



## Northern Rivers Region

### Arts & Culture Snapshot | 2013



### Introduction

This report has been prepared by the Regional Arts Development Officer, Arts Northern Rivers, and provides an overview of the arts and cultural sector in the Northern Rivers region of NSW. It outlines some of the key issues and trends impacting the region and provides a summary of the structure and business models it operates within. It has been developed to provide Arts NSW Arts Funding Program (AFP) assessment panels with an up to date overview of the region.

### Overview – Northern Rivers Region in NSW

Situated on the far north coast of NSW, the Northern Rivers covers an area of 20,895 square kilometres, extending south from the Queensland border along 300 kilometres of coastline, and inland from the Pacific to the Great Dividing Range. The region is renowned for its beaches and rainforests, its warm sub-tropical climate, and its communities, such as Byron Bay, Lismore, Murwillumbah, Nimbin and Yamba. The Bundjalung, Yaegl and Gumbaynggirr heritage influence the culture of the region.

The Northern Rivers is crossed by three major river systems – the Clarence, the Richmond and the Tweed – and is home to 14 World Heritage-listed areas and many more National Parks and State Conservation Areas. The seven Local Government Areas (LGAs) include: Tweed Valley, Kyogle, Byron Shire, Lismore, Ballina Shire, Richmond Valley and Clarence Valley.

The major centres in the region are Ballina, Byron Bay, Casino, Grafton, Lismore, Kyogle, Murwillumbah and Tweed Heads, plus there are numerous coastal settlements, rural towns and villages. The Northern Rivers is home to a population of 271,056 people, with an average age of 39 years. It is also one of Australia's most popular tourist destinations, attracting more than 4.7 million visitors a year.

Some characteristics of the region (in comparison to NSW as a whole) are:

- a large migration away from the region by those aged 20 to 34
- a higher proportion of older persons compared with New South Wales and Australia
- low labour force participation rates compared with NSW and Australia (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2012)

However, 2008 Government reports show that the population of the Northern Rivers includes more creative practitioners than any other regional area of Australia. The region has a high concentration of creative professionals with a growth rate that far surpasses that of other regional areas. Between 2001 and 2006, the creative industries were one of the region's top four growth industries, particularly in the fields of visual arts, design, literature, publishing, screen and digital content.

In the same period, the Northern Rivers recorded the highest creative industries employment growth in the state, more than double the Sydney growth rate, and the highest concentration of creative industry workers outside Sydney.

## Infrastructure

A total of 192 facilities used for arts and cultural purposes have been identified in a survey undertaken by Arts Northern Rivers. The three regional galleries – in Tweed, Lismore and Grafton – are a significant component in the cultural infrastructure of the Region, not only providing exhibition space but also nurturing local artists and stimulating audience development through their programs.

There are no major purpose-built performing arts centres in the region. Public venues for theatre include, amongst others:

- The Northern Rivers Performing Arts (NORPA) manage Lismore City Hall – which has been adapted into a performing arts space
- Byron Cultural Centre's small new purpose-built performing arts space
- Tweed's two multi-purpose Civic Centres at Murwillumbah and Tweed Heads
- The Sariton Theatre, a historic cinema in Grafton, is also being adapted into a performing arts space

There are more than 20 volunteer-run community museums and historical societies across the seven LGAs in the region. The Tweed River Regional Museum is the only professionally-run museum in the region and is currently closed as a new museum is under construction.

There are excellent media (digital video and music) facilities at School of Audio Engineering (SAE) Institute (Byron Bay) as well as at Southern Cross University (SCU), Lismore (including a small studio) and Grafton TAFE (Music and Digital Media Studios).

Festivals are a significant and high-profile component of the life of the region. Key arts and cultural festivals include:

- Byron Bay Writers' Festival
- Byron Bluefest
- Mullum Music Festival
- Splendour in the Grass
- Byron International Film Festival

The region benefits from a number of industry associations and other professional bodies including:

- Arts Northern Rivers
- Northern Rivers Performing Arts (NORPA)
- Northern Rivers Writers' Centre (NRWC)
- Northern Rivers Screenworks
- Northern Rivers Conservatorium
- North Coast Entertainment Industry Association (NCEIA)

Arts Northern Rivers runs a range of regional networks and time-limited projects. These include:

- Festivals and Events Network
- Indigenous Arts Development Project & Network
- Regional Museums Development Project
- Creative Industries Consortium (CIC)

Major capital development projects include:

- Lismore City Hall upgrade (NORPA)
- Tweed River Gallery (Margret Olley Centre gallery extension)
- Tweed River Regional Museum (redevelopment)

## Key issues and trends

### Touring

- Touring throughout the region is somewhat limited due to the lack of large scale purpose-built performing arts centres.
- Lismore City Hall is currently undergoing significant redevelopment and the venue will continue to be managed and programmed by NORPA – whose program includes touring productions.
- The Byron Community Centre offers a small purpose built space which is programmed by the Centre and Byron Ripe Theatre – primarily used for small touring productions.
- The region has a strong festival and events sector that present a significant touring program, predominately in the music sector crossing contemporary, classical and independent genres.
- The region is home to a significant number of professional musicians who tour extensively throughout the region's pubs and clubs.
- NORPA programs an annual season comprised of touring companies as well as locally generated production.
- Byron Ripe Theatre housed at the Byron Community Centre also presents a program of touring productions.

### Infrastructure

In 2008, Arts Northern Rivers conducted an audit of cultural infrastructure in the region as part of the development of the Northern Rivers Creative Industries Strategy. The audit provided a snapshot of available infrastructure in the region including 192 facilities used for arts and cultural purposes.

Key infrastructure issues included:

- Lack of a large scale purpose-built performing arts centre
- Lack of accessible studios giving access to space and equipment for less established practitioners (although SCU and TAFE make space and equipment available when possible)
- Lack of incubator facilities to encourage start-ups and business acceleration for creative businesses

### CALD, Aboriginal and Disability sectors

In June 2005, Arts Northern Rivers worked with local Aboriginal artists to establish the Indigenous Artists Advisory group, which has provided a regional voice for Aboriginal artists, and worked with Arts Northern Rivers to secure funding for an Indigenous Arts Development Officer (IADO).

The region is home to a strong Italian community who provide cultural expression for this community through the New Italy Community Gallery. Local Radio station Bay FM offers a significant multicultural broadcast program. A growing community of African refugees have settled in the Lismore LGA. CALD programs are growing but government and NGO agencies such as the Northern Rivers Social Development Council administer most activity and services.

In 2011 a Regional Disability Arts Officer (RDAO) was appointed by Accessible Arts and located in the Arts Northern Rivers' office. The RDAO liaises with disability organisations and individuals across the Northern Rivers region to develop and deliver strategies for increasing participation in the arts for and by people with disabilities. The Northern Rivers has numerous disability support organisations.

## **Education and training**

The region's well developed educational facilities include two centres of SCU, six TAFE campuses and nearly 30 cultural educational institutions with specialist training in the arts, crafts, theatre and film.

Recent funding cuts to the TAFE's fine arts courses has resulted in a reduction of courses and significant increases in demand for those that are available. These cuts represent a reduction in educational pathways for creative industry development for the region.

## **SWOT Analysis**

### **Strengths**

- Highest concentration of creative industry practitioners in regional Australia.
- Natural resources of the region are vast.
- Established peak cultural bodies (Screenworks, Arts Northern Rivers, NORPA).
- Home to one of only three performing arts presenting companies in NSW (NORPA).
- Strong regional gallery network.
- Significant capital works underway (Lismore City Hall, Tweed Regional Museum, Margaret Olley Centre).
- Aboriginal people have maintained the integrity of much of their culture and language.
- Creative Industries Strategy developed and implemented.
- Creative Industries Consortium that meets regularly.
- Financial support for the Regional Arts Board (Arts Northern Rivers) from all seven LGAs.
- Collaboration across institutions and organisations.
- Key tourism destination, with high levels of international tourist visitation.
- Skill-base is strong in the creative and knowledge based sectors.
- Northern Rivers is a microcosm of many issues that Australia is facing and presents a great test market to pilot new ideas.

### **Weaknesses**

- High youth unemployment levels.
- Population decreases (especially in 20–35 year age group).
- Poor public transport options.
- Significant digital black spots across the region.
- NBN rollout not uniform across the region.
- Distant from state capital – out of sight / out of mind.

- Highest proportions of residents on the lowest incomes in the State.
- A region of small businesses, with less than 1% of businesses employing over 100 people. This limits access to philanthropy, sponsorship and corporate expertise.

### **Opportunities**

- Unique location to test, model and pilot new programs and innovative approaches.
- Exploring the linkages between new technologies and new industries could be a means to keep young people in the region.
- Vast reserves of creative industry professionals available to support mentorship programs.
- 'Sea/tree changers' bring skills and expertise to the region to be tapped.

### **Threats**

- LGAs under financial pressure.
- Amalgamation of LGA's across the state – super councils will impact on local regional arts board.
- Climate change – coastal erosion, flooding impacting on tourism economy.
- Proximity to the Gold Coast – risk of urban sprawl.