - small but beautiful gardens with tree ferns and palms, splendid public buildings erected by the Colonial Government in boom-time and generally the air of a German "Haus- und Gartenstadt", the capital of a little principality.*

Just why Bendigo should look like a German principality had to do with the work of the German born architect Vahland and Beebe. No other Australian architect, with the possible exception of Joseph Reed in Melbourne, had quite as significant an impact on the character of an Australian city in the latter half of the 19th century as did Wilhelm Charles Vahland and his school in Bendigo. Yet this heritage has been scarcely explored in any of the published tourist literature.

Perhaps we need to learn something from the experience of nineteenth century Australians. First of all, we must ask ourselves what is the authentic heritage of the goldfields? Secondly, we should ask how this may be sensitively conserved and presented? For our purposes we should draw a broad bow and consider that the heritage of the goldfields consists of many things: historic vistas and buildings, mining relics and ruins, paintings and artefacts, diaries and letters, surviving institutions and customs, even memories.

Inevitably, a discussion of the heritage of the goldfields should also raise questions of management and equity. Who owns that legacy? What should be done with it? How can it be appreciated? Who should benefit? It is important that we consider what we are doing to protect and develop those material assets which are an authentic link with the age of gold and which may be a different source of gold in the future. This is doubly important because the heritage of the goldfields is under continuing threat from a variety of forces. More than ever before it is being destroyed by the corrosive influences of the modern world. We know, as Jan Morris has warned us, that this process may be spurred on by tourism but continued unsympathetic urban development may be far more devastating. The local governments of this region ought to be doing more in the way of heritage planning and conservation, and in the cultural field generally.

But I want to hang on to my theme of tourism a while longer and pay tribute to the work of Chris Wood who for reasons best known to himself has determinedly set out to civilise and educate the bureaucrats in Victoria's government departments, and specifically those in the Department of Management and Budget, the Victorian Tourism Commission and the Ministry for Planning and Environment. Lord knows we need it!

I want to draw your attention to a report written by Chris Wood which seeks to provide an interpretative framework for cultural tourism in this region. This report was written with the aid of a grant from the National Estate Program. Taking his cue from Paul Fussell's argument developed in his splendid book *Abroad* about British literary travellers in the 1920s and 30s, Chris draws an important distinction between the tourist and the traveller.

*This essential difference between a tourist and a traveller is that the traveller attempts to understand the environment whilst the tourist merely consumes. Modern mass tourism has turned travel into a product to the extent that it may now be called 'commodity tourism'. When we say we want to 'avoid the tourists' we are talking about people who are stupid, noisy, unsympathetic and intolerant of the qualities which distinguish the place they are visiting from home. When we speak of 'tourist traps' we mean places which not only are full of these people but are also 'unreal' to the extent that they are manufactured or have come to be manicured specifically for tourists. They are non-places.*

Wood goes on to make the point that tourists are becoming rarer in the world today because travellers are becoming better educated but observes that a large sector of the tourism industry has not woken up to this fact. Tourism "still treats places and experiences as commodities to be consumed in an unthinking way by bored, passive tourists."

*This tendency to treat knowledge as a commodity even affects the way in which knowledge is organised for tourists. Guidebooks and tour commentators break knowledge down into consumable facts, dates and statistics which aim to justify a place to travellers rather than help them understand it. For example, we constantly read or hear that a building is the biggest or the highest or the first of its kind when we read or listen to tourism commentaries. If the claim that the building has such qualities is given as its chief (often only) significance*
then obviously the commentary is justifying the building rather than teaching the traveller. Knowledge presented in this way makes a mockery of the saying that 'travel broadens the mind'.

What is required is a much greater emphasis on presenting a variety and complexity of experience to the traveller, and relating information to a context which may enable travellers to integrate what they see and hear into their own imaginative frameworks. If travellers are armed in this way they need not be passive consumers. They can experience travel in a creative and interactive manner.

It is perhaps no accident that cultural tourism did not emerge from the travel industry as such but from travel activity organised by educationists and educational institutions. This is continuing with, for example, the Elderhostel program which has provided such an expressive focus for the wanderlust of the aged, retired and unencumbered.

The sort of tourism development that we are arguing for does not depend on million dollar attractions or high rise motels. Rather, it draws on already established cultural networks and seeks strictly limited target audiences. It trades in ideas not images. It is akin to education. Successful cultural tourism will probably depend as much on the development of intellectual skills as well as the sympathetic development of cultural assets and resources. And as I said before I believe it will also depend on local communities developing adequate protection by statutory and other means for their heritage and environmental assets.

And here it is that I really must advance a criticism of the region.

Firstly, I think it is extraordinary that so little professional attention is given to the history and cultural heritage of this region by the region itself. Ballarat, for example, has a fine College of Advanced Education but it runs no courses in the history or culture of the region. The only recent history of Bendigo is Frank Cusack's excellent book which is out of print. No efforts are being made to reprint it. These once was a time when we could rely on school teachers to provide a measure of expertise in this field but do schools in this area even teach history anymore let alone local or regional history? And who is going to teach the teachers? The closest thing we have to a goldfields research institution is a tourism institution, Sovereign Hill, which does a lot of good interpretative work for which it receives insufficient credit. I am a supporter of Sovereign Hill. It is a great institution which needs to be expanded and improved, not duplicated by every other city in the region. Also, we need to recognise its limitations. It cannot be a substitute for the real thing. The real thing is the open air museum all around us.

Mike Butcher has written an important little book on Bendigo's heritage and may well publish more work of this type.5 This sort of amateur work needs to be supported. The National Trust in places like Bendigo and elsewhere provides an active and an important focus for heritage awareness. But consider that many regional experts like Professor Weston Bate who is with us today come from Melbourne, as do so many of the emerging younger historians and heritage experts of the goldfields in recent times: Mike Roper, Charles Fahey, Jon Peck, Chris McConville, Richard Aitken, Andrew Ward and Paul Fox, to name a few.

Despite their important contribution, we should remember that the story of the goldfields is not always well told by amateurs, however well meaning they may be. We do need more professional activity in this area and local institutions (especially educational institutions) should realise it.

I want to reiterate a point that I raised before that the perceptions of "outsiders" have often been better informed and more sensitive to the cultural importance of these places than those of the inhabitants themselves. The same goes for the heritage planning and the conservation movement. Local governments have been sadly reluctant in recent times to support the heritage cause with their own zeal and money. The various goldfields heritage advisory services are provided via the Victorian Government. Central government planners are responsible for a lot of day to day work which should be undertaken here by locals. We should consider that there have been precious few new heritage planning initiatives of real note in this region in the last ten years and most of these have emanated from Melbourne. Bendigo is a long way from fully implementing the recommendations of its ten year old heritage study and other municipalities have taken a less than supportive stand on a variety of important issues. This is doubly disappointing when one considers that under Victoria's new Planning and Environment Act a substantial responsibility now rests with local authorities to act to protect their heritage assets, as our Ministers reminded us yesterday.

Frankly, it isn't good enough. But you may say if that is what the community wants then so be it. But is it what the community wants? Local governments are not exactly always the most democratic or representative institutions. They may not have the appropriate staff to conserve their heritage. Perhaps it is high time that we took a good look at professional development in this area. And what of the responsibility of local governments to the wider community which subsidises so many of their efforts? They should be doing more in the field of heritage conservation and we should be urging them to do more.

We should also insist on the essential inter-relationship of all these things we have been talking about. Above all we need to stop thinking about conservation as being somehow opposed to development, or tourism for that matter. Conservation is not something which is necessarily opposed to development. It is a form of development which proceeds on certain established principles as any practitioner in the field knows. It is the neglect and apathy which is so common in this region and country Victoria generally which is the counter-
vailing force to development. The real issue is what sort of development?

Economists fiddling about with macroeconomic policy in Canberra do not have the inclination or the time to worry about whether incoming Eurodollars are engaged in a mind-broadening exercise in the central goldfields region of Victoria, or whether the impact of tourism on sensitive heritage environments will see their destruction. These are things we have to worry about.

We know that the past is fading before our very eyes with the loss of long neglected relics and the re-processing of old dumps and tailings by modern mining methods that may also be environmentally destructive. More of the past disappears every time we insensitively redesign our streetscapes, and as suburbs spread like moss once-historic landscapes inevitably disappear.

We also lose something if we fail to adequately develop those institutions which keep alive our understanding of the past: our museums and libraries, our galleries and other resources. No wonder that when we seek to recreate the past for tourists we often conjure up a travesty. In the long run this may be an economic loss as well as a loss in human terms.

We need to carefully reassess the ways in which the past is presented. We need to understand that it should not be sequestered in a phoney ghetto on the edge of town but be clearly seen all around use even if in an in-complete form. In order for this to happen we need to make some hard decisions about those things we want to keep, and to fight even harder to keep them. And as far as tourism is concerned we should ask ourselves who is going to be bothered to travel even once to the Victorian goldfields to see Just Anytown USA or, for that matter, a landscape denuded or poisoned by modern mining, much less return for second visit.

Tourism presents us with a dilemma of understanding. We need to stop thinking of it in narrow terms of economic development, of motel beds and razzamatazz exhibits costing millions of dollars. Those sort of exercises are not going to work in any terms which really matter. We need to start thinking of tourism as a cautious and slowly broadening exercise in cultural development. Otherwise it will be a corrupting and destructive force as Jan Morris has prophesied.

REFERENCES