



Tourism-led settlement regeneration: Reaching Timaru's potential

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the preliminary element of a study of tourism development in Timaru, South Canterbury, New Zealand. Deriving from a research project entitled Supporting Success in Regional Settlements, tourism is used to illustrate how local efforts are being focused on ways of making regional settlements more attractive places economically, socially, culturally and environmentally. We situate our study in the urban and tourism-led regeneration literature and report secondary data and documentary analysis of the current situation with respect to tourism development in Timaru District.

Keywords: tourism; urban regeneration; Timaru; South Canterbury; New Zealand

1. INTRODUCTION

The research reported in this paper was funded by the New Zealand National Science Challenge: Building Better Homes, Towns and Cities: Ko Ngā Wā Kāinga Hei Whakamāhorahora, part of which is examining the lived and comparative experience of regional small-town New Zealand. This stream of work, entitled Supporting Success in Regional Settlements, is interpreting and supporting local efforts to make these places more attractive in which to visit, live, work and do business. The research team is examining the broad contexts of regional settlements, their trajectories and how residents are defining their situation and engaging in initiatives to improve their towns economically, socially, culturally and environmentally

(www.buildingbetter.nz/research/regional.html). We are examining what initiatives work best as tools for regeneration and supporting the creation of a community of practice - sharing approaches to settlement development - incorporating private, public and third-sector practitioners. While interpretations of success vary from community to community, one overall aspiration in all of the settlements under study, is sustaining current populations, attracting new migrants and visitors, while simultaneously enhancing the built environment.

In the context of our programme, we have examined regeneration initiatives across four main interrelated dimensions:

- *Economic development:* for example, building on under-exploited local

resources and skills sets; supporting business incubators; place branding and marketing; tourism events to attract new visitors and raise the profile of the town.

- *Community development and planning:* for example, creating new urban and regional spaces and institutional/governance arrangements e.g., to mitigate climate change, provide services to sectors of the community and defending existing resources from threats of closure.
- *Historical, cultural and environmental heritage conservation:* for example, protecting, interpreting, promoting and marketing local heritage resources for their environmental, social and economic value.
- *Property development:* for example, rehabilitating former industrial spaces or public facilities for re-use; constructing new private and public facilities and spaces for interaction e.g., retailing outlets, cycle-ways, farmers' markets, offices, factories, convention centres; providing new technologies and infrastructure to advance connectivity, innovation and entrepreneurship.

The Supporting Success in Regional Settlements project arose from national and international public and policy concern about the considerable variability in the success of towns, cities and regions. In New Zealand, this concern is associated with an anxiety that the well-being of individuals, families and communities cannot be developed to its full potential if they are living in places that are under-performing economically and are under-developed socially, culturally and environmentally. This anxiety is exhibited most strongly in small to medium sized settlements, known as the 'second-tier' with populations of between 10,000 and 65,000.

Regional settlements of this size in New Zealand are currently at the centre of a conversation about the need to 'reboot' struggling areas located outside the main urban centres (Spoonley, 2016). Unlike the UK and other European settings, in New Zealand,

there has been very little recent policy emphasis placed on the development of peripheral regions and their second-tier settlements. Uneven spatial economic development at the national level is a stark reality. This manifests as very significant growth in Auckland, the country's largest city, and a few other centres, with many others in stasis and some in decline (Brabyn, 2017). In the face of this situation, public, private and third-sector agencies in many second-tier settlements have taken it upon themselves to initiate a range of activities aimed at urban regeneration largely unsupported by extra-local agencies (Mackay & Perkins, 2017).

The situation with respect to this support is now changing. The election of the Labour Coalition Government in 2017 has seen the establishment of a '1 billion dollar per annum' contestable provincial growth fund that is to support the implementation of town improvement projects in areas outside New Zealand's main urban centres. This 'powering up of the regions' (Jones, 2018), has captured the public interest and stirred expert debate about investment priorities and the monitoring of the distribution of the fund (e.g., Bennett, 2018; Cropp, 2018).

Tourism initiatives are important in this regard. They have been the subject of discussion in our research fieldwork interviews with a range of stakeholders in second-tier settlements, focusing on the need for local economic diversification and the perception of untapped regional tourism potential. In one of the towns we are studying – Timaru, South Canterbury (township population circa 28,000) – the result of these discussions between us and local community stakeholders, including local government politicians and officials, was the co-production of the following research question: *How can local government and allied tourism development agencies and actors realise the potential of a currently underdeveloped visitor economy and, in turn, provide a greater range of recreational and related services to visitors and locals?* This has led us to the literature on urban-, tourism- and events-led regeneration, and a situational analysis and brief history of tourism activity

and services in Timaru, which has, in turn, influenced the direction of our project in that town. In addition, we reviewed the relevant planning literature, prioritising material on urban and small-town regeneration (Johnston et al. forthcoming). Our other secondary data were derived from an archival search and a review of publicly available material including: local government reports, Council minutes, official regional tourism statistics, the local newspaper, internet sites, tourism brochures and visits to various sites, facilities and events during the summer of 2017/2018. In this paper we discuss the outcomes of that work.

2. URBAN REGENERATION

Urban regeneration is a broad term widely used to describe initiatives, policies and/or projects that singly or collectively contribute to the renewal of city areas, neighbourhoods and settlements (Roberts, 2017). Urban regeneration initiatives typically include housing development programmes (McNally & Granger, 2017); waterfront/business district renewal projects (Shaw, 2018); the adaptive-repurposing of heritage buildings and creation of cultural precincts (Gentle & McGuirk, 2017); the facilitation of economic investment targeting health, crime, and unemployment; the provision of recreation, sport and tourism facilities, community events and local cultural celebrations (Garcia, 2004; Gibson & Connell, 2011; Roberts, 2017; Ruming, 2018; Smith, 2012). Hall and Barrett (2012, p.148) note that while urban regeneration initiatives can take many and varied forms, they generally have four main goals:

- I. Improvements to the physical environment (which have more recently come to focus on the promotion of environmental sustainability);
- II. Improvements to the quality of life of certain populations (for example through improvements to their living conditions or by improving local cultural activities or facilities);

- III. Improvements to the social welfare of certain populations (by improving the provision of basic welfare services);
- IV. Enhancement of the economic prospects of certain populations (through, for example, job creation, education or reskilling programmes or diversifying local economies).

To define urban regeneration and measure its success, urban and regional spatial planners stress the need for holistic thinking. They often define success in terms of functional integrated effectiveness in a number of spheres, including: population; the needs and aspirations of cultural/ethnic groups; recreation, arts and culture; historic heritage; the urban and regional economy; the bio-physical environment; responses to climate change; the built urban environment; housing; physical and social infrastructure; and transport and communication. In these terms, regeneration is a multi-dimensional process delivering multiple outcomes. The outcomes of regeneration, however, may take a long time to manifest, requiring a commitment to evaluating and monitoring the effects of an activity, programme or project over the short *and* long term, and a commitment to changing tack if things do not go as planned (Spire & Moore, 2017).

While the urban regeneration research literature is dominated by a focus on larger European cities and stories of project/programme success and failure, very recent work has emerged from Australia (Ruming, 2018) exploring the multiple aspects and processes of regeneration including planning policy, development financing, remediation and transport. Among its many case-studies is an interesting and useful focus on waterfront regeneration underscoring the changes European, North American, Asian and Australasian ports and associated waterfronts have experienced over the last 50 years (Shaw, 2018, but also see Cheung & Tang, 2015). These areas have undergone dramatic changes from being industrial and commercially focused, to incorporate significant elements of tourism, leisure, hospitality, retailing and

various forms of accommodation (Girard, Kourtit & Nijkamp, 2014; Hussein, 2015; Sairinen & Kumpulainen, 2005).

The impetus for global waterfront transformation and regeneration has been a complex combination of economic and technological changes. The decline of coastal shipping and concentration of fishing fleets in fewer ports in some countries, for example, saw some ports become defunct. Technological changes to international shipping and the development of container services triggered the decline of many urban and regional port areas as they were no longer fit for purpose and became under-utilised. Early regeneration attempts were focused on halting decline and involved significant elements of leisure, tourism, including events, and commercial property development to bring people and activities back to these areas (for a New Zealand exemplar see Adamietz, 2012).

More recently, having seen the success of these early developments, urban and regional authorities in other centres have embarked on second and third waves of waterfront development involving a broader range of activities and infrastructure development. Like many regeneration initiatives, waterfront developments are often very large ventures requiring sophisticated strategic planning over many decades and requiring extensive public and private capital investment (Adamietz, 2012). Tourism is often key to making these spaces thrive.

This literature is directly relevant to our work in Timaru as it is a coastal town with a sea frontage in walking distance from its central commercial and retailing area (for an early historical perspective see Hassall, 1955). Its sea frontage currently displays strong elements of production in the form of a busy port, and consumption and amenity allied to domestic recreation, hospitality and modest levels of tourism.

3. TOURISM-LED REGENERATION

Expressed generally, tourism-led regeneration is a process in which

opportunities for tourism development are pursued strategically as a set of local projects or initiatives in towns and cities – often, but not always as public-private partnerships – for the purposes of sustainable economic, social and spatial development (Wise, 2016; Perkins et al. 2018). The touristic opportunities common to regeneration practice includes: (mega) sporting events (Wise & Harris, 2017); community festivals (Fountain & Mackay, 2017); place promotion and marketing (Kolb, 2017); arts and culture; and the development of a wide range of attractions, spaces, infrastructure, recreational opportunities and visitor services (Owen, 1990). Tourism often overlaps with a wide array of other regeneration initiatives associated with property development, cultural and environmental heritage conservation, the enhancement of greenspace, new retail precincts, community development and planning, and wider economic development projects, including waterfront revitalisation (Mackay & Perkins, 2017). All of these and other examples are associated with attempts in tourism to enhance the image of the towns concerned, to attract visitors and capital and extend the range of services and activities available to locals.

Galdini (2007) uses the example of Genoa, Italy, as a case study in tourism-led regeneration. Following difficult economic times, Genoa has used a comprehensive tourism policy to help regenerate and re-establish its role within the Italian economic and social system. The city fought decline and regenerated through a restructuring programme of the old harbour areas and the waterfront, which included the establishment of an historic centre. The focus of the integrated programme has been to preserve the old town, and at the same time positively influence physical, social and economic conditions by building a better place for residents *and* tourists (for an Australian example see Gentle & McGuirk, 2018). The process has linked the city to the sea, bringing new life to the area. Our Timaru case material tells a similar story.

In places where tourism is neither prominent nor overwhelming, it has the potential to produce economic and cultural benefits for the host community; an increase in visitor numbers means greater use and diversification of hospitality and accommodation facilities and services, thereby contributing to the local economy and improving employment (Edgell & Swanson, 2019). Improvements to infrastructure and public space and facilities often occur when councils and city groups focus on tourism, thus improving the physical and aesthetic form of the city. This formulation is perhaps too strongly orientated toward improvements in physical infrastructure. Our research points also to the importance of social and cultural activities, such as events and festivals, in processes of urban and tourism-led regeneration.

4. LINKING THE LITERATURE TO PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS IN TIMARU

After conducting the literature review and tourism situational analysis, we spent time in Timaru engaging in a number of site visits. It became immediately clear that tourism in Timaru is at cross-roads. Early in the 20th Century, Timaru's Caroline Bay was a very significant domestic tourism destination – known as the 'Riviera of the South' – attracting trains full of short stay visitors from Christchurch and Dunedin seeking relaxation at the seaside and participation in carnivals and events, very much in the British seaside tradition. The Bay's main attraction is an artificially sandy beach situated along the 240 km long Canterbury Bight, characterised mainly by mixed sand and gravel beaches. The sandy beach of Caroline Bay was created as a direct result of the two breakwaters (North Mole and Eastern Extension) being created for the Port of Timaru. Sand accumulated in the lee of the North Mole resulting in a beach protected from the high energy southerly waves making it safe and accessible for recreationists (Fahy, 1986; Hart et al., 2008; Hastie, 1983; Tierney, 1977).

The first official tourism attraction for Caroline Bay was the saltwater swimming baths. Newspaper articles dating to 1886 comment on the excitement accompanying the completion of these baths (Button, 2010). On 22nd October 1912, the Caroline Bay Association was inaugurated (Button, 2010). The Association's initial plans were to construct a road along the Benvenue Cliffs thus creating an esplanade complete with a range of leisure facilities. This work quickly transformed Caroline Bay and Timaru into a very popular beach resort.

The Caroline Bay Carnival – today an annual staple – took time to establish, but by the early 1920s it was the dominant feature of event-based tourism in Timaru. By 1938, the South Islands Travel Association of New Zealand claimed that Caroline Bay was the "BEST equipped beach in the South Island. Its spacious gardens, broad sands and safe warm waters make an ideal holiday resort" (SITANZ, 1938, p.37) and the 'principal attraction' of Timaru.

Caroline Bay went into a slow decline for much of the latter part of the century (Button, 2010), but from 2004 the Bay areas was regenerated significantly under the guidance by the Caroline Bay Development Plan which aspired to:

- Provide greater access to and along the beach front
- Provide a safe clear circulation pattern
- Tell the stories of the place
- Maintain open green space
- Provide for a wider range of activities
- Enhance the Bay experience
- Use planting to enhance sense of place, interest, shelter and wayfinding (Button, 2010, p.109).

While not achieving the heights of past popularity as a holiday resort, the Bay's regeneration has created a very attractive place to spend time for locals and visitors (Figure 1). It is the site of several events including the annual Timaru Festival of Roses, first run in 2002, and the longstanding summer

carnival. In mid-2012, the Caroline Bay Aquatic Centre was opened and as one of our local authority recreation management interviewees indicated it has proven to be extremely popular among locals and visitors alike. Sand dune planting and stabilisation work has created an attractive seafront space for walkers, some with dogs. The recent

regular arrival of little blue penguins has added to the attractiveness of beach area and have become a source of local pride, informal tourism and debates about penguin protection. One of the main debates is about how to exclude dogs from the areas the penguins visit over the summer months (Williams, 2018a).



Figure 1: Caroline Bay today. Photos: H. Evans, 2018

Other developments link Caroline Bay to the wider urban fabric. A very few cruise ship visits have recently contributed to tourism in Timaru, but the potential for growth and positive impacts of these is unclear (McPhee, 2018). Workshops have been held recently to prepare the businesses and port for more visits. The experience of other New Zealand centres with cruise ship tourism has been discussed in these workshops (Aulakh, 2017a). Restaurant Developments on Bay Hill overlooking Caroline Bay (Figure 2) have proven very successful. A proposed accommodation development on the neighbouring former Hydro Grand hotel site, once the location of regionally important hotel and heritage building, controversially

demolished in 2017 (McPhee and Hudson, 2017), has the potential to bring more people to the area and therefore strengthen the already existing spatial links between town and Bay. This, and similar developments, will require greater attention to the ways commercial property can be developed in regional centres such as Timaru (Levy, et al. 2018). Towns of this size do not often attract the same level of institutional investment as seen in large urban centres. This therefore requires Councils and their planners to work with and support local people with an interest in and passion for investment in town redevelopment, but perhaps not having significant property development experience (Levy, et al. 2018).

There is agreement about Timaru's tourism development potential but a need for better coordination among several important strands of activity and associated sites. One very good example is the Te Ana Ngāi Tahu Māori Rock Art Centre representing the ancient Māori rock art sites in the Aoraki region associated with three Māori kainga: Te Rūnanga o Arowhenua, Te Rūnanga o Waihao, and Te Rūnanga o Moeraki (<https://www.teana.co.nz/>).

European-settler built-heritage is also much in evidence in Timaru manifesting in a very attractive Edwardian town centre and some

adaptive re-use of former commercial buildings by community members, and now used commercially in the town's hospitality and tourism information offerings. The Landing Services Building (Figure 3) near the waterfront is an excellent example of adaptive re-use now hosting the Rock Art Centre mentioned above, the tourist information centre, a bar and restaurant. Some of these heritage buildings are the subject of seismic retrofitting concerns and are at the centre of discussions about the need for a masterplan to revitalise the town centre.



Figure 2: Top: Bay Hill hospitality zone. Photo: H. Evans, 2018

Going further, sport tourism associated with Masters Games and national and regional high school tournaments is now well established, taking advantage of the district's central location on the east coast of the South Island and its well-developed indoor and outdoor sports facilities (Quinlivan, 2018; Williams, 2018b). The big limitation to large events, particularly in summer, is commercial accommodation provision. A recent sports event, involving 1000 participants and supporters, saw people being accommodated as far away as Oamaru, some 85 kilometres

distant. The existing accommodation is frequently close to capacity being used often by business clients and tourists visiting or passing through Timaru (Sutherland & Quinlivan, 2018). This suggests the need for a strategy to assist in the management of events in Timaru, particularly those that attract large numbers of people to the area. Such a strategy would provide alignment and support to all events in Timaru, ensuring that they are effectively managed, and that tourism operators are well prepared in advance to offer their best service to visitors (Sutherland, 2017).

Timaru also has a significant art gallery and collection – including paintings of national importance - and its museum is similarly attractive. The Botanical Gardens and other public parks and open spaces add to the amenity of the district.

Finally, in this part of our discussion, it is important to acknowledge the only part of the district that currently hosts high numbers of international tourists, if only for a brief period. We refer here to Geraldine (population 2,500) situated inland on the edge of the district and 35kms from Timaru City. Many of this small town’s domestic visitors are from Canterbury and Otago, and they often stay overnight. But Geraldine is also on the main road from

Christchurch International Airport to the very high amenity Mackenzie District centred on Lake Tekapo and Aoraki Mt Cook, and the road beyond to the international resort of Queenstown. For international tourists who are on the way to these places, Geraldine is mainly a stopover for refreshments, fuel and a comfort break. Timaru is not on this main international tourist corridor and so does not benefit greatly from these visitor flows. While overall, Timaru District’s challenge is to take greater advantage of these tourists by dispersing them more widely and having them stay longer, Geraldine’s challenge is to have them stay more than a few hours in the town.



Figure 3: Landing Services Building. Photo: H. Evans, 2018

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Tourism-led regeneration has an important potential role in diversifying Timaru’s economy and contributing to social, cultural and environmental development. Recent institutional re-arrangements such as the

establishment of the Aoraki Tourism agency (www.aorakitourism.co.nz), albeit on a very small scale, is a welcome signal that is indicative of a desire to move in a positive direction. But despite these developments there is uncertainty about how best to advance

tourism development in Timaru and position it in the district's diversifying economy. Recent data produced by *Infometrics* show that in the year ending September 2017, Timaru's GDP grew by two per cent, with tourism emerging as an important contributor, growing by six per cent over the period (Aulakh, 2017b). Despite these positive developments, our research shows that there are many actors on Timaru's tourism stage, and thus a need for increased coordination and strategic planning. The district's potential is relatively untapped and investment on a greater scale in people and planning is necessary if Timaru is to effectively embrace tourism-led regeneration and achieve elements of its former high status as a premier South Island tourism destination.

We offer two further provisional statements about tourism-led regeneration in small towns. First, while the basic resources to form a strong and attractive tourism destination are often in evidence in small towns, there is often not the capability to take advantage of them. Local tax bases are often far too limited to pay for the intermediation work that is required to make connections and adapt old or create new activities and spaces. Finding new ways to sufficiently resource and re-resource the regions is critically important. Second, many of these small towns are travelled to and through, but not stopped in: so finding ways to encourage visitors to stop, stay and spend is the key challenge for tourism planners and development agencies. Our future work as part of National Science Challenge: Building Better Homes, Towns and Cities: Ko Ngā Wā Kāinga Hei Whakamāhorahora is to address these issues in conjunction with local stakeholders.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We gratefully acknowledge funding from New Zealand's Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment through the National Science Challenge Building Better Homes Towns and Cities: Ko Ngā Wā Kāinga Hei Whakamāhorahora.

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