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MEDIA STATEMENT

International tourism numbers release mask the real-time impact of COVID-19

Today's release by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) of short-term overseas visitor arrivals for the year to 31 January 2020 is timely, but in statistical terms simply masks the major impact COVID-19 is now inflicting on our major tourism and visitor economy.

ABS Overseas Visitor Arrivals data for the year to January 2020 produced an estimated 9.4 million in annual short-term visitor arrivals to Australia, rising 1.6% in trend terms over the prior year and recording 789,000 international arrivals for the traditional high-season travel month.

The January 2020 reporting period captured the full force of the summer bushfire crisis as well as the timing of Chinese Lunar New Year, a significant catalyst for international visitation to our country from across Asia. The back half of January would have begun to slowly capture the onset of coronavirus and its effect on international travel patterns, including a late January ban on both group travel out of China and the subsequent travel restrictions put in place by the Federal Government between Australia and China – our most significant international visitor market. These both remain in place.

ATIC Executive Director Simon Westaway said the backward facing inbound visitor data simply reflects what a once robust Australian tourism industry looked like in contrast to how the debilitating impact of coronavirus and its spread has now had such a dramatic effect on industry – all within a matter of weeks.

Mr Westaway said with the onset of the unprecedented scenario facing the Australian tourism through coronavirus, the need for rapid visitor data delivery to industry and stakeholders as an estimate or in draft format was now paramount as we move forward.

“These are unprecedented times and the new normal requires faster delivery of data to show the real-time and ongoing impacts of COVID-19 from our government authorities,” Mr Westaway said.

“Based on standard timelines the horror movie that's unfolded for Australian tourism during February and now into March will subsequently not be unveiled with formal ABS international visitor statistics until mid-April.

“Whilst industry understands the need to verify and clarify visitor data, real-time private sector insights are already showing air seat capacity and commensurate international visitor falls into Australia as upwards of 30 per cent and climbing. These insights present the real picture of the situation Australian tourism faces!

“We believe it is encumbered on all agencies to best support beleaguered industries like the international student market as well as tourism and that includes any considered way of bringing a snapshot of the most recently collected visitor data further forward for release.

“ATIC continues to stand as one with both our 1 million job generating tourism industry and the Australian Government around the current appropriate public health response to best counter coronavirus. But we also continue to take a stand around how we can best partner and support industry in the most productive way within the market.”

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