

New study finds outback tourism sector vital part of regional economy as COVID19 devastates industry

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An economic development body in central west Queensland says there is no doubt the State and Federal Government need to rescue and protect the valuable outback tourism sector during COVID19 downturn.

The Remote Area Planning and Development Board (RAPAD) has released new region-specific data which shows the industry is a critical part of the outback economy.

CWQ Data Collection and Analysis report into the value of the local tourism industry has found the sector injects \$527.4M into the central west region each year.

Government restrictions to reduce the spread of corona virus has seen the closure of all major attractions, cancelling of events and some communities are actively discouraging visitors and closing their communities to outsiders.

The outback tourism season runs from April until September when it generates most of its income.

The closures and travel restrictions imposed on the sector mean operations will have extremely limited capacity to generate turn over for 18 months from September 2019 until April 2021.

“This new report proves without a doubt, the tourism industry has supported our economies during years of drought, to be dealt this crippling blow now is completely devastating,” said RAPAD CEO David Arnold.

The study found the average domestic overnight visitor spent \$880 per trip in Longreach and \$740 in Boulia.

Tourists spent \$68.8 million in the Winton economy and 306, 200 people visit Longreach per year, 80% of those are domestic visitors who stay overnight.

Qantas Founders Museum in Longreach closed its doors on Tuesday in line with Federal Government advice, standing down its casual workforce and contemplating how long it can sustain the rest of the staff.

“We pay out over a million dollars in wages every year – that’s 1.4 million spent in our local community just on wages not to mention the other local products and services we purchase,” said Tony Martin Qantas Founders Museum CEO.

“While the report’s figures are impressive, they only show visitor spend they don’t take into account the local contribution, the value of tourism to central western Queensland is more than half a billion,” he said.

“We need to keep our head above water now to meet our ongoing non-operational costs and retain a skilled workforce,” Mr Martin said.

 (07) 4652 5600

 info@rapad.com.au

 100 Galah Street | PO Box 592
Longreach Q 4730



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“This couldn’t have come at a worse time; we have come out of seven months of no revenue. Unlike the coastal tourism strips, we are going into our peak season and once the pandemic is over, we are likely to be in our off season. So, we need stimulus to see us through to the next peak season,” he said.

Mr Martin says everything should be considered from grants and government loans to vouchers to visit the outback, Education Department supported school trips as well as promotion.

The Australian Age of Dinosaurs Museum in Winton employs 24 staff and has also had to stand down two thirds of its workforce.

Executive Chairman David Elliott says the loss of this year’s winter tourist season will mean that it could be twelve months before the Museum is in a position to reemploy all of its staff on a full-time basis.

“The COVID19 situation will have a major impact on Winton and its surrounding regions,” he said.

RAPAD Employment Services Queensland (RESQ) delivers the Federal Governments employment programs and Centrelink agent services, CEO Chris Hamilton says they are bracing for a surge in demand.

“We expect to see a significant increase in unemployed seeking our support and assistance over the next 2 to 3 weeks as people register with Centrelink and start to think about what they will do next,” he said.

For those who are work ready, RESQ helps them to find work by linking the jobseeker with potential employers and supporting both through the first 26 weeks of employment. RESQ also offers opportunities for training and upskilling for those who require it so that when the job becomes available, the individual is ready to go. For those who feel they need to do something to safeguard their physical and mental health, RESQ conducts community-based projects that keeps the jobseeker engaged and a contributing member of their local community.

“What’s hard for us is that some of these people had been through the RESQ process before and found stable jobs so it’s sad to see them back, but they have the experience, faith and confidence that RESQ is a great way to get back to work,” Mr Hamilton said.

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For interviews contact:

Rob Chandler
Chair RAPAD

0427 512 314

David Arnold 0428 583 301
CEO RAPAD

Tony Martin
CEO Qantas Founders Museum

0428 583 747

Chris Hamilton 0408 178 907
CEO RESQ

For further information contact:

Nicole Bond 0417 199 369
Media and Communications Manager RAPAD