



East Gippsland Tourism Structure

Developing and sustaining a region-wide tourism body is a challenging task, especially given the need to balance local politics and potential for interpersonal conflict.

This was the situation faced in 2004 by the East Gippsland region of Victoria, which requires two hours driving between Bairnsdale at its western end to Mallacoota on its eastern border.

The previous shire-wide regional tourism group, Lakes and Wilderness Tourism Inc, had been dissolved and its wider marketing role transferred to a new body, 'Destination Gippsland'. Despite the continuation of 13 small Business and Tourism Associations (BTAs), the Shire Council and other local authorities recognised that there was still a need for an overarching body to enable tourism's private sector to speak with a single voice.

Tourism Alliance Victoria was asked by Tourism Victoria and the East Gippsland Shire Council to facilitate the process. Tourism Alliance's then Deputy CEO, Bindi Gove, realised that the survival of the 13 BTAs through three regional tourism restructures proved their resilience and, therefore, they needed to continue in order to underpin the new organization.

Bindi Gove realised that a 'top down' approach to tourism management would not work in East Gippsland. She knew that it was important to create an organization that was 'owned' by the industry and was independent.



She also knew from experience that such a group needed a major project to provide the 'glue' necessary to keep everyone focussed and committed to the task.

The initial project became the production of a quality regional visitors guide, in conjunction with East Gippsland Newspapers. They believed that the guide would not only provide the group with a focus, but it could also potentially provide an ongoing income stream for the group. Each constituent BTA agreed to assume responsibility for selling a section of the guide in their own sub-region, under the guidance of the East Gippsland Newspapers' sales team.

Twenty thousand dollars was released from a trust account created by the previous tourism body. Together with some additional funds provided by Tourism Victoria, it allowed the group to engage a talented Melbourne graphic designer who had recently moved to the region. Additional drought and bushfire relief funding also helped to seed the \$100,000 project.

The new visitors guide set a new standard for the region and, as a result of the group's performance, the Council provided it with funding to engage a three day a week Executive Officer.



Representatives from government bodies and the Council sit-in on the meetings as observers, but do not hold voting rights. There is a healthy relationship between the regional body and their lower level BTAs, as well as with the regional marketing body, Destination Gippsland.



Bindi Gove says that the group's formation was a real example of 'social entrepreneurship' at work. She says it involved a high degree of leadership development and mentoring, as well as developing a major sense of grass roots level ownership.

“ At the start of every meeting for the first year we had to remind each other why the group had been formed and what it needed to achieve. We had to remain focussed and single minded. I got the representatives at every meeting to write down exactly the messages they needed to take back to their local BTAs.

“ There were so many other issues the group wanted to get involved with and there were many outside organizations wanting to engage with it, but we kept highly focussed and held the others at bay while we established the team over a 12 month period.”

Key findings:

Tourism groups in their initial stages need a key project to maintain their focus. Don't get distracted by side issues and don't hold meetings for the sake of it.

Funds will generally flow to the body that is focussed and can truly speak on behalf of the industry.

Try to get a consistent group of people meeting a least once a month; avoid proxies and the churning of representatives.

Rather than trying to hand-pick the skills you need, try to work with the skills available and introduce a strong leadership and mentoring component to encourage them on their journey.