Abstract:

There is currently a significant gap in academic literature examining the benefits of leisure as a driver for the development of communities, especially when discussing the value of social capital developed through leisure. Leisure and social capital research fields do not yet have a common discourse.

There are few examples of public policy innovations incorporating social capital and leisure. Most public policies surrounding leisure provision appear to be ‘needs driven’ so this paper looks at the opportunity side of leisure public policy. Why not look at an ‘assets driven’ approach for competitive advantage through leisure? Can rural and regional areas compete with the world’s most liveable cities and attract skilled people by enhancing their own unique assets and social structures?

This paper presents research in progress analysing the contribution of leisure to the stock of social capital and canvasses the role and agency of local government.
Hello colleagues,

Social capital theorists say that social capital establishes trust, networks and productivity (Granovetter 1973; Becker 1974; Coleman 1988; Baron, Field et al. 2000; Falk and Kilpatrick 2000; Fukuyama 2001; OECD 2001; Schafft and Brown 2003; Durlauf and Fafchamps 2004; Arai 2006; Glover 2006; Knorringa and van Staveren 2007; Schuller 2007) and key leisure academics say that leisure is a fertile arena for creativity and innovation (Parker 1976; Wynne 1990; Edginton, Jordan et al. 1995; Rentschler 1998; Driscoll and Wood 1999; OECD 2001; Florida 2002; Glover and Hemingway 2005; Dillon 2006; Glover 2006; Rojek, Shaw et al. 2006). If this is so then one could argue that public policy strategies using these two areas collaboratively should be considered high priorities for under-performing regions to take advantage of these assets and to attract and retain young people. Therefore, according to my research to date, to increase the value and capacity of regions you must use the policy lever of social networks (see Figure 1).
In this presentation I will argue that:

(1) certain social capital factors are increasingly valued in a globalised world
(2) leisure is a means to build those factors
(3) by building these factors, liveability of regional areas will be increased
(4) and, therefore, regions will build regional competitiveness to offset the magnetism that cities have especially for generations X and Y and those that follow.

Let’s take a step back.

I come from what is known as the Cradle Coast region, encompassing North-West and Western Tasmania. From Cradle Mountain to the coastline. This region is considered a ‘low performing’ region in regard to incomes, education levels, skills retention, liveability indicators and overall industry competitiveness. This is not dissimilar to many rural and remote areas of our country.

Results of a 2007 survey of young professionals in the Cradle Coast region showed that almost 65% of respondents indicated that they envisage leaving the region within the next five years (Moore Consulting 2007). 66% of those will do so for work or educational opportunities. These are interesting statistics that need to be investigated further, especially the worrying fact that 40% of respondents were from the health sector. This is alarming but is there a way of slowing, or even correcting, this indicative result?

What the Cradle Coast lacks in financial and human capital it often makes up for in social, cultural and natural capital. These are rich assets to this region that, through my research, I am attempting to quantify and qualify and then see how I can identify strategies that can accelerate the formation and accumulation of social capital in rural and regional Australia to build competitive advantage as a ‘liveable’ region. These assets to this region are
something to be explored a lot more closely from academic and policy development points of view.

In a report put out late last year on the need for integrated public policy, Shepanski et al. of the Relationships Foundation (2007) stated that “Economic prosperity is no longer viewed as an end in itself, if in fact it ever was. [but] still today, neither the social or environmental dimensions of policy are commonly regarded as contributors to growth or wealth.” This is a fact that I feel rings true in the Cradle Coast, especially as my research leads me to believe that it is not just money that the people that regions need to attract and retain exclusively want.

I’d like to take a moment to explain the term social capital in regard to this research, highlight why I believe it is evidently strong in the Cradle Coast and show that it is an asset to be harnessed for regional advantage?

The development of social capital has been well documented by researchers as an outcome from social activities. Pioneering social capital academic James Coleman (1988) stated that, “Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible”.

Coleman continues this argument when discussing research by Mark Granovetter by saying, “…there is a failure to recognize the importance of concrete personal relations and networks of relations – what he (Granovetter) calls “embeddedness” – in generating trust, in establishing expectations, and in creating and enforcing norms.”

The development of Granovetter’s embeddedness (Granovetter 1985) can also be looked through the eyes of philosopher Manuel DeLanda (2006) who said that, “When conversations (and other social encounters) are repeated with the same participants, or with overlapping sets of participants, longer-lasting social entities tend to emerge: interpersonal networks”.

If people are interacting more often and/or similar circles come into contact with each other more often then community connectivity will increase, hence increased social capital. ...and as I quoted, social capital is productive. Has the Cradle Coast an opportunity to increase ‘production’ through sociality? If so, how? Let’s explore this further.

A short stay in my region often highlights to many travellers and new residents the richness of sociality, or social capital, and the immense beauty of the ‘place’. The strange ‘Hello’, ‘G’Day’, ‘Hi’ or ‘Howdy’ in the street is a welcome surprise. I call it the “Hello Factor”. This is not dissimilar to many other regional areas but it is not something that is going to assist a region to survive on its own.

Social capital guru, Mark Granovetter, way back in 1973 wrote a seminal piece on the strength of weak ties. Weak ties are those ties that are not strong bonding but are linked to you and the value that you place on that relationship. For example, your brother and his best mate may have a strong tie. You might not know his mate that well but there is a relationship between you and the mate nonetheless. This is a weak tie. Weak ties carry with them an element of social capital that makes transactions between people much easier. To continue the example, if you wanted buy a car and your brother’s mate is a car salesman then he may do you a better deal because he knows and trusts your brother.

Only last year Tony Schuller, Head of the OECD’s Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, discussed that, due to the changing social landscape, people are now having less strong ties and developing more weak ties. There are possibly new forms of social capital being developed (Schuller 2007). So far, my research leads me to agree with Professor Schuller and it is my belief that the Cradle Coast offers a stronger breeding ground than major cities to create more stronger weak ties, if that makes sense, due to the ‘Hello Factor’ I described earlier.
The chance of coming into contact with an individual in the City of Burnie in North Western Tasmania has to be of better odds than in the streets of Melbourne, surely. Could this be considered part of a ‘regional advantage’? Maybe, but the thinking needs to be this way if it is to occur. My research leads me to believe that there is a local advantage in this. As I said, weak ties assist transactional capabilities and the Cradle Coast could use this to its advantage. Why wait for the changing social landscape to impact on us? The Cradle Coast, and regional Australia in general, could be on the front of the wave embracing it using public policy levers and strategy.

Now, how can leisure be used to build on this potential advantage?

Well… Fred Coalter (2006), an expert on sport and leisure policy, said that, “(there is becoming) a broad shift from viewing urban regeneration solely in terms of economic and infrastructure development, to a greater emphasis on people and the development of social capital.”

Well… Chris Rojek (2006) in the recently published Handbook of Leisure Studies states that, “Engaging together in leisure pursuits provides one means of transcending our ethnic, professional and ideological identities to build common social capital.”

Local government entities in the Cradle Coast region do not appear to adequately recognise the wider value of leisure to achieving its strategic outcomes for development, let alone effectively recognise the wider value of social interaction to the cohesiveness and success of their communities and enterprises. There is limited discourse into the value of leisure and social capital for increased public, strategic and economic benefit.

Census data sets from 2001 and 2006 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008) show a high level young people working in the Cradle Coast region compared to the Tasmanian average. This is an interesting change in civic participation and is compounded by issues such as the changing working and social structure of families and the ageing population.
The Centre for Industry, Research and Strategic Planning’s study (2001) into participation rates in sport and recreation in North-West Tasmania highlights a move to less structured recreational pursuits. I eagerly await updated figures although I assume that the trend will have continued. These changing leisure patterns should be causing a rethink of traditional scheduling, facilities and services but often are not, especially by local government. One only has to witness attendances at the local Saturday Australian Rules match which is perpetually harder to attract the people to, let alone players, volunteers and administrators. How is regional liveability being affected by these trends? It is certainly not helping.

Civic participation in leisure is integral to building social capital. Examination of the Sport and Rec and Census data appears to warrant a more strategically planned approach to the provision of leisure programs, services and facilities for maximised community benefit if we are to better service the needs of the people we’re trying to attract and retain.

Another factor in this debate is that society appears more tolerant of other pursuits of sub-cultures than it has over the last few decades (Jenks 2006). It now appears to be, once again, ‘cool’ and part of popular culture to play an instrument, act in a play or paint a picture. There is an increasing rejection of the cultural cringe of the twentieth century and new forms of cultural activity are increasingly evident. Arguably, the arts and associated sub-cultures are now considered more mainstream than they have been in recent times and not just for the ‘arty’ types as they have been pigeon-holed in the past by the general Australian culture. These arts activities often go hand in hand with emerging leisure cultures that are coming to the front of daily life.

Stephen Lyng (1990) developed the concept of ‘edgework’ that is dominant in sub-cultures. This edgework is about what happens on the fringe that is relatively risky and/or abnormal. Tasmania can be considered ‘on the edge’ by being ‘on the edge’ of mainland Australia, ‘on the edge’ of industries and
quite possibly ‘on the edge’ of normality. …but is this a bad thing? I’m saying no. Actually, it could be a plus.

Part of the Cradle Coast advantage could be its ‘edgework’ and its willingness to push boundaries using its know what, know how and know who. The innovation and creativity that occurs in the region could stem from its relative edginess, especially with the arts, ecoleisure, water-based sports and the so-called extreme sports subcultures having an increasing influence and impact.

The Cradle Coast lends itself to taking advantage of its assets for edginess which is attractive to generations X & Y. New Zealand is turning itself into a Mecca for creative professionals as it has identified its ‘edgework’ capabilities. Educated and experienced people are leaving places like New York, London and Tokyo in droves to take up this lifestyle (Florida 2002). The social networks in Tasmania facilitate a concentration of ‘edgework’ that could be a breeding ground for growth and advantage.

Garry Chick (2006), a US anthropologist, elaborates on this by saying, “Leisure and expressive culture seem to offer fertile arenas for creativity” and that “leisure is a creative domain wherein cultural innovation and progress may take place”.

The Cradle Coast definately has its own uniqueness and culture to give it its own ‘sense of place’ as is common with many other regional areas. QUT’s Paul Memmott and Stephen Long in 2002 stated that, “Properties of place are transmitted socially”. Ah-ha!!! So place characteristics are somehow tied into this.

At the beginning of this talk we established that social capital establishes trust, networks and productivity and leisure is a fertile arena for creativity and innovation and that these should influence public policy and strategy. Now if the properties of place are seen as important for sociality and can influence leisure then the model needs to be changed to look like this… (see Figure 2)
David Crouch (2006), a leading British cultural geographer, states that, “Each culture holds a stock of cultural value and meanings and moralities that it projects and invests in distinctive places.” This certainly has credence in the Cradle Coast region as the social culture of the area, as discussed, is arguably strong and social culture can often be a reflection of the place. The value of ‘place’ in this context can not be underestimated as a competitive advantage for the region.

Sociality, place and leisure are all indicators of liveability so the concept of liveability comes into the fore of my research when looking at public policy drivers of change for rural and regional Australia. It is widely documented that generations X & Y, especially what Richard Florida called the Creative Professional (Florida 2002), are wanting to experience life as well as have a good income and professional recognition. Therefore, creating liveable environments should be considered extremely important, especially for regional areas.

I argue that the Cradle Coast’s potential liveability advantage lies in its people, landscape, its ‘sense of place’ and overall quality of life. There's something
almost intangible there. There’s something unique about the place. …but more needs to be made of this.

Melbourne is a place ranked as one of the World’s Most Liveable Cities by The Economist’s Intelligence Unit on five key areas (AAP 2004). Namely, stability; healthcare; culture and environment; education; and infrastructure. Notice no reference to sociality… and I find the combining of culture and environment as very interesting.

Perth (4th) and Sydney, Brisbane and Adelaide at equal 6th also ranked in the top 10 in the same ‘liveability’ survey which places pressure on regional Australia to perform.

In contrast, I live on a small island called Tasmania, some of you may have heard of it… just a short car ride and a boat trip from here is my hometown of Wynyard… How is this region, as beautiful as it is to me, meant to compete with fast growing ‘liveable’ cities like I just mentioned?

Just to be provocative, I propose the liveability potential of my region that cities might struggle to offer and some strategies that may assist with this. Why would you want to move to or remain in rural and regional Australia and not a ‘liveable city’ like Melbourne? Well it depends on how the term ‘liveable’ is defined.

The Economist Intelligence Unit in recent years ranked Vancouver equal 1st with Melbourne in its liveability survey that I mentioned earlier (AAP 2004). It’s interesting to note that as recently as December 2007 the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation revealed that Vancouver has the highest break-in rate of all major Canadian and American cities, nearly four times higher than New York, and also has the second-highest combined violent and property crime rate (CBC News 2007). What does this say about the choice of liveability indicators for the survey? It says they are discursively constructed and weighted and relative to who is asking the question.
The term liveability is a debated topic in academic circles as to what constitutes a suitable ‘liveability indicator’ and how indicators are weighted and aggregated to generate a single ‘score’. In my research I use the concept of liveability and expand on it to not just cover standards of living, economic factors and town planning perspectives but also the concept of wellbeing where social assets that are of greater inclusion.

I believe that in a scary globalised, individualised, commodified, world people look for identity and trust and reciprocity and security from personal relations which occurs in small communities. This will be more valued as a factor of liveability into the future and therefore, in my opinion, should be reflected in liveability scales. This would surely give a place like the Cradle Coast a better score… but can we make the score even higher to make this place more attractive?

Regional local government entities with a dominating national, or even global, market focus could miss the little nuances and uniqueness that their patch offers. It’s a fair enough for regional areas to want big-box development to encourage employment, have national-status sports stadiums to bring in events and encourage the building high rise apartments and five-star hotels on their waterfronts to resemble a mini-Melbourne or Gold Coast but they’re no good if no-one wants to live there because they can have the same thing in Melbourne, only bigger, more abundant and with greater amenities… oh… and better weather.

Let’s return to the Public Policy Model of Leisure. Now that we’ve worked out that increased liveability could be an outcome of public policy that is informed by social capital, leisure and place, then the model will actually finish up looking like this (see Figure 3).
As I have shown, social capital can be built through the use of appropriate leisure planning and strategy and the encapsulation of place characteristics. Leisure is increasingly attractive to generations X and Y and I’m sure that this will increase with future generations, although we need to understand what leisure activities it is that they wish to participate in. So it, therefore, should be a key driver for regional development in Australia as it is struggling to attract and retain these generations. The investment in social networks through leisure will enhance liveability and make regional Australia a much more desirable place to live.

All of this augurs for a policy framework that facilitates appropriate leisure planning through policy, especially by rural and regional local government entities, that is assets driven and captures the potential, including social fabric, of its place to enhance liveability.

Leisure and social capital research fields do not yet have a common discourse and there are few examples of public policy innovations in this field. Most public policies surrounding leisure provision in regional areas appear to be:
1. needs driven, or perceived needs driven, to fix problems such as crime prevention, health, integration of lower-socioeconomic areas and economic recovery;
2. tourism and events economy driven without endogenous community capacity building or maximised community asset usage;
3. or are just simply seen as a necessary evil, especially for local government, to highlight appropriate stewardship of public funds to the ratepayer.

My research explores this but looks more at the flipside. Why not look at an assets driven approach for competitive advantage? Can regions further build on an already strong social base? Can regions compete with liveable cities like Melbourne using their own unique assets? Maybe taking an opportunity driven approach instead needs driven approach is the better track to follow?

Going back to my earlier point as to why would you live in the Cradle Coast?… the pay-packet is mostly incomparable, there isn’t a culture of 24 hour cafes and nightclubs or major entertainment events and facilities and there aren’t the major department store epicentres but are there other opportunities for self-satisfaction and the exploration of the self that my region can offer? An assets driven approach to public policy and strategy could be used here to take advantage of the social, cultural and natural assets that exist. Public policy innovations by local government here could form another niche of the Cradle Coast.

Colin Mercer, a renowned cultural planner, explained back in 1991 that “a broad and enabling policy framework… can simultaneously address the (soft) ‘intangibles’ of affirmation, identity, quality of life, celebration and social justice and the (hard) ‘tangibles’ of economic development, leverage, industry strategies, infrastructure development, training programs, domestic and inbound tourism revenue, urban design, town planning and transport.” (in Stevenson 2006).
An Australian cultural planning expert, Deborah Stevenson (2006), scoped the local public policy context by stating that, “…local governments should foster local culture in its widest sense because it is believed that a comprehensive cultural plan that incorporates leisure, recreation, artistic and entertainment pursuits can achieve wide ranging objectives and considerably improve the ‘quality’ of everyday life.”

How many council areas in regional Australia, especially in Tasmania, have a formal recreation, leisure or cultural plan? Not many at all. …and if they did, how high in the plan pile would they sit and would they be linked to the objectives of other strategic plans?

My research is analysing the contribution of leisure to the formation of social capital in a regional setting. My argument is that leisure as a source of social capital is not well understood and, therefore, its value not fully developed and I take the argument a further step by focussing on the importance of local governance arrangement in the formation of social capital through leisure and as stewards of liveability.

Since leisure, in my opinion, is a key indicator and source of liveability it is an important public policy issue within the context of global cities and regions competing to attract and retain human capital. My research into the near future will theorise the nature of the relationship between leisure, place and governance; develop a model for ‘valuing’ the contribution of leisure to regional development; map the distribution of leisure on the Cradle Coast and; analyse those policy levers of governments, communities and markets that can shape the formation of leisure. My research will bring leisure and social capital closer together for public policy innovation and regional development.

I’d like to leave you with a thinking point…

An historian by the name Sebastian de Grazia (1962) pointed out that in Ancient Greece and Rome it was not leisure that was defined as non-work but rather work was defined as ‘negotium’ or ‘un-leisure’. Interesting eh? Maybe
2,000 years ago the Greeks and Romans, both strong policy driven nations, knew where the advantage was. To emphasise this, a turn of the century author, Agnes Repplier (1893) said that, "It is in his pleasure that a man really lives; it is from his leisure that he constructs the true fabric of self."

The sharing of creativity and imagination through leisure-enhanced social capital maybe the winner that my field research will uncover. Regional Australia must attract and retain more people, especially skilled people, and I believe that I am developing an answer. Please stay tuned for more outcomes of my research.

Thankyou.


Centre for Research Industry and Strategic Planning (2001). North-West Tasmania Participation in Sport and Recreation Activities. Office of Sport and Recreation, Department of State Development.


