



Victorian
Environmental
Assessment
Council

Advice on Aspects of Public Land Use Information

Data on recreational activities on Victoria's public land

April 2023



Victorian Environmental Assessment Council

The Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) was established in 2001 under the *Victorian Environmental Assessment Council Act 2001*. It provides the State Government of Victoria with independent advice on protection and management of the environment and natural resources of public land.

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Acknowledgement

We acknowledge and respect Victorian Traditional Owners as the original custodians of Victoria's land and waters, their unique ability to care for Country and deep spiritual connection to it. We honour Elders past and present whose knowledge and wisdom has ensured the continuation of culture and traditional practices. We are committed to genuinely partner, and meaningfully engage, with Victoria's Traditional Owners and Aboriginal communities to support the protection of Country, the maintenance of spiritual and cultural practices and their broader aspirations in the 21st century and beyond.

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Razorback Ridge, Anna Kilborn

Horse riding - Barmah National Park, Emily Godfrey

Golden Beach - Ninety Mile Beach, Visit Victoria

Fishing at Lake Fyans, Visit Victoria

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At a glance

Key messages

- Rest and leisure are recognised as fundamental human rights
- Recreation is now – with nature conservation – the dominant use of Victoria's public land
- There is no basic information available on levels of participation, demographic characteristics, and patterns of recreational use across Victoria's public land
- Recreational use is the only major use of public land without statewide spatial data to inform decision making
- There is no system in place in Victoria for collecting and managing knowledge about recreational activities on public land
- There are no standardised metrics in use in Victoria or more widely for data on recreational activities
- New and novel methods of data collection are not widely utilised (crowd sourcing, remote sensing)
- Aboriginal culture and knowledge and the custodial role of Traditional Owners in undertaking cultural practices and caring for Country is not visible in any of the current data and information
- There is an appetite in the community and from users for easy access to data about recreational activities on public land and to be able to contribute to data collection.

Recommendations for government

Our key recommendations are to improve understanding of recreational use of public land and establish an evidence base over time to support policy development and inform decision making by the development of 1) a Recreation Knowledge Framework and 2) a robust methodology for a recreational user census to be undertaken every five years.

Summary

Background

The Victorian government has asked VEAC for advice on data on recreational activities on public land.

In November 2020, VEAC was requested by the then Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change, the Hon Lily D'Ambrosio MP, to provide advice on aspects of public land use information. Part (a) of the terms of reference is to provide advice on data on recreational activities on Victoria's public land and any significant knowledge gaps relating to those activities.

VEAC compiled an inventory of data on the broad range of recreational activities across Victoria's public land, focusing on outdoor recreation

Intensive recreational facilities on Victoria's public land generally have good usage information resulting from regulated entry and admission data. We focus on data and information for *outdoor* recreation in broader areas of public land with less formal access, often in natural or semi-natural settings.

Information was sourced from published and unpublished reports and papers, government departments and agencies, meetings and workshops with land managers and practitioners, and from recreational user groups, including a Recreational Reference Group established to inform this advice.

Rest and leisure are recognised as fundamental human rights

Outdoor recreation answers many fundamental human needs, enabling the enjoyment of open space and undeveloped places, contact with nature, and the appreciation of natural and cultural heritage. It provides a means for exercise and fitness, enables social connections, as well as opportunities for exploration, self-reliance, and physical and mental challenge.

Recreation is now – with nature conservation – the dominant use of Victoria's public land

With Victoria's increasing population, improved road access, and the ongoing general reduction in commercial uses of public land such as timber harvesting, land managers report an increase in recreational use.

Victoria's land legislation controls the recreational use of public land

Most of Victoria's public land and water is generally available for recreation although specific activities are restricted in certain areas, with variation in the types and level of supporting development that is allowed.

Four primary land Acts govern the use of Crown land in Victoria and set out the legal basis for its control and management: the *Land Act 1958*, the *Forests Act 1958*, the *National Parks Act 1975* and the *Crown Land (Reserves) Act 1978*.¹ These all include provisions for managing and servicing recreational use.

¹ The Victorian Government is currently developing a proposal for new legislation which would, if enacted by Parliament, replace the Land Act, Forests Act and Crown Land (Reserves) Act.

What do we know and where are the information gaps?

Reliable basic information is not available about visits to Victoria's public land

Approximately 39.6 per cent of Victoria is public land of which 37 per cent is terrestrial land with the remainder made up by the state's marine waters. We don't know how many people use public land, but it is likely to be in the order of 150 million visits per year or more. Research examined for the preparation of the inventory suggests that visitors are demographically diverse, although the data is not comprehensive.

Of the major uses of public land, recreational use is the only one without statewide spatial data

Systematically acquired and maintained statewide spatial data is available for native vegetation, forest produce, mineral extraction and licences, threatened species habitat requirements, licences and permits, and fire management.

While many of these spatial data layers include some mapping of recreational activities (e.g. forest recreation and DEECA's More to Explore app), they typically provide locations and sites of facilities with very little information on levels and patterns of use.

Data is not collected using a minimum set of standardised metrics

For various reasons, including resourcing, data collection is often a once-off exercise undertaken for a specific purpose. There is no evidence that a standardised set of measures are used that would allow data to be compared across studies.

Data collection has historically been highly variable across public land categories

Public land has different characteristics. Intensively used reserves such as zoos, golf courses, caravan parks and sports stadia have controlled access and fees for entry, so visitor data is generally comprehensive and highly reliable. By contrast, State forest, national and other parks and undeveloped Crown land reserves have many widely dispersed visitor sites without staffing or usage fees.

Some data is collected on visitor numbers and characteristics

There is some numerical data on the level of visitation to an area of public land in a given period, which may also include data such as the number of people in the visiting group, their intended activities, locations visited, length of visit, and demographic characteristics such as age and postcode. Vehicle or pedestrian counters give very limited information while surveys or booking and permit systems may allow more information to be collected.

Satisfaction surveys of visitors provide generally qualitative information about the adequacy of access, facilities and other things that the visitor has actually used or experienced. Community needs and perception data investigates the views of both visitors and non-visitors, usually undertaken using surveys by telephone or online surveys, or similar methods, in the community rather than at public land locations.

Aboriginal use and custodial responsibilities are not reflected in the available information

The data and information needs and contributions of Traditional Owners in undertaking cultural activities and managing Country, either directly or in partnership with other land managers, have not yet received targeted attention.

Participants in licensed activities are better known

Activities which are licensed (e.g. game hunting, recreational fishing) tend to have better data on participants than those that are unlicensed and require little formal organisation (e.g. walking, road cycling). Where licence data exist, detailed location data about where participants go is often absent.

Broad population level data is available for a small number of recreational activities relevant to public land (bush walking, going to the beach) from surveys of leisure patterns or sports and physical activity.

Recreation organisations hold valuable data on their members

Peak recreation bodies, associations and clubs hold data on membership numbers and some demographic information on their members.

However, for many sports and forms of active recreation, only a small number of participants are members of a relevant association, and many more people participate in an activity than membership numbers indicate.

Tourism data is focused at regional, state and national levels

Data on interstate and international visitors is collected by state and national tourism authorities including visits to public land. This data is generally designed for use at a state or regional level for marketing and the planning of accommodation and transport infrastructure, and may not include all visitors. Day trip visitors for example, are defined as those that have travelled for a round trip of at least 50 kilometres and are away from home for at least four hours.

New methods of data collection are rarely utilised

Our desktop literature review indicates that there is potential for new or novel techniques of data collection to be further explored to supplement current methods. These include using data from mobile phones, fitness trackers, social media, and use of QR codes.

What are the benefits of data and information?

Purposes of collecting data

Recreational data and information are required for several purposes:

- to effectively deploy management resources in the right places and at the right times
- to ensure that recreational opportunities and services are aligned to community needs
- assist in managing the potential impacts of recreation, such as impacts on biodiversity
- to monitor and demonstrate effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability to government and stakeholders, and
- to inform policy and provide evidence for government and other decision-makers.

Benefits of sharing information

Sharing good quality data across the Victorian public sector as well as with other external organisations (e.g. research facilities) and the public:

- enables timely and informed decisions
- maximises accountability and transparency
- allows collaboration between government and the public

- helps to avoid the rework and duplication of additional data collection
- allows users to question data.

What actions are required?

By drawing on models of good practice for collecting and managing data and information to inform decision making, and to address the need for fundamental information on levels of participation, demographics, and patterns of recreational use across public land in Victoria we recommend the following actions.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Develop a Recreation Knowledge Framework to improve understanding of recreational use of public land and to establish an evidence base over time to support policy development and inform decision making that:

- builds on existing research and monitoring
- addresses identified information gaps
- develops protocols for data sharing and a minimum set of standardised metrics
- includes First Peoples knowledge and information needs
- incorporates contributions of citizen science
- explores new technologies for data collection including e.g. remote sensed data, crowd sourced data
- connects researchers and practitioners
- is available to the public
- is coordinated by DEECA in collaboration with all responsible departments and agencies.

RECOMMENDATION 2

- (a) To address the need for fundamental information on levels of participation, demographics, and patterns of recreational use across public land in Victoria, develop a robust methodology for a recreational user census to be undertaken at least every five years across public land that:
 - captures standardised demographics, activities undertaken, geographic areas and sites
 - covers high and low periods of use
 - builds partnerships with local government
 - allows for augmentation by citizen scientists, user groups and the public
 - ensures data privacy
 - includes the public release of results.
- (b) Undertake the first statewide census within 5 years, considering alignment with the Australian Bureau of Statistics Census of Population and Housing to enrich the insights from the data.

1. Introduction

In November 2020, the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) was requested by the then Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change, the Hon Lily D'Ambrosio MP, to provide advice on aspects of public land use information.

The request is for technical advice on aspects of public land use information and does not extend to recommending changes to public land use.

This report address part (a) of the terms of reference to provide advice on data on recreational activities on Victoria's public land and any significant knowledge gaps relating to those activities.

A progress update was published in mid-2021 and is available on VEAC's website.

1.1 Terms of reference

On 30 November 2020, the then Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change requested VEAC to provide advice on aspects of public land use information. See appendix 1 for the full [terms of reference](#).

A range of data on different recreational activities on Victoria's public land is required to support government planning and evidence-based decision-making.

The advice sought in part (a) of the request is to compile an inventory of statewide data on the broad range of recreational activities on Victoria's public land and identify any significant knowledge gaps. The request asks VEAC to provide advice on:

- data coverage and availability (both geographically and by recreational activity)
- data quality, including any inconsistencies
- data custodianship
- age of the data
- suitability of the data for Victorian Government planning, reporting and decision-making
- knowledge gaps.

1.2 About VEAC

VEAC provides the Victorian government with independent and strategic advice on matters related to the protection and management of the environment and natural resources of public land. VEAC was established under the *Victorian Environmental Assessment Council Act 2001*. VEAC is a successor organisation to the Land Conservation Council (LCC), established in 1971, and the Environment Conservation Council (ECC), which replaced the LCC in 1997.

VEAC carries out its investigations and assessments and provides advice at the request of the Minister for Environment. Together, the Act and terms of reference provided by the Minister describe how an investigation or assessment must be conducted, including the number of reports to be prepared, matters to be taken into account, timeframes and public consultation.

Public land is defined in the VEAC Act and includes Crown land and land owned by state government public authorities. It excludes private freehold land, land owned by local councils and Commonwealth land.

The VEAC Act was substantially amended in 2016 to allow the Minister to request the Council to conduct an assessment or to provide advice in relation to a matter that, in the opinion of the Minister, does not require an investigation, having regard to the matter's limited scale or scope or its

technical nature. Assessments do not require formal public consultation unless specified by the Minister in the terms of reference.

This advice on aspects of public land use information was requested pursuant to section 26B of the VEAC Act.

The current five members appointed to VEAC are Mellissa Wood (Chairperson), Joanne Duncan, Anna Kilborn, Nicola Ward and Nick Wimbush. A brief biography of each of the current Council members can be found on VEAC's website at veac.vic.gov.au. The Council is supported by a small research and policy team and an administrative secretariat.

1.3 Information sources

In preparing this report, information was sourced from published and unpublished reports and papers, government departments and agencies, meetings and workshops with land managers and practitioners, and from recreational user groups.

Details of data on recreational activities including information sources are comprehensively referenced in the inventory compiled as part of the preparation of the advice. The inventory is available on VEAC's website.

In 2022, VEAC commissioned Montane Planning to prepare an overview of recreational data and information for Victorian public land. The overview is drawn on for sections 2, 3.1, 3.2 and 4.1 of this report.

A Recreational Reference Group made up of nominees from recreational user organisations was established in 2022 under section 12 of the VEAC Act to provide advice to the Council on aspects of the preparation of this advice (see appendix 2 for organisational membership).

2. Overview of recreational activities on public land

2.1 The dimensions of recreation

Recreation, along with nature conservation, is the most extensive and significant use of Victoria's public land. In this overview recreation is defined as activities that people undertake for pleasure during their free time or leisure, separate from work and the activities and commitments of daily living. This takes in a very large range of active and passive pastimes including informal and short-term use of local open space for relaxation, exercise and outdoor hobbies, as well as more intensive forms of recreation which often require travel, overnight stays, technical skills or equipment such as camping, hiking, four-wheel driving and snow skiing. It also takes in recreation that occurs indoors or in intensive facilities – such as sporting stadia, racecourses, arts centres, zoos and gardens – in addition to outdoor recreation in rural and natural areas such as national parks and forests.

In general, intensive recreational facilities on Victoria's public land have good usage information resulting from regulated entry and admission data. In this advice, the focus is therefore mainly on the adequacy of data and information for *outdoor* recreation in broader areas of public land with less formal access, often in natural or semi-natural settings. Characteristically, the activities are dependent on the environment where they take place. These kinds of recreational activities have connections and overlaps with a range of sectors including sports, tourism, education and volunteering. The same activity can be described in different ways depending on, for example: the motivation of the participant (relaxation, education, assisting land managers); whether they have paid for instruction; travelled from interstate or overseas to participate; or whether they engage in the activity for competition, performance and entertainment, or money. This is a dynamic area for research and analysis.

For all these reasons the report does not try to settle a firm definition of outdoor recreation on public land, aiming instead to be comprehensive in the discussion of recreational activities and the data that is available for them.

Leisure is recognised as a human right² and outdoor recreation answers many fundamental human needs. It enables the enjoyment of open space and undeveloped places; contact with nature and wildlife, and the appreciation of natural and cultural heritage. It provides a means for exercise and fitness, and opportunities for exploration, self-reliance, risk-taking and physical and mental challenge. It enables social connection with friends, family or others with the same recreational interests. It is also important for people who have no structured activity and no specific purpose other than to get away from work, domestic routines and the indoors.

Recreational participants vary widely in their characteristics and profiles: individuals and small informal groups; organised gatherings and events held by clubs and formal recreational networks, school groups; and guided tour clients. They may be local residents, Victorians day tripping or vacationing, or interstate or international visitors. Distinct sectors have developed around the various motivations, objectives and benefits of recreation. These include the education sector where recreational activity and the exploration and experience of the outdoors are undertaken to achieve learning and development objectives. The tourism sector seeks economic benefits for businesses, communities and the state through the provision of commercial services for outdoor recreation. The health sector has emerged as a group of stakeholders with an interest in the wellbeing benefits of outdoor recreation and contact with nature. Recreation, in summary, is multi-

² Article 7 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (United Nations 1966) as ratified by the Australian Government.

dimensional, and management should maintain opportunities for the broadest range of individual and societal motivations and benefits, consistent with protecting other public land values.

Recreation has the potential for impacts and conflicts, as well as benefits. These can include conflicts with other recreational activities or with other land uses, and the potential for impacts on the environment. Public land in Victoria is protected and managed for a wide range of other uses including nature conservation, Traditional Owner rights and interests, the protection of cultural heritage, ecosystem services, water catchment and other natural resources. The public land classification system provides the primary means for providing and controlling recreation opportunities and minimising impacts on other uses.

2.2 Recreation on Victoria's public land

Approximately 39.6 per cent of Victoria is public land of which 37 per cent is terrestrial land with the remainder made up by the state's marine waters. The annual number of visits to public land is not certain but is likely to be in the order of 150 million visits per year or more. Research demonstrates that visitors are demographically diverse. However, as discussed later in this report, there are questions about the comprehensiveness and reliability of present recreational data collection.

VEAC's major Statewide Assessment of Public Land conducted from 2014 to 2017 documented the values and uses of public land including recreation and tourism.

Common recreational activities on Victorian public land include: walking, cycling, picnicking, running, fitness training, dog walking, and swimming; car touring, four-wheel driving, trail biking, boating and sailing; adventure and skills-based activities such as hiking, orienteering, downhill and cross-country skiing, surfing, canoeing and rafting, rock climbing, caving, horse riding, diving and snorkelling; and a wide range of 'search' activities including fishing, bird observing, game hunting, prospecting and geo-caching. Camping is a widespread activity often undertaken for its own purposes or as an adjunct to other activities. Most of the opportunities and facilities for competitive recreation in Victoria occur on public land in cities and country towns including many ball sports, athletics, and equestrian sports. Recreational activities associated with the creative arts are also undertaken on public land including musical performances and individual pursuits such as photography and painting.³

Geography is a major influence on the pattern of recreational use. The Eastern Highlands, stretching from outer Melbourne to the New South Wales border, contains the highest proportion of public land of any part of the state and the most extensive area of mountains and tall forests. It receives widespread use for remote, adventure recreation, and contains all Victoria's snow skiing areas. The major bays of Victoria's coast – Port Phillip Bay and Western Port – are more sheltered than the open coast and contain Victoria's largest population centres in Melbourne and Geelong. Together with the Gippsland Lakes, Corner Inlet and other major inlets, they have the busiest beaches and fishing locations, and highly popular boating, diving and camping opportunities as well as coastal foreshore open space used for relaxation and exercise by many suburban and regional communities. The open coast provides opportunities for surfing and more remote fishing, boating, camping and bushwalking.

In the north of the state, the Murray River corridor and its tributaries contain remnant riverine forests in a landscape that has been highly modified by agriculture and settlement. The scarcity of these remnants, and the hotter, drier climate of northern Victoria, make them very popular destinations for riverside camping, swimming, fishing, boating and canoeing. In the west another remnant natural

³ First Peoples and Traditional Owners undertake cultural practices on public land, as part of their connection to Country, that often include the activities defined above as recreation (for example, camping, fishing, hunting, education and artistic activities). Activities undertaken as an indigenous cultural practice are not included within the scope of this report.

area, Gariwerd/Grampians, is a spectacular forested escarpment landscape, rich in Aboriginal cultural heritage, native flora and wildlife, with extensive bushwalking, camping, and rock-climbing opportunities. In the south, the Otway Ranges, Wilsons Promontory and East Gippsland are highly valued for their combination of adjacent forest and coastline that is suitable for a wide range of land and water recreational activities. Melbourne is generally well endowed with parks, gardens and open space. Recreation in these areas is central to the capital's cultural, social and sporting life. To the west, north and east of Melbourne, a ring of foothill forest areas is heavily used for day-trip picnicking, short walks, mountain biking, trail biking, car touring, and other activities by visitors from Melbourne and the towns and cities of Central Victoria. The Goldfields region of north west Victoria's is popular for recreational prospecting.

While some recreational activities have been established for long periods, other uses are more recent or still emerging. Activities such as paragliding and geocaching emerged following technological innovations. Other activity changes can result from specific tourism marketing and infrastructure initiatives or expansions in educational curricula.

Climate change is affecting the conditions for recreation through reduced snowfall and snow retention, and disruptions to public land access caused by more severe or frequent bushfires, storms, floods and droughts. Population growth and demographic change can cause changes in recreational demand especially for local recreation opportunities close to population growth areas.

2.3 Legislative controls and management provisions

Most of Victoria's public land and water is generally available for recreation although specific activities are restricted in certain areas, with variation in the types and level of supporting development that is allowed.

Four primary land Acts govern the use of Crown land in Victoria and set out the legal basis for its control and management: the *Land Act 1958*, the *Forests Act 1958*, the *National Parks Act 1975* and the *Crown Land (Reserves) Act 1978*.⁴ These include provisions for managing and servicing recreational use. The primary Acts are supplemented by several other Acts which establish public land overlays or govern particular reservation types or uses. Overlays can be applied as reference areas, wilderness zones, remote and natural areas, heritage rivers, natural catchment areas and fisheries reserves. The primary land Acts establish a range of land classifications and define the areas of public land to which the classifications apply. These provide the main framework for controlling and servicing recreation. The Acts set out the purposes and objectives of each land classification. In the case of recreation, they provide general or specific provisions as to what recreational uses may or may not occur on that land or water classification and, where necessary, conditions or restrictions on use. They also provide guidance on what supporting developments and facilities may be provided.

National parks and other areas declared under the National Parks Act cover approximately 3.47 million hectares. The Act requires these areas to be preserved and protected in their natural condition for the use and enjoyment of the public, including protection of wilderness and features of scenic, archaeological, ecological, geological, historic or other scientific interest. Recreational use must be consistent with this preservation and protection objective. The Act provides for restrictions on specific activities, or on all activities in specific areas, where they would be inconsistent with the protection objective. Examples of restrictions on particular activities include prohibiting horse riding, hunting, and bringing dogs into a park except where areas have been specially set aside for that activity. Conditions may be imposed such as limiting the activity to particular times or requiring users to obtain a permit. An example of more general restrictions in an area is the prohibition on

⁴ The Victorian Government is currently developing a proposal for new legislation which would, if enacted by Parliament, replace the Land Act, Forests Act and Crown Land (Reserves) Act.

any form of mechanised recreational access or activity in a wilderness park or wilderness zone. In some instances, the Act provides for inconsistent recreational uses to continue if they pre-existed an area's classification under the Act.

State forest includes reserved forest and protected forest and covers approximately 3.15 million hectares. It is managed primarily under the Forests Act with some aspects managed under the Land Act. In general, a wide range of recreational use is allowed in State forest, and prohibitions and restrictions are applied 'by exception' where areas require special protection or where activities may conflict with other authorised forest uses. State forest provides alternatives for those wishing to undertake activities that are restricted or prohibited in national park areas, such as hunting, horse riding and camping with dogs. The Forests Act also provides for the regulation and management of fire across all public land including regulating campfires and controlling public access during fire danger periods and recovery periods after fire damage has occurred.

Crown land reserves cover approximately one million hectares. The Crown Land (Reserves) Act provides a framework for reserving public land for a variety of public purposes, providing for their management and regulating use. Land can be reserved under the Act for a wide range of community purposes including recreation, leisure, and sport. Most parks, gardens, sports grounds, and other areas used for recreation in urban areas and towns are reserved under this Act. In regional areas land is reserved under the Act for purposes including natural features reserves, reserves for coastal conservation and recreation, alpine resorts, regional and forest parks, wildlife reserves, historic areas and nature conservation reserves – all of which provide opportunities for recreation to a greater or lesser extent. Crown land reserves often contain significant recreational infrastructure where it is necessary and consistent with the reserve purpose. Examples include skiing and accommodation infrastructure in alpine resorts, surf life-saving buildings in coastal reserves, and sports facilities in community recreation reserves.

There are a number of other Acts that provide controls and management provisions for public land recreation including the management of recreational fishing (*Fisheries Act 1995*), the management of hunting (*Wildlife Act 1975*), and regulation of vehicle use on public land (*Land Conservation (Vehicle Control) Act 1972*). The first two of these Acts establish detailed regulatory frameworks for recreational fishing and game hunting including licensing requirements, and restrictions and conditions on activity such as seasonal restrictions, target species and bag limits.

Various government policies and strategies also set out important directions for outdoor recreation. *Protecting Victoria's Environment - Biodiversity 2037* emphasises the importance of contact with nature and first-hand experience of the environment as a way of increasing public support and action for biodiversity conservation. The *Victorian Visitor Economy Strategy 2016* sets out directions for optimising services, marketing and promotion for tourism and visitors to the state. The *Marine and Coastal Strategy* and Parks Victoria's *Land Management Strategy* (September 2022) set out directions for sustainable use and enjoyment of major parts of the public land estate.

3. Recreational data and information

3.1 Types of recreational data

Public land managers and decision makers require recreational data and information for several purposes:

- to effectively deploy management resources in the right places and at the right times
- to ensure that recreational opportunities and services are aligned to community needs
- to assist in managing the potential impacts of recreation, such as impacts on biodiversity
- to monitor and demonstrate effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability to government and stakeholders, and
- to inform policy and provide evidence for government and other decision-makers.

Several types of data and information are required to address these needs. The data and information needs and contributions of Traditional Owners in managing Country, either directly or in partnership with other land managers, have not yet received targeted attention.

Measurement of visitor numbers and characteristics produces numerical data on the level of visitation to an area of public land in a given period. Depending on the measurement method it may also collect other data such as the number of people in the visiting group, their intended activities, locations visited, length of visit, and demographic characteristics such as age and postcode. Simple measurement methods like vehicle or pedestrian counters give very limited information while surveys or booking and permit systems may allow more information to be collected. Licensing data – for example for fishing or hunting – does not necessarily provide information on activity levels or visitor characteristics but it can provide a sample of people for follow-up research that is more targeted and efficient than surveys of the community as a whole.

It is difficult to make direct counts of all visitors to 'broadacre' public land areas (such as national parks and State forest) so monitoring often requires counting visitors in a sample of periods and locations, and then extrapolating from the sample results. Visitor number data are necessary to understand the level to which recreation areas are being utilised, who is using them and for what purposes.

Visitor satisfaction data monitors whether visitors are satisfied with the type and quality of the recreational opportunities and services that they have experienced. The data produced is generally descriptive but some quantitative results can be drawn out. Satisfaction surveys of visitors can provide specific information about the adequacy of access, facilities and other things that the visitor has actually used or experienced. Satisfaction data allows land managers to determine whether management is effective and meeting the needs of visitors.

Community needs and perception data investigates the views of both visitors and non-visitors. To reach both groups collection of data is generally undertaken using surveys by telephone, or similar methods, in the community rather than at public land locations. It is valuable in understanding whether there are significant sections of the community who are not visiting public land because of barriers such as language or mobility, lack of awareness, or lack of opportunities for certain activities. This data allows public land managers to consider changes to management approaches, services and information to align opportunities and services with community preferences.

Recreational infrastructure condition monitoring produces data on the overall disposition of infrastructure in a public land area and its condition in terms of functionality and safety. Facilities on broadacre public land are typically dispersed. They frequently have a relatively low capital value per

unit but a high aggregate value because of the number of assets and the overhead costs of remoteness. They are exposed to damage from weather, natural events and vandalism. Monitoring data can be used to identify and remedy asset deterioration before safety problems and visitor dissatisfaction arise, and to prolong asset life through timely maintenance.

Benefit and impact research investigates the social and environmental consequences that result from recreational use. This includes studies into the economic benefits from visitor and tourism expenditures, the environmental and cultural impacts of recreation, or its benefits to health and wellbeing. Studies can measure the value or contribution of recreation in particular public land categories or specific activities across public land or even all land. These studies can provide information about the cost-effectiveness and sustainability of recreation policies and investments.

3.2 Existing data collection and use

Collection of data on recreation has historically been highly variable across public land categories. This is in part due to the different characteristics of the categories. Intensively used reserves such as zoos, golf courses, caravan parks and sports stadia have controlled access and fees for entry, and therefore visitor data is generally comprehensive and highly reliable. By contrast, State forest, national park areas and undeveloped Crown land reserves have many widely dispersed visitor sites without staffing or usage fees, making them difficult to monitor. For this report the focus is on the adequacy of recreational data and information for these 'broadacre' areas of public land. Table 3.1 on the following page summarises key types of data and information that have been collected for those public land categories over the last ten years.

Information on visitor numbers and satisfaction is used by land managers to monitor and report to the Victorian Government on the extent to which key performance targets are met. These targets are generally set out in the land manager's corporate plan or strategic plan, and higher-level targets are included in the Government's annual budget papers. The monitoring results are available publicly through the annual reports of government departments and agencies, and periodic 'state of reports such as the State of the Parks and State of the Forests. Visitor number data is also frequently used in business cases for investment in recreational infrastructure, education or other programs in combination with benefit assessments to demonstrate the value of a proposed investment.

Data on interstate and international visitors is also collected by state and national tourism authorities including visits to public land. This data is generally designed for use at a State or regional level for marketing and the planning of accommodation and transport infrastructure, and may not include all visitors. Victoria's Tourism and Events research unit, for example, defines day trip visitors as those that have travelled for a round trip of at least 50 kilometres and are away from home for at least four hours. The Australian Bureau of Statistics collects data on sports and recreation participation broken down by activity, but it does not distinguish the status of land where activity is undertaken.

Data on visitor numbers, satisfaction and community needs are used in public land planning including management planning, master planning, capital works planning and the design of information products. However, in broadacre areas the data may not be detailed or current enough to apply to the planning location with confidence, unless new data collection is commissioned as part of the planning project itself. Where recreational activities require some form of licence – such as game hunting and fishing – there is potential to monitor activity more easily by targeted surveying of licence-holders. For example, the Game Management Authority conducts phone surveys to estimate the number of duck and quail harvested during the hunting season and to gather information on hunting behaviours including hunter effort, days spent in the field, location, and the numbers of duck and quail harvested. Data on the actual daily take is collected from a

sample of hunters on the opening weekend, by surveying hunters' bags, to assess the impact of the duck hunting season on populations of game species.

Satisfaction data is used both strategically and locally. System-wide changes in satisfaction can occasionally result from wider conditions or events such as drought or the impact of major flood and fire damage. In these circumstances land managers apply strategic responses such as recovery programs to repair and re-open damaged areas, and increased visitor information about areas most suitable for use. Site-level satisfaction data can be used to identify specific facilities or services that need to be improved. A conceptual review of how satisfaction data can be used was prepared for VEAC's Marine Investigation (see Curtis and Davidson 2013).

Table 3.1 Key forms of recreation data collected for broadacre public land categories over the last 10 years

Public land area/agency	Visitor number measurement	Visitor satisfaction monitoring	Community needs/attitude monitoring	Infrastructure monitoring	Benefit and impact research
National parks system	Visitor Number Monitor – biennial telephone survey of a sample of Victorians and other states to estimate total visitors Booking data for camping and accommodation Localised vehicle counters Licensed tour operator trip records (parks and State forest)	Visitor Satisfaction Monitor – biennial, longitudinal sample survey using face-to-face interviews in park to determine satisfaction and characteristics	Community Perception Monitor -biennial online sample survey of Victorians' perception of the adequacy of recreation opportunities in the park system and Parks Victoria's management performance Segmentation research to identify motivations and preferences of potential and actual visitors	Baseline inventories with systematic scheduled assessment of condition for higher value/risk assets.	Economic value studies of recreation in parks Meta-research in to estimate the value of ecosystem services and other benefits from parks including recreation using 'environmental accounting' Local environmental impact studies on an ad hoc basis
State forest	2019 Online community sample survey using on-screen maps to report visit locations and estimate total visitors Localised vehicle counters	2019 Online community sample survey to identify recent visitors to State forest and measure satisfaction	2019 Online community sample survey to identify non-visitors and their perceptions Segmentation research to identify motivations and preferences of potential and actual visitors	Baseline inventory. ?? condition assessment	Direct survey of a sample of visitors in 2019 to measure recreational expenditure and estimate Statewide economic benefit

Public land area/agency	Visitor number measurement	Visitor satisfaction monitoring	Community needs/attitude monitoring	Infrastructure monitoring	Benefit and impact research
Alpine resorts	Annual visitor number reports for winter and summer seasons (ARCC) Winter reports based on entry fee data, summer reports based on vehicle counters	Satisfaction monitoring by individual alpine resort boards		Regular systematic monitoring of resort infrastructure including water/sewerage treatment, energy, roads and geotechnical stability.	Economic benefit study 2016 then updated annually Assessment of potential climate change impacts
Victorian Fisheries Authority	Licence data (annual) Survey of recreational fishing licence holders (2018)				Angler Diary Program (since 1990s) – catch trend data etc
Game Management Authority	Licence data (annual) Annual harvest data on hunting of species including duck, deer and quail	Licence holder communication survey (2018) Stakeholder sentiment research (2021)	Hunters' knowledge research (2020)		Economic impact research (2013 and 2019) Hunting harvest trends (CSIRO)

3.3 Inventory of data on recreational activities

3.3.1 Approach to compiling the inventory

In response to the terms of reference, VEAC compiled an inventory of data on the broad range of recreational activities on Victoria's public land, focusing on data on outdoor recreation (see section 2.1). This data informed VEAC's assessment of the suitability of the data for Victorian government planning, reporting and decision-making and the identification of knowledge gaps.

Data for the inventory has been gathered from a range of sources, including:

- public land managers such as DEECA and Parks Victoria (including entities such as Alpine Resorts Victoria and the Victorian Marine and Coastal Council), local government, committees of management
- other government agencies such as Sport and Recreation Victoria, Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions
- statutory entities responsible for specific recreational activities including Game Management Authority and Victorian Fisheries Authority
- desktop review of reports and studies containing recreation data, including data available from Tourism Victoria.

All available reports and information on datasets are documented in a table to provide an overview of all data collected on recreational activities on public land in Victoria. The inventory records the types of data collected along with methodology and includes the following information:

Data coverage: the extent of the areas for which data was collected. May include specific land use categories only (e.g. state forest) or be limited to specific sites or regions.

Data availability: is the data publicly available?

Data custodian: the organisation that collects and stores the data or the organisation that commissioned surveys or research.

Presentation of data: most data is presented within reports and the inventory provides details of these reports and, where relevant, links to them.

Age of data: date of the study, and/or the frequency of data collection.

Types of information collected: for example, includes types of recreational activity, where activities occur, demographic information on users etc.

Methodology for data collection: details on how data is collected, for example via electronic counters, questionnaires, manual observations, licensing

A summary of the findings: a brief summary of key findings contained in reports or, where data is collected through licences, the types of information collected about the licensee.

Data quality

The Victorian Government's Information Management Framework stresses that trusted high-quality data across the government enables confident decision-making, informs policy development, promotes data reuse, and supports service delivery.

The Data Quality Guideline (2018) under the framework notes that departments and agencies are becoming increasingly aware of the benefits of data sharing across the Victorian public sector as well as with other external organisations (e.g. research facilities) and the public. Sharing quality data:

- enables timely and informed decisions
- maximises accountability and transparency
- allows collaboration between government and the public
- helps to avoid the rework and duplication of additional data collection
- allows users to question data.

Knowledge of the quality of data is helpful in communicating information about how data can be used, and whether qualifiers or disclaimers for a dataset are necessary.

The seven dimensions of quality of the Australian Bureau of Statistics have been widely adopted to demonstrate fitness for purpose: institutional environment, relevance, timeliness, accuracy, coherence, interpretability and accessibility.

Relevant information pertaining to data quality are noted in the inventory prepared by VEAC where possible.

3.3.2 The inventory

Sample entries are shown in summarised form in table 3.2 to illustrate some of the key data included in the inventory. The full inventory as of April 2023 is available online as an Excel table on veac.vic.gov.au.

Table 3.2 Extract of entries (summarised) in the inventory

General overview of data collected	Author(s) / data custodian	Name of Report (if applicable)	Data collection timeframe	Recreational activities covered	Collection method	Methodology	Details of data collected and/or findings	Geographical coverage
Parks Victoria visitor satisfaction monitoring	Parks Victoria	Data reported in State of the Parks & Annual Reports	Ongoing collection (in alternate years to visitor satisfaction monitoring). Data collected for last 20 years.	General visitation to parks	Survey	Interviews conducted by phone and face to face.	Provides visitor numbers by type of Park. Includes some demographic data.	Victoria: Parks Victoria managed land, including piers and metropolitan parks.
Vehicle counters at selected state forest sites	DEECA	Not applicable	Ongoing since 2022.	General visitation to state forests.	Vehicle counters	Counters placed at selected state forest sites. (approximately 20% of sites).	Numbers of cars and bikes entering and exiting state forest sites. Some walking trails included.	Victoria: state forest.
Alpine resorts visitor counts (Winter)	Alpine Resorts Victoria* / DEECA	Data reported through Annual Reports	Data collected since early 1980's. More detailed weekly figures collected since 1990's.	General visitation to Alpine resorts.	Entrance fees	Entrance fees apply to all visitors entering during the declared snow season.	Number of day visitors to Alpine resorts, does not include season pass holders.	Victoria, Alpine resorts.
Victorian General Game licences	Game Management Authority (GMA)	Data reported through annual reports	Ongoing.	Recreational hunting (general)	Licensing	Not applicable.	Number of license holders. Includes some demographic data.	Victoria, state-wide.
Recreational fishing surveys	Victorian Fisheries Authority	Not applicable	Ongoing since 1995.	Recreational fishing	Survey	Randomised face to face interviews at selected boat ramps.	Attitudinal surveys, includes numbers of fishers and some demographic information.	Gippsland Lakes, Western Port, Corner Inlet and Port Phillip Bay areas.

* previously Alpine Resorts Co-ordinating Council

4. Findings and recommendations

4.1 Knowledge gaps

Investigations for the preparation of this report indicate that the existing recreational data collected by public land managers do not include some types of data that would be useful to decision makers and managers. These are:

- visitor number and activity data at a localised level for more of the national parks system and State forest, and for a priority group of undeveloped Crown land reserves
- spatial representation and analysis systems for recreational data and information
- community perception and needs data for broadacre public land as a whole.

Data on visitor use and activities. Collecting data to inform management at the level of specific parks, reserves or recreational sites is very challenging across a public land estate of approximately 9 million hectares. Parks Victoria previously operated a measurement system based on continuous vehicle counters at a large sample of park entry points, but this was discontinued due to problems with statistical reliability and cost. The system was replaced by a telephone survey (now online survey) of a sample of Victorian and interstate residents, supplemented by vehicle counters in priority locations. The State forests research undertaken in 2019 used a similar methodology and captured visit location data from respondents using online maps. Vehicle traffic counters are deployed at numerous locations across the State forest road and track network. Satisfaction surveys commenced in State forest locations in the 2022-23 summer.

For the thousands of undeveloped Crown land reserves including bushland reserves, natural features reserves and streamside reserves recreational data is minimal or, in many cases, non-existent. There are cost-benefit challenges in collecting more information for low-use reserves and a fundamental question as to whether more data will improve management. There are likely to be some reserves that have significant use or where particular policy decisions such as access for fishing, camping or other activities would benefit from a basic level of recreational data.

Post-visit surveys capture information that can be recalled by the visitor or that form part of their direct experience and perceptions. However, they are unlikely to capture other information important to management: what is the range and frequency of activities being undertaken by all visitors at the location, are there signs of emerging activities or compatibility issues between activities, is a location being used at or near its capacity, do alternative locations have similar levels of use or available capacity at these times? At present, land managers must rely on the anecdotal knowledge of field staff and community members to answer these questions. This information can be insightful but is usually not documented or mapped and may be lost with the turnover of experienced individuals. Consultation for VEAC public land investigations and other public land planning exercises also demonstrates that individuals – whether public land staff, stakeholders, or local residents – can have widely divergent anecdotal views of localised visitor use.

More detailed locational data collection would often need to rely on sampling and extrapolation. Visitor use of locations is highly variable across days of the week and seasons. Improved data collection is likely to require survey of at least a sample of weekdays, weekends, and holiday periods across an annual cycle. This length of time means that collecting locational data on an 'as-needed' basis is often impractical (for example, as part of a public land planning process).

There are recent examples of public land policy debates with very high public interest but few data available to inform decision makers about the level and mix of recreational activities in particular locations: the compatibility of horse-training with other recreational and environmental values at Belfast Coastal Reserve; statewide recreational access to river frontages; and rock climbing in

Grampians (Gariwerd) National Park. Regular data collection would improve the timeliness and range of information available to decision makers. To be useful for management decisions, locational data should preferably have been collected within the last five years.

The challenges to a cost-effective locational data collection program are significant and would require consideration of how to design an effective and reliable sample of locations and survey times across the annual cycle. Subject to design advice, consideration could be given to options such as a single statewide data collection exercise within this timeframe. There are opportunities to investigate innovative opportunities in the methods of data collection including 'citizen science' measurement of recreational use (providing issues of activity bias on the part of the observer can be overcome) as well the feasibility of collecting data using remote sensing. 'Public participation geographic information system' is a process for collecting data from the public on variables such as their use and perceptions of land and water by asking people to record their responses to questions about the variables for particular geographic locations on digital or hard copy maps.

There may be potential to derive data on public land recreation from mobile phone location data that is automatically collected by phone network and service providers, or from application data such as map and navigational apps. There are significant issues to investigate and address including negotiating commercial access to data, and testing the relevance and reliability of these datasets in the public land context.

Spatial representation of recreational data and information. Recreation is the only major use of Victorian public land without statewide spatial data to inform policy makers, land managers and stakeholders. While there are challenges in mapping human activity which moves and changes over time, other forms of social activity are commonly mapped and communicated spatially, especially in urban settings. This deficiency for recreation on public land is linked to the lack of visitor use and activity data at a localised resolution discussed above. Recreational assets are currently mapped but not use and activity. With data at a higher resolution, various spatial analysis techniques can be applied. These include 'heat maps' to indicate geographic areas of more and less intensive recreational use, and graphical representation of the distribution of major activity use areas across the state or regions.

Community perception and needs data for broadacre public land. There has been very little integrated research in recent years into community perceptions and recreational needs across Victorian public land categories. The last significant study was undertaken by the predecessor department of DEECA (formerly DELWP) in 2004. Historically, recreational data collection for the national parks system has been more extensive and systematic than for State forest and undeveloped Crown land reserves. State forest data was significantly improved by a research project in 2019 that surveyed a sample of Victorians online to measure visits to State forest made in the previous six months, their demographics, activities undertaken, and motivations for visiting. The research also surveyed visitors' trip expenditure and then estimated economic benefits using this data. The 2019 State forest research briefly investigated the extent to which visitors visited public land categories other than State forests. It also used an online map technique to assist respondents to define the location of their visit and the category of public land visited.

The lack of up-to-date information on perceptions and needs for broadacre public land as a whole makes it difficult to assess how well the opportunities and experiences for activities are balanced across the public land estate, given the different legislative objectives and controls for land categories described earlier. This is relevant for all activities but particularly important for emerging activities such as mountain biking and trail running where managers are dealing with increasing localised demands for opportunities, services and events with few data on the community's perceptions of needs, opportunities and constraints across public land as a whole. Without

integrated data there is also a risk that the needs and barriers for less visible community groups will be overlooked by individual land managers and not addressed on any part of the public land estate.

Research of this kind detects community wide changes that occur slowly, and therefore does not need to be undertaken frequently. Research every five to ten years is likely to be adequate to identify significant changes.

4.2 Key findings from the inventory

Key points from the preparation of this advice are provided at relevant places in the report. The findings that provide the basis for recommendations are summarised below.

Types of data collected

Council notes that:

- There is no basic information available on levels of participation, demographics, and patterns of recreational use across public land in Victoria.
- Surveys and questionnaires have focused on visitor attributes, such as their preferences, satisfaction and demographics, as well as socio-economic values and opportunities to increase visitation to regional Victoria, more than visit attributes, such as activities undertaken or length of stay.
- Activities that do not require facilities are recorded less often e.g. rock climbing, dispersed camping.
- Many surveys and questionnaires are ad hoc reducing the ability to detect trends or changes in patterns of use.
- Data from licences exclude some groups such as children and people over 65, and some of the data collected such as demographic attributes are not publicly available or shared with land managers; locations. Length of visit and activity type are not always collected.
- Vehicle counters may not accurately reflect visitation where there are many access points and do not provide information on group sizes, duration of visit and activities undertaken.
- A review of available literature shows that there are other methods of data collection for example using social media, fitness tracking applications and mobile phones, and self-registration through QR codes that are not being fully utilised.
- The nature of Aboriginal culture and knowledge and the custodial role of Traditional Owners in undertaking cultural practices and caring for Country is not visible in any of the current data and information on recreational activities.

Co-ordination of data collection and sharing of data

Council notes that:

- There is no system in place for collecting and managing knowledge about recreational activities on public land, such as a knowledge framework, or any overarching processes for data collection, data management, data analysis and decision support systems to support decision making, planning and management.
- Unlike biodiversity data, for example, there are no standardised metrics in use for data on recreational activities, reducing the ability to compare data across public land or build a statewide picture of recreational use.
- There is little evidence that data is routinely shared between land managers.
- There is no focus within DEECA for social sciences research and monitoring similar to that for research on flora, fauna and ecosystems at the Arthur Rylah Institute and marine environmental sciences through the Marine and Coastal Knowledge Framework. ARI in recent years has expanded its capability to include the role of the community in biodiversity conservation and

Victorian's interactions with nature, which could be utilised and built upon for social sciences research more widely, including recreation.

- There is an appetite within recreational users, community organisations and the public, expressed through VEAC's Recreation Reference Group, both for easy access to data about recreational activities on public land, and for the ability to contribute to data collection.

4.3 Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1

Develop a Recreation Knowledge Framework to improve understanding of recreational use of public land and to establish an evidence base over time to support policy development and inform decision making that:

- builds on existing research and monitoring
- addresses identified information gaps
- develops protocols for data sharing and a minimum set of standardised metrics
- includes First Peoples knowledge and information needs
- incorporates contributions of citizen science
- explores new technologies for data collection including e.g. remote sensed data, crowd sourced data
- connects researchers and practitioners
- is available to the public
- is coordinated by DEECA in collaboration with all responsible departments and agencies.

RECOMMENDATION 2

(a) To address the need for fundamental information on levels of participation, demographics, and patterns of recreational use across public land in Victoria, develop a robust methodology for a recreational user census to be undertaken at least every five years across public land that:

- captures standardised demographics, activities undertaken, geographic areas and sites
- covers high and low periods of use
- builds partnerships with local government
- allows for augmentation by citizen scientists, user groups and the public
- ensures data privacy
- includes the public release of results.

(b) Undertake the first statewide census within 5 years, considering alignment with the Australian Bureau of Statistics Census of Population and Housing to enrich the insights from the data.

Appendix 1 Terms of reference

Victorian Environmental Assessment Council Act 2001

ADVICE ON ASPECTS OF PUBLIC LAND USE INFORMATION

TERMS OF REFERENCE

Pursuant to section 26B of the *Victorian Environmental Assessment Council Act 2001*, the Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change hereby requests the Council to provide advice on:

- (a) data on recreational activities on Victoria's public land and any significant knowledge gaps relating to those activities
- (b) improvements to the VEACRECs25 dataset.

This request is for technical advice on aspects of public land use information and does not extend to recommending changes to public land use.

(a) data on recreational activities on Victoria's public land and any significant knowledge gaps relating to those activities

A range of data on different recreational activities on Victoria's public land is required to support government planning and evidence-based decision-making.

The advice sought is to compile an inventory of statewide data on the broad range of recreational activities on Victoria's public land and identify any significant knowledge gaps. VEAC is requested to provide advice on:

- data coverage and availability (both geographically and by recreational activity)
- data quality, including any inconsistencies
- data custodianship
- age of the data
- suitability of the data for Victorian Government planning, reporting and decision-making
- knowledge gaps.

(b) Improving the VEACRECs25 dataset

VEACRECs25 is a dataset maintained by VEAC that provides a spatial representation at 1:25,000 scale of the public land use decisions of the Victorian Government or Parliament, including the government-accepted recommendations of VEAC and its predecessors (the Environment Conservation Council and the Land Conservation Council). VEACRECs25 is a key tool to help land managers and the community understand the purpose for which public land is to be managed.

VEAC is requested to provide advice on issues and gaps in the VEACRECs25 dataset and how this important tool could be improved, including:

- any issues that need to be resolved to ensure Victoria has an accurate record of agreed public land use;
- any aspects of the current data that need clarification;
- the broad types and extent of uncategorised public land⁵

⁵ Uncategorised public land is a broad category for which no specific public land use has been recommended by VEAC or its predecessors. Victoria is estimated to have less than 65,000 hectares of uncategorised public land.

- any improvements to the functionality of VEACRECs25 to assist public land managers and support future legislative reforms; and
- establishing an online accessible repository of relevant information sources for the government decisions represented in VEACRECs25.

The government has committed to modernise Victoria's public land legislation in the Victorian Government Response to VEAC's Statewide Assessment of Public Land Final Report. The improved VEACRECs25 dataset will assist in the transition to the new legislative framework.

Reporting

VEAC must provide reports containing its advice within 12 months from the date of the request,* with separate reports for topics (a) and (b). VEAC must also provide a progress update on its work within 6 months of the request and make this information publicly available.

*extended to 30 April 2023

Appendix 2 Recreation Reference Group member organisations

Recreation Reference Group membership
Australian Motorcycle Trail Riders Association
Australian Trail Horse Riders Association
Field and Game Australia
Four Wheel Drive Victoria
Prospectors and Miners Association of Victoria
Victorian Environment Friends Network
Victorian National Parks Association
VRFish
Victorian Tourism Industry Council