



## A sustainable future for visitor centres in Western Australia

Tourism WA response to the Haeberlin Consulting study, September 2014

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In 2013, Tourism WA commissioned Haeberlin Consulting to investigate the role and importance of visitor centres to tourism operators, local government and other stakeholders, as well as examples of best practice operating and resourcing models. Over 140 relevant stakeholders throughout the State were consulted as part of the project. Visitors were not surveyed, but visitor research undertaken in other jurisdictions was considered.

Of course any study into visitor centres must be considered in the context of the changing methods that travellers use to access destination and product information. In recent times, the number of digital media outlets and online travel agents providing information on destinations and tourism product (and the means for travellers to directly book that product) has grown considerably.

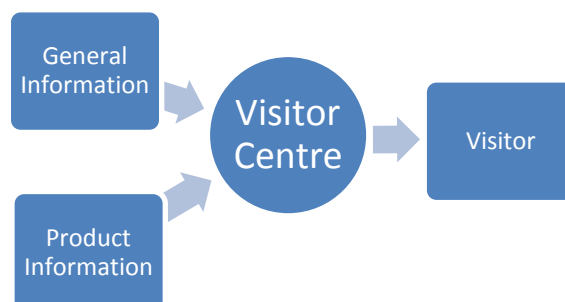
However, according to Haeberlin Consulting's investigations, visitor centres continue to play an important role in providing information about local areas and tourism products, especially small and medium sized tourism businesses. Tourists who use visitor centres tend to stay longer and spend more in a region.

*Travellers see the primary role of visitor centres as providing credible, authoritative and unbiased information.*

While visitors appear to have a clear understanding of what they want from a visitor centre, there appears to be some confusion among local stakeholders, including visitor centres themselves, as to the role and function of visitor centres, and therefore who is responsible for resourcing them.

While tour and accommodation booking capability is important for many visitor centres (as a source of revenue), it is less important for visitors. Visitor centres often focus too heavily on bookings and the sale of product, at the expense of their primary role and in competition with others who perform this role (such as travel agents or tourism operators themselves). Visitor centres that undertake "destination marketing" create further role confusion and would be better placed working more closely with the Regional Tourism Organisation (RTO) in this respect.

Tourism WA's view is that local governments, and tourism operators in their local area, are primarily responsible for visitor centres. Local governments have a community service obligation to provide general information about their area including community and visitor facilities and local attractions, which can be done through a visitor centre, other means such as roadside signage and information bays, or a combination of all of these. Tourism operators, on the other hand, are mostly concerned with promoting their individual businesses and selling their products. Visitor centres often act as conduits for these two important visitor services, sometimes channelled through a local tourism association or cooperative.



Haeberlin Consulting found that financial viability is the main concern for visitor centres, most of which require ongoing financial support. Tourism WA's view is that the financial sustainability of individual visitor centres is a direct result of their cost base and the ongoing support of the stakeholders involved in providing funding and governance to them (ie. local government and tourism operators). Visitor centres facing financial difficulties should consider either reducing their cost base or securing additional funding from their stakeholders. While some visitor centres are able to diversify their income stream through complementary commercial services (such as operating tourist attractions where entrance fees can be charged), this opportunity is not available to all visitor centres.

Ideas for Reducing Visitor Centre Cost Base	Ideas for Securing Ongoing, Operational Funding
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce fixed overheads</li> <li>• Outsource to a larger, nearby visitor centre</li> <li>• Merge, amalgamate, rationalise</li> <li>• Co-locate, collaborate</li> <li>• Pop up visitor centres and technology</li> <li>• Better utilise established (alternative) booking channels</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continually educate local government and the community on the value of tourism and the local visitor centre</li> <li>• Align visitor centre with attractions and/or sale of merchandise etc to diversify income streams</li> <li>• Move physical location to a higher traffic area</li> <li>• Implement local business levies</li> </ul>

It is often difficult for local governments to assess the effectiveness of their investment in visitor centres, and whether they actually need one. Importantly, local governments need to recognise that visitor centres generally do not represent a profit making centre, but rather are part of the (hard and soft) infrastructure that contributes to the overall economic activity that can be generated for a community through tourism.

The introduction of standard return-on-investment (ROI) and effectiveness measures may assist local governments to better understand the “hidden value” of the visitor centre to their community. Haeberlin Consulting has recommended a potential ROI framework as part of the study (refer to Section 4.1), but this does not preclude local governments from undertaking their own research and investigations. Tourism WA plans to work with Tourism Research Australia (TRA) to undertake visitor surveys, in 2014/15, comparing the behaviour and spending habits of those who use visitor centres to those who don't, to provide stakeholders with even more information for decision-making purposes.

Haeberlin Consulting reported that many visitor centres questioned the value of accreditation, claiming that that it is more compliance focussed (versus continuous improvement) and the associated costs (such as staff costs for Sunday trading and public holidays) are difficult to justify. Again, this becomes an important consideration for visitor centres in terms of their cost of operations. However, accreditation is an important way of maintaining minimum standards, professionalism and visitor experience quality. In Western Australia, the Tourism Council Western Australia (TCWA) is responsible for administering the visitor centre accreditation program. There are different levels of accreditation and visitor centres should discuss their specific situation with TCWA to determine and appropriate level for them.

Tourism WA has a policy of only promoting accredited tourism operations, which applies to visitor centres as well. Tourism WA does not believe that there is sufficient evidence indicating that a comprehensive review of the State system is required. However, feedback from the Haeberlin Consulting report will be provided to refine the accreditation program going forward. National guidelines on visitor centre accreditation are also currently being reviewed and Tourism WA will discuss their applicability to Western Australia with TCWA. Customer service training, provided by TCWA and sponsored by Tourism WA, and other training available through TAFEs and universities can also help improve the professionalism of the sector and reinforce the importance of accreditation.

In terms of enhancing the visitor centre network overall, a consistent and centrally coordinated branding and promotional strategy would help to raise the profile of visitor centres and the specific role that they play. If visitor centres and their primary funding sources (local governments and tourism operators) believe this is of value, then TCWA or the Visitor Centre Association of Western Australia (VCAWA) could potentially coordinate and implement this on behalf of the sector.