

Based on a Presentation to [New Rural Industries Australia](#) Conference,

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**Agritourism and the Internet,**

**Remaking the connection between farmers and eaters**

Barry Green and wife Dale, own [Boronia Farm](#), small organic mixed farm and farmstay at Donnybrook in Western Australia.

His company, [Western Tourist Radio](#) operates tourist radio stations in the major tourism towns of South West of WA including Bunbury, Busselton and Margaret River. Barry's passion is organic farming and using agritourism and the internet to help remake the connection between farmers and eaters. To this end he has created the websites [www.farmstaywest.com.au](http://www.farmstaywest.com.au) , [www.organicfoodwa.net.au](http://www.organicfoodwa.net.au) and [www.agritourismwa.com.au](http://www.agritourismwa.com.au) which are developing into communities of like minded businesses and consumers.

Barry has been a committee member and webmaster for Farm and Country Holidays WA Inc, and is currently on the WA committee of [Hosted Accommodation Australia](#) which has replaced Farm and Country Holidays WA as the industry representative body. He is also chair of the [Donnybrook Regional Tourism Assn.](#) Barry believes the internet is creating great opportunities for small businesses with a unique product to compete with much larger organizations.

In a previous life, Barry has been a broadcast and communication technician with The Dept of Aviation and in Commercial Television in Regional WA. He is a fan of [EF Schumacher's](#) book, [Small is Beautiful, economics as if people mattered.](#)

## Intro

I'll talk about tourism generally and agritourism in terms of the place it has to play in reestablishing communications between the farming community and our city consumers. I'll then talk about the ways you can use agritourism as a part of your business, how the internet has a place to play in this. I'll also talk about our experience owning a one cottage farmstay.

I believe agritourism an important tool for the interaction between the farmer/producer and the consumer. This feedback loop is critical to create a truly free market where producers can react proactively to consumer demand. This mechanism that has been broken by Australia's retail duopoly and the commoditization of food. There are too many 'middle men' and marketing distortions for messages to be accurately passed between producers and consumers. Agritourism ventures that can provide this interaction include [farmstays](#), [rural escapes](#), [farmers markets](#), [wine](#) and other food tourism.

### 1) What's a tourist?

The World Tourism Organization defines tourists as

Hand up any one who has ever "traveled to and stayed in places outside your usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes?

Ok so we are all tourists.

Tourists are people like you and me looking for fun and new experiences away from home, if they are prepared to pay us for that experience how is that any different from being paid for some other product that we produce? The beauty of tourism is that you are dealing with the end consumer directly not via some other organization that is generating most of the profit

from your activity. This is where the internet comes in. Before the internet it was very hard to promote small tourism related businesses, that has changed. We are now looking at a real free market private enterprise situation where word of good and bad tourism product is spread. The internet has given 'word of mouth' a whole new meaning!

## 2) What is Agritourism?

Wikipedia Defines Agritourism as:

**Agritourism**, as it is defined most broadly, involves any [agriculturally](#)-based operation or activity that brings visitors to a [farm](#) or [ranch](#). Agritourism has different definitions in different parts of the world, and sometimes refers specifically to farm stays, as in Italy. Elsewhere, agritourism includes a wide variety of activities, including buying produce direct from a farm stand, navigating a corn maze, picking fruit, feeding animals, or staying at a B&B on a farm.<sup>[1]</sup>

I've created the website [www.agritourismwa.com.au](http://www.agritourismwa.com.au) which as you can see incorporates Farmstay, rural escapes, farmers markets, organic farming, food products, wine, and food trails. Each of these pages bring traffic into the website, for example the farmers market page ranks first on google if you search for farmers markets wa, visitors to this page can then readily access the other pages of the site, even if they are not searching for agritourism.

## 3) Place for agritourism in connecting Farmers with eaters and policy makers.

Australia is a highly urbanized community, that hasn't seen a food shortage for over 3 generations. Food is taken for granted by city based governments that currently seem besotted by extractive and technology industries. There seems to be a view by some in power that Australia should be a quarry for the world and we should buy our food from overseas.

It seems to have been forgotten that agriculture is the foundation of any society, it wasn't until farmers started producing more than they could eat that other industries and cultural activities could develop. Any countries [food security](#) is also the foundation to its overall security, there is no point in having a 21<sup>st</sup> century defense force if the country can't feed itself because in times of conflict imports can't be relied on.

Agritourism provides an opportunity for the rural community to engage in conversation with city consumers to help them understand how they rely on us. There is a growing group within

the city who do understand this, these are the thinkers who will eventually lead the non thinkers, the more information we can provide to these people the more they will become our advocates.

#### 4) Food quality

Not only is the **quantity** of food available an issue but **quality**, by which I mean real quality.

Tasty, Nutrient dense foods with a minimum of manmade toxins, not quality judged purely on size and colour.

This slide was supplied to me by Burt Naude an agronomist from [Western Mineral Fertilisers](#). He is concerned at declining food quality and is working with farmers to address the issue.

With a steadily increasing percentage of GDP going into the medical industry, more and more people are starting to ask the question why? Some people, like myself see the problem stemming from current unhealthy agricultural practice and this is giving rise to growth in demand for organic food. For a long time organic agriculture was dismissed as hippy stuff, but there is growing scientific evidence to support the claim that nutrient value of modern foods is declining .

**Quality of food**

- Food nutrient analyses comparing values from 1930's/1940's to those of 1980's/1990's show 20 to 60 percent less nutrient density in modern foods
  - Less nutrient = lower energy
- Modern foods have pesticide/metal residues
  - More toxins = energy must be expended solely to deal with the toxins
- British Report, U. of Louisiana study

## 5) Organic farming

The growth in demand for organic foods seems to defy marketing logic because it is being driven by consumer **pull** rather than marketing **push**. The [fast food industry](#) was created in part by the power of network advertising on commercial television. For a period of 20 years companies could advertise their products on 3 television networks and carpet bomb the mind of the population. In recent times we have seen the growth in demand for organic food, farmers markets and the [slow food movement](#) all driven by demand and small business activity and all interconnected, I'd suggest, with agritourism.

All this has been driven by small business people who do stuff, with little help but some hindrance from government and big business.

Our [www.organicfoodwa.net.au](http://www.organicfoodwa.net.au) is being developed as a network of organic businesses across WA.

As fertiliser and energy prices rise, and organic farming practice improve, I suspect that more and more farmers will go down the organic path, driven by economics, rather than greenie logic. That will be a good thing for all concerned, and a product of true free market private enterprise principals.

## 6) Food as a commodity

The commoditisation of food has made food production increasingly economically irrational and is contributing to the decline of regional communities.

To make money you need to sell a product or experience that is unique and that people want. Agritourism provides an opportunity to differentiate your product from other commodity products.

## 7) Holistic Management.

Some of you would be familiar with the work of [Allan Savory's](#) Holistic Management, taught in Australia by people like [Bruce Ward](#). Holistic management is based on Allan's observations of large herds of grazing animals in South Africa and how we can mimic that process with commercial livestock management. But it has evolved into a whole decision making practice.

In [Tim Fishers "Outback Heroes"](#) Holistic Management is described as "... encompass everything from industry to agriculture, to communities and government and consider humans, their economies and the Environment as inseparable." Agritourism provides a way to make that human link with our consumers

## 8) Government in Agritourism

The following comments relate to government involvement with tourism. I believe there is a place for government involvement in agricultural research, but get concerned at the close relationship between government and Multinational Corporation's where the government becomes effectively the advertising arm for chemicals companies

As a society we seem to look to government to solve problems, I'd suggest that this is a recipe for economic and social disaster because despite the best intentions of politicians, the bureaucrats charged with the job often run their own agendas.

The people behind this conference demonstrate what can be achieved by a group of individuals. In the words of anthropologist , Margaret Mead,

*"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed it is the only thing that ever has."*

The internet is allowing committed groups of citizens to work together. Examples are the use of the internet and facebook by [Ask an Aussie Farmer](#), [Australian Year of the Farmer Farm Day](#) .

In WA the government tourism body, Tourism WA, give encouragement to big resorts but, in my view, none to small businesses. The Tourism WA website [www.westernaustralia.com](http://www.westernaustralia.com) only accepts tourism accredited businesses and then charges as much to list businesses like our one cottage farmstay as they charge a multinational hotel.

That's government user pays policy!

I argue that this make their website a highly regressive tax on small business. In my view the government website is actually a liability to regional WA as few of the smaller business are listed on it yet government funds are used to promote the site internationally as the bee all and end all of WA.

The Tourism WA email newsletter In touch, August 2004, in announcing a new \$2.75 million tourism marketing campaign included:

**Research has indicated that many travellers believe tourism spots in Australia have become overcrowded and overcommercialised. There is also a growing sense of nostalgia for the Australia that existed before the development and commercialisation of recent years.....**

They used this research to create an advertising campaign claiming WA was the “Real Thing” .

I interpret it to mean that the punters are looking for the mum and dad tourism businesses that you'll find all around WA, \_\_\_\_\_but \_\_\_\_\_ not on the tourism WA's website for the reason I've just mentioned!

Government have backed many tourism related website that make a lot of noise then fizzle out, because they don't have community support and become the domain of big business. Examples include <http://info.noleavenolife.com> and <http://www.thetrail.com.au> . I have created [www.noleavenolifewa.com.au](http://www.noleavenolifewa.com.au) and [www.harvesthighway.com.au](http://www.harvesthighway.com.au) as entry points to the [www.touristradio.com.au](http://www.touristradio.com.au) which is affordable to small business.

This is the reason for my skepticism of government involvement in tourism. The internet has provided a tool that allows communities of small businesses to work together with a bottom up approach and has made the top down approach of government irrelevant, although it is taking time for the bureaucrats to come to terms with that.

To quote from American social writer Eric Hoffer:

*In times of change, learners inherit the earth while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to work in a world that no longer exists*

## **9) Nature deficit disorder**

“The American author and child advocacy expert [Richard Louv](#) directly links the lack of nature in the lives of today's wired generation, which he calls nature-deficit disorder , to

some of the most disturbing childhood trends, such as the rises in obesity, attention disorders, and depression.” Agritourism, especially farm and station stays, provide an opportunity for people, children and adults, to get out of the city and connect with the natural world.

There is growing concern about mental health issues with an increasing percentage of GDP going in that direction.

Could this be due in part to nature deficit disorder?

As usual we seem to be looking for cures not causes. It seems that you can make a business out of curing problems but not preventing them, perhaps agritourism, along with ecotourism is the antidote?

I suspect that this disorder is now into its second or third generation and that many of the people making decisions affecting the lives of people in rural Australia are already suffering from the condition!

## **10) Communication, a two way thing.**

The lack of understanding between farmers and eaters is a two way problem. If farmers better understood the resistance to [GM foods](#) by consumers they would be less inclined to go down that path. The private enterprise system is supposed to be driven by consumer demand, those growing GM products would appear to be breaking this law of the free market because there is clearly consumer resistance to these products.

Any stable system requires a feedback loop, there needs to be a feedback between farmers and consumers or our food system will become unstable. A classic example of this is an orchardist neighbor of ours says he sells his small fruit at farmers markets because this is what people tell him they want. He sends his larger fruit to the wholesale market because the buyers there want big fruit.

## **11) The Internet as a communication tool**

The internet has fundamentally changed the face of business. It has long been said that those who control information control the society. Before the internet commercial TV was the most powerful communication tool and it was largely a tool of government and big business, being



outside the price of small business. The internet has changed that, anyone can have a website to promote their products and tell their story and challenge many of the old perceptions.

McDonalds, the people who make burgers, created a website called Make Up Your Own Mind, apparently to counter the claims made by Eric Schlosser in a book called [The Fast Food Nation](#). To demonstrate the point that information is no longer controlled by those with the most money. I created a page on my website called make up your own mind which links to McDonalds website and to the fast food nation site and makes the point that you can read both then ***make up your own mind***. My page ranks second to McDonalds if you search Google for Make Up Your One Mind!



Since this slide was captured, McDonalds [www.makuopyourownmind.com.au](http://www.makuopyourownmind.com.au) has gone off line!

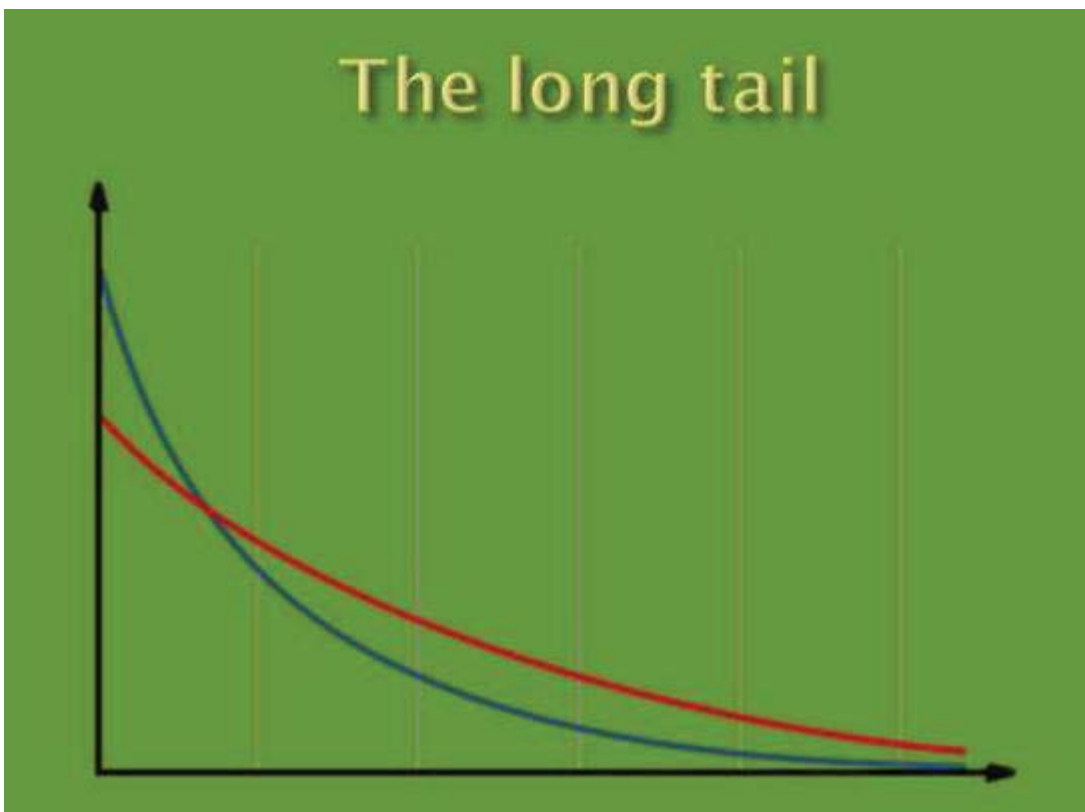
Our website [www.organicfoodwa.net.au](http://www.organicfoodwa.net.au) includes the Copyleft Policy borrowed Peter Kenyon's [Bank of Ideas](#) which states:

*Resources of this website, either in full or in part, can be copied, quoted, reprinted, given away or circulated. Parts may be torn out, extracted and enhanced. In short, all resources are public property. Please use in any way to build the skills and knowledge of citizens in building healthier communities and more vibrant local economies.*

The internet, a product of the best of American technology and enterprise is providing for the free exchange of ideas and information.

## 12) The long tail

Marketing people talk of the long tail, where most business in any area is carried out by a few businesses and there are many businesses fighting over the crumbs.



This graph, taken of Wikipedia, refers to retail business, but I believe the effect will be even more pronounced in the tourism industry. The blue line is the old order, with most business

carried out by a few businesses, on the Left and side. The red line is the new order with smaller businesses gaining a greater share.

The big resorts appear to be popular but is that because they have had the budget to advertise and get people's attention? The Tourism WA research referred to earlier suggests that the punters are over the big developments.

Lots of smaller owner operated tourism businesses and events will contribute more to regional communities than a hand full of big operations, yet as always governments only seem to be interested in big.

Our own farmstay is just one cottage, before the internet it did not generate sufficient funds to promote itself, with the internet it can be seen and people seem to like what we have to offer as it is booked most weekends, school holidays and increasingly through the week. This has been helped by the [Free Fun Park](#) in Donnybrook, that was largely funded by a local family who own [Crendon Machinery](#).

### **13) Tourism and your business**

So much for the big picture, but how can agritourism become part of your business?

I guess that many of us have not seen tourism as a real industry, I know I didn't used to, it was just a wishey wash industry, real men grow beef or fruit or whatever.

But why?

We grow what we grow because we enjoy it and to earn a living, how is earning some income from tourism any different?

How many of you saw the [Australian Story program on Wooleen](#) station last month?

Wooleen is part of our [www.farmstaywest.com.au](http://www.farmstaywest.com.au) community, which promotes farms and station stays across WA with direct links to participants websites. Participants include a link from their website back to farmstay west to help people traveling in WA find other farm and station accommodation.

David and Francis at [Wooleen](#) are using tourism to underpin the station business while destocking to regenerate the land so that in future they can restock at a sustainable level. This is a great example of how tourism can become a part of an agricultural business.

In the week following the Australian Story program over 150 visitors to farmstaywest.com.au came via a link from the Wooleen website, so that ABC program on one station had a flow on benefit to other farm and station stays across WA. I guess the key point here is think cooperation not competition. Tourism is a cooperative businesses, we need each other and links between each other's websites is a way to spread that message . The more things to do and place to stay in any area the more reason there is for people to visit. Tourism businesses within Australia are competing more with Harvey Norman and Bali for peoples disposable dollars, than with each other. Progressive tourism businesses have always been keen to swap brochures, providing links between website is the internet equivalent of that, and much cheaper to implement provided you take the time to learn how to maintain your own website.

#### 14) **Your own website**

To take advantage of the internet you need your own website, make sure that the site is set up so that you can maintain it yourself. Taking the time to learn how to do this could be the best investment you make in your business as it puts control of information in your hands. Properly set up, your website will become much more than a replacement for white and yellow page listing.

If you search for you business name on a search engine your own website should be listed first if it has been optimized for search engines, this is equivalent to a white page listing allowing people who already know about you to find more.

Searching for your business type and town should show your business on the first page, this is equivalent to a yellow page listing. In small towns it should be relatively easy to rank highly, but it is more difficult in larger towns where more businesses are competing for the ranking.

There are many websites on which you can list your business, some charge a flat rate while others charge per click or on a commission basis. Most of the commission based sites do not provide any contact details for your business, but allow people to make a booking on line so that they can get a commission. Astute internet users will often search the internet for your own website and contact you that way. Having said that, many people these days want to be able to book directly on line so it is important to be able to provide that facility.

# Boronia Farm stats, March 2012

Origin	Pages	Percent
<b>Direct address / Bookmark / Link in email...</b>	373	59.5 %
<b>Links from an Internet Search Engine - Full list</b>	110	17.5 %
- Google 98 / 120		
- Microsoft Bing 5 / 9		
- Yahoo! 3 / 5		
- Yandex 2 / 3		
- Unknown search engines 1 / 2		
- Ask 1 / 1		
<b>Links from an external page (other web sites except search engines) - Full list</b>	113	18 %
- http://www.donnybrookwa.com.au/accommodation.html 33 33		
- http://www.touristradio.com.au/donnybrook/ 20 20		
- http://www.touristradio.com.au/farmstaywest/index.html 11 11		
- http://www.boroniafarm.levertds.com/bookingSearchMultiple.html 10 10		
- http://www.touristradio.com.au/pages/self_contained_cottages.htm 3 3		
- http://www.australianbedandbreakfast.com.au/Boronia+Farm_Austral... 3 3		
- http://www.touristradio.com.au/organic_food_and_farming/organic_... 3 3		
- http://www.touristradio.com.au/busselton/busselton_accommodation... 3 3		
- http://www.touristradio.com.au/farmstaywest/about.html 2 2		
- http://www.exploreaustralia.net.au/Western-Australia/The-South-W... 2 2		
- http://www.hotfrog.com.au/Companies/Boronia-Farm 2 2		
- http://www.touristradio.com.au/farmstaywest/rural_escapes.html 2 2		

Website statistics show where traffic is coming from. This slide shows that in March this year traffic coming to our Boronia Farm website was made up of 60% direct address, bookmarked, or email links. 18% links from other websites like the Donnybrook Tourism association website and the tourist radio website with a further 17.5% coming from search engines.

Henry Ford is credited with saying

*Only 50% of my advertising works, I just wish I knew which 50% it was.* Henry would have loved the internet.

Social media like facebook and Twitter, as explained earlier by the people from [Ag Chat Oz](#) , have a big place to play in promoting any agritourism business, but I believe that your own website will still be the foundation of that promotion.

## 15) Farm product sales

A shop front to a rural product, the most obvious example being wine tourism but any number of other products are now using this concept to get people in, to expose them to their product and tell the story about the product and how the product can be bought in the future either through other retail outlets or via the internet.

## 16) Farmers Markets

Farmers markets are providing an opportunity for direct connect between farmers and consumers. They are the **Real Fresh Food People**, able to supply truly fresh produce to consumers who are relearning what fruit and vegetables are supposed to taste like, without the long supply chain of the Australian retail duopoly. They are also an indication of what the true price of produce is without the big mark up of the duopoly.

## 17) Farm accommodation

Farm Accommodation can take many forms. From small to medium sized accommodation businesses. Farmstays tends to cater for children and includes interaction with animals, whereas Rural retreats tend to cater more for adults wanting to get away from the pressures of everyday life and crowds. Every farm is different, so there can be no clear cut line between the two, that's what makes this sector interesting.

Farmstays and B&B business have an Australia wide industry representative body, now called [Hosted Accommodation Australia](#). The organization also has a marketing element based around its website which promotes its members and includes a link to members websites. In the case of our farmstay business, membership gives us a discount on our insurance that largely offsets the cost of membership. I'd encourage anyone contemplating on farm accommodation to contact them.

To operate a standalone farm tourism business requires a number of accommodation units. However I believe that if you have an unused home on the farm it is worthwhile renovating it to provide tourism accommodation, some people like to get away and avoid the crowds. Before the internet it was very hard to promote such business but that has changed. With one

cottage, if you have other commitments at any time you can simply book the cottage out on your website booking facility. This has the effect of making it look harder to get into and more desirable. Most bookings come in advance, unless you are located on a busily traffic road where you might get more passing traffic.

18) **Tourism accreditation.**

Accreditation is mostly a check that you have requires licenses and procedures in place.

Like any accreditation scheme, it is largely a bureaucrat employment device that I'd argue has no place in a properly functioning free market. That's what I love about the internet, it is now providing a free market in the tourism industry, people will find out about good and bad experiences via the internet.

Having said that, if you are setting up a new tourism enterprise it is probably a good idea to go through the accreditation process first up to make sure that you are complying with the rules. With our farmstay we did go through the process, but have not renewed it as I don't believe the cost is justified. Our accreditation is the comments in our guest book and our repeat business. We recently had a repeat booking from a Singapore family, when we emailed them to say the cottage was available for the days they wanted it we received this email, saying *hers how we are feeling right now*, The picture was taken on their last visit. That's our accreditation.

## Here's how we are feeling right now



Farm stay tends to be more about the experience than the accommodation, though it needs to be clean and comfortable. We take a minimum of 2 night stays as it is not worth cleaning the whole cottage for one night.

### 19) **AAA Star Rating.**

Probably not relevant to farm and station accommodation unless you are aiming for 4.5 or 5 star rating. Star ratings were relevant as a way of comparing properties before the internet provided the capacity to show potential guests all you had to offer. The rating scheme is more about the bricks and mortar than the experience that you offer. If you are renovating an old house on the farm, like we did, then you are probably more of an experience business than an accommodation business.

Comments in our guest book indicate that people enjoy the peace and quiet and freedom to roam the farm. Comments like the best part was feeding the animals or playing in the mud at the dam contribute nothing to star ratings.



## 20) **Domestic and Interstate and international tourism.**

This is probably a bit different for WA than other states where interstate tourism is similar to international tourism with the cost of getting to the state being similar. The breakdown here will depend on where you are located and how and where you market the business.

When the GFC hit much of the international tourism dried up, I'm not sure about the long term future of international tourism as energy prices rise, experts might tell you otherwise, but experts have been known to be wrong. The GFC was created by banking experts!

Our farmstay business is 95% domestic, with guests from Perth. These are the people who are going to be eating the food products of our area so are the people whose support we need if we are going to maintain a viable food production industry.

## 21) **Tourist Radio**

So where does Tourist Radio fit in? We own tourist radio stations in the South West of WA and are partners in a business that operates stations in Perth as Radio WA [www.radiowa.net.au](http://www.radiowa.net.au) . Our license allows for a repeating loop program of up to 4 hours duration. The programs include interviews with local people telling the stories of the area and promoting the things to do and products of the town where the station is located and the hinterland towns. The radio programs do not include accommodation promotion as when people are in range of the stations they usually have accommodation and are mostly interested to find out what there is to do. The more things there are to do the longer visitors are likely to stay. While the programs are primarily pitched at visitors, we include a Local Talent Time segment [www.touristradio.com.au/localtalent](http://www.touristradio.com.au/localtalent) that features local musicians. This local content gives local people a reason to listen on occasions and learn more about the things to do in their area. This is a huge market for hinterland towns that tends to be overlooked. The more we can encourage locals to be "tourist's in their own back yard" the better for the local tourism industry. Visitors to [www.touristradio.com.au](http://www.touristradio.com.au) can also download program segments to listen to while traveling. In recent times I have put more effort into developing the website which in turn is promoting the radio service.

## 22) **Our experiences at Boronia Farm**

In the 12 years we have run the farm stay I can't say we have had a bad experience. There have been a few cases when the cottage hasn't been left as tidy as we would like but not

often. The fact that we only have the one cottage means that we develop a relationship with our guests. I suspect that the more units you put in the harder it is to develop this relationship with all your guests and more issues might arise.

When we first had the cottage, we had our own website as well as AAA star rating, tourism accreditation and listed on the government website, each of which cost about 5 nights net revenue, but got very few bookings. Now our only promotion is via our own website with listings on the Donnybrook Visitor Centre website and the tourist radio site, these two drive most of the referred traffic to the website, and the cottage is booked most weekends and school holidays and increasingly during the week.

## **Conclusion**

Rather than just producing a commodity and selling it for what you can get, by engaging your consumers you can create a value-added product that they are happy to consume themselves and enthusiastically recommend to others. Agritourism allows you to differentiate your product and tell your story.

It is very hard to operate an agritourism business alone, you need to work with other local businesses to give people more reason to visit your area. The internet makes this much easier than before.

In a nutshell, I believe that the bush has been screwed for years because information has been controlled by city based government and commercial organizations. The internet has changed that. Agritourism with the internet can provide an opportunity for a new human connection between farmers and consumers.

We are all in business to make money, but if making money becomes the main objective you can lose the big picture. Agritourism is about food, cheer and song ! I leave you to ponder this quote from the author JRR Tolkien.

**If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold , it would be a merrier world. (JRR Tolkien)**

