

**MEDIA RELEASE**

## **BRIGHT FUTURE FOR DARK SKY RESERVE WITH STRATEGY TO TAP ITS STELLAR TOURISM POTENTIAL**

A new strategy will assist in growing the stellar tourism potential of the River Murray International Dark Sky Reserve (RMIDSR) in a plan to leverage the attraction to drive more visitation to the Murray River, Lakes and Coorong and Riverland regions.

The Mid Murray Council has endorsed the *Astro Tourism Strategy* to promote the growth of astro tourism. It will increase its potential to attract investment, create new jobs, enhance the local economy and deliver community benefits, while also preserving and strengthening the environmental values and quality of the RMIDSR.

The strategy, funded by a \$20,000 grant through the Federal Government's Building Better Regions Grant Funding Stream, sets out priorities for Council and opportunities for collaboration with other partners. It also follows increasing investment and interest in the region from businesses and tourism operators following the RMIDSR's accreditation in 2019.

Among the priority actions in the *Astro Tourism Strategy* to build the profile of Australia's first globally-recognised and formally accredited International Dark Sky Reserve are:

- Developing a master plan for the reserve to identify priority locations and plans for tourism facilities including viewing platforms and an observatory and/or a planetarium;
- Advocating for and supporting the development of feasibility/business cases for major new research equipment to be located within the reserve;
- Growing the Dark Sky brand and awareness through a marketing and communications strategy;
- Supporting the tourism industry to rapidly build the visitor Dark Sky experience; and
- Establishing a Governing Committee to implement the *Astro Tourism Strategy* and manage the reserve.

Mid Murray Mayor Dave Burgess said the RMIDSR's potential was enormous and would build on other local tourism offerings including the Murray River and the region's rich natural environment.

"Astro tourism is a growing industry and, with Australia's first accredited International Dark Sky Reserve, we have the opportunity to capitalise on the increasing popularity of this niche market, not only in attracting astronomers and astro-photographers, but also amateur stargazers, families and ecotourists," Mayor Burgess says.

"There is something magical about the night sky and our reserve is one of the few places in the world where people can get a clear view of the stars and the Milky Way in their spectacular glory, protected from the intrusion of light pollution. Being located just 90 minutes from Adelaide, and on the doorstep of three of our State's tourism regions in the Barossa, Riverland and Murraylands, we believe there is significant opportunity to raise the reserve's profile and leverage this to put Mid Murray on the map for tourism."

Collaboration with the business, tourism and government sectors will be key to driving the success of the strategy, and has already delivered significant local investment.

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Murray River, Lakes and Coorong Tourism Alliance tourism development manager Bill Nehmy said local tourism operators were among the first to leverage the RMIDSR's potential by creating unique tourism experiences including guided night-sky viewing tours.

"We already have operators who are bringing people into the region to experience the wonder of our night skies and we strongly believe the RMIDSR gives our region – and South Australia as a whole – a great advantage in many ways," Mr Nehmy says.

"It perfectly complements our region's rich environmental attractions – especially our Murray River and national parks – and adds a new reason to convert day trips into overnight stays.

"As the only one of its kind in Australia, there is huge potential to tap into a diverse range of target markets from families and astronomy enthusiasts through to the scientific community. We are also ideally placed to attract international tourists once COVID-19 restriction ease."

While increasing visitation is a focus for the RMIDSR, its profile is also being raised globally by a new business. Astrophotographers Paul Haese and Jarrod Joh also saw the international interest in the region's night skies and established Swan Reach Imaging – a new private observatory built within the reserve that allows stargazers to supply their own telescopes, which they can access remotely to view our night sky anytime, anywhere.

"Already there has been such strong global interest from astronomers and stargazers in what's happening here because of the quality of our skies. Our clients – most of whom live in light polluted areas or major cities – send us their telescopes and robotic equipment from around the world for installation in one of our observatories which they can remotely access via the internet to capture images whenever they want," Mr Haese says

"We have a two-phase plan to establish the business – the first of which has involved the construction of a small imaging and testing observatory, as well as our network and security centre, and onsite power. Our second phase involves the installation of a 9m by 6m roll-off roof observatory, which is currently awaiting development approval and will hopefully be installed before the end of the year."

Mid Murray Council Director of Development and Environmental Services Jake McVicar said there is substantial potential to attract other economic development linked to the reserve.

"There is a limit to what Council can achieve on its own, but we see opportunities to partner with our tourism operators and the tourism industry more broadly, as well as to work with State and National government and non-government bodies to attract grants and private investment into new and improved infrastructure and experiences," Mr McVicar says.

"We believe that the reserve is an attractive prospect for investors looking to create innovative, privately-funded facilities such an observatory or planetarium, or even research facilities."

Protecting the quality and integrity of the reserve and its dark sky is also a strong focus underpinning the strategy. Council will continue to work to minimise light pollution within the RMIDSR, develop policies to protect the night sky view and raise awareness of the importance of minimising light pollution locally.

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