



Big things are happening in regional NSW — and this week we're shining a light on a standout leader. The Northern Rivers Rail Trail is proving that sustainability and accessibility aren't just industry buzzwords — they're powerful business drivers. As both Sustainable Tourism Accredited and Accessible Tourism Accredited, the Rail Trail has embedded inclusion, environmental responsibility and continuous improvement into every part of its visitor experience. In this case study, we unpack how accreditation and the NSW Tourism Association's Entrant Support Program helped strengthen their systems, sharpen their storytelling and elevate their impact across the region.

Northern Rivers Rail Trail - Case Study

Embedding Sustainability, Accessibility and Award Excellence



The Northern Rivers Rail Trail is more than a scenic journey through one of regional NSW's most beautiful landscapes. It's a powerful example of how sustainability, accessibility and industry engagement can work together to create a truly inclusive visitor experience.

As a **Sustainable Tourism Accredited and Accessible Tourism Accredited** operator, the Rail Trail team has demonstrated that accreditation is not just a badge — it's a framework for better business.

Sustainability in Action

As a Sustainable Tourism Accredited operator, the Rail Trail also demonstrates leadership in environmental responsibility and long-term regional impact. By activating disused rail corridors into vibrant, low-impact tourism infrastructure, the project supports:

- Regenerative regional visitation
- Low-emissions recreational travel
- Community-led economic activation
- Preservation of local heritage and landscape



Sustainability and accessibility are not treated as separate pillars — they intersect. Both ensure the Trail remains viable, welcoming and relevant for generations to come



Accessibility as a Core Value — Not a Compliance Task

For the Northern Rivers Rail Trail, accessibility is embedded in its DNA. From the outset, the team recognised that creating a welcoming space for everyone meant thinking beyond minimum standards. Accessibility became central to how the Trail was designed, delivered and continues to evolve. Through the Accessible Tourism Accreditation program, the team:

- Introduced onboarding accessibility training for all staff
- Invested in targeted infrastructure improvements
- Used real-world data and lived experience insights to guide decision-making
- Shifted focus from physical access alone to the *entire visitor journey*

This includes digital touchpoints before arrival, wayfinding and signage, on-ground programming, and the storytelling that shapes the experience. Rather than “ticking boxes,” the process helped build a genuine culture of inclusion — one that informs everything from operational planning to community engagement.

The result? A team that describes itself as more human, more aware, and more responsive to the diverse needs of its visitors..



Leveraging the NSW Tourism Association Entrant Support Program

When entering tourism awards, the Northern Rivers Rail Trail team took full advantage of the **Entrant Support Program** delivered by NSW Tourism Association — and describes it as a *game-changer*.

“If you’re thinking about entering a tourism awards program, do yourself a favour and take full advantage of the Entrant Support Program offered by NSW Tourism Association. It’s an absolute game-changer.”

The team praised the depth of expertise and generosity of the Association’s staff and judging mentors, highlighting:

- Small, interactive webinars where real questions could be asked
- Personalised feedback that strengthened submissions
- Clear guidance that reduced overwhelm
- A structured pathway that kept them focused and confident

“Yes, it can feel a bit overwhelming at first... but once you get started, you’ll realise the Association has created a clear, supportive pathway — practically a cheat sheet to success.”

Their experience reinforces an important message for industry: award programs are not just about recognition. When approached strategically, they become powerful tools for reflection, refinement and growth.

The Outcome

Through accreditation and awards participation, the Northern Rivers Rail Trail has:

- Strengthened its operational framework
- Deepened its commitment to inclusion
- Embedded sustainability into long-term planning
- Elevated its industry profile
- Built internal confidence and clarity

Most importantly, the process has reinforced accountability — to visitors, to community, and to the future of regional tourism.



Why This Matters

The Northern Rivers Rail Trail demonstrates that accreditation and awards are not endpoints. They are catalysts.

Catalysts for better systems.

Catalysts for stronger teams.

Catalysts for more inclusive visitor experiences.

And in regional tourism, that leadership matters.



Inspired by what the Northern Rivers Rail Trail has achieved?

Now is the time to back your own business. Accreditation isn't just recognition — it's a practical framework to strengthen your operations, build trust with visitors and demonstrate your commitment to quality, sustainability and accessibility. Become accredited today! Already Quality Accredited? Upgrade to Sustainable Accreditation or enrol in another program. Find out more below.

And if you're a North Coast operator, mark your calendar: **North Coast Tourism Awards nominations open 4 March 2026**. Entering the awards is more than a trophy moment — it's a chance to reflect, refine and showcase the incredible work happening in your region.

If you've been thinking about becoming accredited or stepping into the awards arena, consider this your nudge. We'd love to see you take the leap.

ACCREDITATION



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