

People and Communities

The Social Assessment for the Gippsland Regional Forest Agreement provides a snapshot of the people and communities who use and value the region's forests. Its methodology included data analysis, mail and telephone surveys of forest user groups and the general community, personal interviews, informal networking and workshops.

Retail trade (14.5 per cent) and Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing (13.5 per cent) are the major employers for the region's population of 174,000 people. In addition, the Latrobe region provides Gippsland with a higher rate of employment in the power industries than in other areas of rural Victoria.

Community Case Studies

Detailed case studies were undertaken for six communities to assess each community's socio-economic structure, historical response to change, community attachment and to identify forest values and attitudes towards forest use and management.

The community workshops found that people living within the Gippsland region participate in a variety of economic, recreational and cultural forest related activities and identify with a range of forest values.

The township of **Yarram** provides a major service role for the surrounding rural communities, and the agricultural, timber, fishing and tourism industries. Major issues raised here included the impact of the restructure of government agencies, changes in agriculture and timber industry, water quality, and plantations management. Visions for the community include a proposal for a National Park in the Strzelecki Ranges and the expansion of educational and employment opportunities for younger people.

Heyfield provides an entry point to the Alpine National Park and the high country. It is the centre of the hardwood timber industry in the Wellington Shire, and additional new mill operations and restructure have improved stability and job security in the town. Community visions include improved water management, opportunities for young people and development of new tourism opportunities.

Dargo's major industry is beef cattle, although there is some sheep farming and it produces a significant amount of walnuts for commercial purposes. The township has been affected by the closure of the local mill and the downturn in agriculture, however it is experiencing an increase in tourism. Workshop participants saw tourism and outdoor recreation as the most likely economic base, but wanted the town to retain its special qualities.

Swifts Creek is a small highland settlement along the Great Alpine Road. Priorities at Swifts Creek included maintaining and improving access to services and broadening the economic base of the township by encouraging sustainable agriculture, mining and tourism.

The township of **Bairnsdale** is the major service centre for the East Gippsland Shire, however it has felt the effects of the agricultural economic downturn, the rationalisation of government departments and utilities, and changes in the timber industry. Tourism was part of the economic vision for Bairnsdale, although there was concern that rapid tourism expansion may cause environmental problems, particularly with water quality.

Sale is the largest centre for retail, commerce, administrative and human services, including education, within the Wellington Shire. It has also felt the effects of economic change. An important issue in Sale was the desire to see mixed species forests managed for multiple-use, in addition to timber production. Tourism opportunities included the development of world class wetlands, the re-development of the Port of Sale, and an improved road over the mountains past Dargo.

Community telephone survey

A random telephone survey of 1100 Gippsland region households canvassed attitudes to the use and management of their native forests. Its findings included the following:

- Eleven per cent said they had been involved in native forest management, planning or preservation in Victoria, with more than a third of those having planted trees on a farm, school, or in other organised events, and another 20 per cent involved in environmental groups such as Landcare.
- Just over half the respondents had visited a Victorian National Park in the last year and 35 per cent had visited State forests. While more people had visited national parks, State forests were used more frequently.
- Sixty one per cent of respondents were confident that National Parks are managed well in Victoria, and 56 per cent were confident that State forests are managed well.
- The three things nominated as most important in National Parks management were maintaining public access (21 per cent), maintaining or improving fire management (19 per cent) and protection of native flora and fauna (13 per cent).
- Most frequently raised issues for State forest management were fire control and management (22 per cent), replanting and reforestation (20 per cent) and maintaining public access (13 per cent). Many people were unable to identify management issues important to National Parks (20 per cent) or State forests (25 per cent).
- Eighty per cent of respondents believe that National Parks are important to their local economy. The figure is the same for the local economic importance of State forests.

Timber industry and household expenditure

The social assessment found that overall, the softwood and hardwood timber industries (including contractors) contribute \$33.5 million in annual household expenditure to the local and regional economies. The timber-processing industries in the region generate \$26.1 million in annual household expenditure, led by the APP Maryvale mill (\$18 million), with the mills at Heyfield and Drouin West generating \$2.8 million and \$1.3 million respectively. Contracting businesses in the region generate \$7.4 million in annual household expenditure.