

NATURAL DISASTERS AND OTHER SERIOUS EVENTS

BACKGROUND

From time to time, Victoria experiences a natural disaster or other serious event that disrupts normal activities and negatively impacts on a region's appeal as a tourist destination, or detracts from Victoria's image as a safe destination for interstate and international visitors. This may include; bushfires, floods, storms, outbreak of disease, pollution or even the threat of terrorism. While bushfires, for example, are commonplace in Victoria, serious events do occur. Most recently, Victoria faced the February 2009 bushfires, where significant and tragic losses were experienced by households and the business community alike.

The tourism industry is particularly vulnerable to such events, as visitor numbers can be significantly impacted before, during and after a natural disaster or other serious event. Tourism and tourism-related businesses make a significant contribution to the economy, providing employment and a wide range of products and services including; accommodation, tours, events, recreational activities, cafes, restaurants and attractions. These businesses play an important role in many regional towns and centres in particular, as they help attract a stream of visitors and boost the customer base for local businesses.

KEY ISSUES

Impacts

- A natural disaster or related event has the potential to impact Victorians right across the State, not just those in close proximity to the event. The impact can be direct or indirect and may be short-term or long-term. In addition to any direct loss or injury to people and any loss or damage to property, tools or stock; many businesses may also be impacted through the loss of customers. SMEs are particularly vulnerable to fluctuations in cash flow and may not have the financial reserves to cope with unexpected shocks.
- While those directly affected often receive assistance and support, there is a recognised lack of assistance for businesses that are indirectly affected by such an event; a significant proportion of which are tourism or tourism-related businesses. The failure of public policy (and related support programs) in acknowledging and addressing this dimension of natural disaster affected businesses must be addressed as a priority. VECCI recently established the VECCI Business Relief Fund (VBRF) to assist such businesses. VTIC supports this Fund, which with appropriate State and Federal Government support, will continue in perpetuity to assist businesses impacted by other natural disasters.

Communication and Information Provision

- The accurate provision and dissemination of information is vital throughout high risk periods (such as periods of high fire danger), during any emergency phase, and in the days and weeks following a natural disaster or other serious event. In the first instance, information must be provided in an accurate and timely manner that ensures the safety of all concerned. Public safety is the key driver of communication at this stage.
- Consideration must be given to tourists, tour parties, tour businesses, independent travellers, and foreign speaking visitors, all of whom have specific public messaging requirements. A clear and consistent message should be delivered through multiple channels. Consideration should be given to those people, including tourists, who will not have access to mobile phones, radios, television, internet, and those who do not speak English. Visitor Information Centres (VIC) are a regular reference point for visitors. As such the VIC network can play an important role in providing information.
- Each region or settlement must have a contingency plan in place that outlines an appropriate response which gives consideration to the local area including the availability of roads and/or safe havens. Where appropriate, contingency plans may include evacuation procedures or the use of safe havens. In addition to the needs of local residents, consideration must be given to the needs and safety of visitors to the area, who in peak seasons, may make up a significant proportion of the local population.

- While safety must always come first, a balanced approach is needed. The information must present an accurate assessment of danger and the locations to which the danger relates. Bushfires, for example, are quite normal during the summer months, but are often localised and many areas remain safe and appropriate to visit. A blanket approach discouraging travel in general has many potential negative implications, including a detrimental impact on businesses operating in the area.
- A natural disaster or other serious event has the potential to have long-term effects on a region's or State's reputation as an appealing tourism destination. There is a risk that the event may have a negative impact on visitors' perceptions regarding safety, access, attractiveness, availability of accommodation, availability of activities and the likelihood of disruption to travel plans. While media coverage has a role to play in providing information, it has the potential to magnify the seriousness and extent of the event. With modern technology, such a message can spread both quickly and widely, causing extensive damage to existing and future marketing campaigns.
- These factors highlight the need for a planned and coordinated communications response that seeks to put the issue into perspective, reassures observers about the measures taken to address the situation and fully explain the true extent of the crisis. Where necessary, ongoing communications should be delivered to ensure that destination reputation is restored and visitors return.

Recovery

- In the recovery phase, a balance needs to be struck between providing relief support and the need to ensure, where possible, a timely and sustainable resumption in 'business as usual' trading conditions. While emergency relief is essential for many directly and indirectly affected parties, there can be unintended consequences for some, particularly local traders including cafes, restaurants and accommodation providers, if significant and enduring relief and related support continues, especially in instances where these businesses would normally provide such products and services. In such circumstances, local traders can be denied their normal income.
- In the rebuilding process following a natural disaster or other serious event, there must be a balance between the need to establish 'safe' structures and the importance of re-establishing the original and/or natural attractions of the affected area.

POLICY POSITION

- VTIC supports the use of a collaborative communication and educational strategy to assist businesses and visitors prepare for and recover from a natural disaster. VTIC supports improved contingency planning by the tourism industry to minimise the risk and potential economic loss that may be associated with unforeseen natural disaster or other serious events.
- VTIC supports the provision of timely and accurate information which seeks to ensure the safety of all concerned, while not causing unnecessary disruption to travel and normal business operations in otherwise safe regions.
- VTIC supports the use of targeted communications following a natural disaster or other serious event to ensure that destination reputation is restored and visitors return.
- VTIC believes that in the rebuilding phase following a natural disaster, consideration must be given to the original and/or natural attractions of the affected area, as these play an important role in attracting visitors, and in turn, supporting the local community.
- VTIC believes that in the recovery phase there should be, where possible, a timely and sustainable resumption in 'business as usual' trading conditions, to avoid any unintended negative consequences for local traders.
- VTIC supports the VECCI Business Relief Fund and recognises that there is currently a lack of support for businesses who are indirectly affected by natural disasters and other significant events.