

**Joint Standing Committee on Migration**

**Inquiry into the Working Holiday Maker Program**

**Tuesday 29 September 2020**

**Executive Director – Simon Westaway**

**Speaking Notes**

**Introduction**

Through the Chair I thank the Committee for accepting our written submission and hear our words.

The Australian Tourism Industry Council represents over 10,000 predominantly SME tourism and micro tourism enterprises from all corners of our country.

With the release of the Inquiry's Interim Report and developments impacting the Working Holiday Maker Program, including its interrelationship with our hard-closed international border, I make these short remarks.

This is a fluid situation for the WHM Program.

We understand no more than 67,000 Working Holiday Makers remain in-country – and the number continually drops.

Under this scenario and a closed international border, action is needed urgently.

**The Interim Report**

ATIC welcomes this Committee's Interim Report and its bipartisan backing amongst members.

- It is a very good Report.
- It makes clear sense.
- The Recommendations have do-able things.
- All sides agree.

I point out 3 of the 10 Recommendations for additional comment.

**Recommendation 1** – The Gap Year at Home.

A very sensible idea.

It could set a trend for Australia's Generation Z as the COVID recession changes people's outlook post school and tertiary studies or looking for career work.

As a former senior executive of Tourism Australia, a role exists for them for drive the Gap Year promotion as part of its overarching in the domestic visitor market.

It needs to be contemporary, digital, above and below the line!

It needs to be for adults, parents and empty nesters too.

It clearly could be instructed to incorporate this into their **Holiday Hear This Year** activity, side by side, with their current WHM Marketing Programs in key overseas markets.

**Recommendation 4** is an important holistic recommendation.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> point on 'Extending the Northern Australia provision, allowing work in hospitality, tourism and other industries to apply in all regional, rural and remote areas' is strongly endorsed.

The Northern Australia provision should not apply just to Northern Australia (above the Tropic of Capricorn). We need to think beyond the latitude line.

The submission by the Federal Member for Grey outlines that in his rural SA electorate tourism and hospitality businesses in more remote areas find it extremely difficult to attract staff. The same applies for many other parts of Australia. But in his region these positions don't qualify for the visa extension.

It is a frustration that WHM visas assist other remote industries to find a workforce, but tourism and hospitality do not. This must change.

One clear example:

Arkaroola Wilderness Sanctuary & Retreat in the South Australian Flinders Ranges.

Arkaroola is no different in its employment recruitment challenges and it employs up to 20 backpackers a year.

If hospitality or tourism work in remote areas, such as in regional and outback South Australia, and similarly other regions, were recognised for second and third year visa extensions under the WHM Program, in the same manner as is the case north of the Tropic of Capricorn, it would make a huge difference.

In quoting TICSA member and owner, Doug Sprigg, and he won't mind me using this.

*"Motivated Australians don't seem to look for seasonal employment in remote areas of South Australia. Generally, they are looking for full-time long-term employment. And Having multilingual, enthusiastic staff greet and cater for international and Australian visitors is bliss!"*

**Recommendation 8** – a Hotline for WHMs is noted – this is reputational stuff.

The vast bulk of WHM to our great country have a fantastic, never to forget experience.

We need better mitigations and we need better real-time oversight of the Program.

**I make some final observations**

**WHMs delivery significant economic benefit to Australia**

Backpackers within the WHM Program have long-demonstrated their propensity to travel extensively throughout Australia.

They integrate well and take up hard-to-fill roles across key regional industries – including tourism and hospitality.

With a closed border and as WHM visas expire, their steady decline is putting further downward pressure on the tourism industry. This is particularly the case for tourism businesses like hostels and specialist backpacker accommodation, bus and transport offerings that specially cater for

backpackers, through to tourism centres and regions that receive strong volumes of these high-valued tourists.

The Program's annual economic value pre-COVID has been estimated by TRA at \$3.2 billion with 308,000 Working Holiday Makers accumulating 46 million visitor nights during 2019.

On any measure an incredibly important visitor market.

### **Flexibility for the WHM going forward is needed**

The Interim Report provides a genuine pathway.

ATIC welcomes recent extensions for the WHM Program against the current arrangements due to COVID.

Moving forward we are seeking for first year WHM visa holders to be considered for a second-year extension on the same terms of conditions.

For second-year WHM visa holders an extension could be the same as for year one on the same terms and conditions.

In the area of extension this should also importantly allow a WHM visa holder to work within tourism and hospitality including those are currently receiving a WHM extension, including in their third (3rd) year.

### **The WHM program needs better oversight and a nurturing home?**

The next decade long 'national long-term strategic tourism industry plan' – Tourism2030 – needs to economically capture WHMs. This will enable overarching long-term planning.

### **Finally, WHMs as a long-haul travel bubble must be more aggressively explored**

People tend to forget we are a global village.

Whilst there's nothing like Australia, to borrow the Tourism Australia tagline, there's plenty of international work/study/travel offerings for travelling youth out there.

We need a revitalised WHM package and be an early-mover on travel bubbles.

And the competition is going to become fiercer post COVID.

Developing a travel bubble proposal select out of Europe and Asia. It must be prioritised as international seat caps next rise.

The ability to package via TA, airlines and industry, a select Australian entry and quarantine, offset arrangements around quarantine and start getting these desired visitors back to travel and holiday work? Thank you

### **Further Details:**

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