



Packed and Ready

A framework for building
resilience in the visitor economy



About the NRMA

The NRMA represents over 2.6 million Australians in NSW and the ACT, making it one of the largest tourism and transport companies in Australia. We provide motoring, transport and tourism services to our Members and the community.

About Risk-e Business

Risk-e Business Consultants has decades of demonstrated law enforcement, fire and emergency management expertise, in both the public and private sector. Risk-e Business is a subject matter expert on emergency management, specialising in high quality investigations, training and reviews to improve outcomes, processes and procedures

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Foreword

Businesses and communities across the globe have been battered by several major natural disasters and a global pandemic over the past decade, with the Australian visitor economy severely impacted by these events.

The Black Summer Bushfires and COVID-19 wiped \$90 billion from the sector in 2020, with in excess of 137,000 job losses. Floods affecting the mid north coast have further dampened hopes of the sector returning to pre-COVID levels by 2023-24.

Natural disasters and global pandemics are a sobering reminder of the importance of emergency preparedness, environmental management and industry coordination, noting the visitor economy's reliance on global travel and the appeal of our natural environment for its survival.

The Black Summer bushfires, COVID-19, September 11, SARS and the GFC are all examples of significant crisis that have caused us to pivot, recover and restart our industry.

Both the 2020 NSW Bushfire Inquiry and Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements identified the need to ensure tourism businesses were better prepared for bushfires and other natural disasters, and that emergency management frameworks appropriately consider seasonal populations such as tourists in evacuation planning.

This paper seeks to provide solutions to better integrate the visitor economy into key emergency management frameworks at all levels of government, building strong relationships with emergency response agencies, developing agile and responsive communication networks and supporting business continuity planning and training will be key to navigating a challenging operational environment in the coming decades.

With longer and more extreme fire seasons, severe flash flooding, destructive cyclones and hailstorms all predicted to become more prevalent, the sector in partnership with government must plan for a future where these shocks aren't considered unusual but expected.

Drawing on observations predominantly from the Black Summer bushfires in NSW, but with further reference to the compounding impacts of COVID-19, the NRMA along with its industry counterparts have summarised key areas of focus that will improve the sector's ability to respond to natural disasters and pandemics, with the ultimate goal of making the industry more resilient to future events and shocks.

While recommendations of this paper largely pertain to the NSW and Australian Government in the first instance, there is impetus to ensure that all state and territory emergency management frameworks duly consider the visitor economy when preparing, responding to and recovering from major events and disasters.



CEO Column

2019-20 was not the year we expected. Instead of what is normally a joyous time of the year as families hit the road and gather in our holiday parks, we were confronted by the very real and devastating impacts of bushfires followed by a global pandemic. The impact of these events ran much deeper than simply property loss or cancelled trips, with families and staff confronted with the very real prospect of losing their homes and their local communities being changed forever.

The Black Summer Bushfires and subsequent pandemic are a stark reminder of the power of nature and how connected we are globally, and that our industry is susceptible to external shocks and tremors. More concerning still, research shows that the likelihood and severity of these extreme events will only continue to rise in the future.

If this is our reality, then we need to be prepared. We need to have frameworks and relationships in place that allow us to prevent, prepare and respond as quickly as possible to minimise the impact on the sector.

We want an industry that comes together during adversity, and thrives in recovery. Building frameworks and partnerships with government that encourage collaboration, cohesion and common purpose are all the natural cornerstones required to deal with hardship and build resilience.

It is with this in mind the NRMA Group in conjunction with its industry colleagues presents *Packed and ready: A framework for building resilience in the visitor economy*. Working together with government, we can better prepare our communities and tourism operators for future events, strengthen coordination and information dissemination during crisis, and better plan stimulus to aid recovery.

In partnership with the industry's leading associations and the 300,000 tourism businesses we collectively represent, we are committed to working together and with government, to ensure the future of our sector remains bright, resilient, and sustainable.

Rohan Lund
NRMA Group CEO

Recommendations

Governance Framework

1. Emergency Management Governance Arrangements (Visitor Economy)

That Industry, in conjunction with the NSW Government, reviews emergency management planning arrangements around the 'Visitor Economy' to improve coordination and communication, and enhance the existing Emergency Management Governance Framework at all stages of Prevention, Preparation, Response and Recovery. This should include the expansion of the State Emergency Management Committee to include an additional 'Visitor Economy' Functional Area.

Prevention

2. Industry/Emergency Services partnership in development of plans

That, in order to ensure tourism businesses are better prepared for natural disasters, industry, together with Local/Regional Emergency Services and in consultation with local councils should work together to develop improved emergency management and evacuation plans. This would include assistance with assessments, planning documentation and site preparation.

Preparation

3. Emergency Management Assistance Portal

To ensure tourism businesses only need to access one government agency site for all documents/plans to assist in emergency management preparation (business continuity, Business Connect, recovery grants and mental health assistance), the NSW Government through Service NSW works with industry to identify the best channels to implement and communicate emergency management support material.

4. Tourism Business Disaster Preparedness Kit

That in order to ensure tourism businesses are prepared for disasters, industry works with the NSW Government, through Resilience NSW and supported by Destination NSW and its Destination Networks to develop disaster preparedness support for tourism businesses. In the first instance, this would be a 'Tourism Business Disaster Preparedness Kit'.

5. Enhanced education of disaster warnings to keep holiday makers informed

That in order to provide greater consistency of information communicated to guests prior and during travel, standardised messaging on emergency alerts, warnings and bushfire danger ratings and what to do in these situations should be developed for operators and included in the 'Tourism Business Disaster Preparedness Kits'.

6. Emergency Management training open to industry

That the NSW Government supports making the Emergency Management training developed by Resilience NSW available to tourism operators to improve their knowledge and skills. Additionally, that the industry works with Resilience NSW to develop training packages that meet the specific needs of the sector.

7. National Tourism Incident Communication Plan

That the Australian Government work with State and Territory Governments to update the National Tourism Incident Communication Plan to ensure it is current and exercised annually through the Australian Standing Committee on Tourism (ASCOT). This would include ensuring industry contacts within the plan are current and up to date.

Response

8. Visitor Economy Advisory Taskforce

That industry continue to exercise the Tourism Restart Taskforce (or similar) that is able to come together with relevant governments as required, providing a high-level emergency management advisory taskforce and industry decision-making body to assist government at time of a major crisis.

9. Database of industry operators and assets

That industry develops a database of operators available to assist and provide their asset base to the NSW Government if required in an emergency (personnel, temporary accommodation and standard, transportation services). The database could be replicated in other states and territories and would be regularly reviewed in conjunction with Government.

10. One central point of truth

That industry adopts 'a central point of truth/authority' as defined by the NSW Government (or Australian Government where appropriate), to ensure that up to date and reliable information is provided to customers and operators in emergency events.

Recovery

11. Open for business app

That the NSW Government through Service NSW and Destination NSW work together with industry to develop a mechanism that maps and updates travellers on the status of recovery efforts, including regions and tourism businesses open for business and ready to receive visitors post-disaster.

12. Recovery packages

That industry reviews in concert with the NSW Government, recovery and stimulus packages for major crisis, determining those that were most effective and beneficial, along with implementation timeframes in future rollout of programs.

13. Nationally consistent approach and definitions

That the Australian Government works with State and Territory Governments to agree standard definitions in an emergency (i.e. hot spots in pandemics) and that there is an agreed upon consistent approach to border closures/openings.

14. Expansion of Australian Reinsurance Pool Corporation

That the Australian Government consider expanding the Australian Reinsurance Pool Corporation to provide reinsurance for all natural disasters for commercial property insurance.

Recommendation	3-6 months	6-12 months	12-18 months	Comments
Include the 'Visitor Economy' as a functional area within Emergency Management Governance Arrangements		✓		
The industry to work together with local/regional emergency services to improve emergency management and evacuation plans		✓		
Service NSW to develop an 'Emergency Management Assistance Portal' to provide a one-stop-shop for business continuity, recovery grants and mental health assistance for tourism businesses	✓			Businesses are able to request storm and flood support through the Service NSW website. Business Profiles could be expanded to include business continuity resources.
Develop a Tourism Business Disaster Preparedness Kit	✓			Service NSW has already commenced this work
Develop standardised messaging for tourism businesses at all levels of emergency warnings and what to do in these situations	✓			
Offer emergency management training to tourism operators		✓		
Have ASCOT exercise the National Tourism Incident Communication Plan annually	✓			
Form a Visitor Economy Industry Advisory Taskforce to act as a high-level advisory taskforce to Government in an emergency	✓			Composition of taskforce to be reviewed with Government. The Australian Government has recently established a Reimagining the Visitor Economy Taskforce to assist with recovery.
Develop a database of industry operators and assets that can be used by government during an emergency		✓		
Adopt one central point of truth as defined by Government in an emergency and communicate this to industry	✓			
Develop a mechanism to map and update travellers on business open for business post disaster			✓	
Review recovery and stimulus packages for major crisis determining those most effective		✓		
Develop nationally consistent definitions and approaches to be agreed by the states in an emergency.		✓		
Expand the remit of the Australian Reinsurance Pool Corporation.		✓		Australian Government recently announced its intention to establish a reinsurance pool as part of the FY22 Budget.

“Working together with government, we can better prepare our communities and tourism operators for future events, strengthen coordination and information dissemination during crisis, and better plan stimulus to aid recovery.”

The cost of natural disasters and crisis

\$35b

The cost of extreme weather disasters in Australia between 2010-2019¹. This cost has more than doubled since the 1970s.

\$70b

The amount lost by the visitor economy to October 2020 as a result of the bushfires and onset of the pandemic. By the end of 2020, a loss of \$90 billion is estimated².

\$458m

The extended losses in the Southern NSW Local Government Areas (LGAs) over the 2020 Christmas holiday period as a direct result of the bushfires, affecting 3,365 FTE local jobs³.

\$4.4b - \$100b

The total estimated cost of Australia's recent bushfires⁴.

18%

fewer tourism jobs (+137,000) than at the end of 2019⁵.

\$874m

Increase in mental health costs, higher over the next five years as a result of the pandemic (projected total \$51.6 billion)⁶.

The tourism industry is both the most vulnerable and least prepared to manage climate risks, due to its reliance on natural attractions already impacted by extreme weather⁷.

2023-24

Expected date of return to 2019 domestic travel levels with international travel returning by 2024-25⁸.

Being prepared: how likely is another event?

The United Nations has identified the Australia/New Zealand region as one of five Climate Change Vulnerable Hotspots for the global tourism industry⁹.

In the short term, climate projections indicate that changing weather patterns are very likely to increase exposure to extreme weather events in the coming decades¹⁰. These include:

- Longer fire seasons and more extreme bushfires that will cause catastrophic damage and reduce the amount of time available for conducting mitigation and fuel management activities including hazard reduction.
- Devastating and destructive cyclones that affect inland communities – including an increase in extreme category 4 and 5 tropical cyclones.
- Hailstorms with large hailstones will increase in frequency and affect Sydney, Adelaide, Perth, Canberra and Melbourne, and the inland region from the Hunter River, down through the central and southern New South Wales highlands, and into central and eastern Victoria.
- Storms and severe flash flood events will increase across the country, with the east coast of Australia becoming particularly vulnerable to flash flooding and fast response river flooding¹¹.

In the long term, popular coastal destinations will become increasingly threatened by rising sea levels as temperatures rise, while colder climate tourism destinations like ski resorts will lose their appeal due to low levels of snow fall and a shorter winter season¹².

This phenomena is not unique to Australia, with 22 climate disaster events recorded in the US alone during 2020, each resulting in losses exceeding US\$1 billion each¹³. The estimated cost from Australia's recent bushfires is conservatively estimated to be \$4.4 billion, with some estimates ranging to over \$100 billion¹⁴.

Multiple lines of evidence, including future climate change projections point to a continuing trend of more frequent and compounding climate events that do not follow typical historical experiences¹⁵.

The timing, frequency and severity of extreme weather events will continue to become more unpredictable, impacting the ability of the tourism industry to prepare.

A recent Climate Council report indicated the tourism industry is both the most vulnerable and least prepared to manage climate risks, mainly due to its reliance on nature-based attractions that are already feeling the impacts of extreme weather events¹⁶.

Integrating the sector within existing and regularly exercised emergency management frameworks, strengthening relationships with key coordinating agencies, and developing mechanisms to assist businesses in extreme weather events, will be key to navigating a challenging operational environment in the coming decades.

Understanding the emergency management framework

The State Emergency and Rescue Management Act 1989¹⁷ (SERM Act) sets out the governance framework for emergency management in NSW. The NSW State Emergency Management Plan (or EMPLAN) set out in the Act outlines emergency management arrangements that exist to allow the State to prevent, prepare for, respond to, and recover (PPRR) from emergencies¹⁸. Each of these four stages overlap and through coordination and collaboration, relationships are developed across agencies and organisations involved in all stages of PPRR.

- Agriculture and Animal Services
- Engineering Services
- Health Services
- Telecommunication Services
- Welfare Services
- Energy and Utility Services
- Environmental Services
- Public Information Services
- Transport Services

The visitor economy is currently not recognised as its own Functional Area, but rather represented on the State Recovery Sub-Committee of Resilience NSW under the area of 'Business, Industry & Tourism'. There is no representation of tourism or the visitor economy at the prevention, preparation or response phases of Emergency Management arrangements.

Why establish a 'Visitor Economy' functional area?

The visitor economy is not a homogenous sector, but made up of interconnected sectors that come together to provide the visitor experience. Most notably, these include accommodation and food services, attractions, aviation and land transport, heritage and cultural facilities.

The sector is predominantly made up of small businesses that nationally employ almost half a million people. This is more people than the agriculture, mining and banking sectors. In NSW alone, there are 107,115 tourism businesses employing 175,100 people, compared to 24,500 agricultural farms employing 81,900 people²², for example.

To be successful in all aspects of PPRR, an appropriate network needs to exist between the visitor economy and government to facilitate communication and coordination in relation to the areas of prevention, preparation and response, similar to those that have existed and functioned successfully with sectors such as the agriculture industry for many years.

The introduction of an adequately staffed and funded 'Visitor Economy' Functional Area would improve all functions associated with PPRR, ensure effective and coordinated communication during an event, and establish one point of contact for industry within emergency services to liaise with.

By including the 'Visitor Economy' in the Government's existing framework, the state in conjunction with industry representatives can better coordinate the sector in times of crisis, but also leverage communication channels (industry associations, membership organisations, distributors and booking agents) to ensure timely and consistent messaging is provided to operators and visitors.



Figure 1: Comprehensive approach 'PPRR' to emergency Management¹⁹

The State Emergency Management Committee (SEMC) established under the SERM Act is responsible for a range of programs and arrangements to enact PPRR within NSW (see Figure 2). The delivery of these programs and arrangements occur at state, regional and local levels through Emergency Management Committees.

A Functional Area within the SEMC is defined as a category of services involved in activities to prevent, prepare for, respond to or recover from an emergency²⁰. The following Functional Areas are currently defined through the Act and regularly come together in the provision of support to emergency agencies during a crisis²¹:

State Emergency and Rescue Management Act 1989

NSW State Emergency Management Plan (EMPLAN)



State Emergency Management Committee (SEMC)

Established under the SERM Act and enacts the EMPLAN



Visitor Economy Advisory Taskforce

Taskforce of supporting tourism associations

- Inputs to Function Area Visitor Economy
- Inputs to Recovery Sub-Committees
- Provides advice to NTICP
- Focus on organisations that communicate directly to distributors and travellers

'Visitor Economy' added as additional functional area

Proposed 'response' measures, see page 20

Snapshot: tourism coordination during the Black Summer bushfires

The 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires highlighted coordination with the tourism industry during wide-scale natural disasters is sometimes difficult.

Operators found it challenging to link to local emergency services and navigate government agencies for advice, where in some instances conflicting information was provided.

A number of accommodation providers report being given evacuation orders yet were given limited information on where to evacuate to or roads closures likely to affect the evacuation process. In some instances, tourists returned to accommodation sites after being directed away from evacuation points as weather events changed or sites were at capacity.

As fire events begun to unfold, tourists and visitors often sought assurance from accommodation providers about whether it was still safe to travel, or what action was expected of visitors when evacuating²³.

In some instances mixed messaging was received, with NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) issuing evacuation orders, while some neighbouring Local Government Areas and businesses unaffected by fire encouraging people to visit²⁴. For travellers unfamiliar with the region, this made travel decisions confusing.

There was also the added perception of Australia 'being on fire' in key inbound markets with limited information provided to distributors to counteract this perception overseas.

Recommendation

Emergency Management Governance Arrangements (Visitor Economy)

That Industry, in conjunction with the NSW Government, reviews emergency management planning arrangements around the 'Visitor Economy' to improve coordination and communication, and enhance the existing Emergency Management Governance Framework at all stages of Prevention, Preparation, Response and Recovery. This should include the expansion of the State Emergency Management Committee to include an additional 'Visitor Economy' Functional Area.

Tourism representation in emergency response frameworks

The Department of Tourism, Innovation and Sport, of which Tourism and Events Queensland is an agency, is represented at the State Disaster Coordination Group (SDCG) and at the Queensland Disaster Management Committee (QDMC) by their Minister. The QDMC is chaired by the Premier.

FIGURE 2: NSW State Emergency Management Committee and the visitor economy's proposed involvement in the NSW emergency management framework.

Building resilience in the visitor economy

The following section outlines key initiatives that would improve the tourism sector's involvement in all stages of emergency prevention, preparation, response and recovery. All are aimed at making the sector more resilient to future events.

Prevention

The identification of hazards, the assessment of threats to life and property and the taking of measures to reduce potential loss to life or property²⁵.

Development of emergency plans

A large proportion of holiday destinations and accommodation sites are located in or surrounded by national parks or crown land. Tourism operators have a responsibility to ensure their properties are prepared for potential bushfires and natural disasters through hazard reduction to minimise the risk to property, visitors and staff, yet a majority of site preparation occurs by NSW Parks & Wildlife Service and Crown Lands.

Hazard reduction is a vital component of bushfire prevention and property maintenance. In NSW, this risk is managed through local Bush Fire Management Committees (BFMC) which develop Bush Fire Risk Management Plans²⁶. To an operator, the process of identifying the appropriate networks to work with can be daunting.

Tourism operators should work with surrounding land managers and responsible government agencies to ensure that property and national park areas are adequately maintained. This should include engagement with local councils, recognising while they do not maintain surrounding bushland, have a critical role in planning and coordinating infrastructure development, maintenance and preparation of assets in these environments during and after events occur.

To improve the current process, NSW RFS, NSW State Emergency Service (SES), local councils and tourist operators should regularly work together to survey sites to understand emerging risks, implement risk mitigation strategies and assist with the preparation of bushfire evacuation plans and hazard reduction. This in turn encourages knowledge and information sharing, collaboration and preparedness should an event occur.



Recommendation

Industry/Emergency Services partnership in development of plans

That, in order to ensure tourism businesses are better prepared for natural disasters, industry, together with Local/Regional Emergency Services and in consultation with local councils should work together to develop improved emergency management and evacuation plans. This would include assistance with assessments, planning documentation and site preparation.

Preparation

Arrangements or plans to deal with an emergency or the effects of an emergency²⁷

Emergency Management Assistance Portal

The Black Summer bushfires demonstrated the importance of crisis and risk management planning to effectively deal with major disasters. Business continuity and financial planning, evacuation plans, insurance, cash flow management and of growing importance, mental health support is required when preparing for and responding to disasters.

A survey conducted by Resilience NSW and Service NSW post bushfires revealed 66% of tourism businesses were still unsure whether they were ready for, or felt prepared for another disaster²⁸. Only 23.5% of tourism businesses had a business continuity plan (BCP) in place prior to the event, compared to 38% now implementing a plan. A further 59% reported now doing something differently to prepare for disasters, including improving business practices such as stock control, online systems, diversifying business models and improving cash flow.

Whilst information to assist in these areas has been made available by government, many operators had difficulty identifying the most appropriate sites to access support or believed that it was too time consuming and difficult to apply for grants or assistance.

Service NSW has established a single site for households/ individuals where all information is stored, with individuals only having to 'tell their story once' to access support. The site was very well received by the community, however, was not expanded to cover businesses.

Working with industry, Service NSW should work with the sector to identify the best channels to implement and communicate emergency management support material. This could include the development of an 'Emergency Management Assistance Portal' where all services currently offered by multiple Government agencies can be located for ease of reference. Industry bodies and associations would work with government to educate and promote the portal to ensure tourism operators were aware of the service.

The Queensland and Victorian Governments have already established similar models^{29,30} that cut across different Government portfolios to assist tourism operators in preparing for and managing their properties during a crisis.



Recommendation

Emergency Management Assistance Portal (Service NSW)

To ensure tourism businesses only need to access one government agency site for all documents/ plans to assist in emergency management preparation (business continuity, Business Connect, recovery grants and mental health assistance), the NSW Government through Service NSW works with industry to identify the best channels to implement and communicate emergency management support material.

Tourism Business Disaster Preparedness Kit

The 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires highlighted knowledge gaps of tourism businesses in preparing for and responding to a crisis. In some instances, a lack of established relationships with local emergency services meant site preparation and hazard reduction was insufficient, and communication and information updates were slow to reach operators. This in turn delayed communication to tourists on appropriate visitation or evacuation plans as events escalated.

NSW Government can work with industry to develop a 'Tourism Business Disaster Preparedness Kit' (or similar) that provides a check-list of activities to be undertaken in order to prepare for events. This would include templates to assist operators prepare and protect their property, prepare staff for events, and understand risk warnings and restrictions likely to be issued by emergency response agencies.

The kit would identify key agencies to engage with both during preparation and the response phase so businesses receive the most appropriate guidance and information to act quickly and communicate effectively with guests to keep them safe.

Whilst this work has commenced, industry believes that this should be a priority for the NSW Government with similar models already developed in Victoria and Queensland.



Recommendation

Tourism Business Disaster Preparedness Kit

That in order to ensure tourism businesses are prepared for disasters, industry works with Government, through Resilience NSW and supported by Destination NSW and its Destination Networks to develop disaster preparedness support for tourism businesses. In the first instance, this would be a 'Tourism Business Disaster Preparedness Kit'.

Enhanced education of disaster warnings to keep holiday makers informed

Visitors by their very nature are often unfamiliar with the destinations they visit. Visitors from urban environments may not have been exposed to or have limited knowledge of bushfire safety and fire progression across a rural landscape. This was a key observation of both the NSW Bushfire Inquiry and Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements.

When an emergency event occurs, visitors are forced to navigate unfamiliar accommodation and surroundings, road networks and terrain in very trying circumstances. This places additional burden on tourism operators to keep visitors informed and safe amid changing circumstances.

A NSW RFS survey conducted post bushfires showed that many visitors and those who owned secondary homes were aware of the bushfire activity in the vicinity of their travel destination, but did not believe they would be directly affected. Continuing with annual holiday plans and wanting to escape smokier conditions at their primary place of residence were the main motivators for travel during the bushfire threat³¹.

Educating operators on the different levels of emergency warnings and what it means for their operations and visitors could improve coordination and confidence around appropriate action to be taken in the event of an emergency. This information should be contained in a 'Tourism Business Disaster Preparedness Kit', along with standardised messaging that tourism providers can provide to visitors to inform their decision to travel. Regular information sessions offered to tourism operators by RFS and SES should reiterate appropriate action required by operators should warnings escalate.

Enacting and distributing real-time information during a major event could also be facilitated through the 'Visitor Economy' Functional Area if established by government.



Recommendation

Information packages and evacuation plans available to holiday makers

That in order to provide greater consistency of information communicated to guests prior and during travel, standardised messaging on emergency alerts, warnings and bushfire danger ratings and what to do in these situations should be developed for operators and included in the 'Tourism Business Disaster Preparedness Kits'.

Emergency Management training to Industry

Emergency Management training is currently provided by Resilience NSW on behalf of the State Emergency Management Committee using industry-based facilitators in a multi-agency learning environment³². However, this training is currently only provided to emergency services and agency staff, not operators.

The visitor economy and Resilience NSW should work together to develop an emergency management training package specifically for the sector, building proficiency and confidence in managing large volumes of guests and property in an emergency. This should be done in conjunction with local councils that coordinate assets, utilities and amenities in the area.

Trained tourism operators accredited through the program could potentially provide on-the-ground assistance to government agencies and local councils during major events (e.g., coordination of evacuation centres).



Recommendation

Emergency Management training open to industry

That Government supports making the Emergency Management training developed by Resilience NSW available to tourism operators to improve their knowledge and skills. Additionally, that the industry works with Resilience NSW to develop training packages that are designed for the specific needs of the sector.

National Tourism Incident Communication Plan

The National Tourism Incident Communication Plan (NTICP) was developed to apply the Council of Australian Government's National Strategy for Disaster Resilience to major events impacting the visitor economy, and was issued by the Australian Standing Committee on Tourism (ASCOT) in 2013. The objective of the plan was to ensure timely and accurate information was communicated to governments, tourism organisations, inbound tour operators and the domestic and international travelling public³³ about emerging events or major crisis.

The Black Summer bushfires and COVID-19 saw NTICP enacted, however a lack of exercising the plan between major events meant contacts were outdated, information and escalation points were slow, and information was not fit-for-purpose.

As a result, industry established and enacted mechanisms to provide a central repository of information through the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) to provide consistent and reliable information that addressed industry concerns and needs.

Leveraging established industry networks to design messaging fit-for-purpose should be a priority of the NTICP, and if activated early can counter balance misinformation that ultimately affects consumer confidence to travel.



Recommendation

National Tourism Incident Communication Plan

That the Australian Government work with state and territory governments to update the National Tourism Incident Communication Plan to ensure it is current and exercised annually through the Australian Standing Committee on Tourism (ASCOT) to ensure familiarisation with the plan. This would include ensuring industry contacts within the plan are current and up to date.

Response

The process of combating an emergency and of providing immediate relief for persons affected by an emergency³⁴

Visitor Economy Industry Advisory Taskforce

In order to effectively respond to major events, understanding the capacity and capability of the sector to respond is critical. A Visitor Economy Advisory Taskforce should be established to provide advice to Government on short, medium and longer-term response measures that ensures initiatives are purpose-built and effective in mitigating and minimising the impact on the sector.

Taskforces are not an unfamiliar concept for Government or the tourism industry, with the NSW Visitor Economy Strategy 2030 developed through the establishment of a Taskforce chaired by industry leaders, bringing together government, regional tourism networks and the private sector to determine the sectors future direction³⁵.

The establishment of the Tourism Restart Taskforce in April 2020 by the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) and more recently the Australian Government's Reimagining the Visitor Economy Taskforce seek to provide advice to government on recovery initiatives in response to COVID-19³⁶. Whilst widely supported by the industry as a best-practice model for cooperation, the Taskforces were only established during the Recovery phase of PPRR, not Prevention, Preparation and Response.

The Taskforces, or a version thereof, should be expanded and utilised at all phases of PPRR to ensure that there is improved coordination between government and industry (See Figure 2, p.15).



Recommendation

Visitor Economy Advisory Taskforce

That industry continue to exercise the Tourism Restart Taskforce (or similar) that is able to come together with Government as a high-level emergency management advisory taskforce and industry decision-making body to assist government at time of a major crisis.

One Central Point of Truth

The enormity of the Black Summer Bushfires and the speed with which events escalated highlighted that in many instances industry and the community were using multiple sources of information to remain up-to-date and informed.

Government Apps and webpages including Fires Near Me NSW, Live Traffic NSW (road closure information), Airvisual (air quality), and Fire progression maps (RFS website) were all being used to understand fire progression, while the COVIDsafe app (Australian Government), Service NSW (COVID safe check-in) and NSW Health website (Public Health Orders) were frequently visited during the COVID-19 outbreak.

It is important that real-time information on events and guidance on what action is required of operators and travellers is obtained from a single nominated government authority and that industry directs travellers to this central point of truth.

Industry updating their websites with outdated information on fire warnings, border closures, or Public Health Orders created confusion for travellers.

The NSW Government needs to provide the sector with guidance early as to which nominated site will be used to ensure accurate and timely information (for state-based events). This would be enhanced through the inclusion of a 'Visitor Economy' Functional Area to the SEMC to ensure messaging is specifically designed for industry and that existing communication channels are also utilised for maximum impact.

For large-scale global events (such as pandemics) a similar approach should be adopted by the Australian Government through the NTICP (See page 17).



Recommendation

One central point of truth

That Industry adopts 'a central point of truth/ authority' as defined by the NSW Government on state-based events, to ensure that up to date and reliable information is provided to customers and operators during emergency events.

Database of industry operators and assets

Tourism assets are often overlooked or underutilised as 'safe' venues or support services during a major event. This places greater pressure on public assets, particularly those operated by local councils.

Where assets were repurposed during the bushfires, the process of linking to government response agencies was time consuming and slow, and often involved additional levels of certification/ verification prior to use e.g. background checks for volunteers, permits to operate transportation vessels in evacuation efforts.

The development of a voluntary industry database, including operators willing to lend their assets to Government in times of emergency could be prepared and exercised annually through Resilience NSW to reduce implementation and coordination efforts required during an actual event. Industry should annually engage with Resilience NSW on the database, to understand potential future events and Government's likely support needs. This is consistent with recommendations made in the Royal Commission into Natural Disaster Arrangements in relation to a national register for personnel, equipment and assets.

Further, mandatory quarantine as a result of COVID-19 saw the use of a significant number of accommodation venues to contain potential infection and minimise the risk of community transmission. The development of an accommodation database, where providers have met pre-determined standards in relation to facilities, vaccination of staff, air-conditioning, and CCTV could assist government in the selection of suitable accommodation should another event occur.

However, due consideration must be given to appropriate messaging and potential compensation to operators where their involvement and assistance in government programs leads to unintentional brand damage. In Victoria for instance, it was assumed hotel quarantine was run by the hotel operator when in fact this was not the case. When an outbreak occurred, the cluster was named after the hotel in which it originated, causing considerable reputational risk and brand damage to the operator.



Recommendation

Database of industry operators and assets

That industry develops a database of operators available to assist and provide their asset base to the NSW Government if required in an emergency (personnel, temporary accommodation and standard, transportation services). The database could be replicated in other states and territories and would be regularly reviewed in conjunction with Government.

Recovery

The process of returning an affected community to its proper level of functioning after an emergency³⁷

Open for business

Encouraging visitation and expenditure in local communities after a major event aids economic recovery. Following the bushfires, travellers found it difficult to understand whether it was safe to travel and which areas were open for business. Subsequent COVID-19 restrictions further dampened consumer confidence and the ability to travel.

Generic messaging across regions proved ineffective in providing visitors with certainty about where and how to travel with confidence. There was also the added complexity of some locales being unaffected by fire, but required access through fire-affected regions. Lack of local knowledge meant there was a perception that whole regions were closed to visitors.

Developing a mechanism that maps and updates travellers on the status of recovery efforts, regions and tourism businesses open for business could expedite recovery. It could also offer operators an additional avenue to communicate with potential travellers about what they can do to best support their business get back on their feet (i.e. order from the cellar door, pre-order from online stores while the business gets back up and running).

Buy from the Bush, Empty Esky, Roadtrip For Good are all examples of grass roots campaigns that encouraged Australians to engage with local businesses affected by fire. Destination NSW recently used map-based technology to design roadtrip itineraries for visitors looking to hit the open road again. Guidance on how best to 'reopen' and communicate this to visitors including operating hours could be made available through the 'Emergency Management Assistance Portal'.

Recommendation

Open for business app or website

That the NSW Government through Service NSW and Destination NSW work together with industry to develop a mechanism that maps and updates travellers on the status of recovery efforts, including regions and tourism businesses open for business and ready to receive visitors post-disaster.

Stimulus packages

The visitor economy was one of the worst affected sectors by the Black Summer bushfires and COVID-19. Destination Southern NSW determined 72% of businesses in southern NSW were significantly affected costing the local economy \$458 million, impacting 3,365 FTE local jobs³⁸. In the first ten months of 2020 alone, the Australian visitor economy experienced losses of approximately \$70 billion relative to 2019. Extended to the end of 2020, a loss of \$90 billion is estimated³⁹.

Recovery assistance in the form of grants and reduced loans are often made available to bushfire affected individuals/households. However the 2019-20 bushfires and subsequent COVID-19 pandemic has seen historical investment in stimulus packages to aid sector-wide recovery.

The industry seeks to ensure funding committed to generating economic activity is fit-for-purpose, effective and implemented in a timely manner.

To improve the process, Government, in concert with industry should review stimulus packages, identifying those that were most beneficial to the sector, and what improvements could be made to make these packages more effective should they be needed again in the future.

The design of stimulus initiatives in the preparation stage of emergency management would minimise implementation times post-event, encouraging quicker uptake, and generate greater economy activity when stimulus is needed the most.

Recommendation

Recovery packages

That Industry reviews in concert with Government, recovery and stimulus packages for major crisis, determining those that were most effective and beneficial, along with developing improved implementation timeframes in future rollout of programs.

Nationally consistent approach and definitions

The national strategy for the control of COVID-19 was 'disease suppression with the goal of no community transmission'⁴⁰. Restricting the movement of persons in and out of a designated hotspot area was an effective and responsible tactic to contain infection and spread of the disease.

State and territory governments have varied greatly in their interpretations and responses to hotspots despite the Australian Government circulating guidance on determining factors that constitute a hotspot for the purposes of federal assistance⁴¹. There were distinct differences in risk tolerance and confidence in public health responses across all states and territories.

For tourism operators with operations across multiple states and territories, the inconsistencies made management of their businesses incredibly difficult.

The wholesale closure of state and territory borders when state governments had not declared outbreaks as 'hotspots' was counterproductive and had disproportionate impacts on the sector. It is estimated that \$6.8 billion in lost tourism spend occurred over the Christmas period alone due to border restrictions⁴².

Inconsistencies in state approaches meant that industry and consumers had no confidence in the process, resulting in delayed interstate travel demand. Tourism Australia's February Sentiment Tracker found that travellers were more concerned about travel restrictions impacting their plans than actually contracting the virus (41% compared to 27%)⁴³.

National Cabinet, in conjunction with the state and territory governments, should develop a nationally consistent framework for managing local outbreaks, contact tracing and quarantine to restore business and consumer confidence in our ability to manage future pandemics.

Recovery

Nationally consistent approach and definitions

That the Federal Government works with State and Territory Governments to agree standard definitions in an emergency (i.e., hot spots in pandemics) and that there is an agreed upon consistent approach to border closures/openings.

Expansion of Australian Reinsurance Pool Corporation

As the prevalence and severity of natural disasters has increased in Australia⁴⁴, the ability for tourism operators to obtain appropriate natural disaster insurance has become increasingly difficult. Operators are being forced to self-insure, and in some instances where the cost of insurance has become so high, they are unable to operate their businesses effectively.

Operators are increasingly reporting that access to insurance is only becoming worse, and in some instances, can't be obtained at all. Flood and bushfire mitigation and safety practices around recreational assets (such as waterslides) are being increasingly scrutinised by insurance companies, and being used as reasons not to renew policies.

As recently highlighted by the Insurance Inquiry Report December 2020, without insurance many businesses will not be able to recover from a natural disaster without government assistance⁴⁵.

The establishment of the Australian Reinsurance Pool Corporation (ARPC) after the September 11 attacks recognised a changing risk environment where there were certain threats to property individual businesses could not mitigate.

The Australian Government recently announced its intention to establish a reinsurance pool to cover cyclone and related flood damage in Northern Australia in the FY22-23 Budget.

The ARPC should be expanded to provide reinsurance against all major natural disasters in disaster-prone areas, thus making insurance more accessible for the tourism industry.

Recommendation

Expansion of Australian Reinsurance Pool Corporation

That the Australian Government consider expanding the Australian Reinsurance Pool Corporation to provide reinsurance for all natural disasters for commercial property insurance.

Conclusion

2019-20 highlighted the importance of emergency management and planning to the visitor economy's recovery and resilience. The Black Summer bushfires and COVID-19 have magnified the importance of industry and government working together to achieve improved outcomes within existing emergency management frameworks.

The four phases of emergency management overlap and are equally important, however currently in NSW the visitor economy is only involved in the recovery phase. Recent bushfires, floods and COVID-19 have demonstrated the need to involve industry in all phases to improve preparedness, communication, response times and expedite eventual recovery.

All State and Territory Governments need to consider how they plan, prevent and support their visitor economies during major disasters.

Both industry and government have shown a willingness to engage and further enhance relationships to deliver improved outcomes for the sector.

Key to this in the NSW context will be the establishment of the Functional Area of 'Visitor Economy' within the emergency management framework that will enhance the coordination of the sector in a state of emergency.



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