

People and Communities

The Social Assessment for the West 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.

Manufacturing and retail trade industries are the major employers for the region's population of 570,188. While overall employment in the agriculture, forestry and fishing sector is lower in the West region (8.4 per cent) when compared with rural Victoria (13.1 per cent), it varies widely within the region, from 29 per cent in the Otway region to four per cent in the Midlands. More information from the social assessment is included in fact sheets on forest industries.

Community Case Studies

Detailed case studies were made of six communities: Apollo Bay, Colac, Ballarat, Daylesford, Dunkeld and Heywood, 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.

- ❖ **Apollo Bay** saw tourism as the future vision for the town. Participants felt that the community has become more political about development issues affecting the town, and more environmentally aware. They expressed strong sentiments about logging of native forests especially in the Otway Ranges. There was also concern about the impact of harvesting forests and of logging trucks on traffic and roads.
- ❖ While **Colac** has been affected over the past decade by the restructuring of State and local government, the rural recession and restructuring of the rural sector, it is diversifying into new products and market niches, with an increased focus on value adding in the town's timber mills. Participants recognise the importance of the Otways for forestry, water supplies and tourism, and feel that the town's strategic location is an asset for future development.
- ❖ Despite **Ballarat**'s appeal to tourists with its rich history of gold, its wealth and historic buildings, the downturn in the rural sector and manufacturing sectors has resulted in high unemployment, especially among youth. Participants see employment generation as critical for the future prosperity and envision establishing Ballarat as a regional centre for commerce.
- ❖ Tourism is increasing in **Daylesford**, known as the 'Spa Centre' of Australia, and the area has attracted new residents seeking alternative lifestyles. However, participants felt that the increase in tourism has also increased the cost of food and real estate, and that more resources should support local infrastructure. They want to maintain environmental values and were concerned specifically about harvesting in the Wombat forest, and possible impacts on water catchments.

- ❖ A small town with an aging population, **Dunkeld** has been impacted by the decline in wool and beef prices and a reduction in the farming population, resulting in the closure of the bank and the general store. Despite these setbacks, participants value its new tourism focus as the ‘Southern Gateway’ to the Grampians, but also want the town to retain its uniqueness.
- ❖ A service and commuter town, **Heywood**’s population has decreased though dairying has maintained its economic base. Conversion of agricultural land to blue gum plantations was of concern to participants who, while acknowledging that it enables farmers to sell their farms or earn alternative income, feared plantations would result in a loss of population and amenity. Tourism opportunities include a ‘Timber Wine and Roses’ festival, the Great South Western Walk and new boutique vineyards.

Community telephone survey

A random telephone survey of 880 West region residents canvassed attitudes to the use and management of their native forests. Its findings included the following:

- ❖ Eighteen per cent of respondents had a household member employed in one or more forest-based industries, with 68 per cent employed in grazing, 15.3 per cent in tourism and 6.9 per cent in recreational prospecting.
- ❖ Nine per cent of respondents said they had been involved in native forest management, planning or conservation, with 33 per cent involved in tree planting on a farm, school, or organised events and another 23 per cent involved in environmental groups such as Landcare.
- ❖ More than half (55 per cent) of respondents had visited a national park in Victoria in the last year, compared with 38 per cent visiting a State forest. Most visits to parks were for bushwalking (84 per cent), others for picnics or barbecues (33 per cent), drive or 4WD travel (28 per cent), camping (19 per cent), and sightseeing (18 per cent). Major activities in State forests were bushwalking (59 per cent), drive or 4WD travel (34 per cent), picnic or barbecues (28 per cent), sightseeing (16 per cent), firewood collection (7 per cent) and camping (8 per cent).
- ❖ Thirty five per cent said protection and preservation of native flora and fauna was the most important consideration in national parks, followed by fire management (19 per cent) and public access (13 per cent).
- ❖ The three most important issues in State forest management were fire control and management (23 per cent), replanting and reforestation (20 per cent), and better management of logging (19 per cent).
- ❖ Seventy seven per cent of respondents believe that National Parks are important to the local economy of the area they live in, and 70 per cent of respondents believe that State forests are important to the local economy of the area they live in.

