



**A United Approach to Tourism:
For the municipalities of
Mitchell, Murrindindi, Shepparton & Strathbogie**

FINAL REPORT

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Tourism Alliance Victoria

March 2009

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Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge everyone who participated in the United Approach to Tourism project. All interviewees gave freely of their time and openly shared their opinions and ideas with us. For that we are really thankful as it provided us with a great insight to the region, its issues and challenges, as well as the dreams and wish-lists of locals.

We would also like to acknowledge Tourism Victoria and the Tourism Excellence program and the Bureau of Meteorology.

Finally, thanks to the Steering Committee for giving us the opportunity to undertake this study and produce this report. We trust you'll find it very useful and hope that it will assist with your plans for the future.

Executive Summary

Part way through the United Approach to Tourism project Victoria suffered the February 7 bushfires. While this interrupted the planned research and event investigation in Murrindindi Shire we were able to meet with some of those in the fire affected areas in mid-March to encompass their ideas and opinions in the study. While it is acknowledged that priorities of the locals are not focused on tourism, it is hoped that this report will aid with the planning process and rebuilding of the tourism industry in the affected areas.

Tourism Alliance Victoria conducted interviews with more than 30 stakeholders, experienced various tourism products in many towns and attended at least one event in Mitchell Shire, Shire of Strathbogie and the City of Greater Shepparton. We were unable to attend a scheduled event in Murrindindi Shire as it was cancelled due to the bushfire situation.

Our major findings in terms of structures are that if the region, encompassing the City of Greater Shepparton and Shires of Mitchell, Murrindindi and Strathbogie, wishes to develop a consolidated regional tourism offering, it needs one overarching tourism body or Regional Tourism Organisation (RTO) to provide a cohesive and collaborative approach to marketing, funding applications, event planning and branding. We encourage the existing Local Tourism Associations (LTAs) to focus on visitor servicing instead of crossing the boundary into marketing as well. A reduction in the number of LTAs, based on the level of member activity and engagement, is suggested to reduce duplication of effort and cluttering of the market and to provide clarity, both for consumers and for the industry.

We recommend the RTO receive adequate funding support from the four Councils; at least one paid position within the group; clearly defined roles and responsibilities which must be documented; and a communication plan that can be implemented and measured. Better communication is required between Councillors, Tourism Victoria and operators in each town who are not currently engaged in tourism. There is a need to increase and improve understanding of the industry in its entirety; its benefits; and flow-on effects. At present this role lies with Council.

Instead of lobbying for a separate jigsaw piece for the four-Shire region, establishing an effective RTO in the next 12 months with a view to developing that group into one of Tourism Victoria's Regional Tourism Boards is likely to have more success at the State Government level, which can result in more marketing dollars and promotion through increased market awareness.

According to Tourism Victoria data, two-thirds of all visitors to Victoria also travel in regional Victoria, which is encouraging for the industry as a whole and also in the context of this project. Of this group, 50% are holiday and leisure travellers and one-third travel to visit friends and relatives. These trends were reflected in the anecdotal information regarding visitation.

Council and tourism association websites were reviewed as the Internet is increasingly the first information source for travellers. The quality of presentation, information and level of user-friendliness varies significantly across the websites reviewed. Duplication of information across a number of websites is problematic as this clutters the region's online tourism presence and is confusing for the consumer. A consolidated online presence for the project region is recommended.

The main weaknesses identified centred on the poor perception of the towns in the project region as tourism destinations. This a perception held not only by the market generally but also by locals living in these towns. The lack of appreciation of the value of tourism may stem from this view and this in turn hinders engagement in and development of local tourism, which requires both financial and community support.

Lack of quality tourism product has been identified as a weakness; however there is good base of product with potential for further development in the tourism market. The food and wine product is readily available in the region but lacks the cohesion, and in part the quality, that has made this a core feature of other regions such as the Yarra Valley and Mornington Peninsula. Similarly, the horse industry has a strong presence in the form of stud farms, race tracks and riding schools, and great potential for attracting an international market, but these need to be incorporated into tourism and developed and marketed as tourism product. History and heritage is also a strong aspect of the region but it has not been well developed into tourism product.

In addition to these product groups, the other tourism strengths of the region are easy access via the Hume and Goulburn Valley Highways and the V-Line train connections throughout much of the region; the proximity to greater metropolitan Melbourne; and the natural environment and landscape.

As a result of these basic strengths across the Shires of Mitchell, Murrindindi, Strathbogie and the City of Greater Shepparton there are various tourism opportunities for the region. Our recommendations for the future of tourism include capitalising on the region's already strong equine industry and partnering it with the food and wine industries in the region. Achieving Recreation Vehicle (RV) Friendly status in some of the key towns in the region is a realistic task for each Shire, as is engaging the local communities, instilling pride in them and creating awareness of their local and regional assets through a campaign targeting residents. The Goulburn Valley High Country Rail Trail Project, already underway, is a significant piece of tourism infrastructure and a great opportunity for developing and promoting cycling tourism in the region.

Common barriers to product development include: lack of accommodation and lack of quality accommodation; negative attitudes of locals; a lack of funding; a lack of identity of individual Shires and this region as a whole or unfavourable identities; planning permits and issues with Council departments; lack of industry engagement; lack of education and understanding amongst communities and Councillors regarding the value of tourism.

Objective

To develop a plan to grow the economic return from tourism within the region defined broadly by the municipalities of Mitchell, Shepparton, Strathbogie and Murrindindi.

Project Overview

Tourism Alliance Victoria has undertaken this research project to identify the existing tourism performance of the region, encompassing the councils of Mitchell, Strathbogie, Shepparton and Murrindindi, and to recommend a clearly defined plan to grow the industry into the future.

Methodology

Below is the methodology we used to complete the United Approach to Tourism Project:

OBJECTIVE (PER PROJECT BRIEF)	ACTION
<p><u>TOURISM STRUCTURES</u> Identify the current tourism structures which currently operate within the defined region and investigate tourism structures across Victoria.</p> <p>Make recommendations in relation to appropriate structures to manage tourism within the defined region taking into consideration how effective existing structures have been.</p> <p>Investigate opportunities to resource the recommended structure and provide recommendations including a review of the strengths and weaknesses associated with the structure.</p>	<p>Conduct visits and interviews with Shires in the Project Region: Mitchell, Murrindindi, Strathbogie, Shepparton.</p> <p>Undertake consultation with Campaign Committees for The Murray River, Victoria's High Country, Daylesford & the Macedon Ranges, Yarra Valley and the Dandenong Ranges.</p>
<p><u>VISITATION & MARKETS</u> Identify current visitation patterns, key source markets and the economic impact of tourism within the defined region/sub regions.</p> <p>Recommend future alliances to achieve maximum visitation and yield for the region.</p> <p>Recommend opportunities to improve methods of co-promotion of the designated region.</p>	<p>Collect Visitor Information statistics and research current visitation patterns, key source markets and the economic impact of tourism within the defined region/sub regions.</p> <p>Review current research on visitor patterns.</p> <p>Meet with local tourism associations within the four Shires, such as the Goulburn River & Ranges Food & Wine Tourism Network.</p>
<p><u>PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT</u> Identify the strengths and weaknesses of the region from a tourism perspective.</p> <p>Identify key tourism opportunities.</p>	<p>Conduct a product audit of Mitchell Shire, Murrindindi Shire, Shire of Strathbogie, and the City of Greater Shepparton. Utilise Tourism Alliance Victoria and VECCI databases to establish trends and survey member tourism businesses.</p>

Investigate and recommend opportunities to cooperate and collaborate to stage a significant regional event in each municipality on a regular basis.	Meet with local tourism associations within the four Shires, such as the Goulburn River & Ranges Food & Wine Tourism Network.
Investigate and report on branding opportunities.	Meet with organisations such as Country Racing Victoria and Bicycle Victoria. Meet with local operators in each Shire.

We met and conducted interviews with:

- Shae Keenan, Regional Marketing Manager, Tourism Victoria – Goldfields and Daylesford and Macedon Ranges Campaign Committee representative
- Anita Verde, Regional Marketing Manager, Tourism Victoria – Yarra Valley and Dandenong Ranges Campaign Committee representative
- Nigel Aldons - Regional Marketing Manager, Tourism Victoria – High Country and Murray Campaign Committees
- Catherine MacMillan, Economic Development and Tourism, Strathbogie Shire Council
- Libby Webster, Events, Strathbogie Shire Council
- Leah Jones, Chair, Strathbogie Tourism Association and owner, Wise Woman Wearables
- Neville Harris and Robert Asquith, organisers, Euroa Show n Shine and Rotary members
- Rebecca Gannon, owner and manager, The Butter Factory, Euroa
- Clive Atkinson, Aboriginal Community Strategic Planning & Policy Unit, Shepparton
- Leanne Mulcahy, Business Development Coordinator, City of Greater Shepparton
- Stephanie Inglis, Retail Coordinator, Shepparton Show Me
- Mark Leocata, owner, Shepparton Backpackers Motel
- Rebecca Sloane, trainee manager, Shepparton Backpackers Motel
- Cr. Jenny Houlihan, City of Greater Shepparton and owner, The Living Room (retail gift store)
- Steve Ansell, President, Kilmore Chamber of Commerce
- Glenn Barry, Organiser Victorian Country Thoroughbred Festival
- Louise Barling, owner, Old Seymour Post Office and Tourism Officer, Seymour Chamber of Commerce
- Graeme Dove, President Seymour Chamber of Commerce
- Chris Gillard, Economic Development, Mitchell Shire Council
- Juanita Breen, Tourism Services Officer, Mitchell Shire Council
- Pip Kerr, Marketing and Business Development Manager, Country Racing Victoria
- Jackie Noonan, on secondment from CRV to Tourism Victoria
- Mark Francis, Manager – Major Events & Promotions
- Amanda McCulloch, Tourism Manager Greater Shepparton City Council
- Virginia Boyd, President, Dookie Lifestyle
- Vincent Wilson, Property manager, Country Comfort Shepparton
- Geoff Proctor, Chair, Murrindindi Regional Tourism Association
- Bob Elkington, Economic Development and Tourism Manager, Murrindindi Shire Council
- Rod and Teresa Clue and Sandra Hanley, Yea Business and Tourism Association
- Mitch McCrae, Upper Goulburn Food, Wine and Culture Group

- Kaye Bernadi, President, Tourism Greater Shepparton
- Arlen Keen, Facilities Manager, Bicycle Victoria

We made further attempts to speak with the following stakeholders but were unable to achieve this within the project timeframe:

- Nedra Kriekenbeek, Nagambie Lakes Tourism & Commerce
- Michelle Marshall, Kinglake Ranges Business Network
- Graeme Brown, Mystic Mountains Tourism
- Christine Nunn, Violet Town Business Network
- Pat Watkins, Manager and David, Owner, Golden Trout Hotel, Eildon
- Cr. Sue Marstaeller, Mitchell Shire

We attended the following events:

- Kilmore Cup, Sunday 15 February
- Seymour Alternative Farming Expo, Friday 20 February
- Mooroopna Fruit Salad Market Day, Saturday 21 February
- Australian Lawn Bowls Championship Finals, Saturday 21 February
- Nagambie on Water Festival, Saturday 7 February

We stayed at these properties:

- The Butter Factory, Euroa
- Kilmore Motel, Kilmore
- The Carrington, Shepparton



Kilmore Cup



Australian Lawn Bowls Championship Finals



Nagambie on Water Festival

FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Tourism Structures

There are various tourism management and tourism marketing structures which currently exist in the City of Greater Shepparton and the Shires of Mitchell, Murrindindi and Strathbogie. Compiling a list of all the groups and Local Tourism Associations in the region has its challenges as they are not listed in one place nor do those operating in each region appear to know who else is currently operating.

Below is a list we believe service a tourism function or are tourism organisations that currently exist:

City of Greater Shepparton	Murchison Action Group Shepparton Show Me Lifestyle Dookie Shepparton Chamber of Commerce Tatura Revitalisation Committee GM Lifestyle Mooroopna Traders' Association Tourism Greater Shepparton
Mitchell Shire	Kilmore Chamber of Commerce Mitchell Tourism Group Greater Seymour Chamber of Commerce Wallan Chamber of Commerce
Murrindindi Shire	Murrindindi Regional Tourism Association Alexandra Traders & Tourism Assoc. Eildon Action Kinglake Ranges Business Network Mystic Mountains Tourism Inc. Upper Goulburn Food Wine & Culture Group Yea Business & Tourism Association Strath Creek & Flowerdale Business & Tourism Assoc. Victorian Caravan Parks Association – Eildon Division
Shire of Strathbogie	Strathbogie Ranges & Nagambie Lakes Tourism Board Strathbogie Tourism Association Nagambie Lakes Tourism & Commerce Euroa Chamber of Commerce Violet Town Chamber of Commerce Euroa Community Action Group Nagambie Community Action Group Avenel Community Action Group Strathbogie Community Action Group Violet Town Community Action Group Strathbogie Tableland Action Group
Mitchell/Strathbogie/Dookie	Goulburn River & Ranges Food & Wine Tourism Network

Strong, well managed and professional Regional Tourism Organisations (RTOs) – also referred to as Regional Tourism Associations - and Local Tourism

Associations (LTAs) are pivotal to sustainable growth of the industry. To achieve best practice effectiveness these organisations should be private sector driven and supported by local government. The primary role of regional associations is cooperative destination marketing whereas the most effective role for local associations to focus on is visitor services. To achieve industry maturity RTOs and LTAs will need to play an enhanced leadership and commercially focused role, be professionally managed and accountable. There are three types of tourism groups that exist:

System 1

This model is appropriate when local government identifies tourism as a priority economic generator and prefers to contribute significant resources such as staff, facilities and marketing funds to maximise the development of tourism. It also recognises that tourism is essentially a private sector business activity and establishes a mechanism to provide industry input and advice on tourism development strategies, as well as encouraging strong local and regional associations. See diagram below.

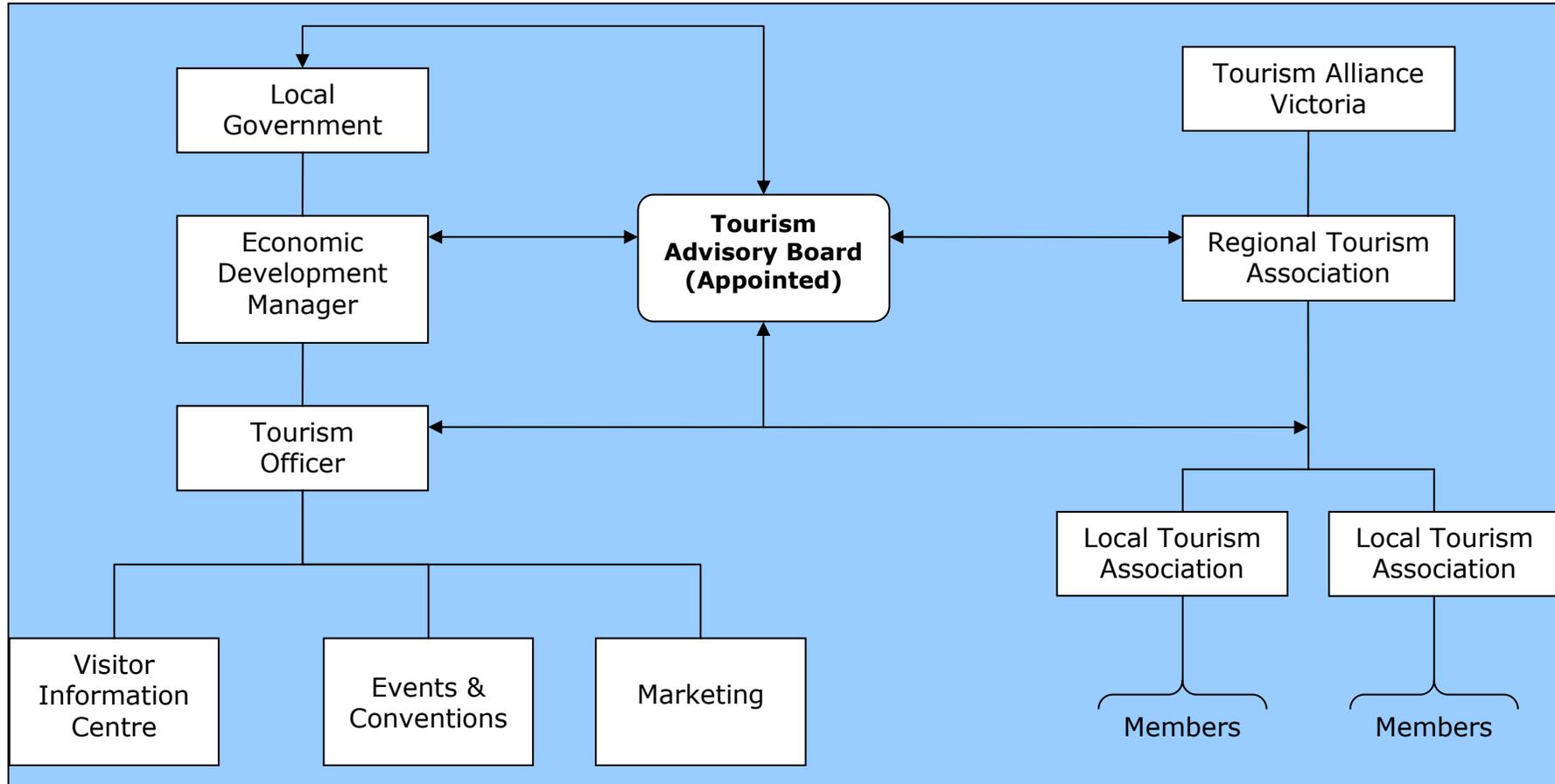
System 2

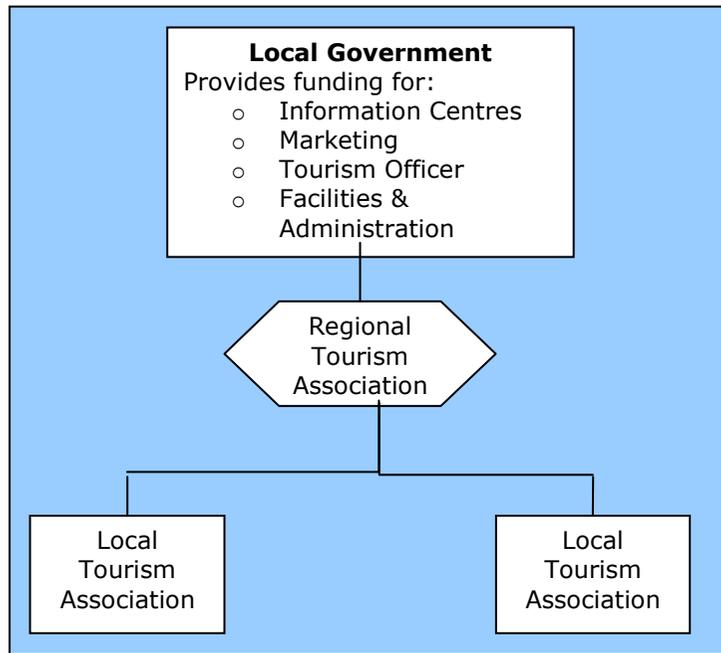
This model is appropriate where local government identifies tourism as being important, but does not wish to be involved in management and implementation, believing that this can best be industry driven. Under this model, local government should expect accountability from the tourism association for return on investment (through tourism and marketing plans). Local government could also expect representation on the regional tourism organisation management committee or board. See diagram below.

System 3

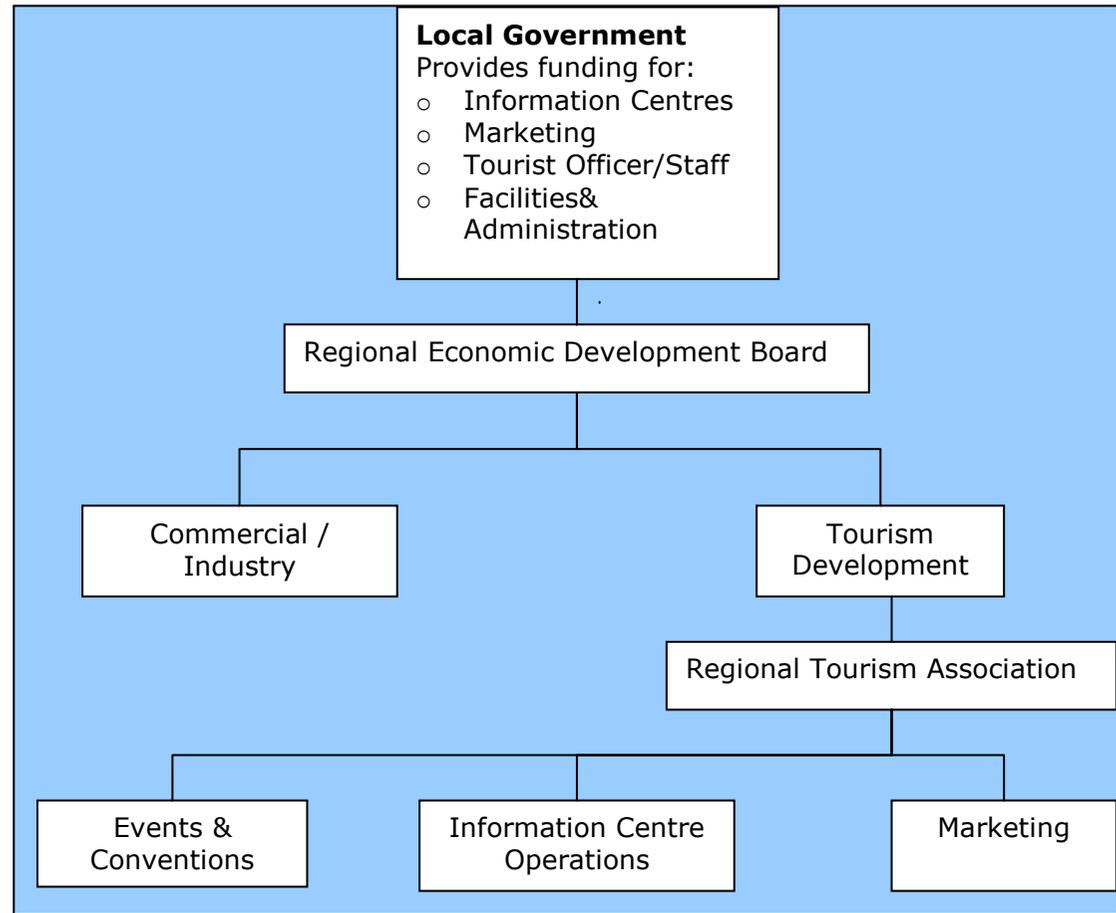
This model is appropriate where it is considered that regional economic development is best structured independent of local government, to encourage significant community participation. It also integrates all aspects of economic development. See diagram below.

System 1





System 2



System 3

Tourism Victoria

In Tourism Victoria's *Regional Tourism Action Plan 2009-2012* they have recognised, as the industry has, that effective regional industry structures are a key factor in building successful tourism destinations.

Many regional tourism organisations across Victoria have played a lead role in the development of the tourism industry and directly influence visitation, yield and visitor satisfaction. The structure of Victoria's regional tourism industry is facing a number of challenges due to the rapidly changing environment. Tourism Victoria has stated that this needs to be addressed in order to provide a strong platform for growth. Extensive consultation has identified a number of issues with the current industry structures in regional Victoria which reinforce the need for change, including:

- Many regional structures are under-resourced and lack adequate funding support;
- Regional structures rely heavily on volunteers who are struggling to cope with competing demands from their own businesses;
- The roles and responsibilities of some regional structures are unclear or duplicated;
- Many regions do not have adequate communications mechanisms in place to ensure that all stakeholders are informed and engaged in tourism development;
- Industry is unclear about how to work with and engage with Tourism Victoria on issues outside of marketing;
- Regional Campaign Committees focus on marketing and are unable to address other critical issues impacting regional tourism growth such as product development, investment attraction, skills training and sustainability management; and
- There is recognition that sustainable tourism development at the regional level requires a more strategic focus to create a strong foundation for industry growth.

Given the challenges which already exist, the structure for a regional tourism organisation or overarching tourism body for the Local Government Areas (LGA) of Strathbogie, Mitchell, Murrindindi and the City of Greater Shepparton needs to be carefully considered. Adequate funding support will be required; at least one paid position will be needed within the group; clearly defined roles and responsibilities must be documented; and a communication plan will be essential and it will need implementing.

The Example of Gippsland

Developing and sustaining a region-wide tourism body is a challenging task, especially given the need to balance local politics and potential for interpersonal conflict. This was the situation faced in 2004 by the East Gippsland region of Victoria, which requires two hours driving between Bairnsdale at its western end to Mallacoota on its eastern border. One of the benefits that the Shires of Strathbogie, Mitchell, Murrindindi and the City of Greater Shepparton have is their location, access to Melbourne and relatively close proximity to each of the other LGAs. The previous shire-wide regional tourism group in East Gippsland, Lakes and Wilderness Tourism Inc, had been dissolved and its wider marketing role transferred to a new body, 'Destination Gippsland'. Despite the continuation of 13 small Business and Tourism Associations (BTAs), the Shire Council and other local authorities recognised that there was still a need for an overarching body to enable tourism's private sector to speak with a single voice.

Tourism Alliance Victoria together with Tourism Victoria and the East Gippsland Shire Council facilitated the process. It was recognised that the survival of the 13 BTAs through three regional tourism restructures proved their resilience and, therefore, they needed to continue in order to underpin the new organisation. A 'top down' approach to tourism management would not work in East Gippsland, it was important to create an organisation that was 'owned' by the industry and was independent. It was also recognised that such a group needed a major project to provide the 'glue' necessary to keep everyone focussed and committed to the task.

The initial project became the production of a regional visitor's guide, in conjunction with East Gippsland Newspapers. They believed that the guide would not only provide the group with a focus, but it could also potentially provide an ongoing income stream for the group. Each constituent BTA agreed to assume responsibility for selling a section of the guide in their own sub-region, under the guidance of the East Gippsland Newspapers' sales team. Twenty thousand dollars was released from a trust account created by the previous tourism body. Together with some additional funds provided by Tourism Victoria, it allowed the group to engage a graphic designer. Additional drought and bushfire relief funding also helped to fund the \$100 000 project.

The visitors guide set a new standard for the region and, as a result of the group's performance, the Council provided it with funding to engage a three day a week Executive Officer. Representatives from government bodies and the Council sit-in on the meetings as observers, but do not hold voting rights. There is a healthy relationship between the regional body and their lower level BTAs, as well as with the regional marketing body, Destination Gippsland.

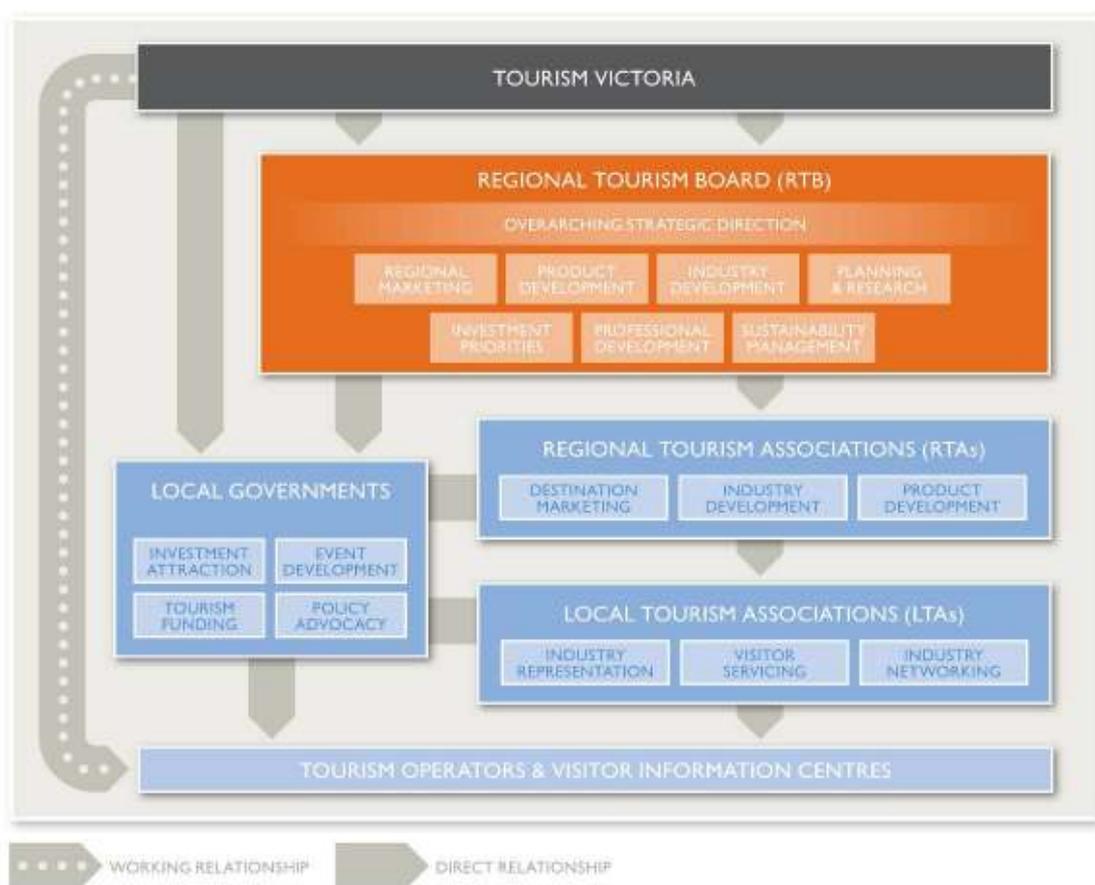
A high degree of leadership development and mentoring, as well as developing a major sense of grass roots level ownership were needed for this group to be successful.

Tourism Victoria has recognised the positive case study of Gippsland which has provided a successful approach that can be implemented across the State. The strategic partnership in Gippsland has had a major impact on advancing the performance of the tourism sector in the region. Establishing the new structure involved forging a strong partnership between Local Government bodies and Tourism Victoria to successfully centralise and coordinate tourism activities through a peak regional tourism body – Destination Gippsland Limited (formerly Inc). A professional executive was also appointed to implement the new structure and manage tourism development in the region. The revised approach to industry

leadership in Gippsland has yielded many positive outcomes for the local tourism industry. Specifically, it has:

- Established clear leadership for the tourism sector;
- Overcome fragmentation within the industry and engaged a broader range of partners in tourism development;
- Enabled better coordination of activities and more effective use of resources;
- Improved communication between industry bodies and stakeholders;
- Provided a more effective mechanism to respond to crises including bushfires and drought;
- Created a more powerful advocacy voice for the tourism sector in the region;
- Promoted the value of tourism in the region to the broader community; and
- Created a central point of contact to liaise with Government (especially Tourism Victoria) on regional issues.

Tourism Victoria plans to evolve industry structures in regional Victoria over the next three years. This will involve the creation of a Regional Tourism Board (RTB) in each region to set the overarching strategic vision and direction for tourism. The RTB will play a critical role in creating a platform for future growth and will have responsibility for a range of key tourism functions. The proposed roles and responsibilities of various tourism bodies in regional Victoria follow:



Regional Tourism Board (RTB) - Responsible for holistic tourism development and advocacy for the region. Functions will include regional marketing, industry development, product development, skills training, mentoring, networking, identifying investment priorities and managing sustainability. The RTB will play an important role in consolidating the strategic direction of the tourism industry for the entire region and communicating with key partners such as Tourism Victoria.

Regional Tourism Organisation / Association (RTO) - Responsible for the management and development of tourism within a sub-region or product group and increasing visitation and yield through destination marketing. Activities include representing Local Tourism Associations (LTAs), industry sectors and/or Local Government on issues affecting the tourism industry within their region. RTOs will have an important liaison role between the RTB and local industry.

Local Tourism Association (LTA) - Represent local tourism businesses and focus their efforts on enhancing the visitor experience. Activities include conducting industry networking functions, conducting local familiarisation tours and advising Local Government on local tourism issues.

Tourism Victoria states that the new RTBs will not replicate other structures nor create additional bureaucracy in the region. The current Regional Campaign Committees will be disbanded once the new RTBs are in place; and where appropriate, relevant sub-committees will be created to support the new Boards for key activities such as marketing. This will ensure that the Boards are not overly burdened with operational matters and are able to focus on key strategic issues.

The proposed implementation schedule for the roll-out of the RTBs is due for completion in 2011. This three-year roll-out plan has been determined based on factors such as size, maturity, industry engagement, resourcing, Local Government support and staffing.

Tourism Victoria has noted that a number of destinations are concerned about their fit within current regional campaign boundaries, in particular the Shires of Mitchell, Murrindindi, Strathbogie and the City of Greater Shepparton. Whilst there are no plans to change the campaign boundaries, they have stated that relevant destinations will be provided with assistance to review their status and future positioning.

Regional Tourism Organisations

Tourism Alliance Victoria recommends the Shires of Strathbogie, Mitchell, Murrindindi and the City of Greater Shepparton form a Regional Tourism Organisation (RTO). This will more likely lead to representation on the RTB to be formed by Tourism Victoria. There will be strength in numbers and resources and a relaxation of boundaries will be needed to work together. A coordinated approach will benefit the region and as has been recognised, tourists do not believe in Shire boundaries, therefore the region should work as one with combined resources instead of four competing groups.

An example of a successful RTO is on the Shipwreck Coast. Shipwreck Coast Marketing is an industry-driven regional tourism body, directed by a board of 12 representative tourism operators and other skilled professionals and managed by a small team of professional staff. In 2009, Shipwreck Coast Marketing had a name change to reflect the core role; it was previously known as Shipwreck Coast Tourism.

The aim of Shipwreck Coast Marketing is to maximise the economic benefits of tourism to the Shipwreck Coast region by developing and marketing the region as a competitive tourist destination in partnership with the industry and natural resource managers.

Shipwreck Coast Marketing's primary function is to undertake the external promotion of the region, whilst fostering the development of the region's tourism industry. Its intention is to increase visitor numbers, length of stay and visitor expenditure resulting in increased employment and growth of the regional economy; an aim similar to that of the City of Greater Shepparton and Shires of Mitchell, Murrindindi and Strathbogie.

Shipwreck Coast Marketing provides leadership to the local tourism industry, to increase professionalism, improve organisational structures and encourage partnerships and cooperative initiatives, which will maximise the industries effectiveness and best utilise Shipwreck Coast Marketing's resources. Shipwreck Coast Marketing links efforts with a diversity of organisations to market the region domestically and internationally, and to create an environment in which everybody benefits from tourism.

Shipwreck Coast Tourism (SCT) was established in 1991. The local government municipalities participating under the structure of SCT are Corangamite, Moyne and Warrnambool. Supporting income results from the local tourism industry, via a partnership fee. Until the formation of SCT, the marketing of regional tourism was managed by South West Tourism and covered the region west of Geelong to the South Australian border. It was identified at that time that the South West Tourism initiatives were not taking the best advantage of the tourism potential of the region and associated economic benefits.

Up until the formation of SCT, regional tourism was generally not recognised as being a key economic driver for the south west region, although there was some support from State Government. SCT's introduction of a new structure of a skills based Board of Management with Memorandums of Understanding amongst the three municipalities was seen as a fresh approach to the management and marketing of regional tourism at that time.

In summary, the primary role of SCT was identified as being responsible for:

- External marketing of the region encompassing the three municipalities
- Building relationships with key strategic partners

- Industry communication & development

As part of the implementation of its role, SCT aimed to:

- Increase visitor length of stay, visitor expenditure and visitor numbers by encouraging appropriate product development and by positioning the Shipwreck Coast as a distinctive and competitive tourist destination, whilst remaining an integral part of the Great Ocean Road region.
- Through leadership and research to the local tourism industry, increase professionalism, improve organisational structures and encourage partnerships and cooperative initiatives, which will maximise the industry's effectiveness and best utilise Shipwreck Coast Tourism's resources.

Tourism Alliance Victoria recommends the formation of the RTO between the Shires of Mitchell, Murrindindi, Strathbogie and the City of Greater Shepparton follow the same construction as SCT.

Primary Research Findings

We received a large amount of feedback from our primary research regarding industry structures. Some of the most common themes and opinions were:

- All four of these Shires are in incorrect Campaign Committees.
- Mitchell Shire does not have spa and wellness product yet is aligned with the Daylesford and Macedon Ranges Campaign Committee.
- The City of Greater Shepparton is in the Murray Campaign Committee yet is not on the Murray River.
- Murrindindi and Strathbogie are in the High Country Campaign Committee yet neither identifies with High Country product or positioning.
- Murrindindi sees more connections with the Yarra Valley and Strathbogie, with no current Campaign Committee.

Summed up by one interviewee: "A more focused and better aligned Campaign Committee that fits our product, positioning, structure and opportunities would greatly assist tourism within this region". Tourism Alliance Victoria agrees.

Tourism needs a higher profile within each of the Councils of Mitchell, Murrindindi, Strathbogie and the City of Greater Shepparton. This could be achieved through educating Councillors, in particular through using economic terms and the Tourism Impact Model, which in turn would most likely result in a greater commitment in terms of dollars and staff resources to the industry being provided by Council.

There are currently too many tourism groups in existence who are not very productive. Fewer Associations and more direction and clear goals are needed for Local Tourism Associations (LTAs) in the project region to be a success. The majority of LTAs operating at present lack members, funds and direction. Action oriented people are needed and leaders within each group who turn motivational and enthused ideas into successful activities. Reduce the number of groups and pool the talent you already have.

Relationships with LTAs and Council are presently highly dysfunctional, disjointed and unclear according to our interviewees. This was found to be similar for many Associations and in all regions and when speaking about Tourism Victoria Campaign Committee relationships as well. All relationships in these four Local Government Areas could be improved through better communication and by having a skills based Board with strong leadership guiding a region-wide tourism group. Industry representatives in one tourism group, an overarching tourism body that covers these four Local Government Areas is required. Tourism talent was identified by many interviewees as lacking in this region.

Representation on current groups needs to be reviewed. There are possibly too many local government representatives and not enough industry representatives in tourism associations. A review of the role and responsibility of the Campaign Committees and all Associations having measurable outcomes will assist in direction.

Websites that publish information about this area need to be more professional and useful and they need a profile. Funding from Councils would assist in this venture and this could be the 'glue' project and first undertaking for the new RTO.

Branding

When discussing the formation of an overarching tourism body, possible names for the Regional Tourism Organisation (RTO) were discussed. The research revealed conflict and some confusion surrounding the word 'Goulburn'. Is it Goulburn in New South Wales? Does it refer to the brand Goulburn Valley fruits? Should the brand be linked to a river in a time of drought? Should it be linked the name to an unattractive highway?

"The Food Bowl" is a name specific to Shepparton. Whilst the term is recognised, understood and accepted by locals, it is not a term that is widely used in the context of tourism marketing. Conversely, Tourism Greater Shepparton uses the slogan "The Green Heart of Victoria" but in meetings with Council staff and members, TGS members and tourism operators, this phrase was never mentioned.

Although a name based on a geographic location is simple the correct area needs to be well-defined and understood. For example, the name "Central Victoria" could well include the City of Greater Bendigo, Macedon Ranges and Campaspe Shires. Other suggested names following a geographic theme were: "Northern Victoria", "North Eastern Central Victoria" and "North Eastern Victoria". Obviously there are some difficulties with taking a direction-specific approach.

Another alternative name for the region, "The Heart of Victoria", has been suggested. "Heart" reflects the central location of these four Shires; as a major food producing area with a good water source it encompasses the idea of nourishment and lifeline; and the Hume Highway is a major arterial road. As one of the State's growth areas, it will also be the region that more and more Victorians will call home.

These are merely suggestions. Tourism Alliance Victoria recommends employing the services of a branding professional to investigate and develop the project region's identity further. Further suggestions that encompass the main attributes of the region are "Equine and Wine", "Paddocks and Plates", "Fields and Food", or "Horses and Harvest". Any of these could eventually be incorporated into the name or branding of the new RTO as they capture what distinguishes the project region from others in Victoria: the equine industry and the produce offering.



Above: Kilmore Cup

Below: Nagambie on Water Festival



Recommendations and Tips

Some tips from Tourism Alliance Victoria when forming a new Regional Tourism Organisation (RTO) or Overarching Tourism Body:

Define what an LTA and an RTO is. Even those currently involved in tourism groups were unsure what role they or their association played or should play. More communication is needed as Tourism Victoria and the individual Councils were not aware of all the groups existing in these Shires.

Tourism groups in their initial stages need a key project to maintain their focus. Don't get distracted by side issues and don't hold meetings for the sake of it. Keep meetings at the same time and day for example: first Tuesday of each month at 10am – you need consistency.

Try to get a consistent group of people meeting a least once a month; avoid proxies and the churning of representatives.

Strong communication is needed between all LTAs, RTOs in the region, Tourism Victoria and industry bodies such as Tourism Alliance Victoria to avoid duplication and utilise the sharing of resources.

Funds will generally flow to the body that is focussed and can truly speak on behalf of the industry. With the formation of Tourism Victoria's Regional Tourism Boards here is an opportunity to make a play for funds through a new RTO and possibly one day become a RTB.

Rather than trying to hand-pick the skills needed, work with the skills available and introduce a strong leadership and mentoring component to encourage them on their journey.

VISITATION & MARKETS

Visitor and visitation information was sought for each of the local government areas involved in the project and can be divided into data collected by Tourism Victoria and data collected through Local Government and VICs. In terms of the latter, the nature of this information varies considerably from LGA to LGA, due to differences in the type of information sought and the methodologies used to collect this data. Information from both categories is presented here.

It is also noted that Tourism Research Australia (TRA) has developed Regional Tourism Profiles (2007) for tourism regions across Australia¹. Unfortunately the delineation of the TRA regions does not correspond to the Tourism Victoria campaign regions, or to local government areas. For example, TRA's Regional Tourism Profile 2007 for the "Goulburn Region" appears to encompass the City of Greater Shepparton and the Mitchell Shire². The data presented is aggregated for the "Goulburn Region", with no breakdown of figures for local government areas within the region. The other region relevant to this project is "Upper Yarra"; however, according to TRA, "for those tourism regions where data were not robust enough for a profile to be compiled, combined regional tourism profiles have been prepared." Upper Yarra is one such region and data for Upper Yarra is included in a combined profile for "Other Victoria regions". It is therefore difficult to present a meaningful analysis of the TRA data, or to compare it with data collected by Tourism Victoria or by individual local governments.

Tourism Victoria visitation data

For the year ending September 2008, domestic visitor numbers to and within Victoria declined by 0.2% to 17.1 million. In the same period, domestic visitor nights decreased by the same amount to 52,719. For regional Victoria, domestic visitor numbers remained steady with 11.2 million visitors for the period, however domestic visitor nights in regional Victoria decreased by 2.7% from the previous year to reach 33.4 million. The ongoing challenge is to persuade visitors to regional Victoria to stay longer.

Collectively, the City of Greater Shepparton and the Shires of Mitchell, Murrindindi and Strathbogie are covered by five of Tourism Victoria's campaign regions: Yarra Valley & Dandenong Ranges, Daylesford and Macedon Ranges, Goldfields, Victoria's High Country and Murray.

Domestic Overnight Visitors YE September 2008	(000s)	% Victoria overall	% Regional Victoria
Victoria	17,117		
Regional Victoria	11,216	66%	
Daylesford & Macedon Ranges	505	3%	5%
Goldfields	1,227	7%	11%
Murray	2,005	12%	18%
High Country	895	5%	8%
Yarra Valley & Dandenong Ranges	598	3%	5%

¹ Tourism Research Australia

http://www.tra.australia.com/content/documents/Regional%20Tourism%20Profiles/2007/Background_FINAL.pdf

² Ibid.

http://www.tra.australia.com/content/documents/Regional%20Tourism%20Profiles/2007/VIC/Goulburn_FINAL.pdf

Based on data for the year ending September 2008, 66% all domestic overnight visitors to the State travelled to regional Victoria. Visitors to the five above-mentioned campaign regions accounted for 47% of all domestic overnight visitors to regional Victoria and 31% of all domestic overnight visitors to the State overall.

In the same period, there were 34.6 million domestic daytrip visitors to Victoria, 66% of whom visited regional Victoria. The breakdown of this figure for the relevant campaign regions is as follows:

Domestic Daytrip Visitors YE September 2008	(000s)	% change 07-08
Victoria	34,687	-0.6%
Regional Victoria	23,107	-0.4%
Daylesford & Macedon Ranges	1,226	+2.0%
Goldfields	2,965	+3.7%
Murray	2,924	+6.5%
Victoria's High Country	735	-16.8%
Yarra Valley & Dandenong Ranges	2,760	+1.5%

Whilst this level of visitation is encouraging, the challenge for the Councils contributing to this project is how to direct more of this visitation to towns within their local government areas.

Purpose of Visit

The statistics regarding purpose of visit for the year ending September 2008 are:

Domestic visitors	Holiday	VFR	Business	Total
Victoria	8,120	5,850	2,759	17,651
Regional Victoria	6,223	3,647	1,003	11,558
Domestic visitor nights				
Victoria	26,474	17,353	6,834	53,294
Regional Victoria	20,130	9,460	2,723	33,982

Holiday and leisure travellers account for more than half of all visitors to Regional Victoria; VFR travellers, one-third; and business travellers less than 10 per cent. On average, holidaymakers in travelling to country Victoria stay for 3.2 nights; those visiting family and friends stay for 2.6 nights; and those travelling for business stay 2.7 nights. In the case of holidaymakers and VFR travellers, these numbers point to "long weekend" type visits.

Market profiles of the five relevant campaign regions reveal that visiting friends and relatives and eating out at restaurants are the two main activities undertaken by visitors to these regions. This reinforces two factors:

1. the importance of engaging locals (the hosts of VFR travellers) and educating them about nearby tourist attractions and activities
2. the importance of having good quality food and wine offerings that will appeal to both locals and visitors

Importance of VFR travellers

The perception of travellers visiting friends and relatives is that they stay with family or friends, rather than in commercial accommodation, and are therefore

low yielding visitors³. However, research shows that VFR travellers are high repeat visitors and over the lifespan of their visitation, they are worth much more than one-off visitors who stay in commercial accommodation⁴. It has also been demonstrated that a considerable proportion of VFR travellers do use commercial accommodation⁵. Because VFR travellers have a personal relationship with a destination, they can also serve as good ambassadors for the destination.

Importance of engaging locals

In the context of VFR travel, the role of the host (i.e. the locals) should not be underestimated. VFR travellers look to their host to suggest and recommend activities and as such, the host takes on the key role of decision-maker. It is therefore important that locals be informed and educated about the attractions, activities and events in their town so that they can encourage visitation, participation and attendance.

The issue of "local pride", or the lack of it, was a common theme that emerged in almost all of our interviews. It is imperative that local residents have a sense of community pride – if they are not proud of their town, or feel that there is anything there worthwhile seeing or doing, then it they will not recommend their town as a destination for tourists or visitors.

Pictured: Mark Ryan of Shepparton, Finalist, Australian Open 2009



Below are some examples of activities that promote local involvement in and knowledge of tourism products. These types of initiatives are a great way of engaging locals and informing them about local tourism product. The initiative from Mildura Tourism reinforces the importance of the VFR market and is a great example of applying the findings of tourism research.

From Mildura Tourism:

Industry invites locals to be a "Tourist in their own town"
Dates have been set for Mildura Tourism Week 16 – 24 May 2009
Mildura Tourism Week this year will focus on connecting the local community with the tourism industry with the theme - "Be a tourist in your own town". The week will encourage locals to visit the wonderful tourism assets the region has to offer. This activity aims to stimulate the Visiting, Friends and Relatives market as the local community are the host accommodation for over 30% of visitors to the region annually.

³ Jackson, R. T. (2003), "VFR Tourism: Is it underestimated?", *Journal of Tourism Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 17 – 24 (originally in *Journal of Tourism Studies* (1990), Vol. 1 (2), pp.10-17

⁴ Meis, S., Joyal, S. & Trites, A. (1995) "The U.S. Repeat and VFR Visitor to Canada: Come Again, Eh!", *The Journal of Tourism Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 27 - 37

⁵ Braunlich, C. & Nadkarni, N.(1995), "The Importance of the VFR Market to the Hotel Industry", *The Journal of Tourism Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 38 - 47

Mildura Tourism members and stakeholders will be invited to participate in 2009 Mildura Tourism Week via an Expression of Interest in the next few weeks. The week will be promoted locally via direct mail, press, radio and TV. The dates for the week have been set for Saturday 16th of May to Sunday 24th of May 2009.

From the City of Greater Shepparton:

Become a friend of the Visitor Information Centre

Friends of the Visitor Information Centre receive exclusive offers, discounts and event invitations

It costs nothing to become a Friend of the Shepparton Visitor Information Center and registering as a friend will give you exclusive accommodation and local produce offers, special discounts and VIP invitations to our special events!

You can also keep up to date with the latest news, events and promotions happening in and around Greater Shepparton all for becoming our friend!

Visitor Information Centre data

The table below shows statistics as provided to Tourism Alliance Victoria by accredited Visitor Information Centres (VICs) located in the project regions.

LGA	VIC Location	Walk-ins	Phone	Email	Total
Murrindindi	Marysville*	39,251	3,600	996	43,847
Shepparton	Shepparton	35,223	12,510	2,249	49,982
Murrindindi	Alexandra	25,945	281	17	26,243
Strathbogie	Nagambie**	13,756	1,839	440	16,035
Mitchell	Seymour	9,074	933	6	10,013
Mitchell	Kilmore	4,048	304	2	4,354

VIC Statistics as collected by Tourism Alliance Victoria for the period June 2007 - June 2008

*phone call and email figures based on 12 month average

**Nagambie VIC was closed July, August & September 2007

There are a number of limitations of this data collection. Some statistics are recorded manually by volunteers at the VICs. As the staff may vary from day to day, there may be a lack of consistency in these recordings. In other cases, such as collection of visitor postcodes in the Alexandra VIC, the information is provided voluntarily by the visitor, who is not prompted to do so by the staff. As in the case of the Marysville VIC, some figures are based on a calculated average, rather than actual enquiries. In some VICs walk-ins are recorded by an electronic device at the entrance to the Centre. Numbers recorded in this manner can be increased to due children running in and out of the Centre, crossing the counting device several times.

VICs that are co-located within another business may also record visitation by all customers to the business, not just those with a specific visitor query. There are other activities, such as competitions which require lodgement of entry forms at the VIC (e.g. Central Goldfields), that will also produce an artificially increased visitation number.

Despite Marysville having a much stronger reputation as a tourist destination than Shepparton, it should be noted that Shepparton VIC was not far behind Marysville VIC in terms of walk-ins and far exceeded Marysville in both phone and email enquiries. Overall, Shepparton received the most enquiries, with phone and email figures providing a significant boost. This is despite Shepparton's poor reputation as a tourist destination, both within and outside of the LGA.

With the exception of the Shepparton VIC, use of online enquiry methods is minimal and in some cases virtually non-existent. This should be cause for concern. According to Roy Morgan Research, the number of Australians using the Internet for travel purposes is increasing, with up to 3.5 million Australian visitors to travel websites in an average four week period.

The availability of an online enquiry system (whether it be a simple email address to the VIC or a more sophisticated online enquiry form), combined with a stronger online presence is essential to providing pre-arrival and destination information to travellers and prospective visitors. Moreover, training of VIC staff and volunteers in the use of computers and online tools is vital to gaining the maximum benefit from an online presence.

Visitation data by Local Government Area

City of Greater Shepparton

According to the 2007 Shepparton PAVE Report produced by Urban Enterprises the City of Greater Shepparton attracted over 1.7 million visitors in 2007, of which 445,000 were overnight visitors and 1.3 million were daytrip visitors. It is estimated that the direct and indirect expenditure of these visitors is worth approximately \$473 million per annum to the City of Greater Shepparton.

The main purpose of visit included:

- "visiting friends and relatives" (532,000 visitors);
- "going shopping" (310,000 visitors); and
- "holiday leisure purposes" (285,000 visitors)

Other reasons for visiting Greater Shepparton include:

- "business" (275,000 visitors);
- "health reasons" (72,555 visitors); and
- "sports events, including participation" (68,165 visitors).

Whilst the VFR, shopping and holiday/leisure markets can be considered to be core markets, our research indicates that sport tourism has considerable growth potential, given the nature of high profile events recently won and hosted by the City of Greater Shepparton, such as the Junior Davis Cup tennis tournament and the Australian Open Lawn Bowls Championships. Major events such as the basketball tournament and the Spring Car Nationals were named as drawcard events.

The peak period for the family market is from July to October, with two school holidays occurring in this period. The low season for this market is February through to Easter, which is first term for school children.

Business visitation, through conferences and business events, is also a growth market that is well-supported by high quality conference and event venues and facilities such as Riverlinks, Eastbank Centre, Westside Performing Arts Centre, Shepparton Showgrounds, and Tatura Park Exhibition and Events Complex, designed specifically for equestrian and livestock events.

Of the 1,725,417 visitors to the Greater Shepparton area in 2007, 1,280,607 or 74% were day-trippers, with the remainder being overnight visitors. Converting more day-trip visitors to stay at least one night, or more, would increase tourism expenditure in the region. An events-based strategy will certainly drive visitation but extending length of stay will require more high quality accommodation, restaurants and cafes, as well as other attractions and activities to achieve this objective.

The high proportion of day-trippers supports the claim that Shepparton is easily accessible from Melbourne. By the same token, it also means that it is (too) easy for visitors to turn around and go home again. The lack of distance means that other compelling reasons to stay must be developed and promoted.

Backpacker market

Shepparton attracts a large international backpacker market due to the casual fruit picking work available to people travelling on a working holidaymaker visa. The peak period of backpackers in Shepparton is therefore fruit picking season, November through to June. Typical source markets are Germany, France, Korea

and Japan. One budget motel operator, whose market is predominantly international backpackers, estimates that around 1500 backpackers per year stay at his property.

However, there are concerns that the prolonged drought will eventually force fruit growers off the land and this would signal the end of the international backpacker market in Shepparton as this is the only reason they come to town. This highlights another current problem, which is the lack of attractions and activities in the Shepparton area that are aimed at the youth and backpacker market. The above-mentioned motel operator is experimenting with informal day-trips organised in-house that take the backpackers on their days off to surrounding towns and areas to go fishing and bushwalking. The first of these trips has proved popular and more will be organised in future.

Mitchell Shire

Statistics collected at Seymour VIC by Mitchell Shire Council for the calendar year 2008 showed a total of 9,816 for walk-ins, phone and email/fax queries. This is comparable to the total figure derived from VIC statistics provided to TAV over the 12-month period from June 2007 to June 2008. Seymour VIC has also been collecting data on visitor origins. For 2008, the results on visitor origins are as follows:

Seymour VIC visitor origin stats 2008		
Origin	Number	%
Overseas	640	7
Melbourne area	2387	26
Country Vic	2543	27
Sydney area	590	6
Country NSW	955	10
Canberra	75	1
Adelaide area	120	1
South Australia	50	1
Queensland	515	6
NT	8	0
Western Aust	173	2
Tasmania	231	2
Unknown	973	11
TOTAL	9260	100

With 26% of all visitors coming from Melbourne (predominantly post code areas 3000-3200) and 27% coming from country Victoria, the significance of the intrastate market is clear and marketing activities should be focused on these areas. Not surprisingly, December, with Christmas and New Year's Eve, is a busy period for VFR visitation. Anecdotally, couples and "grey nomads" make up a large proportion of visitors, with the latter group coming "for the peace and quiet" of the area. International visitors tend to be backpackers, who are then directed to Shepparton for fruit picking work.

Apart from this data, there is no other current visitor information available, nor is there data on the economic value of tourism for the Shire. It is strongly recommended that the Tourism Impact Model be implemented for Mitchell Shire in order to gain a clear indication of the economic value of tourism to the Shire.

Shire of Strathbogie

It is noted that the Strathbogie Ranges Tourism Association Visitor Information Centre, located in the BP Petrol Station in Euroa does not provide visitor information statistics to TAV. The visitor information section is merely a large brochure stand at the back of the service area of the petrol station and it is not specifically staffed to handle visitor enquiries. The petrol station staff does not track visitor statistics as they claim most visitors only stop there to buy petrol⁶. Clearly there is a lack of interest in providing a true visitor information service and presumably the BP staff would not be trained to handle tourism-specific enquiries.

It was suggested to us that the VIC should be relocated to Seven Creeks Park, identified by one interviewee as the traditional "stopping place" in Euroa. It could then be included in plans to redevelop the Park and could be expanded to become a proper travellers' rest with amenities such as a café and toilets, as well as the visitor information component. This suggestion is thought to have merit and is recommended for further consideration. Funding for the development of this site could be applied for through the Regional Infrastructure Development Fund.

Another suggested location for a VIC in the Shire of Strathbogie is Plunkett-Fowles Winery, on the corner of Lambing Gully Road and the Hume Highway in Avenel. Similar to the current VIC in the BP petrol station, we have concerns that the quality of the VIC and its service delivery may be compromised due to the co-location with and competing priorities of the host business. If a VIC were to be located at Plunkett-Fowles Winery, a much larger car park, potentially with capacity for tour buses would need to be built. The current car park capacity is inadequate for increased traffic and visitation.

A more consistent collection of visitor statistics through the VICs in the Shire of Strathbogie is recommended. The Tourism Impact Model should also be undertaken to assess the economic impact of tourism in the Shire of Strathbogie. Without this information, pushing the case for further tourism development and investment in the area is difficult to justify from a Council perspective.

Anecdotally, October through to April is the busy period for tourism in the Shire of Strathbogie. The school holidays and long weekends that fall in this period represent peak visitation times. Winter is typically the quiet part of the year. The VFR market is a big market. Interstate traffic tends to come from New South Wales; intrastate day-trip traffic is usually from Shepparton and other nearby towns. From Euroa's perspective, many visitors are "just passing through", emphasising the need to develop Euroa, and indeed Strathbogie overall, as a destination rather than a stop-over point, to give travellers a reason to stay, rather than just a reason to stop.

Murrindindi Shire

The VIC statistics from Marysville and Alexandra reflect high walk-in traffic for both Centres, but very low numbers of phone and email queries for the Alexandra VIC. This reflects the historic popularity of Marysville as a destination for couples seeking a romantic weekend away. A growing interest from the gay market (similar to Daylesford) was also reported.

⁶ As explained to Fiona Brooke, Industry Development Officer responsible for the Visitor Information Centre program

The picnic race days in Alexandra and Yea attract family groups, especially where they coincide with a public holiday, such as the Stonelea Alexandra Cup on the Saturday of Labour Day long weekend. Easter is also a very busy time in the Shire, with the Molesworth Auction, the Eildon Lions Easter Market and the Picnic Race Meeting in Yea.

The visitor markets for Murrindindi Shire are varied, including camping holidaymakers (typically couples and young families); caravanning holidaymakers; touring motorcycle clubs; and fishing enthusiasts, ranging from high-end fly fishers to weekend anglers. In winter, Lake Mountain traditionally attracts the family "snow play" market, learners and cross-country skiers.

The outdoor education sector is also usually a big market for the Shire, with school camps and adventure activities, taking advantage of proximity of national parks and reserves. Already, this market has declined significantly since the bushfires and will remain impacted to some extent due to the damage done to the parks and reserves.

Visitors to Murrindindi Shire are predominantly from Melbourne, often just day-trippers. There are some international visitors, namely from Europe, the United States, New Zealand and Canada. Interstate visitors come from all states.

Visitor Information Centres

City of Greater Shepparton

The Shepparton Visitor Information Centre is considered to be effective in its provision of information to tourists. It is hoped that the existing VIC can be redeveloped as part of the Lake Victoria regeneration project to make it a lakeside feature. A representative of the City of Greater Shepparton indicated that the lake would be filled as soon as possible. This would make the existing VIC site more appealing, in the interim, until the entire site is redeveloped. This would also be very beneficial to nearby businesses overlooking the lake.

There are also plans to establish additional satellite Visitor Information Centres during key events and festivals and at the new SPC Ardmona site. This may be particularly useful during of the redevelopment of the existing VIC, but it is also important to avoid duplication in the long term. It is suggested that a satellite VIC could also be located at another entrance to Shepparton, perhaps in Mooroopna to capture visitors arriving from the west.

Mitchell Shire

There are two VICs in Mitchell Shire, one in Seymour and one in Kilmore. The Seymour VIC is considered the better of the two, although it has been noted that VIC staff need more direction and better leadership. The Kilmore VIC suffers from its location within the local library. Given that Kilmore VIC registers the lowest number of enquiries all registered VICs in the project region and the limited resources already available to VIC activity in Mitchell Shire, it may be better to eliminate the Kilmore VIC and focus resources on the Seymour VIC.

In terms of an optimal location for the VIC, one suggestion was a location on the Hume Hwy, on the way to touring regions, with enough space for tour buses to park and a proper rest stop with toilet and washroom facilities. A link with a successful business was again suggested, but as mentioned previously, there are concerns about co-locating a VIC with a business.

Shire of Strathbogie

The VIC in Euroa, located in the BP service station is not considered to be effective in providing tourist information to visitors, although in terms of location, the BP was considered by one interviewee to be a good site for a VIC. As reported above, the VIC is merely a brochure stand without a dedicated staff to answer visitor queries in person.

The Nagambie VIC is not IT savvy and there is a need to develop expertise in online booking and payments to make this a more efficient commercial operation. Better VIC signage is also required.

It was suggested that more local shops be allowed to display a lower case "i" and be supplied with approved tourism brochures that can be handed out to customers. This would help to support the one accredited VIC in Nagambie and would be a good way of engaging local business people in tourism and improving locals' knowledge of tourism events and activities in their region.

Murrindindi Shire

An arrangement has been proposed whereby the VIC staff from Marysville would work in the Alexandra VIC, which is struggling for staff at moment. The Alexandra VIC collects postcode information from visitors but does not actively solicit the information (visitors are invited to add their postcode to a list placed inside the entrance to the VIC). This means that the data may not accurately reflect all visitors to the Centre. At the non-accredited Yea VIC, statistics are collected and provided to Council. The VIC is located within a local restaurant on the main street. Restaurant staff are allowed to provide visitor information as part of their regular work shifts. There is no charge to the VIC for this service.



Alexandra Visitor Information Centre

PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT & SWOT ANALYSIS

WEBSITE REVIEW

Website	Content	Comments
http://www.greatershepparton.com.au/visitors/	Visitors Page: "The City of Greater Shepparton is synonymous with great food, wine, waterways and weather. Greater Shepparton boasts a diversity of cultural, outdoor and sporting activities seldom found anywhere else."	This is how Shepparton sees itself as a destination. Does not pick up the "Green Heart of Victoria" branding used by Tourism Greater Shepparton.
	Accommodation page	Very good page - details, images, links and contact details of each property.
	Activities & Attractions page and Amusement page	Need more differentiation between the two categories
	Food and Wine page	Needs links to featured restaurants, wineries, etc. No mention of restaurants featured in The Age Good Food Guide, e.g. Teller in Mooroopna
	Show Me retail and commercial marketing strategy Shopping in Shepp page	Great recognition of retail / commercial offerings as another visitor/tourist attraction and recognition of the wider economic value of tourism (retail as a supporter of events). Need to have listing by category as well as alphabetical listing. Sounds great but should have some mention of general business hours as the reality may not meet the expectations of visitors, esp. those from Melbourne who are used to Sunday trading. A retail map of the Shepparton CBD would also be useful.
	Yanha Gurtji Shared Path Network	An explanation of the name of the path would be useful and also help promote links with indigenous culture.
http://www.tourismgreatershepparton.com.au/index.php		Good website that focuses on leisure tourist information and activities; does not confuse this with general business or economic development. Links to Council site.
Website	Content	Comments
http://www.mitchellshire.vic.gov.au/Page/Page.asp?Page_Id=324&p=1	Tourism Directory	Comprehensive list of businesses but lacks images, no call to action.
	Calendar of Events	Does not distinguish between community events aimed at locals and tourism events that would also attract visitors, as well as locals. Lacks images.
http://www.seymournow.com.au/index.cfm/home		New e-portal – good initiative but why only for businesses within a 50km radius of Seymour when it advertises the "Goulburn River and Ranges".
http://www.seymour.org.au/index.cfm/Home		How does this differ from the e-portal? Will it be superseded when the e-portal is operational?

Website	Content	Comments
www.strathbogieregion.com.au - This link could be made more obvious on the Strathbogie Shire Council website.	Savour... the culinary delights of many fine eateries and cafes - from gourmet restaurants to bakeries and fine coffee shops.	Only 1 restaurant featured under Restaurants & Eateries
	Avenel, Euroa, Longwood, Strathbogie, Ruffy, Violet Town	How about sections featuring each town and its attractions / activities / accommodation / restaurants / etc.?
	Equine/Horse Industry The Strathbogie Ranges Region is widely known for its thoroughbred horse industries. Labelled the "Horse capital of Victoria", a vast array of successful equine businesses have relocated their operations to take advantage of our regions many award winning resources that help fuel their success.	What events / attractions are there / can be developed that link in with, leverage and strengthen this reputation?
	Calendar of Events, Places of Interest	Update!! And keep updated
Website	Content	Comments
http://www.murrindintourism.com.au/	Activities - Adventurous page	Needs links to operators and providers of listed activities - at least a contact number for bookings and enquiries, but preferably email or online booking form.
Overall lack of "calls to action" on this website	Activities - Bushwalking page	Upload trail maps
	Activities - Horse Riding	Needs links to horse riding operators - at least a contact number for bookings and enquiries, but preferably email or online booking form. Also trail maps.
	Activities – Camping	Needs links to camping operators / equipment providers – as above. Also trail maps and links to Parks Victoria information.
	Activities - Arts, Crafts, etc	Needs links to galleries, esp. featured galleries and artists; include times and location maps for markets.
	Activities - House Boating	Needs links to houseboat operators, accommodation providers, inc. contact details for bookings and enquiries.
	Lake Mountain Alpine Resort	Any summer activities?? Link to Lake Mountain website
	Accommodation	List property details under relevant category rather than all at end of page; link properties to websites where available.
	Links	Need more links! And also include them on relevant pages, not just under "Links". This may then eliminate the need for a Links page.
http://www.murrindindi.vic.gov.au/Calendar/Calendar.asp?h=-1	Calendar of Events	Does not distinguish between community events aimed at locals and tourism events that would also attract visitors, as well as locals.

WEBSITE REVIEW

A strong online presence is vital for providing prospective visitors with information and “setting the scene” for them and whetting their appetite before they arrive. The table above shows some of the online tourist information provided by the local governments in the project region as well as information from a sample of tourism associations. This is discussed in more detail below.

City of Greater Shepparton

The websites of the City of Greater Shepparton and Tourism Greater Shepparton (TGS) are well-laid out and easy to navigate, with attractive, colourful images. However, links to the TGS website on the Council website are not apparent. The comprehensive visitor information provided on the Council website may also cannibalise traffic to the TGS website. It would be useful to compare hits on the Visitor pages of the Council website with overall hits on the TGS website.

The Shepparton Show Me website is good but there should be a listing or option to search by retail category – women’s clothing, souvenirs, children, etc. – as well as the alphabetical listing. This would then also quickly reveal any gaps in the city’s retail offering.

Mitchell Shire

The Mitchell Shire website appears to be based on a standard local government website template (it is very similar in layout to the Strathbogie Shire Council website). The tourist and visitor information is in the lower half of the left-hand navigation bar and the first listed sub-category addresses tourism businesses and operators rather than visitors, whose dedicated sub-section is listed last. This indicates that tourism is (currently) not a priority for the Council. Whilst links to “Upcoming Events” appears on the homepage, there is no differentiation between community activities, geared to the locals (e.g. Seymour Microchipping Day, when locals can have their pets tagged and identified) and actual events that would attract visitors, such as The Seymour Craft and Produce Market. Both of these take place on Saturday 21 March (image below). It is suggested that a separate Events Calendar that will appeal to visitors as well as locals be developed, in addition to a “Community Noticeboard” for activities that are generally only relevant and of interest to locals, such as the microchipping.

Unlike the other three shires, Mitchell has no dedicated tourism website. There are, however, other websites that include tourism: the Mitchell Business website; also www.seymour.org.au, the website for Seymour Business and Tourism Inc.; and the new “e-portal”, www.goulburnriverandranges.com, developed by the Seymour Chamber of Commerce and Tourism. Initially the e-portal was designed to include businesses within a 50km radius of Seymour; however, this area is expected to be increased with the scope of the website. The portal is eventually supposed to be more tourist-focused, but the opening lines on the homepage would indicate a broader business outlook:

Inside you will find

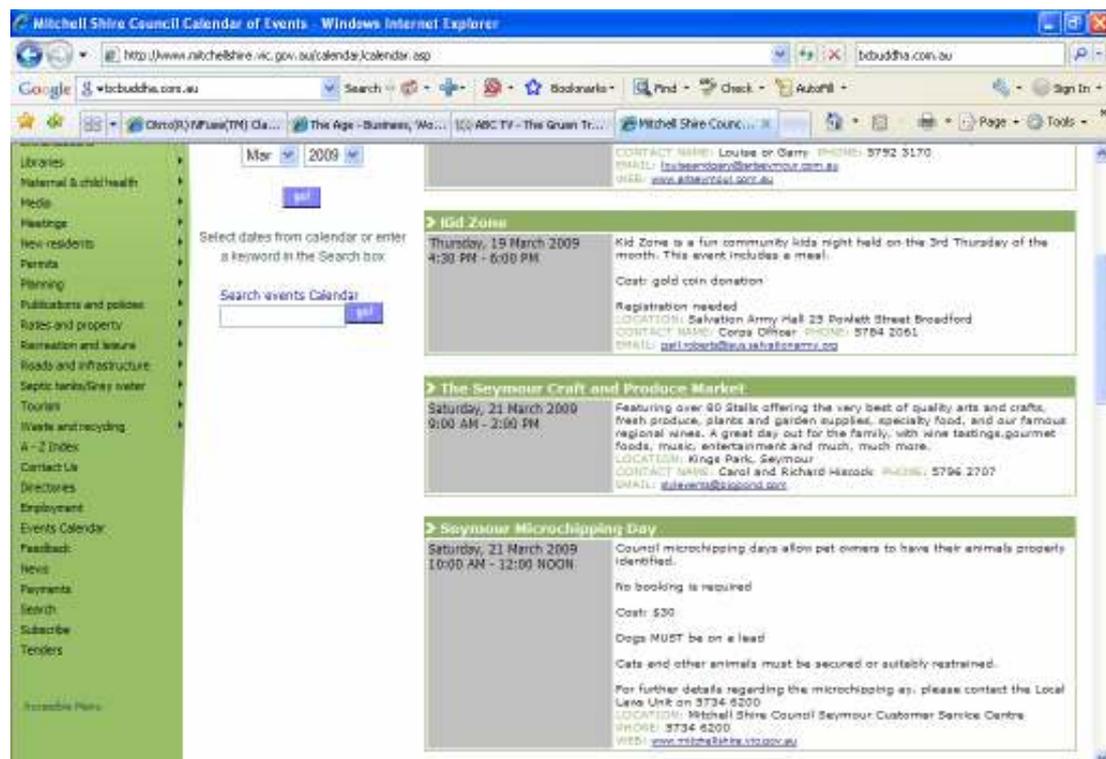
- [What is in our region](#)
- [Things to do when you visit us](#)
- [Information on starting/bringing new business here](#)
- [Resources that support our local communities and businesses](#)

The Chamber hopes that it can be developed into and used as a “regional tool” for businesses. This is fine but it also means that the site, like existing sites, will not

serve the purpose of providing tourism and visitor information. There is already a considerable amount of duplication of information across these websites and none is designed to market specifically to tourists and visitors. Furthermore, the choice of domain name is somewhat unfortunate as it is very similar to the name and website of the Goulburn River and Ranges Food and Wine Tourism Network page: www.goulburnrandr.com.au.

The Goulburn River and Ranges Food and Wine Network website is managed by Mitchell Shire Council and provides visitor information for an area that includes “the abundant red soil around Dookie in the north to the renowned Nagambie Lakes area in the centre and the lush beauty of the Strathbogie and Tallarook Ranges”, focusing on food, wine and local produce. It is a good website but some pages need to be updated and proof-read. It is interesting that in the “Regions” section, the phrase “Dookie and District” is used to describe a region that is essentially the Greater Shepparton area; meanwhile “Murchison & Rushworth” is treated as a separate region again, although Murchison is part of Greater Shepparton, and Rushworth belongs to Campaspe Shire. From a regional tourism structure perspective, the statement that the Network is an initiative involving the Shires of Strathbogie and Mitchell (only) adds to confusion.

Given that the online space for Mitchell Shire businesses is already quite cluttered, rather than proposing a tourism-specific website, an improved tourism section with a higher profile on the Council website is recommended to support tourism activity and development in Mitchell Shire.



Screen shot of Mitchell Shire’s Events Calendar

Shire of Strathbogie

Given the similarities in website layout, the comments made with regard to the Mitchell Shire Council website also apply to the Strathbogie Shire Council website. The Strathbogie Ranges Tourism (SRT) website is www.strathbogieregion.com.au. The link to this site could be made more obvious on the Strathbogie Shire Council

website; it is currently buried under "Experience Strathbogie / Strathbogie Ranges Region".

Overall the SRT website has many gaps in terms of information and images and the events page in particular urgently needs to be updated for 2009. The "restaurants and Eateries" section only features one restaurant! This is not acceptable "food and wine" is to be considered a regional strength. The listing of the towns within the Shire is useful but could be greatly enhanced with links through to sections featuring each town and its attractions, activities, accommodation and restaurants as well as a location map to show where each of these towns is within the Shire region. The "Our Towns" section on the City of Greater Shepparton website and the Destinations/Townships link on the Murrindindi Tourism website are good examples of how this could be done.

The "Equine Industry" section on the SRT website is inadequate for a region that calls itself "The Horse Capital of Victoria". As will be discussed below, there is great potential in developing the linkages between tourism and the thoroughbred industry. In the meantime, this section of the SRT website could at least feature riding schools, riding trails, stud farms and horse shows.

The Nagambie Lakes Tourism website is informative and appears well-maintained. A link to this website from the Strathbogie Shire Council website is recommended.

Murrindindi Shire

Context: The Murrindindi Tourism website was viewed prior to the Black Saturday bushfires and the comments included here were noted at the time of viewing.

The Murrindindi Tourism website provides good listings of things to do and see and places to stay in Murrindindi. The comments in the table on pages 33-34 indicate the deficiencies on individual pages. Overall, what is lacking is calls to action – links to operator websites and links for sending email enquiries to operators would provide an immediate means of contact. This is useful as web-browsing may be done out of business hours, making telephone contact details redundant. Visitors keen to enquire or book should be able to do so online.

With regard to the Murrindindi Shire Council website, the findings are similar to those of the Mitchell and Strathbogie Shire Council websites, in particular pertaining to the Calendar of Events. There is a button for "Special Events"; however, there are few listings. It appears that all events are listed under the "General" category. Similar to Mitchell, it would be helpful to separate the locally-focused activities from the events that aim to attract visitors.

The "Attractions and Activities" information is quite good, but why not incorporate this information (along with some images and a location map) into web pages as part of the overall website, rather than placing it into a PDF document. The pages could then be formatted for printing direct from the website and this would eliminate the need for the PDF altogether and make for a more dynamic and attractive website.

Limitations:

Not all websites of all tourism associations in the project region were reviewed in depth due to time constraints. However based on the websites that were reviewed, it is clear that the online presence of tourism in the project region is cluttered and should be consolidated to provide consistent and accurate information.

REGIONAL TOURISM PRODUCT STRENGTHS AND PRODUCT AUDIT

Mitchell Shire

The PDF 2008 tourism directory provided on the Mitchell Shire website provides a lengthy listing of the following businesses:

- 12 Bed n Breakfasts
- 4 caravan parks
- 1 resort
- 6 motels
- 5 art galleries
- 7 attractions
- 2 business groups
- 6 conference facilities
- 2 bakeries
- 7 hotels (pubs)
- 22 restaurants and cafes
- 1 historical society
- 1 market
- 4 recreation and leisure facilities
- 7 wineries

The directory was, however, last updated on 21/01/2008, so an immediate action would be to review and update the directory for 2009.

Some of the attractions, accommodation properties, wineries, businesses and services not listed in the directory include:

- Kestrel Motor Inn, Kilmore
- Old Kilmore Gaol
- Pretty Sally Trail Rides
- Greater Seymour Chamber of Commerce
- Seymour Business and Tourism
- Kilmore Chamber of Commerce and Tourism
- Brave Goose Vineyard
- Kilmore Golf Club
- Kilmore Tennis Club
- Kilmore Leisure Centre
- Old Kilmore Gaol Seymour Cup
- Kilmore Cup
- Kemp's Bakery, Kilmore
- Willira Gallery and Café
- Brackley Cottage
- Seymour Motel
- Lancemore Hill
- Wallan Old Time Market
- Seymour VIC
- Kilmore VIC

In addition, 7 of the 9 restaurants and cafés listed on the "Welcome to Kilmore" brochure produced by the Kilmore Chamber of Commerce and Tourism are also not included in the directory.

It would appear that the information in the tourism directory is supplied using the business-specific "fact file forms" which can be downloaded from the website. It would also seem that inclusion in the tourism directory is voluntary, relying on the business owner to know where to find the form and then complete and submit it. This may be an easy way of collecting the relevant information but it does not make for a comprehensive directory of the Shire tourism offerings and the end format is not user-friendly – a black and white, 28-page document with no images. Moreover, thought should be given to the end-user of the document. If it is intended only for consumers such as visitors and tourists (as the title of the document suggests) then it is probably not necessary to include a section on "Business Groups". However, if the directory is for a business audience, perhaps aimed at attracting investment or sponsorship, this information may be relevant.

From a local's perspective, Mitchell Shire's product strengths include:

- Its location at the junction of two major highways, which provides good access, together with V-Line access
- Puckapunyal Army Museum
- Army Tank Museum

- Railway Heritage Museum
- Nature walks, heritage trail
- Old Kilmore Gaol for antique auctions
- The self-sufficiency of Seymour as a town
- Seymour's accommodation capacity: 300-400 beds in a 10km radius of Seymour (368 as counted 8 years ago)

The community spirit, Mitchell's business community and council relationships were also cited as being a strong point, along with the residential growth which has put the Shire in a stronger financial position. From a whole of region perspective, the cooperation and communication between the four Shires involved in the project, as well as the wineries in Nagambie, Murrindindi's product and the equine and wine industries were also named as regional product strengths. Although not specifically mentioned, the Seymour Cup and Kilmore Cup should also be considered as good tourism product for Mitchell Shire.

The heritage railway was thought to be under-promoted and it was suggested that the Army Tank Museum at Puckapunyal (pictured below) could be linked by rail to the Railway Heritage Centre, developing a "big boys' toys" / transport theme.



City of Greater Shepparton

From information provided on the City of Greater Shepparton website and the official visitors' guide, the following list of tourism products has been compiled:

- 2 bed and breakfasts
- 18 motels
- 6 caravan parks
- 1 guest house
- 1 self-contained property
- 5 serviced apartments
- Over 400 retail outlets, including restaurants and cafes
- 5 factory sales outlets
- 11 amusements and attractions
- 3 wineries
- 14 conference venues
- 1 art gallery
- 20 recreation reserves
- 46 parks and playgrounds

In addition, Greater Shepparton boasts a calendar of over 60 annual events. Of these, the following were cited during interviews as being product strengths for the area:

- Dookie Arts Festival
- Taste of Tatura
- Herald-Sun Tour
- Fruit Loop Cycling event
- Horse races at Tatura (Italian Plate Day)
- Harness racing
- Spring Car Nationals
- Sporting events such the Shepparton Half Ironman Triathlon and the Shepparton Junior Basketball Tournament
- International Dairy Week in January
- Arts and crafts market in Queens Park

Other products and aspects that were considered to be strengths from a tourism perspective were:

- Mooving Art cows (pictured right)
- SPC Ardmona Factory Sales
- Small towns – Dookie, Mooroopna, Tatura
- Farmgates and wineries in Dookie & Murchison
- “Food Bowl” reputation
- Fruit picking
- Lake Victoria (once it has been re-filled and landscaped)
- Easy driving distance from Melbourne and, in particular, Melbourne Airport
- Rumbalara Football and Netball Club in Shepparton
- New greyhound track
- Indigenous artist talent
- Canoe trees
- Shepparton’s large indigenous population (about 6000).
- Walking Trails
- Rivers and irrigation system
- Weather



The city’s family-friendly atmosphere and young, multicultural society as well as good event facilities supporting big, well-staffed events were also mentioned as part of the City’s key strengths in attracting tourism. What was not mentioned were the ten annual horse shows and events that are held at Tatura Park. This would appear to be a significant niche event segment but it does not seem to have the same profile as other events on the calendar.

Within the Greater Shepparton area, the small towns are recognised as having their own unique attractions. In particular, the Lifestyle Dookie community group was mentioned as successfully developing and promoting tourism for its town. In response to our question about product strengths, Virginia Boyd of Lifestyle Dookie wrote:

"We feel our beautiful town and district offers an excellent spot for people to visit on a weekend or on the way through to see its natural beauty,

nestled between Mt. Major and Mt. Saddleback, we offer meals at our local Hotel The Gladstone, our café The Dookie Harvest, the Dookie Emporium offers a wide range of antiques and collectables and we have a renovated, inviting park for people to take time out. The views in spring are amazing with patchwork hills all around. It is definitely a photographer's dream. Lifestyle Dookie sells a branded Dookie product on Hats, Aprons, shirts, stickers, cups and headbands. Money raised is placed back into the community and community projects. We are also working on a Dookie Calendar every two years. This project has seen two beautiful calendars being produced so far."

Ms Boyd's statement reflects not only local pride but also excellent product and market knowledge. In particular, local pride in one's town is considered to be a vital element in establishing a tourism strategy. It is this element that is noticeably lacking on other Shires and indeed other parts of the Greater Shepparton area.

Shire of Strathbogrie

The following tourism products and services are listed on the Strathbogrie Council Directory:

- 10 bed and breakfasts
- 3 caravan parks
- 6 hotels/motels
- 18 self-catering properties
- 7 wineries
- 6 function venues
- 11 cafes
- 10 restaurants
- 3 antique shops
- 8 gift shops
- 1 gallery
- 1 sky-diving club
- 1 boomerang manufacturer

Interviews with locals also revealed the following tourism product strengths in the Shire:

- Wineries and food
- Alpacas
- Equine industry – stud farms
- Mangalore Airport
- Straw bale houses,
- Stone houses
- Local artists (Tom Long, Michael Leunig, glass blower, textiles, photographer)
- The people
- The Mill
- Ned Kelly trail and story
- Indigenous caves in Euroa
- Euroa Butter Factory
- Historic homes and buildings
- The eclectic area
- Heritage Trail
- North East Pub
- Public transport to Avenel
- Showgrounds infrastructure
- Violet Town community
- Village atmosphere of the town
- Hume Hwy access – Euroa is at a major junction
- Good stopover point
- Lake Nagambie – guaranteed water
- Scenery
- Rusty Springs
- Cycling rail trail
- Public transport (train) links
- Volunteers
- Seasonal hallmark events
- Show & Shine – very popular, in its 7th year (pictured below)



In contrast, the Strathbogie Ranges Tourism website lists just seven accommodation properties, seven places of interest, two wineries and one restaurant. Overall, the Strathbogie tourism offering is disjointed. The wineries could be better leveraged from a marketing perspective and more could be done with the small towns within the Shire; for example, links to the websites of each community, or a feature business in each town, such as Ruffy Produce Store, could be included on the relevant pages of the Council website. The Nagambie Lakes Tourism website is better presented in this regard. Nagambie Lakes Tourism was also represented at the Nagambie on Water Festival, held on the Labour Day weekend, which was an excellent opportunity for the association to promote the region's tourism products and services.

Shire of Strathbogie calls itself the "Horse Capital of Victoria" however there is at present little connection between the equine industry and tourism. Tentative steps in this direction were apparent in the Wine and Equine tours arranged as part of the Nagambie on Water Festival. The tours were billed as "exclusive tours" but priced at just \$10 for adults, with children under 15 years free. The tours were also clearly run as a fundraising activity, with all proceeds going to Nagambie Hospital. Tourism is a commercial activity and products such as these tours have great potential as a high yield product; however, they must be priced accordingly (especially if they are called "exclusive"), not only to attract a certain, higher spending market, but also to provide an incentive to both the stud farms and wineries to participate. There is certainly potential for this type of combined product – the Wine and Equine Tours sold around 55 tickets in total.

Murrindindi Shire

The Official Visitors' Map for Marysville featured 38 accommodation properties; 12 "Things to See and Do"; and eight natural attractions. On the Marysville Tourism website, the downloadable restaurant and café guide named 15 businesses. Sadly, a large proportion of Murrindindi Shire's tourism products and services were destroyed in the Black Saturday bushfires. The key township of Marysville was lost, along with Kinglake National Park. Lake Mountain Alpine Resort sustained considerable damage to many of its buildings and its ski trails and other infrastructure was destroyed. Numerous smaller towns in the area and other State parks and reserves were also destroyed or very badly damaged, as was the main road leading to Marysville via Black Spur.

The regional strengths that remain after the bushfires are the proximity to Melbourne; food and wine; Lake Eildon; the 14 waterfalls in the region; picnic race days in Yea and Alexandra; and the Goulburn River. Nature-based tourism was, and will continue to be, the basis of the tourism offering for Murrindindi Shire. Some aspects of this will take some time to become viable again – much of the bush, parks and reserves will need months, and in some cases, years, to regenerate. Tracks for bushwalking, including the disabled access boardwalk, will need to be re-established once the area is safe to access (falling trees will remain a hazard for some time). The coming snow season for Lake Mountain will rely on the right weather conditions to produce decent falls that will attract families back to the area. The region is also home to many trout farmers and whilst many have lost fish stock, buildings and other property, it is expected that this industry will re-bound.

The bush environment, parks and reserves, along with the proximity to Melbourne combined to make the region very popular for school camps and other outdoor education activities. Alternative sites will need to be identified as substitutes for those areas which have been burnt out and are deemed unsafe.

Some activities such as platypus tours are still operational. A large artists' community (around 200 artists) was identified as another strength of the area and there is an opportunity to involve this group in tourism product development as the re-building process gets underway.

The reconstruction of Marysville, Kinglake and surrounding townships will take place under new building, planning and zoning requirements and policies. With these new guidelines and standards, it seems unlikely that a replica of the old Marysville, with its heritage buildings and facades, could be achieved. However, the reconstruction process presents a unique opportunity to establish and develop tourism infrastructure, product and services, not only within Marysville, but across the whole Shire. A review of the current regional tourism plan is therefore essential to identify tourism priorities within the reconstruction process and to ensure that the new tourism infrastructure aligns with and complements existing tourism infrastructure in other parts of the Shire.

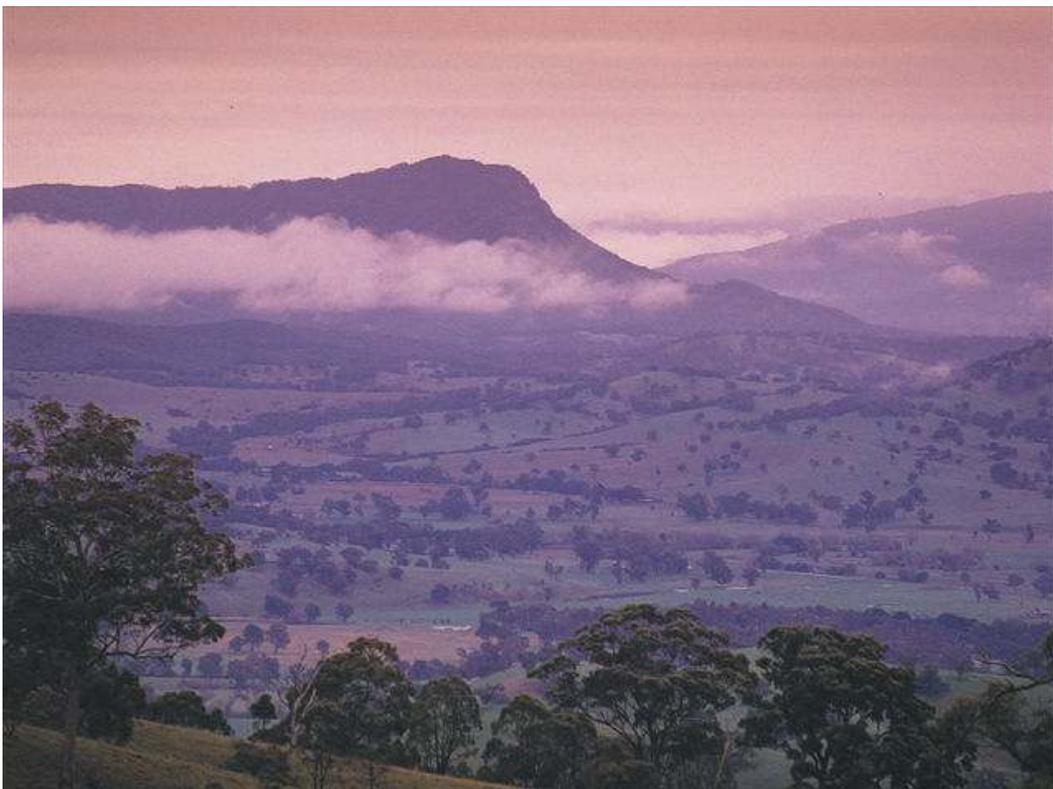


Image from Murrindindi Tourism website

REGIONAL WEAKNESSES FROM A TOURISM PERSPECTIVE

Through the stakeholder interviews, a number of weaknesses common to all four local government areas have been identified and are discussed below, together with recommendations for overcoming or addressing these weaknesses.

Poor perception (“not seen as a tourist destination”)

This point was raised repeatedly in relation to the City of Greater Shepparton and Mitchell Shire. In addition, an overall lack of awareness of the region (where it is on the map) was identified as a significant weakness. Specifically, the perception that Seymour is just a service town for the Army and a farming town was mentioned as part of an overall perception problem for the area. It was also mentioned that for a large part of the year in Mitchell Shire there are no events and the few attractions and restaurants in the Shire are not enough on their own to attract large numbers of tourists. Whilst Mitchell may not have quite the extensive events calendar that Shepparton has, there are at least 17 events listed in the Mitchell OVG events calendar. The comment suggests a lack of local awareness and emphasises the need to educate the local community accordingly.

Shepparton’s image has suffered recently due to bad press regarding road accidents and a highly publicised sexual abuse case. Poor security and public safety were also cited as problems for the town, with reports of backpackers being assaulted or robbed. Shepparton is also known as a fruit growing and farming town, rather than a tourism town or place to visit. Certainly the events-focused strategy recognises the lack of attractions in the more traditional sense and is providing a successful alternative means of bringing visitors to the area.

Lack of local industry engagement

In towns where the local tourism businesses, and in particular accommodation providers, are currently doing “well enough”, there is something of a “why bother with tourism” attitude. These businesses do not see the need to get involved with the local tourism or business association or to become more active in tourism. Accompanying this mindset is the belief held by many local businesses that they are “not in tourism”; even to the point where some local businesses will not participate in a local festival or similar event (i.e. they will not open to trade during the event).

One example of where this attitude is changing is Yea. When access to the town was restricted due to the bushfires, the local business sector realised the importance of the visitors and traffic that usually passes through Yea. The most recent meeting of the Yea Business and Tourism Association saw attendance by 27 local businesses – double the usual attendance – and the Association hopes to capitalise on this momentum and increase both membership and participation in local tourism initiatives and events.

Completing the Tourism Impact Model is a good process for determining and demonstrating the value of tourism within a local economy. It is recommended for all Shires that have not already done it. The information derived from the Model can then be used to demonstrate to both Councils and local businesses the benefits of investing and participating in tourism.

Lack of infrastructure

This varies in scale from Murrindindi, where most of the tourism infrastructure needs to be re-built; to Mitchell Shire, where poor signage, a lack of public

amenities such as toilets and a disjointed shopping precinct and the lack of maintenance of historical buildings were named as weaknesses in local tourism.

Lack of access to the river was cited as a weakness in both Greater Shepparton and Mitchell Shire, whilst in Strathbogie, there is a need for facilities such as a pavilion that could accommodate events such as trade shows and large-scale events.

Signage is an issue in regional Victoria generally. In the case of the project region, old signage, in particular signs which display the old Jigsaw campaign branding, needs to be removed.

Lack of infrastructure is often due to a lack of funding and/or Council support. If Council support can be secured (in part through demonstrating the value of tourism), funding can then be applied for through Regional Development Victoria's Regional Infrastructure Development Fund. The Fund guidelines specify the improvement of tourism infrastructure and facilities as the type of capital works projects that the Fund supports.



Old Kilmore Post Office

Lack of local pride

Whilst difficult to quantify, this sentiment was expressed by numerous interviewees across all four local government areas. It is considered a serious problem because if the locals don't think there is any reason to visit their town, it will be even harder to attract visitors. In Mitchell Shire, some felt that their local community was wary of new people and fresh business coming to the town – whether to visit or to settle. Others felt that there was a lack of community spirit, due to a transitory demographic. In Shepparton, it was commented that the town has a “down-market” feel.

One way of combating this mindset is to “talk up the town” and show locals what their town has to offer through a local family program, such as the ones conducted in Shepparton and Mildura, mentioned in the Visitation section of this report. Rather than familiarity breeding contempt, this familiarisation initiative would allow locals to experience local attractions and activities and educate them about “things to do and see” in town.

In the case of Murrindindi Shire, there appears to be a greater sense of local pride in Alexandra (“Friendly and Beautiful”) and Yea, where the heritage overlay of the

main street is seen as an asset for the town. Marysville's reputation as a tourism icon was well-known before the fires. There is nostalgia and sadness for what used to be but also a strong desire to re-build.

Town rejuvenation / beautification

The need for a town beautification program and better general maintenance of their town was common feedback from stakeholders in the Shires of Mitchell, Shepparton and Strathbogie, specifically for the towns of Shepparton, Dookie Main Street, Seymour and Kilmore.

Tourism Alliance Victoria considers this an important step in restoring local pride as well as improving the overall image of these towns as tourism destinations. A town beautification or rejuvenation program would be not only a benefit for locals, but may also serve a broader purpose in helping to attract visitors and even business investment to the town or Shire.

Limited trading hours

Tourism is a 24/7 industry. In order for all Shires to gain the maximum economic benefit from tourism, businesses will need to be open on weekends and in the evenings. The Melbourne metropolitan market, a significant source market across the project region, is accustomed to being able to access restaurants, shops and services after 5pm and on weekends and it is essential that this expectation and demand is met, if the region is to be taken seriously as a tourism destination.



TRADING HOURS	
Monday	9am - 5pm
Tuesday	9am - 12pm
Wednesday	9am - 5pm
Thursday	9am - 5pm
Friday	9am - 5pm
Saturday	9am - 12pm

Lack of accommodation

Lack of accommodation was cited across all four Shires as a weakness, though the context of this varies from Shire to Shire. In Murrindindi, it is a matter of assessing how many beds have been lost and determining how this supply will be replenished and over what period of time. In towns such as Marysville and Kinglake, the immediate priorities will be to re-establish homes for residents, so accommodation properties are not expected to be re-built in the short to medium term. However, the reconstruction process presents a unique opportunity to evaluate the desired or optimal mix of accommodation properties and address any gaps or deficiencies that existed in the accommodation sector prior to the fires. The new building standards will also have an impact on the cost and style of building.

In Greater Shepparton, the accommodation offering is predominantly motels, caravan parks and self-contained apartments. There is a lack of B&BS in the Greater Shepparton area; more boutique style accommodation would help diversify the accommodation offering and help re-position Greater Shepparton's "down market" reputation. There is also a need for large scale, more upmarket accommodation to adequately support the conference and event strategy. It is hoped that this gap will be filled in part by the opening of Quest Shepparton in the middle of this year. Shepparton currently cannot compete with other regional centres such as Albury-Wodonga in this regard.

There is a similar capacity problem in Strathbogie. In Euroa, for example, the current supply of accommodation is able to meet general demand but when there are big events such as Show n Shine, guests are forced to book in other towns such as Nagambie or Seymour. A large Quest- or Accor-style property would be able to meet not only the extra demand for existing events but also encourage more events in the region. Boutique accommodation such as the Euroa Butter Factory (pictured) can also become a drawcard for the region and again helps to re-position the town in the eyes of the market.



Lack of upmarket, 5-star and boutique accommodation is also a problem for Mitchell Shire. Like Greater Shepparton, accommodation in Mitchell Shire is mainly motels and caravan parks, although there are a few B&Bs as well as a large conference venue at Lance more Hill.

Given the existing supply of caravan parks across the region and the excellent access provided by the Hume and Goulburn Valley Highways, it is strongly recommended that towns across the project region participate in the "RV Friendly Town" scheme organised by the Campervan and Motorhome Club of Australia (CMCA).

Lack of product and transport

Ironically, the "great access" that is mentioned across the region as one of its strengths is also a weakness in that towns along the Hume and Goulburn Valley Highways become victim to travellers just "passing through". Larger towns such as Shepparton are known as a good base for visitors, but this also means that those based in Greater Shepparton tend to then travel and spend money outside of Greater Shepparton. Good quality, differentiated product needs to be developed to give travellers a reason to stop and to stay.

In Greater Shepparton and Murrindindi Shire in particular, the lack of things to do for the youth market was cited as a problem not only for visitors in this age group but also for the locals. For the backpacker market in Shepparton, there is not a great deal to do except for fruit picking work.

In Murrindindi, tourism product such as the State and National Parks, walking trails, hazelnut and blueberry farms, and the general natural environment has been destroyed by the bushfires. Nature-based product redevelopment will therefore depend largely on the regeneration process of the forest areas. The time period for this will vary, depending on the extent and intensity of the fires' impact.

With regard to transport, there are V-line train services running from Melbourne to New South Wales via many towns in the project region - Wandong, Kilmore East, Broadford, Tallarook, Seymour, Avenel, Euroa, Violet Town, Nagambie, Murchison East, Mooropna and Shepparton - as well as coach services from these train stations. A greater frequency of train services was cited as a means of improving visitation, but again, improved access must be supported by a strong product offering. Recommendations for product development are discussed further on in this report.

Local Tourism Associations

As identified earlier in the report, there are too many LTAs on the one hand and a lack of statistics and data collection on the other. The latter can be addressed through the Visitor Information Centres, which should have at least one fulltime staff and properly trained volunteers in order to meet this need. Councils can greatly assist their local tourism industry by supporting the VICs in this regard.

Along with the many LTAs come many tourism websites and this confuses both the market and the local industry. Consolidating the web-based information into a central, attractive and accurate website would strengthen the image and perception of tourism in the minds of visitors and consumer, locals, and the industry.

Development issues

There were a number of issues raised relating to planning, zoning and development. In Strathbogie, with the pending construction of the Nagambie Bypass, it was recognised that the process would need to be managed well in order to avoid community backlash and also to ensure that the township of Nagambie does not suffer economically as a result of the bypass.

Zoning issues relating to the flood plain in Seymour was mentioned by several interviewees as a hindrance to local business and tourism development, with the restrictions impeding access to the river, one of the area's great natural assets and attractions.

From a different perspective, development issues with regard to skills shortage, particularly in the tourism sector, were also raised. It is hoped that the population growth of the Shires will bring with it some of the skills currently lacking in the local labour force.

Finally, there was general agreement that the equine industry, whilst strong in its own right, was under-developed from a tourism perspective. This was seen as a great opportunity to build on and would also provide a chance to develop a new segment of wine-equine tourism.

THREATS TO TOURISM IN THE REGION

Global Financial Crisis

Surprisingly only one interviewee mentioned economics as a possible barrier to development so perhaps the tourism industry do not view themselves as being impacted on by this or perhaps circumstances as a result of the crisis are yet to be felt in regional Victoria.

Population Growth

Mitchell Shire is one of the fastest growing areas in Victoria and the need to manage this growth was recognised as an important challenge facing the Council, particularly for towns such as Kilmore, Wallan and Beveridge. Nevertheless, such growth and subsequent development was seen to be vital for the future of towns such as Seymour, even if this was not the view of many local residents. Whilst over-population, is a threat, this growth can be turned into an opportunity if it is properly managed.

Competition

The obvious competition comes from other regions which have a higher tourism profile and benefit from greater funding from Tourism Victoria. Although perhaps less so in the current economic climate, cheap interstate and overseas holidays made possible by budget airlines also offer strong competition in the tourism market.

Furthermore, given the economic downturn, it is not just a matter of tourism and travel competing with other luxury consumer items for discretionary spending funds; it is also a matter of those discretionary funds shrinking or disappearing altogether.

Reluctance to go outdoors

Despite recent rain, the bushfires, and in particular, the horrific images in the media have greatly damaged public perception of the outdoors. This was evident in the Department of Education's call for week-long cancellation of all school camps in the week commencing 2 March. Safety is, now more than ever, a key consideration for those venturing into country Victoria. Even with the fire threat now over, the destruction of the State and National Parks and the trail infrastructure, as well as the risk of falling trees presents the public with an unsafe environment into which they are reluctant, if not unwilling, to venture. Given that the natural environment is part of the project region's attraction, this public perception will have some impact on visitation, even for areas far from Murrindindi Shire.

Weather

Climate change

Climate change is any long-term significant change in the expected patterns of average weather of a specific region (or, more relevantly to contemporary socio-political concerns, of the Earth as a whole) over an appropriately significant period of time. Australia and the globe are experiencing rapid climate change. Since the middle of the 20th century, Australian temperatures have, on average, risen by about 1°C with an increase in the frequency of heatwaves and a decrease in the numbers of frosts and cold days. Rainfall patterns have also

changed - the northwest has seen an increase in rainfall over the last 50 years while much of eastern Australia and the far southwest have experienced a decline. Climate change may lead to a deterioration of natural ecosystems through increased temperatures, extreme weather events and less rainfall in the southern part of the continent of Australia, thus reducing its capacity to sustain a large population and could have devastating effects on the tourism industry let alone locals.

Sea Level Rise

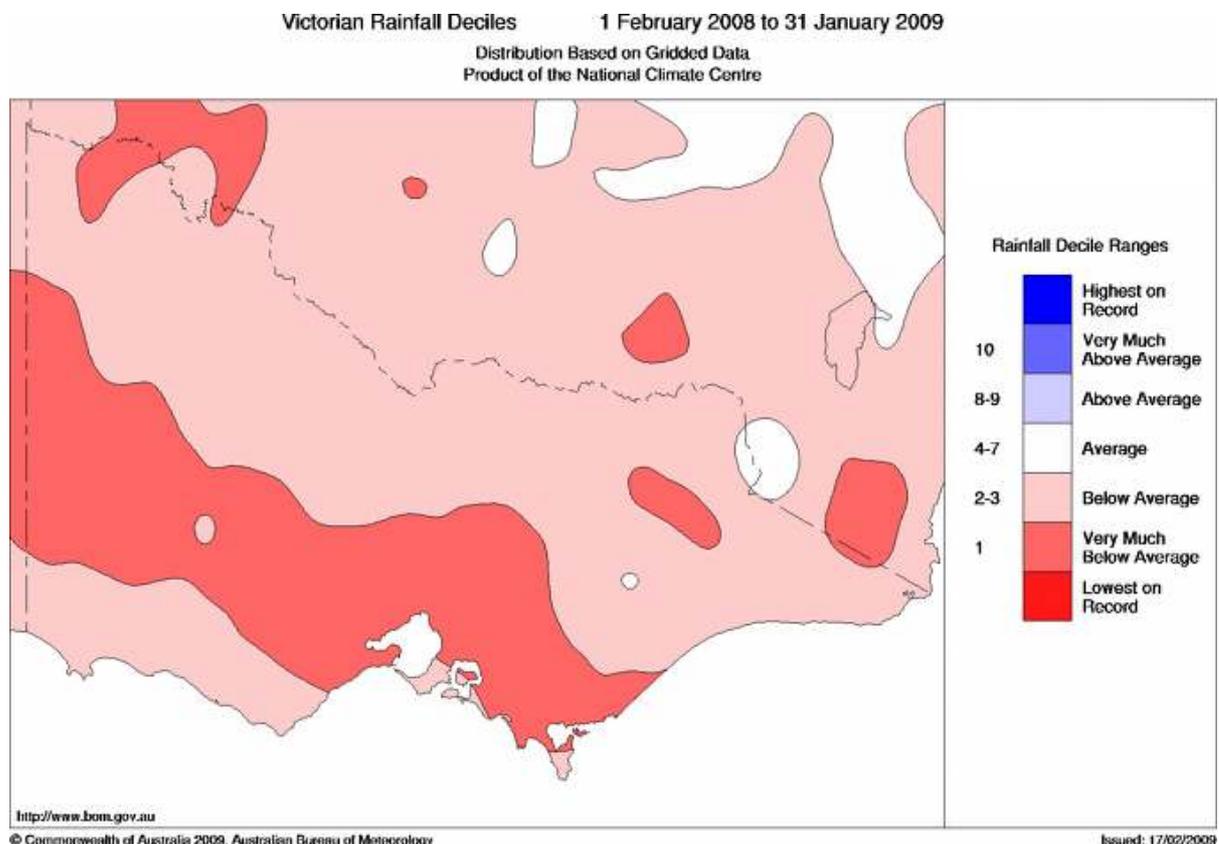
At the Australian coastal sites monitored, global sea levels rose by about 17cm during the 20th century and by around 10cm from 1920-2000. Luckily the Shires of Mitchell, Murrindindi, Strathbogie and the City of Greater Shepparton are not coastal locations and this would be a direct threat to your region. According to the Bureau of Meteorology, increases in sea level by 2100 could be between 18 and 59cm.

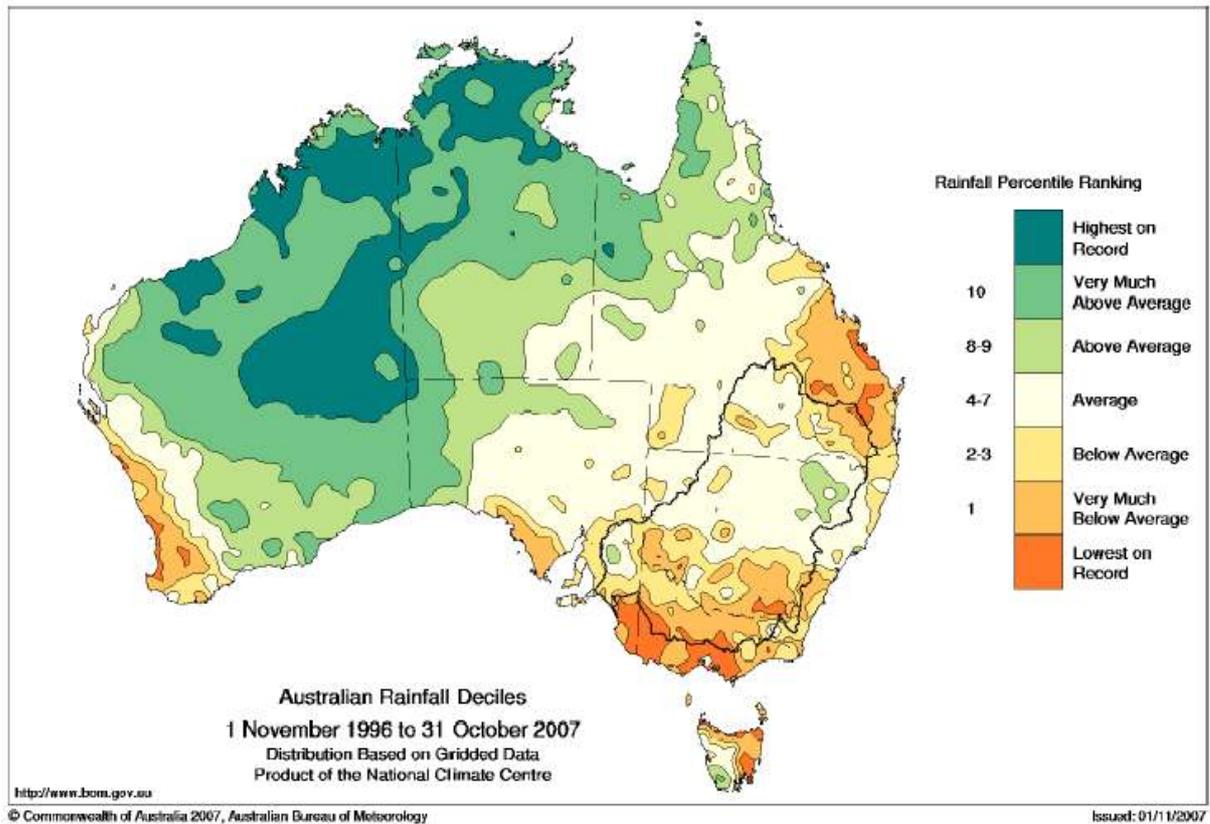
Water

Many urban and regional areas of Australia have been facing severe drought over the past decade. This is particularly the case for most areas in the state of Victoria. It may lead more people to enter the tourism industry which traditionally has low barriers to start a business and may attract alternative farmers and create tourism experiences such as lavender farms and farm stay accommodation.

Rain

Less rain and the possibility of floods in the future are threats to tourism and Victoria. Below you can see how rain fall is affecting Victoria and Australia:





As a result of the weather tourism may be impacted in a number of ways:

- Human Behaviour – maybe they’ll go elsewhere? Make late cancellations? have contemporary needs disappear, for example, eco tourism
- Health and Safety will need to be more closely monitored for example: Extremes (heat) and disease (mosquito borne). A duty of care will need to be in place for all tourism operators
- Water – availability and quality will need to be considered for both human and recreational use. Warmer oceans may lead tourists to coastal destinations.
- Planning Zones may need to be reviewed - sea levels, bush fire risk, food security, water security
- Infrastructure - coping in extreme events, designs for different climate

Drought

Despite a fairly limited amount of water-based tourism product, the drought is a major concern across the project region as it has damaged the landscape and natural setting that is the backdrop to regional Victoria. In Shepparton, Lake Victoria is empty; meanwhile, the persistent use of images of Bonnie Doon Bridge has led to a perception that Lake Eildon has no water, which is not the case. Concern was also raised about a general perception that all of regional Victoria is suffering from drought and is no longer attractive to visit, making the task of marketing regional tourism all the more difficult.

Whilst water assets such as the Goulburn River, Lake Eildon and Lake Nagambie, in their current state, could be better incorporated into the region’s tourism product and marketing to combat these negative perceptions, Tourism Alliance

Victoria does not recommend basing a tourism strategy solely on these natural assets as water supplies cannot be guaranteed.

From a different perspective, the drought is also resulting in unemployment in the agriculture industry, which in turn is impacting negatively on regional communities. Tourism offers a new avenue for local economic growth and new employment opportunities, but this will also require education and re-training of locals and support from Councils.

BARRIERS TO PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT - SHIRE BY SHIRE FINDINGS

The following items are based on observations by the researchers and interviews with stakeholders.

City of Greater Shepparton

- Funding
- The time available from volunteers to work on various projects
- Resources and grants needed to establish the Indigenous cultural centre in a good location
- Poor public perception of Tourism in Greater Shepparton
- Lack of local support
- Council's Planning Department
- Too many tourism groups. *Could Shepparton Show Me become Show Me Greater Shepparton to fund tourism, events and retail in one group with representation from Council and private businesses?*
- Tourism related businesses not seeing themselves as tourism businesses
- Tourism Victoria's Murray Campaign Committee – "it is absolutely useless to Shepparton"
- Zoning and planning restrictions
- Rail access from Melbourne – need more services, more frequently
- Cooperation between tourism operators/council

Mitchell Shire

- Zoning – floods plains mean a lack of land available for development
- Lack of identity for region and towns within it
- Lack of skilled employees
- Lack of housing and rental accommodation
- Some bigotry regarding Aboriginals, therefore indigenous tourism is unlikely to be successful here; although an Interpretive Centre is viewed as a possible attraction in this area.
- Parochialism and local attitudes – locals are not proud of their towns and don't understand why tourists would want to visit
- Funding
- Suitable race dates need coordinating with Country Racing Victoria and Racing Victoria Limited
- Perception at Tourism Victoria that Mitchell is not worth any recognition and that "country people are idiots"
- Perception that Seymour is just a 'service town' for the Army and a farming town, but nothing more than that
- Lack of support from Council

Murrindindi Shire

- Ongoing perception of total destruction; fire fear in future summers *Media Messaging for the future will be a key to this*
- Politics between Local Tourism Associations
- Parochialism between towns, for example: Marysville VIC wouldn't take others' brochures without payments
- Campaign Committee Politics – Marysville involved with Yarra Valley Campaign Committee yet other towns and operators from within Murrindindi Shire all had/have to pay for the privilege, \$30-40K each
- Bureaucracy and boundaries to get a business started

- Passion to start a new business is needed, not a desire to make money as the tourism industry doesn't make money
- Global Economic situation at present – lots of wholesale or niche products are needed to survive
- Heritage overlay in Yea however this could be good opportunity for funding and assistance from Heritage Victoria and The National Trust. Streetscape needs improvement but town/Council isn't interested.

Shire of Strathbogie

- Lack of water
- Joining successful events with ones that don't fit the profile/target markets for example: Show and Shine with Farm Gate tours. *However if trying to attract one market to Show and Shine perhaps their partners would join them on the trip knowing they could do a Farm Gate tour and avoid the motorised exhibits?*
- Close mindedness amongst operators and inactive traders who don't want to work together
- Towns and operators dislike Council therefore don't work well with them
- People don't grasp opportunities unless it is "their idea", tall poppy syndrome – a class system exists in Euroa
- Winton car show is competition if scheduled on the same day as has happened in the past
- Fear that Shepparton may want to "steal" the Show & Shine or put on a similar event
- Lack of funding
- Lack of accommodation could hinder events particularly Show & Shine should it be developed into a long weekend event

COMMON BARRIERS TO DEVELOPMENT IN THE REGION

- Lack of accommodation and lack of quality accommodation
- Negative attitudes of locals
- Lack of funding
- Poor alliances between organisations and groups
- Tourism Organisations in the area
- A lack of the right talent to promote tourism in the right roles at a local government level and also at a local tourism association level
- Identity of individual Shires and Region as a whole
- Planning permits and issues with Council departments for example: wineries unable to add accommodation to properties, green wedge planning zones and flood plains
- Sensitivities of different groups for example: building a nature walk versus environment sustainability
- Lack of industry engagement
- Lack of education and understanding regarding the value of tourism
- Competition with other destinations such as Bendigo and Ballarat



At the Seymour Alternative Farming Expo,
the only wine on tasting was from New South Wales.

OPPORTUNITIES - SHIRE BY SHIRE FINDINGS

The following items are based on observations by the researchers and stakeholder interviews and suggestions.

City of Greater Shepparton

- Opportunities for more small businesses in towns surrounding Shepparton
- Water – river, lake when it gets finished and the Splash Park
- Tatura heritage precinct including the WWII war camps and Tatura Museum
- Develop Indigenous tourism product that connects The Flats with the Goulburn River; product could include stories of the land, environmental aspects, gallery and walking tour being put together with Rotary – to be similar to Norman Lindsay trail in Creswick, or the Memorial in Echuca; also consider education programs for adults, backpackers and school children.
- Indigenous tourism shuttle bus or car painted with Aboriginal art - sponsorship needed from Allen's (snake lollies), Nestle etc.
- Hosting regular sporting events for example: Junior Davis Cup and Australian Lawn Bowls Championships. This will assist to even out peaks and troughs for accommodation suppliers.
- Fruit Salad Day in Mooroopna could be a great monthly or quarterly event. *Currently run on a volunteer basis only and will need funding*
- VIC Open Day to inform locals about local attractions, producers etc. This is important for the Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) market so locals can promote local tourism to their visitors
- Equestrian facilities in Tatura
- Investment in Tourism Development in Greater Shepparton from both Council and industry and an alliance with Murrindindi, Strathbogie and Mitchell Shires.
- Keen to see these 4 Shires recognised as a sub-region by Tourism Victoria, with a campaign committee established across the regions consisting of successful industry leaders and Council representatives
- Developing touring routes and product trails across the specific region
- Focus on event tourism development
- A large and central cultural centre, café, restaurant, gallery, theatre for performing arts
- Web presence
- Boutique type establishments e.g. little towns with a "village feel", food, B&Bs, shops, gourmet products
- Develop 'food bowl' product and build on food processing industry possibly with factory visits
- Strong market as family friendly
- Attract more 'Tree changers' which will in turn attract more VFR
- Riverlinks is a good concert venue; need to attract bigger acts to town
- Thoroughbred farms could attract international markets
- Cycling routes and events
- Public Transport
- Canoe trips
- End of season festival for backpackers to celebrate end of fruit picking

Mitchell Shire

- An event encompassing stud tours, food and wine, half a dozen studs could participate
- Polo at Spring Racing Carnival time, November?

- Jazz or Blues train - utilise 12kms of track between Seymour and Puckapunyal
- Investment in accommodation sector
- Employment opportunities in equine industry, education and training for locals to be skilled and needed staff in area
- The dinner of the Country Racing Thoroughbred Festival should be aimed at more than just owners – aim for tourists to have a country dinner experience and the festival weekend
- Better racing content and promote race days more to attract locals plus visitors. Need Racing Victoria Limited to recognise tourism
- Link more with Champions Racing Museum to promote tours and country racing experiences
- Thoroughbred Festival should be in October, linked with Spring Festival. Not in August as the weather is poor
- Insulation for town will help them be green and reduce carbon footprint and gain a better reputation
- Use celebrities linked with the area for example: ex AFL and Australian cricket player Simon O'Donnell is investing already, and there are some other famous locals like ex AFL player and media personality Brian Taylor
- Empty shops
- Recreation Centre for caravans – to draw them to town become an RV Friendly town
- Leadership program
- \$15m rail trail between Mansfield and Tallarook – needs to be implemented
- Infrastructure – B&Bs
- Fire tourists to see how area recovers
- New blood – engage and involve due to housing regeneration
- Music acts to attract day tippers
- Build a levy bank so things can be built on the flood plain then a train line put on top too
- Picture theatre or a drive-in combined with car clubs plus Show and Shine
- Heritage railway – trains are ready, need a track to operate on and program, promotion and a better display
- Making the Goulburn River and Ranges Spring Festival into an Annual Event, something similar to the Hunter Valley Horse Week
- Riding schools, currently not promoted through tourism channels
- Mangalore airport for region under-utilised
- Melbourne-Sydney train line – tap into this market; Seymour is one of the bigger stations on the line
- Regional Calendar of Hallmark events that don't clash or compete
- Combining events to produce a weekend of events rather than a one day attraction, as was done in 2008 with the 3 day event, Shop Seymour/Tastes of the Goulburn/Seymour Cup. High quality attractions to get the tourists here – possibly food, wine and thoroughbreds.
- Market style development at the old dye works site
- Cable tramways at Bylands
- Restoration/beautification of town – tidy up median strips, flowerbeds in roundabout
- Goulburn River and Ranges Spring Festival – could be an annual event with funding: business breakfast on Friday, market stalls for retailers, roving entertainment for families & children; coincides with Taste of Goulburn and Seymour Cup
- A meaningful identity
- Attract working, blue collar Australians who have money, not white collars who have lost on the share market
- Signs on the highways

- Removal of outdated signs
- Tourist accommodation especially B&Bs, attractive self-contained accommodation & 5-star accommodation
- Water board to deal with flood plain zoning issues
- Seymour Alternative Farming Expo – showcase Victorian wine and produce, not wine from New South Wales and take-away food items. Opportunity for local musical acts to perform. With a three-day attendance of approximately up to 55,000 the audience is huge and potential for tourism and its flow-on effects is enormous. A VIC booth/stall should feature at the beginning of the Expo to assist with dispersing some of the large crowd. Opportunity to cross-promote local businesses in Expo guide – this may encourage post Expo patronage (assuming businesses are open after the Expo).

Murrindindi Shire

- Equine industry and related lifestyle – space to keep horses; horse training & whispering at Yarck; dressage school at King Lake; riding schools in Shire; Yea & Alexandra race meets. Race Clubs have strong picnic races, good quality events; Stonelea Cup is very popular and attracts an upmarket crowd
- Water-based activities: fishing, boating
- Re-growth of forests – green spot campaign similar to Grampians after their fires. May be of particular interest to environmental science/biology University students, a possible new target market
- Produce sector (Upper Goulburn Food Wine and Culture) & “By Victoria” campaign
- Conference market – Lake Eildon Resort, King Lake Resort (if rebuilt)
- Rail Trail – Tallarook to Mansfield
- Redevelopment of Lake Mountain should include summer activities and a ski trail.
- Mountain biking
- Demountable luxury tents
- Arts Centre
- Educational Tourism for example: through fire recovery time and beyond
- Marysville theme
- A waterfall map and trail
- Disperse conference attendees in Melbourne out to the regions – enforce flow-on effects for dispersal
- Collaborative approach especially for Rail Trail (only one in Australia to follow a river) with 4 Shires plus Mansfield
- Combining product/s – food, wine, cycling, platypus tours, environment walks. A trail from Yea to Seymour for 4 nights
- Market day trips now as there are limited beds as a result of the fires
- B&Bs and luxury accommodation
- Local Produce operations for those who are left following the fires and who still have product.
- Race clubs are nice for country meets
- Trout Festival at Lake Eildon and in surrounds. Attract Rex Hunt through the Future Fish Foundation
- Marysville – build it again
- Wetlands Discovery Centre (potential VIC site)
- BMX track and skate park – also good for locals, as well as competitions
- Recreational Vehicle (RV)-friendly town scheme
- Eco-tourism – Yea is where the Goulburn River is closest to Melbourne
- Golf
- A stand alone VIC with paid staff

- Wellness product development

Shire of Strathbogie

- Country Fair like seen in *Babe* – produce, art galleries, local artists
- Strathbogie Plateau – potential for a 5 star development
- Pipeline with water
- Open air cinema and salsa dancing at Euroa Butter Factory
- Violet Town market could be even bigger, more and better advertising
- Longwood Clydesdale races and country wares weekend
- Wine showcase
- Vintage car tours
- Food, wine and stud tours
- Rodeos
- Studio tour of local artists including Michael Leunig.
- 7 Creeks Run – could bring concerts back and be developed with proper planning
- Tear off map with walks around town
- Great indigenous sites – don't want it to be commercial but do want appreciation of site. Caves are on private land and are currently closed off yet feel they could be opened. A good walk to the caves and around with a great story to tell
- Involve the new residents in tourism – young blood needed in town and tourism
- Signage
- Cleaner and tidier town
- Positive word of mouth and better attitudes are needed
- Improve customer service skills
- Passing traffic
- Heritage and history of the town
- "Rally of the Valley" – a tour has been organised for car clubs to visit Euroa and tour through the surrounding areas, stopping at various attractions, food/wine places, etc. Seven clubs have participated so far and it's been very popular; some have booked again for this year.
- Improve the Euroa VIC and possibly change its location from the service station – expand to become a proper travellers' rest with café, toilets, etc. Maybe relocate to 7 Creeks Park, the traditional stopping place in town?
- Sporting history and possible future? Euroa used to be a sporting town – Sheffield Shield matches used to be played here; English Cricket Team visited back in the 1950s, VFL/AFL practice matches used to be played here
- Sunnymede Garden – featured in Australian Open Gardens, very pretty, but not open regularly
- Tourist trail – but feature stops need to be spruced up
- Water park
- Mangalore Airport – as air show in the region
- Thoroughbred Country reputation
- Sustainable tourism and environmental tourism
- Queen's Birthday Art Weekend at Mitchelton Winery
- Ned Kelly Tourism Route
- Set up sister city arrangement with Tipperary (Ned Kelly's father's home county in Ireland)

COMMON TOURISM OPPORTUNITIES OF THE REGION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Using the common strengths of the region as viewed by the researchers and the locals in each town, there are plenty of opportunities to improve methods of co-promotion of and within the designated region. Through stakeholder interviews Tourism Alliance Victoria have investigated and here, recommend opportunities to cooperate and collaborate. Happily there are many more opportunities than barriers to development.

Equine Industry

Shire of Strathbogie's tag line is the 'Horse Capital of Victoria'. The equine industry has long been a prime economic driver for Shire of Strathbogie. Proximity to Melbourne, good climate and soil, along with a breadth of ancillary equine services afford North East Victoria a strong competitive advantage. Including the townships of Euroa, Nagambie and Avenel, Strathbogie boasts a number of long established studs and broodmare farms. Although without a race track in Strathbogie, the project region overall has quality tracks and clubs: the City of Greater Shepparton has Tatura Park, Italian Plate Day, harness racing, various equestrian events and the Goulburn Valley Equine Hospital; Mitchell has Kilmore and Seymour and Murrindindi has Alexandra and Yea. Horse riding schools exist in the region too, however they are not well connected with or promoted as tourism.

At country race meets, opportunities to promote tourism could include market stalls or exhibits for other local attractions or produce, such as food and wine stalls. There is also the opportunity to cross-promote more local businesses such as restaurants and pubs in the race book. This may encourage post-races patronage (assuming businesses are open after the races). For example: "a free bottle of wine when dining on the night of the races at X restaurant" or "buy one get one free main meal at the X pub".

The region needs to attract more owners up to the region and also let the public experience the horse industry at its beginnings. Studs attract high yield visitors who could then be dispersed into the region. To do this, more upmarket accommodation, restaurants and cafes are needed.

Another opportunity is to promote race name sponsorships to Melbourne based companies and race book advertising. Race book advertising should be tailored to suit the tourism offering in each town and the region as a whole for example: tear out discount voucher for attractions in area or bottle/glass of local wine etc. This would attract city groups and corporate supporters, who are generally, high yielding visitors, to visit for race day and possibly at least one night of accommodation. Racing packages should be packaged to include accommodation, race entry tickets, dinner and wine and attractions. Country Racing Victoria (CRV) is keen to run packages similar to Cricket Australia. CRV are not currently resourced to do it but see the potential. They would like to appoint a travel agent similar to 'Spirit Travel' who used to do tours to the Manangatang races. These packages included trains, accommodation in Swan Hill and the race day.

Making stronger alliances with CRV also has further potential. CRV have suggested putting logos and slogans of tourism organisations on race club stationery and arranging for the Customer First Call Centre (CFCC) which takes bookings for country race clubs take an order, to put in a tourism brochure with the tickets and race day information. Tatura Italian Plate Day is a good example of a race event that is more than just horse racing, featuring a spaghetti eating

competition hosted by ex-AFL footballer Robert 'Dipper' DiPierdomenico. Having a celebrity connection to an event can be invaluable. There is always 40 minutes between each race on each race day so there is certainly time to run a variety of activities between races (other than the usual Fashions on the Field) and for punters and visitors to visit stalls and exhibits.

The Country Thoroughbred Festival could grow to encompass more than just one race track and two studs who provide tours. It is an opportunity for the equine industry to partner with other local assets such as the food and wine industry to create offerings and promotions such as "Paddocks and Plates", "Fields and Food", "Horses and Harvest" or "Hooves and Harvest".

Food and Wine

Harvest and produce are the opportunities for this region, rather than the restaurants and cafés. These could be combined with a rail trail or an equine experience such as a stud tour, or a cruise from Tahbilk to Mitchelton Winery to Swettenham Stud, for example. As can be seen from the strengths and product audit above these four Shires have many assets in the areas of wineries and food production. Rather than view each other as competitors, these businesses need to work together to capitalise on the quantity and variety of offering through joint marketing and promotion.



Recreational Vehicle (RV) Friendly Town Scheme

The 'RV Friendly Town' scheme is an initiative of the Campervan and Motorhome Club of Australia (CMCA) that promotes RV tourism related services across Australia. By promoting the symbiotic partnership between the RV tourist and small towns the CMCA hopes to encourage expansion of tourism related infrastructure and services and also promote the economic advantage to small towns of providing RV tourist specific amenities.

An 'RV Friendly Town' is one that happily provides amenities and services for the mobile traveller. Some of these services include:

- access to medical and pharmacy services,
- parking within close proximity to general shopping area with groceries & fresh produce,
- service centre for basic vehicle repairs,
- a Tourist Information Centre (TIC) and town map with essential services,
- access to potable water,
- access to Dump Point,
- provision of short term (24/48/72 hour) parking within 2.5km of town centre,
- provision of longer term parking within 5-10km of town centre, at a reasonable rate,
- Council to provide one person as contact,
- 'RV Friendly Town' signs to be erected at town entrances.

At present only Ararat, Sale, Charlton and Heathcote are Victoria's RV Friendly towns so this is a great opportunity for the project region not only to develop RV friendly towns but to become known as an RV Friendly Region. As CMCA have over 50,000 members, this is a great network and market to tap into, not to

mention the many grey nomads and younger travellers hiring vans to see Victoria and Australia.

Cycling

Competitive cycling events are generally held in one location only once or twice as the cycling fraternity tend to compete in an event once and move on to different challenges. This would not be sustainable over the long term but great opportunities for unique 'one-off' events exist in this region. Bicycle Victoria's Great Victorian Bike Ride rotates through the State's regions and also provides good one-off, large-scale influx of tourism as the ride follows its route through various towns.

The development of infrastructure to support leisure cycling, such as the Goulburn Valley High Country Rail Trail, is important as it presents benefits for local residents as well as for local tourism. By serving residents as well as tourists, the case for funding of such infrastructure is much stronger. Larger towns, particularly ones with train access, are important launching points for rail trail-based tourism. Cyclists will typically drive or take a train to a large town that has accommodation, restaurants and cafes and other visitor amenities, establish a base there and then go cycling. By its nature, rail trail-based cycling is also great for dispersal of visitors and their expenditure and provides a tangible and meaningful way of connecting smaller towns which may otherwise remain disparate.

Local Pride Campaign

A greater awareness of tourism product and the value of tourism is needed to educate the locals about what tourism can do for their town or region. If the locals do not love where they live, or know what there is to see and do in their town, why would they promote it to anyone else and try to attract visitors? Offer a 'come and try' day for locals to experience their region's tourism product or perhaps a local business' loyalty or incentive card which allows a buy one entry, get one free so they are encouraged to bring their visiting family and friends. Another suggestion is to produce a coffee table book that promotes the local attractions and shows the assets. This could also be sold in the VICs as a souvenir. Positive word-of-mouth from the locals about their own region is a cheap and effective form of advertising.

Identity

Once a brand identity has been developed, increase awareness amongst Victorians as this where the majority of the region's visitors are from. Try to have towns in these four local government areas featured on weather maps in metro and regional television stations; enter photo competitions showing the scenery and people of your areas; or create a brand that incorporates regional tourism assets.

Better use of local events for promoting tourism

Existing events such as the Seymour Alternative Farming Expo, the Mooroopna Fruit Salad Day and Nagambie on Water Festival could incorporate more overall tourism promotion. Every event in the region should be seen as a tourism opportunity as each event brings in visitors.

Filming Destinations

It is noted that all four local governments are included in Film Victoria's Film NE Project: <http://www.filmnortheastvictoria.com.au>. Furthering this relationship and exploring new ways of attracting film makers to the region is encouraged as use of towns as locations would bring in film crews, create local employment, build local pride and showcase the region to potentially millions of people.

The success of *The Castle* and *Bonnie Doon* is just one example. *Bonnie Doon* is a holiday and weekend destination for bushwalkers, trail bike riders, off-road 4WD enthusiasts and fishermen. Many motor cycle and car clubs use *Bonnie Doon* as a base for their weekend rallies around Lake Eildon and the King Valley.

Associations

Combine the tourism talent in the region to form one overarching tourism body and reduce the number of ineffective Local Tourism Associations (LTAs). A strong, combined retail group for the region, whereby boutique and niche providers of product can work together as an alliance to promote and sell their wares to the public is another good opportunity for cooperation and collaboration.

Training for Operators

Professional development training is needed especially in the area of customer service. Attendance at future Tourism Excellence workshops in Victoria is encouraged. Offer a barista training course to your operators to improve the standard of coffee in your region. The Age Good Food Guide now includes a "Coffee Map" of regional Victoria – inclusion on this map would be a great way of promoting good quality restaurants and cafes in the region and improve the region's overall reputation as a "foodie" destination.

Signage



Councils need to take the lead on this issue, from a local maintenance and amenities perspective, and continue the discussion with Vic Roads and Tourism Victoria to achieve the removal of outdated signage and the erection of new, accurate signage. This will certainly be required if a new RTO is established for the project region.

An idea that has worked really well in the Southern Grampians is having signage 1km before a turn-off to a tourism attraction which allows caravans, buses and cars with trailers enough time to be able to slow down from 100km/h and make the turn to visit the attraction. Then have another sign 300 metres before the turn-off.

During events, event signage needs to be clearly posted well before turn-offs. The City of Shepparton did this particularly well during the Australian Open Lawn Bowls competition. Signage for the Nagambie on Water Festival was too small and needed to be posted well before entering Nagambie.

Sister Cities

Metro and regional sister city relationships within Victoria could benefit some of the towns in the project region. One such partnership exists between Benalla and

Ararat who work as buddies. In one exercise they sent mystery shoppers to each other's towns then gave each other feedback on the tourism experiences. This worked really well as both the criticism and compliments were from outsiders. Similar exercises can be done between metro and regional sister cities or local governments, as well as between regional cities or Shires.

Spa and Wellness Tourism

Although the project region is lacking in spa product, there may be an opportunity to tap into Tourism Victoria's focus on spa and wellness tourism by promoting nature-based activities popular in the region such as cycling, bush-walking, horse riding and even fishing, which tie in with the wellness aspect. Relaxation is not just about spas. Bush Creek Buddha in Taggerty, which offers yoga weekends, is a good example of a bush retreat that capitalises on the natural and peaceful surroundings and fresh mountain air of the region to offer a relaxation experience.

Seasonality

The four Shires combined form a year round destination. Take better advantage of this and use all four seasons to attract visitors and promote the region's offering.

Indigenous Tourism

At present no other area of Victoria actively markets an authentic indigenous experience. Opportunities exist here to promote Australia's indigenous culture and educate visitors using The Flats in Shepparton, the Euroa caves and local artists.

Conclusions

Based on the research, there are sufficient commonalities across the four Shires of Shepparton, Mitchell, Strathbogie and Murrindindi to justify a united approach to tourism. However, it is essential that each of the four local governments understand the value of tourism and the benefits it can bring, and actively encourage its development. It is also important that local communities are engaged in the development of tourism across the region and are given a sense of ownership over the process.

The region's common key products are food and wine and the horse industry, both of which are manifested in different ways in each Shire. The offer of relaxed country life that is easily accessible from Melbourne is another strong element that applies to all Shires. A branding and marketing strategy needs to be developed based on these common strengths and elements. This will in turn demonstrate "what the region is famous for" and help address the region's common weaknesses of poor image and low awareness. (Marysville is an exception; however it now has other perception issues, namely high awareness, but a badly damaged image).

From an organisational perspective, it is recommended that the four Shires each contribute financial and human resources to the establishment of a Regional Tourism Organisation that encompasses and represents the four local government areas. The board members of the RTO should ideally be selected on a skills-basis to ensure the RTO's relevance to, understanding of, and acceptance by the tourism industry. Paid staff should also be tourism professionals.

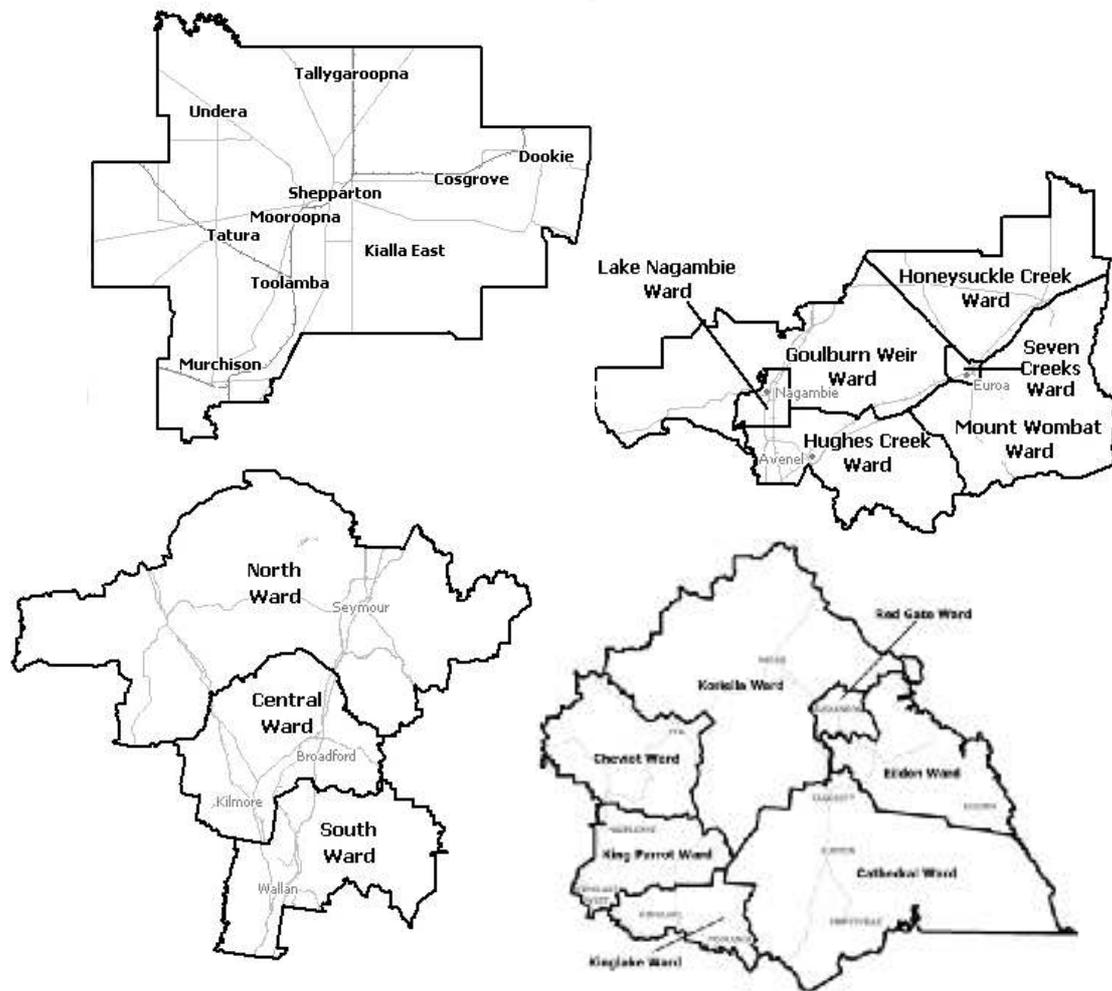
Whilst there are numerous recommendations relating to product development and marketing activities, these should be prioritised for implementation. Recommendations for activities that capitalise on the region's core strengths – the horse industry, food and wine, and good access – should be the main focus.

Lastly, the notion that "tourists don't know or care where the boundaries are" has become something of a catch-cry throughout this project and should perhaps be adopted as guiding principle. If the four Shires are to successfully develop, maintain and ultimately benefit from a unified tourism strategy, the local government boundaries will need to be set aside in order to achieve this.

Appendix I

Maps of Local Government Areas (clockwise from top left):

City of Greater Shepparton, Shire of Strathbogie, Murrindindi Shire & Mitchell Shire



Appendix II

Sample Questionnaire

(Questions varied slightly, depending on the interviewee – Council representative, tourism operator, RTO/LTA representative)

TOURISM STRUCTURES	
1	Is there a tourism structure or organisation you work with in your region?
2	Do you work with Tourism Victoria, your local government or a local association?
3	Are these effective relationships? How could they be improved?
4	Do you have any external resources available? What constraints are there? -
5	What future alliances do you believe would benefit this region? -
PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT	
6	What do you consider to be the product strengths of your region? (Attractions / events / restaurants / local art & craft)
7	Weaknesses?
8	Potential opportunities?
9	Barriers to product development?
10	What's the brand identity at the moment? None What would you like to see as future branding of the region?
VISITATION AND MARKETS	
11	What are your key source markets – where do the majority of your visitors come from? Victoria / Interstate – which states? / International – which countries? / Families? VFR? Backpackers? Couples? Short breaks? Just passing through?
12	What are the key periods in the calendar for the region – e.g. Easter/Xmas/public hols/school hols/seasons/special events?

13	Are there patterns between peak periods and type of visitor – e.g. families during school holidays
14	Are the Visitor Information Centres effective?
15	Has your Local Government Area explained what the economic impact of tourism is to your local government area?
16	Do you believe you're "in tourism"?
17	What would be your personal wish-list for tourism here?