

Working with Caravan Parks, Not Against Them

Building a regional accommodation ecosystem where free stays and paid parks strengthen each other.



David Williams

FOUNDER & PRINCIPAL CONSULTANT (& CARAVANNER)

Argo Advisory & Consulting

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Executive Summary

| The strongest RV friendly regions do not choose sides.

Few issues create more debate in regional tourism than free camping.

For many councils, the discussion quickly becomes polarised. Caravan park operators fear lost business, while travellers advocate for more low cost or free overnight options. Councils are left trying to satisfy competing interests while supporting local economic development.

Unfortunately, this is the wrong conversation.

The real question is not whether communities should support free camping or protect caravan parks.

The real question is:

How can a regional destination maximise visitor spending, extend length of stay and strengthen the entire visitor economy?

The most successful regional destinations no longer see free overnight stays and commercial caravan parks as competing products. They recognise that each serves different visitor needs and that together they can increase total visitor expenditure.

The objective is not to redistribute visitors.

It is to grow the market.

CONTINUED

Moving Beyond the False Choice

Across Australia, the phrase “free camp versus caravan park” has become embedded in public debate.

It suggests that every traveller choosing a free overnight stop represents a direct financial loss for a commercial operator.

In practice, visitor behaviour is far more complex.

Caravan travellers are not a single market.

They have different travel styles, budgets, trip durations and accommodation preferences.

Some seek premium holiday parks with resort style facilities.

Others simply require a safe overnight stop before continuing their journey.

Many use both during the same trip.

A regional tourism strategy should recognise this diversity rather than force travellers into a single accommodation model.

Understanding Traveller Behaviour

A typical grey nomad travelling for several months might:

- Use a 24 hour free stay area when passing through a town for one night.
- Move into the local caravan park when they decide to stay several days.
- Book a premium holiday park during peak season or bad weather.
- Stay in a free precinct near a walkable town centre to enjoy local hospitality.
- Return to a preferred caravan park in later trips because of consistent quality.

These decisions are influenced by weather, travel distance, available facilities and planned activities.

They are not ideological choices.

They are practical ones.

Successful destinations provide a range of accommodation options that meet different needs throughout the journey.

The Economic Question

Councils should ask:

“Where does visitor spending occur?”

Not:

“Where did visitors sleep?”

Accommodation is only one component of the visitor economy.

Regional travellers also purchase:

- Fuel and vehicle servicing.
- Groceries and everyday retail.
- Meals and coffee across cafés, bakeries, pubs and restaurants.
- Wine, produce and local specialty goods.
- Tours, attractions and paid experiences.
- Repairs, equipment and outdoor gear.

Much of this spending occurs regardless of whether the visitor stayed in a free precinct or a commercial caravan park.

The economic objective should therefore be increasing total visitor expenditure rather than maximising one accommodation category.

Caravan Parks Remain Essential

Commercial caravan parks play a vital role within regional tourism.

They provide:

- Powered sites, showers, laundries and camp kitchens.
- Cabin, villa and glamping accommodation for non RV visitors.
- Family friendly facilities such as pools and playgrounds.
- Extended stay options for travellers pausing between journeys.
- Local employment and long term community investment.

Many visitors actively seek these services.

Councils should support caravan parks as important tourism businesses.

The goal is partnership, not competition.

The Role of Free Overnight Stays

Free or low cost overnight areas serve a different purpose.

They:

- Provide a safe stopover for self contained travellers passing through.
- Encourage self drive visitors to stop in town rather than drive on.
- Direct spending into cafés, pubs, shops and attractions.
- Attract shoulder season and midweek visitation.
- Introduce first time visitors to the destination.

Many visitors who initially stop for one free night later return for longer stays in caravan parks after discovering the destination.

The free stay becomes the introduction, not the substitute.

The Visitor Journey

Think of visitor accommodation as a progression.

Stage One

Traveller notices a welcoming 24 hour RV precinct.

Stage Two

They explore the town.

Stage Three

They discover attractions, wineries, walking trails or events.

Stage Four

They decide to stay longer.

Stage Five

They move into the local caravan park.

Stage Six

They recommend the destination to others.

Every stage supports additional local spending.

CONTINUED

Lessons from Regional Australia

Langhorne Creek

Visitors often begin with a simple overnight stay but remain longer because of exceptional wineries, walkable experiences and welcoming hospitality.

The accommodation is only the beginning of the visitor experience.

William Creek

Travellers arrive because of location and practical facilities.

Many extend their stay after discovering scenic flights, history and the unique outback atmosphere.

Daly Waters

The pub itself has become a destination.

Accommodation options complement rather than compete with the visitor experience.

Warrnambool

Commercial accommodation, public infrastructure and major attractions work together to support one of regional Victoria's strongest visitor economies.

Building Partnerships

Councils can strengthen relationships with caravan park operators by:

- Involving operators early in visitor economy planning.
- Sharing visitor data, traveller feedback and destination insights.
- Co-designing signage that promotes both free and paid accommodation.
- Referring longer stay travellers from free precincts into commercial parks.
- Collaborating on marketing that promotes the whole destination rather than individual sites.
- Supporting caravan park operators in seeking grant funding and industry programs.

When the focus shifts from accommodation to economic development, collaboration becomes much easier.

Measuring Success

Rather than asking:

“How many people used the free camp?”

Ask:

- What is total visitor expenditure in our town?
- What is the average length of stay across all accommodation types?
- How is retail and hospitality turnover trending?
- Are caravan parks maintaining or growing their occupancy?
- Are visitors leaving positive online reviews and recommending the destination?

These measures reflect the health of the entire visitor economy.

A Strategic Framework

Regional accommodation should be viewed as an integrated system.

The system includes:

- Free 24 hour RV stay precincts for self contained travellers.
- Low cost overnight areas managed by councils or community groups.
- Commercial caravan parks offering powered sites and amenities.
- Holiday parks with cabins, villas and family facilities.
- Farm stays, station stays and boutique accommodation.
- Motels, hotels and short term rentals for non RV visitors.

Each serves a different market.

Together they strengthen destination competitiveness.

Five Recommendations for Councils

1. Replace the free camp versus caravan park debate with a visitor economy strategy.
2. Engage caravan park operators as strategic partners.
3. Design free overnight areas to encourage visitors into town.
4. Measure visitor spending rather than accommodation choice.
5. Promote accommodation diversity as a competitive advantage.

CONTINUED

Looking Ahead

Australia's caravan and RV market continues to expand.

Communities that embrace a balanced accommodation strategy will be better positioned to attract visitors, encourage longer stays and strengthen local businesses.

Those that continue framing the discussion as a competition between accommodation providers risk missing the broader economic opportunity.

The future belongs to destinations that work together.

Conclusion

Regional tourism is not a zero sum game.

Every visitor who chooses to stop, explore and spend contributes to the local economy.

Caravan parks are an essential part of that economy.

So too are well planned overnight RV precincts.

The most successful communities understand that the objective is not to determine where visitors sleep.

It is to create compelling destinations where visitors choose to stay longer, spend more and return again.

When councils, caravan park operators and local businesses work together, everybody benefits.

That is the foundation of a successful regional visitor economy strategy.

WHERE THIS LEADS NEXT

Turning insight into action.

Every regional community has the potential to strengthen its visitor economy. The difference lies in leadership, planning and a willingness to think beyond individual assets and towards the whole visitor experience.

If you would like to discuss how these principles apply to your council, tourism organisation or region, Argo Advisory & Consulting works with regional leaders across Australia to translate insight into practical, measurable outcomes.

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

David Williams

Founder & Principal Consultant (& Caravanner)

david@argoadvisory.com.au

argoadvisory.com.au

About the Author

Founder and Principal Consultant, Argo Advisory & Consulting. David advises regional councils, tourism organisations and economic development agencies on visitor economy strategy, RV tourism and regional growth. Drawing on deep marketing expertise, Australian authenticity and extensive travel throughout regional Australia, he helps communities develop practical, evidence based strategies that increase visitation, strengthen local businesses and create more resilient regional economies.