

SHOWCASING REGIONAL CULTURE: THE “SHEEPVENTION” RESEARCH REPORT

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ABSTRACT

“Sheepvention” is an annual event in Hamilton, Victoria, Australia. It brings together farmers for stud sheep auctions and ‘inventors’ marketing new products and services. 67% of visitors Sheepvention are not directly involved with wool and meat production. Most of these people live in the town of Hamilton and attend Sheepvention to ‘have a look’, ‘learn something’, meet friends’ and ‘catch up with what is happening in this industry’. With no obvious “fair” component we consider what this means for policy makers responsible for the event, and for state and local government in their choices for infrastructure support for such events.

Introduction

One of the more usual traditions in rural communities around the world is the annual “fair” or agricultural show. These events are ostensibly designed to showcase agricultural produce, providing a forum for leading farmers to be recognised, and for all farmers to learn about new ways of doing business. The agricultural show is also an important cultural event defining national identity [1]. Smith and Bender [2] in their compendium of Pacific Rim urbanisation, rethinking place and identity, see these events as examples of the ‘localization of Modernity’.

In Australia, as in many western countries, agricultural shows have tended to be replaced by more unique, targeted events (see Rydell [3] for a discussion of the “fair” in North American culture), such as, for example, the Jacaranda Festival in Grafton and Mardi Grass at Nimbin (the biggest hemp festival in the Western world!), both in New South Wales. In south west Victoria in the town of Hamilton, which describes itself as “the wool capital of the world” [4] the annual “Sheepvention” has just celebrated its 25th year. Sheepvention brings together wool growers with their prize rams and sheep to be judged before the auction on the last day. It also holds a competition for inventions related to wool growing, thus its name Sheepvention.

Sheepvention

The Australian wool industry has gone through a dramatic change since the early 1990s when the centralised purchasing scheme was abandoned because of an extensive stockpile that had been built up as part of the subsidisation of wool growers. In fact the sheep flock is now at its lowest level since the early 1950s, down to 98 million from the highs of 180 million around 20 years ago. In the early 1980s, before the crash in the reserve price of wool, Garden [4] in his history of Hamilton noted that ‘wool is the backbone of local primary industry, and Hamilton still rides on the sheep’s back’. (p. 236). In fact it was just before Garden published his celebrated history of Hamilton that Sheepvention first started, in 1983, as a relatively small event for wool growers, enabling them to

parade their prize stock and realise their value at auction the following day. That Sheepvention has grown to become a major event on the regional calendar of south western Victoria, precisely over a period when local agriculture has been diversifying away from wool, raises interesting questions as to why this event, with its strong sheep-industry focus, maintains its popularity in the local community. We speculate that wool growing still defines the regional culture for many citizens and that Sheepvention provides an opportunity for them each year to affirm this aspect of their regional identity and participate in it. If this is the case then it has important implications for understanding the purpose of such regional events: more than merely providing instrumental support for a given industry (such as wool growing) or an opportunity to attract tourists one or two days each year, these events' most significant contribution may be in the less-obvious area of identity and culture. Assessing such events only on their contributions to industry and tourism risks missing the valuable role they can play in affirming and re-creating common identity among residents of a region.

The Survey

Some 68% of people attending were from within 50kms (approx) of Hamilton; given the overall Shire population of 17,000, we can estimate that around 80% of the shire population attended Sheepvention this year. This is a significant percentage of residents. Given the 2003 Melbourne show, located in a metropolitan area with approximately 3 million residents, attracts only 20,000 people a day over five days, it is clear that Sheepvention is very well patronised by the Hamilton citizens and those within the shire.

About 31% of men came to Sheepvention simply to “have a look” or for something to do, while about 24% came to be informed, to update themselves, and/ or to learn in general. Together, the men who came to look and those who came to learn constitute over 55% of respondents. Equal to those coming to be informed, about 24% of men came to sell, exhibit, or work on a stall. About 20% indicated that they had come to buy, 9% to be entertained, 6% to learn specifically about sheep/wool or related information, 4% to learn specifically about machinery/ equipment/ inventions, and about 4% came to meet others, to accompany a friend and/ or to socialise. As with men, the most common response women gave (about 35%) for coming to Sheepvention was to have a look or something to do. The next most popular response among women was that they had come to buy (about 23%).

Importantly, the great majority of farmers – about 90% – had attended Sheepvention before. Nearly a third of farmers – about 32% –were very-long-term attendees, who had first attended Sheepvention prior to 1983. This suggests that for farmers actually involved in wool growing and other farming activities, Sheepvention does have an important instrumental value connected to their business. Farmers overall had attended Sheepvention an **average of 11 times** (10.98) with a standard deviation of 8.377. Significantly, about a quarter of all farmers had attended Sheepvention 20 or more times.

The survey asked respondents if they were staying in commercial accommodation and how much they expected to spend at Sheepvention. Our conservative estimate of expenditure over the two days at Sheepvention was in the order of \$3.5 million ranging from basic food items to orders for high priced farm machinery. When combined with visitor expenditure in the town of Hamilton, which is estimated from our survey to be around \$40,000 over the two to three days, this is a significant economic injection into the town. Assuming a multiplier of around 2 for this expenditure (in the

accommodation and food services industry employing local labour) the direct spending of visitors in Hamilton during Sheepvention has an economic impact in the order of \$80,000 – a significant contribution to the local economy.

When combined with expenditure at Sheepvention, the overall spending is in the order of \$3.6million. A key question for local policy makers is, how much of this expenditure – especially that at Sheepvention – is captured by local businesses, versus how much goes directly out of the community through businesses who only visit Hamilton for Sheepvention and who make no other purchases in the town? Also, if the economic opportunity afforded by Sheepvention is to be realised by local businesses what can they, and the Southern Grampians Shire Council, do to work with the Sheepvention Committee to make this happen?

Conclusion

Sheepvention, well established after twenty five years, is a reminder to the people of the western districts of Victoria of its history, certainly its hard-won achievements during this time. There has been significant restructuring in the Australian wool industry over the last two decades and the regional community has worked through these difficult times, and is entering a period of economic growth and revival based, not only on wool, or prime lamb production, but also on increased cropping regimes, plantation forestry and the development of a \$30billion, 30 year mineral sands mining and processing industry. Given this diversification a challenge for local policy makers will be the way in which they develop and manage ‘shows’ like Sheepvention such that they help define and , for the regional community, these hard-won achievements.

References

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- [4] Garden, D. (1984) *Hamilton: A Western District History*, Melbourne, Hargreen.