

Tourism? We are missing out big time



Moyjil/Point Richie is one of three rich cultural and environmental sites in the south-west that could be maximised to form a major tourist attraction at the end of the Great Ocean Road.

The Terrier

A little statistic popped out of Parks Victoria about six weeks ago that should have had us all gasping and wondering what we are doing wrong in Warrnambool.

[Here it is:](#)

“A record daily peak of 11,000 national and international visitors made the trip to the Twelve Apostles during Chinese New Year celebrations”.

Please read that again, because it took me at least three reads to believe what I was reading: a record **daily** peak of

11,000 national and international visitors visited the Twelve Apostles during Chinese New Year (between January 28 and February 15) this year.

This was a 30% increase on last year. Thirty per cent!

And this is all happening less than an hour from Warrnambool – 72.7km down the road – yet we are seeing so little of the action here.

Why??

This is not a new question.

Over the years there has been much head-scratching, hours of discussion and piles of reports on how to encourage this lucrative market of cashed-up, eager travellers to travel just one more hour down the road to Warrnambool where, we would hope, they stay for more than 24 hours rather than passing through on their way to somewhere else, or turning around and travelling back to Melbourne.

To me, the answer starts here: give them something irresistible, something that they haven't already seen or heard during their trek down the most popular coastal road in Australia.

And what might that be?

To me, the answer starts here: our incredible indigenous story.

I don't know about you, but whenever I travel overseas, I can't wait to immerse myself in the indigenous history, to read about it, see it and experience it through a tour, a trek, a talk, a meal or a spontaneous, random encounter.

Here in the south-west, and right here in Warrnambool, we are sitting on some of the richest indigenous stories in Australia, creating a natural 'trail' from **Moyjil/Point**

Richie, to **Tower Hill** and out to **Budj Bim** (Mt Eccles/Lake Condah) near Heywood.

Budj Bim is on the cusp of a UNESCO World Heritage listing partly because of its stone eel traps that are 1500 years older than the Pyramids or Stonehenge.

And Moyjil, apart from being a geological wonder, has been [a site of human occupation for at least 35,000 years](#) and, pending the results of ongoing tests, could also be the oldest site of human habitation *anywhere on the planet*, dating back 80,000 years.

Why are we not celebrating and promoting this far and wide?



December 2016: The western walkway from Moyjil down to the beach.

Tower Hill, meanwhile, is where Great Ocean Roaders can see a koala, emu or a kangaroo while also learning about indigenous culture, but its full potential as a tourist attraction is far

from realised, starting with the poorly signposted, pot-holed and dangerous entrance that must be the worst of any tourism attraction in Victoria.

To be fair, progress is being made at each of these sites to promote its significance (especially Budj Bim) and plans have been drawn up to manage their futures, but I cannot find any coordinated effort to promote the three locations as a **not-to-be-missed tourism experience** that would, in turn, create jobs and boost our local economy.

There is no single, one-stop-shop to find out about what should be a cultural and environmental gem of a self-guided tour: there is no one map, brochure, website, or app.

Try it yourself: visit the [Visit Warrnambool website](#), click on “what to see and do” and see [what you find](#).

The top listings alternate, but when I clicked, the first item was mini golf.

But back to Moyjil for a moment.

A 24-page [conservation and management plan for this area](#) was published in 2013, setting out how it should be cared for by the State Government (which owns it) and Warrnambool City Council (which manages it) but, four years on, there are worrying signs about the financial commitment needed to look after this precious piece of coast.

The western walkway from the carpark fell apart in early December last year, just before the start of the peak tourism season, and access to the beach was blocked.

It is now late April and the walkway is still busted although now, of course, there has been five months’ of people making their own path down the side of the walkway, as we do, and the erosion is obvious.

When it will be fixed, nobody knows.



April 2017: The western walkway from Moyjil down to the beach.

I contacted the state Environment Minister Lily D'Ambrosio and her spokesman said the council had applied last year for a slice of \$730,000 in funding to fix the walkway as one of several work projects it had planned for the site.

It was not successful. (The \$730,000 fund received applications totalling more than \$3.1 million).

"DELWP is willing to look at how it can support Warrnambool City Council in fixing this walkway, and will discuss with Council how the department can assist," he wrote.

I asked the council for its take on the situation and its spokesman said: "We will continue to seek funding from the

State Government for maintenance. It will also be part of Council's upcoming budget deliberations."

And that was it. No passion. No prioritising. No real sense of urgency.

I can only wonder when a wooden walkway – a walkway – can't be fixed (Triton woodworkers + youth unemployment project?), what the long-term future really holds for this magnificent site.

And in the meantime, the vast majority of the tens of thousands of tourists who are travelling to the Twelve Apostles each summer just turn around – or keep driving...

Motor museum to revive Fletcher Jones site



The new owner of the Fletcher Jones site, Dean Montgomery, is in Warrnambool for a couple of days to check out his purchase and to chat with locals about their ideas. He has also arrived with a few of his own.

OPINION

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] I [/dropcap]t has been a long time since there has been a feeling of genuine excitement around a project in Warrnambool, but the new owner of the former Fletcher Jones factory, **Dean Montgomery**, is about to change all that.

Dean, who is based in China but who grew up in a working class family in Geelong, took some time out today (26/5) to have lunch with *Bluestone Magazine* and the two key players in the [grassroots campaign](#) to save the best of the FJ site, **Tonia Wilcox** and **Julie Eagles**.

Although it was not planned as an official interview, and hence I am writing this as an Opinion piece rather than a story with quotes from Dean, he was quite happy to sketch out

his very broad brush plans for the derelict factory and revealed that a key component will be **setting up a classy motor museum in the eastern end.**

Did you hear that? A museum. How absolutely magnificent and not only is this just the sort of usage that *Bluestone* has [always argued](#) would be perfect for such a large and high-profile site, it will provide a much-needed shot in the arm to Warrnambool's tourism appeal.

Dean is a self-confessed motor enthusiast – and so why wouldn't he take this opportunity to create his own giant garage in an industrial space? – but don't be fearful that this will be a museum full of bogan cars and hot rods. Having spent a couple of hours chatting with him today, it is clear that he has much more class than that.



Plans for a classic car motor museum in the former Fletcher Jones site has the potential to open up a new tourism market for Warrnambool, just as the National Motor Museum in Birdwood has done in the Adelaide Hills (pictured above).

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] W [/dropcap]hile it is very early days, with so much to be done, such a museum has the capacity to again put Warrnambool on the map as a must-visit destination, just like the [Birdwood National Motor Museum](#) has done in the Adelaide Hills.

It will provide an incentive for tourists on the Great Ocean Road to keep driving beyond Port Campbell rather than cutting up through Timboon, as so many now do, to reconnect with the Princes Highway back to Melbourne.

My head is already running away with ideas, as it tends to do, for an annual classic car rally along the Great Ocean Road that would start at the T&G building in Geelong (which Dean and his brother own and have restored), and finish at the Fletcher Jones site in Warrnambool.

Warrnambool has a strong classic car culture (I can still remember the customised panel van shows held at the Warrnambool Drive-In in the 70s) and, from what I can see, there is no large-scale, up-market, classy car museum anywhere else in Victoria.

What a fantastic opportunity and even though I can't tell the difference between an EH and EJ Holden, I would much rather see a car museum on the site than a hardware store.



The stars have aligned for the Fletcher Jones silver ball and the future is again looking bright. Image courtesy of Andrew Kirkham, [A&E Photography](#).

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] D [/dropcap]ean, who is a self-made millionaire from manufacturing commercial kitchen equipment (everything from stainless steel benches to chef aprons, glassware and crockery), also has plans for a cafe within the FJ site and has made a very public commitment to keeping (and restoring) the iconic silver ball and gardens.

Indeed from how Dean was talking today, he is not planning to pull down anything, but rather to repair and restore what is there – including removing the asbestos that has, for some strange reason, always been held up as an insurmountable

obstacle.

Dean doesn't talk about obstacles: he talks about opportunities. He doesn't appear to fret about "red tape", but talks about finding a way through it.

This is how he has, to date, been able to take on projects such as the T&G building in Geelong and the Leura Hotel in Camperdown (be sure to stop and take a peek in the window next time you are passing through).

For those who had written the FJ site off, it is a reminder of what positive, creative thinking can do. For those who always believed in its potential – like the 600-plus people in the [Save the Silver Ball and Fletchers Gardens](#) group – it is a dream come true.

Warrnambool has a beating heart again, and it is round, silver and sitting on top of three red legs.

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Keeping the spirit of Fletcher Jones alive