

Kati Thanda-Lake Eyre – not just a wildlife paradise but also an economic lifeline

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Introduction

Kati Thanda-Lake Eyre, the new name for Lake Eyre rightly reflecting its Aboriginal connection, and its rivers are increasingly on the tourist map around Australia and the world, a reflection of their magnificent cultural and environmental values. Despite this, the tourism industry and its capacity to cater for increasing numbers of visitors is not well developed in many parts of the Lake Eyre Basin (Schmiechen 2004). There is much less known about the sustainable economic values which flow when people are provided opportunities to appreciate these values through tourism. My business is tourism, focused on Lake Eyre. We have already shown that our business is growing and primarily because of the status of this river basin and the water it occasionally delivers to Lake Eyre. It is very important that the river continues to flow uninterrupted, not only for its environmental and cultural values, but also to support the sustainable businesses in the river basin such as ours, which is so dependent on tourism. People come to visit Lake Eyre because it is one of Australia's natural wonders. Lake Eyre and its boom and bust cycles are our big draw card.

I live almost a stone's throw away from Kati Thanda-Lake Eyre. We charter aircraft from William Creek, Marree and Coober Pedy to fly over Lake Eyre (Fig. 13.1). This aerial perspective gives people a wonderful idea about the sheer size of this magnificent wetland. We also provide accommodation, fuel and supplies for tourists. The floods make a huge difference to our small communities in South Australia, substantially increasing the number of visitors to our region and their financial contribution. Tourism provides jobs. When water flows into the lake, it triggers the movement of mainly retired and semi-retired people to our remote region, often fuelled by stories in the media. The lake is increasingly important as an economic resource as tourism grows.

Our Lake Eyre economy

The value of Kati Thanda-Lake Eyre to our region's economy really began during the floods of 2000, when public interest in the lake began to grow. About five years later, flows reached the lake with a small flood, which produced another spike in tourism. The floods of 2010 moved interest and numbers to an unprecedented level as it became widely known that the rivers were flowing into Lake Eyre, popularised by the magnificent ABC documentaries also captured in a book (Lockyer 2012). About 99% of our visitors are Australians, predominantly 'baby-boomers' keen to visit Lake Eyre once in their lifetimes. They come mostly from



Fig. 13.1. Our tourist flight business out of William Creek on the western edge of Kati Thanda-Lake Eyre has grown considerably as people have continued to want to see the magnificent environments of the Lake Eyre Basin rivers whether in flood or dry times (photo, R.T. Kingsford).

Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Perth. We are also increasingly seeing international tourists, mainly from the United States and Europe. Our tourist season usually starts in April, with numbers growing significantly over the winter but the season increasingly extends through November. Many travel through the Flinders Ranges before coming to Kati Thanda-Lake Eyre.

The air flights reflected the extraordinary level of interest during the 2011 flood of Lake Eyre, as people flew from the major urban centres. Apart from our operations (Fig. 13.1), there were special air charters using Fokker 50s (a 50-seat aircraft) while QantasLink brought a Dash 8 aircraft chartered from Brisbane. Alliance Airlines, who predominantly service the mines, also flew tourists to see Lake Eyre. Not only did this influx of tourists come to see Lake Eyre but they also often stayed overnight in the outback towns and got supplies when the aircraft had to refuel in Birdsville, Broken Hill, Coober Pedy and Innamincka. The 2010–11 flood had a dramatic impact on our business.

We have our flight operations centre at William Creek, which usually has 12–20 people in the dry times but these numbers swell to 200–300 people when the floods come into the lake. In normal dry years, our company usually runs three or four small, single-engine aircraft, with our three pilots taking tourist flights over the Lake and its rivers (Fig. 13.2). In the flood years of 2010 and 2011, we had to employ 22 pilots and 18 aircraft. We flew more than 22 000 people over the lake, constantly flying between February and



Fig. 13.2. Kati Thanda-Lake Eyre is one of Australia's great natural wonders, revealing incredible colours and vistas whether flooded or dry (photo, R.T. Kingsford).

November. Each person paid \$180–200 for their lifetime flight of an hour over the lake. A few people would also fly up the rivers to Birdsville, Bedourie and Innamincka over a couple of days, staying overnight in one of these towns. Our biggest challenge was coping with the demand for good accommodation. The demand to see the lake has meant that we more than doubled the number of rooms available in William Creek from ~30 to 70 beds. We are also improving the style of accommodation and services. We have installed access to potable water and underground power. By building our solar generation capacity, we have managed to reduce the eight diesel generators to one. We are increasingly adopting the philosophy of ecological sustainability wherever possible, reflecting our values and those of our visiting tourists.

The very large injection of tourists into our business was also very important for the local economy, providing jobs for local people. The Australian Government also built a bitumen airstrip, replacing the dirt one. This was also critical. It allowed larger, high-performance aircraft and jets to land and also limited the damage to aircraft generally, encouraging more visitors. At the same time, we upgraded the refuelling system to ensure we could adequately service the increasing number of aircraft landing. Importantly even in the dry periods, we have an increasing number of tourists wanting to experience outback Australia and visit the vast dryness of Kati Thanda-Lake Eyre. We see more opportunities to cover the vast outback distances in our aircraft and take visitors to other magnificent places in the Lake Eyre Basin.

The future

Ultimately, we rely on the rivers, mostly coming from Queensland, to deliver us a flood and Kati Thanda-Lake Eyre with water. One thing is certain: if the flow of water stopped or there was even less water coming, there would be a danger that it would not reach Lake Eyre. This would devastate our business. It would also affect employment in all local South Australian towns, including Port Augusta, Coober Pedy, Marree and Oodnadatta, as well as Queensland communities.

Australians want to learn and understand more of their land and the outback is a magnet for this. Lake Eyre in flood brings the wonder of our natural environment to the Australian general public. And it improves our economy enormously, and most of all it is sustainable. We can continue to expand our business and the opportunity for Australians and international visitors to come and see the outback and its wonders. Encouragingly, more and more Australians are embracing and understanding the outback and the majesty of Kati Thanda-Lake Eyre. We in the hospitality and tourism industry will continue to grow and improve our ability to cater for the needs of this ever expanding tourism market. Most importantly, we are not affecting the rivers and the lake. Any development upstream of the water resources by irrigation or mining will have a devastating impact on our livelihood. I passionately believe that we can look after this place and also make a living, contributing not only to long-term environmental but also to economic sustainability.

References

- Lockyer P (2012) *Lake Eyre – A Journey through the Heart of the Continent*. Harper Collins, Australia.
- Schmiechen J (2004) *Lake Eyre Basin Heritage Tourism – Future Directions*. Lake Eyre Basin Coordinating Group, Adelaide, <http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/59515/20140605-1214/www.lakeeyrebasin.org.au/archive/media/future_directions.pdf>.