

# LOCAL CHALLENGES TO REGIONAL DESTINATION BRANDING: CASE STUDIES OF TWO HERITAGE COMMUNITIES IN NORTH EAST VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA

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## Abstract

*This paper explores the local community context which underpins the branding of regional tourism areas. It is based on case studies of two heritage destinations, Glenrowan and Beechworth, located within the region marketed for tourism as Victoria's High Country, in North East Victoria, Australia. This research examines these local destinations' relationship with and response to the regional destination brand. It involves ongoing engagement with and interpretation of the regional and local context through field visits and observation, secondary data, and in-depth interviews. Participants include stakeholders traditionally involved in regional branding as well as members of the local destinations who are often left out of these branding decisions and processes. The findings suggest that destination branding is difficult in a regional sense due to the influence of previously unconsidered place-specific factors. This paper focuses on one aspect of this local context – the general nature of local communities which comprise the destinations of a tourism region - and explores the relationship between local identity and community participation and the regional brand. The implication is that local context is important, but complex, and points to certain influencing local factors which may need to be taken into account in developing and applying frameworks of regional branding. The purpose of this paper is not to solve the problems but to highlight the issues and provide a platform from which to explore them further by drawing on multi-disciplinary perspectives in order to inform of the theory, processes and practices of regional destination branding.*

**Keywords:** local context, community heritage, identity, places

## INTRODUCTION

The potential for tourism to generate employment, investment and economic growth has seen governments at all scales try to capitalise on the importance of tourism by investing public funds in tourism marketing (Prideaux & Cooper, 2002). As a result, since the 1980's in Australia, tourism has been used as a key policy instrument by governments keen to be seen as active in the development and regeneration of declining regional areas (Hall 2007). The result has been the establishment of destination marketing organisations (DMO) and regional tourism organisations (RTO), (or versions thereof), in order to 'coordinate tourism planning, development, marketing and promotion among and within local areas' (Jenkins 2000, p. 175).

Under this model, regional tourism areas are created through the assignment of somewhat arbitrary geographical boundaries. These regions tend to span numerous individual communities and Local Government Areas (LGAs / Shires). The tourism region is

assigned an overarching (or umbrella) brand name to represent its core products and experiences. In many cases the regional brand is developed and imposed by state level tourism organisations in a top-down process. As a result, while the assigned brand may fit the region as a geographical locator, in many cases the individual local destinations within the region have little association with or ownership of it.

This paper reports on the findings from exploratory research which examines the relationship between regional tourism branding and the nature and identity of local communities which comprise the destinations of the region. It is based on case studies of two heritage destinations, Glenrowan and Beechworth, located within a traditionally mixed farming area in the north east of the State of Victoria, Australia. The findings highlight the challenges of regional branding due to the complex and dynamic nature of the local context which underpins the regional brand. Each destination is characterised by the interaction of a number of factors which creates a distinct sense of community and local identity, which in turn appears to influence the nature of tourism development and marketing of these destinations, and their respective response to the regional brand.

While recognising that there are other issues which affect regional destination branding, but which are beyond the scope of this paper, it is the relationship between local community and the regional brand which is the subject of discussion here. The contribution of this paper is to raise previously unexplored local community into the picture in order to inform of the theory, processes and practices of regional destination branding.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

There is widespread acknowledgement that the competitiveness of destinations depends on the ability to develop and project a unique and recognisable brand (Buhalis, 2000; Prideaux & Cooper, 2002). The keys to successful destination branding include: a strong and shared vision (Morgan et al., 2004); commitment to the brand's essence and values, and consistency of expression (Morgan et al., 2004); and cooperation and collaboration between stakeholders (Crockett & Wood, 1999; Heath & Wall, 1992).

However, Pike (2005, p. 258), in lamenting the paucity of research on destination branding, acknowledged the complexity of destination branding, in particular the ability to capture the essence of a multi-attributed destination in a way that is both meaningful to multiple tourism markets and effectively differentiates the destination from competitors. Ooi (2004, p. 107) claims that most destination branding research deals narrowly with the 'poetics of branding', concentrating on how brand images and messages are formulated, while neglecting issues of implementation and support of the destination brand. Morgan et al. (2004, p.14) claim that there is little understanding of the extent to which place brand management is a collective activity embraced by residents and smaller operators, and call for more research to explore the impacts of such brands at the local level.

Practically, we know that destination branding has encountered many challenges, as supported anecdotally and by case studies such as New Zealand (Morgan et al., 2003; Ryan & Zahra in Morgan et al., 2004), and in Australia, the Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast (Prideaux & Cooper, 2002) and the Hunter Valley in New South Wales (Dredge &

Jenkins, 2003).

There is a small body of research on the branding of regional (i.e. rural) destinations which has explored a number of dimensions such as: regional tourism policy and planning (Dredge & Jenkins 2003); competitiveness and success (Buhalis, 2000; Prideaux & Cooper, 2002); destination image (Blain et al., 2005; Cai, 2002); the role and activities of DMOs / RTOs (Blain et al., 2005; Jenkins 2000); the role and interests of stakeholders (Morgan et al., 2003) and relationships and networks among them (Crockett & Wood, 1999; Hankinson, 2001 & 2003); and processes of consensus building (Heath & Wall, 1992). These studies have successfully identified some critical general level issues with regional branding including: complexity and lack of control; power imbalances and political processes; stakeholder ownership and cooperation; and deficiencies in resources and expertise. What appears to be missing, however, is the perspective of the local destinations which comprise regional tourism areas, perhaps due to the complexity and politics identified.

MacBeth (1996) calls for a 'foregrounding of the locals' in the planning, development and marketing of tourism, which this paper seeks to do. As such, this study builds upon previous research by delving below the state / regional scale and institutional DMO / RTO focus to explore the local context which underpins regional destination branding in order to more fully elucidate some of the issues identified. To this end, this research draws on multi-disciplinary perspectives relating to place and community, in an attempt to provide a more integrated and holistic perspective on regional branding, reflective of local cultures and identities. For this purpose, place is considered to be a socially constructed phenomenon (Allen et al., 1998). Places are where people, institutions and entities (which have a high degree of 'local embeddedness'), come together in unique ways to give meaning to such individuals and entities, just as they give meaning to places (Castree et al., 2004, p. 64/65). Hall states that sense of place is where 'people feel a particular attachment or personal relationship to an area in which local knowledge and human contacts are meaningfully maintained' (2007, p. 241).

In summary, there has been little research to date which explores the relationship between local community and regional branding, a gap in the knowledge which this paper will go some way towards addressing. The implication is to highlight some of the local contextual issues which tourism policy-makers and destination marketers may need to consider in developing and applying frameworks for regional destination branding.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The genesis of this research can be traced back to field visits to Glenrowan and Beechworth, in June and August 2005 respectively, to attend events commemorating the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Siege of Glenrowan and the subsequent imprisonment and trial of Ned Kelly<sup>6</sup> in Beechworth. These field visits started a journey of discovery to understand

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<sup>6</sup> Edward "Ned" Kelly (c. 1855 – 11 November 1880) is Australia's most famous bushranger, and, it is argued, Australia's greatest cultural icon and 'the closest thing Australia has to a national hero' (Seal 1996, p. 145) due to his defiance of the colonial authorities. After murdering

more fully the nature and processes of regional tourism marketing. In 2006, Tourism Victoria, the state's tourism agency, re-branded the north east Victoria (NEV) tourism region to *Victoria's High Country*, presenting a unique and timely opportunity to examine first hand the relationship between regional destination branding and the identities of individual destinations at the local scale. The re-branding of NEV was highly contentious for a number of local communities and tourism industry groups who felt the new brand did not fit with their sense of identity nor best represent their tourism offering. Hence, they either strongly opposed the new brand or ignored it completely. Within this context, the towns of Beechworth and Glenrowan provide interesting comparative cases in that they perceive a lack of fit with the new regional brand, while also displaying sharp contrasts in their respective tourism development and marketing to date, despite historical similarities and close heritage ties.

An ongoing program of research incorporated ten individual field visits to the region to date, over the period June 2005 to August 2007, including festivals and commemorative events, a regional branding summit, ongoing observation, and interviews with regional tourism stakeholders and community members. In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the branding context, and to examine local sense of place and identity, it was deemed necessary to immerse within this context to develop relationships with and engender the trust of participants.

This research is therefore a multiple, or collective, instrumental case study (Stake 2005; Yin 2004) in that the cases facilitate understanding and provide an ideal opportunity for confirming, challenging or extending (Perry 2001) the principles of destination branding. In an effort to explore the multiple perceptions of reality of these particular contexts a process of triangulation is being used to clarify meaning (Stake 2005, p. 454). This includes extensive analysis of secondary data including historical records and literature; regional policies; tourism plans and marketing strategies; convergent discussions with key informants; and in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis has identified emergent themes for further investigation through ongoing engagement with literature in the fields of: place and community (such as sense of place and place identity), heritage management, and regional policy and development.

To date thirteen in-depth interviews have been conducted with a range of participants across two groups. The first group includes stakeholders traditionally involved in regional branding, such as institutional state and local government officials, and regional destination marketers and industry members. However, the second group comprises individuals and groups from the local destinations of Beechworth and Glenrowan who are often left out of regional branding decisions and processes, but who represent the vast majority of the regional tourism context, including: community associations and

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three policemen, he and his gang were proclaimed outlaws. A final violent confrontation with police at Glenrowan, the only place where Kelly wore his iconic metal armour and helmet, led to his capture and trial. He was executed by hanging at Melbourne Gaol in 1880. His daring and notoriety made him an iconic figure in Australian history, folk lore, literature, art and film.

committees; historians and heritage interpreters; members of the local tourism industry, including retailers and hospitality operators; local entrepreneurs and community ‘champions’, as well as tourism opponents. In this way, this research adopts an ‘eclectic and inclusive’ approach to the notion of local community (MacBeth, 1996) based on a commitment to or interest in the locale or region.

## **Background to the Cases**

Located approximately 250 kilometres north east of Melbourne, the state capital of Victoria, NEV is predominantly a mixed agricultural area with some service and light manufacturing industries. Apart from the main cities of Albury-Wodonga and Wangaratta, with populations of approximately 42,000, 28,000 and 16,000 respectively, and the rural town of Benalla (8,600) (Victoria Australia, 2007), the region is largely comprised of small country towns. Tourism contributes to the region’s economy - approximately A\$500m in the year to June 2006 (Tourism Victoria, 2006). However, visitation has been volatile and lacking growth over the last five years due to extreme weather conditions which have led to successive seasons of summer wild fires and lack of snow on the ski fields in winter.

Since May 2006, the region has been marketed by Tourism Victoria, as *Victoria’s High Country (VHC)* with the tagline *You Can Always Blame the Alpine Air*. Prior to that, the region had been branded *Legend’s Wine and High Country (LWHC)* since 1997 when Tourism Victoria introduced the prevailing regional tourism strategy (Hall 2003, p. 188). The rationale for the brand name change was a ‘low level of consumer recognition and association for the *LWHC* name’ (Tourism Victoria 2006). The re-branding process involved a limited amount of consultation with tourism stakeholders at the regional scale.

The region is promoted largely for nature-based adventure based upon its Alpine landscapes, as well as for touring holidays (Tourism Victoria, 2007). It is also characterised by a rich cultural heritage landscape of gold rush history and strong associations with a number of historical legends - the mountain cattlemen, and the Australian bushrangers (outlaws), the most famous of which is Ned Kelly. Within the region, the communities of Beechworth and Glenrowan have the closest association with the Kelly legend and while he is a ‘major (if not the main) element in their destination image and tourism industry’ (Frost, 2006, p. 250), the connection between town and legend has been leveraged for tourism in different ways.

## **Beechworth**

Beechworth is one of the primary destinations in NEV. It proudly boasts being Victoria’s ‘best preserved gold rush town’ (tourism promotional material). In the mid-1900s it developed as the regional capital, but gradually declined as gold ran out. At the 2001 Census, Beechworth had a population of 2,778, of which one quarter were employed in a professional capacity and a slightly older population demographic. The appearance and ambiance of the town suggests a relatively higher socio-economic profile. The majority of people do not work in the town itself, but commute to employment in the larger regional centres.

Beechworth is the seat of government for the LGA of Indigo, the 'Heritage Shire', which has a strong focus on tourism. Indigo was created in 1994 through the special grouping of four historic towns on the back of intense local lobbying (against becoming part of another larger LGA). These communities felt that they had a distinct identity based on rich individual and collective cultural heritage (Beechworth Tourism Industry Worker). Beechworth is the jewel in Indigo's tourism due to its expertly preserved heritage streetscape and carefully restored colonial buildings, including thirty classified by the National Trust.

Since its decline as a major administrative centre, Beechworth has evolved as a tourist area primarily due to the 'coming of the [National] trust' in the 1950s (Griffiths 1987, p.95), which elevated the town's heritage in the minds of the community. It has recently re-invented itself as a popular destination and growing wine-producing area offering visitors an eclectic mix of galleries, antiques, boutiques, old hotels, as well as provedores, cafes and restaurants, more synonymous with the gourmet enclaves of metropolitan suburbs. The result is that today, Beechworth is more akin to the Tourist Shopping Village described by Getz as 'small towns and villages that base their tourist appeal on retailing, often in a pleasant setting marked by historical or natural amenities' (1993: 15).

### **Glenrowan**

In contrast, Glenrowan has seen visitation almost halve in the past decade (Glenrowan Tourism Operator). It is a small town located in the Wangaratta LGA, a larger and more heterogeneous LGA in terms of rate-payer and economic bases. At the 2001 Census, Glenrowan had a population of 342 characterised by a lower socio-economic profile.

The township has had a fairly troubled history. The Siege of Glenrowan by Ned Kelly and his gang in June 1880 is arguably one of the most notorious events in Australian history. However, the history of Kelly and the Siege is strongly contested (Frost, 2006; Jones, 2005; Seal, 1996). Debate still rages about whether Kelly was a hero or a murderous villain and his significance as a symbol of national identity. The character and identity of Glenrowan is entirely defined by this one historical event, and ancestral relations on one or the other side of the saga still prevail. Anecdotal evidence suggests that up until recently it was impossible to mention the name of Kelly in the local hotel without a brawl erupting.

Unlike Beechworth, Glenrowan has consistently struggled to capitalise on its heritage for tourism beyond a few souvenir shops and an animated theatre. There is little apparent regard for the heritage integrity of the town, as lamented upon by travel writer Bill Bryson (2001). Nothing tangible remains of the historical events that took place at Glenrowan. National Heritage Listing only came to the Siege site in 2005, due to intense and lengthy lobbying by a small group of passionate locals, and after a protracted process, interpretive signage is now being developed. Interviews, supported by extensive media coverage, have revealed that plans for further tourism development are rife with politics and conflict.

Glenrowan was previously in the LGA of Benalla, and anecdotal evidence suggests that it was not unhappy to lose it to Wangaratta in the amalgamations of the 1990s. However,

this lack of continuity, combined with the highly contested history, has meant that Glenrowan has always been perceived as a rural backwater, largely ignored in terms of investment and development, including tourism. The town is increasingly a feeder suburb for the towns of Wangaratta and Benalla with many new residents from outside the area (Glenrowan Stakeholders). While tourism operators and those with connections or passion for the history of the town continue to lobby for due recognition of that heritage, for historical as well as tourism purposes, the town continues to lack basic infrastructure such as sewerage, water, and footpaths.

## **FINDINGS**

The findings suggest that there are factors embedded in the local context which appear to have influenced the nature and extent of tourism development and marketing of these destinations, and their respective response to the regional brand, *VHC*. The unique combination of these factors in each case result in a distinct sense of community and local identity. As highlighted in the background information above, these factors include: history and heritage; local government jurisdiction and support; socio-economic and demographic factors; and evolution of tourism development. While recognising that there are other issues which affect destination branding, it is the relationship between local community and regional branding which is the focus of this discussion as it is considered that this has wider applicability to other regional areas grappling with similar destination branding challenges.

### **Nature of regional communities**

Like many rural areas, the NEV region is not an entity in and of itself but a collection of overlapping and interrelated communities, characterised by a diverse and fragmented array of residents and business owners, and administered by different LGAs. Within this context, there are varying degrees of ‘sense of belonging’ to the region as a whole, with strong attachment to particular sub-regions and local communities, a complexity which has implications for control and cooperation within regional tourism planning and marketing.

The townships of Glenrowan and Beechworth are long-established, founding communities in Victoria, that pre-date tourism. They both have a history and a reason for being which are fundamental to what they look like today and how they function. While tourism destinations today, they are also rural communities that function first and foremost as places to live, work, raise families, do business, and recreate in, as highlighted by one participant as follows:

“.. tourism is an important industry to us, but it’s not the main industry, but it does employ a lot of people ... with the tobacco industry demise there’s a lot of diversification about our cultural base and some other people are going into grapes or tourism enterprises of some sort.....” Wangaratta Stakeholder A

Historically, Beechworth has been characterised by a tightly knit community with a strong sense of its own history and identity, with the result that the community has had an active voice and role in how the township has been developed and marketed for tourism. By contrast, Glenrowan appears to lack a cohesive sense of community which can help drive

such grassroots initiatives:

“Glenrowan, it has its own particular set of issues up there because a lot of people, a lot of the residents don’t necessarily want tourism, but the community out there too needs a lot of community capacity building because there’s a lot of in-fighting and the shopkeepers don’t necessarily get along with one another.” Wangaratta Stakeholder A

### **Locality and Identity**

Agnew (1987) argues that place can incorporate three related, but slightly different aspects of locality: place as location (a distinct point on the earth’s surface), place as locale (a physical area for everyday life), and place as a locus of identity (a focus for personal and collective loyalty), all of which have implications for the branding of regional destinations. Destination regions tend to be defined by somewhat arbitrary geographical boundaries. However, people, i.e. residents, business owners, do not live in ‘regions’ per se. Rather, they live in communities which are firmly rooted in the ‘local’ as opposed to the ‘regional’. People have longstanding connections with a town or place, the result of which is a strong sense of local identity which is often closely related to a community’s history and cultural heritage, as is particularly the case in Beechworth:

“There was marching in the streets with banners saying ‘No, we will not amalgamate. No, we are a distinct area’. There was a real community grassroots campaign which gets back to how parochial the little towns are ... it was just the community saying, we’re special, we’re distinct, we’re not Wodonga, we’re not Wang[aratta] and our point of difference is heritage ... so that’s why we’re the Heritage Shire.” Indigo Stakeholder A

With respect to the regional destination brand, the response from these two local communities suggests limited and differing capacity to identify with and capitalise on it, as exemplified by the responses of participants:

“I don’t think it does a lot for Beechworth being just called the ‘High Country.’”  
Beechworth Tourism Industry worker

“The interesting thing with the branding is that it doesn’t ply with the heritage.” Indigo Stakeholder B

“Heritage is not a major [regional brand] product strength, which is a shame I think. We have Ned Kelly for crying out loud!” Wangaratta Stakeholder A

Given that the brand promise is ultimately delivered by the local tourism community, then these communities should feel that the destination brand ‘represents their sense of place’ (Pike 2005, p. 259). However, in these cases, the regional brand reflects neither the identities of these local communities nor the vision and aspirations they have as tourism destinations. The communities of Beechworth and Glenrowan appear to have had a strong allegiance to the previous brand, *LWHC*. It appears that a brand that overtly acknowledges ‘heritage’ better represents the identity of these destinations. The reaction is the need to “make our own branding stronger than that” as opposed to a rallying behind the regional brand strategy.

## **Community Participation**

Pike (2005) draws attention to the politics of destination decision-making and the need for balance between community consensus and brand theory because a top-down approach to destination brand implementation is unlikely to succeed. Overall, the findings of this research suggest that the regional brand is perceived by local communities as something handed down from above as “just the government spending money”, in order to “do something different”, i.e. change for the sake of change. It appears that these communities perceive that they had little input into the regional brand, with the process of consultation viewed as token and selective:

“I hate it. This was one of those surveys that they did and I just don’t agree with it...they didn’t really ask me, no.” Glenrowan resident

“It really was token effort to obtain all the information.” Indigo Stakeholder A

MacBeth (1996) argues that the top-down ‘consultation’ model disempowers local communities, in that it gives primacy to the state / region and assumes that ‘professionals’ know best what is good for local communities, as illustrated by one participant:

“[the marketing model] is a top-down approach which is out of touch with the regional reality ... our focus should be at the local level. We need research into the local operators, in terms of their needs and interests. We need to operate at and relate to the grassroots level, not be prescriptive from the top-down.” Wangaratta Stakeholder A

In these cases, a strong imbalance in power relations within the region meant that certain regional communities were deemed ‘non-key’ and are neither embraced into the fold of the ‘regional branding community’ nor presented with any compelling reason to engage in the tourism marketing process and support the new brand.

## **CONCLUSION**

This exploratory research suggests that there are both theoretical and practical challenges to regional destination branding including:

- The general nature of rural communities - people live in local communities, not regions, and their identity is firmly grounded at that scale.
- The appropriateness of the particular brand chosen to some communities – brand identity.
- The process by which the regional brand was selected and implemented – a ‘top-down’ branding approach lacking any real participation from local community members.

In certain situations there appears to be a number of factors that influence whether a regional brand is embraced by the local destinations in the region. These factors are strongly grounded in the local scale and will be explored more fully in this research through further analysis of the local context and engagement with literature on place and community, including sense of place and place identity.

Overall, regions are comprised of diverse and complex local communities, many of which view this diversity as an asset to be embraced, rather than seeking to establish a brand that masks differences and pretends that the region is somehow consistent. The imposition of arbitrary regional boundaries, with associated brands and marketing processes, assumes a level of intra-regional cohesiveness that is not evident in reality. As a result, rather than uniting communities the regional brand can be a source of division, internal competition and conflict. A top-down process of branding regions can mean that communities are effectively alienated and disenfranchised by the brand. This may result in community disengagement from the regional tourism industry through further lack of participation and coordination, and / or 'going it alone' which may then jeopardise the integrity of the overarching regional brand. It is acknowledged however, that engaging the participation of local communities and stakeholders is a complex and resource intensive exercise.

The implication is not that the concept of regional destination branding is not applicable but to highlight that local context is important, but complex, and to point to certain influencing factors which tourism policy-makers and destination marketers need to take account of in applying frameworks of regional tourism branding. This paper simply builds on earlier research by identifying some of the challenges in order to provide a platform for a more holistic exploration of the issues to better inform of the theory of regional destination branding and to lay the foundation for the development of more pragmatic guidelines for destination marketers. It also highlights that future research needs to continue to delve into issues of local context, particularly how they affect the branding of tourism regions.

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