

Gippsland forest dialogue

Forest Recreation: Heyfield Wetland Centre

22nd – 23rd November



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Acknowledgement of country	3
.....	3
Executive summary	4
What we heard	4
Opportunities for change	5
Next steps.....	5
In essence.....	6
Introduction	7
Why we gather?	7
Why this topic and why now?.....	7
Who was involved?	8
How the process works?	8
Co-Chairs	9
Scoping the dialogue.....	10
Dialogue context	10
Aims and objectives.....	11
The dialogue process	11
Opportunities for change	12
Overarching Co-Chair synthesis	12
GFD strategies for action.....	14
Future directions	14
Next steps.....	14
What we heard: Key themes.....	15
Key insights	15
Local problems, local solutions	16
Policy: transparency and evaluation.....	17
Education	18
Forest values.....	20
Forest behaviour.....	21
Fracture lines	22
Wave analysis	23
Reflections	25

Dialogue evaluation	25
Learnings for future dialogues	26
Participant feedback.....	27
Acknowledgements.....	28
Appendices	29
Government context	29
Jindivick dialogue report.....	35
Heyfield dialogue scoping report	36
Participants list	37
Event overview	38
Further reading	45
GFD get involved	45
What's next	45
Our strategic plan	45

Acknowledgement of country

The Gippsland Forest Dialogue organises events across the Traditional Lands of the Gunaikurnai, Bunurong, Wurundjeri Woi-Wurrung, Taungurung peoples, and into the lands of the First Nations of far East Gippsland, the Moogji, Bidhawal/Bidwell/Bidwall and Monero peoples. The Heyfield event was hosted on the lands of the Gunaikurnai.

We pay our respects to the Elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded. We acknowledge the Traditional Owners on whose lands we tread as the original custodians of Country, their enduring rights, and that many of the issues we discuss are the product of settlement.

We open the door to hear and respond, to listen and to learn, to understand and acknowledge their individual and collective voice. We aspire to strengthen partnerships and acknowledge that increasing agency for traditional owners comes through ongoing conversations and working together.



Executive summary

In November, community members, recreational users, land managers, Traditional owners, academics, local organisations and people with long connections to Gippsland's forests came together in Heyfield to explore on shared question:

How can we enjoy, care for and protect our forests in ways that honour their many values and support the communities who depend on them?

The Heyfield Recreation dialogue built on earlier conversations held at Jindivick in 2024. Together, participants explored the changing landscape of forest recreation – from growing visitor numbers and shifting demographics, to the pressures on land managers, to the opportunities emerging through new government initiatives such as the Great Outdoors Taskforce and the Healthy Forest Plan pilots.

Across two days of field visits. Shared meals, presentations and small group conversations, several strong themes emerged.

What we heard

Local knowledge matters

People want to see local experience, lived knowledge and community voices meaningfully included in decisions about forest access, recreation and management. Many felt that policy is often shaped far from the places it affects.

Trust and transparency

Participants expressed frustration with unclear decision making, limited evaluation of policy impacts, and a sense that community input does not always influence outcomes.

Education is essential

With more visitors, including culturally and linguistically diverse communities and people new to the bush, there is a growing need for practical, accessible education about safety, behaviour, cultural values and environmental care. Education is also needed for land managers to understand the needs and views of these new visitors.

Forest values are diverse

People connect with forests in many ways: through recreation, culture, family history, wellbeing, work and identify. These values sometimes align and sometimes conflict, and managing this diversity requires care and collaboration.

Behaviour impacts the forest and experience of others

Vandalism, unsafe practices, unmanaged tracks and high impact activities were raised as concerns. Participants saw value in a shared charter or common ground agreement to guide respectful behaviour.

First nations leadership is growing

Joint management and Traditional Owner aspirations are reshaping the future of public land. Participants recognised the importance of listening to and working alongside First Nations communities, and the growing demand and interest in First Nation cultural experience.

Emergency and safety pressures are increasing

Fires, floods, blue green algae, road conditions and ill-prepared or inexperienced visitors all shape how people access and experience forests.

Opportunities for change

Participants explored several practical opportunities:

- Empowering local people through involvement in maintenance, education, mentoring and decision making
- Developing shared behavioural expectations, such as a Gippsland Forest Charter
- Strengthening education, especially for new visitors, families or schools
- Supporting volunteerism and exploring new models for community-based stewardship
- Improving transparency in policy development and evaluation
- Creating spaces for cross-recreational collaboration
- Building stronger partnerships with Traditional Owners
- Exploring sustainable funding models, including social enterprise approaches

Next steps

Participants expressed a strong desire to keep the conversation going. Suggested next steps included:

- Ongoing contact with dialogue participants
- Sharing the dialogue report widely
- Engaging with youth and schools
- Hosting information sessions with Government and peak bodies
- Learning from international best practice via the global Forest Dialogue network
- Using opportunities like the Healthy Forest Plan pilots to elevate Gippsland voices

- Inclusion of voices not heard at the dialogue our underrepresented in ongoing conversation (all abilities, First Nations, CALD communities)

In essence...

The Heyfield recreation dialogue showed that, whilst there are many opinions, Gippslanders care deeply about their forests, not only as places to visit, but as places that shape identity, wellbeing, culture and community life.

People want to be involved. They want to be heard and they want to help shape a future where recreation, environment, culture and community can all thrive together.



Introduction

Why we gather?

The Gippsland Forest Dialogue (GFD) was created to bring people together — people who care about forests, who use them, who study them, who work in them, who live beside them, and who hold knowledge about them. Since 2022, the GFD has offered a space where diverse voices can meet on equal footing, share perspectives, and explore how Gippsland’s forests can be cared for into the future.

The Dialogue model is adapted from The Forests Dialogue (TFD), an international initiative based at Yale University. It is built on three simple principles:

Engage

bring people together in a safe, respectful environment

Explore

listen deeply, learn from one another, and understand the complexity of forest issues

Change

identify opportunities for collaboration and positive action Gippsland is the first region in Australia to adopt this model, and the Heyfield Recreation Dialogue is the seventh event held since the group began.

Why this topic and why now?

Recreation in Gippsland’s forests is growing rapidly. More people are visiting, more activities are emerging, and more communities are looking to forests for wellbeing, connection, and economic opportunity, especially with the cessation of native forest logging and Government initiatives such as the Great Outdoors taskforce. At the same time, land managers face increasing pressures — from climate impacts to reduced resources — and Traditional Owners are taking on greater leadership roles in land management.

The Heyfield Dialogue was designed to explore these shifts. It built on a scoping conversation held at Jindivick in 2024, where participants identified five key themes that needed deeper discussion:

1. Local problems, local solutions
2. Transparency and evaluation of government policy
3. Education and connection
4. The value of forest recreation
5. Forest behavior and shared expectations

Who was involved?

The Gippsland Forest Dialogue (GFD) brought together 40 people with a wide mix of experience, background and perspectives, including:

- Recreational users – from mountain bike riders to 4wders, horse riders, walkers and campers
- Local residents and community leaders
- Traditional owners
- Land managers and government representatives
- People working in tourism, conservation, farming, education and industry
- Individuals with long personal or family connections to Gippsland's forests

The diversity of voices was one of the dialogue's greatest strengths. Many participants noted that they rarely have the chance to speak with people outside their usual networks, and that these conversations were some of the most valuable parts of the event. Of course, not all voices were represented and GFD will continue to reach out to involve anyone interested.

How the process works?

The Dialogue unfolded over two days and included:

- A field visit to local recreation sites
- Presentations from participants and co-chairs
- Small-group discussions
- Shared meals and informal conversations
- Reflection sessions to draw out insights and themes

The process is intentionally non-adversarial. It is not about debating or winning an argument. It is about listening, understanding, and building relationships that can support better decisions and stronger communities.

Participants are asked to:

- Share their knowledge and perspectives
- Listen with curiosity and respect
- Encourage others to speak
- Protect the privacy of individuals and the confidentiality of personal stories

The GFD does not advocate for specific positions or outcomes. Instead, it creates the conditions for collaboration — and trusts that good ideas emerge when people feel safe, heard and valued.

Co-Chairs

The conversations were led and facilitated by two passionate Gippslanders.

Liz Clay

Liz has a long history of environmental advocacy and involvement in community. Hailing from Noojee, Liz has ridden many of the horse trails of Gippsland and has a strong connection to people across the region.

Dan Salzman

Hailing from Swifts creek Dan is an outdoor enthusiast and super keen mountain bike rider. He has worked on forest industry transition and forest management planning, bushfire and emergency response and has a strong connection to Gippsland.



Scoping the dialogue

Dialogue context

Recreation in our forests is important to both those visiting and those living in Gippsland. Gippsland's forests have much to offer including:

State forest

- There are 300 formal recreation sites in State Forest including 68 campsites, 87-day visitor areas, 73 walking tracks and 4 formal mountain bike tracks.
- State forest promotes 5 extensive 4wd trails across the region
- Other key recreational uses are fossicking, fishing, canoeing, horse riding, trail bikes and educational programs
- High use sites include Toorong Falls, Noojee Trestle Bridge, Cooper Creek, Blue Pool, Mt Taylor MTB,
- Formal Visitor monitoring indicates over 300,000 visits per annum but the number is substantially more than this

National Parks

- Visitation to PV managed land is popular with highlights including Wilsons Prom, Gippsland Lakes, Cape Conran and Buchan Caves
- Parks Victoria doesn't keep specific figures for visitation to Gippsland but reports 80 million annual visits to national parks and reserves and estimates 1.7 million annually in Gippsland

Private forests

- "Plantations are used by groups and individuals for activities including mountain biking and four-wheel driving"

More detailed context of the Victorian Government, DEECA and Parks Victoria is contained in the appendices

Aims and objectives

The aims of the Forest Recreation dialogue were to:

- Bring a broad range of recreation stakeholders together to investigate the issues in managing our forests for recreation.
- Foster collaboration among stakeholders, allowing interested parties to learn from one another, trust each other, and synthesise current knowledge and
- Provide a Gippsland perspective on forest recreation to government in response to their Great Outdoors policy initiative

The dialogue process

The forest dialogue is an engagement approach developed at Yale University and practised in a number of countries around the world. It involves a process of engage, explore and change. Gippsland is the first Forest Dialogue group in Australia, formed 3 years ago and this is the 6th dialogue that has been conducted in that time.

Appendix “Event overview” provides a detailed overview of the content and discussion held over the two days.

What you can expect attending a dialogue

The purpose of the dialogue and the group is to build trust and connection across stakeholders and community members interested in the future of our forests. Our intent is to provide a safe and respectful space where people can come and share their thoughts and importantly listen to views of others.

The group is not a decision maker or an advocate for any specific view or position. Whilst we look for opportunities for collaborative change, we do not force this.

Part of that safe place is that whilst we report on the conversation, but we do so in a way representing the various views but not specifically identifying individuals or their particular comments.

There is no guarantee of any specific outcome from a dialogue other than the building of relationships and learning you may take away for yourself or your work or interests.

What is expected of participants

Participants are expected to approach the dialogue consistent with this in mind.

- To share knowledge and perspectives
- To listen to others and show them respect and encourage their voice
- To be open and curious and willing to empathise with others
- To respect the privacy of participants and the confidentiality of what is shared

Opportunities for change

Emerging trends

- Increased visitation to forests by culturally and linguistically diverse groups, some of which have little experience or history with the forest environment. The forests need to be accessible to all groups including all abilities requirements
- Decreasing resources and centralisation of management and policy making, at the detriment of local knowledge or input
- Diversification of forest users and growth of recreation pursuits such as mountain bike riding, forest wellbeing activities, 4wding and hunting.
- Increased use and pressure on key recreational facilities and resultant vandalism and restricted capacity to maintain sites
- Decline of timber and other industries in Gippsland and increasing role of tourism and forest recreation in the economy and future of Gippsland
- Climate change and impacts on forests and the environment in terms of fires, floods, algal blooms and consequences to users such as safety and access
- Traditional owner self-determination and joint management of public land.

Overarching Co-Chair synthesis

The major takeaways from the Heyfield Recreation dialogue included:

- The importance of diverse voices and sharing knowledge to get the best outcomes
- There is an opportunity right now for local people to be involved as Government responds to the Great Outdoors taskforce through initiatives like the healthy forest plan pilots in Noojee and Orbost.
- The need to be clear in expectation management of participants as to what the dialogue is and isn't
- The need to break down perceptions of the GFD as over represented of certain views or experiences
- A very diverse group and number of people gave up their weekend and participated and expanded their networks across Gippsland
- There is a need for some type of cross recreation forum so the needs of various recreation users can be shared
- Local communities need to be involved and empowered in management of forests and recreation, but there are challenges in volunteerism
- There is a desire to explore decentralised community-based models and investigate sustainable funding models including user pays principles

- Whilst local involvement is important, it is also important to recognise many visitors come from Melbourne and there is growing demand from non-traditional and ethnic groups which requires their engagement and participation
- All abilities needs must be included in planning and consultation

In introductory remarks the following observations were made by participants:

- Many participants have family connections to bush and the land
- Being in forests provides a sense of place, peace and calmness
- Forests are home for other beings not just trees and humans
- Many gave examples of personal observations of negative change in the forests due to fire or forest uses and that they do not provide the same experience opportunities as when they were younger
- Many were concerned about the lack of opportunities for kids to connect with forests in the way they did and administrative and social barriers to this connection, e.g. the paperwork required to take a school group to the forest

In reflection on the first day's presentations and field trips, participants made the following observations:

- In addition to formal agenda discussion, One-on-one conversations with other participants were important and thought-provoking
- There is a tendency for government processes to engage people living in the local communities, but the experience from the field trip emphasised the need to think about who the people who use the places as many may not be residents of the region.
- Forest bathing session was a good opportunity for the reflection and appreciation of small details in the forest
- The dialogue provided a platform to meet new people you may not usually associate with or come into contact with.
- Discussions explored increasing access for recreation, but such access may come at the expense of the environment.
- In increasing access to recreation, there is a need to be more aware of the environmental impact and striking a balance
- The definition of recreation can differ across people, while some look at recreation in the context of 4WD driving, others are focussed on activities with families, and that access can allow opportunities for education and getting more in touch with nature
- What is 'acceptable recreation' and who decides? Respect the bush means different things to different people?
- Will a 'recreation industry' replace the timber industry but have just as many impacts? What is the potential impact of recreation and how can high use, high intensity uses be managed?
- How to maintain freedom of access. Some concerns about more constraints through proposals to license bush users
- How can community groups control trail development and their impacts?

- Grassroots effort like the MTB club is a good example of having that balance between recreation and protecting the environment
- There may be a disconnect between policymakers in Melbourne and communities, but the voluntary participation of Chloe on the first day shows that the government is willing to listen to community voices and this presents an opportunity to leverage changes
- May need to expand community concept to a community of users, not a place-based group
- More funding should be invested on maintenance rather than on other developments
- Need to make sure policies are made on a place-based level
- Education is very important with the need to start young regarding 'acceptable behaviour' and respect.
- Where does citizen science fit?
- How can First Nations people be more involved and bring their concept of respect for elders and traditional knowledge to decision making

GFD strategies for action

- Initiation of ongoing contact with dialogue participants to build on the conversations
- Report to government on the dialogue and value of this mechanism to give voice to local communities in Gippsland
- Greater engagement of key voices not at the dialogue including First Nations
- Investigate a universal Code of conduct for forest recreationalists
- Reach out to CALD communities and all abilities to better represent their voices

Future directions

Investigate ways to keep the conversation and formed relationships going

Looked to international best practice via the international FD community of practice

Take advantage of opportunities such as the pilot Forest Health plans to promote the views and perspectives of Gippslanders.

Next steps

Conduct an information session with key peak stakeholder groups and government policy makers on the dialogue and potential follow up and collaborative opportunities

Look for ways to promote the report and related issues across Gippsland including involving youth and potential collaborations with schools.

What we heard: Key themes

Across the two days in Heyfield, participants shared stories, concerns, hopes and lived experiences that revealed a rich and complex picture of forest recreation in Gippsland. While people came from different backgrounds and held different priorities, several themes emerged again and again — often expressed with deep care for both the forests and the communities connected to them.

These themes reflect not only what people said, but what they meant: the values behind their words, the frustrations beneath the surface, and the aspirations that brought them to the Dialogue in the first place.

Key insights

Climate impact. A changing climate will provide challenges to forest visitation and enjoyment including safety issues associated with emergency events, access issues associated with Blue Green Algal events and environmental issues associated with increased vulnerability of some biodiversity communities.

High visitation sites. Some areas, like Cheyne's Bridge are being negatively impacted by overuse. Balancing equity in access, providing for a range of users and managing conflicting recreational activities can create problems. Involvement of the users themselves in this issue may lead to sustainable outcomes and resolution.

The Victorian Government panels and taskforces are consulting with community about the future of their forests, but people feel disempowered and do not trust that their views will influence decisions. Announcements such as the pilot Forest Health plans for Noojee and Orbost offer a chance to build back this trust if managed well.

Forest user behaviour can create issues impacting on the environment and also costing considerable funds in site maintenance and repair, including vandalism. A Gippsland Forests Charter of Common Ground (an intergenerational agreement) could provide a statement of shared values and aspirations and behavioural standards, outlining responsibilities that go with access.

New approaches to managing funding for recreational opportunities and especially ongoing maintenance are needed. The Dialogue participants were supportive of ideas like the social enterprise maintenance model developed by Destination Gippsland for maintenance of mountain bike and walking trails. Volunteers continue to be an important resource but recruitment is harder, the cohort aging and we need to investigate new volunteer models, especially those attractive to young people.

Decreased community connection or knowledge of forests. With less people living and working in the forest areas, there is a reduction in connection and an influx of people,

mostly from cities with little bush knowledge. There is an opportunity to involve local people to help in this education of forest visitors.

Safety issues for forest recreationalists. Perhaps tied to visitation by new user demographics and loss of connection to forests, there is a growing safety risk to visitors, from such hazards as mine shafts, waterways (increased drownings), vehicle accidents on remote and low standard roads and search and rescue of lost visitors. If we encourage people into the great outdoors, we need to help them understand the risks and how to be prepared.

The increasing demand for cultural experiences in our forests and role of First Nations people as land managers. Recognised groups are taking up joint management of areas of public land and this is likely to increase and in place transition to sole management. Traditional owners will have their own land management aspirations that need to be listened to and integrated into future management of forests.

As well as these general insights, 5 key issues were identified at Jindivick and further explored at Heyfield.

Local problems, local solutions

Whilst policy for consistency is developed at a Statewide level, often the implications of its implementation locally are not understood. Opportunities are lost and unintended impacts occur due to lack of involvement of local people.

Both dialogues explored how we can involve locals, in both policy and its implementation to obtain the best results for the State, the environment and local communities.

Ideas discussed included:

- Involving and empowering user groups in such matters as site maintenance
- Using locals in education programs with visitors, including advise on hazards or prevailing conditions
- Training roles for locals to become rangers and work in their area
- Establishing mentor programs to support locals to leadership or influencer roles
- Getting young people involved and motivated and connected to their local areas before they leave and head to urban areas
- Value the knowledge and incentivise locals to work collaboratively with land agencies for better outcomes – this could include financial reward for participation.

It was also noted at a policy level sometimes the implications of decisions on locals and on the forests are not fully considered in an impact or consequence analysis. Proposed programs should start small and have working models to draw out insights and learnings for larger scale implementation.

Issues like pest management can benefit from local knowledge and intelligence. One idea explored was local management or reference boards, similar to Lakes and Catchment community panels to oversee decisions and Government program implementation.

Forests are also important for the mental health of locals and visitors, anxiety in young people, depression in adults in isolated locations are on the rise and connection to forests can have a positive impact. Also, programs like forest therapy and outreach programs need support.

Some discussion at the dialogue focussed on outdoor education and access and opportunities for school children. For very valid safety and wellbeing reasons access is strictly managed but we need to not lose sight of the importance of children getting to be a part of their environment.

Ideas discussed included:

- Youth leadership programs including Broadening Horizons or local council youth councils to discuss forests
- Connecting local schools to local forests in their curricula
- Increasing investment and support to teachers to get kids out in the forest
- Holiday programs for kids and concepts such as the 'summer by the sea' program for forest areas

Discussion also included the loss of skills and resources in local communities to be actively involved in forest management, due to efficiencies of scale and centralisation of works programs.

Local people want to be empowered to be a part of the solution as they are the ones most impacted by decisions about the forests they live in.

Policy: transparency and evaluation

Both the Jindivick and Heyfield dialogues noted a discord between statewide policy and local impact and consequence of policy.

A further theme was the evaluation of policy and accountability for decision making. This suggests a lack of appropriate evaluation of decisions and their consequences. The dialogues explored how to get more regional or local input into policy development and evaluation.

There was also a perception in participants of the agenda being run by influential groups or agencies with the ear of government without reference to local concerns or perspectives. This perception has led to or reinforced a lack of trust and lack of opportunity for local people to influence broader Government decision making or policy development.

Both dialogues looked for ways to increase the participation and voice of local communities, as they have a unique perspective and understanding of consequences

of policy and also a valuable voice in how policy is implemented, especially as local communities are the most Impacted by decisions.

Dialogues discussed ways to integrate local perspectives, including exploration of local decision-making models, such as CMA models of community boards.

There were also questions around how to get more regional governance in land management, with ideas including regional spaces to share information like a crucial incident centre, making authority more local.

Evaluation, renewal and review we identified as critical components not paid enough attention in current government processes.

In many instances communities have sought evidence and information on which to base or validate a decision and transparency was again identified as an issue. Freedom of information being one mechanism but one of last resort and looking for more proactive means.

Some potential solutions or ways forward explored at both dialogues included:

- Incorporation of different stakeholders' opinion
- Greater emphasis on the idea of accountability
- Local-scale and use of local knowledge in local policies
- An emphasis on evaluation and transparency
- The use of adaptive or trial-and-error systems, allowing learning and change
- Creation of test case landscapes or trials of land management that work – something to model other approaches off. This may align with the proposed Healthy Forest plans in Orbost and Noojee.
- 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.
- Open dialogue with the community, not testing of predetermined decisions.
- Focus on the metrics that matter to evaluate these – decided by local communities.
- Co-operative land management – or community land management models.
- A “Social Contract for Local Forests”

Education

The Dialogue noted both the need for investment in education to better connect people to the forests, behave appropriately, recreate safely, contribute to their management and to take advantage of opportunities to educate visitors to Gippsland.

Learning about the forests, cultural and historic heritage and the flora and fauna are growing areas of interest for visitors to the region.

Education programs need to provide a balance of science, local knowledge, cultural knowledge and historic perspective.

There are many examples of programs which could be adapted to forests or expanded. Options explored at the dialogue included:

- Nature steward programs
- Programs targeted at new and emerging visitor groups, especially CALD communities with cultural appropriate and diverse language delivery
- Adapting or extending the junior ranger program across land tenures
- Family based learning models
- Greater use of virtual education by provision of YouTube, use of influencers
- Specialists to assist schools in forest outreach, making it easier for teachers to get students out in the forest
- Reinvigoration of the forest centre model (e.g. Toolangi)
- An adaptation of the summer by the sea coordinated program to a forest setting emphasising safety

There is a growing trend of active participation in forest science programs (citizen science) especially monitoring and this could be expanded.

It was also discussed that there needs to be education of the decision makers with locals having a chance to explain their country.

It was also noted that post COVID there has been an influx of new residents and opportunities should be made to educate them on living in a bush environment.

Forest behaviour and how it manifests in things like vandalism, interference with native plants and animals and lack of knowledge or respect for cultural heritage also needs to be addressed with visitors to change a culture of entitlement to one valuing the forest and the opportunity to recreate in it/

- Different aspects of education should be respected; equal value should be placed on education about behaviour and safety
- Examples like a nature stewards' program can be an opportunity
- While targeted programs for the various user groups and multicultural groups can be effective, there is also a need to understand the inherent risks in that and balance both cultural norms and safety
- Ideas of junior ranger programs and family-based collaborative models, where parents and kids can learn together
- Need to hold citizen science to the same rigour as any other science
- Growing trend of people getting information in the virtual space means that virtual education will become increasingly important to target those people (e.g. use of YouTube etc.)
- Locals should be granted a space to tell their stories
- Stories from TOs need to be integrative collaboratively instead of having distinctions

Forest values

With limited financial resources of government and reduced presence in the region of land agency staff, it is important to find new and creative ways to maintain recreation sites and continue to ensure of the safety of forest visitors.

Volunteers have always played a large role but there are challenges in maintaining this, especially recruitment to avoid fatigue and over reliance on a committed few.

The dialogue explored the proposition that if people value the opportunity, then they should be willing to contribute to the maintenance of recreation sites and access. It was further pointed out that if people do not pay, then they can de-value it believing it is someone else's problem. Recent efforts to make campsites free in some national parks, whilst intended to increase use, saw the system abused, people booked and held sites speculatively then did not show up as there was no penalty, the result reduced not more visitation.

A number of user pays propositions were discussed including:

- Honour systems
- Site memberships (which can create a platform to communicate to users about expectations, rights and responsibilities. Membership also creates a sense of connection and ownership)
- Local management of funds – revenue retention where it is generated and collected
- Investigating international models – for example use of QR code parking at trailheads (Scotland)
- Sponsorship of recreation assets, by individuals or organisations (example Bibbulum Track WA “dunny donor: scheme)

It is also important to be able to articulate the value forests bring into the economy so investment by Government has a consequential link. If not well thought out revenue collection can be cost burden in itself, also there needs to be equity in that it is affordable for all and doesn't promote elite access.

The value of forests in general, not just visitor revenue generation needs to be factored in so investment to ameliorate impacts of recreation can demonstrate a positive environmental outcome. For example, it is worth fixing up roads, not just so more people can come but also so you reduce impacts on water quality of road users and impacts on other environmental factors.

Forest behaviour

Forest recreation can lead to poor behaviour of visitors if:

- They do not value the forest or experience
- They do not understand the consequences of their behaviour on other forest values
- They have different cultural understanding of forests and recreation
- They are unaware of expectations in their behaviour when visiting the forests
- There is no sense of consequence for bad behaviour

The dialogue explored the concept of establishing high level principles that everyone who wants to use forests have to agree to, with specific additional requirements for particular uses.

In part this is accepting that forest recreation will involve a trade off with other values, but if activities are managed in areas away from high cultural or environmental value or in ways which minimise the impact then some level of disturbance associated with the activity can be justified. In turn it will acceptance from users that at times other values may override their right of access, e.g. track damage over winter, sighting of a threatened species etc.

It is a challenge getting everyone signed up, but there are international models and user specific codes of behaviour with much commonality, to draw upon.

A nuanced approach is needed to ensure checks and balances are in place and that recreationalists are part of this process and have some ownership and accountability. Many recreation groups want to do the right thing, and their presence in the forest gives them knowledge beyond their activity which can be useful in overall values management, be that species, historic heritage, cultural heritage or emergency management.

A component of any charter or licence or permitting system is enforcement and resources need to be available for this and again peak recreation bodies can play a part.

In exploring the concept of a charter or principles of forest behaviour the following were discussed:

- 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

Fracture lines

The co-chairs identified the following 'fracture lines' – defined as sources of points of disagreement and uncertainty between stakeholders.

It is important to articulate these areas of contention or tension and find ways to listen and understand differing viewpoints.

Key fracture points included:

- Impact of forest recreation on ecological values and if any harm can be justified in a broader land management program and balancing forest values
- User pays principles and level of access to the forest for recreationalists
- Illegal building of facilities and tracks on crown land
- Different needs and cultural expectations of emerging user groups.
- Disconnect between urban policy and visitors and rural people



Wave analysis



Wave analysis is a participatory process to help a group analyse how things currently operate and future possibilities. It is used in order to plan realistically for the future.



New Edges: New ideas or concepts that are not realised but could emerge over the next few years
Increasing diversity of volunteer groups
New volunteer groups and new ways of engaging volunteers
First Hike model – introducing migrants into the bush
Technology in forest visitation and management – drones, AI
State principles with Regional Place based variation
Collaborative restoration projects
New government models in forest collaboration
New governance models – Gippsland Lakes committee model
Emerging trends: Still experimental but are on the move
Use of technology – role of social media
Healthy forest plans – place based
New funding models – private and public blended funding
Cultural heritage tourism – Tali Karn Cultural Heritage trail model with GLaWAC
Eco certification – East Gippsland shire
All abilities access – opening up of forests to Victorians
Long distance walking trails
Devolution of power to first nations groups – joint to sole management
Traditional Owner aspirations for forest management
Principles of forest use
Changing user demographics – new communities
Event based recreation – rave parties etc
Segmentation of forests
Dark sky tourism
Constrained government funding
Established norms: current standard operating environment
Environmental education is quite strong in schools at present
Mixed use recreation model
Sense of entitlement – free access and use
Prioritised management of values – cultural, biodiversity etc
Safety – campfires, roads etc
User responsibility issues – inc vandalism, littering and behavioural issues
Dying practices: we keep doing even though they are no longer relevant or effective
Easy access for school kids (prohibitive regulation)
Cattle grazing in high country
Sluice boxes in rivers
Traditional volunteer models – need new approaches
Drivers – undercurrents
Tensions between user groups – passive vs active (motorised) activities
Education – curriculum barriers, safety/procedural barriers to getting out there
Aging population in almost all Gippsland shires
Overseas trends and opportunities to learn – governance models, volunteer programs, fundraising and investment models and Codes of conduct
Climate change
Population increase / demand increase (in cities – main recreation users)

In summary

- 41 participants
- 188 voices (hats worn by participants)
- Strong voices (well represented views)
 - Forest lovers, long term residents, academics, bushwalkers, volunteers, public servants, environmentalists, multi gen Gippslanders, parents
- Weak voices (under represented views)
 - Visitors, young people, new residents, migrants, local govt, first nations, hunters, motor bike riders, tourist providers
- Voices not heard (not in the room)
 - All abilities, multi-cultural forest users, city people (key visitors), dog walkers

Learnings for future dialogues

Investigate direct marketing to key groups including youth, First Nations, CALD communities and all abilities advocates.

Explain the dialogue process and the GFD group so people know what they are getting into (expectation management)

Consider alternate structures – e.g. one day events, agenda, more open discussion

Consider a registration fee to assist with cost management



Participant feedback

Participants were asked to provide their feedback on the dialogue via a survey one week post event.

Participants were asked to rate their satisfaction with the event, its structure, logistics and communication on a scale from 1 to 5.

The following ratings were achieved:

- Overall satisfaction: 4.11
- Structure of event: 4.29
- Logistics: 4.71
- Communication: 4.43

Ideas to improve

- Overly ambitious agenda, 2 days too long
- Zoom option for presenters,
- New formats: Friday evening and Saturday
- Online chats during event (remote peeps can follow)

What did you like best

- Opportunity for everyone to be heard
- Spectrum of participants, Respect shown to all, Tough conversations
- Socializing, everyone heard and respected

What would you change

- Rather than jam packed agenda a slower event
- An evening speaker
- Emphasize dialogue not about outcomes – expectation management

Would you recommend a dialogue to colleagues or friends

- 78% definitely, 22% maybe

Who is not here who should be

- First nations, Youth, People with disabilities, multi-cultural, city folk

Dialogue topics to consider

- Ones of interest to conservationists
- Cultural land management practices
- Agroforestry, Logging and fire history
- Active biodiversity management

Acknowledgements

Sponsors

GFD would like to acknowledge the support of Wellington Shire in the conduct of this dialogue and the provision of funding via their small grants program

Co-Chairs

GFD would like to thank Liz and Dan for their facilitation of the event and production of this report

Scribes

GFD would like to thank Rod Keenan and Ming Hui Choy for their note taking at the event

Presenters

GFD would like to thank the following presenters and speakers at the event

Paul Brooker – DEECA – Cheyne's Bridge campsite

Mike Dower – PV – Management of Blores Hill

Nicholas King – Mountain bike riding strategy

Jess Barrett – Forest therapy exercise

Wendy – Heyfield Wetlands presentation

Ewan Waller – Gunaikurnai perspective

Wally Notman – report on Jindivick

Chloe Ward – Great Outdoors taskforce

Providers

GFD would like to thank for following locals for making this a success

The volunteers of the Wetland centre

Heyfield bakery for catering

Adington farm B&B for accommodation

Blue Line buses for transport

The view from here – promotional material

Appendices

Government context

Victorian Government policy context

Tourism is an important industry for Gippsland. It generates an estimated \$1 Billion for our local economy (Destination Gippsland). The region attracted 7 million visitors in 2019, and after a drop during COVID has recovered and is expected to grow.

Gippsland's natural beauty is a key asset to this industry and also the reason many of its 300,000 residents live here. Over 60% of Gippsland's land base is forested public land.

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".

Just before the commencement of the Taskforce's public consultation period the following statement was posted on their Engage Vic site; "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 were 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 survey closed on 12 January 2025. GFD lodged a submission which was the report produced from the Jindivick dialogue. The taskforce then lodged its recommendations with Government.

On 21st October 2025, the Government released its response to the Great Outdoors taskforce recommendations.

<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/our-plan-victorias-great-outdoors>

The response included the following:

As part of our plan for Victoria’s great outdoors, we’re investing \$30 million to unlock 1.8 million hectares of state forests in Gippsland and North East Victoria with better tracks and trails, and amenities to boost regional tourism.

We want to make sure locals have a say on the projects that matter most to them and how money is spent in their patch of the bush – that’s why we’re investing \$4 million to pilot Healthy Forest Plans with the Orbost and Noojee communities.

We’re also investing \$14.2 million to improve tracks and trails, campgrounds and toilets as well as upgrades at key spots like Heyfield’s Cheyne’s Bridge Recreation Area, Buckland Valley Visitor Experience Area and next stage of the Yackandandah Creek Masterplan - creating new reasons for travellers to stop, stay and spend locally.

To keep the bush in top shape, we’re also putting more boots on the ground with \$7.2 million for extra rangers to guide visitors, tackle pests and weeds, and protect native wildlife.

Victorians love getting out into nature – whether it’s camping, hunting, fishing, hiking or just soaking up the quiet. This investment keeps our forests open for everyone to enjoy, now and for generations ahead.

Following the end of native timber harvesting, the Government commissioned the Great Outdoors Taskforce to reimagine the future of Victoria’s forests to meet community expectations.

Informed by extensive consultation and expert advice from the Eminent Panel for Community Engagement, we are releasing the Government's Response, backed by targeted investment to promote community access, support regional economies, and better manage the forest.

In 2021, the Government announced it would create three national parks, two conservation parks, and seven new and expanded regional parks in the state's central west. This legislation is now before the Victorian Parliament and there will be no further changes to our state forests.

More details are provided on the DEECA website

<http://www.deeca.vic.gov.au/futureforests>

The DEECA website notes 4 main actions to be undertaken:

1. Protecting our environment – which includes pest and weeds initiatives, regeneration involving community, extension of Yarra Ranges National Park to include Yarra Tributaries Forest Reserve.
2. Resetting the management framework for state forests – which includes a new public land act, streamlining processes and approvals to make it easier to do things on public land, new recreation facilities and enabling traditional owners' collaborative management of forests
3. Working together for healthy forests – piloting healthy forest plans for Orbost and Noojee, involving the community
4. Driving recreation and tourism investments in regional economies

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.

Forest Management Planning for State Forests

In 2022-2023 DEECA undertook a forest management planning process including assessment of peoples use and enjoyment of forests.

Feedback from consultation processes included:

- Involving the community in decision making
- Ensuring tourism benefits local communities whilst protecting the natural landscape
- Balance economic benefits with lifestyle of locals

- Involve Traditional owners and ensure sustainable economic livelihoods for their people
- Improve educational opportunities, forest access and the collection and sharing of information
- Improve the regulation and compliance of recreational users

Overarching themes included:

- Concern about track closures
- Quality of information on Departmental systems and websites
- Overcrowded campsites
- Concerns about anti-social behaviour
- Concern regarding broader policy such as firewood collection
- Appreciation of upgraded recreational facilities and the More to Explore app

Notable issues included:

- Campfires – unattended or non-compliant with regulations
- Inappropriate visitor behaviour
- Conflict between user groups (eg trailbikes on walking tracks) and with communities
- Traffic management into and out of popular sites
- Illegal tree felling and harassment of wildlife
- Vandalism of recreation sites
- Water pollution
- Illegal camping
- Littering, disposal of faeces
- Safety – number of search and rescue callouts, deaths (drownings, mine shafts)
- Lack of tenure awareness
- Coordination of information across agencies
- Competing demands on staff, recreation/land management/emergency management and prioritisation

As part of the planning process, DEECA via social research identified 6 visitor profiles to match their recreational assets and experiences to, these were:

- Country enjoyment – older or infrequent sightseers with relatively low engagement with the outdoors
- Nature walker – enjoy nature and the escape it offers through bushwalks and outdoor activities they can enjoy with their dog
- Leisure camper – tend to be younger and full-time workers. For them nature offers the ability to relax, unwind and have fun

- Outdoor adventurer – tend to be younger, high-income males. They spend a lot of time outdoors participating in many high energy activities
- Backcountry pursuits – highly engaged with the outdoors. Motivated by a challenge, they are typically participating in a wide range of activities
- Nature learner and carer – this group likes to visit State Forest to understand formal or informal educational experiences

Parks Management

PV manage a number of iconic parks and reserves in Gippsland, covering both land and water. They protect important natural and cultural values at a landscape scale. Many parks and reserves are contiguous to State forests. PV use their Visitor Experience Framework to guide the identify visitor experience areas.

Many of the recreational tracks. Trails and sites that are enjoyed today are based on tracks and sites originally created and used by First Peoples as they lived, travelled and played across the lands and waters of country for thousands of years.

The Gunaikurnai Aboriginal Land and Water Corporation (GLaWAC) and PV have created a structured approach to developing and managing recreation sites and visitation. Joint management plans have been established for 14 public land parks and reserves jointly managed by PV and GLaWAC. These include:

- Buchan Caves Reserve
- Corringale Foreshore Reserve
- Gippsland Lakes Coastal Park
- Lake Tyers State Park
- Mitchell River National Park
- New Guinea Caves
- Raymond Island
- Tarra Bulga National Park
- The Knob Reserve
- The Lakes National Park
- Baw Baw National Park
- Avon Wilderness Park
- Alpine National Park

Each park has a well-developed visitor strategy. The goals and strategies aim to promote and encourage appropriate visitation, awareness and appreciation of Gunaikurnai cultural heritage, and the protection of the natural environment and culturally significant sites.

Jindivick dialogue report

On Saturday 16 November, the Gippsland Forest Dialogue convened a scoping dialogue on the theme of recreation in Gippsland's forests. It was attended by 25 people, mostly West Gippslanders.

A range of views and ideas were put forward by attendees, with discussion around the following:

- Gippsland residents highly value local forests but this is not reflected in Government priorities and investment in facilities
- Some areas are being negatively impacted by overuse. Balancing equity in access, providing for a range of users and uses and managing conflicting recreation users are contentious issues
- Victorian Government panels and taskforces are consulting with community about the future of their forests, but people feel disempowered, are suffering consultation fatigue and do not trust that their views will influence decisions
- 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 forests
- New approaches to managing and funding recreation opportunities in Gippsland's forests are needed. Decentralised decision making and an increased community role will empower local knowledge, capacity and resources resulting in better outcomes for forests
- 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

Some key issues noted were:

- Over utilisation of popular areas
- 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
- Lack of education and awareness of regulations
- Challenges of accommodating different user groups and understanding good practice
- Scarcity of enforcement and people on the ground to manage forest assets
- Lack of leadership from government and desire for an opportunity for greater community voice and participation in forest management
- Fewer children growing up with knowledge and experience of forests

Potential opportunities for change included:

- Increased capacity for local. On ground managers, including joint management with 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

There was concern regarding a basic loss of connection with forests, especially the younger generation. Ideas discussed included:

- Increasing local knowledge in management and policy, especially indigenous knowledge
- Broader education around appropriate uses in different areas
- More awareness of forest natural assets – shared via info centres, guided walks, websites and social media
- Creation of a forest discovery centre with info on tracks and trails, safety, guidelines, heritage etc
- Forest experiential education – outdoor ed programs
- Holiday programs for kids, to explore pathways of using forests for therapy/wellbeing programs
- Welcome new residents with community champions to build resilience and connection to towns and improve disaster preparation

Five themes, highlighting the discussion and issues explored at the dialogue, were identified and provide a starting point for this Heyfield dialogue. These themes and the discussion are detailed in the Opportunities for dialogue section.

Heyfield dialogue scoping report

A scoping paper was prepared, using the Jindivick dialogue to help guide the conversation at Heyfield. This paper was sent to all participants ahead of the dialogue, a copy is available on our webpage.

Participants list

The following people registered for the event

Peter West, Tom Mabin, Peter Devonshire, Mick Harrington (registered not in attendance), Cheryl Drayton (registered not in attendance), Francine Hall, Prue Hasler, John Hasler, Liz Langford, Rod Keenan, Wendy Wright, Oli Moraes, Jo Lewis, David Francis Foreman, Wally Notman, Nicholas King, Neil Barraclough, Ming Hui Choy, Ewan Waller, Chris McEvoy, Jess Barrett, Steb Fisher, Caroline Trevorrow, Robyn Gower, Ian Cane (registered not in attendance), Timothy Franke, Emma Birchell, Joe Van Beek, Maurie Killeen, Erin Baxter, Mitch Smith, Barry Howlett, Darren Minto, Paul Brooker, Mike Dower, Chloe Ward, Beth Seamer, Mark Coleman, Dan Salzmann, Liz Clay



Event overview

Day 1 summary

Chris' Acknowledgement of Country and welcome

Points from personal introductions by participants

Family connections to bush and the land

Being in forests provides a sense of place, peace and calmness

Forests are home for other beings not just trees and humans

Many gave examples of personal observations of negative change in the forests due to fire or forest uses and that they do not provide the same experience opportunities as when they were younger

Many were concerned about the lack of opportunities for kids to connect with forests in the way they did and administrative and social barriers to this connection, e.g. the paperwork required to take a school group to the forest

Introduction

- Rod: ideas to set up GFD stem from the global The Forest Dialogue, to provide a platform to establish relationships and generate conversations across stakeholders
- Liz: as a starting point, people come from different backgrounds, but all share the love for forests
- Dan: there is no planned outcome for this dialogue, the journey/process is more important

Agenda for the day

Sharing session by Chloe Ward, Director of Industry and Community Strategy at DEECA, on the government's response to the outcomes from the initial consultation with communities for The Great Outdoors Taskforce and Eminent Panel for Community Engagement, and subsequent discussions

- The government has recently consolidated all the inputs for GOT and EPCE and is in the early planning phase for how those get implemented. Nothing is definitive and there are no answers yet.
- This process provides a huge opportunity for Victoria and the Gippsland region
- State government has allocated \$31.05 million to the response package to carry out a range of initiatives, including on-ground efforts, maintenance of assets, running of longer-term pilot sites etc.
- Responses from the consultation show the desire for state forests to be managed for multiple uses and shift from managing the impacts from native forest harvesting to considering different values such as economic, recreation, and those from Traditional Owners

- There is minimal tenure change being proposed, and in the case of Gippsland, the key changes are around changing the urban north into a conservation park, with strong support from communities and TOs
- There is a need to engage TOs for good outcomes in management, and communities need to be at the centre of forest management plans. This is the focus of the Healthy Forest Management Plan
- A question to Chloe was who sets goals for these plans? Government may have parameters or legislative commitments that can't be changed? How will conflicts between local, place based and broader government expectations be managed?
- Healthy Forest plan pilots to be run and will start second half of the year, with a focus on communities
- The government is interested in getting views on what those pilots and forest plans will look like
- Forest tourism plan proposed to set up a taskforce to identify areas where private companies can invest in tourism infrastructure, and this will focus on state forests
- Calls for moving from passive to strategic management
- Past work on forest management plans will be used to inform the HF and Tourism plans
- Private finance can play a big role given that the government has resource constraints – need creative finance solutions
- Both plans will look at how to move through barriers to promote access to outdoors and explore more opportunities for getting people into nature. Examples could be looking at tackling regulatory barriers or investment
- Place-based concept to community is important
- Further work needed to see where the healthy forest plan sits within DEECA's management framework
- There is currently a strong working relationship with TOs and their reps to explore such issues
- The transition away from timber harvesting has already happened, which involved exploring what alternative industries there are
- Continued conversations with communities are needed to determine whether this process means that forests will be opening up
- Looking at how effective that engagement processes are can help inform future initiatives
- There is a need to balance place-based community perspectives vs state-wide sector perspectives
- It has been 6 years of planning for the diversification from timber harvesting since the initial announcement in 2019, and will take more time but will open up opportunities
- On the question on how there is a need to find a way back to the communities since most of the decision making happens in Melbourne,
- It was suggested the (re)introduction of miscellaneous license to collect things like firewood, as a way for people to reconnect to forests when there has been a loss of such culture due to fragmentation etc.

- Question on how to deal with the loss of livelihood from the end of native forest harvesting, and how to balance the rise of ecotourism with possible introduction of red tapes – Chloe shared the success of the worker transition program from DEECA in helping people find new employment, and reiterated the desire for multiple use as a platform to explore with the community on ways forward
- Dan wrapped up the session by highlighting that these are all opportunities for change, and while change is hard, it is necessary; positive start to look at the healthy forest plans
- Some concerns that plans are being developed ‘on the run’. That there has been a loss of local connection with government, with the closure of Vicforests e.g. obtaining firewood licences or other permits. That more tourism will impact on ‘traditional’ local uses such as hunting and on conservation values.

TO perspective – Ewan (as a board member, representing GLaWAC)

- Ewan acknowledged the absence of TOs at the dialogue, but shared his experiences from involvement with TOs
- On recreation, Elders on Adelaide Hills pointed out that involvement of First Nations people in planning needs to start early, and the Snow River is an example of good planning where good areas are set aside
- Managing forests are just an extension of what TOs have already been doing, they are part of their lives and are not seen as a separate thing
- Forests talk to people, people need to listen and it is evident that our forests need a lot of help with its history of degradation and exploitation
- First Nations feel grief when they see Country disrespected, rubbish dumped etc
- Western perspectives and priorities after bushfires are to rebuild houses and communities, but TOs see the need to heal Country after these events
- Examples of good practices mentioned included the management of the Alpine Ash landscapes, where GLaWC are involved and management is integrated with TOs
- There are important stories to be told from joint management in the high country and ideas of place-based management, these all signify exciting times ahead
- Doing work with TOs will definitely take more time and effort as things like sorry business and culture work can hinder efficiency, but is necessary
- The implementation of additional amenities at Tyers Lake Park is an example of GLaWC implementing feedback from consultation
- Education is key in changing the culture to a more respectful one
- GLaWC wants to be involved with all of the work at the state government level (GOT, EPCE), but they need to fit into the structure of good planning and time is a huge determining factor
- Need a different business model – not volume based, experience based
- There are different languages being used in different cultures (e.g. management vs Caring for Country), and TOs perspectives might not align with western ideas of management; additional work is needed to integrate western and TOs perspectives

Day 2 summary

Participant reflections from day one

- One-on-one conversations with other participants on the way to the field trips were thought-provoking
- There is a tendency for government processes to engage people living in the local communities, but the experience from the field trip emphasised the need to think about who the people who use the places are (many may not be residents of the region)
- Forest bathing session was a good opportunity for the reflection and appreciation of small details in the forest
- The dialogue provided a platform to meet new people that he does not usually associate with, coming from the environmental side
- Discussions from day one mostly explored increasing access for recreation, but such access may come at the expense of the environment (e.g. the creation of mountain bike trails may have detrimental environmental impacts)
- While GOT is focused on healing the impacts of timber harvesting and degradation from other industries including recreation, it was felt like the dialogue fell short on discussing environmental aspects and had the impression that the board is very much aligned with the forest industry, although others disagreed and highlighted that everyone comes from different backgrounds
- In increasing access to recreation, there is a need to be more aware of the environmental impact and striking a balance
- Definition of recreation can differ across people, while some look at recreation in the context of 4WD driving, others are focussed on activities with families, and that access can allow opportunities for education and getting more in touch with nature
- What is 'acceptable recreation' and who decides? Respect the bush means different things to different people?
- Will a 'recreation industry' replace the timber industry but have just as many impacts? What is the potential impact of recreation and how can high use, high intensity uses be managed?
- Everyone cares about the forests and the dialogue is a good place to start discussing such topics as people are open-minded and keen to hear about different perspectives
- How to maintain freedom of access. Some concerns about more constraints through proposals to license bush users
- How can community groups control trail development and their impacts?
- Grassroots effort like the MTB club is a good example of having that balance between recreation and protecting the environment
- Feedback about how the talk from Chloe required more context (there was the use of lots of acronyms), and GFD needs a stronger stance on the power unbalances stemming from Melbourne
- There may be a disconnect between policymakers in Melbourne and communities, but the voluntary participation of Chloe on the first day shows that

the government is willing to listen to community voices and this presents an opportunity to leverage changes

- May need to expand community concept to a community of users, not a place-based group
- More funding should be invested on maintenance rather than on other developments
- Need to make sure policies are made on a place-based level
- Education is very important with the need to start young regarding 'acceptable behaviour' and respect. Challenge is how to reach resistant or informal users who are not part of clubs. Discussion of coastal based programs and how they might be extended to forests.
- Where does citizen science fit?
- How can First Nations people be more involved and bring their concept of respect for elders and traditional knowledge

Jindivick reflections – Wally

- Scoping dialogue for recreation held last year in Jindivick was a lead up to this dialogue
- A lot of uncertainty then around possible changes in land tenure has been cleared up with the release of more details about the outcomes of the GOT and EPCE
- The scoping dialogue discussed ideas about lack of transparency and accountability, education and awareness, accommodating different interest groups, lack of resources and manpower, and lack of desire from government to engage communities more
- Opportunities raised included things like citizen science programs, TO engagement and involvement etc.
- There were concerns then from Cheryl (TO) about the loss of bushcraft knowledge and how to extend that to other communities who have not been exposed to such things growing up
- Participants share common love and respect for forests regardless of what values and opinions they have
- There is a need to nurture the love for forests across generations
- Themes that emerged then: local problems, local solutions; policy transparency and evaluation; education; forest value; forest behaviour

Group activities according to the 5 themes – discuss as a group

The President of the Wetlands Committee gave a presentation on their journey and lessons for local place-based management (Heyfieldwetlands.org.au)

Day 2 than undertook workshops to explore the 5 themes and use wave analysis to look at new and emerging trends.

Field trip

Field trip – Blores Hill mountain bike park

- Sharing session by Nick King Gippsland MTB Inc on grassroots effort to establish a network of mountain bike trails and challenges on seeking funding
- - community association
- Formed in 2008
- Advocate for safe trails across Gippsland
- Need to make it fun
- Many illegal trails
- \$1m federal grant plus \$1m state
- Initial trails here and Colhoun
- Needed to find land - adjacent to mine site
- Now 7 parks, 1000km of shared trails
- Digital trail map
- Solar lighting at hornet hills
- Most bins, signs etc a council responsibility
- Needed funds for trail maintenance etc. 3% of capex, developed ales for trails profit on beer
- Forming a NFP to undertake work, training and skill development in natural resource management. DCM co funded under GOT announcement \$500k
- Allowance for offsets
- Trails coordination forum oversees interaction between different uses
-

Mike Dower from Parks Victoria spoke about

- Complicated land tenure
- Management of the Glenmaggie regional park
- Common sense cooperative arrangement needed
- Box ironbark forest type relatively high CV
- Old tracks used by horses, motor bikes now mountain bikes
- Community engagement and input needed
- Current conflict is limited
- Volunteer input very important

Issues

- risks and flow on litigation
- Funding and resources, multiple sources of finance
- Cultural and heritage values some high values
- Some pushback from HVP about access to pine areas

Forest bathing session led by Jess

- Value of being in forest - mental health, blood pressure etc
- Soft fascination
- Connect with the now

Field trip – Cheyne’s Bridge recreation area Paul, regional manager DEECA

- Sharing session by Paul on the difficulties associated with maintaining the area
- Reflections on social behaviour and recreation use, and ideas of engaging with culturally diverse communities
- Low investment state forest site with picnic tables
- High intensity use, main attraction is no fee, easy access, in the bush, river swimming, fishing, hunting, motor cycles, little control
- High CALD community use, large groups come and completely occupy the site, different cultures have different practices for toileting etc.
- DEECA staff lack cultural understanding - need training and education
- Area is gradually expanding.
- Question is how to manage the expanding demand for and impact on these types of sites across the region
- Should DEECA be adapting sites to cultural needs?
- Need broader planning for different uses
- Who are the community? Many users are coming from the city
- How do these more remote users input to ‘community’ led plans
- Sport has been a vehicle for education about natural environment
- Future Control options include marked sites, bookings and fees - Most other states have site or visitor fees

Further reading

Forest Management Planning: values assessment (DEECA unpublished)

PV / GlaWAC Joint Management Plans

PV visitor management framework

Destination Gippsland Strategy and Annual reports

Jindivick Dialogue report: Gippsland Forest Dialogue

GFD get involved

What's next

Register for our newsletter or become a member at

<https://gippslandforestdialogue.org.au/join-gfd/>

Our strategic plan

See our strategic plan on our website....