

Lifestyle Oriented Small Tourism [LOST] Firms in the Ferguson Valley, Western Australia

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Introduction

Lifestyle has been oft cited in the literature as the main motivation for those establishing or acquiring tourism related businesses in attractive destinations. However, the term has many different dimensions and connotations, both positive and negative, that have emerged in the tourism literature since the 1980s. Furthermore, the trend towards increased migration, reinforced by the baby boomer generation pursuing new opportunities for enhanced quality of life has given rise to the phenomena variously referred to as 'lifestyle migration' in Europe (Vaugeois and Rollins, 2007), 'amenity migration' in North America (Moss 2006) and 'sea- change' in Australia (Stehlik 2007) that underwrites the growth of lifestyle firms in tourism and hospitality. Demographers have noted the internal migration of urban dwellers to rural areas of Australia since the 1970s and refer to this as 'population turnaround' because it has arrested the decline of rural communities that had occurred in previous decades (Burnley and Murphy 2004). Coastal and mountain locations are also popular destinations that receive this flow of migration, creating significant impacts in resident communities, land use and economic activity, both positive and negative. In light of these trends and impacts, the need to understand this phenomenon and those that pursue an ideal lifestyle through tourism and hospitality related business endeavors has never been more acute.

This understanding is premised on the assumption that lifestyle is a socially constructed phenomenon (Russell and Faulkner 2001) which, when applied to a tourism and hospitality business context, creates a degree of complexity in motivations, meanings and values that sets it apart from other business models. However, lifestyle oriented small tourism [LOST] firms have significant influence in tourism destinations through the quality of the experiences they provide, service standards, investment decisions and environmental performance so the business dimensions of lifestyle firms are also important.

There is an obvious connection between LOST firms in a destination and the promotion of a desired lifestyle to their potential customers, the lifestyle-led consumer groups. It has long been recognised in marketing that consumers do not only purchase physical products and services, they also buy concepts and associated images attached to those products and services. For example, Kamman et al (1998) has suggested that rural life could be conceptualized as meaning quietness, space, physical activities, feeling of belonging to a community, small and human scale, sparsely

populated, low density building, fresh air, healthy and peaceful. Kamman et al (1998) suggest that these lifestyle concepts and associated products can be 'reverse network engineered' in certain geographical locations to provide a blue print for policy and planning and encourage and stimulate certain forms of activities while excluding others that conflict with the lifestyle concept.

Walmsley (2003) contends that there will be winners and losers in the emergent lifestyle-led consumption oriented society, citing places such as Denmark, on the south coast of Western Australia as having an image that "can accommodate a lifestyle oriented tourism industry" (2003:68). In this way, tourism is critical to the changing nature of rural locales that are the target of lifestyle consumers as well as those small tourism firms that seek to exploit the locational and lifestyle benefits that are vested in these places. Potentially all 'post-rural' places could offer the 'otherness' that urbanized Australians are increasingly demanding and thereby capitalize on the centrality of lifestyle in the consumer society, increasing mobility and prosperity of lifestyle oriented groups, such as retired baby boomers and advances in technology for place promotion. The need to generate an income during the transition from farming to tourism, or from salaried to self-employment or retirement is also a significant driver of change in rural areas. Thus, opportunity and necessity is evident in many rural areas, including the Ferguson Valley in Western Australia that forms the case study in this paper. Descriptions of the valley in the words of the LOST firms designed to appeal to lifestyle oriented consumers provide insights into the multiple dimensions of lifestyle firms as depicted in a systemic model of LOST firms proposed in this paper.