

A Better Way for Buloke

(By Kerrie Allen, Campaign Director, Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting Inc.)

From the Auditor General's report and SGS Economics analysis (2016 and 2018) which showed rural Victoria's communities were faring worse than other states, to the Census data released March 2018 depicting the vast majority of the most disadvantaged areas in Victoria were rural, it couldn't be any clearer.

Victoria's rural towns are in serious financial trouble.

Salt in the wound was the Australian Taxation Office's list of ten lowest earning postcodes in Australia, featuring our own 3482.

And all this was before Covid-19.

The Solution is in Our Nature.

But there is a lifeline.

Tourism

Across Australia, tourism typically contributes more to the economy than agriculture, forestry and fishing combined. In 2019, for the fourth consecutive year, annual growth in direct tourism GDP outperformed the national growth rate (Tourism Satellite Account 2019).

Nature-based tourism, growing faster than all other forms of tourism put together, is worth over \$41 billion to our country (Unlocking the Great Outdoors 2017).

Tourism Research Australia Visitor Surveys consistently show bushwalking as a top pastime of domestic and international tourists. And, for the year ending December, 2019, for the first time, birdwatching, data was included.

A whopping 866,000 domestic tourists went birdwatching in 2019 across Australia. In fact a huge 44% more overnight domestic tourists went birdwatching than visited the reef.

Wildlife Watching

For those interested in global trends, this is consistent. The latest US Fish and Wildlife National Survey found while interest in hunting — already minor — was decreasing, interest in wildlife watching had increased 20% since 2011. The economic contribution of wildlife watching also increased 28% up to \$76 billion USD.

Year ending December 2019, Australia's top four international tourist sources were China, New Zealand, the US and UK. Between them, 284,000 tourists (on top of the

866,000) went birdwatching in our country, or a compelling one in ten. As New Zealand is likely to be our main international tourist provider for the immediate future, it is worth noting more of them went birdwatching than visited the reef, too.

Clearly, our wildlife are valuable.

According to Parks Victoria, nature-based tourism is worth \$2.6 billion and one in four jobs to our state.

The stunning wetland habitats we are blessed with, such as Boort and Kerang, which are rich in birdlife unique to our country make for a tremendous opportunity.

Shoot With Cameras

Should we replace the guns with cameras here, we can tap into the growing numbers of birdwatchers currently flocking elsewhere such as Yea Wetlands, typically pulling 30,000 visitors a year and Winton Wetlands pulling 66,000 to a small area near Benalla.

With the indigenous culture, we are blessed with at Boort, why not compare our opportunity to that of Kakadu which attracts over 200,000 visitors a year?

Another example is Phillip Island Nature Parks which contributes \$500 million a year and 2100 jobs to Victoria, of which \$120 million and 800 jobs are bestowed just on the local government area.

While less than half of one percent of the population take part in recreational waterbird shooting, and only half again — or 13,000 — actually participating in it around the whole of Victoria (GMA license statistics), the adverse impact is significant. Despite some shooters aiming to do the right thing, studies have shown that only 16% of tourists would not be deterred by shooting (The Australia Institute "Out for a Duck").

Fears Founded

Their fears are founded. Headlines run pretty much every year of shooters' non-compliance to rules and the danger posed to people and animals.

This year it was "Coked-up-shooter's gun seized". Last year it was "Camper's terrifying night at Lake Burrumbeet." And the year before, "Over 30 hunting related offences recorded in the first weekend of duck shooting including shooting without a licence and shooting whilst under the influence of alcohol."

Collateral Damage

Studies have also shown that threatened and protected species are collateral damage. A recent Freedom of Information request resulted in our obtaining reports which show between 300 and 972 non-game/threatened species were killed during duck shooting each year over a six-year period just at the few waterways which happened to be monitored.

Given the vast majority of areas where shooting is allowed are not monitored, the real number would very likely be far higher.

Reports such as The State of The World's Birds 2018 and The Living Planet Index 2020, show the terrifying reality that we are rapidly losing the very assets which attract tourism.

Over two-thirds of the world's animal populations have been lost in just over four decades. Australia is one of the worst offenders in the developed world. Victoria has the highest number of threatened species by sub region in Australia.

Numbers Plummet

Despite not yet being classed as "threatened", populations of our native waterbirds allowed to be shot each year in Victoria for recreation — many species found nowhere else on earth — have plummeted since the 1980s.

Recreational native waterbird shooting is banned in QLD, WA, ACT and NSW. In Victoria, poll after poll shows majority of Victorians — city and country — want it to end here too. It's time.

We don't all need to be as busy as Phillip Island. But by protecting and leveraging the precious wildlife we are lucky enough to still have, we can tap into a consistent flow of sustainable tourism securing our financial futures.

References

- US fish and wildlife national survey 2016.
- Tourism Satellite Account December 2019.
- Tourism Research Australia National Visitor Surveys
- SGS Economics and Planning Analysis 2016 and 2018.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics



• Pacific black duck, picture by Eleanor Dillely.



• Australian wood ducks (resting on one leg), picture by Eleanor Dillely.

- The Australia Institute, Out for a Duck.
- Phillip Island Nature Parks Contributes \$498 Million Media Release.
- Living Planet Index 2020
- Centre for Ecosystem Science University NSW Annual Waterbird Surveys.
- State of the Worlds Birds 2018.
- GMA License Statistics
- 2016 Census data released March 2018.

Mallee Braces for Bushfire Season

Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMVic) is continuing to prepare the Mallee District for the upcoming bushfire season, building on fuel management works conducted throughout the year to reduce bushfire risk for communities and the environment.

FFMVic has recruited additional seasonal firefighters in the Mallee, with 45 fixed-term firefighters in place across the district from late October to work alongside the Department's permanent firefighters. FFMVic personnel are also attending training and briefings in preparation for the summer ahead.

Teams of emergency specialists are now on standby for the Irymple Incident Control Centre, ensuring FFMVic and partner agencies are ready to respond to emergencies 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Testing and servicing the Mallee District's fleet of specialised firefighting vehicles is also under way. Two firefighting aircraft will be based in Ouyen later this month and a water-bombing helicopter will be located at Sea Lake. Linga Airbase is ready for activation as required.

Planned Burning
This preparation builds on FFMVic's fuel management works throughout the year, including planned burning, slashing and mulching to reduce the speed and intensity of potential bushfires in the Mallee.

Since mid-last year, FFMVic has completed more than 8,900 hectares of planned burning in the Mallee District with crews taking every opportunity to conduct burns when conditions allow and it is safe to do so.

This has included planned burning to reduce bushfire risk in the communities of Cow-

angie and Murrayville, with the high priority burns conducted on the boundaries of the Big Desert State Forest and Murray Sunset National Park.

Fuel Reduction

In the same period, crews also completed more than 2,200 hectares of mechanical fuel reduction work using heavy machinery to maintain strategic boundary fire breaks and fire vehicle access in Mallee Parks. This work focussed on the southern boundary of the Big Desert State Forest and the eastern boundary of Wyperfeld National Park.

All FFMVic crews are adhering to appropriate public health and hygiene guidelines to ensure operations can safely continue across the state.



• Blue-billed duck, picture by Natini Scarfe.