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Greening Rural Festivals: Ecology, Sustainability and Human-Nature Relations

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Chapter 6

Greening Rural Festivals: Ecology, Sustainability and Human–Nature Relations

C. GIBSON and C. WONG

Introduction

From Ibiza to Byron Bay, festivals have been linked to environmental degradation, a simple consequence of the numbers attending and their immediate impacts on delicate ecosystems. Environmental impacts are linked to the scale of visitation and the capacity of communities to support festivals with appropriate infrastructure. At the same time, festivals can provide unique opportunities for people to come together in the celebration and promotion of environmental causes – whether through festivals with an overt ‘green’ educational message (Curtis, 2003) or through management practices aimed at reducing per capita consumption of resources. By advocating practices such as recycling, use of public transport, waste minimisation and use of sustainable materials and services, festivals seek to ‘green’ their image and make practical improvements on their environmental record. Successful ‘green’ festivals send a powerful place-marketing message to visitors (especially urban ones) that their town or village is forward-minded and switched on to contemporary issues. Festivals also immerse people – literally – within nature, especially rural festivals held on farms, in parks or near scenic landscapes; and festivals bring nature to the people, in the case of agricultural shows, food and wine festivals and flower shows. This chapter discusses how festivals are bound up in questions of environmental impact and sustainability, how rural festivals in particular catalyse new encounters between humans and nature, and what this means for understanding festivals as a ‘green’ issue.

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linked to environmental numbers attending and their environmental impacts are of communities to support. At the same time, festivals come together in the cities – whether through festivals (Curtis, 2003) or through per capita consumption of clothing, use of public transport, materials and services, practical improvements on festivals send a powerful message (urban ones) that their hold on to contemporary life – within nature, especially near scenic landscapes; use of agricultural shows, this chapter discusses how environmental impact and sustain new encounters between understanding festivals as

Environmental Impacts of Festivals

Only quite recently have questions of the environmental dimensions of festivals and event tourism become the focus of discussion, with emphasis previously favouring economic impacts and issues of cultural change and inclusion (Hall, 1989). Even though festival and event managers are now increasingly attempting to make festivals more 'green', it remains the case that peer-reviewed scientific studies of the environmental impacts of festivals are rare. In one study, a festival involved prolonging the use of lights, thus disturbing and delaying the emergence of bats, impacting their feeding habits as well as their ability to raise their offspring (Shirley *et al.*, 2001). Another assessed the noise pollution produced by a festival (Gupta & Chakraborty, 2003). In some instances where particular environmental impacts have been discussed, festivals were not even especially the focus, but rather acted as a background where fireworks or bonfires were discussed for how they release contaminants in the air such as dioxins, heavy metals or suspended particulates (e.g. Dyke *et al.*, 1997; Fang *et al.*, 2002; Farrar *et al.*, 2004; Kulshrestha *et al.*, 2004; Lee *et al.*, 1999; Ravindra *et al.*, 2003). Other studies surveyed residents and visitors about the perceived environmental impacts of a festival, without actual measurement of environmental degradation (e.g. Gursoy *et al.*, 2004), or discussed the environmental implications of permanent facilities built for events such as the Olympics (e.g. May, 1995). This latter issue is relevant for mega or hall-mark events but less so for rural festivals as they tend to be small (Gibson *et al.*, 2010), and make use of the existing infrastructure or erect temporary facilities.

That festivals have not been subject to much environmental impact research is not to say that they are trivial or have no negative environmental consequences. Development applications to authorities for permission to stage a festival are becoming more common – especially in Australia and in other countries where environmental regulators such as the Environmental Protection Authority have developed national standards on water and air quality. Because of this, it seems likely that more research will be needed on the environmental impacts of festivals – at the very least so that issues of pollution and waste can be compared across festivals, enabling improvements to be made.

How are Environmental Impacts Measured?

There is no single methodology that will adequately describe and quantify the range of environmental issues generated by festivals. Biophysical

techniques, such as soil sampling, water quality testing and ecosystem surveying, could be selected as methodologies to assess the environmental impacts of festivals, but such techniques are unable to quantify impacts that occur beyond the festival site in question. Ecological impacts may extend beyond the physical boundaries of a festival location (through, for example, attendees' transport emissions). Also, biophysical methods are unable to account for the indirect effects of consumption of natural resources (e.g. energy) used to stage the event, or how these vary at dissimilar festivals. Third, although it might be ideal to simultaneously employ several biophysical survey methods, this would be difficult and complicated, requiring much scientific labour as well as being expensive and time consuming. Given that most rural festivals are small, it is no surprise that comprehensive studies of the environmental impacts of festivals are rare.

In the absence of an overall technique, some festivals model the water and energy usage required to operate a festival, usually as part of efforts to contribute to an overall sustainability agenda, and to be able to market a festival as 'green'. Online carbon calculators provide one means at little or no cost (though their accuracy or applicability to all kinds of festivals is not certain). Carbon calculators produce estimates of the quantities of carbon used in staging a festival, and then are able to neatly recommend the purchase of carbon offset credits. Large festivals are also increasingly contracting specialist consultancy firms for more detailed carbon and water use audits (see Chapter 12). Again – there is no consistency across festivals: specialist consultancies tend to bring their own individual expertise, preferred models and measurements to bear on the festival in question and carbon calculators each have their own algorithms.

In the absence of biophysical surveys, a comprehensive whole-of-event measurement of an 'ecological footprint' is a possible alternative (Wong, 2005). Devised by Wackernagel and Rees (1996), the 'ecological footprint' measures the 'load' imposed by a given population on the environment. The ecological footprint documents how much of the annual regenerative capacity of the biospheres (expressed in mutually exclusive hectares of biologically productive land) is required to renew the resource throughout of a defined population in a given year, with the prevailing technology and resource management of that year (Monfreda *et al.*, 2004).

The appeal of the ecological footprint for festivals lies in the fact that various demands on the environment could be examined (e.g. food consumption, resource use, waste disposal and carbon dioxide emissions) in a manner more comprehensive than quick calculator or auditing exercises limited to energy use, while remaining fairly simplistic in its execution.

Because of current levels of ecological academic people struggle

Wong (2005) calculates that the carbon footprint of a festival is an immensely large number, often outside the range of what is possible for an overall ecological footprint. The actual water footprint of a festival is often in the order of 1.43 ha/capita (or 1.96 g/capita) previous to the festival, that an average festival appears to produce a permanent resource loss around the festival site, as the festival site is often densely located than if the festival was an ordinary event.

Where the case of energy use is much higher, the Splendour in the Grass festival in Australia is a proportionally large festival, with distances from the festival site to the nearest town.

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Because ecological footprints measure the *land area* necessary to sustain current levels of resource consumption and waste assimilation, the results of ecological footprints are also more easily communicated to non-academic audiences (than, for instance, tonnes of carbon dioxide, which people struggle to conceptualise).

Wong (2005) tailored the ecological footprint method for specific application to a music festival, Splendour in the Grass, in Byron Bay, a small but immensely popular town on Australia's east coast with some 5000 people outside festival times. For Splendour in the Grass, three estimates of the overall ecological footprint of the festival (low, medium and high) were produced using data obtained from surveys of festival participants, from actual water and energy-use readings on-site, and from existing consumption models. The festival's ecological footprint was calculated to be 1.12 hectares per capita (or 1.53 global hectares per capita) for the low estimate, 1.43 ha/cap (or 1.75 gha/cap) for the medium estimate and 1.75 ha/cap (or 1.96 gha/cap) for the high estimate. When compared with those of previous applications of the ecological footprint, the findings indicated that an average festival attendee demanded much less ecological space in an aggregate sense than an average resident nationally. In other words, it appears possible that attending a festival is less demanding on environmental resources than staying at home, undertaking 'normal' daily activities around the house. This is because the many forms of energy (e.g. sound and lighting) and inputs consumed by people at a festival, as well as the festival site itself, *are consumed collectively* – by a large number of densely located people and thus consumed at a lower per capita level – than if the same number of people were at home or going about their ordinary business.

Where festival versus national ecological footprint results differed – in the case of the Splendour in the Grass festival – was on the per capita energy required to support travel behaviour: transport resource was much higher, proportionally, for the festival than the national average. Splendour in the Grass is a music festival known nationally as one of Australia's premiere 'alternative' music festivals, and thus a very large proportion of attendees travel great distances to be there (53% travelled distances greater than 1000 km). Making matters worse, the majority of festival attendees (69%) chose to drive to the festival.

Cross-tabulations of variables were also conducted to ascertain relationships that could aid in the prediction of ecological footprints for future festivals. It was found that certain demographic variables (e.g. gender, occupation, industry) were associated with consumption patterns (e.g. choice in food, accommodation, transport). Women tended to eat less food

at festivals than men; students were more likely to use 'lower impact' accommodation types such as camping than those in better-paid professional jobs, and used less water accordingly. However, students travelled further: 53% travelled between 1000 and 2000 km to get to the festival site, most from Sydney or Melbourne. Those more likely to come by car to the festival were also more likely to buy souvenirs and other items available at festival stalls (thus increasing per capita overall consumption levels). Festival audiences are not a homogenous mass, but rather a diverse community who consume – and thus impact on the environment – in complex ways.

Beyond 'Impact': Festivals and Human–Nature Relations

Measuring human impacts on environment – through tools such as biophysical testing and ecological footprint analysis – makes it possible to tell whether festivals damage local ecosystems, and to estimate how a range of resources are consumed in staging festivals. From this it is possible to make useful interventions in festival management in order to reduce environmental harm.

However, as geographers such as Sarah Whatmore (1999), Noel Castree (2002) and Lesley Head (2008) have shown, there are particular practical and conceptual problems with adopting an approach focused on human impacts on the environment. Human-impact research relies on an exceptionalist assumption that humans are distinct from nature (and impacting negatively on it) rather than seeing humans as different from other plants and animals, but still very much a part of nature – one of many agents in interactive ecological systems, forging connections, growing dependencies and indeed, causing much damage. This critique of the human–nature binary underpinning 'impact' is important, because conceptual understanding of humans as separate from, but acting upon, an inert non-human nature, have resulted in unhelpful practices that can ironically *prevent* improvements in environmental management from taking place. Breaking down the assumption of a passive nature impacted upon by destructive humans enables consideration of longer-held negotiations of environmental conditions by Indigenous peoples. It also reveals more complex and iterative processes of interaction and adaptation between humans and non-human nature – from which important ethical, conservation and biodiversity lessons can be learned.

Following this line of critique, new ways of framing festivals as cut through by 'environmental' issues are possible. Beyond measuring the direct impacts of festivals on the environment, it becomes possible to

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– through tools such as analysis – makes it possible to estimate, and to estimate how a festival might be implemented in order to reduce

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of framing festivals as culture. Beyond measuring the festival, it becomes possible to

discuss how festivals catalyse particular encounters between humans and nature – how festivals reconfigure human–nature relations, even if temporarily (Gibson, 2010). From considering these kinds of encounters, it is possible to rethink what the 'greening' of festivals might mean more broadly.

This is especially the case in rural festivals, where encounters with 'nature' may be the rationale for an event, a key reason for hosting the festival in the first place, or a unique selling point compared with metropolitan events. The oldest of all festivals – pagan rituals, harvest celebrations, equinoxes, Aboriginal ceremonies – were much like this, commemorating the evolving rhythms of nature, marking the turn of the seasons. Traces survive in such festivals as agricultural shows (timed to take advantage of regional harvests; see Chapter 2 by Darian-Smith), cherry blossom festivals (in Japan) and full-moon parties. In Australia, modern festivals revive such practices: both Tumut's Festival of the Falling Leaf and Bathurst's Autumn Heritage Festival celebrate the turning colours of deciduous trees (in a country mostly covered by evergreens); Batemans Winter Magic Festival and Hobart's Antarctic Midwinter Festival raise spirits in the depths of their cold-climate winters; while the Oberon Daffodil Festival of Spring Gardens (in Blue Mountains, NSW) and the Australian Springtime Flora Festival (the largest gardening festival in Australia, in Kariong, NSW) are among spring bloom flower festivals too numerous to list here. All rely on the graceful turn of seasonal nature, and create communities around benevolent encounters with the weather, the seasons, plants and animals.

At some festivals, nature might be a *raison d'être*, but human regard for nature may not necessarily be reconfigured substantially, any further than, for instance, a general appreciation of nature's beauty and its aesthetic appeal. A good number of music festivals held on rural properties might fit into this category: appealing to an Arcadian idyll, to a generic, escapist sense of pastoral retreat, that is, nature as a nice backdrop to a party. Debates about the ecological impact of trance and techno festivals (when staged in forests or on scenic pastoral properties) have involved such a critique – pointing out the contradiction that techno festivals are often more about psychotropic adventures of the mind, than a commune with nature – and can actually produce levels of environmental damage through trampling, light and noise pollution, that undercut any gains in ecological awareness. At festivals non-human nature might be commodified outright, with less concern for transforming the environmental consciousness of participants than for emptying their wallets.

But in other cases, festivals centred around nature are indeed connected to quite overtly transformative agendas, such as the Yellow Gum Winter

Flowering Festival in Bannockburn, Victoria, a festival aimed at celebrating, in the words of its flyer, 'the annual winter flowering of the local Yellow gum *Eucalyptus leucoxylon* ssp *connata*, which is an important source of food and shelter for many resident and migratory birds and mammals'. The Yellow Gum Winter Flowering Festival complements year-round efforts by the Friends of Bannockburn Bush landcare group to revegetate weedy soil dump sites, and aims to raise awareness of ecological inter-connectivity as exemplified by the gum's annual flowering. At the festival, for instance, guided walks and talks by landcare volunteers draw attention to the plant and its role in bird migrations. Indeed, not merely is the festival aimed at raising environmental awareness among humans, its organisers even claim on its festival website that 'the nationally significant Swift Parrot comes all the way from Tasmania to be at our Festival' – humans and nature entwined.

In Parkes, NSW, the site of an internationally significant research telescope (known colloquially as 'The Dish'), the rhythms of celestial nature provide a different source of inspiration, for the annual AstroFest, organised by the Central West Astronomical Society. According to organisers, 'The Central West of NSW boasts some of the darkest skies in Australia, and as such is a wonderful place to appreciate the wonders of the night sky The festival endeavours to bring to the people of the Central West world renowned astronomers, both professional and amateur, so they may share their enthusiasm and love of the heavens' (CWAS, 2010: 1).

At both Inverell's Opera in the Paddock and Bermagui's Four Winds Festival, the opportunity to see and hear classical music performed in the 'natural' setting is a major reason for attendance, above and beyond the actual music. 'Natural' landscapes can provide the ideal 'frame' for classical music, as in Bermagui's tranquil waterside festival site, or provide striking juxtaposition, as in South Australia's Opera in the Outback. In an example of ultimate juxtaposition, SnowFest in Gloucester, New South Wales involves the complete importation of snow from further afield, that is, imported nature in an otherwise decidedly unsnowy environment (see Chapter 4).

Festivals are therefore capable of providing opportunities to engage people with nature in all manners; some playful, others more deeply committed to conservation. Festivals can promote environmental messages in ways that are fun, creative or experimental. Some focus on environmental restoration activities, such as the Mount Elephant Festival in rural Victoria, which involves music, stalls and actual restoration efforts, on an ex-farm site that local residents rallied around converting to publicly owned biodiverse habitat. According to organisers, local community

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groups raised money to buy the farm in 2000 from its previous owners, and staged an annual festival to raise further funds to revegetate the site and to raise environmental awareness about local habitat (Anon., 2003). Even when in some years rain affected attendances (and subsequent fund-raising activities), the festival was still considered 'worth it' for its contribution to the site's conservation and educational values.

Indeed, festivals can reach audiences otherwise rarely exposed to conservation or sustainability ideas. Not everybody ranks environmental issues as most concerning to them (even people who might be 'pro-environment' at some level) and certainly, only a minority of the general public are actively involved in environmental education, restoration or activism. With roots in community affairs and frequently drawing in the support of schools, community choirs, amateur theatre groups and Rotary and Lions Clubs, festivals can provide ways for communities to celebrate their local and wider environments, without having to resort to green dogma or rely too heavily on 'expert' knowledges (Curtis, 2003). But also, the ever-present field of stalls at festivals provides space for environmental scientists and non-profit organisations to communicate to a general public audience, especially so at festivals with a nature/environment theme. At the Port Stephens Whale Festival in NSW stalls from the Organisation for the Rescue and Research of Cetaceans (ORRCA), Ocean and Coastal Care Initiative, Conservation Volunteers Australia, Hunter Wetlands Centre, and Marine Mammal Research are all present. As well as live entertainment, the festival also features daily mock up whale rescues (Port Stephens Whale Festival, 2009) – a particularly vivid example of how to engineer festival encounters with nature.

Elsewhere on the same coast, Eden's Whale Festival features whale-watching tours, a parade in the theme of 'whales, mermaids and neptunes' and tours of the town's historic whaling station. What makes this festival significant is that it takes place in a previously iconic whaling town. The festival thus cements Eden's economic transformation and updated place identity: once a town with a predatory view towards nature, Eden (as exemplified with its festival) fosters a new relationship with whales based on preservation and coexistence.

Such festivals can be large in scope and ambition: in the case of the Tweed River Festival in NSW, official events spanned a full month – dedicated to celebrating an entire river catchment. The festival included a Biodiversity in Art exhibition; foreshore/wetland and bird information walks; an open day at a special purpose Sustainable Living Centre ('learn how to reduce your carbon footprint and live more sustainably'); a launch of a DVD about attempts to restore and rehabilitate the banks of the Tweed

River; round-table meetings of catchment managers 'to share knowledge about natural resource management in the Tweed'; guided kayak tours; the Tweed River Classic Boat Regatta ('lovingly restored or re-created classic boats cruise the Tweed River'); dragon boat races; river swim races; live entertainment and stalls dedicated to catchment environmental issues. Such events promote environmental awareness – of a catchment, of a local plant, of a celebrated local natural feature – amidst activities that are not otherwise always about the environment, *per se*. Through music, stalls, rides, games, competitions, food and incidental interactions of people of diverse ages and backgrounds, an air of conviviality descends on festivals that in turn can create a suitably open-minded context within which to engage with environmental themes.

There is then, something about the carnival atmosphere at festivals, which enables human–nature relations to be reconfigured in creative and engaging ways. At the Garma Aboriginal festival, held annually since 1999 by the Yothu Yindi Foundation on the Gove Peninsula in remote north east Arnhem Land, the festival format creates an arena in which tribal Yolngu celebration of the country and connection to land is reproduced, *and* in which other non-Aboriginal visitors are invited to share in that sense of celebration and reverence for human–nature bonds (see Chapter 7). At another Aboriginal festival, the Yaamma Festival in Bourke (western NSW), visiting Indigenous artists and local school children install artworks along the banks of the Darling River, as part of aims to 'unite communities along the river system and promote healing and reconciliation between all peoples' (Outback Arts Inc., 2010). Here, as at Garma, festivals enable Indigenous knowledge about nature to be practised and renewed, and to circulate throughout the wider community.

'Productive' Nature

In contrast, other (often more traditional) festivals have twisted human–nature relations in less emancipatory ways, celebrating mastery over nature, the success of the colonial project and ability to productively convert settled country into industrial production. This has long been the case at agricultural shows (Anderson, 2003) which throughout Australian history have advanced modernist ideals of technological improvement, masculine rurality and the submission of nature to human ingenuity (see Chapter 2). But, plagued by competition from other entertainment forms and the struggle to remain relevant in multicultural, post-industrial Australia, many agricultural shows have in recent years merged to form larger, generic regional events, restructuring their programs so that events

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celebrating mastery over nature (such as woodchopping and livestock judging) are only one among a range of newly introduced attractions including live music, fairgrounds, dog shows, stunt cars and motorbikes and showbags of candy and toys for children. Some regional shows now reflect wider transformations in the Australian agricultural industries, shifting their focus away from the celebration of rural bounty towards niche agricultural production, including organic food, gastronomy, celebrity cooking and gardening. Modernist celebration of the mastery of Australian industrial farming is increasingly supplanted by sophisticated marketing of post-Fordist, foodie culture, itself suggesting new ways of commodifying and selling nature.

Beyond agricultural shows, other festivals of food have sought to celebrate regional agricultural, viticultural and horticultural products and in doing so are generating new 'cultures of nature' (Castree, 2005: xxii) across rural Australia. Diversification of Australian agricultural production is reflected in celebrations of increasingly diverse food types. Competitive natural advantage in agriculture becomes a means to construct new place identities, as niche market production becomes further specialised and new natures come to be associated with regions. Here are but a few examples (from Gibson *et al.*'s (2010) database of over 2800 rural festivals in Australia): the Batlow Apple Blossom Festival, Casino Beef Week, Collector's Pumpkin Festival, the Guyra Lamb and Potato Festival, Tweed Valley Banana Festival, Pakenham's Celebrate Asparagus festival, and an annual Nut Festival in the tiny alpine settlement of Wandiligong: 'In April and May, walnuts and chestnuts fall from the trees in orchards, backyards and along the lanes of Wandiligong where they are gathered by pickers, residents and visitors. The Wandiligong Nut Festival celebrates this harvest by hosting a two-day festival' (Wandiligong Nut Festival, 2010: 1).

Metropolitan tastes, cultural capital and nature again combine in the proliferation of produce festivals throughout rural Australia (where regional wineries, landscapes, primary produce and even locally distinct soil types feature in the rationale for festivals), as well as festivals dedicated to organic food, slow food and seafood – often playing on region-specific production and niche marketing of wine (Tenterfield, NSW), olives (McLaren Vale, South Australia), cheese (Hunter Valle, NSW), beer (Maitland, NSW) and oysters (Ceduna, South Australia). Multiculturalism too refracts engagements with nature. In Woolgoolga, NSW (a small coastal town unusual for its large Indian migrant community), a curry and chilli festival has become a highly popular drawcard for the entire north-coast region. The migration of Igor Van Gerwen, a Belgian master

confectioner, to Latrobe, Tasmania led to investment in a local chocolate factory, and enabled that town to put on a chocolate festival – held in the middle of the winter in the coldest Australian state (itself relying on frigid nature in a way barely possible anywhere else in the country for fear of the chocolate melting). In Broome, the Shinju Matsuri Festival ‘rekindles the excitement and romance of Broome’s early days as a world-renowned producer of Pearls and Pearl shell (Shinju Matsuri, 2010), but has also become that remote town’s key arts festival and celebration of Indigenous culture and migrant history (the Japanese, Chinese, Malay, Koepangers and Filipinos were all involved in pearl harvesting and diving, as were Indigenous people).

There is a corollary too in flower shows and gardening festivals – that once celebrated the domestication of nature and reproduction of English gentility in the colonies (Chapter 9), but are now increasingly reflective of multicultural ‘ways of being with nature’, incorporating native flowers (as at Hobart’s Floral Festival, which has as its overt aim the promotion of native planting) and gardening styles from the Mediterranean, Bali and Singapore. These are complemented by specialist festivals for all manners of gardening enthusiasts and collectors: festivals are now dedicated to daffodils (Braidwood and Oberon, NSW), roses (Goulburn, NSW, Cavendish, Morwell and Skipton, Victoria), camellias (Hobart), tulips (Wynyard, Tasmania, Silvan, Victoria), irises (Hamilton, Tasmania, Rainbow, Victoria), dahlias (Portland, Vic), orchids (Warrnambool, Wangaratta and Ballarat, Vic), rhododendrons (Blackheath), chrysanthemums (Bendigo), geraniums (Horsham, Vic) and begonias (Ballarat). In one of the more over-the-top examples, no less than half a million bulbs are planted for the Tesselaar Tulip Festival in Silvan, Victoria:

Tulips are magic for so many reasons, their exotic majesty a reflection of nature’s miraculous beauty. They encompass every colour from dazzling to delicate hues in patterns most daring and others most plain. They have inspired poets and artists and bewitched nations with their allure. They are the stuff of legend, and rumoured to be the sleeping cradles of the fairies. They are even said to have their origin in the blood of a star crossed lover ... Escape the every day for a little hocus pocus at a festival packed with entertainment and splendor. Delight in the magic of spring at the Tesselaar Tulip Festival. (Tesselaar Tulip Festival, 2010: 1)

Whether framed as gastronomic tourism, industrial bounty or specialist obsession, productive nature features and is recast in myriad ways in rural festivals.

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Conclusion

Festivals cannot help but impact on the environment. They bring people, cars, noise and generate waste. Tracks and fields are trampled, the air polluted (especially through carbon dioxide from cars) and local transport, sewerage and emergency services are stretched. These can be particularly acute in the case of rural festivals, given the small scale of host towns (and their infrastructure) and sensitivities regarding proximate ecosystems, habitat and national parks. Methods have been proposed that seek to model these impacts – such as the ecological footprint method – and private sector waste management firms are developing increasingly sophisticated methods of collecting recyclable materials (thus minimising landfill). But much more could still be done, especially to reduce car dependency (given it appears to be by far the largest component of the overall environmental impact at festivals). Also still lacking is a shared stock of knowledge and experiences of festival environmental management. At present, understanding the environmental impacts of festivals still tends to be approached on a case-by-case – and largely ad hoc – basis. It remains difficult to tease apart substantively 'successful' examples of environmental management at festivals from marketing greenwash, and there are too few scientific studies that adequately model total environmental impacts, meaning there is no clear-cut, accepted method of analysis.

Beyond immediate impacts on air, water, energy use and waste, festivals (and rural festivals especially) need to be understood as moments where it is possible for people to encounter nature collectively, and intensely. In some cases, such encounters prove controversial, to the point that festivals have to find alternative accommodation (such as the Splendour in the Grass festival in Byron Bay, whose application to locate on rural property adjacent to koala habitat was controversial, leading to it moving to a different state; see Gibson & Connell, forthcoming). But encounters with nature need not be so polemical: other (often smaller, non-profit) events celebrate landscapes without mass destruction, and even incorporate environmental restoration activities. Some festivals construct nature as a 'wild' force successfully tamed by humans (in the case of agricultural festivals), as ephemeral beauty thence controlled and made domestic (flower shows) or appreciated in new, and more benign ways (whale festivals). Festivals generate new environmental knowledge (e.g. raising awareness of the totality of a river catchment, in a region otherwise fragmented into scattered villages and towns) and echo old ones (in the case of Aboriginal love of the country). 'Greening' festivals requires far more than mere introduction of recycling initiatives or purchasing carbon

offsets: festivals – and especially rural festivals – are opportunities to rethink the way in which we relate to non-human nature, and reconfigure our practices accordingly.

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Chapter 11

Elvis in the Country: Transforming Place in Rural Australia

J. CONNELL and C. GIBSON

Like many other small towns in inland Australia, Parkes (in New South Wales) has gone through tough times in the past two decades. Restructuring of agriculture and drought brought economic challenges, the loss of activities such as banks and shops and a slowly falling population. In this century, the pattern of decline in Parkes has been arrested and the establishment of an exceptionally successful festival has played a part in that. Indeed the Parkes Elvis Revival Festival demonstrates how a small, relatively remote place can stage a festival that generates substantial economic benefits, fosters a sense of community, seemingly against the odds, and in doing so has gained nationwide notoriety and publicity without any particular local claim to musical heritage. The festival represents about as narrow a rationale for an event as can be imagined – the legendary performer is long dead, and festival visitors arrive to see mere impersonations of the original. Yet the festival has invigorated the town, attracted loyal, repeat visitors and brought a community together on an otherwise hot and dusty weekend in the tourist off-season, because it is well-organised, slightly weird, in a friendly town and, above all, fun.

This chapter discusses how an unlikely festival overcame adversity and local opposition to become one of the most famous festivals in the country. Not only has it gained national prominence but, along with 14 other Australian festivals, mostly metropolitan, it is listed in Frommer's *300 Unmissable Festivals Around the World* (2009) where it is also distinguished as setting (in 2007) a new record for the most Elvises (though the plural form is usually referred to in Parkes as Elvi) in one place.

The chapter is based on repeated visits between 2002 and 2010 to undertake research in collaboration with the organisers of the Elvis Revival Festival, involving surveys of businesses, residents and visitors and interviews with local tourism promoters, local government representatives,

tourists and families hosting home stay visitors. Across nearly a decade we have tracked how a small place with few economic prospects has created a tourism resource, and subsequently captured national publicity, through a festival based around the commemoration of the birthday of Elvis Presley, a performer who had never visited Australia, and certainly not Parkes, and had no links to the town. Indeed, Elvis rarely left America. The Parkes Elvis Revival Festival demonstrates how 'tradition' can be constructed in rural places (rather than being innate), how small places can develop economic activities through festivals, and create new identities, though constantly contested.

Elvis Comes to Parkes

Parkes is a small New South Wales country town of about 9600 people 350 km west of Sydney. Like many other inland country towns, it had lost population (4% between 1996 and 2006), had higher than average unemployment rates and low levels of participation in the labour force (43% of the total population), with a population increasingly dominated by those of retirement age. It has long been a service centre in Australia's wheat-sheep belt, though the North Parkes copper mine provides economic diversity, and it is a significant rail centre. However, other than its historic radio telescope ('The Dish'), a vital link in the 1969 Apollo moon landing (which became, in 2000, the subject of a popular Australian feature film of the same name), Parkes has little in the way of visitor attractions.

The establishment of the Elvis Presley Festival in Parkes was entirely the result of a chance local whim, when a couple of local people devoted to the memory and music of Elvis, proposed the idea to council members, as recalled by committee member, Neville Lennox, who later formally changed his name to Elvis Lennox:

It was Bob and Anne Steel up at Gracelands restaurant. They're big Elvis fans and they own the restaurant. They were just having a bit of a talk to the right people at the right time, at one of their functions. They were councillors and they said, 'Well there's nothing going on, nothing celebrated that time of year. Elvis's birthday's the eighth. Come along to the next council meeting, we'll put it to the board'. It just evolved from there. (Interview, 2004)

Parkes happened to have a club and restaurant called Gracelands, and a small group of committed Elvis fans willing to organise an event. This suited the pragmatic aim of the local council of the time, namely to improve summer tourism, though there was no great excitement about hosting the event. An Elvis Revival committee was subsequently formed and, in 1992,

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what was a very small group of local fans decided to stage Australia's first Elvis festival. The first Elvis Revival Festival was held in January 1993, coinciding with Elvis' birthday. It attracted about 500 people from as far as Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney, and set the theme for those that followed, with Elvis and Priscilla (Elvis Presley's wife) look-alike competitions, a street parade with vintage cars, shop window displays of memorabilia, Elvis movies at the cinema (since closed), and concerts, one of which was at the Gracelands Club. Indeed the fortuitous presence of a Gracelands Club had been one factor convincing organisers that Parkes was the appropriate place for the festival though eventually the restaurant no longer had the capacity to hold the crowd, and entertainment and people spread to other pubs and clubs.

The first festivals were largely ignored by the local media as inappropriate for a country town or trivial (despite the dearth of news in mid-summer), and that exclusion has only partly diminished. By contrast, the national media have regularly covered the Festival, invariably because of its curiosity value, but also as a result of what were seen as ludicrous claims by the organising committee that it wanted Parkes to become the 'Elvis capital' of Australia. For Bob Steel, then chair of the organising committee, the lead-up to the first festival hinted at such national publicity:

We have been overwhelmed with the attention this festival is receiving. For example, even the *Melbourne Truth* ran an article on the festival, suggesting that we could become the Elvis capital of Australia. Newspapers, television and radio stations have all been giving the festival plenty of coverage and if nothing else, it has certainly given Parkes publicity. (Quoted in the *Parkes Champion Post*, 8 January 1993: 5)

Ironically, this kind of national coverage, and its celebration of tackiness and kitsch, has probably drawn most visitors, as typified by one picture in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Figure 11.1). Indeed the coverage of the Festival in every year has focused almost exclusively on the multiple, gaudy jump-suited Elvis.

The festival once began on the Friday night of the weekend closest to Elvis' birthday (8 January 1935); although since 2008 it has been drawn out to earlier in the week and longer into the next week. It has usually involved dinner and various forms of Elvis entertainment at Gracelands (although that club recently closed), with all participants encouraged to dress in appropriate annual themes: cowboy, speedway, Hawaiiana; usually linked to Elvis movies. Saturday sees the street parade of vintage cars and motorbikes (and vintage Elvis impersonators), with market stalls (ranging from memorabilia – rarely 'real' – to country handicrafts) in the main park area. The park is the venue for the main sound and look-alike

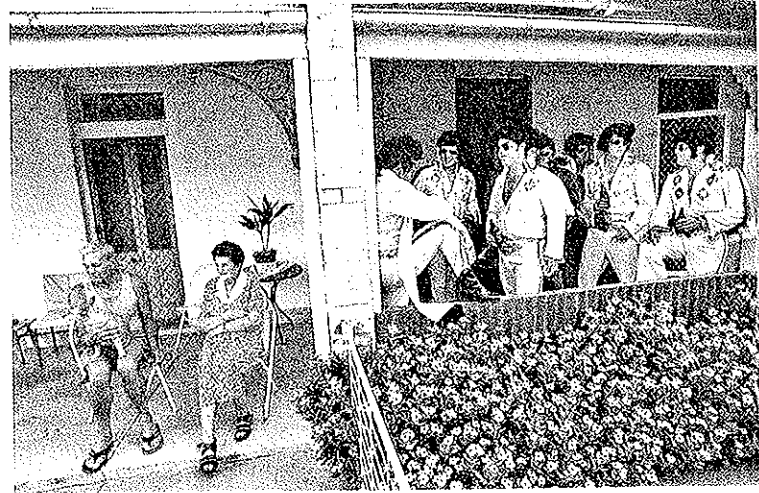


Figure 11.1 Parkes, according to the *Sydney Morning Herald* (January 2003: 8) (Source: Brennan-Horley *et al.*, 2007: 75)

competitions – Elvis, Priscilla, Lisa-Marie (Elvis' daughter) and Junior Elvis – and the day concludes with several feature performances in different local clubs by touring professional Elvis impersonators. The highlights of the Sunday are the highly attended Gospel Church Service, further competitions and performances and the unveiling of a new plaque on the Elvis Wall (at the park where the Festival first began) to commemorate another 'legend' of Australian rock 'n' roll music (often one of the previous night's top-billing performers). The wall itself surrounds gates that are a replica of the gates of Presley's Graceland mansion in Memphis. A talent contest with more diverse themes brings the festival to an end as most visitors return on Sunday night often over considerable distances. A special train (the Elvis Express) runs from Sydney (Figure 11.2), with the support of CountryLink rail which has become the main sponsor of the festival. Many of those who use the train are dressed as Elvis or Priscilla and CountryLink provides its own Elvis impersonator to perform in the carriages. By 2010, the Elvis Express had eight carriages and almost 400 passengers: the physical capacity of the line. A second train from Melbourne has been planned.

On some occasions Elvis movies have been shown and the local lawn bowling club has urged visitors to 'kick off your blue suede shoes' and have a game. An Elvis celebrant is available for couples to marry or renew

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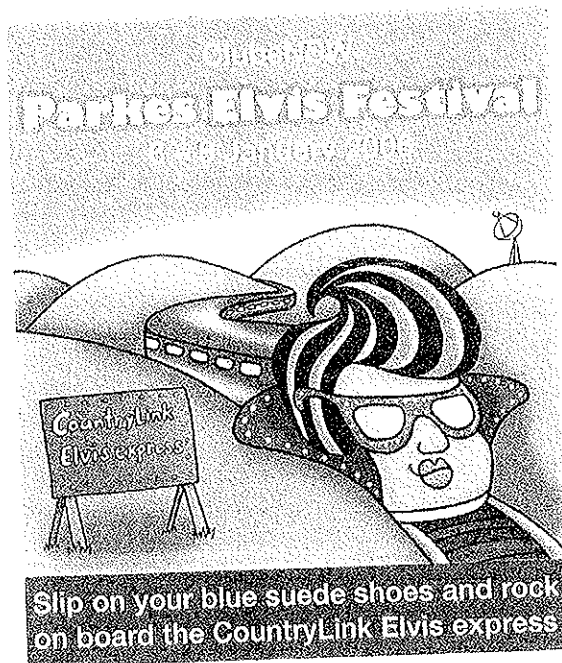


Figure 11.2 The CountryLink Elvis Express (Source: State Rail, promotional material 2005)

marriage vows during the weekend, and that has become extremely popular. Elvis buskers occupy all the street corners (and there is a prize for the best), and the Private Collection of memorabilia of Elvis Lennox – with a pink Cadillac parked in the driveway – is open to visitors. The emergence of Parkes as home of the Elvis Festival played a pivotal role in influencing Neville to take on the icon's name:

I prefer Elvis to Neville, me original first name. After the first two years of competition here in the look-alikes – I won that in 93, 94 – and walking up the street or down the street, whichever the case is and you hear people yell out across the street at ya 'g'day Elvis' and that. And I said, 'ya know, that would be an idea'. So I put it to me mother, asked her permission to do so and she said 'you go ahead and do with it what you want'. And I said, 'thankyou very much'. Paid 75 dollars and had it legally changed. (Interview, 2004)

An avid collector, Lennox amassed a formidable amount of Elvis paraphernalia, some of which comes from a personal trip to Memphis in 1997, the same year as his name change (Brennan-Horley *et al.*, 2007), and he has been a stalwart of the organising committee since the Festival began.

In its second year, the festival brought visitors from further afield, including Western Australia and Queensland, and added a clambake at Gracelands, with sand and surfboards brought in to transform the car park. The Parkes Tourism Promotions Officer heralded it a success, and conceded that it had become an integral part of the annual events calendar.

Although interest grew steadily, the organisation of early festivals was a struggle, and even the elements conspired against success. In two of the first four years, bush fires prevented visitors leaving coastal New South Wales to travel inland and then floods cut off the town. The small number of visitors suggested that the Festival might founder. However the local rugby team decided to support the Festival as a fun event and began what has become a tradition of dressing up as tacky Elvis look-alikes, in jump suits from the late Las Vegas years. Since then for the entire period of the Festival the town, and especially the venues, is seemingly awash with Elvis impersonators (Figure 11.3) which for many creates a colour and atmosphere that is the hilarious highlight of the Festival. Local support and this new image first got the Festival through difficult times.

Even so for most of the 1990s the Festival barely survived; leadership was lacking and local event management skills were few. As Kelly Hendry, the Parkes Tourism Manager, explained:

It started off small and started to grow. The word started to get out and the media coverage got out about the festival but I guess the lack of resources and lack of skills among the committee and just a few different things, and lack of support from the community saw numbers start to dwindle and the festival nearly fell over a couple of years ago. That's when the tourism board got back on board again. (Interview, 2004)

For its first decade the Festival struggled to galvanise support amongst people who perceived it as tacky, inappropriate for a respectable country town, with no local relevance and taking place in the hottest month of the year when temperatures were normally above 30 degrees and 'escaping' to the coast was almost essential. Many people saw the 'Dish' as a more appropriate symbol of the town, and an American performer who had probably died of a drug overdose as at best irrelevant and at worse degrading.

However, external media coverage never flagged and each year new visitors arrived for the Festival. As the Parkes Tourism Board gradually

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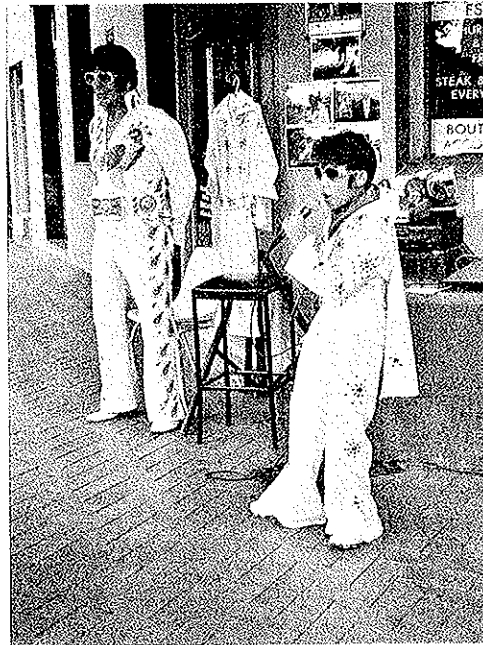


Figure 11.3 Elvis impersonators busk outside the Royal Hotel, Parkes, 2010 (Photo: John Connell)

warmed to it publicity increased and numbers too gradually increased. As Kelly Hendry observed, 'it's got that uniqueness and no one else is doing it' (Interview, 2004). By the early years of this century the street parade was drawing a crowd of around 2500, with one or two hundred at most of the commercial events, and more than 500 estimated to have come from outside the town. In 2006, organisers estimated that over 5000 people participated in the festival. Since then it has grown and estimates for 2010 suggest that as many as 10,000 had come into Parkes at the peak time on Saturday morning.

For the first time in 2002, media coverage became international, with Japanese film crews setting up noodle tents to feed hungry Elvises. The kitsch element of the festival was growing too. While the Parkes Shire Council eventually provided financial support, and it is now partly locally funded and sponsored, it is run largely voluntarily by a committee of locals, tourism promoters and Elvis fans, with all profits going to local

charities. In recent years, further financial support has come from the New South Wales State government and major sponsors. By 2010, there were ten of these, including the regional Rex Airlines, Country Energy and North Parkes Mine, and a host of minor sponsors. In 2004, it was officially supported for the first time by the New South Wales State government, under the Regional Flagship Events Programme, with the Minister for Tourism observing that

What the Parkes Elvis Revival Festival does for regional New South Wales is act as a flagship by attracting more tourists. The Festival is always the highlight of the New Year in central New South Wales. (Quoted in *Parkes Champion Post*, 17 January 2005: 3)

By the 18th festival in 2010, which coincided with what would have been Elvis's 75th birthday, there were some 140 distinct events spread over five days (ranging from Bingo with Elvis and Hunka Hunka Breakfast with Elvis through dozens of musical events to the Elvis Golf Challenge), approximately 400 or 500 Elvis impersonators (not all of whom, fortunately, sung), and 10,000 visitors, half of whom were from the nearby region. By then the Sunday morning Gospel Service had become the single largest event with more than 2000 people. What had begun in the local Baptist church now took place in the giant Woolworth's car park, the only 'venue' in town that was large enough. Five years earlier, the key parts of the Festival – the main open air stage and markets – had moved from a peripheral location to the very centre of the town, where they were more accessible to shops. Elvis had come to town.

Visitors: Who, Where from and Why Elvis?

Tourist numbers have become considerable, and now larger than the population of Parkes. Festival visitors were first surveyed in 2003 (125 respondents) and have been since every year, providing data on their demography, expenditure patterns, transport arrangements, accommodation type, motivations to visit and their experiences in Parkes.

The age of visitors to the festival has always been somewhat older than that at other music festivals, although intriguingly it is almost identical to that at the very different Opera in The Paddock (an annual event in a field several kilometres outside Inverell, northern NSW), at which we have also conducted research. The Elvis Festival is dominated by people from the 45 to 65-year-old cohort, who made up over 60 percent of all visitors in every year since we started surveying visitors. In 2010, some 84% of respondents were aged over 45. This distribution was unsurprising,

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reflecting the considerable popularity of Elvis with people who experienced their youth when Elvis was alive and active as a performer. That there was some 'aging' between 2003 and 2010 may have partly reflected return visiting. Younger people were fewer, and those who were present tended to see the event as a fun 'kitsch' or 'retro' event, rather than about nostalgia or reminiscence.

Festival visitors came from a range of occupational backgrounds. In 2003 and 2004, the largest group were professionals, a group well known for their propensity to travel and for their high levels of attendance at festivals, followed by tradespersons, retirees, and managers and administrators. By 2010, the largest group was now retirees, again suggesting return visits, but professionals and trades people were well represented.

In 2003, as many as 80% had not attended an Elvis Revival Festival before, but respondents enthusiastically said that they were likely to return to the festival. Of those who had attended previously, most had visited in several consecutive years – a measure of the presence of 'devotees' at the festival, for whom the Elvis festival was much more than mere entertainment. By 2010, some 53% had not attended before; return visits had become much more important. Of those who had been before a dozen had been more than 10 times. A couple had been to every one.

In early years, word-of-mouth and newspaper advertisements were the most common ways that visitors found out about the festival, with a modest rise in visits to the festival website in 2004, perhaps a reflection of increases in the numbers of younger people attending. By 2010, word of mouth was again most important but over a third of visitors claimed 'prior knowledge': the Festival was now well known. Direct advertisement was less crucial.

Much like other festivals, most visitors came from nearby. Many participants were from Parkes itself and more than half were from regional New South Wales, especially the central-west region that includes Parkes. Of the 30% who were from further afield most came from Sydney and fewer from other states. However, it was these more distant visitors who were more likely to stay several nights, to spend substantial sums of money especially on evening club performances, to be 'serious' Elvis enthusiasts (often members of Elvis fan clubs, and rock 'n' roll clubs, such as Lithgow Workers Rebel Rockers Dance Club) and more likely to come repeatedly. By 2010, the Elvis Express had become a reunion of old friends, singing, dancing and reminiscing, and eating Elvis Cupcakes and Love me Tender Chicken, throughout the journey.

Most people attending the Festival not surprisingly came for fun, relaxation and a sense of community. When prompted on their experiences, well over 90% had enjoyed the entertainment, country hospitality and music. Between 2003 and 2010, that never changed. A little less important as a general rationale was 'Because I'm an Elvis fan', so that the Festival involved many people who were there because it was a fun weekend, for whom a generalised nostalgia was sometimes of significance, but the actual theme was not necessarily the key to participation. There was also a large minority for whom being an Elvis fan constituted the main reason for participation, and who eagerly anticipated the festival year after year.

Many saw the festival as an opportunity to let their hair down: 'I put all my Elvis things on this morning. I can't wear it around Warwick [Queensland] because people would think we were a bit queer, but here we can express ourselves' (Interview, 2007). For others nostalgia dominated: 'It brings back your youth. And it's just the joy you experience now. I play Elvis music every day. Not many days go by that I don't actually sing Elvis music. I spend about five hours a week doing Elvis things' (Interview, 2010). For such people, travelling to Parkes was something of a pilgrimage.

Return visitors were more likely than others to be Elvis fans, enjoy the music and enjoy spending time with friends and family. Such testimonies indicate the manner in which festivals – even the most seemingly esoteric or incidental – transcend daily life and bring a range of meanings to individual lives. For a handful of fans, the visit to Parkes was akin to pilgrimage (cf. King, 1994), albeit a pale reflection of the trip to Graceland in Memphis, but the closest that Australia can offer. Some visitors suggest the presence of 'postmodern' tourists (or post-tourists), visiting Parkes for the humorous and kitsch ('everything was sensational, baby! uhh huh huh!'; 'eating at Gracelands – wow – I've been to Gracelands!') (Figure 11.4). For particularly committed fans of Elvis, there is essentially no other means of expressing such devotion, without lengthy and expensive travel to America.

The Town Becomes Full

On our first visit to the Festival in 2002, it was possible to arrive in Parkes on the Saturday morning in time for the parade and book into a motel for Saturday night. Hotels and motels still had some spare capacity. That quickly ended as numbers grew. Parkes had succeeded so well from the Festival that, by 2006, it effectively reached the limits of local

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Figure 11.4 'Eldest Presley', Parkes Elvis Revival Festival, 2010 (Photo: John Connell)

accommodation, and Parkes has 13 motels with about 1000 bed spaces. Not only had Parkes become full, but towns such as Forbes, some 35 km away, were also full. Dubbo, even further away, was almost booked out by the end of the decade. Routinely by the end of one festival signs have gone up outside all the motels that Parkes is already booked for the following year, a further indication of the strength of return visiting.

In 2004, Parkes made the decision to establish a 'tent city' on the edge of the town where visitors could hire tents and have access to basic facilities, and where caravans could also be parked. That was modelled on the experience of the Tamworth Country Music Festival where a tent city had long been successful. The same company that established the Tamworth tent city developed the Parkes tent city, and revenue mainly accrued to the operator.

Two years later, Parkes decided to establish home hosting modelled on similar schemes in the larger NSW towns of Gunnedah and Bathurst, in

association with festivals in those places. The intention was to meet continually expanding demand, ensure that more revenue from accommodation remained in Parkes and provide a friendly and homely experience. Other NSW towns, including Moree and Tamworth have subsequently adopted the scheme.

This home stay system involves local residents with spare bedrooms offering their homes as accommodation, and in return they receive 50 dollars per guest per night. The majority of the money made from home hosting goes either to the hosts or to the festival itself, helping the income remain in the town. Hosts provide a continental breakfast and a ride to and from the train station as guests arrive and depart. In 2006, the first year, just four homes and 15 guests stayed. By 2010, there were 125 homes and 547 guests (and 1561 bed nights; most visitors stayed for three nights). In other words, home hosting provided a third of the formal beds in Parkes. The cost to the guest was \$66 per bed per night, of which \$50 goes to the host, \$10 to the Elvis Festival committee and the remaining six dollars used to partially cover the expenses of the home hosting programme coordinator. Both hosts and guests were enthusiastic about the programme and many guests returned to the same host in subsequent years. Almost all the hosts joined the programme to support the local committee and the town; just a couple were in it 'for the money'. While most hosts were genuinely altruistic and enjoyed meeting people the income generated was valuable at a time of economic stress. As one host said: 'it's been the savior of the town with the drought' (Interview, 2010). Revenue went directly into the hands (and pockets) of local residents, increased interest in hosting and widened local support for the Festival.

The Economic Impact of Elvis

Like many small festivals the Elvis Festival made no money in its early years, and that in itself meant that local support was subdued or non-existent. But by the 2000s, that was changing rapidly. Visitor surveys in 2004 indicated that economic impact of the festival had already become considerable. Visitors then spent an average of A\$440 per person over the festival weekend, translating to an injection of over A\$1.1 million into the local economy. Accommodation (averaging A\$142 per person), food and drink (A\$134) and entertainment (A\$51) were the most common forms of expenditure, with smaller amounts spent on souvenirs (A\$43) and other services such as fuel (A\$28). For a town of its size, that expenditure was considerable; both because there were

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relatively few services in some categories while multipliers spread that revenue through the local economy. By 2010, the direct visitor expenditure contribution of the festival to the town was over \$3 million. Moreover the impact of the Festival was felt much further away, in towns such as Forbes and Dubbo where people stayed, in campsites, motels and caravan parks in a number of towns nearby or en route, and likewise in petrol stations and cafes far away from Parkes itself. There are significant regional impacts.

Some of that local expenditure went to the local market stalls. In its earliest years, there was virtually no commercial presence, and even in 2002, there were merely a dozen stalls doing a desultory business selling local goods. By 2008, the number of market stalls had passed a hundred and the main park was so crowded that numbers had to be cut back to 70 in 2009 to allow crowd movement. Stalls now sold local rural goods – honey, jams, soaps and handicrafts – while some stallholders came from inter-state as part of a national circuit (Figure 11.5). Only a handful sold Elvis memorabilia. Local businesses – the Rotary Club, the Lions Club, schools, the fire



Figure 11.5 Stallholder, Parkes Elvis Presley Revival Festival 2010 (Photo: John Connell)

brigade and so on – had their own stalls and barbeques that did good business. Indeed, most things sold well. As one visitor observed:

You've got Elvis wine, Elvis beer, Elvis tooth brushes, there's heaps of stuff – it's really tacky ... the tackier it is the better it is ... I mean people are buying 45 foot Elvis rugs ... which is classic behaviour at a festival ... the details are irrelevant. People consume all this memorabilia because people are in the spirit of it and that's what a festival does, it changes your behaviour. (Interview, 2007)

The majority of formal Parkes businesses recognise that trade increases during the Festival, to the measurable extent that across years we surveyed businesses (2004–2008) a quarter of businesses put on extra staff over the weekend, adding a total of between 30 and 50 jobs to the town. Predictably, restaurants, cafes, clubs and accommodation facilities accounted for the bulk of new shifts created. These businesses were also those with the highest dependency on local suppliers and labour. The festival improved employment multiplier impacts by generating extra work in those activities that, in turn, are most closely embedded in the local economy rather than others that rely on goods and services (such as books and clothes) imported from state capitals and beyond. Over time, the businesses that benefited most from the influx of visitors stayed open much longer; Saturday afternoons and even Sundays were much less 'dead' than in earlier years or on other weekends, and further multiplier effects ensued. Elvis had been taken on board.

Whose Town?

Until quite recently, Parkes rarely mentioned the Festival in any of its standard tourist publications, preferring to advertise itself as the town with 'The Dish', and as a prominent regional commercial centre. Its long-standing tourism brochure simply ignored the Festival. Only since 2007, has it been officially mentioned.

In the 2004 survey, local businesses were questioned about the appropriateness of the festival as a marker of place identity, as opposed to other options such as 'The Dish'. Opinions were divided. The majority (62%) were strongly supportive, most of the remainder were 'mildly supportive' while some 5% expressed no support at all for the festival. Over 80% of businesses agreed that the festival had a positive impact on publicising Parkes as a tourist destination, yet over 65% either mildly or strongly favoured 'The Dish' as a source of more appropriate imagery.

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recognise that trade increases and that across years we see more businesses put on extra staff and create 30 and 50 jobs to the town. And accommodation facilities. These businesses were also local suppliers and labour. The impacts by generating extra income are most closely embedded in the local goods and services (such as restaurants and beyond. Over time, the influx of visitors stayed open on Sundays were much less pronounced, and further multiplier effect.

redefined the Festival in any of its attempts to advertise itself as the town's commercial centre. Its long-term impact on the Festival. Only since 2007,

questioned about the appropriateness of the Festival's identity, as opposed to the town's identity. The majority of the remainder were 'mildly supportive' at all for the festival. The Festival had a positive impact on the town over 65% either mildly or more appropriate imagery.

Business reaction to the Festival was mirrored in broader community sentiments. But as the Festival grew these too became more positive. Interviews with some thirty local residents immediately after the 2009 Festival found either substantial support, or mere indifference, with little significant hostility. For some it was 'the best thing that has ever happened here'; an 81-year-old noted 'it's great for the town and the people'. Another woman argued: 'Those who only think of the Dish live in the past and we have to be more creative now'. While some preferred to stay away from the crowds or Elvis was 'not my thing', just one 61-year-old woman was bitterly opposed: 'I hate it; it closes off the main street, there's no access to businesses. Since the first one, really rude people came from Sydney. Prices go up. We should promote the dish and our good restaurants, but we're under the thumb of the council'. By contrast, perhaps the most convincing of all was the woman who explained

I hated it when it first started. It was ridiculous and stupid and wasn't the image that was at all appropriate to our town. But over the years I watched and could see that it was making money and wasn't so bad. Last year I took in homestays and had six more visitors this year – lovely people and I made over \$600. (Interview, 2009)

Winning over the majority of local people was eventually possible. A year later, a more detailed survey (Jetty Research & UTS 2010) found even more overwhelming support, recognising the short-term economic benefits at festival time and the longer-term benefits from tourism, while, significantly, at least 20% stated that their views had changed over the years, and they were now more positive about the festival. Many had participated and become involved as volunteers or additional paid staff.

Even the successful film *The Dish* (2000) had first provided something of a setback to Parkes since some saw it as making Parkes look backward by being based around the first moon landing (Brennan-Horley *et al.*, 2007). However, its commercial success brought some new interest in Parkes and greater enthusiasm for the film. Similarly the growing success of the Elvis Festival helped to change local perceptions of the event and garner further support and interest from local businesses and the wider community. The majority of local people not just came to terms with festival, but decidedly embraced it. As one homestay host said: 'If it's good for Parkes I'll be in it'. One local man, dressed in a jumpsuit with guitar, stated:

I've gone all out; there's no half measures in this town. I've got the wig and the suit, the rings and don't forget these awesome sunnies ... it's

tackalicious! I think if we were anywhere else we'd get bashed but around here you just get bought beers; it's fucking fantastic' (Interview, 2009)

By the mid-2000s, the mayors, and councillors, routinely dressed up and accompanied the train on the large stage to Parkes, crowds of several hundred welcomed the train, and draped visitors in leis (not only in the Hawaii years). The Festival had become part of Parkes life.

Parkes has succeeded despite the scepticism and downright opposition of some of the townsfolk, concerned about the image and status of the town. Some prefer the link to an Australian icon – 'The Dish' – as the appropriate image for a town named after the founder of Australian Federation, while others still object to what they see as a tawdry celebration of popular culture. Nonetheless, enough are well aware of the economic benefits, most stores on the main street have increasingly decorated their windows and entered into the Festival spirit, and what was once a more divided community has benefited substantially and come to terms with its strange musical identity.

Elvis has Not Left the Building

Over time, the residents of Parkes have adopted Elvis. He was never their choice as a symbol but in the end they have adapted to life with Elvis, just as the wider world has come to see Parkes as the Elvis town. For the first time in 2009, an English newspaper, *The Independent*, featured Parkes and Elvis in its travel section. In Parkes, its growing Elvis reputation led former Wiggles member Greg Page (the yellow Wiggle in the world's most popular children's television band) to choose the town to locate his collection of Elvis memorabilia (the fourth largest such collection in the world) – forming the basis of a new permanent museum. The collection was housed in its own building, next to a rather dowdy 'traditional' museum of no great interest. Parkes is now home to, amongst many other things, the gold lamé suit (worn by Elvis on the cover of *50,000,000 Elvis Fans Can't Be Wrong*); as well as Elvis and Priscilla's marriage certificate, and the last Cadillac Elvis owned. The tourism potential of such a museum collection in what was previously a fairly anonymous rural Australian town cannot be overstated. Just as importantly the new museum has given Parkes a year-long Elvis presence and, in a place with no other distinct tourist attractions, provides a rationale for visiting and remaining a little longer, remembering the experience and cementing the connection between Parkes and Elvis.

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Small, struggling towns in rural Australia have promoted festivals of all sorts, both as community-building exercises and because they can attract visitors. Few have been anywhere near as successful as Parkes, despite an unpromising theme and an inauspicious beginning. The Parkes Elvis Festival demonstrates how a small place can stage a festival in a relatively remote location, on a theme of no local relevance, and succeed despite itself. Indeed Parkes succeeded against long odds: droughts and floods, early local hostility and a festival site on the fringes of town, an incredulous national press and an oppressive climate. Most other festivals linked to individual musical performers try to generate a link to that performer – whether birth place, place of death or place of famous recordings (Gibson & Connell, 2005). This is not so in Parkes. Although it has now become known throughout Australia as a location associated with Elvis, Parkes has wholly invented this association.

Myth and tradition are not always tied to authenticity and credibility where tourism and festivals are concerned. Like Bundanoon (see Chapter 16), Parkes has become the site of an 'invented tradition', where a particular image has been grafted on to a place, linked to a particular imagined historic past, but assumed to have been ever present (Hobsbawm, 1983). However, unlike 'traditions' now widely if incorrectly accepted as innate (such as tartan kilts in Scotland), it is quite clear to all that there is no Elvis tradition in Parkes. The town has succeeded in spite of itself and created a celebration of kitsch, fantasy and popular culture that is as 'real' as any celebration of Elvis in Australia could be. Its many supporters derive a variety of sensory experiences and pleasures from the Festival, none more so than the serious Elvis fans for whom it is an annual ritual (Mackellar, 2009). The town has effectively, if belatedly, deployed what can be seen as 'strategic inauthenticity' (Taylor, 1997), placing the town on the tourist map, thus creating a form of 'invented geography'. Parkes' identity is no longer just as a wheat town, the home of the 'Dish' or the 'crossroads of a nation', but is also a place that resonates nostalgically of an American legend (Figure 11.6).

Parkes thus mirrors somewhat similar tourist destinations in the United States, notably Roswell (New Mexico) and Metropolis (Illinois), of which the former became the 'UFO capital of the world' (Paradis, 2002) and the latter the home of Superman, the comic book superhero who is based in the fictional city of Metropolis. In both places, festivals celebrate such invented spatial relationships. Such towns have been able to gain significant economic and social benefits by developing and trading on unlikely, improbable, even wholly fictitious and sometimes 'unworthy' events and associations. Perhaps ironically, in 2010, Parkes, anxious to develop



Figure 11.6 Parkes railway station, Elvis Revival Festival 2010 (Photo: John Connell)

Festivals at other times of the year, were contemplating a Tedfest festival for the fictitious Father Ted, the star of the cult comedy television series, simply because there was not one in Australia.

Both locals and tourists have questioned the longevity and sustainability of the Elvis Revival Festival but, so far, it has grown each year and many visitors keep coming back. By 2010, the apparent joke had become an institution supported by the local council, the state and the nation. It had also seen off competition – including competition from nearby Forbes which once mounted a jazz festival on the same weekend. In 2001, the small South Australian seaside town of Victor Harbor launched the Festival of the King, this time marking the date of Presley's death. For the first time, Parkes had a form of direct competition for the 'Elvis market', though that too proved to be short lived. Elvis had come to just one town.

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Elvis Festival 2010 (Photo: John ...)

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