

What tourism can learn from mining

New Zealand's tourism industry can learn much from both the successes and failures of the mining industry, according to Adjunct Professor Bruce Harvey of the University of Queensland.

At a time when the tourism industry's 'social licence' to operate is under growing pressure in many communities, Prof Harvey says mining companies have learned tough lessons on gaining support from local people.

These lessons also apply to the tourism industry which needs continued public support to thrive, he says.

Prof Harvey, who has 40 years international experience in the mining industry, is a speaker at the Tourism Summit Aotearoa in Wellington on 9 November. He has been at the forefront of developing Social Performance as a new professional discipline in the extractive sector, including seven years as Global Practice Leader – Communities and Social Performance at Rio Tinto.

He is now an independent consultant and an Adjunct Professor at the Sustainable Minerals Institute, University of Queensland.

Early bird registration for the Tourism Summit Aotearoa is available until 20 October. Go to www.tourismsummit.co.nz for details.

The topic for your Summit address is 'What can we learn from the mining industry?' The links between mining and tourism aren't immediately apparent – is it valid for tourism to be compared with mining?

Mining is not a popular industry. Over the past three decades the levels of public discomfort with mining have grown and the number of community conflicts that have delayed or closed down mining projects has escalated.

Successful mining companies have learned tough lessons and have developed a professional approach towards social performance that earns them 'social licence' – an intangible social contract that means local people support their presence. Just as many companies have not learned and often fail as a result.

Social performance is not based on advocacy and philanthropy; it is based on wholesale behaviour change. The general lessons are transferable and mature tourist operators who want to maintain, or even expand, their positive public consent can benefit from learning from the mining sector.

At another level, the infrastructure that is underwritten by a mine, such as telecommunications, airports and roads, mean that other locally based industries, such as tourism, can develop.

The mining industry in Australia and New Zealand has faced a range of social licence issues over the years. What sort of issues have you investigated? Have they been resolved?

Specific issues are many and varied, however they almost all come back to land and achieving a fair distribution of benefits and impacts. Mining can produce very strong cash flows and economic distribution, along with major locally confined impacts. Historically, the people of the land and near neighbours were frequently left out of decisions affecting their economic options and their culture and environmental values.

Local level agreements are now a mining industry norm. They have emerged as global best practice comprehensively covering all the issues that need resolution.

Is mining becoming more environmentally sustainable?

Mining necessarily involves massive environmental impact over relatively small areas, some of it irredeemable. However, most of the land disturbed by mining can be remediated or regenerated for other purposes post-mining.

There are very good examples in New Zealand of areas after mine closure becoming highly productive farm land, scenic lakes and wetlands, tourism ventures, industrial estates and other imaginative uses.

So, managed well, mining can leave behind sustainable environmental or economic assets, depending on what local people want.

Where is the balance between environmental sustainability and economic opportunity?

I believe that balance should be a decision entirely for local and land-connected people to make.

To a very large extent, landscapes are social constructs; they replicate what local people want them to be. If a large majority of people want tracts of landscape set aside as wilderness, then they remain wilderness as a result of that socialised vision.

More frequently, landscapes that look pristine are not; they are the result of massive human intervention that has shaped them into something that sustains human and economic occupation. New Zealand's famous rolling green hills, neatly fenced and covered in white cottonwool sheep, fit this category.

Likewise, the beautifully regenerating nature parks and coastlines that are recovering from an earlier frontier century. We reap what we sow, and New Zealand has had the foresight to evolve itself as 100% pure.

Anything else you would like to say?

I am greatly looking forward to learning how tourism is emerging as a major pillar in New Zealand's economy, how it is being driven by entrepreneurship and how it is balancing the needs and aspirations of different land users.

The innovation and economic drive that is very evident in New Zealand in the 21st century is something to behold. Forty years ago I left a country that was dominated by sheep farms and plantation forestry; now I can't keep track of the amazing things Kiwis are doing in everything from adventure tourism to digital creation to earth-orbital freight delivery.

This article was first published in Inside Tourism, 21 September 2016.