

# 11 Social impacts of community events: The Clunes Book Festival, Australia

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## Abstract

This case study considers the social impacts of a community event, the Clunes Book Festival, held annually in Australia. The festival has been an integral part of the revitalisation of the town of Clunes and the catalyst for its transformation from rural backwater to a bustling town, thanks to its investments in the creative economy. However, these changes haven't been welcomed by all residents, as some feel that the changes in the town downplay its history and heritage. The case takes a critical perspective and allows learners to understand the diversity of stakeholders involved in the events industry and their varying ideas of place transformation through events.

*Subjects:* Sustainability; event impacts; stakeholder theory; social capital

## Introduction

Eleanor and her husband Scott are considering a move to the country. They have been working in the city of Melbourne (located in the state of Victoria, Australia) for over 20 years and they are tired of the rat race. They are both lawyers and have built up a successful law practice over the years, but now that their children have grown up and flown the nest, they would like to slow down a little and spend more time relaxing. A move to a country town within a couple of hours' drive of Melbourne would allow them to return to the city from time to time during the week for meetings with important clients but would mean that they could work from home for the rest of the time and live somewhere yet and attractive. They long for a rural idyll, with peace and tranquillity high on their list of desirable attributes, but they can't move somewhere without high quality amenities, such as reliable wi-fi and good coffee!

Eleanor and Scott are keen to move to Clunes, as it ticks all their boxes in terms of liveability. They researched the background and history of the town, as well as

its suitability as a liveable destination. But they are aware that not all the longer-term residents are keen on amenity migrants like them, and they know that this may cause some tension. They don't want to live somewhere where their neighbours might resent them. It's a difficult decision so they decide to have a meeting with Stewart, a local government representative to get some insight into the town.

## Clunes Book Festival

The town of Clunes, in Victoria, Australia is located approximately one hour's drive north of Melbourne and played an important role in the Victorian gold rush in the late 19th century. Clunes was one of the first places where gold was discovered in Victoria and was at the centre of the gold rush of the late 19th-century. At that stage, it had a substantial settlement, with a railway connection, banks, taverns and a population of over 6,000. One of the proud boasts of Clunes is that the main street was built to be wide enough to allow two carriages to turn. However, at the end of the gold rush, the town's importance gradually diminished, and it became a sleepy agricultural backwater with only 846 inhabitants in 1996 (Mair & Duffy, 2018).

The town is recognised as one of the best-preserved 19th-century towns in the Central Goldfields area of Victoria. Because of this, the town has often been used as a location for film and television, particularly the main street which featured in *Mad Max* (1979) and *Ned Kelly* (2003). However, the economic livelihood options for residents were limited to agriculture and a few service sector businesses (a grocery store, a bank and a couple of hotels). By the early 2000s population decline, a longstanding drought, weakened local agriculture, high unemployment and an ageing population, and a resultant struggling local economy led to what might be considered the town's lowest point.

Stewart explained that at this stage, a group of local residents (many of them relatively new amenity migrants who had moved to the countryside seeking a better standard of living) decided to try to revitalise the economy of the town and looked to books and literature for inspiration (Mair & Duffy, 2018). The key element of this transformation was the Clunes Book Festival, first held in May 2007, and held annually ever since. Following the success of the book festival, which now regularly attracts 18,000 attendees, the organisers set up a not-for-profit organisation, Creative Clunes, which organises the festival, and also book readings and meet-the-author sessions throughout the year (Clunes Book Town website). In addition, Clunes has been an accredited Book Town by the International Organization of Book Towns since 2012. Book Towns are an international network of regional towns which cater for book lovers, and which aim to contribute to the economic development of regional areas. Usually, book towns convert unused public or commercial spaces in a town into second-hand book shops, providing a critical mass of retail outlets that attract a book loving market. This designation is also very important for destination marketing. Clunes even hosted the 2018 International Conference of Booktowns, cementing its place in the international network.

Clunes now regularly attracts over 50 visiting book traders who bring the largest collection of second-hand, collectable, new and small press books to be gath-