

Dear members of the Great Outdoors Taskforce,

**RE: Recreation in Gippsland's Forests – a summary of the Gippsland Forest Dialogues recent work with the community**

Please accept this as the Gippsland Forest Dialogue's submission to the consultation process currently underway for the Great Outdoors Taskforce on the future of state forests. We are choosing to submit directly to you, rather than via the Engage Victoria website.

The [Gippsland Forest Dialogue](#) (GFD) is a locally based, not-for-profit incorporated association of community members who seek to facilitate informed conversations about Gippsland's forests during an era of rapid change. We have operated since 2022. The group uses an approach developed over 20 years by the international "[Forest Dialogue](#)" (developed at Yale University) to provide safe spaces for respectful dialogue on controversial and challenging topics in environment conservation and management.

The Forest Dialogue approach allows diverse voices to come together to discuss, share information and perspectives, and consider solutions to complex problems in a way that is safe and constructive for all participants. We believe that this kind of approach is sorely missing in the broader discussion of how we manage our forests in the future.

In this spirit – and recognising the recent intense interest in recreation and future uses of Victoria's State Forests in Gippsland - on the 16 November, we convened a scoping dialogue on the theme of recreation in Gippsland's forests. The event was chaired by Gippslanders and facilitated by the advisory committee of the GFD. It was attended by 25 people - mostly West Gippsland locals with a good balance of gender and demographics - invited specifically for their strong and diverse interests in Gippsland's forests.

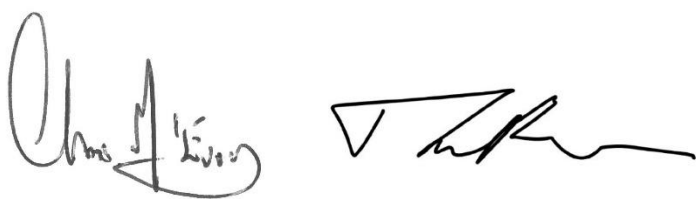
The following summary (attached) is provided to you to outline the main findings and discussion points of this scoping dialogue. We encourage you to read and consider these findings, as some of them are directly relevant to the Great Outdoors Taskforce terms of reference. We intend to follow this dialogue with a larger event on the same topic this year.

As President and Vice President, we want to emphasise the value and merit in bottom-up, community driven forums of the kind that the GFD facilitates. These dialogues open up the space for a diverse range of regular Gippsland community members – from farmers to foresters, from conservationists to hunters - to come together and openly discuss their views in a respectful space and environment.

We believe that our approach, free from Government involvement and organisation ideology, often allows the most honest discussions and develops the opportunity for unique and diverse partnerships and new thinking about how State Forests can be managed for a range of values.

We hope you find the attached report of interest. We are both very happy to meet and discuss the Dialogue with you further, if of interest.

Regards,



**Chris McEvoy (President, GFD) & Dr. Tom Fairman (Vice President, GFD)**



## **The Gippsland Forest Dialogue**

### ***Scoping Dialogue: Recreation in Gippsland forests***

**Jindivick, 16 Nov 2024**

On Saturday 16 November, the Gippsland Forest Dialogue (GFD) convened a scoping dialogue on the theme of recreation in Gippsland's forests. The event was attended by 25 people, mostly West Gippsland locals, invited specifically for their strong and diverse interests in Gippsland's forests.

The dialogue considered opportunities and challenges of recreation in Gippsland's forests during a time of uncertainty about land management, tenure and future use of forests.

Attendees were able to get to know one another through walking and talking in beautiful native forest, before participating in structured dialogue together.

Attendees put forward a diversity of views and ideas. Some overarching conclusions from the discussion:

1. Gippsland residents highly value local forests and their recreation opportunities, but this value is often not reflected in government agency priorities or investment in management or facilities.
2. Some areas are being negatively impacted by overuse. Balancing equity in access, providing for a range of users and uses and managing conflicting recreation uses are contentious issues.
3. Victorian Government panels and taskforces are consulting with the community about the future of their forests, but people feel disempowered, are suffering consultation fatigue and do not generally see – or trust – that their views will be represented in government decisions.
4. Compared with previous generations, younger people are not being provided sufficient opportunities to spend time in, and learn, about the bush. This increases the risk of recreation behaviours that impact negatively on forest environments.
5. New approaches to managing and funding recreation opportunities in Gippsland's forests are needed. Decentralised decision making and an increased community role in managing local forests can better use local knowledge, capacity and resources, resulting in better outcomes for forests and communities. People are keen to explore this.
6. A Gippsland Forests Charter of Common Ground (an intergenerational agreement) could provide a statement of shared values and aspirations for forests and responsibilities for care and reciprocity.

The scoping dialogue provided a non-confrontational, community-led forum to discuss complex issues. It allowed people to discuss openly and free from their organisations or employers. This document provides further details on the scoping dialogue, its findings, processes and next steps.

#### **Dialogue Co-Chairs:**

Jess Reeves and Wally Notman

#### **Dialogue Host:**

Chris McEvoy



*Figure 1. Attendees of the Gippsland Forest Dialogue in Jindivick.*

## Summary of Proceedings

The meeting commenced at 10am at a private forested property in Jindivick, with introductions from co-chairs, and Welcome to Country by Traditional Owner, Cheryl Drayton. The meeting followed with introductions from the GFD steering committee on the process of the Forest Dialogues and a brief explanation of the GFD origins. Participants were then given the opportunity to introduce themselves and their interests in recreation aspects in the area. There was a diverse mix of people from various backgrounds and knowledge areas, with majority of the participants residing in the Gippsland region or having ties with the region.

A walk to the nearby Mountain Ash forests was organised after the introduction sessions and was a chance for everyone to learn more about the importance of these ecosystems (e.g. habitat for greater glider, yellow bellied glider) and the history of the area, including the held Indigenous knowledge shared by Cheryl. This also enabled space for informal discussions between participants.

A plenary discussion began after lunch, prefaced by a short explanation of the ongoing government directed processes that concern State forests in Gippsland and North East Victoria, such as the consultation for the Central Highlands and the Great Outdoors Taskforce (see appendices). Participants were encouraged to share burning questions they may have or challenges they identify for recreation in Gippsland, which were further explored in the subsequent break-out groups. Key topics included:

- Popular areas being over utilised
- Minimal and seemingly cursory engagement around forest policy, with no follow up.
- Centralised decision making with lack of transparency and accountability, with locals left to live with the outcomes of these decisions.
- Lack of education and awareness of regulations
- Challenges of accommodating different user groups and understanding of good practice
- Scarcity of enforcement and people on the ground to manage the forest asset
- Lack of leadership from government and the desire for an opportunity for greater community voice and participation in forest management
- Fewer children growing up with knowledge and experience of forests

Various fracture-lines between user groups were lightly identified, such as heavy 4WD tracks in high conservation value areas, however these were not explored at depth. Much of the discussion was focussed on steps forward and how change could be enacted.

Potential activities that could increase care for forests and enable less impactful recreation included:

- Increase capacity for local, on-ground land managers, including joint management for Traditional Owners
- A stewardship model with different groups taking on different roles
- Support for citizen science activities to monitor impact and change
- Empower local communities to advocate for their forests and appropriate use

Knowledge was acknowledged as a key asset held by many community members, but also a deficit, particularly for young people and visitors to the region. There was concern around the loss of basic bushcraft knowledge and how to extend this to user groups who have not grown up in the region. Key points were:

- Local knowledge needs to be valued and elevated – particularly indigenous Knowledge

- Increasing the use of local knowledge in policy formulation
- Broader education around appropriate uses in different areas
- More awareness of forest natural assets, including biodiversity, shared at information centres, guided walks, websites and social media to increase awareness
- Creating a 'forest discovery centre' with a range of different information on tracks and trails, safety, guidelines, biodiversity, heritage etc. to enhance visitor experiences
- Forest experiential education, i.e. the forest being an annexe or a normal extension of local (and non-local) education. An example of this was the former Noojee Outdoor Education Centre (NOEC) and other existing outdoor education campuses.
- Holiday programs for kids, and to explore pathways of using forests for therapy/wellbeing programs (the Toolangi Forest Education Centre was very successful but closed 15 years ago due to lack of funding)
- Welcome new residents with past local experiences through community champions. This would build resilience and connection, as well as awareness of and preparedness for natural disasters

A key challenge is how to put an appropriate value on forest recreation. It was acknowledged that recreation is undervalued in government agencies, current management capacity is limited, and that more resources are needed to support effective management. Fees and charges for recreation access are used elsewhere but can often cost more to collect than they bring in. Providing for equity of access and opportunity is important if any fee structure was introduced. Other opportunities and issues discussed included:

- Potential to source philanthropic funding to support recreation activities
- The right balance between privatising opportunities (eg, ski fields, viewpoints, or desirable camping places)
- Different pricing and charges for different types of uses
- Balance the needs and access of local and external users
- A bond style investment model being used in the US to support better management of forests and parks

Through their diverse opinions and experiences, participants shared a common love and respect for our forests and a need to ensure that they are cared for and nurtured for future generations to enjoy. One idea was to develop a charter of common ground (intergenerational agreement) outlining shared values and aspirations for the forests, as well as responsibilities for care and reciprocity. This may take a similar form to the UK's idea of the 'countryside code' – of agreed and taught behaviours in the countryside.

Following the breakout discussions and consolidation of the results, the dialogue ended with general reflections and closing remarks from the organisers. Reflections focused on the potential to build on this scoping exercise to host a more in-depth dialogue including a wider group of stakeholders that allows for more socialisation and reflection on ideas, as well as engaging with settings and places that highlight the fracture lines in forest recreation.



## **Appendix 1**

### **Agenda**

#### **09:30 Assemble at Jindivick Nth**

Morning tea

#### **10:00 Dialogue commences**

Co-Chairs and Host introduction: Jess Reeves, Wally Notman & Chris McEvoy

Rapporteurs: Jo Lewis, Peter Kanowski

Acknowledgement / Welcome to Country: Cheryl Drayton

Gippsland Forest Dialogue background: Tom Fairman & Rod Keenan

Participant introductions

#### **11:00 Forest Walk**

Host Chris McEvoy along with the previous owner guide participants to various points within the property

Landscape context: Land tenure; State forest management; Fire and disturbance; Water Catchment values; Recreational and cultural access/use.

Traditional owner perspective – Cheryl

#### **12:30 Lunch**

#### **1:00 Plenary discussion**

Setting the scene: Current understanding of Vic Government Panels and Taskforces and other policy and regulatory directions related to forests.

Forest recreation and re-creation trends. Private, State, National Parks.

Previous multi-stakeholder forums

Participant perceptions about recreation in the context of broader forest management – key issues for breakouts

#### **2:00 Breakout session**

Small groups sessions exploring key themes from plenary

#### **3:00 Breakout group reports and plenary discussion**

#### **4:00 Afternoon tea and close**

## Appendix 2 – Dot points from discussion and break-out groups

The session also featured Liz Clay describing her experience in the 1990s, forming the West Gippsland Timber Industry and Environment Group, a group of loggers, environmentalists and sawmillers, who while getting to know each other at a personal level, came together to discuss forest management issues and articulate a way forward to government.

Below are the participants burning questions, comments and challenges they identified for recreation in Gippsland (further explored in the subsequent break-out groups).

- Popular areas are being over utilised (e.g. Toorong Falls)
- Minimal engagement has occurred in the VEAC (Victorian Environmental Assessment Council) consultations
- There is scepticism of how policy is determined and lack of transparency around how decisions made
- 'People behaving badly' (4WD motorbikes, horse riders, walkers) – how do you accommodate multiple user groups and ensure they comply with the rules?
- Resourcing for compliance (lack of)
- Dumping of rubbish (is common)
- Lack of community education and awareness of regulations
- Community engagement has been removed in (DEECA) districts
- More (DEECA) staff on the ground, not more middle management
- Review previous decisions and their efficacy to inform future decision making
- Support citizen science to monitor forests
- Allow freedom to fail
- Kids aren't learning about forests – parents aren't showing them
- Recreational users need to know where they can access (forests) and what they can access and why
- A forest stewardship model with different groups taking on different roles
- Non-traditional funding sources need to be considered too
- Leadership is important – who makes and how do we make the compelling argument about why we want forests looked after?
- A charter of common ground (intergenerational agreement)
- How do we manage the 5% (the people behaving badly)? Or is it about advocating for the activities of the 95%?
- Pay for a permit for recreational use. Funds go to policing
- Many problem users are from Melbourne
- Education about what you can do on different parcels will be important if there are land tenure changes.
- Will there be shooting for invasive species allowed? (in the event of land classification changes)
- Government (has a role) to promote the way people interact with the bush.
- The forest road network is a legacy of the timber industry. As a funding source for maintenance, this is no longer available. Will the network be maintained? .

### **Five key themes emerged:**

- Local problems, local solutions
- Transparency and evaluation of policy
- Education
- Value
- Charter of common ground

Breakout groups explored the key themes respectively. Key points are noted below.

### **Theme #1: Local problems, local solutions**

- Change impact is not understood (not understanding the impact of potential land tenure changes).
- Haven't done the work to fully understand the issues / implications, i.e. safety (of land tenure changes).
- Access to emergency services is important due to hazards around forests, especially for urban visitors who are unfamiliar to the area
- Diminishing resources – Rangers on the ground, access and maintenance
- Seek balance of local security and experience of forests (in relation to the recent abundance of security lighting in the local area)
- Local solutions required to deal with pests and diseases
- Leadership building - future custodians of forests are needed due to diminished capacity (of government resources)
- Local board of representatives - consultative committee (similar to CMA model)
- How does local expertise get expressed and brought into the equation?
- Joint management with Traditional Owners – capacity building
- Potential to incorporate guides, with opportunities for Traditional Owners in this aspect
- Forest experiential education: Previous examples / small models. Noojee Outdoor Education Centre (NOEC). Alpine School.
- Holiday programs can be organised for kids, and to explore pathways of using forests for therapy/wellbeing programs
- Access to forests - how to advise forest users of hazards generally, including access to emergency services / communications.
- Use the local forest as an educational ANNEX, i.e. directly linked with local schools.
- Anxiety in young people - use of forest therapy (including for kids).
- Reach into the on-line world, even locally - i.e. Beau Miles example.
- Proposed programs should start small, and have working models to draw out insights and learnings for larger scale implementation
- There is a need to understand the implications of panel consultations (in relation to the current Eminent Panel for Community Engagement and the Great Outdoors Taskforce)
- Greater local presence is required which may have been lost with the centralisation model – local representation
- Opportunities for advocacy are needed and can draw from existing councils that emerged in recent years to provide these opportunities
- Concerns around lost traditions and skillsets

## **Theme #2: Transparency and evaluation of policy**

### **Problems:**

- Government has a number of major projects or decisions, and how these are made or formulated are not transparent.
- When consultation occurs, little information is available and there is the impression decisions are already made.
- Policy is formulated with a lack of understanding of local communities or an appreciation of their knowledge. Government does not allocate enough funding or resources to actually develop local policies.
- Additionally, the stakeholders which are consulted seem to be highly selected, creating a division between those in the community who do and do not get a say.
- It is unclear what is driving Government decisions – on everything from recreation decisions to changes in land use policy - and how these decisions are reached.
- Existing policies are badly out of date and do not enable new management approaches – which may otherwise be possible.
- There has been a shift from land managers “doing” to being “bureaucrats”.
- There is an impression that actors or groups with access to power and funding are largely driving decisions around recreation and land use.
- There is a sense that in terms of policy creation, there is a lack of:
  - Trust
  - Accountability
  - Opportunities for input
  - Which all lead to a broader sense of a lack of cohesive strategy for local policy in regional Victoria.

### **Solutions:**

- Incorporation of different stakeholders’ opinion
- Greater emphasis on the idea of accountability
- Local-scale and knowledge in local policies
- Functions to ensure evaluation and transparency
- Have in place trial-and-error systems. Create test case landscapes or trials of land management that work – something to model other approaches off.
- A need for a “whole of Gippsland plan”
  - This plan would address issues around compliance of land use, and allow a great level of community say in planning.
  - Ultimately this leads to more transparent government.
- Before making decisions – speak to the community, seek broad feedback.
- Focus on the metrics that matter to evaluate these – decided by local communities.
- Co-operative land management – or community land management – is a potential solution. Government role is to facilitate this.
- A “Social Contract for Local Forests”?

## **Theme #3: Education, for who, what, and how?**

- Education for everyone, but having targeted groups as well, particularly the schools

- Education to the people making the decisions, having strong advocacy groups for different users
- Important to have a platform or profile somewhere for people to know where to find relevant knowledge and resources
- Newer cohort using land – 4WDs more common, tracks more accessible, less knowledge, less bushcraft, more damage
- Use avenues of existing groups, cross-sharing of knowledge
- Literacy-building around the forest and bushcraft
- As there are changing demographics in the region, with linguistically diverse backgrounds, it is important to include their perspectives too
- Inclusion of Traditional Knowledge, who has the right to give the knowledge and the capacity to build that
- Welcome new residents with past local experiences through community champions. Builds resilience and connection
- Regulators are the one that can and should help educate the public about legal matters
- Creation of a space for a united leadership, enabling local voice and transparency of higher-ups
- User groups – specific messaging (safety and environment) and understanding of needs
  - Provide alternatives and make aware of consequences
  - Dedicated adventure areas
  - Rotational ‘trashing’?
- Celebration of the idea of ‘space’, what the value of a particular space is – what is special
- Change culture of entitlement – younger generation education
- Healthy partnerships and shared resources between groups
- Forest discovery centre with a range of different information on tracks and trails, safety, guidelines, biodiversity, heritage etc. to enhance visitor experiences (Noojee?)
- Website to host regional information and calendar of events (page on Destination Gippsland website?)...and photos
- Bushcraft passport for accessing areas
- Guided walks and night walks

#### **Theme #4: Values**

- How to put value on benefits of forests?
- How to articulate what those values are and mean?
- It is difficult to put a financial value on a lot of things in the forest, such as experiences
- Lack of understanding of what those values are in the community
- Growing demand of recreational values especially from the city
- How to reconcile competing values of various recreational users?
- Multiple uses are shifting over time – 4WD and horse riding trails
- Balancing the needs and interests of ‘external’ and local users
- Changes in land tenure restrict access and lower the value of forests to people
- Common ground found in general agreement that forests are undervalued, and not valued until the need to pay for them
- Some general willingness to pay to use forests

- Issues of how to apply fees, how to set the price, and how to deal with differences in capacity to pay (equity)
- Are there other ways of getting income? Licenses or direct access charges can be some ideas.
- Consolidated revenues and need to seek a balance
- US bond model for its natural resources and parks can be a case study
- Land managers do not recognise recreational values, especially in many official documents
- There are competing and changing values, which will be challenging to reconcile
- The concept of Recreation Opportunity Spectrum, and the lack of application to forests here (including state forests)
- Conflict often arises between outsiders and locals on values

### **Theme #5: Charter of common ground**

Agreed (and assumed) set of principles that may be shared by different forest users include:

- Love for country, respect for bush
- Sustainable, respectful, and safe access to forests
- Ideas of having an intergenerational agreement to protect resources for future generations
- Analogous to the idea of sharing the road with big trucks, there are different road users but everyone shares the road harmoniously
- Need for education, licensing, compliance, and regulations
- Decision-making by Traditional Owners
- Ideas of Ostrom's work on commons
- Set up a baseline data for monitoring and comparison of progress
- Consider different pricing for different uses
- Have agreed upon behaviour with each other (e.g. UK's idea of taught behaviour in the countryside; countryside code)
- Bush basics education
- New users often not understanding how things work, need for opportunities to educate
- Transparency of where the money goes to (for national parks and other income generating areas)
- Importance of equity in money distribution
- People have to feel safe in the forests
- Need for a periodical review of the charter

## **Appendices 3 - Key current Victorian Government processes with respect to future State forest management**

In late 2019, in conjunction with the announcement of the planned transition out of native forest timber harvesting by 2030, the government implemented “Immediate Protection Areas”, precluding any timber harvesting from 96,000 hectares of State forest in Eastern Victoria.

In 2021, the government established the “Eminent Panel for Community Engagement” (EPCE), to determine future uses of the Immediate Protection Areas in the Central Highlands, Strathbogie Ranges and Mirboo North areas, the latter two being completed in December 2022.

In early 2023, the government requested the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) to assess the values of the Immediate Protection Areas in the Central Highlands and East Gippsland, and in adjacent state forests. Soon after, the government brought forward the proposed 2030 native timber industry closure to Jan 1, 2024 and extended VEAC’s work to include all of the Central Highlands State forests, with VEAC releasing its desktop report titled “Assessment of the values of state forests in the Central Highlands”, late in 2023, published to help inform the now extended work of the EPCE to provide advice and recommendations to the government on the future uses of State forest in the Central Highlands.

VEACs assessment included identifying the natural, social, economic and cultural heritage values of the Central Highlands, as well as current and likely future threats to those values. In addition, and somewhat controversially, the report identified, both in narrative and spatially, what VEAC deemed the typical land use categories commensurate with the values it identified.

Public consultation following the release of VEAC’s Central Highlands report was conducted by the EPCE during Autumn 2024, with numbers attending community drop-in sessions in the 100’s, as awareness of the process and fears of potential future access restrictions grew.

The Panel was then responsible for preparing its report to the Government with recommendations for the future use and management of Central Highlands state forests. Following this, VEAC would assess the potential economic implications of proposed land use changes recommended by the Panel and produce its final report. There has been no update on the status of these last two tasks since July 2024.

Almost in parallel to the above process, the government in April 2024, launched the Great Outdoors Taskforce, whose task it is to consult with the community to provide recommendations to the government on the future management of 1.5 million hectares of Victoria’s state forests (not including the Central Highlands) that were previously available for timber harvesting, as well as approximately 590,000 hectares of relevant adjacent state forests. These areas seem to correspond to areas State forest where commercial timber was allocated to VicForests, largely the area zoned as General Management Zone and Special Management Zone (~1.5 million ha) and other areas of State forest set aside for conservation or other purposes, known as Special Protection Zone (~590,000ha). The function of this forest management zoning system is quite complex and beyond scope of this discussion.

Along with this, the government very recently requested VEAC to carry out an assessment of the values of the same State forests within eastern Victoria, designed to help inform the work of the Taskforce in providing advice and recommendations to the government on the future use and management of these State forests.

Interestingly, it appears the Taskforce has shifted somewhat from the initial position articulated in the government's April media release, where amongst other things it stated "The Taskforce will also explore which areas need to be protected to safeguard threatened species, areas that qualify for protection as National Parks and opportunities for Traditional Owner management. The panel will prioritise areas of state forest where some decisions can be made now and advise on where more engagement is required".

Recent updates on the Engage Vic website marking the commencement of the Taskforce's public consultation period state "....the Taskforce will not be making any recommendation for large-scale changes to land tenure, including not creating any new National Parks", the following text possibly explaining the rationale behind in this shift:

'We know that the greatest threats to the sustainability of our forests and the environment are the effects of climate change, bushfires (which are stronger and more frequent), as well as the challenge of pest plants and animals. These threats don't obey lines on a map and occur across all land tenures. The Taskforce understands that good conservation management to mitigate these threats must be a core function of all public land managers and will consider how this can best be achieved in the taskforce assessment area".

Through the Engage Victoria platform, the public are invited to provide their thoughts and opinions, either individually or on behalf of a group, on the future use and management of Victoria's forests via completing a written survey about their views on forest management, and/or completing a map survey about their views on specific areas of interest. The surveys closes at 11:59pm on 12 January 2025.

The EPCE used a very character limited, written and interactive map survey in its engagement process, with no prospect for group submissions. However the Great Outdoors Taskforce survey appears more structured and allows for more extensive feedback, including by groups. This may provide an opportunity for the outcomes of the Gippsland Forest Dialogue Scoping Workshop to be submitted via the survey, but direct communication from GFD with the Taskforce may allow for the Workshop Co-Chairs report to be submitted directly.

The two Victorian Government authorities responsible for the management of State forests and the Parks system are currently in the process of significant change. Within the Department of Energy Environment and Climate Change Action, this is an internal reform, apparently driven by budgetary constraints, resulting in the significant loss of jobs within Bushfire and Forest Management Services in regional Victoria. Similarly, Parks Victoria has recently done similar, and the Minister for the Environment has announced a review.

Of note, other government process and policy imperatives around Traditional Owner self-determination and the renewal of Victoria's public land legislation (including the creation of a new Public Land Act), will greatly influence the future management of Gippsland's forests.