

Cockatoo, 2 September 2016

---

██████████ Aukje van Vark

Dear Sir, Mrs, Miss,

We own a farm in Cockatoo, Victoria.

Over the past years we have worked towards building up a training facility for horses, and a woodworking studio, working towards being an income earning business. To have the time to do this, we relied heavily on volunteer backpackers, who did the menial tasks that are essential to living on a large property, but which take time. Time that cannot be put into building our business. The advantage for our backpackers, was that they learned new skills, often even just getting used to working physically, doing regular hours and the importance of finishing a job. They also experienced Australian life, the importance of consistency in animal care. Another bonus was that they could earn their second holiday visa while working in a friendly environment. Our advantage was that wood chopping, mucking out, weeding, feeding our meat animals, and vegetable garden care freed us to work towards our business, for a manageable cost; feeding and housing friendly people.

Last years changes have seriously impacted on the availability of this type of temporary labor, causing us to have to fold out ideas of starting our own business. Many of my friends and acquaintances are suffering the same fate; they are doing their own maintenance again, and not putting in the hours to build their fledgling businesses, causing many not to earn a suitable income anymore.

At the moment we are travelling - we now have the time, having stopped our own business development- and while seeing large parts of (mainly West) Australia, we have come to realise, that the problem (or impact ) goes much further then realised. Australia and its income in this area largely depends on backpacker labor.

Take the Nullarbor- all roadhouses on it have backpackers behind the counter, in the kitchen and cleaning the accompanying campsites. This actually goes for every single roadhouse we have visited in the past 5,5 months. Agriculture in WA- the wheat fields are harvested by backpackers. Fruit in the Kununurra area; Backpackers. Cows get milked by backpackers, Broome and surrounding area thrive on backpackers- people working behind the counter and doing tours are backpackers. Hostels earn their money and get their staff out of backpackers. All campsite we visited have backpackers welcoming people, and cleaning. Every single tourist attraction has backpackers behind the counter, guiding tours, selling products- making things work. Eating out, we get served by backpackers, and that is as much in the south as in the west or north.

Now- as we worked our selves with backpackers in the past 6 years, I know that these people are coming here because it is good earning, and Australia is such a magnificent country, that they often want to stay here longer then planned- which costs money, and they need to earn that. Although a small part will take part of this money on travels outside of our country, most will spend this money in Australia again.

I also know all the stories about fruit picking places that will abuse this willing young and unorganised group of people; charging them exorbitant rates for accommodation when there is no alternative, paying per tonne, which somehow ends up being a very low per hour rate- forcing them to stay on rainy days, but not giving them work, and not signing off on days they are available for work, but not offered any- while still having to pay their accommodation on site. Organised crime in hostel/orchard businesses. Circumstances for many backpackers are bad- but they cope as they need to have their second holiday

visa- and employers know this. Especially now their alternative; working for free in a teaching environment- is taken away last year.

The new tax plans are again forming an obstacle for young people honestly trying to earn some spending money to stay longer in this country. They are being punished- for what? The new tax rules are treating them as the milking cow some employers see them as; come here- do our work we can't find anyone for, save our rural economy, but take as little out of it as you can- is what it is conveying. This may be an unwanted side effect. At the moment already, in the diverse backpackers forums on social media, and on various immigrant sections, the question is coming up; Is there any point going to Australia- will I earn any money- what will I have left after taxes?

Now, while travelling, I realise that a large part of Australia will not function anymore when the number of backpackers will decline. A large part of our produce will not be harvested anymore, roadhouses will not get personnel anymore, all businesses that thrive on seasonal cheap labour- will not be able to get it. Or- will have to offer more money. As if the base sum rises, the amount after tax will stay reasonable. Meaning that wheat, fruit, vegetables, beer, meals, fuel, accommodation etc prices for every person in Australia (not only backpackers) will have to rise, after all, the money to pay employees has to come from somewhere. So; businesses that at the moment are actually earning money will either fold, or struggle even more, just like so many fledgling businesses that were relying on volunteers, or be forced to raise the price of their service, whatever it may be.

I can only ask you to reconsider- don't change the tax rules for temporary international travelling labour- and maybe even- consider rethinking your working holiday visa rules. That would really help a lot of small businesses that are at the moment flying under the radar- as they are struggling to stay above water, or rethinking the future of their business.

Sincerely yours,

Aukje van Vark