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False Promise: World Heritage, Ecotourism, and the Local Community of Strahan, Tasmania

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Abstract: The inscription of properties on the World Heritage List often places restrictions on existing livelihoods. In these contexts, tourism is widely held to be a panacea for the economic and social wellbeing of local communities. Ecotourism, in particular, is regarded as addressing both environmental and social needs of communities. However, existing research demonstrates that tourism seldom delivers benefits to Indigenous peoples or local communities in developing countries. This paper suggests that such limitations are equally problematic for local communities in developed nations such as Australia. Through ethnographic research including participant observation and interviews, this paper describes the impacts of tourism on the local community of Strahan, a small logging, fishing, and mining town that transformed into a tourism village following the World Heritage listing of Southwest Tasmania. We suggest that contrary to the widely held view that tourism created employment and economic growth in the town, locals experience diminished quality of life, limited opportunities, and reduced amenity and services. This suggests that ecotourism overlooks its responsibilities for local communities in developed countries, with profound consequences for social sustainability.

Keywords: heritage; tourism; employment; services; infrastructure; social impact

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1. Introduction

The inscription of properties on the World Heritage List inevitably leads to changes in the management and use of these sites. Foremost are restrictions placed on activities deemed to have a detrimental effect on significant natural or cultural attributes. This frequently includes significant changes to existing and latent activities that local communities rely on for subsistence, employment, and income, and that might also form important aspects of cultural or social identity. While extractive economies like mining, fishing, and forestry, as well as agriculture and urban development, are largely incompatible with conservation, they often form the basis of local economies and communities. The cessation and even modification of such economies can lead to unemployment, poverty, dislocation, and disintegration for local communities. Thus, the creation of protected areas can be detrimental for local livelihoods. In seeking to conciliate local communities who are impacted in this way, governments and environmentalists highlight the potential of tourism to provide alternative jobs and economies for local communities. Ecotourism, in particular, is widely held to be an industry that can support economic and social development while maintaining and protecting sensitive heritage environments. Ecotourism is particularly valued in protected area contexts because of its aligned goals of conservation and local community empowerment. It is promoted as a sustainable and socially responsible alternative economy across diverse regions, protected areas, and communities. Indeed, tourism is even promoted as an economic benefit of conservation [1–3].

The ability of ecotourism to deliver sustainable economies is the subject of considerable research, with a growing body of literature on the limitations of these claims. Some research questions whether tourism is in fact compatible with the conservation of biodiversity [4–8], while others interrogate whether economic benefits do in fact flow to local communities [9–16]. By and large, these studies are concerned with how ecotourism has failed to deliver benefits to Indigenous peoples and local rural communities in developing nations. These communities are often vulnerable to poverty, displacement, and disempowerment, and tend to lack the cultural, social, and economic capital, skills, and capacity to engage meaningfully in tourism development [14,17–23]. Rather, it is large multinational corporations that more often reap the economic benefits of tourism developments [24–26]. That research identifies the very clear power differentials between often impoverished local communities and the transnational corporations that wield considerable economic power.

While the International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education", the question of the wellbeing of local people is often ignored. Carrier and Macleod (2005), for instance, critique the 'ecotourism bubble' in two Caribbean destinations to show how tourism disrupts and constrains locals, especially where it is controlled by, and caters for, outsiders [9] (p. 325). They found that tourism dislocated and disadvantaged the local population (p. 317); changed local livelihoods (p. 325); increased pressures on local infrastructure (pp. 319–320); contributed to social fragmentation (p. 320); produced insecurity in employment (pp. 320–321); and alienated people from the natural environment (pp. 325–326). To this extent, they argue that the "socio-cultural consequences of ecotourism … seem not to accord with its socio-cultural objectives" [9] (p. 329). What is less understood is the way in which tourism development might be similarly problematic for local non-Indigenous communities in developed countries.

This paper explores how the declaration of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area led to the transformation of the west-coast town of Strahan from an industrial town into a tourism village. Based on ethnographic research, particularly interviews with locals, we suggest that despite the economic figures and public rhetoric, tourism in Strahan has not unequivocally benefitted local communities. Rather, the changes to the town have (re)produced inequalities and issues for a largely non-Indigenous, local community in a developed country.

2. Materials and Methods

Our investigation of the benefits and impacts of tourism for the town of Strahan was undertaken through an ethnographic study built from both long- and short-term research associated with the Tasmanian World Heritage Area. This includes ethnographic, archaeological, and heritage research originating in the 1990s and continuing to the present. Some research was undertaken under the auspices of government agencies, prior to and outside the requirements of university ethics approval processes.

Ethnography is the core method of anthropology and is used to build a holistic understanding of communities [27]. It takes an inclusive approach that does not predetermine specific groups of participants or questions. While not widely used in tourism or heritage research, ethnographic methods are highly suited to this type of inquiry [28]. Tourism researchers may observe participants at a distance, or by directly participating in activities. They can also read texts written about or by tourists [27,29]. For this research project, we were able to use a combination of these methods. Importantly, we were able to build on prior long-term ethnographic research by Knowles in which she had been embedded in the community for several months. During this time, she spoke to many people of widely different viewpoints, and never refused to speak to anyone who wished to talk to her, regardless of their closeness to the study [30]. This type of embedded ethnographic research is characterised by what Bell (2019) refers to as the "distinctive form of

relationality" of ethnography [31]. This enabled us to conduct subsequent shorter term fieldwork, for which formal ethics approval was obtained, and allowed us to quickly reconnect and establish rapport and trust with interlocutors. Ethnography is traditionally associated with long-term fieldwork embedded with the people being studied, but rapid field methods are becoming more common place. More important than the duration of interactions is the way in which ethnography makes "intensive excursions" into the lives of those the researchers wish to understand [32]. Our intensive excursion for this research built on our prior knowledge, relationships, and observation of Strahan that enabled us to focus our fieldwork on how the claimed benefits of tourism have flowed to local community members.

We spent two weeks in the town of Strahan in 2012 where we conducted participant observation including informal interviews and daily observations of tourist flows at tourism areas of the town. We had conversations with about half a dozen tourism operators and employees, retailers, and hospitality workers as they went about their work at the wharf and in the village, and at the heritage railway. During these observations, we also heard conversations between business operators and tourists. We held similar conversations and observations with tourists on board the signature tourism attraction in the region, the Gordon River Cruise, which takes up to 190 passengers. In addition to making observations of the general activity on board, we spoke directly with five groups of tourists, including two couples travelling from northern Europe; two interstate family groups, one with young children and another with an adult son; and two young international students. In addition to participant observation and conversations across a variety of locations during these weeks, we held semi-structured interviews with land managers and key community members. These included interviews with interlocutors from long-term fieldwork associated with the Parks studies by Knowles [30], and Collett [33], and other community members who were suggested to us. These interviews included members of well-known established Strahan families; a local who had owned and operated their own independent tourism accommodation over many years; a tourism owner-operator with long-term knowledge of changes in the local tourism sector; and a retailer and volunteer who had originally come to Strahan as an environmental activist. Interviewees were asked about their association with Strahan, their family life and education, and employment opportunities. We also asked people to share their observations and experiences of how tourism had impacted the town, including whether infrastructure and amenities had improved and whether the town population had changed. In conversations, we provided information about the research, and for semi-structured interviews, we sought prior consent. We have further drawn on publicly available interviews and commentary surrounding the 40th anniversary of the Franklin Blockade in 2023, and more recent census and tourism data.

3. Results—An Account of Strahan Village

Strahan is a village adjacent to Macquarie Harbour on the west coast of Tasmania, Australia. It is one of several small towns around the periphery of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area which comprises almost one quarter of the island state. The region is rugged and densely forested, with few access roads and small local populations. Understanding its industrial history is an important framing for understanding the social impacts of shifting to a tourism-based economy.

3.1. Colonial Extractive Industries

Despite its relative remoteness, the region has a long history of human resource use, including more than 35,000 years of Aboriginal occupation [34,35]. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, southwest Tasmania became home to colonial extractive industries including the logging of prized Huon Pine. A Huon Pine industry was established with convict labour at Macquarie Harbour from the 1820s [36]. Mining was established towards the end of the century, with tin, gold, and silver mining established at

Mount Bischoff, Macquarie Harbour, and the King and Queen Rivers. Macquarie Harbour provided the most convenient access point for the broader region, and for much of the nineteenth century, it was primarily a service centre for prospectors and piners [37]. While Strahan did not have particularly rich mineral resources of its own, as the main access point for many west-coast mines, its prosperity was firmly linked to these industries. One of the largest and most successful mines in Tasmania, the Mount Lyell mining company generated the much larger population centre at Queenstown. However, with no overland transport between Queenstown and the capital city of Hobart, Strahan was critical to moving these resources. By the early 1900s, Strahan was one of Tasmania's busiest ports, linked to the Mount Lyell mine by rail, and home to more than 1500 residents and a large transient population of miners and foresters [37].

The reliance on extractive industries meant that by the 1920s Strahan was in decline. A railway to the northern port of Burnie, established in 1892, provided a safer and more reliable transport option than the treacherous ocean passage into Macquarie Harbour, and became the preferred network for the mines at Zeehan. The decline of the West Coast was also more widespread with the closure of many smaller mines, the depletion of accessible timber, and the post-war depression. These factors impacted heavily on Strahan and the town suffered a significant downturn. However, the town remained the key transport hub for the Mount Lyell mine, even after the Mount Lyell Highway between Queenstown and Hobart was opened in 1932. The Mount Lyell mine expanded its Strahan handling facilities, including the construction of an additional wharf in 1953, but after 1970, the company began to use the railway connection to Burnie [37].

The remoteness of Port Macquarie, its notoriously wild weather and rough seas, and the rugged hinterland gave Strahan a monopoly in early colonial years and through a substantial portion of the twentieth century. However, as alternative transportation was developed, Strahan lost its strategic position as the key west-coast port. The severe weather conditions also limited the local fishing industry. Strahan established its own local fishing fleet from the late 1800s, and this industry survived through the twentieth century, incorporating lucrative crayfishing by the 1950s [38]. Despite changes in technology, maritime access to Macquarie Harbour remains difficult [39], and in some seasons, fish catches are reduced by up to 90% due to bad weather [38]. Strahan economies were already fragile and new opportunities were needed.

3.2. Hydro-Electric Schemes, Dams, and Environmental Protest

From the early 1900s, the Tasmanian Government began to develop a hydro-electric scheme to supply the state with power, with the first dam constructed at Great Lake in southwest Tasmania in 1910. The construction of dams, powerlines, and associated infrastructure required a significant workforce. The industry was a key part of post-war recovery, employing a number of migrants [40,41], and remained a significant employer of Tasmanians for much of the twentieth century.

The construction of a network of dams after the Second World War did not spark any major protests. However, when the Tasmanian Hydro-Electric Commission (HEC) announced plans to flood Lake Pedder in the late 1960s, an environmental movement was born [42]. Despite significant public protest from a growing number of conservationists, Lake Pedder was flooded, an event which was described by the IUCN as a global ecological tragedy [43,44]. The loss of Lake Pedder was the catalyst for the formation of a strong conservation movement in Tasmania, culminating in the establishment of the Greens political party [42,45]. Consequently, when the HEC announced a plan to dam the Franklin River, it sparked Australia's most famous environmental campaign, 'the Franklin Blockade'. During the campaign, the southwest was listed as the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area, and in a series of political negotiations and manoeuvres, the Commonwealth Government eventually intervened to stop the dam. This decision was made despite a majority of Tasmanian voters supporting the dam, on the basis of the jobs and opportunities it would afford locals.

The conflict between local communities in favour of the dam and the conservationists, many of whom came from the Australian mainland, was intense and sometimes violent. And much of it played out in Strahan which was the closest town to the dam site. Consequently, those working on the dam construction came face to face with protestors on a daily basis. The conflict fundamentally shaped Tasmanian politics, creating an impermeable division between a Tasmanian working class and its support of development, and a zealous green agenda that left little space for ambiguity [42].

3.3. Shifting Economies

At the heart of the conflict was a desperate need for local jobs. Tasmania is traditionally the state that has suffered the highest levels of unemployment in Australia. The proposed dam was particularly important to the people on the West Coast. Many of the towns, including Queenstown and Strahan, were in economic decline and unemployment was high. The fight for the dam was about people's livelihoods and the survival of their towns and communities. This is summed up in a quote from Kelvin McCoy, a trade union leader who led the pro-dam Tasmanian development committee in 1983:

> "They go around the mainland saying that the dam should not be built. They don't tell people that we have the highest unemployment rate in the commonwealth, and that the dam will be the best commercial venture for Tasmania … Some of them have never been to Tasmania in their lives and I question how on earth can they be so sentimentally stupid about an issue so far from them. [L]et me ask all those on the mainland who are constantly making an issue about our dam to kindly leave us alone." (quoted in Sparrow, 2019) [46].

The Commonwealth Government understood that its intervention to halt the construction of the Franklin River dam had cost a number of jobs and contributed to the long-term problem of unemployment in Tasmania. Cabinet papers from the time document an overall assessment of the Tasmanian economy and identify alternative sources of employment, including the construction of roads, food processing, fisheries, timber harvesting, and tourism [47]. The papers acknowledge that all these options, including tourism, were of limited or finite benefit for the Tasmanian economy. Nevertheless, the potential to grow tourism and local employment was widely promoted. In many instances where there is opposition or concern about World Heritage listing, locals are persuaded to support these propositions with the promise that the listing will stimulate tourism and create employment and alternative economies. Despite the fact that the benefits of World Heritage listing are often unrealised [2,48,49], local communities seldom have other options. Such is the case with Strahan. The withdrawal of work associated with the Hydro-Electric Commission meant that locals had little option but to embrace tourism.

3.4. A Single Tourist Destination

Strahan became a gateway to the southwest, and the jump-off point for tourist experiences in the Wilderness World Heritage Area. In 2002, Federal Group, the largest tourism developer in the State, purchased part of the town, including the hotel, pub, and other shopfronts along the foreshore, to create Strahan Village (Figure 1). It also acquired the Gordon River Cruises [50], an attraction that existed many years prior to the Franklin Dam dispute. Strahan Village was thus packaged into a single tourist destination. The local pub, restaurant, and hotel rooms built in the style of small 19th century cottages, were all held by a single operator. Significantly, this includes iconic town features like the Hamer's Hotel, the scene of past conflict and community cohesion for the town. Strahan Village was sold to the motoring group RACT in 2013, and it continues to operate as an integrated model. Strahan Village accommodation and amenities are directly across the road from the wharf where cruises depart each day. The Gordon River cruises are the signature activity of the Wilderness World Heritage Area, and the key way in which people experience

the region [51] (p. 173). This attraction is the central ecotourism venture, and is the principle reason for tourists to visit Strahan.

Figure 1. Strahan Village waterfront at Macquarie Harbour, Tasmania. Photo credit: Tourism Tasmania and Rob Burnett.

While there are alternative accommodation and tourist activities available in and around Strahan, most people experience the World Heritage Area through the single packaged experience of Strahan Village and the Gordon River Cruise. Options such as hiring a kayak or following a walking trail further into the World Heritage Area are available but these kinds of businesses have struggled because of very limited interest. While hikes, such as the challenging 5-day Overland Trail, and similar physical activities are popular in other parts of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area, the demographic profile of visitors to Strahan largely comprises of older, self-drive tourists. The Strahan single experience of the World Heritage Area is highly suited to the age, fitness, and preferences of this group, and allows people of all abilities to experience the region with minimal effort from the seated comfort of a modern catamaran.

3.5. Strahan as Tourism Success

It is therefore arguable that Strahan is a successful tourism enterprise. Strahan Village is popular with tourists. It offers a sanitised experience of the West Coast, far removed from its origin as a working class and working town. Compared with the neighbouring Queenstown with its denuded hills, industrial landscapes, and declining businesses[1], Strahan appears idyllic. The Village is picturesque; its heritage buildings are restored and well maintained; it sits on the edge of a tranquil cove in the harbour, and the surrounding landscape is covered with dense rainforests and clear running rivers and creeks. All tourism activity is oriented to the Esplanade, where all amenities are within easy strolling distance. This creates a calm sense of gentility that is removed from the more textured lives of local people, their struggles and histories. This scenic presentation of the West Coast is clearly preferred by tourists. While it is necessary to drive through Queenstown to reach Strahan via road from Hobart, many more tourists stay in Strahan than Queenstown, and most stay long enough to join one of the daily Gordon River Cruises (Table 1). As a tourist destination, Strahan is comfortable, aesthetically pleasing, and even luxurious. As a former resident described it:

> "The new Strahan played on my university graduate snobbery to some degree – decent wine could be now procured in Strahan. Strahan was now the darling of the chardonnay set." [52].

This is an effective tourism model, demonstrated in visitor numbers in excess of 130,000 each year (Table 1). The payoff between environment and jobs is thus held to be a success story, especially by those who fought to save the Franklin. In an interview with the Greens Leader, Christine Milne, in 1995, she reflected that:

> "One of the best examples of ecotourism providing alternative employment is at Strahan in Tasmania. Strahan was a fishing village on the west coast of Tasmania and had little future at the time of the Franklin Dam Debate. Many residents wanted to support the dam seeing their only future prospect in terms of jobs with the Hydro Electric Commission. Others however, recognised that if the area could be saved that it would be the source of sustainable jobs into the future. That is exactly what has happened and Strahan is now a thriving local community which has experienced over $90 million worth of investment since the Franklin Dam days. Ecotourism provides employment for local people on the West Coast." [53].

This view has held strong. In a radio program 25 years after the Franklin Blockade, tourism was heralded as the saviour of Strahan [54]. The program included interviews with several locals who agreed that tourism had benefits, even some who had engaged in acts of violence against protesters at the time of the Blockade. The most supportive interviewees were members of families who operated river cruises or those who owned businesses that serviced the construction of hotels and facilities. These individuals expressed a new appreciation of the employment created through tourism. While saving the Franklin allowed ecotourism to develop, some locals suggested that it was the protests that had created tourism interest rather than the river itself. And at least one suggested that tourism growth was inevitable as the Tasmanian tourism industry expanded.

It might seem, then, that the development of ecotourism was prophetic in saving the town of Strahan. For the locals interviewed, and for environmentalists, the development of ecotourism has delivered the promised jobs and a sustainability industry for the local community. However, a closer examination of these outcomes suggests a more ambiguous and complex relationship between tourism and the local community.

Table 1. Visitor numbers for Strahan and Queenstown, Tasmania.

	2016/2017	**2017/2018**	**2018/2019**	**2019/2020**
Day Visitors				
Strahan	22,513	18,976	15,904	20,922
Queenstown	56,661	51,176	52,347	58,995
Overnight Visitors				
Strahan	110,623	111,370	113,750	112,920
Queenstown	40,737	40,312	35,105	35,469
Total Visitors				
Strahan	133,136	130,346	129,654	133,842
Queenstown	97,398	91,488	87,452	94,464
Gordon River Cruise	84,075	78,797	79,882	85,199
West Coast Wilderness Touring Route	268,721	277,816	279,759	285,109
Total Touring Route	622,596	640,282	630,859	630,826

4. Discussion

4.1. The Promise of Tourism

Tourism is now the main source of employment for locals, and some companies and individuals have made significant profits from the growth of tourism in Strahan. However, our research suggests that the industry has exacerbated the low-income and status of locals and the precarity of the town's future.

4.1.1. Economic Growth

Strahan has experienced a boon in tourism, with more than 140,000 people visiting the town each year. Alongside this has been a growth in infrastructure and a general interest in the town. The primary industry is tourism, but more particularly accommodation, as Strahan is the preferred overnight stay on the West Coast, offering tourists the kinds of amenities they prefer. Many houses have been purchased as tourist accommodation businesses, and locals told us that this had led to an increase in property values in the town, making both rent and purchase less affordable for residents.

While tourism is estimated to generate some AUD 135 million per year for the West Coast [55], little of this money benefits local communities. It is arguable that the additional expenditure on local infrastructure for tourism provides broader economic returns for the town. However, the model of a centralised ownership of the core tourism facilities and services in Strahan does not bear this out. The profits are not returned to local businesses or families, but rather to a large corporation based elsewhere in the State. Our interviews reveal that while there is some benefit to a few independent accommodation providers and operators, this is not a widely shared economic benefit, and many of these operators are also absentee homeowners. And according to our interlocutors, while tourism has increased the price of housing and delivered large profits to locals who have sold their properties, this poses a significant barrier to locals who want to continue to live in the town; see also [56,57]. Many locals have not enjoyed proportionately higher wages alongside this increase in property value—and the increased gentrification and higher expectations of rental return developed from the sharing economy [58–60] has put many homes beyond local affordability. This is demonstrated in the 35% vacancy of dwellings in Strahan, compared with just 11% nationwide. Nearby Queenstown, with a much higher level of unemployment, has a higher rate of occupation, and housing is much more affordable relative to income [61,62]. The impact of housing prices without equivalent wage increases is that, in many instances, Strahan locals have experienced a net decrease in income.

4.1.2. Jobs

The main selling point of developing tourism in Strahan is that it would create jobs. Several people told us that Strahan has full employment for local people; that no one was out of work. This is slightly at odds with the Australian Census data from 2016 which suggests that unemployment sits around 6%, which is aligned with the state and national averages, and there is an additional 10% of people classified as 'away from work', which is double the state and national average [61]. Nevertheless, this statistic is considerably stronger than the 17% of unemployment experienced in nearby Queenstown. Significantly, these data will have captured tourists staying in Strahan overnight. For the whole of the West Coast, only 200 people are employed full-time in the tourism industry, with another 140 employed in part-time roles [55]. On the whole, the jobs that were available to locals were low-skill, casual, and without pathways to careers. For instance, many locals were employed as cleaners who could be called in for shifts depending on hotel occupancy. This is also supported by the Census data, which show that the primary employment for people in Strahan is in the accommodation industry, comprising 16% of all jobs, compared with just 1% of jobs in this industry nationally [61,62].

Nevertheless, Strahan enjoys a lower unemployment rate than comparable West Coast towns, and this is almost certainly a consequence of tourism. However, there was

no overall improvement in local people's socio-economic status. Our observations and the stories from our interlocutors suggested that locals were largely employed in casual, low-skilled, and low-paid jobs, none of which offered any prospect of career or professional development. Most of the better paid or high-status positions were held by outsiders, people who lived elsewhere but who came into town on short-term rotations of fortnightly shifts or slightly longer contracts. While this remains to be tested, there is some evidence to support these claims.

Besides tourism, salmon farming and a renewal of mining are the main industries near Strahan. The most visibly significant industry in Strahan since the Franklin Dam dispute is the establishment of commercial salmon farming in Port Macquarie. The industry is a source of pride and shown off to tourists aboard the Gordon River Cruises. The cruise makes a short diversion to the salmon farms where tourists witness the swirling throngs of shining fish jostling for space and food in their circular enclosures. Atlantic salmon are unable to establish themselves as a wild population in Tasmanian waters, and all farmed salmon are of a domesticated variety [63]. Despite this, and the fact that salmon farming is coming under increasing environmental scrutiny in Tasmania, the fish itself is strongly associated with the wild and wilderness [64], making it a symbolically palatable industry to sit alongside the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. While salmon farming is a multi-million-dollar industry for Tasmania, it remains relatively small in comparison with global markets. And while the industry produces some 60 thousand tonnes of fish each year [65], a report by the Australia Institute questions the actual value to the Tasmanian economy, suggesting it contributes just 1% of revenue [66]. The report suggests that this is a small payoff for the environmental impacts which, like the Franklin Dam, are pitted against the creation of jobs [46]. However, at a local level, the economic benefit of salmon farming is negligible for the residents of Strahan. The salmon companies employ very few, if any, locals to work on the farms, instead using a drive-in-drive-out workforce from bigger population centres like Hobart. There is no local processing plant which could support both local employment and growth, and extend the tourism interest in the industry. Almost all salmon farm workers live elsewhere and do not contribute to the sustainability of community social or cultural life. People who work on the salmon farms are almost entirely drawn from Hobart, and locals expressed disenfranchisement that they could not gain employment in this highly visible and economically profitable industry ostensibly based in the region.

There has also been a renewal of mining activity on the West Coast, made possible by new technologies that allow the extraction of very small quantities of valuable minerals from previously depleted mines. One such mine operates just outside the town of Strahan. However, this operates as an entirely separate sphere and contributes little, if anything, to the community of Strahan. The company provides its workers with accommodation, mess hall, and bar, and mine workers are actively discouraged from venturing into Strahan for meals or drinks. This type of worker accommodation is oriented towards a dislocated drive-in-drive out workforce that does not accommodate families or a life as part of a local community. The miners and their industry are not compatible with the presentation of Strahan as a quiet village on the edge of the World Heritage Wilderness. The workers threaten to disrupt the touristic presentation of Strahan as a tranquil town in a wilderness area and the idea of an unspoilt nature.

The ecotourism focus of the town then seems to narrow the job prospects for local people.

4.1.3. Population and Services

An important aspect of keeping jobs in the town is related to the sustainability of communities. One of the biggest threats to community, that accompanies the demise of industries such as the abandonment of dam construction, is the flow-on effect of population decline as people leave to find work elsewhere. Despite increased tourism activity and a real-estate boom that indicate a greater interest in the town of Strahan, the local

residential population has not actually grown. The increased number of people in Strahan is entirely related to the temporary population that fills and empties the town each day, in time with the cruise timetables.

As such, the significant expansion in infrastructure in Strahan is almost entirely related to tourism. The town offers high standards in hotel accommodation, fine dining, and retail options. The influx of tourists has also improved some infrastructure, including the construction of a bigger and more efficient sewage system. However, the infrastructure is all oriented to tourists who on average spent just a night or two in Strahan, rather than servicing the needs of the local population. The upgrade to the water and sewage facilities is a good example. The increase in the scale of tourist accommodation and growth in visitor numbers put pressure on existing services and created the need for greater capacity. However, the construction costs were borne by local government, and by implication local rates payers, whereas the previously existing infrastructure was likely to have been sufficient for the needs of residents.

The resident population remains small and, consequently, some of the community benefits that might arise from a thriving community have failed to materialise, or, in some cases, have declined or disappeared. Most notably, this includes essential services such as education and health.

Local children are unable to complete high school in town, which has a direct impact on educational outcomes and the prosperity of the town. Their options include attending boarding school, family relocation to other towns, travelling long distances to school, or withdrawing from schooling. The last of these options is frequently the most affordable and realistic one for low-income families.

The population is similarly too small to sustain its own doctor or medical service, and locals must travel a considerable distance to access healthcare. Emergency care is equally precarious. The local ambulance service is operated by local volunteers, one of whom suggested to us that this service was most often needed by motoring tourists who underestimate the precarity of Tasmanian mountain roads. Volunteers not only transport tourists to medical services, but are often left to manage the relocation of personal affects tourists leave behind in these emergency situations because of the large number of absentee accommodation providers.

Further, the population is unable to support a taxi service which previously operated in the town. Tourists have no use for taxis as they most often arrive in their own vehicles, or as part of coach tours that are accommodated centrally. Tourism therefore brings no additional demand for local transport business, and there is insufficient demand to support either a taxi service or more flexible rideshare options. This has an impact on several aspects of town life, including for the elderly or disabled and anyone else without independent transport.

The low population is felt even more keenly out of peak season. The tourism season in Tasmania is quite restricted, with most visitors travelling to the island state over the summer. Without the daily influx of tourists, it is uneconomical for the local supermarket to bring in fresh produce, so that locals are forced to travel elsewhere for the necessities of daily life.

4.2. The Costs of Tourism

4.2.1. Disintegration of Community Ties

The lack of schooling, careers, services, and amenity in Strahan leads many locals to leave town in search of better educational and employment opportunities, as well as a better quality of life. The significant catalysts for people to leave town relate to children who reach high school level and young adults seeking work. This leads to a skewing of the town age demographic. It also leads to a disintegration of families, as children either move away to boarding school or parents move with their children to other towns. While the ABC radio broadcast about ecotourism in Strahan emphasised the positive impacts of

tourism, at least one local interviewee acknowledged that many of the old families have moved away since the Franklin Dam dispute [54]. For small towns where families have known each other over several generations, this loss of connection and knowledge is significant and undermines a sense of belonging.

4.2.2. Social Fragmentation

At the same time that existing relationships in the town have shifted and changed, tourism has produced new forms of social disintegration. The different employment opportunities within the tourism industry that are offered to locals and outsiders maintain a division between the two. This had even become true of the local parks manager who no longer resided in town. As most management positions are held by people who are not originally from Strahan, a power differential has developed in which locals hold jobs that are subservient to outside managers. This pattern is not only a product of the existing socio-economic status of locals, but one that is reinforced by the corporate ownership of Strahan Village. Several locals spoke fondly of a former hotel manager who, in contrast to all others, enjoyed working and living in the town and made concerted efforts to become part of the local community. The manager and their family socialised with locals, joined community activities and groups, and formed a number of close friendships with locals. When the family was unexpectedly—and reluctantly—transferred from Strahan to elsewhere in the state, locals saw this as a deliberate company response to the positive relationship between the manager and locals. The locals who shared this story felt that the manager was moved because they were too familiar and friendly with locals, and had not maintained the class boundary.

This marginalisation of locals is further reinforced through the creation of distinct tourist spaces in the town. There are clear class differences between the largely working-class locals and affluent tourists who visit Strahan. The communal spaces previously enjoyed by locals have been displaced by tourist venues and activities. This was explained to us in relation to the previously vibrant pub that had been the centre of socialising in town. The pub was the site of many disputes between protestors and locals during the Franklin Blockade, but outside of this conflict, it was the site of many community events and interactions over many years. The pub is now part of the complex owned by Strahan Village. Locals no longer feel welcome, and as noted above, mine workers are actively discouraged from frequenting the venue.

Other social factors, including the small local population, have further compounded this social disintegration. For instance, the absence of a taxi service means that people are less likely to drink out, even at the new, less characterful bar on the edge of town. Instead, locals now tend to drink at home, in a much less cross-sectional or social way. Not to overstate the importance of alcohol in the town social fabric, sport was similarly once a key weekend activity for many locals, but there are no longer enough young people to form local football teams, further removing opportunities for community socialisation.

4.2.3. Connection to the World Heritage Area

In addition to the disintegration of team sport, many recreational and cultural activities popular with locals have been curtailed by the declaration of the World Heritage Area [30]. A parks manager suggested, however, that while locals were now less likely to practice illegal activities in the WHA, the drive-in-drive-out workers who gained familiarity with the region were increasingly using parts of the WHA illegally, establishing semi-permanent campsites, building unauthorised tracks, and engaging in prohibited fishing activities. In contrast, local people have become disengaged from the World Heritage Area.

While tourism development has been encouraged as an environmentally appropriate solution to creating employment in the face of job losses arising from the Franklin River Dam dispute, it has also promised a greater awareness of the significance and value of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. Surprisingly then, tourism around Strahan

is strangely divorced from the values of the World Heritage Area. Despite one interviewee suggesting that the Franklin Blockade was in fact a catalyst for tourist interest in Strahan, there is nothing in town to indicate that this was once the epicentre of a violent struggle between conservationists and dam construction workers. There is no recognition that Strahan is the site of the most significant environmental campaign ever staged in Australia. Speaking to tourists and listening to the commentary on the Gordon River Cruises, it was apparent that neither the campaign nor the World Heritage values are part of the motivation for visiting the West Coast. Several tourists directly stated that they had not heard of the dispute.

5. Conclusions

The promise of tourism to save the community of Strahan is like many other promises made in response to the listing of World Heritage properties and the declaration of environmentally protected areas around the world. As Carrier and Macleod [9] identified in their study of tourism in two Caribbean destinations, the attraction of tourism disrupts and constrains locals. While ecotourism and ecotourists seldom acknowledge or recognise the impacts of their own participation in tourism on the environment [9,67], they also fail to recognise the social aspects of the construction and maintenance of what tourists use, see, and do [9] (p. 329).

Tourism is sometimes argued to offer better job opportunities beyond the kind of labouring work of extractive industries, but the case of Strahan suggests that local people have not gained any greater socio-economic or skill benefits. While labour is in short supply, this is produced by the factors that have made Strahan a difficult place to live. Local residents are largely employed in menial positions, with few prospects of career progression or skill development. The economic benefits largely flow to a large corporation that has no local footprint in the town. And significantly, while job creation and environmental protection are posed as counterbalances in tourism, there is no indication that the adoption of tourism in Strahan has produced greater environmental awareness. On the contrary, the breakdown of social fabric means that temporary workers in mines and fish farms have little responsibility for environmental degradation and participate in damaging activities with impunity, while locals have largely removed themselves from using these areas in response to Parks and Wildlife Service regulations.

These problems are under-researched and little recognised within tourism settings such as Strahan. The local community of Strahan is not offered the respect and support that is claimed as a cornerstone of ecotourism. As Carrier and Macleod [9] (pp. 329–330) have suggested, in ecotourism discourse, 'local people' does not in fact mean people who live locally, as we might assume. Rather, ecotourism casts local people as groups of people with visually distinctive cultural practices that are suitable for tourist consumption. This fetishization reduces local people to material expression and ignores the social relationships that underpin local relationships [9] (pp. 329–330). In the case of Strahan, a working-class town, local people are not recognised or accorded the same attention as the 'exotic other' that is so valued within the ecotourism framework, and so the rhetoric that ecotourism offers a panacea for local economies and wellbeing remains unchallenged.

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Requests to access the datasets should be directed to the authors, but may be subject to third-party permissions.

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Note

1. There are some recent developments in Queenstown that suggest its fate may be shifting, but it has been in severe economic decline since the 1990s.

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