

Can Australia become an international cycle tourist destination?

Alan A. Parker argues that Australian governments are missing a valuable source of tourist income.

Australian governments do not recognise the potential tourist income that would come from becoming an international bicycle touring destination nor do they understand that, in the greenhouse world of tomorrow, bicycling is a practical energy conserving form of eco-tourism. Why is this so, when Dutch experience shows that bicycle touring facilities are not only good for the environment, they are very a profitable investment in the future. Bicycle tourism earned the Netherlands around \$300 million a year in the 1990, which is bit more than they spend each year on bicycle infrastructure and shows that bikeways for bicycle tourists will pay for themselves in the long run.

The Tourist Forecasting Council predicts that 8.4 million tourists will visit Australia in 2008 compared with 4.2 million in 1998 and that backpacker tourists are the biggest spenders because they stay longer. Tourism is clearly the most resilient and strongest growing sector of the Australian economy but the more ecologically sustainable forms of tourist travel are not given encouragement or any priority in regional development. There are over a hundred million people in the world who are both well off enough to travel overseas and enjoy riding bicycles. In many countries, cycling for pleasure is the fastest growing area within the leisure and tourism market and what people enjoy doing at home they also enjoy doing abroad. By 2008 there will at least three times as many potential international bicyclist tourists as there are today but we will not see many of them in Australia unless the government takes eco-tourism seriously.

Based on Dutch experience, this article argues that to cope with the increase in tourism generally and

bicycle tourism in particular, there needs to be an expansion of intercity rail travel and the provision of bicycle hire facilities at rail stations and intercity bus stations. The problem is that Commonwealth Government is not funding the necessary rail infrastructure on an equal basis with road funding and the intercity rail system is literally falling apart. The deaths of two international bicycle tourists last year on highways without sealed shoulders indicates the need for a cycling equivalent of the Readers Digest Motoring Guide to Australia that identifies recommended low traffic routes. Furthermore, the State road authorities need to stop destroying around one hundred bridges in rural Australia each year that prevent the use of low-traffic rural roads as bike routes.

The good news is that hiker and bicycle tourist development projects are making good use of disused rail lines in most States and the planning of a \$140 million tourist development project known as the NSW Coastal Cycleway along 1500 km of the east coast of Australia is nearing completion as a regional development project. Whether or not it gets built will be the litmus test of a Commonwealth commitment to bicycle touring.

The international growth of tourism

With tourism being the largest business sector and leisure being such an important dimension of society throughout Europe and North America, the growth of cycle tourism in these countries presents a great tourist development opportunity for Australia. Of equal importance the world population will be over 9 billion by 2050 and a population increase of two billion by

2020 with much of this growth being concentrated in Asian cities. Tourists escaping from high density and polluted urban environments will value the wide open space and natural beauty of rural Australia. The Australian wilderness will be the priceless jewel in the eco-tourist crown.

Many able-bodied Australians also prefer to get away from the big cities for their holidays and the growth in that market is assured despite the lack of infrastructure in many rural areas. According to data from Bicycle Victoria's Great Rides and the Bicycle Institute of NSW's Big Rides, local cycle tourists spend a lot, too. Today, there are many more of them than overseas tourists, and if they enjoy themselves they tend to return to the same places again and again. This domestic tourist demand needs to be well catered for in order to build up the infrastructure for the growing number of international tourists who will come in time.

Cycle tourists and backpackers have great spending power. In 1998 they stayed, on average, longer and spent more than other tourists (Hopkins 1999) and had a high multiplier effect in regional economies. The multiplier effect is estimated at around 2.6 by the Bureau of Resource Economics, because spending tends to concentrate on local foods, accommodation and transport provided by local people not multinational hotel chains.

Since 1974, this writer has travelled with a bicycle as accompanying baggage several times throughout the UK and Australia. There were lots of hassles and problems touring in both countries without a car. It was much easier to get around the UK with a bike if you had a tourist rail

vass for the holiday period than in Australia were it was necessary to fly between some cities. However, it was not until I made a tour of 10 Dutch cities for one month in 1997 travelling every day by rail that I realised just how pleasant and convenient touring historic cities could be using bicycles hired from the central stations. This experience has convinced me that linking national bike routes and the inter city rail network with bicycle hire facilities in Australia could be a major international cycle tourist and back packer tourist attraction.

In the Netherlands, there are excellent rail connections to and from Schiphol Airport near Amsterdam to every city in the country and there are bicycle hire facilities at all major stations so touring cities by bicycle is possible even if you do not take your bicycle with you to Europe. The Dutch transport system caters for all kinds of cyclists and bringing your bicycle with you is not necessary. The Dutch transport system is user friendly and easy to adapt to so it earns a lot of tourist dollars as a consequence.

Dutch bicycle infrastructure is much more than bike paths, it is a user-friendly transport system with comprehensive urban bikeway networks and long distance inter-city bicycle paths. These facilities are integrated with a rail system where there are bicycle hire facilities at all major stations and most trains carry bicycles. International tourists are choosing to use the bicycle facilities available to all Dutch people. Before international bicycle tourists can be catered for in Australia it is essential to increase the numbers of Australians choosing to cycle for all purposes and those cycling to railway stations in order to make public transport a viable option for the 50 per cent of adults in Australia who own a bicycle.

Given the huge distances in Australia, even with the necessary rail infrastructure funding, new bus services would need to be provided and integrated together with bicycle hire facilities servicing the rail and long distance bus network. Most important of all, there needs to be commitment to eco-tourism, which means those tourism modes that reduce transport emissions. This is particularly important now that the

computer modelling done for the government in the final GST negotiations with the Democrats shows that greenhouse gases from transport will increase by 60 per cent between 1997 and 2015 (Hamilton 1999) which is way above the 8 per cent increases agreed to under the Kyoto Protocol.

The NSW Coastal Cycleway: an international tourist attraction

The proposed 1500 km coastal cycleway in NSW, from the Queensland border to the Victorian border is proposed as a priority project for regional development. Detailed plans have been prepared by a former Associate Professor at the School of Town Planning, University of NSW. (Duck-Cohen 1995). This cycleway could also be linked up with the existing rail stations, the off-road bikeways along disused railway trails and other urban and rural bike routes on roads with low traffic volumes.

For example, the Coastal Cycleway planner Elias Duck-Cohen states: "NSW has a unique settlement pattern, with a string of communities lining the coastline nearly all within 20 km or less of one another. By creating linkages between these communities as well as safe cycleways within them, the cycleway would perform an important transport function - besides being of great recreational value for residents and holidaymakers alike.

The cost of developing the whole non-metropolitan route (which comprises more than 90 per cent of the cycleway) is estimated at \$140 million ... to complete the cycleway under existing RTA/Council funding might take 15 years. The setting up of coastal cycleway fund is therefore suggested, offering local councils a subsidy of 2:1 or more, as an incentive to accelerate progress. This additional funding is justified by the project's tourist potential.

The Coastal Cycleway would be of international significance. Once completed it would allow travel agents to promote successfully special cycle touring packages attracting overseas visitors.

Already, even without a proper cycleway, overseas backpacker cyclists are to be seen braving the dangerous Pacific Highway. The

demand is clearly there, and Wollongong provides some evidence of how even a 30 km stretch of cycleway can increase local tourism and stimulate cycle-related business.

A project of this sort could conceivably be expected to attract contributions from the Federal government and, once underway, from corporate and other sources as well."

The BFA submission to the House of Representatives Inquiry into the Development of Regional Services and Infrastructure supported this project.

Conclusion

There is clearly a need for new initiatives in promoting the back-packer tourist market and the building of attractive alternatives that will benefit rural towns and provincial cities. Another initiative is promoting eco-tourist safari tours for both overseas back packers and able-bodied Australian tourists generally. Bicycle tourism and hiking are both sustainable forms of eco-tourism. The greatest potential for cycling road routes that are suitable for cyclists of all ages are the 400,000 km of local roads in populated rural areas (Cox 1997). The potential for linking up local rural roads with ferries, bridges for non-motorised users and bikeways on national highways is shown to have great potential in the proposed NSW coastal cycleway.

Rail systems and cycling networks complement each other and should be planned with this in mind. The restoration of many rail services is desirable, as is the restoration of luggage vans on normal services. All new passenger trains should be designed to accommodate bicycles. If train services are replaced by bus services the bus services should provide for the carriage of bicycles. Existing road and rail bridges that can no longer be used by commercial traffic should not be closed but kept open for horse riders, cyclists, hikers and motorcyclists. Unless bridges are provided it is essential to keep as many ferry crossings open as possible. Bicycle hire facilities at bus depots and rail stations are desirable. Above all, the Commonwealth has to fund the long distance inter city rail system so that it does not fall apart. 