

Opinion

21

Air race nosedive is yet another blow for a State with a part-time Tourism Minister

Our last big event just fell out of the sky



BEATRICE THOMAS
INSIDE STATE

The announcement that next year's Red Bull air race series had been cancelled in Perth and worldwide did more than just free up a weekend for about 300,000 people.

It left a gaping hole in Tourism WA's 2011 events calendar and raised serious questions about the performance of its events arm, Eventscorp, and a Tourism Minister who is ultimately responsible for attracting visitors to the State.

From the moment Tourism WA issued a press release on Thursday morning confirming Red Bull's shock decision, its public relations strategy was to focus on what events Perth had left.

But one look at the lacklustre remaining line-up gave the critics all the ammunition they needed.

Events such as the Hopman Cup tennis tournament and the ISAF Sailing Championships are probably as big as it gets next year.

Other events such as the Perth Fashion Festival, Rottneest Channel Swim and Sculptures by the Sea have not been generated by Eventscorp but rather given sponsorship money under its role of "developing and elevating" events.

Eventscorp said it had "attracted" 10 of the 19 events listed on the 2011 calendar, including the contentious One Movement music festival, leaving nine events on its list that are

effectively sponsorship deals with promotion support.

"Eventscorp's remit is to actively bid for and develop major international and local events which will attract significant numbers of international and interstate visitors and have a positive economic, media and social impact for Western Australia," executive director David van Ooran told *Inside State*.

The problem is, none of the events listed could be considered major international events of the ilk of the Red Bull air race. Most are local or national, with perhaps some interest from international participants.

"There is nothing of substance or size that provides West Australians with the same level of attraction that saw them come out of their homes, go down to the river and enjoy the river for a couple of days," Australian Hotels Association WA chief Bradley Woods said.

"That's where we open ourselves up to being boring and we miss out on global exposure as a destination."

The issue is not only that Eventscorp lost the Red Bull air race — it was a decision made by organisers with little explanation and will affect all participating cities such as New York, Rio de Janeiro, Abu Dhabi and Barcelona.

The other cities are bigger, attract more visitors and have a raft of big international events to fill the air race hole.

WA has also lost the Johnnie Walker Classic golf, Rally Australia and V8 Supercars.

The Government argues the Rally Australia contract was cancelled under the previous Labor government and the owners of the



Johnnie Walker Classic pulled the event altogether.

But V8s remains an embarrassing situation for this Government, with no guarantee the race will return, according to the organisers.

Added to the list of problems for Tourism WA are the latest quarterly figures showing intrastate visitor numbers at a five-year low despite a \$29 million marketing budget.

Tourism WA points out that international visitors increased 2 per cent. That is great, so long as they don't expect to attend any big events.

At the heart of the problem, according to tourism sources, is a Tourism Minister who isn't really interested in tourism.

Liz Constable has a big workload with the senior education portfolio and questions are being asked over whether she should hand over tourism to someone else.

"It can take six to eight months to get an appointment to see her if you're in the tourism industry," one insider said.

"With previous ministers it was a question of days or weeks but the response from her staff is always that she's very busy.

"In terms of the portfolio she has absolutely no idea.

"She gets briefed just before something's about to happen and she

knows how to spin a line.

"Her attendance at tourism industry events and functions is non-existent. There's no leadership in terms of the minister directing discussions or having open and frank briefings with the industry."

Dr Constable is a close friend of Premier Colin Barnett but as an independent MP, she does not have to answer to a backbench the way any other minister would.

Shadow tourism minister Ljiljana Ravlich said Dr Constable seemed to have no interest in tourism and her only big decision had been to axe 85 jobs and close 12 regional tourism offices. Ms Ravlich said Tourism WA chairwoman Kate Lamont, who runs several businesses, had become a "de facto minister", making major decisions and fronting the media.

It was Ms Lamont who fronted the cameras last week only to be caught out when asked to name WA's top five events.

Her eventual response was the sailing championships, Perth Fashion Festival, the Wallabies rugby Test, the Ashes and the Peggy Guggenheim art show.

By Tourism WA's reckoning, tourism is the third biggest economic contributor to the WA economy — almost equal to agriculture — and employs 82,000 West Australians.

Mr Woods said as a \$7 billion

industry it was not unreasonable to expect more from Dr Constable.

Tourism Council of WA president Paul King also said: "We love our minister but we'd just love her to be working for us full-time."

Dr Constable said the restructure of Tourism WA was evidence of the commitment and support she had for stronger tourism outcomes, adding it was the Government's role to "market the State to attract visitors and travel".

Further evidence of her commitment, she said, was the \$5.6 million Experience Extraordinary campaign and the Extraordinary Taxi Ride.

According to Dr Constable it was appropriate for Ms Lamont to respond publicly about operational matters because she was "the accountable officer of Tourism WA under the Act". That is unless it's about Serena Williams being confirmed for the Hopman Cup — that one Dr Constable will take.

Yesterday, the Tourism Council of WA announced Dr Constable would give a breakfast address next month outlining "her vision for tourism in WA".

Given the ordinary nature of her so-called extraordinary campaigns, and growing disgruntlement within the sector, this time she needs to come up with something special.