The Great Ocean Road: from where to where?

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In the genre of 'scenic routes' the Great Ocean Road on Victoria's southwest coast is one of the best in the world. It has compelling beauty and drama, a high-energy coastline and it winds through a region of rich natural and cultural significance. Serious consideration should be given to proposing the Great Ocean Road for inscription on the World Heritage List as a cultural landscape of international importance. Among the 690 sites on the List, 14 are Australian, none of them in Victoria. Yet this paper suggests a paradox. In the context of contemporary values about conservation and sustainability, the Great Ocean Road would probably not be built.

Mention of the Great Ocean Road stirs the imagination of many Australians. Spectacular landscapes and wild seas: shipwrecks, drama and tragedy; bushfires and landslides; summer holidays and winter bushwalking; sand, surf and swimming. Drivers think of the concentrated negotiation of narrow roads and passengers remember looking down at the waves and rocks waiting at the bottom of steep cliffs. Scenic lookouts abound. Scenic is an appropriate word, for this is a constructed landscape, a deliberate arrangement designed to enhance the drama and impact of the coastline as seen through the windscreen of a motor vehicle.

The traditional custodians of this country are the Wauthurong, the people who harboured escapee William Buckley for 32 years from 1803. They camped in the creek valleys to harvest the rich seafood but made their tracks and trading routes along ridges and up into the hills. Intrepid Europeans took the beach route. G.E. Morrison, the great London *Times* correspondent in Beijing, did his first long walk from Barwon Heads to Adelaide at the age of 17. He published his wonderful *Diary of a Tramp* in the Melbourne leader in 1880. Two years later 1882 he walked alone to the Gulf of Carpentaria, a good preparation for his great 5000 km-journey across China in 1894.

The earliest Europeans came by sea and along coaching tracks from inland. Lorne began as a timber town, but by the 1880s was busy as a favourite holiday place for people from all over Australia. Sir George Reid, Premier of NSW and a controversial Federation father, took his holidays in Lorne. Visitors journeyed with horses through the Otway forests, going up and over the ranges from the railway station at Dean's Marsh on the Birregurra–Forrest line. The modern road follows the alignment of the old coach road. Rudyard Kipling caught the unmistakeable atmosphere of a Lorne summer in this extract from *The Flowers* (1895):

Buy my hot-wood clematis,
  Buy a frond of fern
Gathered where the Erskine leaps
  Down the road to Lorne –
Buy my Christmas creeper

And I'll say where you were born!
West away from Melbourne dust holidays begin –
They that mock at paradise woo at Cora Lynn –
Through the great South Otway gums sings the Great South Main –
Take the flower and turn the hour, and kiss your love again!

Apollo Bay was much smaller and still is. It also started as a timber port, but the seas of Bass Strait were too stormy for reliable trading. Yet it was the very difficulty of the coast which would make it spectacular as a drive.

Pony tracks connected Aireys Inlet to Lorne, following the telegraph lines over the hills, but the visionaries wanted a road to rival the Amalfi coast in Italy, the Corniche in France, or the new coast roads in California and New Zealand. Besides, certain illustrious citizens had real estate in Lorne and saw the need for development.

Visit the Great Ocean Road, the world's most inspiring coastal drive

If you visit the plethora of Great Ocean Road websites or read the frenzied tourist literature you might gain the impression that the track connects Melbourne with Mount Gambier, hugging cliffs above the ocean the whole way. Not so. According to Vicroads, the authentic Great Ocean Road is 241 km long and runs from the Spring Creek roundabout in Torquay to the T-junction at Allansford, where it joins the Princes Highway 20 km east of Warrnambool.

But this is just the official description. For many people the true core of the Great Ocean Road is the 75 kilometres stretch from Eastern View to Apollo Bay which does really hug the cliffs. It begins at the Commemorative Arch, built in 1939. This 'conspicuous propylaeum', possibly Australia's most famous piece of highway iconography, is a solid structure of dark timber and stone pillars. In style it might be the imposing entrance to a national park in Canada and the US with its white art-nouveau lettering, *Great Ocean Road*.

This is the third arch of this design on the site. Five bronze plaques on the seaward pillar tell the story. The first announces that the Great Ocean Road Trust built the road to commemorate the services of those who served in the Great War, 1914-1918. A parallel plaque dedicates the arch itself to the memory of Major W.T.B. McCormack, Honorary Engineer to the Trust and Chairman of the Country Roads Board.

A second arch replaced the first when the road was widened in 1973. The fourth plaque memorialises a ceremony in November 1982 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Road. Just three months later this structure was destroyed by the Ash Wednesday fires of 16 February 1983 when the entire coast between Lorne and Anglesea was burnt black. Such is the public affection for this icon that a tentative murmur that it might not be replaced was greeted with a howl of protest. So there is a fifth plaque commemorating the third structure. Local myth tells of two more major disturbances, one

when it was vandalised shortly after the first arch went up, and later when a truck took the top off in 1984.

Few people read this collection of bronzes, although the Surf Coast Shire has recently installed an explanatory sign on site. Most travellers read the arch itself as marking the beginning of a special piece of road.

Still this was not the first of the arches. The original was a simple structure which stood at the first tollgate nearby. It carried the painted lettering, Returned Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Great Ocean Road.

This highway on the coast of Bass Strait, in Victoria, is one of the most beautiful and universally enjoyed memorials in Australia (Walling 1952, 53)

So we come to the Road's most significant story. The Great Ocean Road, 'the world's best ocean drive' is a war memorial. In 1917 a group of citizens, based in Geelong, formed the Great Ocean Road Trust to realise their long-held dream of a direct route along the coast. The Trust was chaired by Mayor Howard Hitchcock, Geelong's leading mover and shaker.

They produced a persuasive basket of motives. The Road was to link the coastal settlements, increase land values (the real estate industry was soon involved), provide a communication route for land holders and the military and be a major tourism asset. Two motivations predominated. It was to be a memorial to all those Victorians who served in World War I and would give employment to returned servicemen in healthy, beautiful surroundings.

The Great Ocean Road Trust embodied a partnership between Government and community enterprise common in early Victorian road building. Locals knew that the Government could not do everything and were prepared to pitch in to make things happen. The aspect of the Road as a war memorial and provider of employment for ex-soldiers increased its ability to attract public support. Co-operation between Government and Trust was very close. In 1918 the Government approved of the Country Roads Board doing work on behalf of the Trust and the task of surveying and road building began. A third agency, the Repatriation Department, was closely involved in supervising and part-funding the wages of the men.

The Road was unusual for the times because it was built on a completely new alignment and did not follow any existing track or footpath. It was purpose-built as a scenic touring road, characterised by sea level crossings of rivers and inlets and elevated headlands. It is highest at Cinema Point, 103 metres above sea level, and Cape Patton, 82 metres.

Work proceeded in stages according to the availability of money and materials. Some of the sections on steep cliffs and unstable slopes were very difficult. The men worked with pick and shovel, horses and drays. They stayed in well-organised camps, complete with

vegetable plots, cooks and pianos. Names such as Monash Gully, Artillery Rocks and Shrapnel Gully testify to their recent war experience.

The first section between Eastern View and Lorne opened in 1922, and the second from Lorne to Apollo Bay ten years later. A total of 3000 returned servicemen were involved. Towards the end of the project, employment was given to victims of the Great Depression beginning in 1929.

The project was exceptionally well documented in photographs because of the close involvement of Charles Herschell as Managing Director and later Chairman of the Trust. He was an early film pioneer and the founder of Rose postcards which carried many scenic views of the Road. It is distressing to record that the photographic records were destroyed during World War II because space was needed in Herschell's offices for the large number of war newsreels. (Alsop 1982, 42) The loss of documentation of the work and its workforce is especially sad, even though there is a very good supply of landscape scenes. Building the road coincided with the advent of the great age of mass photography, as well as popular motor touring.

A SAMPLER OF TOURISM PROPAGANDA

The long highway cliff-hugs it's [sic] way from Geelong to the South Australian border along dazzling ocean scenery.

A photographer's dream

Where every turn reveals a breathtaking vista
Where apostles will move your spirit
Where nature will inspire you

One of the world's most scenic drives is the GOR, a swirling stretch of astonishing seascapes, landscapes and seaside towns.

Through the windscreen of your rented convertible. . .

The road has been carved by nature. No flyovers here, no roundabouts or transit lanes, just a simple black track hugging the headlands and dipping into the bays

For much of the way the road clings to the coastline, twisting g and turning, with every bend revealing a sight more spectacular than the last. See the grand architecture where the ocean has carved mighty arches, caverns and coves [caves?] from the rock. Then follow its trail past soothing estuaries and gentle bays.

The road was partly financed by tolls and it remained a toll road until 1936 when the Country Roads Board of Victoria, predecessor of the present Vicroads, took over control. Up until that time it had been a rough and narrow track, open only to the adventurous. It was frequently closed in the winter months after heavy rain caused rock falls and the surface churned to mud. In the summer dust was a problem, especially for driving with the canvas top folded back.

Ironically the Great Ocean Road Trust, while espousing the virtues of the scenic landscape, did more than any other agency to open up the coast for ribbon development. They had to think of ways of raising money, apart from direct appeal. The Government released Crown land at Eastern View, and the Trust built a hotel and golf links in the hope of developing a township. It failed, and the forest has now reclaimed the golf links while the hotel burned down on Ash Wednesday, long after it became a private house and the home of Rev Dr. Percy Jones, well-known musicologist. His Bechstein burned that day. So did the personal collection Dame Joan Hammond had willed to the nation. Today this strip of housing backs on to the Lorne-Angahook State Park, a reminder of the dangers of uncontrolled development and the need for appropriate planning. All along the coast, local citizens work hard to conserve the environment. The inspiring views from Anglesea across to the Aireys Inlet lighthouse were protected when local citizens and environment groups organised to buy the heathlands and add them to the public domain.

The Trust also acquired a large tract of land at Big Hill. Edna Walling, the distinguished landscape gardener, bought and conserved property there. Her book *The Australian Roadside* contains many local photographs and a separate chapter on the Great Ocean Road. Holdings on Big Hill are quite large because the ground is very steep. Before Ash Wednesday the relatively modest bush shacks could not be seen from the road. Their replacements are conspicuous, even grandiose. Landscape vistas are foreshortened and hillsides diminished by this visual clutter. Fortunately most of the rest of the road has remained relatively free from man-made visual intrusion, apart from the black bitumen strip itself.

It is a route loaded with memory. Families who explored the Road in 'the early days' recall adventure. My father tells of negotiating the narrow track outside Lorne when a bush fire came down over the road ahead and towards them. There was no place for the fellow in front to turn his caravan. So they unhooked it and made their escape, manhandling the cars around, as you could in the thirties. When they drove through next day there was nothing except twisted steel and burnt crockery. That was January 1939 when half the state burned. Forty-four years later he was to escape the Ash Wednesday fires, again along the Ocean Road.

It would not be built today

The Great Ocean Road would not accord with current policies and strategies of ecological, social and economic sustainability along the coastline of Victoria.

For many years after the Road was completed the coastal settlements remained quiet villages with a small core of permanent residents augmented by weekend and holiday influxes. Traffic was relatively sparse and the pace leisurely. But since the final section of road was laid to bitumen in 1983 traffic along the coast has increased exponentially. For many tourists it has become a beautiful through road to the extraordinary Twelve Apostles, the iconic images of the coast. The settlements have become pit stops. Tourism Victoria claims there are now 5 million visitors to the region every year. The figures are growing rapidly.

The Great Ocean Road has become a highway cutting through communities, dividing them up and separating them from their beaches and bush. As the track becomes ever wider and faster, its impact increases. It is often very busy, with impatient traffic slowed down and banked up at peak times. Crossing the road with young children and beach paraphernalia becomes a nightmare, so even local residents take the car option. The Road dictates the way people live and becomes the determining force. Local communities are reeling under the pressure. More and more through-traffic, bigger coaches, more and bigger supply vans. Vicroads are now installing bicycle shoulders where they can, though stretches between Lorne and Apollo Bay may be too narrow.

The future management of the whole region is now a major preoccupation of all stakeholders. The pressure on resources and infrastructure from increased tourism and expanding permanent populations is enormous. Water supply, waste disposal and inappropriate development are major concerns.

There is an urgent need to provide safe and easy access to the area while meeting the need of protecting the environment and local amenity of townships along the road. Small communities face big dilemmas. Tourism is an increasingly important source of income, yet the social and environmental impacts can be heavy. More jobs mean more people and more impact. On the other hand most people want to maintain the remote feel and village atmosphere. Many former weekenders convert to full-time in order to enjoy their beloved sea and bush, and friendly village life. Residents want peace and quiet.

The tourism industry wants more of everything, especially overnight stays to increase the yield for the industry. At the same time their leaders know they must conserve the beauty which attracts tourism in the first place. They talk about not killing the goose which lays the golden egg.

The Government has at last initiated a process of coordinated planning to deal with a deteriorating situation. The Great Ocean Road Corridor Strategy will be an integrated, holistic plan for sustainable management of the region. The twelve major government agencies and local authorities which have responsibility for aspects of the Road are contributing to the Strategy, as well as local communities and many other users and business interests. This is catch-up policy-making because the genie is out of the bottle.

The process is assisted by the Victorian Coastal Strategy which offers guidelines for an ecologically sustainable approach to all uses and development along the length of the

Victorian coast. Further, after nine years of social and scientific investigation, community consultation and reports, the Victorian Government is now poised to enact a visionary system of marine national parks and special reserves. Several of these sites lie off the Great Ocean Road coast and will add to the heritage significance of the area.

Informal proposals for coping with the pressures include making the traffic one-way at certain times, or arranging for a massive rockslide to close the Road. We may have to return to the original idea of a major inland highway with local feeder roads dropping down to coastal townships, just as the coach roads did. There is a current proposal for a Great Otway Walk along the high ridgelines of the Otway Ranges, but it is controversial. One possible solution would be to convert The Great Ocean Road into The Great Ocean Walk? This would not diminish its heritage significance.

The Great Ocean Road fulfilled a dream to link up the seaside settlements, open up the coast for development and provide the motoring public with 'one of the most beautiful ocean drives in the world'. On the face of it, the dream has become an environmental and social headache.

We are presently modelling the effects of global warming. If predictions are right many sea-level points along the Great Ocean Road are threatened. There is a supreme irony here. It was Greenhouse gas which created the road, and Green house gas which could destroy it.

References

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