



2021 TOP 100 GOOD PRACTICE STORY

Title of the Story: A Love Story: Reshaping the NSW Central Coast

Destination Name: Central Coast, New South Wales

Country: Australia

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Nomination Category: *(Please check the boxes that indicate the focus of your story)*

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- Localizing the destination supply chain
- Decarbonizing the destination supply chain
- Culture & Communities
- Environment & Climate
- Nature & Ecotourism
- Tourism Reset & Recovery**
- Other

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Issues faced

Today, tourism looks very different in our coastal slice of New South Wales, Australia. Since March 2020, the Central Coast's destination management has undergone a complete transformation in the way it looks, feels, runs, how it communicates - and who it communicates to. We've moved from an external Regional Tourism Organisation model to an internal Local Tourism Organisation setup led by Central Coast Council. Our destination has flipped from welcoming 6.9 million annual visitors in March 2020 (National and International Visitor Surveys, Tourism Research Australia), to appealing purely to domestic travellers and locals. The promotion of iconic regional events has been eclipsed by a craving for nature-based experiences on the Central Coast, and our marketing strategy has adapted to loving local as regional NSW communities edge toward rebuilding.

This rapid shift in just over one year is the result of a combination of decisions and challenges that have not only disrupted the normal way we "do" tourism, but reshaped it. Following the 2019-2020 bushfires that ripped across regional NSW, decimating an estimated one billion wildlife nationally and biting at the heels of the Central Coast's hinterland community, our region needed to promptly rebuild itself as a vibrant, resilient and sustainable tourism destination. Before we could take a breather, the global pandemic reached our shores, borders closed to international tourists, and the regional tourism industry suffered a massive blow. The only route to recovery was to adapt. Situated halfway between Sydney and Newcastle, the Central Coast desperately needed to sharpen its identity and find a competitive advantage to create a sustainable visitor economy - not only to survive COVID-19, but to strengthen the region's economic future.

From July 2020, the Central Coast's tourism marketing and destination management was officially brought in house with a dedicated local Council team, (recommendation of Tourism Management Review, March 2020). The timing of this move proved to be both challenging and perfect, placing great expectation on internal resource to launch a completely new Destination Brand Strategy off the back of bushfires, floods, coastal erosion and a global health pandemic. The goal was to roll out the refreshed, modern aesthetic of the Central Coast as a desirable destination to more than 330,000 locals and 5.7m regional visitors (June 2020), to cultivate brand advocacy and local pride. With the target audience now residents as well as visitors, the clear path to recovery was to support our local visitor economy from within; from its heart. And what better place to introduce a Destination Brand than through members of its community: a collective of Brand Ambassadors to launch 'Love Central Coast'.

Methods, steps and tools applied

In 2020, the Central Coast region was the sixth most popular regional destination in NSW for nature-based tourism activities, with further growth predicted in this area. Visitors participating in nature-based activities grew 155% from 432,000 in 2009 to 1.1mil in 2019 - our region had 2.4 million visitors to its five national parks in 2018 alone! But it's more than just the visitors - raising local pride alongside increased visitation needed to be part of the strategy too. In a region as large and diverse as the Central Coast, with more than 100 suburbs and major town centres, over 100 indigenous sites, a landscape that stretches along 87km of Pacific Ocean coastline to lush, hinterland hamlets... reshaping the Destination Brand into a magnetically attractive place to live, work and play in a time of crisis required considerable strategic thought. Through market research, community consultation, stakeholder engagement, conceptual development and both in-region and out of region marketing of assets, the new 'Love Central Coast' look launched our fresh brand in July 2020, gently appearing across our destination website, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube channels, regional billboards, urban signage, town centre flag banners, and bus shelters.

The selected Central Coast Destination Brand slogan 'Designed by nature, shaped by makers and creators', now positions our natural assets at the centre of our tourism marketing. This follows results of Central Coast Survey Insights 2020 and Market Research 2019 Insights into Community Perceptions, showing 75% of respondents agreed a key strength was the Coast's natural environment, with references to 'beaches, lakes, bays and water' dominating perceptions. The first of seven key pillars in the new Destination Brand is 'Nature', weaved into all marketing and communications, to locals and visitors. To place nature at the heart of our tourism marketing we shaped the 'Love Central Coast' brand messaging around 12 key Brand Ambassadors collectively inspired by the Coast's incredible natural environment, including organic farm producers, world-class surfers, environmentalists, indigenous and botanical artists. All campaign creative features our Brand Ambassadors in their natural environment. Take Ace Buchan, a world-class professional surfer and environmental activist, and Kyal & Kara, professional renovators and designers. Both are also ambassadors for Take 3 for the Sea, a global ocean conservation movement based locally in Long Jetty. There's talented native flora illustrator, Nicole Berlach, and mural artist Grant Molony, both producing art inspired by our destination's pristine natural environment and abundance of wildlife. Weaving in the hinterland is Eden & Louise of Fanelli Organics, an organic farm adapting to COVID-19 by developing their sustainable agri-tourism product through farm tours and farm stay accommodation.



From April 2021 onwards, Love Central Coast began introducing the local community and visitors to the unique stories of 12 Brand Ambassadors via a series of targeted digital marketing campaigns. With the dual objective of growing local pride and raising visitor perceptions, the campaign messaging speaks to blooming families, developing families and active travel couples aged 18-34 years (the Central Coast's key markets), encouraging greater appreciation for our region's natural beauty and the freedom it offers.

Key success factors

Through nature-focused brand campaign messaging, we seek to promote visitor dispersal to take pressure off bustling town centres during a time when many city-dwellers are pursuing staycations in regional towns, and overcrowding is not only undesirable, but potentially unsafe. We are actively fulfilling Strategic Priority 2 in our current Destination Management Plan (2018-2021) with a focus on inspiring sustainable tourism via mid-week, off-peak and dispersed visitation to have a positive impact on tourism expenditure and contribute to the community through employment and building local pride. The Central Coast's next Destination Management Plan is currently under development, and through the previous year's tourism marketing insights we have gleaned it needs to feature 'sustainability' as a key focus, supported by the new Destination Brand and ECO Destination status the Central Coast is pursuing for 2022. This connects to a wider strategic goal - with Ecotourism & Sustainability noted as 'emerging strengths' in the NSW Visitor Economy 2030 strategy (Strategic Pillar 3), and even supports Tourism Australia's ongoing commitment in their Sustainable Tourism Statement. The need for greater awareness, investment in infrastructure, and promotion of the Central Coast's natural assets is a key strategic priority of Central Coast Council's Eco and Rural Tourism Feasibility Study (July 2020) and the Tourism Opportunity Plan (2019-2024). By launching a new Destination Brand with nature as one of its central pillars, we are also meeting an objective in the Central Coast's Community Strategic Plan: to promote and grow tourism that celebrates the natural and cultural assets of the Central Coast in a way that is accessible, sustainable and eco-friendly (Objective C4). Ultimately, our key success factor is empowering the community and businesses to hero our region's natural assets to drive sustainable tourism. Acting as advocates, led by our ambassadors and user-generated content via #LoveCentralCoast, we aim to build a stronger, more sustainable visitor economy that domestic travellers can fall in love with and want to visit time and time again.

Lessons learned

Through authentic, visual storytelling (rather than the manufactured, sanitised tourism campaigns of the past), we are now actively embedding the Central Coast as a desirable place to live, work and play, set against our natural backdrop of national parks, waterways, ocean and hinterland, shaped by the diverse local maker and creator community. By flipping the idea that we're simply a summer holiday 'pit-stop' on a road trip north of Sydney, we're repositioning our region into a destination for the conscious traveller, tomorrow's families, and today's empowered locals. We don't just want people to visit, we want people to fall in love with the Central Coast. And when you love something, you naturally want to protect it. As a region rich in ecotourism experiences, we're aware of our current need for further product development and credibility for our natural assets. Our strategy forward is to engage the community on this sustainability journey, working directly with nature-based ambassadors from the ground up to share their success stories. The greatest lesson learned through launching Love Central Coast is the value of 'spreading the love'. Traditional tourism on the Central Coast struggled to balance promotion of the Coast's northern reach with the southern peninsula, or supporting smaller businesses alongside the industry's largest players. Through deployment of a series of digital 'Love Local Guides' produced in house during lockdown periods (collectively attracting over 200,000 views), we've discovered the power of supporting 'small and all' to fuel a stronger visitor economy.

Results, achievements and recognitions

In just two months since launch, our local Brand Ambassador stories have produced more than 1.53 million impressions on social media, reaching more than 297,000 unique eyeballs, and driving more than 7,000 visits to our destination website 'Create your story' campaign hub. Their video stories have been viewed more than 55,000 times, and by expanding our strategy to include cross-promoting video content organically on each ambassadors social media channels, engagement levels shoot even higher. Since July 2020, the Love Central Coast social media audience has grown by more than 12,000 followers, largely due to the positive engagement with the new brand's creative direction and investment in paid advertising to launch in and out of region. As Love Central Coast continues to springboard fresh tourism campaigns, further awareness of our region's cohesive voice will be recognised, such as the recent win for Ettalong Beach as 'Most Compelling Itinerary' in the NSW Top Tourism Town Awards 2021, and The Entrance named a Finalist in Wotif's Aussie Town of the Year Awards 2021. We are also on track to obtain ECO Destination Certification by 2022, in partnership with Ecotourism Australia, moving the Central Coast closer to a more resilient, sustainable future. As the new local tourism organisation representing our destination and its community's best interests through Council, we are proud to be placing the individual experience with the natural environment at the heart of our brand marketing, because where there is love there is hope, and where there is hope - there is growth.



Additional references

Love Central Coast destination website: <https://www.lovecentralcoast.com/>
Central Coast Brand Ambassadors: <https://www.lovecentralcoast.com/create-your-story>
@LoveCentralCoastNSW Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/lovecentralcoastnsw/>
@LoveCentralCoast Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/lovecentralcoast/>
@LoveCentralCoast YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/LoveCentralCoast>

Destination Management Plan 2018-2021:
<https://www.dsn.com.au/app/uploads/2018/07/Central-Coast-Destination-Management-Plan-Nov-2017-FINAL.pdf>

Tourism Opportunity Plan 2019-2024:
https://cdn.centralcoast.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/Council/tourismopportunityplanadoptedoctober2019_0.pdf

Central Coast Community Strategic Plan 2018-2028 ():
<https://cdn.centralcoast.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/Community-strategic-plan-2018-2025.pdf>

Destination NSW Visitor Statistics:
<https://www.destinationnsw.com.au/tourism/facts-and-figures/regional-tourism-statistics/central-coast>