

## **North East Victoria: Forests, People and Communities**

The Social Assessment for the North East Regional Forest Agreement provides a snapshot of the people and communities who use and value the region's forests.

Information was collected through mail and telephone surveys of forest user groups and the general community, personal interviews, informal networking and workshops.

Overall, the assessment paints a picture of a growing region with a strong sense of community and a high level of interest in forests and forest management.

With a population of 174, 000 at the last census, the North East has relatively higher household incomes and educational qualifications than regional Victoria as a whole.

Its main industries include community services (19.4 per cent), wholesale and retail trade (18.2 per cent), and manufacturing (15.7 per cent) concentrated in the major regional centres of Benalla, Wangaratta and Wodonga. Agriculture and forestry continue to make a significant contribution to the regional economy (9.9 per cent).

Communities in the North East have been affected by changes in land use, including contraction in timber industry employment and reduced access to forests for activities such as grazing, bee keeping and mining. However, tourism and recreation have provided new opportunities with the establishment of national parks, wilderness areas and historic reserves.

### **Attitudes to forests**

A telephone survey of 1100 residents, along with other information collected for the Social Assessment, shows that as well as valuing their forests highly and displaying a keen interest in their management and use, the people in the North East support the need to balance a wide range of competing uses and values.

Issues of concern in the local community include the need to maintain access to forests for a range of activities, as well as the protection of landscape and biodiversity values.

The telephone survey included the findings that:

- Thirty six per cent of respondents or their family members work in forest dependent industries (timber, mining, tourism, beekeeping, seed collection, grazing);
- Fifty nine per cent said they had visited native forests in the last year for reasons other than work;
- Thirty per cent were concerned about changes to native forests as a result of human use;
- Sixty eight percent identified the natural beauty of the region's forests as a reason for deciding to live in the area.

### **Timber industry and household expenditure**

Timber processing and contracting industries using hardwood from the North East directly support 1,336 people - both sawmill employees and their families.

These employees make a significant contribution to the local and regional economy, with at least \$14 million generated each year in household expenditure.

Within the Wangaratta forest management area (FMA), most timber industry employees work in Mt Beauty and spend their money in the townships of Wodonga, Wangaratta, Myrtleford and Beechworth.

Within the Benalla-Mansfield FMA, timber employees and their families contribute to the local economies of Mansfield and Benalla.

Most timber industry employees in the Wodonga FMA work in Corryong. Their expenditure is mainly in Corryong and Wodonga.