Collaborative Evaluation & Research Centre

Supporting Innovative Research and Evaluation

Strategic Planning Report for the Tourism Innovation Working Group: Heyfield & District 2024

FEDERATION UNIVERSITY

COLLABORATIVE EVALUATION & RESEARCH CENTRE

SUPPORTING INNOVATIVE RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

Strategic Planning Report for the Tourism Innovation Working Group: Heyfield & District

2024

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The Collaborative Evaluation & Research Centre (CERC) Federation University Gippsland is an innovative initiative that aims to build evaluation capacity and expertise locally in Gippsland, and nationally and internationally. As a local provider in Gippsland, Victoria, the CERC understands the value of listening to the community and has the ability to deliver timely and sustainable evaluations that are tailored to the needs of a wide variety of organisations.

Professor Joanne Porter is the Director of the CERC. Joanne has led a number of successful research projects and evaluations in conjunction with local industry partners. She has guided the development of the CERC since its formation in 2018.

The CERC team that evaluated the Strategic Planning Report for the Tourism Innovation Working Group: Heyfield included:

- Sam Fenton (Lead)
- Professor Joanne Porter
- Megan Simic
- Dr Daria Soldatenko

CONTENTS

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of six innovation themes identified in the Heyfield and District Context Analysis[1], which states the following regarding the opportunity to develop tourism in the area (p. 3):

> *Heyfield's location, nearby places of scenic beauty, Lake Glenmaggie, forested areas including tracks and trails, can support and add value to tourism ideas. Heyfield is known locally as a Gateway to the Southern Alps.*

The aim of the Heyfield and District Context Analysis was to "to investigate opportunities that will lead to long-term economic and social benefits, new jobs in sustainable industries, and to support the transition away from native timber harvesting"[1]. Following the context analysis, the next step for the tourism innovation theme was to identify specific opportunities to leverage the community assets to improve the local economy, employment opportunities and community wellbeing.

Through the Heyfield and District's Local Development Strategy (LDS), a draft for the Heyfield Adventure Hub (Appendix 5) was developed as part of a smart specialisation strategy. An aspect of smart specialisation is identifying where innovative efforts (and funding) should be concentrated. The draft strategy (Appendix 5) represents current efforts by the Heyfield Tourism and Traders Association (HTTA) and the Tourism Innovation Working Group (TIWG) to focus on leveraging natural assets and current businesses to provide a platform for an improved local visitor economy. These efforts are encouraged by current visitor activity through the holiday and long weekend periods and are aimed at developing year-round tourism activity. The proposed Adventure Hub is an adventure and nature-based activity concierge for the Heyfield Region, located in the Wetlands & Information Centre, which, according to the draft strategy, may conduct the following activities:

1. Promote the Heyfield Region and all it has to offer in adventure and nature-based activities and experiences to existing and potential visitors.
2. Link visitors to an adventure together with the relevant information.
3. Hiring out equipment such as mountain bikes or paddleboards to assist visitors experience, their adventure or attract others to deliver services.
4. Work alongside stakeholders to develop and implement new adventure activities fitting in with the Heyfield Region (Heyfield, Cowwarr, Tinamba, Glenmaggie, Coongulla and Licola).

This research report represents a community-led study approach, capturing views on local tourism, along with stakeholder and expert views on how to improve the visitor economy, while preserving or enhancing the local culture and the liveability of the region. A brief literature review provides a snapshot of the experiences and lessons learned from towns and regions that have transitioned from extracting resources from nature to support the local economy, to leveraging natural assets for tourism.

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[1] Wood, P. (2023). The Future of Heyfield and District Context Analysis: Advancing Community and Business Innovation.

The report concludes with a series of strategic recommendations based on the following goals:

- Having a fundable lead agency to manage future projects based on the recommendations.
- Increase access and options for visitors and the local community to participate in and enjoy a wide range of outdoor activities, including adventure activities.
- Increase community income across a range of services through increased visitors.
- Preserve, reinforce, and support community pride in the local history and culture.
- Strengthen community capacity to achieve sustainable commercial outcomes that are respectful and supportive of the preferences and wishes of Heyfield & District citizens.

1.2 KEY FINDINGS

Data from the Future of Tourism in Heyfield and District survey (completed by local residents (68.1%) and business owners (21.3%)) demonstrated that the majority of participants considered that tourism is important for Heyfield and District (8.5 scores out of 10) and that the region is attractive as a destination (6.9 scores out of 10). According to participants' responses, the main attractions that bring visitors to Heyfield and District, were Glenmaggie, Wetlands, High Country, Cowwarr Weir, Blores Hill Mountain Bike Park, Recreational Vehicle (RV) park, and wineries. These natural assets provide opportunities for various activities such as camping, swimming, skiing, canoeing, boating, fishing, and four-wheel driving (4WD). The participants believed that *'Local community'* and *'Natural assets and access to them'* make Heyfield and District special.

The participants expressed a high level of satisfaction with the majority of listed facilities with an average value of 3.0 or higher on a scale from 1 to 5, especially with caravan park accommodation, camp accommodation, food services, and outdoor activities options in Heyfield and District. The majority of participants (89.4%) believed that there was a potential to attract more visitors and develop tourism in Heyfield and District. A significant proportion of participants (83%) felt that the community was interested in developing more tourism facilities and they felt that tourism mixed very well with the community. Participants provided their thoughts on how tourism in the region might be improved. Co-designed recommendations included the development of more facilities (e.g., shops, hotels, cafes, paths), the improvement of existing facilities, tourism offer diversification with more events, tours, and attractions. In addition, the importance of increasing awareness about tourist offers in Heyfield and District, active advertising, and promotion of the region as well as the balance between tourism development and maintaining the community 'vibe' were mentioned by participants.

The themes that emerged from the interviews with a range of experts and stakeholders indicate that Heyfield and District is an attractive destination for visitors with untapped potential to develop services, infrastructure, and accommodation. Promotion of existing visitor attractions could also be developed, and tied to a sense of local history and culture that could potentially connect the community to their identity as a town and as a region:

> *"Just out of Heyfield is our best mountain bike park. That is absolutely on my radar as something that the town could be working towards should be promoting themselves: those bike cafes, you know, bike racks and things at the front of shops, all those kinds of things."*

Including the local community in upcoming changes was seen as important, so that liveability and local culture are maintained:

> "If the community has a stake in their own organisation, it's more likely to thrive and survive."

The potential to streamline the online presence of Heyfield and District attractions was discussed with stakeholders, along with enhancing the social media visibility of attractions through 'instagrammable' picture opportunities:

> "But also that Instagrammable moment, unfortunately, this is the world we live in now. People want that photo."

During interviews with expert stakeholder participants, examples of successful visitor services and attractions in other places led to consideration of what might work for Heyfield and District. A sequential approach to building an ecosystem of attractions, services, governance, and human resources was reflected in the examples provided:

> "So, from Hotham into Omeo, what we saw was people moved into the area. So there's people purchased buildings, properties and developed things to compliment the mountain bike park."

Diversity of attractions, accommodation, food, and services was seen as a key element to attracting travellers and visitors, and it was indicated that Heyfield and District could strategically develop a more connected and available array of offerings for different types of visitors.

> "So as soon as you bolt and cluster a handful of useful service and utility elements together, people will go there, and they will stop."

Support services, lessons and hire equipment for adventure activities came through as additional needs for visitors that should be developed. In order for an operator or series of operators to meet these needs, sustainable revenue throughout each week of the year was put forward as a key consideration:

> "If you look at any of the successful outdoor activity slash tourism type towns, you need to have a seven day a week prospect for a fair amount of the year to make the whole thing tick in regard to financing or return an investment for any entrepreneurs."

While bringing in entrepreneurial talent was discussed, the importance of increasing the capacity of current providers and encouraging collaboration to provide cohesive visitor offerings was emphasised. Finally, the Adventure Hub concept emerged from a range of participants, and the need for a governance model, government support and a champion with the ability and capacity to drive the initiative was considered. Funding and support for such a commercial hub were encouraged. If the Adventure Hub becomes a fundable lead agency to carry out the recommendations of this report, it could be auspiced under a current fundable organisation:

> "Adventure Hub, I think that's a brilliant idea. I think it's new, it's fresh, it's something we don't have. It's something people want."

> "I would suggest that the council need to come up with a good five-year kind of revenue guarantee to keep it going."

1.3 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Several recommendations have been identified throughout this evaluation. The following recommendations are based on the findings of this report:

1. **Establishment of a Tourism Innovation Working Group and Project Officer.**
   - Reposition the TIWG as a sub-committee auspiced under the HTTA.
   - The Heyfield Community Resource Centre (HCRC) project officer/steering committee works with the TIWG to develop a charter based on this research report and aligned with the Gippsland Destination Management Plan and the Local Development Strategy.

2. **Develop a Community Collaboration and Consultation engagement plan.**
   - Provide a regular time and place for community engagement with a project officer to foster a collaborative environment where landowners, managers, and community members can identify and work toward common goals.

3. **Enhance Visitor Experience to the region.**
   - Develop a series of visitor experience maps (customer journeys) for visitors and travellers. Identify activities, related services, shopping, and dining itineraries to serve budget, mid-range, high-end and school group visitor experiences.
   - Collaborate with existing businesses to develop and market all-inclusive packages that cover accommodation, meals, and activities, simplifying activity planning for visitors.
   - Coordinate educational tours and activity offerings across Wetlands, Australian Sustainable Hardwoods (ASH) and Munjara Outdoor Centre for primary, secondary, alternative education and tertiary students.

4. **Incorporate History and Culture into implementation and planning.**
   - Develop an ongoing project to gather and record stories from the community to refine and communicate local historical and cultural themes.
   - Collaborate with local artists to develop collections and purchasable artefacts to represent this identity, e.g., Indigenous history, timber industry, recreation and adventure.

5. **Develop a Marketing strategic plan.**
   - Identify and develop 'Instagrammable' picture-taking sites.
   - Connect with visiting special interest groups through social media and encourage posting, sharing, and connecting through hashtags.
   - Develop a school-specific promotional strategy for educational experiences.

6. **Development and implementation of an Adventure Hub.**
   - HCRC Steering Committee/project officer initiates the development of an Adventure Hub
     - Hold a project kick-off meeting for the Adventure Hub with a small group of key stakeholders.
     - Formalise the Adventure Hub as an auspice committee under the HTTA.
     - Install an advisory panel of experts for the Adventure Hub.

The Future of Tourism in Heyfield & District - June 2024

47 participants

Future of Tourism in Heyfield & District survey

Transition from timber harvesting to visitor-based economy

12

Interviews with experts and local stakeholders

Scale of 1 to 10

8.5 - Tourism importance for the region
6.9 - Attractiveness of the region

47% Considered that the local community and natural assets make the region special

89% Considered there was a potential to attract more

83% Considered that the community was interested in developing more tourism facilities

53% Felt that tourism mixes very well with the community

Comments from stakeholders:

"The Adventure Hub, I think that's a brilliant idea. I think it's new, it's fresh, it's something we don't have. It's something people want."

"As soon as you bolt and cluster a handful of useful service and utility elements together, people will go there and they will stop."

"We need the correct advertising or websites to be able to have people when they put a word search in to be able to see what they want."

Key Recommendations

- Establishment of a Tourism Innovation Working Group and Project Officer
- Develop a Community Collaboration and Consultation Engagement Plan
- Enhance visitor experience to the region
- Incorporate history and culture into implementation and planning
- Develop a marketing strategic plan
- Development and implementation of an Adventure Hub

2. INTRODUCTION - STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR TOURISM INNOVATION: HEYFIELD & DISTRICT

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This research project provides new findings and insights about how community organisations can collaborate with the Tourism Innovation Working Group to successfully and sustainably generate a visitor economy in Heyfield & District. The research is applied in nature and directed at addressing the needs, preferences, and culture of the local community. Building on the strengths of the community, the approach synthesised research on regional towns in transitioning economies, with existing local expertise.

The Institute of Education, Arts and Community (IEAC) along with the Collaborative Evaluation and Research Centre (CERC), through this project, have built on the work undertaken by the Petra Wood on behalf of DEECA and Wellington Shire.

This report builds on the body of work already completed through research, meetings, workshops, and documents developed through the Local Development Strategy – Heyfield & District[1]. It includes a review of the literature focusing on the best practices for regional communities to transition to tourism.

Stakeholders and experts were interviewed, and transcripts were analysed. A community survey was also developed to capture the Heyfield and District community's voice in making a successful transition to a visitor economy. All data were ethically and systematically processed to produce a prioritised sequence of actions.

2.2 PROJECT DELIVERY / ACTIVITIES

Research activities for this project included a brief literature review, 12 stakeholder interviews of approximately 20-30 minutes, a community survey and the production of a strategic report with recommendations based on data analysis.

This project provided a list of informed and actionable recommendations to the Tourism Innovation Working Group (TIWG). The project adopted a systematic approach, to generate transferable and reproducible findings that present informed and actionable recommendations. The deliverables and recommendations also identified stakeholders and partners to consult with and collaborate with in future iterations of the project.

3. THE EVALUATION

3.1 AIM OF THE EVALUATION

The aim of this project was to identify opportunities that would improve the visitor economy in Heyfield and District, while upholding the local community liveability, culture, and preferences.

3.2 EVALUATION RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. To identify options for a fundable lead agency to manage future projects based on the recommendations.
2. To develop an understanding of ways to increase access and options for visitors and the local community to participate in and enjoy a wide range of outdoor activities, including adventure activities.
3. To develop an understanding of options to increase community income across a range of services through increased visitors.
4. To develop an understanding of how to preserve, reinforce and support community pride in the local history and culture.
5. To develop an understanding of how to strengthen community capacity to achieve sustainable commercial outcomes that are respectful and supportive of the preferences and wishes of Heyfield & District citizens.

3.3 DATA COLLECTION / TOOLS USED

A mixed methods approach was used to identify the potential for Heyfield and District to improve the local visitor economy while supporting the local community culture. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected via community survey and individual semi-structured community interviews as shown in Figure 1 below.

Quantitative — Community survey

Qualitative — Stakeholder interviews

Figure 1: Data collection tools

4. EVALUATION FINDINGS

4.1 FUTURE OF TOURISM IN HEYFIELD AND DISTRICT SURVEY

Introduction

Presented below are the results of the online survey completed by community member participants in Heyfield and District. Posters with the QR code to Future of Tourism in Heyfield and District survey were distributed throughout Heyfield & District with the help of Wellington Shire, DEECA, the Heyfield Traders Association and the Heyfield Tourism Innovation Working Group. In addition, Social Media posts were distributed via LinkedIn and Facebook with a link to the survey. A total of 47 completed surveys were included in the analysis.

Demographic information

The majority of participants were female (n=32, 68.1%), and 25.5% (n=12) were male. Two participants preferred not to state their gender and one did not respond to this question. All participants were over 18 with a high proportion of those aged 45-64 (n=26, 55.3%). The number of participants for each age category is shown in Figure 2 below. Only one participant (2.1%) identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.
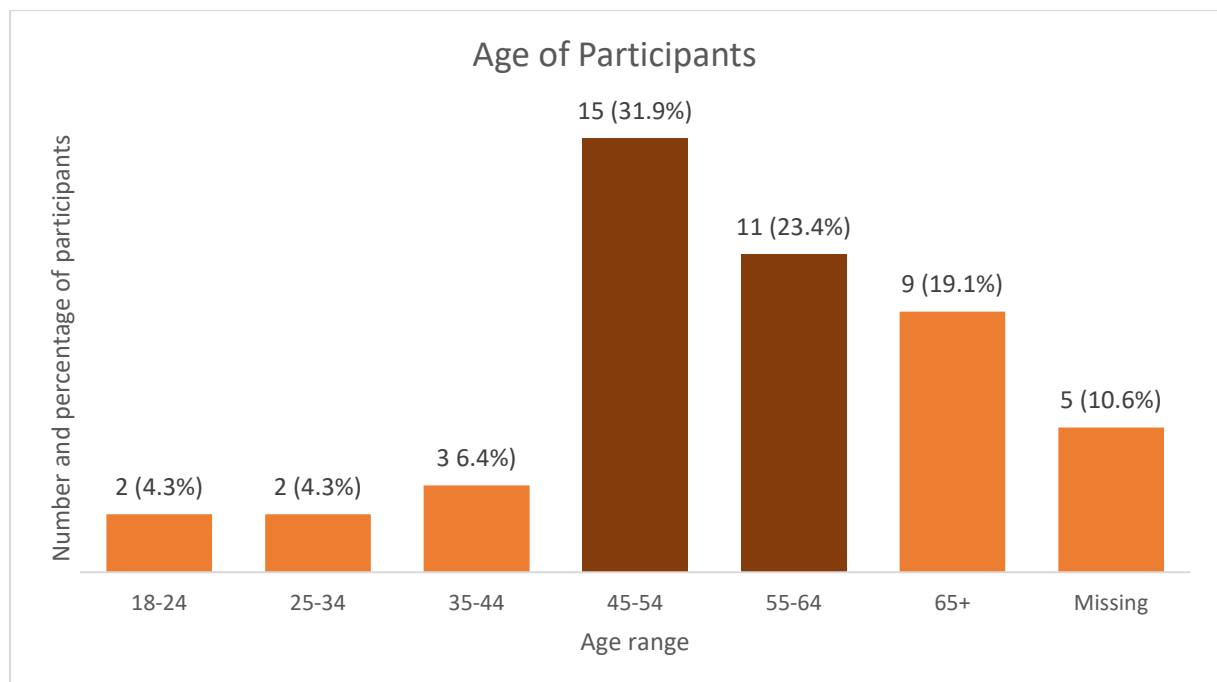
Figure 2:Age range of participants

As shown in Figure 3, almost 70% of participants (n=32) were local residents. Ten participants (21.3%) reported that they were local business owners. Among other responses, there were "Working in Heyfield" and "Part-time (50/50) local resident with another home elsewhere". Three visitors to the Heyfield and District (6.4%) participated in this survey.

Participants

Category	Value
Local resident	32 (68.1%)
Local Business owner	10 (21.3%)
Visitor	3 (6.4%)
Other (please specify)	2 (4.3%)

Number and percentage of participants
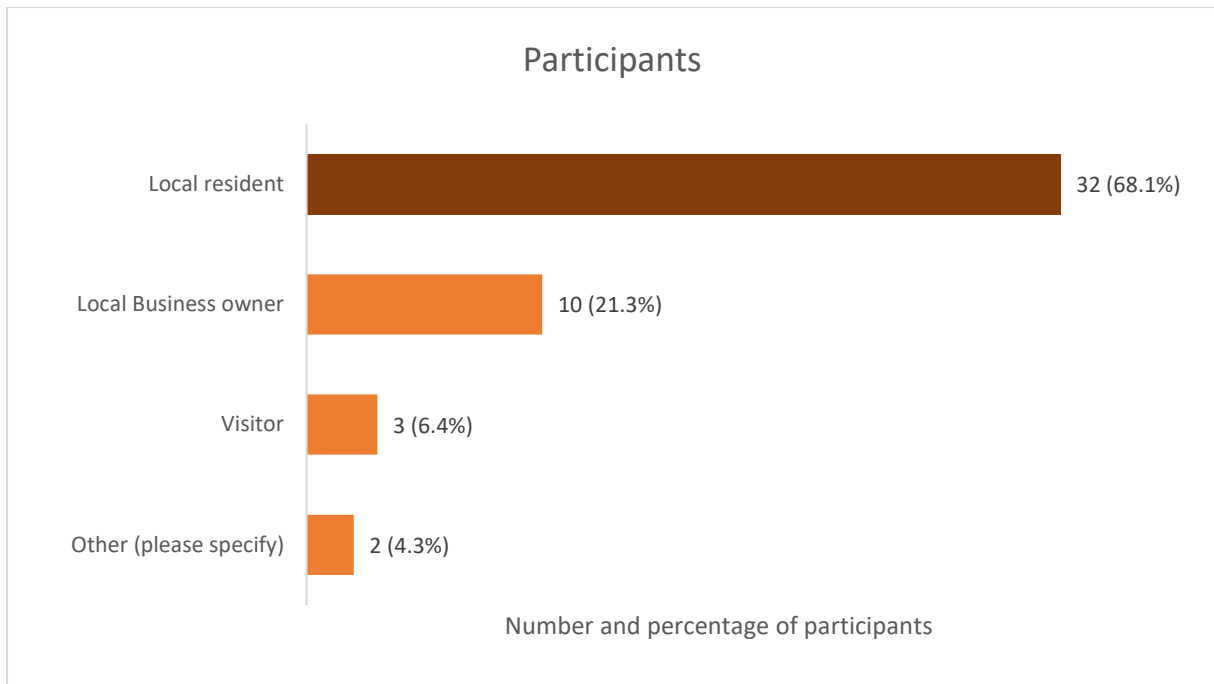
Figure 3: Groups of participants

Over half of the participants lived in Heyfield and District for over 10 years (Figure 4). An equal proportion of participants (n=5, 10.6%) spent 5 to 10 years and 1 to 5 years living in Heyfield and District.

Length of time living in Heyfield and District

Category	Value
10 years or more	27 (57.4%)
More than 5 years but less than 10 years	5 (10.6%)
More than a year but less than 5 years	5 (10.6%)
Less than a year	3 (6.4%)
N/A	5 (10.6%)

Number and percentage of participants
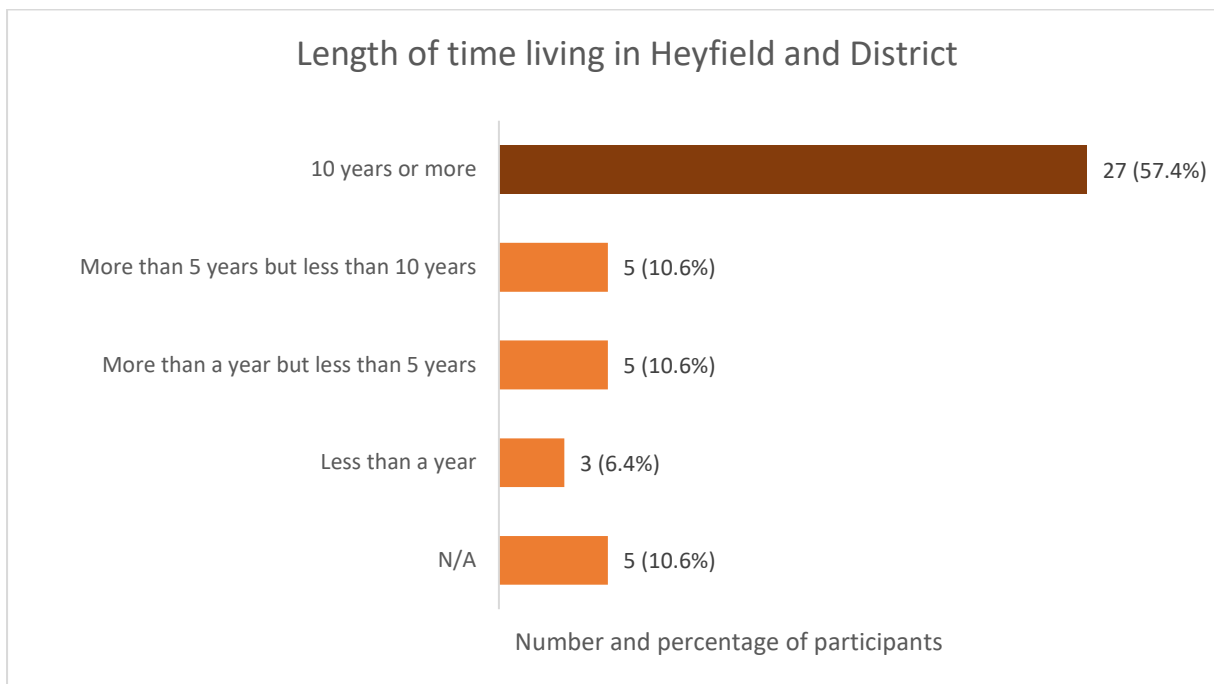
Figure 4: Length of time living in Heyfield and District

Of the 47 participants, 46 agreed to disclose their employment status. As seen in Figure 5, approximately one-third of participants (n=13, 27.7%) were full-time employed and the same number of participants were employed part-time. Those who were retired represented one-fourth of the

survey participants. In addition, 10 business owners (21.3%) and 7 volunteers (14.9%) engaged in the survey.

Out of 37 participants who recorded that they were employed, 22 (59.5%) worked in Heyfield and District, while 13 (35.1%) worked somewhere else.

Employment status

Category	Value
Employed part time	13 (27.7%)
Employed full time	13 (27.7%)
Retired	12 (25.5%)
Self-employed – business owner	10 (21.3%)
Volunteer	7 (14.9%)
Employed casually	2 (4.3%)
Student	1 (2.1%)
Employed in tourism-related jobs/businesses	1 (2.1%)
Unemployed	0 (27.7%)
Seeking employment	0 (27.7%)

Number and percentage of participants
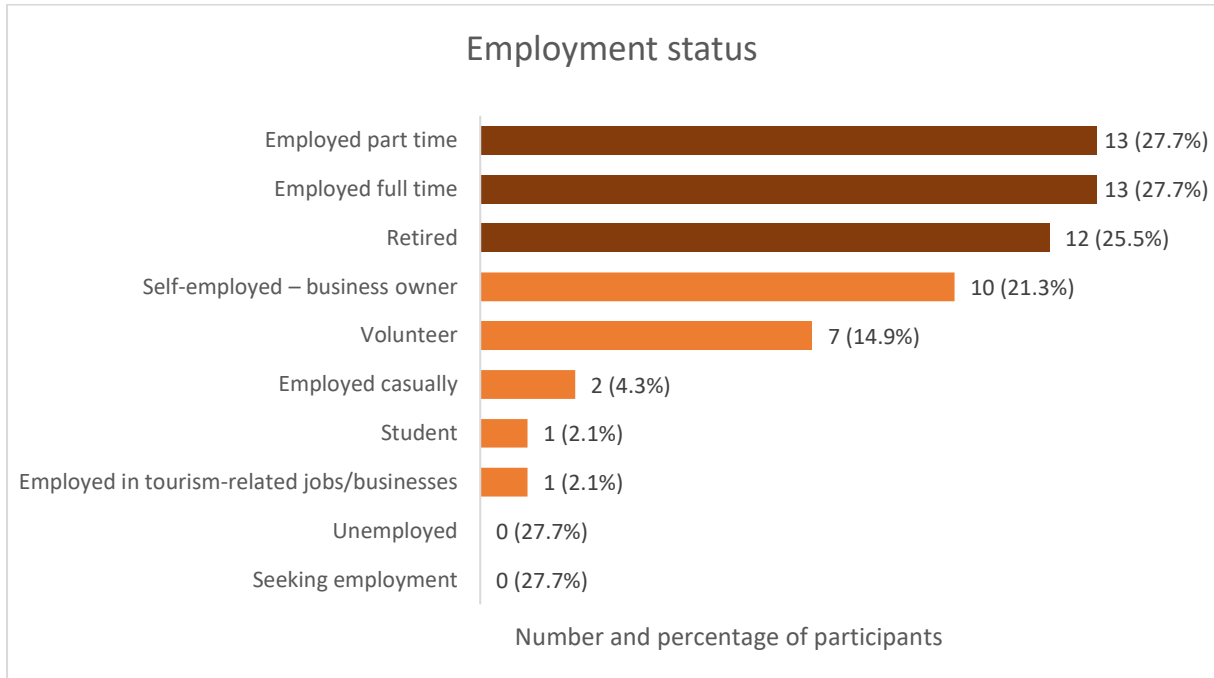
Figure 5: Employment status of participants

Tourism in Heyfield and District

Survey participants were asked to rate on a scale of 0-10, how important tourism is for Heyfield and District and how attractive Heyfield and District is as a destination. Both questions were answered by all participants and as shown in Figure 6, the average values are quite high (8.5 and 6.9 respectively).

Participants' opinions about Tourism in Heyfield and District

Question	Value
How important is Tourism for Heyfield & District?	8.5
How attractive is Heyfield & District as a destination?	6.9

The average value (fom 0 to 10)
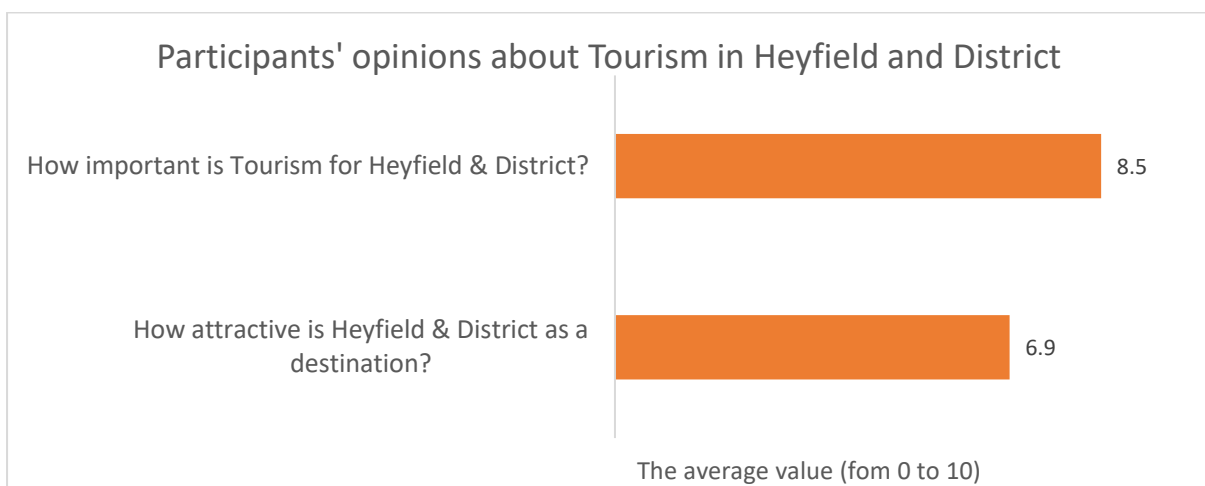
Figure 6: Participants' opinions about Tourism in Heyfield and District

Participants were given a series of statements about the economic and environmental impact of tourism in Heyfield and District and asked to rate each one from *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree*.

The original responses were on a five-point Likert scale. For reporting purposes, *Strongly Agree* and *Agree* have been combined in the positive and *Strongly Disagree* and *Disagree* have been combined in the negative throughout this report. The results are presented using a three-point Likert scale. The results are shown in Figures 7 and 8 below.

Most respondents equally agreed with the statements that tourism '*Has an overall positive impact on the local economy*' and '*Supports local business and investment*' (n=37, 78.7%), followed by '*Attracts new residents and skilled labour*' (n=24, 51.1%) (Figure 7).
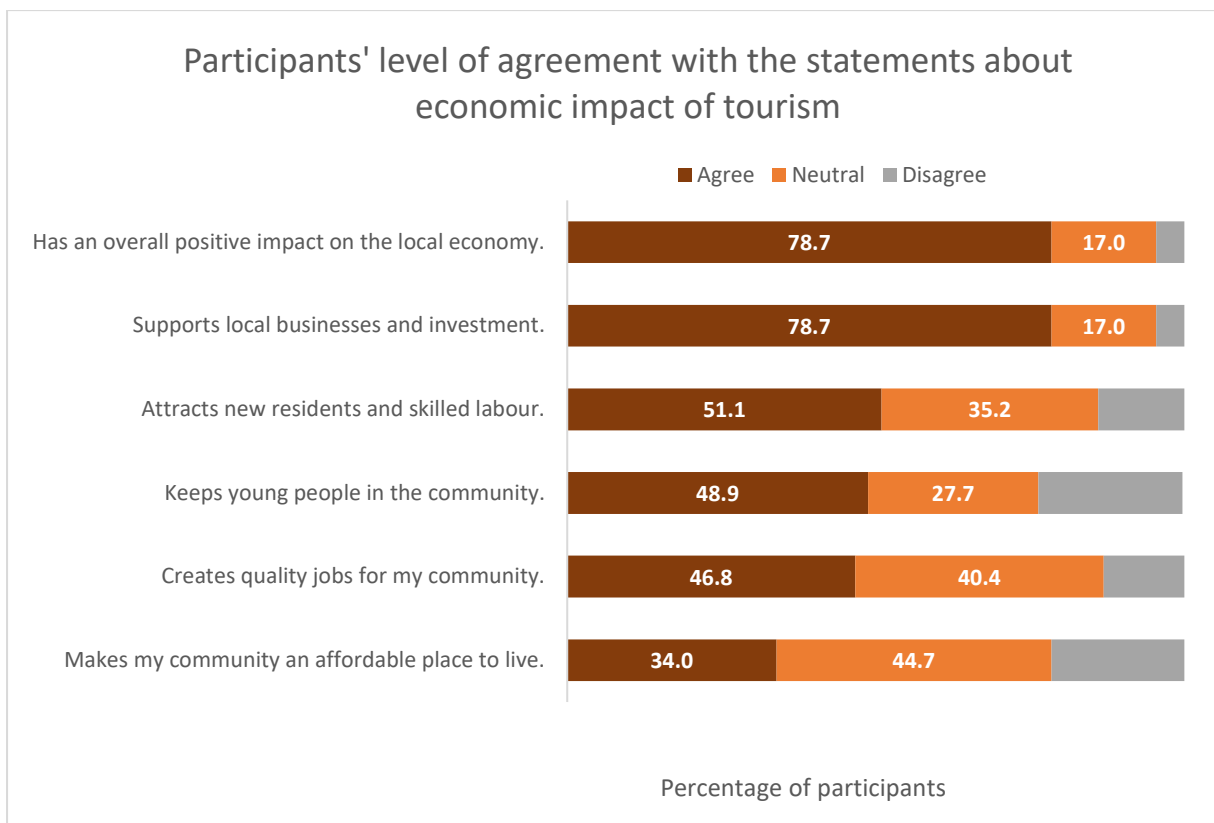
Figure 7: Participants' opinions about the economic impact of tourism in Heyfield and District

In terms of the environmental impact of tourism in Heyfield and District, a large percentage of participants agreed with the statement that tourism 'Increases the opportunity to have an active lifestyle' (n=37, 78.7%), followed by 'Supports the protection and restoration of our natural assets' (n=33, 59.6%). Only 34.0% of participants (n=16) believed that tourism attracts disrespectful behaviours toward natural assets.

Figure 8: Participants' opinions about the environmental impact of tourism in Heyfield and District

Some participants provided comments through open-ended responses regarding the environmental impact of tourism highlighting its "*double-edged sword*", as "*some people are very respectful of our natural assets and a lot of the groups that use them actively participate in restoring and maintaining many of our natural assets but of course, at the same time there are always individuals that are disrespectful and don't care if their actions has a negative impact on our natural assets*".

> "*Use of 4WD (four-wheel drive) tracks naturally degrades these tracks, however, it is an important recreational activity for those in the community. More education or purpose-built facilities may allow people to engage in their hobby without damaging important infrastructure*".

In response to survey question about the attractions and activities that bring visitors to Heyfield and District, participants mainly named particular places and activities that are directly associated with these places. The most often reported places were Glenmaggie, Wetlands, High Country, Cowwarr Weir, Blores Hill Mountain Bike Park, RV park, and wineries and reported activities were camping, swimming, skiing, canoeing, boating, fishing and four-wheel driving. Figure 9 shows the word cloud generated from participants' responses to the question about the main attractions and activities in Heyfield and District.

Figure 9: Responses about what attractions / activities bring visitors to Heyfield and District

The participants were asked about what makes Heyfield and District special. This was an open-ended question and responses were coded into similar concepts or themes. Responses can belong to more than one code of concept or theme. Forty-six participants (97.9%) responded to this question. A large proportion of responses were coded to *'Local community'* and *'Natural assets and access to them'* (n=22, 46.8%, equally) (Figure 10).

What makes Heyfield and District special

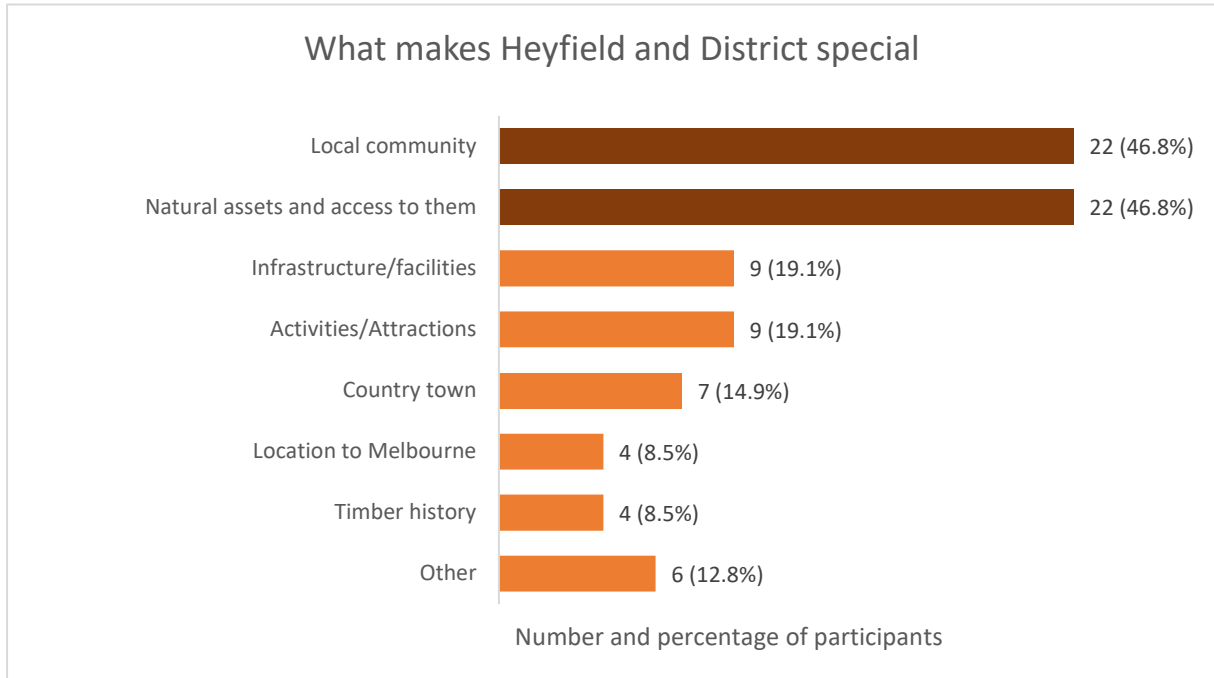| Code	Number and percentage of participants
Local community	22 (46.8%)
Natural assets and access to them	22 (46.8%)
Infrastructure/facilities	9 (19.1%)
Activities/Attractions	9 (19.1%)
Country town	7 (14.9%)
Location to Melbourne	4 (8.5%)
Timber history	4 (8.5%)
Other	6 (12.8%)

Figure 10: Codes for what makes Heyfield & District special

An example of the quote for *'Local community'* was:

> *"Everyone knows everybody. It is so good that we can all reach out and get help, we all come together as a community. Heyfield is an amazing small town".*

Examples of quotes for *'Natural assets and access to them'* were:

> *"It's in the middle of everywhere and there are rivers, lakes, mountains, the ocean, national parks all within an hour's drive in any direction from Heyfield".*

> *"It has any number of unique natural assets that support all the outdoor activities, including the Southern Alps, Heyfield Wetlands, Lake Glenmaggie and Blores Hill Mountain Bike Trail".*

Some quotes with a combination of identified codes:

> *"Great local community and surrounding areas with plenty of activities to participate".*

Selected "*Other*" responses (n=6, 12.8%) included "*good climate", "green and clean", "great service", and "fuel and camping supplies"* (Figure 10).

Thirty-five responses to the open-ended question "*What might be a tourism landmark / symbol for Heyfield and District?*" were coded according to themes and a response can belong to more than one code. As presented in Figure 11, the majority of participants (n=12, 25.5%) considered that Lake Glenmaggie might be a symbol of the region, while 10 participants (21.3%) replied to this question in a broader way saying that natural assets such as lakes, mountains, and/or parks could represent the region. Wetlands, Gateway to High Country, Blores Hill and Rail Trail were mentioned by participants. In addition, six responses (12.8%) were related to timber memorials, for example, "*a log as a symbolic mark to the history*".
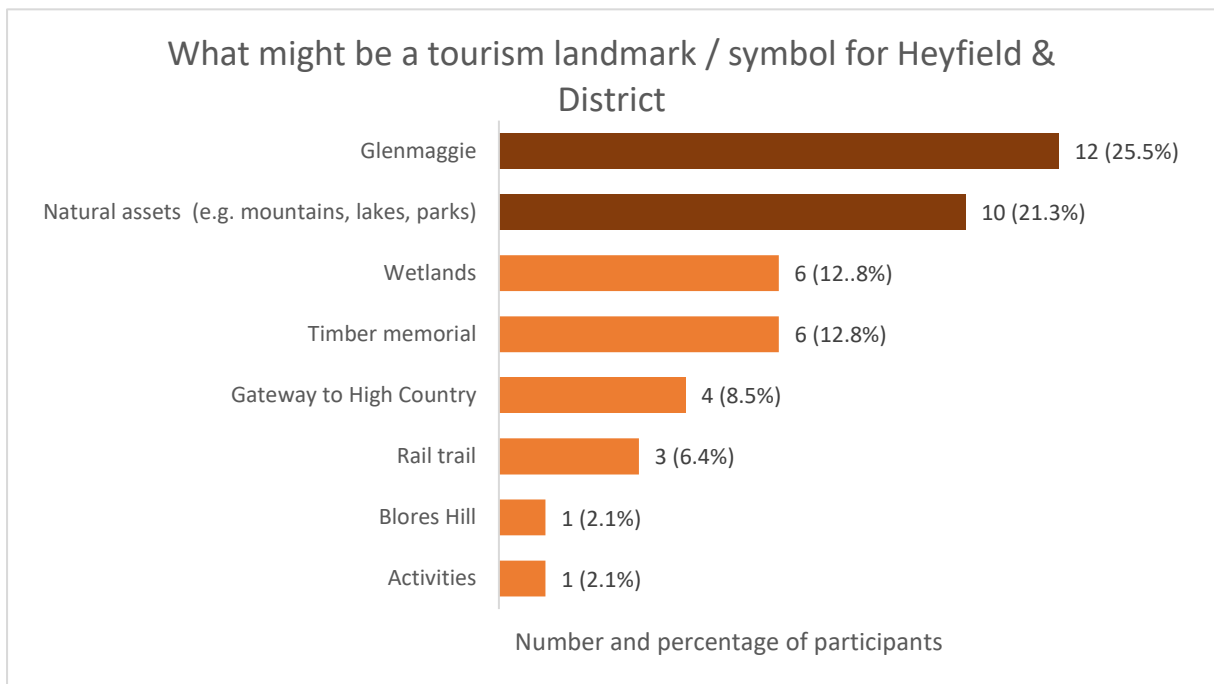

Figure 11: Codes for what might be a tourism landmark / symbol for Heyfield & District

Participants were asked to identify experiences from the provided list that they had participated or enjoyed in the past 12 months in Heyfield and District. As shown in Figure The most common responses were related to purchasing stuff locally: '*Purchased food & beverages locally*' (n=45, 95.7%), '*Paid for services locally*' (n=42, 89.4%), and '*Purchased goods locally*' (40, 85.1%). In addition, participants were active in using trails (n=37, 78.7%), parks (n=37, 78.7%), lakes (n=36, 76.6%) and wetlands (n=36, 76.6%) for recreational and leisure purposes.
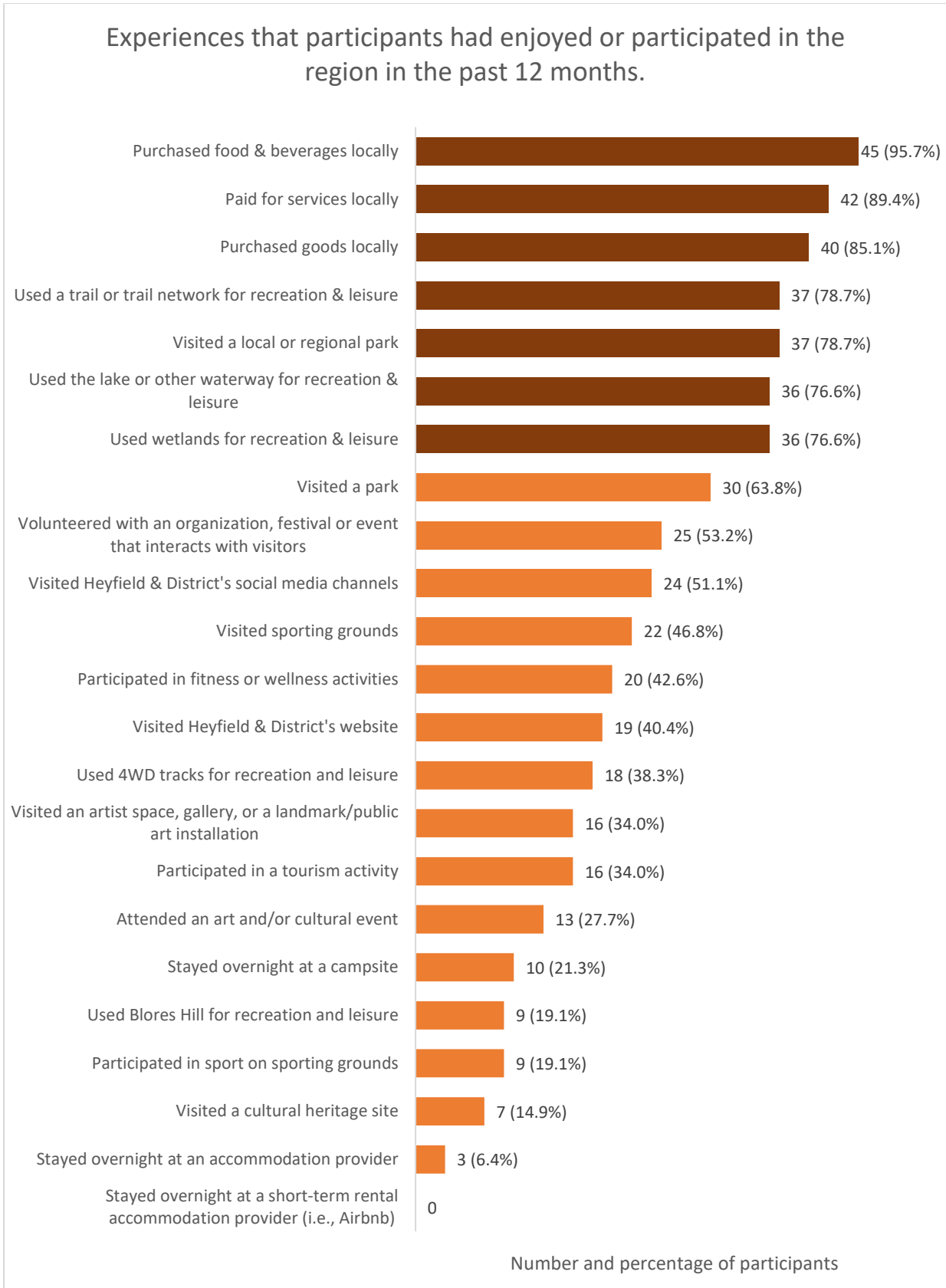
Experiences that participants had enjoyed or participated in the region in the past 12 months.

Experience	Number (Percentage)
Purchased food & beverages locally	45 (95.7%)
Paid for services locally	42 (89.4%)
Purchased goods locally	40 (85.1%)
Used a trail or trail network for recreation & leisure	37 (78.7%)
Visited a local or regional park	37 (78.7%)
Used the lake or other waterway for recreation & leisure	36 (76.6%)
Used wetlands for recreation & leisure	36 (76.6%)
Visited a park	30 (63.8%)
Volunteered with an organization, festival or event that interacts with visitors	25 (53.2%)
Visited Heyfield & District's social media channels	24 (51.1%)
Visited sporting grounds	22 (46.8%)
Participated in fitness or wellness activities	20 (42.6%)
Visited Heyfield & District's website	19 (40.4%)
Used 4WD tracks for recreation and leisure	18 (38.3%)
Visited an artist space, gallery, or a landmark/public art installation	16 (34.0%)
Participated in a tourism activity	16 (34.0%)
Attended an art and/or cultural event	13 (27.7%)
Stayed overnight at a campsite	10 (21.3%)
Used Blores Hill for recreation and leisure	9 (19.1%)
Participated in sport on sporting grounds	9 (19.1%)
Visited a cultural heritage site	7 (14.9%)
Stayed overnight at an accommodation provider	3 (6.4%)
Stayed overnight at a short-term rental accommodation provider (i.e., Airbnb)	0

Number and percentage of participants

Figure 12: Experiences that participants had enjoyed or participated in Heyfield and District in the past 12 months

20

When asked about their satisfaction with the proposed tourism facilities in Heyfield and District (from 1 - *Very Poor* to 5 - *Excellent*), the participants expressed a significantly high level of satisfaction with all listed facilities with an average value of 3.0 or higher. Figure 13 demonstrates the average value of participants' satisfaction level with the tourism facilities in Heyfield and District.

Participants' level of satisfaction with the tourism facilities in Heyfield and District

Facility	Average value
Caravan park accommodation	3.9
Camp accommodation	3.8
Other accommodation	3.7
Food services	3.7
Attractions	3.6
Outdoor Activity Options	3.6
Retail	3.6
Heyfield Visitor Information Centre	3.5
Wayfinding signages	3.4
Highway signage	3.2
Availability of public toilets	3.1
Condition and cleanliness of public toilets	3.0

The average value (fom 1 to 5)

Figure 13: Participants' level of satisfaction with the tourism facilities in Heyfield and District (the average value)

To look closely at the participants' satisfaction level with each proposed tourism facility in Heyfield and District, the original five-point Likert scale responses were modified into three-point scale responses. The *'Good'* and *'Excellent'* responses were combined to *'Good'* for simplification in the presentation of results. The same was applied to *'Very Poor'* and *'Poor'* responses to make one group '*Poor*'. Figure 14 demonstrates that the higher satisfaction scores were assigned to Caravan park accommodation (n=33, 70.2%), followed by Food services (n=32, 68.1%), Camp accommodation (n=31, 66.0%), and Outdoor activities options (n=31, 66.0%).
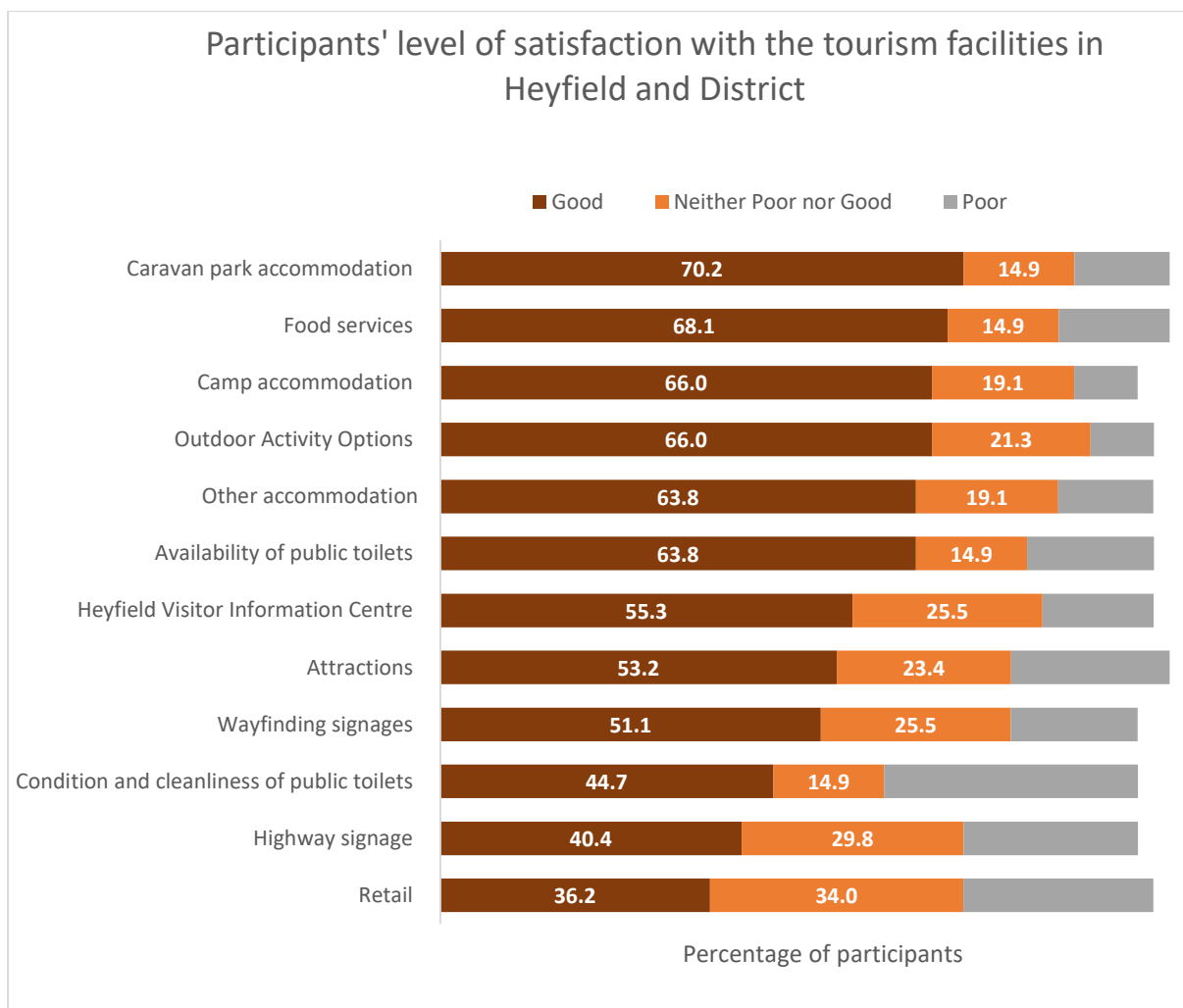
Participants' level of satisfaction with the tourism facilities in Heyfield and District

Legend: ■ Good ■ Neither Poor nor Good ■ Poor

Facility	Good	Neither Poor nor Good
Caravan park accommodation	70.2	14.9
Food services	68.1	14.9
Camp accommodation	66.0	19.1
Outdoor Activity Options	66.0	21.3
Other accommodation	63.8	19.1
Availability of public toilets	63.8	14.9
Heyfield Visitor Information Centre	55.3	25.5
Attractions	53.2	23.4
Wayfinding signages	51.1	25.5
Condition and cleanliness of public toilets	44.7	14.9
Highway signage	40.4	29.8
Retail	36.2	34.0

Percentage of participants

Figure 14: Participants' level of satisfaction with the tourism facilities in Heyfield and District

Potential for tourism development in Heyfield and District

Participants were asked about their thoughts on the potential for Tourism Development in Heyfield and District and provided with the opportunity to express their ideas on how tourism in the region might be improved. Out of 47 participants, 42 (89.4%) considered that there was a potential to attract more visitors to Heyfield and District and only 5 (10.6%) were not sure.

A significant proportion of participants (n=39, 83%) felt that the community was interested in developing more tourism facilities and they chose the response '*Yes, we have some tourists and would like more*'. Only 3 participants (6.4%) replied '*No, we already have enough tourists*'. In response to a question about participants' feelings about the number of tourists visiting the community during the high visitor season, slightly more than half of participants (n=25, 53.2%) felt that tourism mixed very well with the community, while 7 participants (14.9%) felt mildly overwhelmed (Figure 15).
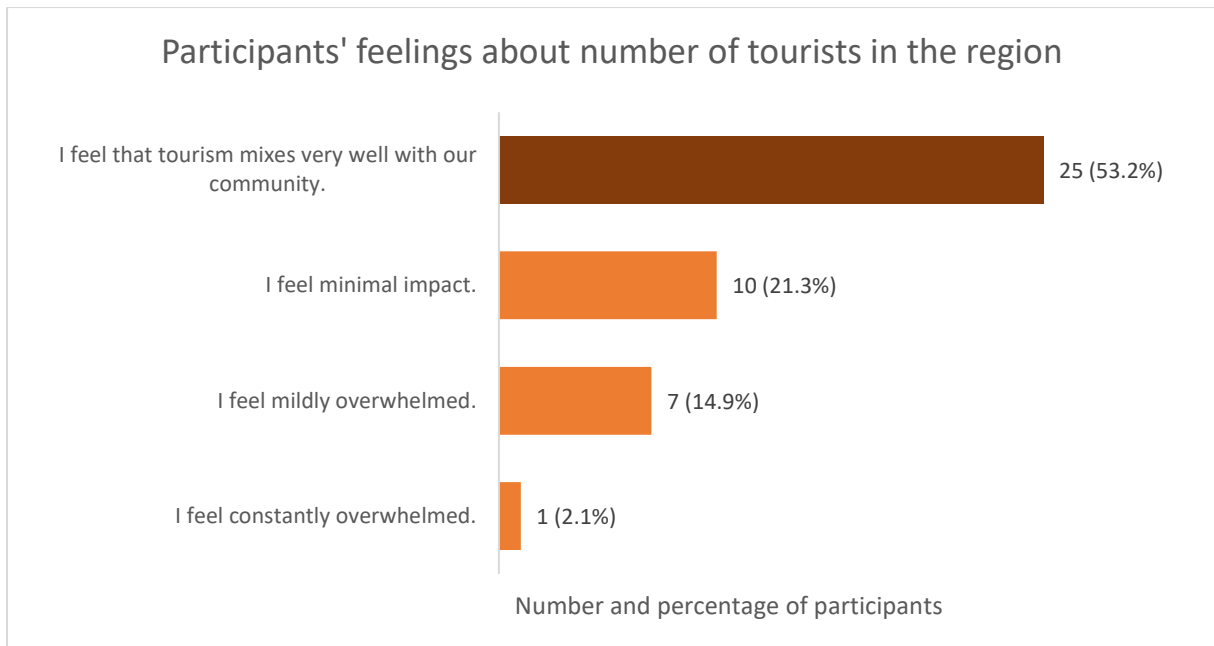
Participants' feelings about number of tourists in the region

- I feel that tourism mixes very well with our community. — 25 (53.2%)
- I feel minimal impact. — 10 (21.3%)
- I feel mildly overwhelmed. — 7 (14.9%)
- I feel constantly overwhelmed. — 1 (2.1%)

Number and percentage of participants

Figure 15: Participants' feelings about the number of tourists visiting the community during the high visitor season

Forty participants responded to the open-ended question *"How can tourism in your region be improved in terms of services and attractions?"*. All responses were coded according to the identified themes. Responses can belong to more than one code of concept or theme. As indicated in Figure 16, the most popular responses were related to '*More facilities'* (n=29, 61.9%) including shops, hotels, cafes, paths, parks and playgrounds, and public transport. Some recommendations here were quite specific, such as "*pathway from Heyfield to Lake Glenmaggie*", "*bike path from town to Blores Hill, more water taps along the rail trail and a retailer that sells local produce*", "*more buses to connect to trains in Traralgon for events running"*.

Participants' recommendations on how tourism can be improved in Heyfield and District

- More facilities (e.g., cafes, shops, paths) — 29 (61.9%)
- More events, tours & attractions — 15 (31.9%)
- Improvements, restoration & renovation — 9 (19.1%)
- Increased awareness — 7 (14.9%)
- Businesses' operational hours — 5 (10.6%)
- Visitor Information Centre — 3 (6.4%)
- Communication between businesses — 3 (6.4%)
- Training for businesses — 2 (4.3%)
- Training services for tourists (e.g., 4WD) — 2 (4.3%)
- Other — 3 (27.7%)

Number and percentage of participants
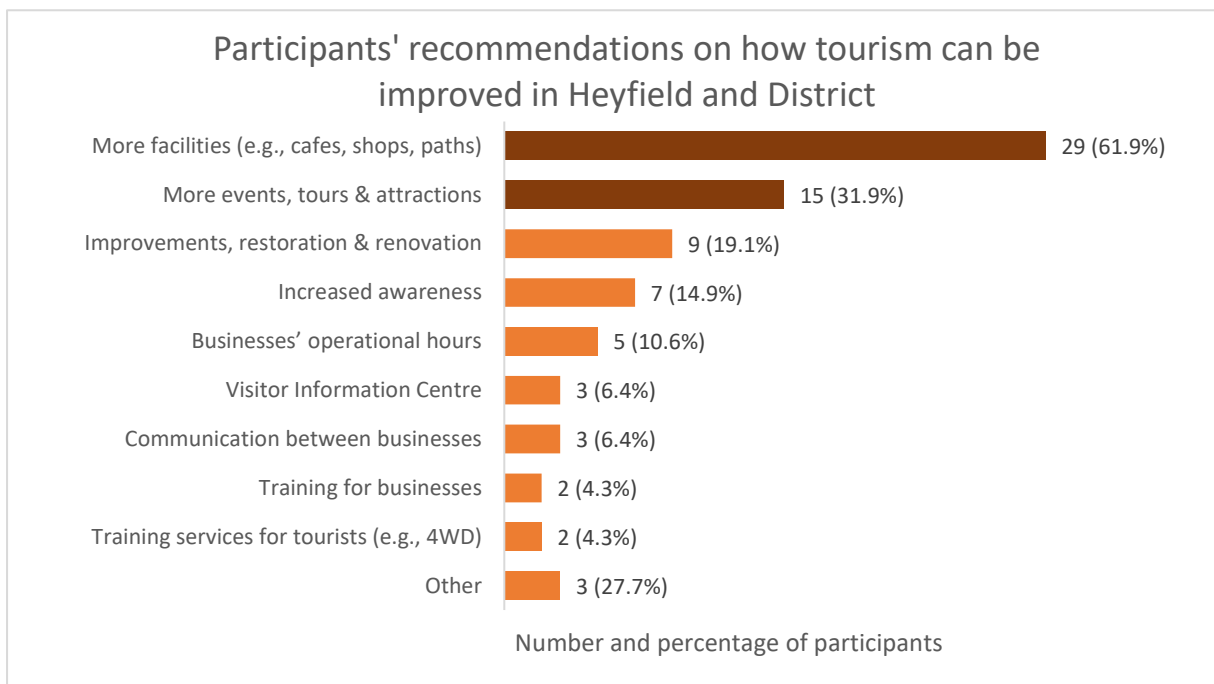
Figure 16: Participants' recommendations on how tourism can be improved in Heyfield and District

The first recommendation group was followed by '*More events, tours & attractions*' (n=15, 31.9%) and '*Improvements, restoration & renovation*' (n=9, 19.1%). '*More events, tours & attractions*' group combined recommendations on tourism offer diversification. Some examples were as follows: *"Historical railway - could create a miniature railway park or some other attractions for families and rail enthusiasts. Activate wetland more - tours on flora & fauna and wildlife, update interpretive signs. Indigenous cultural tours"; "new attractions and events especially for teenagers and families";* and *"utilise the Heyfield Wetlands more for maybe concerts or open-air music".*

Some examples of recommendations on '*Improvements, restoration & renovation*' were *"upgrade sports facilities", "ensure that business signage in town is up to date and fresh",* and *"increase RV park".*

In addition, the importance of increasing awareness about tourist offers in Heyfield and District and for businesses being open more hours and more "*tourist-oriented*" as well as "*the improved communication between businesses*" were mentioned:

> *"Better information and assistance for visitors around what we have and how visitors can access it. Especially linking visitors to local service providers that may be able to help them if they would like to undertake a new adventure/outdoor activity but don't have the equipment or know how to start".*

> "*More education to the businesses in the town about tourism and being present*".

> *"Perhaps more coordination between the food offerings and shops is needed particularly for popular tourist times, to ensure that there is some offerings for visitors to town and not all business owners have holidays at the same time".*

"Other" responses included "*financial support*", "*equipment hiring*" and "*better access for the non-driving community*" (Figure 16).

At the end of the survey, participants were asked if there were anything else they would like to say about tourism in Heyfield and District. Along with some similar themes identified earlier (such as '*more new businesses*', '*longer operational hours*', '*upgraded paths and facilities*', and '*improved public transportation*'), additional important comments were provided around the balance between tourism development and maintaining the community vibe, as well as engaging residents in all aspects of our community:

> *"Not to overdo it so as to keep the small town vibe"; "It needs to include local timber industry resources";* and *"Tourism is good for Heyfield and the greater district both financially and promoting a strong sense of community".*

Moreover, the need for financial support to maintain facilities and the focus on the environmental aspect of tourism development were also highlighted:

> *"Funding is required to better maintain facilities used by tourists especially with increase in use, including track/road network. More focus to deal with undesirable behaviour by tourists to encourage more respect for environmental and recreational values and the locals who live and work here (rubbish, vandalism, illegal hunting, damage to environment, etc)".*

An active advertising and promotion of the region was also emphasised as an important action for tourism development in Heyfield and District.

4.2 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Data from the Future of Tourism in Heyfield and District survey demonstrated that the majority of participants considered that tourism was important for Heyfield and District and that the region is attractive as a destination. According to the participants' responses, the main attractions that bring visitors to Heyfield and District were Glenmaggie, Wetlands, High Country, Cowwarr Weir, Blores Hill Mountain Bike Park, RV park, and wineries. These natural assets provide opportunities for various activities such as camping, swimming, skiing, canoeing, boating, fishing and 4WDing. The participants believed that *'Local community'* and *'Natural assets and access to them'* make Heyfield and District special.

The participants expressed a high level of satisfaction with the majority of listed facilities, especially with Caravan Park accommodation, Camp accommodation, Food services, and Outdoor activities options in Heyfield and District. The majority of participants believed that there was a potential to attract more visitors and develop tourism in Heyfield and District. A significant proportion of participants felt that the community was interested in developing more tourism facilities and they felt that tourism mixed very well with the community. Participants provided their thoughts on how tourism in the region might be improved. Offered recommendations included the development of more facilities (e.g., shops, hotels, cafes, paths), the improvement of existing facilities, tourism offer diversification with more events, tours, and attractions. In addition, the importance of increasing awareness about tourist offers in Heyfield and District, active advertising, and promotion of the region as well as the balance between tourism development and maintaining the community vibe were mentioned by participants.

Introduction

Presented below are the results from the thematic analysis of interviews with stakeholders and experts. The first stakeholders were identified in consultation with Wellington Shire from their professional network. From there, a 'snowball' recruitment approach was taken, where stakeholders and experts recommended who else might best answer the same questions (see Appendix 2). A total of 12 stakeholders agreed to be interviewed and share their thoughts regarding the possibilities for tourism development in Heyfield and District. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in a reflexive manner, allowing interviewees to elaborate and express further meaning to their responses. Through the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts by the CERC team, two major themes and six minor themes were generated, as shown in Figure 17.

Imagine the possibilities
- A hidden Gem
- What could be

A way forward
- Improved facilities and resources
- A focus on sustainability
- Consult and collaborate with the community
- Develop and operational model

Figure 17: Thematic analysis: Major and Minor Themes

Major theme 1: Imagine the possibilities

The first major theme "Imagine the possibilities" was generated from interview participants discussing what they appreciated about Heyfield and District, and what they saw as future possibilities that related to building the local visitor economy. Within this theme, two minor themes were generated: "A hidden Gem" and "What could be".

Minor theme 1.1: A hidden gem

The first minor theme "A hidden gem" outlined the interview participants' feelings about Heyfield and District and what was unique about the area. A clear message among the stakeholders and experts interviewed was that Heyfield and District had a strong and successful track record of innovation, entrepreneurship and volunteer effort to build world-class operations and facilities:

"I think what's amazing and unique with Heyfield is that they are a town that know who they are. They are a town that's already proven that they're innovative. For example, the wetlands area, done entirely by volunteers. If you look at the level of innovation and their faith in that community, you don't have to go any further than ASH. I mean, that is more than world class in what's happening there. And more than world class when it comes to innovation".

Participants reflected on Heyfield's rich culture and history as a potential source of connection between the community and visitors, because the region had *"a story to tell, whether it's the timber industry, the four-wheel driving, the nature-based.....but there is obviously a lot of people who live in the community that hold those stories".* Telling the stories of Heyfield and District was also discussed as a source of promotional advertising:

"Knowing that one of the world's greatest cyclists got a start riding his mountain bike around Heyfield, like that the sort of stories that capture people's imagination. And they think, I want to ride in the wheel tracks of Cadel Evans".

According to the interview participants, the region had a lot of tourist attractions and activities that could be of interest to anyone, *"there's something for everyone here".* Among the attractions, the most popular were the Rail Trail, Alpine National Park, Thompson River, Padley, Glenmaggie, Blores Hill, Cowwarr, the Wetlands, wineries, kayaking, pack rafting, four-wheel driving, and bushwalking. Through discussions about the current state of Heyfield and District, it became apparent that there was a strong sense of pride in the local area, along with a deep appreciation for the natural assets and the lifestyle options available: *"I'm in paradise where I am at Glenmaggie"*.

One of the biggest tourist attractions in Heyfield and District was Blores Hill mountain bike park. The participants discussed the possibilities to enhance the attraction aspect of the park and identified the *"need"* for its improvement, including the development of *"amenities"* such as *"toilets"*. Despite the desire to make some upgrades, the attraction was still highlighted as a major drawcard for the region:

"Just out of Heyfield is our best mountain bike park. That is absolutely on my radar as something that the town could be working towards should be promoting themselves: those bike cafes, bike racks and things at the front of shops, all those kinds of things".

Another common attraction mentioned was the Recreational Vehicle (RV) Park in Heyfield, which was *"fabulous and very popular. They* [the community] *put a lot of work into that and work very hard. So I think that's certainly something that they could be promoting"*. Other attractions were also discussed as having further potential, including *"a few nice little art galleries that are in the main street of Heyfield, which I think are a bit of an unsung hero."* Another place, Munjara Outdoor Centre, with strong tourist potential and the possibility of building further infrastructure and services, came up as a business opportunity, as this place *"could take a lot of development. It's in a great spot. It's got access almost on three sides to the lake and it's got space that you could develop further".*

Another aspect raised in relation to the natural assets of the area was the connection with the traditional landowners, as *"Heyfield has fantastic mountainous region as its backyard, fantastic waterways, just the diversity of landscape and stories, especially coming from the Gunai Kurnai*

connecting with traditional landowners and the stories of the early settlers and the explorers that went through the region." Strengthening this connection to history and the Traditional Owners through local tourism was seen as an opportunity to increase understanding and pay respect to the regions' history.

Participants highlighted that there was a sense among the community that Heyfield was a great location to stay and play, and that it was a central location for further recreational activities. The region was described as a "*gateway to the high country*" that presented the possibility of a multi-faceted adventure offering for visitors using Heyfield as a 'base camp' for further exploration. Participants further discussed the need to attract travellers heading to other areas:

> "*Within an hour you're in the high country, an hour the opposite direction you're on the 90 Mile Beach, Gippsland Lakes probably an hour and a half and actually you can access Lake Wellington in half an hour*".

> "*There is a way for people to not go through Heyfield to get to the high country. So, this is where I see that they need to pop something in place that makes them the attractor*".

The key stakeholder participants demonstrated the potential tourism strength of the Heyfield and District region, voicing their excitement and eagerness to explore and adapt current and future opportunities. They outlined the strong community ties and motivation of the community to support and appreciate their region, another potential key factor to the success of development of tourism opportunities.

Minor theme 1.2: What could be

In the second minor theme, stakeholders and experts reflected on what had worked well for tourism in other Victorian regions in their experience. Throughout the discussions, specific examples of regional tourism success stories were put forward. Access to equipment such as "*e-bikes*" through "*hire*" and "*rental*" was a key consideration for catering to visitors:

> "*A good example is in Lakes Entrance. There is a learn to surf (hire) shop. Both you can hire equipment from there, they run surfing lessons in various places. They've also got the equipment, the got the clothing, they've got the whole thing. And, they're also just knowledgeable and helpful*".

There were many examples of successful adventure tourism in regional areas. Stories from stakeholders outlined common elements of developing an ecosystem to allow visitors to access equipment and services to enable a positive recreation or adventure experience. Another element discussed during the interviews was the growing of an ecosystem of offerings one step at a time, either through business growth or collaborating with other services in wider Gippsland, *"from Hotham into Omeo, what we saw was people moved into the area. So, there's people purchased buildings, properties, and developed things to compliment the mountain bike park."* Behind many of these success stories were entrepreneurs and champions with a vision and drive to provide offerings to visitors built around a key attraction:

> "*She* [local community member] *started doing the transport up and down and then from there she built it up into guiding and then from there she's got a shopfront in Lakes Entrance. She*

hires out canoes, paddleboards, takes people, she's done a lot of work. She's created a product with a local helicopter company".

When discussing the topic of a fundable lead agency for an Adventure Hub in the Heyfield and District region, a specific example of successful governance structures and practices was put forward - The Inverloch Tourism Association, as *"they have recently gone from a reliance on one person with maybe a couple of others in town doing everything".* Stakeholders described how the region had *"just gone through this transition period and gathered up people… and then we did a local area action plan as well."* Another example of a successful governance structure was the Gippsland Mountain Biking Hub:

> "(It was) *incorporated as an association in 2008 and since then it has had much success in leveraging state and federal money and local funding sources and events to develop the Gippsland Mountain Biking Hub, which is actually 12 mountain bike parks now right across Gippsland".*

Through discussion of the specific examples of regional tourism success, it became evident that diversification of tourist offerings and targeting a wide range of visitors and user groups was the foundation for attracting and retaining visitors to regional areas. Specific examples of attractions such as *"touristy shops", "good food"* and *"wine"* from *"really first-class restaurants"* was successful in attracting *"day visitors"*. A stakeholder gave another specific example from Cave Hill Creek:

> *"Cave Hill Creek, which is near Ballarat, and five days a week you've got kids there. And on the weekend you either have community groups that could be state callisthenics training weekend, or crochet members group weekend or whatever else. But then they also cater for things like weddings and other special events on the weekend as well".*

It was reported that Heyfield and District, while having a range of attractions, seemed to be missing a consistently available array of connected activities, related services, shopping, accommodation and dining at budget in mid-range and high-end levels. The current diversity of offerings in Heyfield came up as an area of future potential:

> *"It is on the rail trail, Heyfield, so there is that kind of nice cycling element to it. Other than that though, I don't resonate with it as a tourism destination, because I don't know if there's many other things drawing me there, other than the gippies pizza…. So as soon as you bolt and cluster a handful of useful service and utility elements together, people will go there and they will stop."* (P)

The key stakeholders and experts providing their perspectives during interviews demonstrated the potential of the Heyfield and District region through other local examples of tourism excellence they had witnessed or experienced. They could see how other tourism opportunities across the state of Victoria could resonate with Heyfield and District due to its current and potential unique offerings, geographically and through community action.

Major theme 2: A way forward

The second major theme "A way forward" encompassed the reflection of stakeholders and experts on how the visitor economy in Heyfield and District could transform, while preserving and enriching the local culture, history, and liveability. Four minor themes were generated: "Improved facilities and

resources", "A focus on sustainability", "Consult and collaborate with the community", and "Develop an operational model".

Minor theme 2.1: Improved facilities and resources

This first minor theme captured stakeholder discussions surrounding the improvement of existing facilities in Heyfield and District and the required resources. Lake Glenmaggie was cited often as a key attraction for the area, and ideas were expressed around upgrading the existing accommodation and facilities, along with new developments to accommodate school groups and other visitors. There was a belief that new or upgraded accommodation at Lake Glenmaggie wouldn't threaten existing providers, because "*you're generating more people coming*", but it could be perceived that way. The participants raised the importance of expanding activities around the existing natural assets, "*maybe more horse riding, maybe more four-wheel driving, maybe more fishing, that sort of thing*".

The importance of increasing awareness of tourist attractions and offerings among visitors and the local community was highlighted. For example, whilst Blores Hill was a key adventure asset, it was not well-promoted, "*how many people know it's there? I didn't even know it was there until we went to it*".

The potential to streamline the online presence of Heyfield and District attractions was discussed with stakeholders, along with enhancing the social media visibility of attractions through 'instagrammable' picture opportunities, as "*this is the world we live in now. People want that photo.*" Stakeholders' discussion how "*if they* [potential tourists or visitors] *know something is in that area, they will go out of their way to go there and get that picture*".

The need for human resources to maintain and support natural assets like Blores Hill mountain bike park was a common concern. Strong volunteer support appeared to be a strength of the community in Heyfield and District, however, there were several mentions of additional human and capital resources required to improve and maintain local assets to a standard that would suit a range of visitors with a range of tastes and interests:

> "*I know volunteering is really strong in Heyfield and I've read that in a few of the notes from the community. That's great, but they also need help and support to be able to do the works that are required to maintain those assets in world class condition because that's the type of traveller that an area like Heyfield could attract if the trails are maintained appropriately*".

In addition, participants often reinforced the need for creating options for visitors and the local community to access a range of activities through support (such as guiding and instructing) and equipment, "*…you can then have kayaks and canoes available for rent, you can develop programmes of teaching people to sail".*

Rentals, supporting programs, services and retail outlets were commonly mentioned as ways to attract a range of visitors. Limited accommodation around the town of Heyfield was cited as a reason for the limited opportunity to attract visitors to stay and spend. Moreover, longer opening hours of existing businesses emerged as a common opportunity to provide a consistent visitor experience:

> "*There's limited, very limited accommodation in Heyfield. So people will come to Heyfield, they'll stock upon supplies at the supermarket and they will move through Heyfield and then*

go and they'll go into the Alpine National Park, or they'll go to Lake Glenmaggie or Coongulla. It's hard to get people to stay in town because there's very limited accommodation".

With some improvements to local facilities, infrastructure, and support, the stakeholders and experts were adamant that the region could support a thriving tourism economy. Improving the promotion and advertising of the regions current assets was also outlined as a potential opportunity to widen the reach of Heyfield and District tourism.

Minor theme 2.2: A focus on sustainability

The second minor theme "A focus on sustainability" outlined the common understanding that in order for new visitor attractions to be developed, they would need to be economically viable in a sustainable manner, not only during events or peak visitor periods:

> "*If you look at any of the successful outdoor activity slash tourism type towns, you need to have a seven day a week prospect for a fair amount of the year to make the whole thing tick in regard to financing or return an investment for any entrepreneurs*".

Sustainable year-round income was often mentioned in reference to current businesses maintaining staff and opening hours, and to attract new businesses to attract visitors. School groups were mentioned several times by stakeholder and experts in relation to bringing in a "*totally new audience*" throughout the week and non-holiday periods.

Strategic development and connectivity of the natural assets through entrepreneurship was a possibility identified by several interviewees. It appeared to be a common opinion that there was a range of services and facilities that could be developed, and that they should be strategically connected:

> "*Get the benefit of potentially seeing a startup business in hiring bikes or mechanic services and making sure that they lift a product price and the quality which then can help for sustainable tourism. There's lots of really good examples of sustainable tourism practices*".

Rentals and repair services were common suggestions for potential entrepreneurs and mentioned as part of a suite of offerings needed for a consistent visitor experience. The connection between locations, facilities, accommodation, programs, and services was repeatedly mentioned, things that make it "*easier to go from point A to point B in a way that might be about accommodation, or about meals, or about sharing*" as a requirement for attracting visitors. Bundling these offerings into "*a package deal. Here's a bike, here's a picnic, here's your accommodation, and here's your weekend*", was a repetitive thread of conversation:

> "*I'm a massive believer in the power of three, so if there's a reason to go there for utility on your vehicle or your bike or your boat. Plus, there's information and there's a coffee stop or a food grab or a great pizza or something*".

The common thread among these conversations was that visitors and travellers passing through are attracted to an itinerary of activities with supporting services rather than a single reason to visit.

There was much discussion of what the community might think, or how they might feel about an increasing flow of tourists coming through Heyfield, in particular the town centre. The common concern expressed by participants was about "*the loss of their local culture*":

"Everyone says, you should build more mountain biking and they'll be coming. We'll become like Derby. I've been to Derby. There's no locals there anymore. They've ruined their sense of community cause locals can't afford to live there anymore".

There were suggestions relating to tourism development, that plans should include measures to preserve the local culture and affordability, involving community input to balance growth with maintaining Heyfield and District's identity. Towns such as Derby and Bright were commonly mentioned as places that have compromised the culture and liveability of the local community through tourism. Derby was also put forward as an aspirational example of 'what could be' for Heyfield and District:

"Blue Derby is a fantastic mountain bike trail network that was born out of the collapse of mining and it's totally rejuvenated that town".

Whilst concerns surrounding losing the current local identity were considered by stakeholders and experts, they believed that sustainable, all inclusive tourism opportunities within the Heyfield and District region that considered the voices of locals could be beneficial for those visiting and residing in the community. Having sustainable tourism opportunities were important to support the local regions' economy all year round.

Minor theme 2.3: Consult and collaborate with the community

A key discussion point for stakeholders and experts was about the involvement of the community in potential upcoming tourism opportunities. There was a common understanding that in order for any new development to thrive, it would need collaboration and support from the community that included a range of vested interests, *"a concerted community effort and the land owners and managers, all in agreement with it, will make everything a lot easier".* It was highlighted as essential to engage with the community "*to build that understanding about the importance of tourism to their economy".* A need for developing a shared understanding and common goals throughout the community was expressed by a range of participants:

"I feel working together is the way forward. And listening to every voice in the community, whether that's the smallest voice or the youngest voice or the oldest voice or even people that can't speak for themselves, it is really important to capture that, to find out what their aspirations are for their community. And that then would guide what happens for the community of Heyfield".

"Definitely, capturing the thoughts and wishes of the community is first and foremost what anyone should consider before any funding decisions are made. So, what does the community want? Because they live there".

The current strategic landscape for the region regarding tourism was uncertain throughout the interviews. There was a sense of need for forward traction in developing tourism opportunities, and a need for establishing clear objectives and plans:

"I don't think there is a strategy at the moment to do any of that [tourism development]. *So that's probably the starting point is - what do you want to do? Where do you want to attract people to, and what do you want them to do when they get there?"*.

There was a common intention that any development in local tourism should directly benefit the local community and provide new opportunities for recreation, active living, and employment. People in the community "*want to get the benefits that come from that physically, mentally, but imagine turning that into your career as well*".

Extending on discussions about an itinerary of visitor activities or packages of offerings, there were discussions about the need for businesses to communicate with, and understand each other better. It was suggested that businesses should visit each other "*to understand what is on offer … to work better as a network and more collectively*". Discussions also turned to strengthening business opportunities and revenue through collaboration and partnership:

> "*Getting people to work together because I think they're much stronger when they do that. So, I think local businesses could definitely partner better than they do, especially the visitor services. They tend to work in isolation a little bit*".

A need was also expressed to improve the way that businesses collaborated and functioned as a network to provide a coherent offering to visitors, and by doing so bring economic benefit to themselves and the community. Building on the discussion of collaboration, developing alignment through common interests and goals was also put forward. There was a strong sense that the community had untapped potential that could be harnessed if the community could be united:

> "*Capability within the people in the community than what anybody realises. That there is a huge benefit in bringing people together that have got a some sort of a common goal of some sort or a common interest or a common topic that you never know what you're going to uncover*".

Another section of the community with the potential to participate in the visitor economy discussed in interviews was the regions' youth. Youth engagement was an issue that was repeatedly mentioned, with a need for people with skills to engage and mobilise local youth and develop a sense of purpose:

> "*The level of engagement with young people has been non-existent and a big part of that is because I am* [not good] *at it, and the other part of it is because we are in 'maybe' land. I think if we get into 'tangible' 'practical' land that there is huge amount of, like I said before, capability and resources including young people that could be tapped-in should help, that would be purposeful.*"

Buy-in for tourism development from all stakeholders in the community, while seen as a challenge, was also seen as a priority. There was an evident need for a unified effort from the community, landowners, and managers to develop tourism and a sustainable way.

Minor theme 2.4: Develop an operational model

A key issue identified by stakeholders throughout the interviews was the need for an entity with an appropriate operational model to drive tourism innovation, and for that entity to be sufficiently resourced. A popular starting point that appeared to have consensus was the creation of an 'Adventure Hub', to build an adventure brand for Heyfield and District. The need for an Adventure Hub, or similar visitor support service for Heyfield and District was a starting point for this research. According to interview participants, the Adventure Hub was "*a brilliant idea. I think it's new, it's fresh,*

it's something we don't have. It's something people want", and that the *"Adventure Hub would be a destination in its own right".*

However, the means to establish and sustain such an entity was a point of confusion. There was uncertainty around "*who owns it, who is responsible?*", the governance models or "*how it would run? Who's in charge of it? Where the money goes?*". The importance of "*the passionate, driven group of people*" was highlighted during the interview discussions.

One of the common discussion points was the source of capacity and expertise to develop new visitor-based business opportunities. Inviting external businesses to participate in and support the local economy was also discussed. It became apparent that there was a level of human resource support to improve the local visitor economy, however, there was a need expressed for a dedicated, fully resourced operational model to design and implement a strategy. Interviewees indicated that a balance of external and existing community expertise was needed to establish a working operational model to improve the local visitor economy. The Wetlands Resource Centre was mentioned as a location with potential for further utilisation, as it is considered to "*be able to make that into something that is more useful to our visitors*".

Another benefit of creating an Adventure Hub put forward was connecting to user groups/interest groups and incentivising visits. The suggested idea was that visitors could be attracted through special interest group activities and events and "*make it an annual thing that they're going there and giving these incentives to go there*". Business models for the Adventure Hub were discussed by stakeholders such as "*just for standard – president, secretary, have to hold AGMs (annual general meetings) - Nothing extraordinary, but they've got some really extraordinary people who are driving it. And it goes back to having the expertise and the support".* As an alternative, operating in an auspice arrangement was suggested:

> *"Let's say you get $1 million bucks to create a building and you can populate it with a whole heap of these tools and assets to keep those interest groups serviced. Then that feels to me like it would be a local lead group or auspice by the council. And I would suggest that the council need to come up with a good five-year kind of revenue guarantee to keep it going. And then you have KPI's (key performance indicators) based on that improved visitor experience".*

When citing examples of successful adventure tourism services, there was a repeated element of attracting the right person who has capacity for the job – "*that catalyst, that person who's got the expertise and who's prepared*". The quality of the existing support directly from the community was also mentioned, as there is a need "*to have a strong business tourism association and the Heyfield traders are an example of that*".

Extending on discussions about the development of an Adventure Hub or similar visitor service, participants provided their thoughts on how such an enterprise might be created, saying that "*it's best to start fresh with an organisation, getting that buy in, bringing people along the journey so if you've got an Adventure Hub, an organisation, it could possibly be a social enterprise*".

Existing efforts have been challenging so far, because it was "*incredibly difficult to find an appropriate and willing host agency. We don't have that host agency. We can't apply for funds and therefore this project can't go forward*". Regarding an operational model for an Adventure Hub or similar service, specific aspects were identified:

> *"It's got an overarching committee board, something that's overarching that maybe has got representatives from these existing groups that come together as board or committee and overseeing things. And then underneath that it's got paid staff, how many staff - four. And those staff it could be a marketing and promotion person overall but not just tourism but for the other avenues as well. And could be then a specific potentially part time project managers for the particular projects that are running that are also looking for ongoing funding and how can we have a business model that's sustainable… What it's trying to do is pull these pieces together, have one entity that then has got multiple functions underneath".*

Further to the aspects required for an operational model to work, the importance of tourism oversight was discussed in relation to the local economy, "*making sure that the tourism dollar stays in the community is really important and it's not extracted out of Heyfield in that area. So, with the community understanding that, this circular economy, regenerating back into its community through tourism, is really important*".

Improving the visitor economy for the benefit of the local community was discussed by many interviewees, and the need for local oversight of new initiatives to ensure this benefit was repeatedly mentioned as a priority. Understanding and managing expectations of government support was a common issue. This discussion included the need for greater support through funded positions and support from government agencies, and also understanding the limits of this support:

> "*And then you have the local government hell bent on another particular initiative and outcome. Because one small town won't be able to achieve those big goals across different government departments and be able to maintain the level of support or promotion or whatever else Heyfield is expecting from those particular government agencies*".

Whilst it was identified as a novel undertaking that required careful consideration and planning, the implementation of an Adventure Hub in the Heyfield and District region could see great benefit. The stakeholder and expert participants demonstrated how through careful planning and inclusion of expert and local knowledge, the Hub could be a thriving central point for all tourism activities in the region.

4.4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The themes that emerged from the interviews with a range of experts and stakeholders indicated that Heyfield and District was an attractive destination for visitors with significant untapped potential to develop services, infrastructure, and accommodation. Promotion of existing visitor attractions could also be developed, and tied to a sense of local history and culture that could potentially connect the community to their identity as a town and as a region. Including the local community in upcoming changes was seen as important, so that liveability and local culture are maintained. The potential to streamline the online presence of Heyfield and District attractions was discussed, along with enhancing the social media visibility of attractions through 'instragrammable' picture opportunities.

Examples of successful visitor services and attractions in other places led to consideration of what might work for Heyfield and District. A sequential approach to building an ecosystem of attractions, services, governance, and human resources was reflected in the examples provided.

Diversity of attractions, accommodation, food, and services was seen as a key element to attracting travellers and visitors, and it was indicated that Heyfield and District could strategically develop a more connected and available array of offerings for different types of visitors.

Support services, lessons and hire equipment for adventure activities came through as additional needs for visitors that should be developed. In order for an operator or series of operators to meet these needs, sustainable revenue throughout each week of the year was put forward as a key consideration.

While bringing in entrepreneurial talent was discussed, the importance of increasing the capacity of current providers and encouraging collaboration to provide cohesive visitor offerings was emphasised. Finally, the Adventure Hub concept was discussed with all participants, and the need for an operational model, government support and a champion with the ability and capacity to drive the initiative was considered. Funding and support for such a commercial hub were unanimously encouraged.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

As a result of the decline of the extractive industries, economic planners often consider the transition to tourism as an alternative source for regional development (Johnson et al., 1994). The shift of the economy to an emergent tourism industry has been explored in a few areas that historically have been characterised by extractive operations, for example, Eden (NSW, Australia) (Schweinsberg et al., 2012); Japan (Knight, 2000), Silver Valley (the USA) (Johnson et al., 1994), George Town (Penang, Malaysia) (Chan et al., 2017). In such a transition, the recommoditisation of natural resources, such as forests and national parks, into tourist attractions plays a significant role. In the shift from industrial timber forests to recreational forests, the forest ceases to be simply the site of timber products and becomes the site of a new kind of product - a touristic product (Knight, 2000).

According to the existing literature (Chan et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 1994; Schweinsberg et al., 2012), the transition from extractive economy (e.g., farming, logging, oil exploration, mining) to tourism can be a complex process, as the development of sustainable nature-based tourism industries requires planners to reconcile many competing notions, including tradition versus modernity, economic development versus environmental protection and service sector development versus primary-industry development (Schweinsberg et al., 2012).

Tourism development in small regional (rural) areas can bring various opportunities and threats from economic, environmental, and socio-cultural perspectives. Simpson claimed that tourism may be variously viewed "as a destroyer of culture, undermining social norms and economies, degrading social structures, stripping communities of individuality; and as a saviour of the poor and disadvantaged, providing opportunities and economic benefits, promoting social exchange and enhancing livelihoods" (2007, p. 1). Tourism can play the role of an enabler or delayer of socio-cultural progress in communities (Liu, 2003). A well-developed tourism industry can act as a magnet for the diversification of an economy (Johnson et al., 1994). For example, a shift in the structure of the local economy in George Town, Penang, led to an increase in tourism, hospitality, and creative industry-aligned services. Tourism contributed positively towards job creation, income generation and local economic growth (Chan et al., 2017).

Chan et al. (2017) argued that tourism "could contribute to protection and revitalisation of cultural heritage and urban landscape, but might negatively affect the social fabric of the local community, the economic structural, and thereby forcing the locals to gradually leave the area as they are unable to support themselves with increasing living cost and feel unable to cope with the overwhelming presence and foreign social behaviours of the tourists". Gentrification, a potential consequence of tourism development, can lead to the displacement of long-term residents and the erosion of local culture (Chan et al., 2017). However, the interaction between residents and tourists can also foster innovation and entrepreneurial activities, supporting a broader socio-economic transition (Chan et al., 2017)

Historically, the focus on nature in the forest- to nature-based tourism transition in regional communities has become central and socio-cultural aspects of tourism's relationship with its host environment have been often marginalised (Cole, 2006). Nature-based tourism is considered a more environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable use of rural Australia's unique natural environments than traditional primary industries, and it promotes a less overtly extractionist

relationship with the natural environment than does logging (Schweinsberg et al., 2012). However, traditional primary industries are deeply rooted in the community's identity and social and economic structure. The extractive industry culture has been developed through decades and generations and is critical for local residents. The transition to tourism development often requires a fundamental re-organisation of a community's economic and social structure (Schweinsberg et al., 2012).

That is why, the understanding of residents' attitudes towards tourism development and the active involvement of communities in tourism planning is a key criterion of a soft (smooth), effective and successful transition from the traditional extractive industry to tourism. It is vital as tourism development should be based on three core components of sustainable tourism, namely full community participation, long-term planning, and environmental responsibility (Choi & Murray, 2010). In addition, according to Johnson et al., (1994), as traditionally extractive dependent communities replace their economy with a tourism-based one, residents might feel that their traditional social and economic culture is threatened. Community leaders have a significant role in educating the local population about the reality of changing the economic base of a community and what to expect from that shift.

Economic transition will lead to changes in the lifestyle of the community. It is important to continually monitor community sentiments for changing perceptions of how the changes affect the community's economic, environmental, and social setting. Moreover, planners and developers of the area should avoid compromising existing residents' recreation and transportation needs and have to monitor the environmental impacts of their plans (McNulty, 1985).

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6. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 DISCUSSION

This discussion will explore the opportunities for Heyfield and District to improve the local visitor economy, while supporting the local community culture and preferences, based on the following objectives:

1. Having a fundable lead agency to manage future projects based on the recommendations.
2. Increase access and options for visitors and the local community to participate in and enjoy a wide range of outdoor activities, including adventure activities.
3. Increase community income across a range of services through increased visitors.
4. Preserve, reinforce, and support community pride in the local history and culture.
5. Strengthen community capacity to achieve sustainable commercial outcomes that are respectful and supportive of the preferences and wishes of Heyfield & District citizens.

1. Having a fundable lead agency to manage future projects based on the recommendations.

The concept of the Adventure Hub (adventure tourism concierge entity) has been somewhat clarified through stakeholder and expert interviews, and opportunities identified by the community survey indicated that leveraging natural assets for recreation is something worth pursuing. Questions regarding who should initiate the Adventure Hub and how it should operate repeatedly emerged. One stakeholder described how governance of this Hub could occur:

> *"It's got an overarching committee board, something that's overarching that maybe has got representatives from these existing groups that come together as board or committee and overseeing things. And then underneath that it's got paid staff, how many staff - four. And those staff it could be a marketing and promotion person overall but not just tourism but for the other avenues as well. And could be then a specific potentially part time project managers for the particular projects that are running that are also looking for ongoing funding and how can we have a business model that's sustainable… What it's trying to do is pull these pieces together, have one entity that then has got multiple functions underneath".*

Suggestions from stakeholders and experts included incorporating a new entity, and auspicing a committee under a current organisation within Heyfield and District, "*it's best to start fresh with an organisation, getting that buy in, bringing people along the journey so if you've got an Adventure Hub, an organisation, it could possibly be a social enterprise".* The HTTA was put forward as a strong source of community leadership:

> "*One of the things we do know that you need to have a strong business tourism association and the Heyfield traders are an example of that.*"

According to the Heyfield Adventure Hub Draft Strategy (Appendix 4, p. 3):

Heyfield Tourism and Traders Association (HTTA) are an established group tasked with the promotion of the local business and tourism sector. They have initiated some marketing campaigns, been the conduit for local events, grant applications, and business development.

Given the activities, experience, and established leadership within the HTTA, it could potentially make a suitable organisation under which the Adventure Hub could be auspiced, however, governance and financial support will be key considerations for sustainable growth:

> *"Let's say you get $1 million bucks to create a building and you can populate it with a whole heap of these tools and assets to keep those interest groups serviced. Then that feels to me like it would be a local lead group or auspice by the council. And I would suggest that the council need to come up with a good five-year kind of revenue guarantee to keep it going. And then you have KPI's (key performance indicators) based on that improved visitor experience".*

Further consideration and incorporation of local knowledge and expertise was highlighted in stakeholder and expert participant responses. Harnessing local knowledge, support and buy-in was demonstrated as a potential sustainable solution to tourism coordination and leadership.

2. **Increase access and options for visitors and the local community to participate in and enjoy a wide range of outdoor activities, including adventure activities.**

In order to increase access to a greater variety of activities for a greater variety of community members and visitors, accommodation options were suggested through the data. There is an opportunity to increase the quantity and quality of accommodation in Heyfield and District. Options include expansion of current accommodation and building additional options to accommodate different experience expectations and budgets. In response to survey question about the attractions and activities that bring visitors to Heyfield and District, participants mainly named particular places and activities that are directly associated with these places. The most often reported places were Glenmaggie, Wetlands, High Country, Cowwarr Weir, Blores Hill Mountain Bike Park, RV park, and wineries and reported activities were camping, swimming, skiing, canoeing, boating, fishing and four-wheel driving.

Forty participants responded to the open-ended question *"How can tourism in your region be improved in terms of services and attractions?"*. The most popular responses were related to '*More facilities*' (n=29, 61.9%) including shops, hotels, cafes, paths, parks and playgrounds, and public transport. Some recommendations here were quite specific, such as "*pathway from Heyfield to Lake Glenmaggie*", "*bike path from town to Blores Hill, more water taps along the rail trail and a retailer that sells local produce*", "*more buses to connect to trains in Traralgon for events running*".

Some other examples of recommendations from survey participants included *"upgrade sports facilities", "ensure that business signage in town is up to date and fresh",* and *"increase RV park".*

In addition, the importance of increasing awareness about tourist offers in Heyfield and District and for businesses being open more hours and more "*tourist-oriented*" as well as "*the improved communication between businesses*" were mentioned:

"Better information and assistance for visitors around what we have and how visitors can access it. Especially linking visitors to local service providers that may be able to help them if they would like to undertake a new adventure/outdoor activity but don't have the equipment or know how to start".

"More education to the businesses in the town about tourism and being present".

"Perhaps more coordination between the food offerings and shops is needed particularly for popular tourist times, to ensure that there is some offerings for visitors to town and not all business owners have holidays at the same time".

Support services, lessons and hire equipment emerged as enablers to get the local community and visitors participating in adventure activities. Currently, there are limited services, and entrepreneurial activity in this space will require opportunities to build steady cashflow through year-round visitors. Interview responses from key stakeholders indicated that an ecosystem of services can build with one entrepreneur at a time, if there is a major attraction to draw visitors with needs to be met:

"If you look at any of the successful outdoor activity slash tourism type towns, you need to have a seven day a week prospect for a fair amount of the year to make the whole thing tick in regard to financing or return an investment for any entrepreneurs".

There is currently a variety of land and water based outdoor and adventure activities on offer, which could be further developed with the leadership of the local community and expertise of experienced, outdoor activity entrepreneurs and outdoor economy experts, such as Outdoors Victoria. As such, in the development of an Adventure Hub, an expert advisory panel could be beneficial in providing counsel to local leaders.

3. **Increase community income across a range of services through increased visitors.**

In order to capitalise on the existing leadership and structures in place such as the Tourism and Traders Association, and Tourism Innovation Working Group, along with new leadership, entrepreneurship and expertise, it will be necessary to establish the Adventure Hub as a collaboration of both incoming and existing leaders.

A catalyst for additional, sustainable adventure tourism initiatives will be a major entrepreneurship initiative with that can bring leadership, expertise and an existing market to Heyfield and District. Such an initiative could potentially transform the visitor economy with year-round visitors, stimulating and sustaining further local businesses activity through non-holiday/non-peak periods. Identified in stakeholder interviews, sustainability of any tourism opportunity was paramount. Another important consideration highlighted was ensuring a circular economy for the region:

"Making sure that the tourism dollar stays in the community is really important and it's not extracted out of Heyfield in that area. So, with the community understanding that, this circular economy, regenerating back into its community through tourism, is really important".

Through discussion with key stakeholders and professional networks, an entrepreneurship opportunity has been offered by Belgravia Outdoor Education. The Belgravia Outdoor Education team have the experience, expertise and existing markets for school groups and other adventure-based clients to have an immediate impact on the visitor economy, provide training and jobs for local people. There are also similar organisations that could offer similar benefits, however, as yet none have approached the Heyfield and District community. The combination of new and existing leadership and expertise in the local community could provide a basis for guidance toward sustainable business opportunities. Oversight of the Adventure Hub could include this expertise, along with established community leaders. This expertise might also involve expanding the knowledge of local, state and federal political and funding landscapes to help navigate sufficient resourcing and an effective operational model for the Adventure Hub. This approach will also support feasible and economically sustainable business models for future initiatives.

The possibility for an external company to take over the lease of Munjara to develop the site (See appendix 4) could potentially create a sustainable platform for employment and quality visitor experience. According to Belgravia Leisure (Appendix 4) redevelopment of this site would require:

- Minimum 21 year lease to provide an acceptable return on investment
- Up to $1.5m for new buildings and kitchen/ dining room – BOE would seeks supporting funding for this project. Providing accommodation for 120 students and 12 staff
- Up to $500K of activity set up for equipment for delivery
- Up to $300K of activity build: climbing tower or high ropes etc.

The feasibility of such a project depends on multiple factors including the willingness of the current leaseholder to engage in the project, funding contribution from the company proposing redevelopment, the possibility of an extended lease, and the relative benefit to the community compared to other projects that might be eligible for community development funding.

The strength and depth of the community resources, ability to innovate and willingness to volunteer presents opportunities for further development in the town in a way that is congruent with community culture. The innovative workplace practices and production methods already occurring at ASH could be further promoted to educational groups and interested visitors. This could potentially intersect with other local educational and adventure activities such as Munjara Camp for outdoor recreation and the Wetlands for environmental education. The Adventure Hub proposed by the Tourism Innovation Working Group could adopt an innovation process to develop and bring these multi-faceted visitor experiences together, and also find ways of improving economic benefit to support the sustainable operation of future projects. For example, multi-use projects where attractions such as gardens can serve to educate, but also create produce. Another multi-use example would be improving the visitor experience at ASH, which also serves as a commercial enterprise supporting the community and employing the local residents.

To improve year-round cash flow, there is an opportunity to entice visitors through a coordinated suite of experience elements, particularly year-round educational group visits (primary, secondary and tertiary). E.g., Adventure camp at Munjara, Environmental science activities at the wetlands and an educational tour of ASH. Experiences at Munjara, ASH, Blores Hill, Lake Glenmaggie, the Wetlands and

other natural asset-based activities, all represent opportunities to attract school groups and stimulate the visitor economy through non-holiday periods. A collaborative approach to packaging school experiences, and an innovation process to continually adapt and improve these offerings could be coordinated by the Adventure Hub or a similar body.

4. Preserve, reinforce, and support community pride in the local history and culture.

Survey participants were asked about what makes Heyfield and District special. Forty-six participants (97.9%) responded to this question. A large proportion of responses were coded to '*Local community'* and '*Natural assets and access to them'* (n=22, 46.8%, equally). An example of the quote for 'Local community' was:

> *"Everyone knows everybody. It is so good that we can all reach out and get help, we all come together as a community. Heyfield is an amazing small town".*

Examples of quotes for '*Natural assets and access to them'* were:

> *"It's in the middle of everywhere and there are rivers, lakes, mountains, the ocean, national parks all within an hour's drive in any direction from Heyfield".*

> *"It has any number of unique natural assets that support all the outdoor activities, including the Southern Alps, Heyfield Wetlands, Lake Glenmaggie and Blores Hill Mountain Bike Trail".*

Some quotes with a combination of identified codes:

> "*Great local community and surrounding areas with plenty of activities to participate*".

Selected "Other" responses (n=6, 12.8%) included "*good climate*", "*green and clean*", "*great service*", and "*fuel and camping supplies*". Furthermore, responses to an open-ended question "*What might be a tourism landmark / symbol for Heyfield and District?"* were coded, with the majority of participants (n=12, 25.5%) considering Lake Glenmaggie as a symbol of the region, while 10 participants (21.3%) replied to this question in a broader way saying that natural assets such as lakes, mountains, and/or parks could represent the region. Wetlands, Gateway to High Country, Blores Hill and Rail Trail were also mentioned by participants.

Interviews with key stakeholders echoed the responses from survey participants, outlining that community pride was a key strength for the region:

> "*I think what's amazing and unique with Heyfield is that they are a town that know who they are. They are a town that's already proven that they're innovative. For example, the wetlands area, done entirely by volunteers. If you look at the level of innovation and their faith in that community, you don't have to go any further than ASH. I mean, that is more than world class in what's happening there. And more than world class when it comes to innovation*".

Capturing the cultural heritage of the town and telling stories not yet captured, or not yet promoted, could enhance the identity of the town, and improve town pride through local community members sharing their voice and having that voice acknowledge and shared with visitors. During interviews with

stakeholders and experts, they outlined the "*few nice little art galleries that are in the main street of Heyfield, which I think are a bit of an unsung hero.*" Art and Craft that are unique to the area can provide another reason for people to visit. Developing art and craft based on the local culture, landmarks and stories can also deepen a sense of place among artists, the community, and visitors. Visitor appetite for the type, quality and quantity of art and artefacts for viewing and purchasing could be gauged and catered for through a collaborative community approach.

Another aspect raised in relation to the natural assets of the area was the connection with the traditional landowners, as "*Heyfield has fantastic mountainous region as its backyard, fantastic waterways, just the diversity of landscape and stories, especially coming from the Gunai Kurnai connecting with traditional landowners and the stories of the early settlers and the explorers that went through the region.*" Strengthening this connection to history and the Traditional Owners through local tourism was seen as an opportunity to increase understanding and pay respect to the regions' history.

There was a sense of opportunity for visitors and the local community to connect to the natural assets on a deeper level through creating more opportunities for recreation, and also for connecting to the rich history of these places through story telling.

5. **Strengthen community capacity to achieve sustainable commercial outcomes that are respectful and supportive of the preferences and wishes of Heyfield & District citizens.**

Buy-in from the community is a key aspect of successful tourism development, as identified through the data and from the literature. As demonstrated in the project literature review, it is vital as tourism development should be based on three core components of sustainable tourism, namely full community participation, long-term planning, and environmental responsibility (Choi & Murray, 2010). In addition, according to Johnson et al., (1994), as traditionally extractive dependent communities replace their economy with a tourism-based one, residents might feel that their traditional social and economic culture is threatened. Community leaders have a significant role in educating the local population about the reality of changing the economic base of a community and what to expect from that shift. As such, an approach that continually engages the community and invites discussion and feedback is imperative to successfully building the local visitor economy.

Survey participants were asked about their thoughts on the potential for Tourism Development in Heyfield and District and provided with the opportunity to express their ideas on how tourism in the region might be improved. Out of 47 participants, 42 (89.4%) considered that there was a potential to attract more visitors to Heyfield and District and only 5 (10.6%) were not sure. A significant proportion of participants (n=39, 83%) felt that the community was interested in developing more tourism facilities and they chose the response '*Yes, we have some tourists and would like more*'. Only 3 participants (6.4%) replied '*No, we already have enough tourists*'. In response to a question about participants' feelings about the number of tourists visiting the community during the high visitor season, slightly more than half of participants (n=25, 53.2%) felt that tourism mixed very well with the community, while 7 participants (14.9%) felt mildly overwhelmed.

There was a strong sense of existing leadership and capacity for taking the initiative to support tourism. The Heyfield Tourism and Traders Association was often mentioned as a source of leadership and organisation toward improved tourism outcomes. However, a need for individuals with the expertise, time, capacity, and motivation to be a catalyst for a range of adventure-based development opportunities was repeatedly discussed. Key stakeholders identified the need to look towards the expertise that currently exists within the Heyfield and District region, as it was abundant:

> "*Capability within the people in the community than what anybody realises. That there is a huge benefit in bringing people together that have got a some sort of a common goal of some sort or a common interest or a common topic that you never know what you're going to uncover*".

With a blend of strong and experienced leadership from the HCRC, HTTA and TIWG, along with new entrepreneurial talent and leadership, it is possible to manage the growth of local tourism. This presents a feasible and sustainable opportunity to develop the visitor economy in a way that continues to be respectful and supportive of the preferences and wishes of Heyfield & District citizens.

6.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Establishment of a Tourism Innovation Working Group and Project officer.**
   1.1. Reposition the TIWG as a sub-committee auspiced under the HTTA
   1.2. HCRC project officer/steering committee works with the TIWG to develop a charter based on this research report and aligned with the Gippsland Destination Management Plan and the Local Development Strategy.
   1.3. Develop a local area action plan or incorporate an action plan into the charter.
   1.4. Develop clear messaging for the community and stakeholders based on the charter and action plan.

2. **Develop a Community Collaboration and Consultation engagement plan.**
   2.1. Develop an online platform to update the community and provide feedback channels to ensure all community voices are heard and considered as tourism initiatives develop.
   2.2. Provide a regular time and place for community engagement with a project officer to foster a collaborative environment where landowners, managers, and community members can identify and work toward common goals.

3. **Enhance Visitor Experience to the region.**
   3.1. Develop a series of visitor experience maps (customer journeys) for visitors and travellers. Identify activities, related services, shopping and dining itineraries to serve budget, mid-range, high-end and school group visitor experiences.
   3.2. Actively seek and/or support entrepreneurs to fill prioritised gaps identified in the visitor experience maps.
   3.3. Collaborate with existing businesses to develop and market all-inclusive packages that cover accommodation, meals, and activities, simplifying activity planning for visitors.
   3.4. Identify upgrade and expansion opportunities for current accommodation options.
   3.5. Collaborate with business owners to explore options to extend operating hours for visitor needs.

3.6. Coordinate educational tours and activity offerings e.g., Wetlands, ASH and Munjara Outdoor Centre for primary, secondary, alternative education and tertiary students.

4. **Incorporate History and Culture into implementation and planning.**
   4.1. Develop an ongoing project to gather and record stories from the community to refine and communicate local historical and cultural themes.
   4.2. Collaborate with local artists to develop collections and purchasable artefacts to represent this identity, e.g., Indigenous history, Timber Industry, Recreation and Adventure.
   4.3. Explore options to connect and expand on cultural heritage attractions.

5. **Develop a Marketing strategic plan.**
   5.1. Increase awareness of the mountain bike area through targeted marketing campaigns and signage.
   5.2. Identify and develop 'Instagrammable' picture-taking sites across Heyfield and District.
   5.3. Connect with visiting special interest groups through social media and encourage posting, sharing and connecting through hashtags.
   5.4. Streamline online strategy to access visitors searching for visitor experiences available in Heyfield and District.
   5.5. Build a local tourism network to encourage, support, celebrate and promote local businesses that partner and collaborate to enhance overall service offerings and visitor experiences through events and/or social media.
   5.6. Develop a school-specific promotional strategy for educational experiences.

6. **Development and implementation of an Adventure Hub**
   6.1. HCRC Steering Committee / Project officer initiates the development of an Adventure Hub
       6.1.1. Hold a project kick-off meeting for the Adventure Hub with a small group of key stakeholders for example:
       - Heyfield Community Resource Centre Project manager/Chair
       - Wellington Shire representative
       - DEECA representative
       - TIWG representative
       - HTTA representative
       - Gippsland MTB representative
       - Destination Gippsland representative
       - Peak body representative – Outdoors Victoria or similar
       - Adventure/recreation business expert/representative
       - Business structure expert
       - Local business expert/representative
       - Outdoor provider representative (e.g., Outdoor Education Group, Belgravia Outdoor Education, Outward Bound, Gippsland Adventure Tours).
       - Wetlands Information Centre representative
       6.1.2. Formalise the Adventure Hub as an auspice committee under the HTTA.
       6.1.3. Install an advisory panel of experts for the Adventure Hub.
       6.1.4. Develop a charter and visual identity for the Adventure Hub.
       6.1.5. Negotiate design and space for the Adventure Hub at the Wetlands Information Centre.
       6.1.6. Seek seed funding for initial staffing and business activities.

       6.1.7. Adopt an innovation process for projects (e.g., triple diamond process).
       6.1.8. Capacity improvement for Blore's Hill including revenue generation and amenities.

6.1.9. Connect and collaborate with all parties involved to support the development of Munjara or similar site.

6.1.10.   Develop a volunteer support and training program

6.1.11.   Support development of youth involvement and participation in the Adventure Hub implementation and planning.

6.1.12.   Seek options, funding and support for connecting trails and activities for visitors and the local community.

6.1.13.   Explore needs for Gateway infrastructure and services to support 'base-camping' in Heyfield and District.

6.1.14.   Develop a special interest group strategy offering incentives and packages to conduct annual events and other activities.

7. LIMITATIONS

There were limitations related to this evaluation that must be considered. These include:

1. A larger sample size of survey respondents would have been ideal to gain a deeper understanding of how individuals living in Heyfield and District feel about the development of tourism. The current sample may not be representative of the entire population.

2. Increased timeframes for data collection may have encouraged greater participant response numbers by ensuring a broader reach of the project.

Despite these limitations, the evaluation is considered to present a credible assessment of the project.

8. METHODOLOGY

8.1 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The approach of the CERC to this evaluation was informed by a Participatory Evaluation and Co-Design Framework.

Participatory evaluation

A participatory evaluation framework puts people from the community and those delivering the programs, projects and services at the centre of the evaluation. Participatory evaluation is a distinctive approach based on the following principles:

- That evaluation should be a co-designed, collaborative partnership through 360° stakeholder input including project participants and project funders;
- That integral to evaluation is an evaluation capacity-building focus within and across projects;
- That evaluation is a cyclical and iterative process embedded in projects from project design to program assessment;
- That evaluation adopts a learning, improvement and strengths-based approach;
- That evaluation supports innovation, accepting that projects will learn and evolve;
- That evaluation contributes to the creation of a culture of evaluation and evaluative thinking;
- That there is no one or preferred data collection method rather the most appropriate qualitative and quantitative methods will be tailored to the information needs of each project.

Co-design

Co-design is a process and approach that is about working with people to create 'interventions, services and programs which will work in the context of their lives and will reflect their own values and goals'[2]. Co-design can be done in many ways but is about collaborative engagement that is bottom-up, creative, and enables a wide range of people to participate and importantly steer decisions and outcomes. Co-design is not a consultation process but a partnership approach where 'end-users' actively define and shape strategies and outcomes. The role of the 'expert' is to facilitate this process.

8.2 EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The evaluation of the project utilised a variety of data collection tools in a mixed methods approach providing information about process, outcomes, impact and capacity building. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analysed as described below.

Quantitative data

Posters with the QR code to Future of Tourism in Heyfield and District survey were distributed throughout Heyfield & District with the help of Wellington Shire, DEECA, the Heyfield Traders Association and the Heyfield Tourism Innovation Working Group. In addition, a social media post was distributed via LinkedIn and Facebook with a link to the survey.
The survey design:

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[2] VCOSS (2015). Walk alongside: *Co-designing social initiatives with people experiencing vulnerabilities*. V. C. o. S. Service. Melbourne.

- Allowed for the collection of information from a defined group of participants.
- Enabled a data to be collected quickly.

Qualitative data

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken to explore the lived experience of participants involved in this project. The CERC research team invited a range of stakeholders and experts to take part in interviews to share their ideas about the possibilities to improve the visitor economy of Heyfield and District. Semi-structured interview questions were designed to guide the researcher to capture all desired information while providing flexibility for the participants to elaborate on their ideas and experiences (see Appendix 3).

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistical analysis was performed using SPSS to better understand how the Heyfield and District Community and visitors feel about tourism development.

A thematic analysis technique was used for the qualitative data with findings presented under theme headings together with participant quotes. The thematic analysis utilised Braun and Clarke's six-step process[3] which included familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes and producing the report (Figure 18).

Step 1 • Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down identical ideas

Step 2 • Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashon across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code

Step 3 • Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all relevant data to each potential theme

Step 4 • Checking in the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis

Step 5 • Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells; generating clear definitions and names for each theme

Step 6 • The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis

Figure 18: Six-Step Thematic Analysis

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[3] Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2022) *Thematic analysis: a practical guide.* SAGE Publications Ltd

As qualitative analysis is an inductive process, some interpretation of the data was required to create the thematic map. It was actively acknowledged that the researcher's interpretations would inform the results of this study, hence, any prior conceptions of the topic were reflexively bracketed to the best of the researcher's abilities[4].

[4] Berger, R. (2013). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. Qualitative Research, 15(2), 219-234. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475

9. ETHICAL APPROVAL AND PRACTICE

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Federation University aims to promote and support responsible research practices by providing resources and guidance to our researchers. We aim to maintain a strong research culture which incorporates:

- Honesty and integrity;

- Respect for human research participants, animals and the environment;

- Respect for the resources used to conduct research;

- Appropriate acknowledgement of contributors to research; and

- Responsible communication of research findings.

Human Research and Ethics applications, *'Strategic planning report for the Tourism Innovation Working Group: Heyfield' (Approval number: 2024-009)* was approved by the Federation University Human Research Ethics Committee (Appendix 1) prior to data collection and analysis. Participant anonymity was maintained by removing any identifiable information from the evaluation.

10. ABBREVIATIONS

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CERC	Collaborative Evaluation & Research Centre
TIWG	Tourism Innovation Working Group
HTTA	Heyfield Tourism & Traders Association
LDS	Local Development Strategy
DEECA	Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action
HCRC	Heyfield Community Resource Centre
ASH	Australian Sustainable Hardwoods

10. LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

FIGURES

11. APPENDICES

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APPENDIX 1: HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL

Federation University | Collaborative Evaluation & Research Centre (CERC)

I am pleased to advise you that the Low Risk Ethics Committee has approved your ethics application, titled *Strategic planning report for the Tourism Innovation Working Group: Heyfield*, reference **2024/009**.

Approval period: 18/03/2024 to 18/03/2029

This approval is subject to the following conditions:

1. The project must be conducted strictly in accordance with the proposal approved by the Committee, including any amendments made to the proposal required by the Committee.
2. The Chief investigator must advise the Committee, via email to research.ethics@federation.edu.au, immediately of any complaints or other issues in relation to the project which may warrant review of the ethical approval of the project.
3. Where approval has been given subject to the submission of copies of documents such as letters of support or approvals from third parties, these are to be provided to the Ethics Office prior to research commencing at each relevant location.
4. **Amendment requests** must be submitted to the Committee **PRIOR** to implementation of such changes. Amendments cannot be implemented prior to receipt of approval from the relevant ethics committee. Amendment requests may include:
   - Changes to project personnel
   - Project extension (note, extensions CANNOT be granted retrospectively)
   - Amendments to project procedures
5. **Annual and Final Reports** MUST be submitted by the following deadlines:
   - *Annual Progress Reports* - annually on the anniversary of the approval date. Amendment requests will not be accepted for projects with overdue annual reports.
   - *Final Report* - within one month of project completion, which may be prior to the expiry of ethics approval. Submission of a final report will close off the project.
6. It is incumbent on the research team to keep track of reporting requirements and submit reports on time. Reminders may not be sent by the Research Office and should not be relied upon.
7. If, for any reason, the project does not proceed or is discontinued, the Committee must be advised via the submission of a Final Report.
8. The Human Research Ethics Committee may conduct random audits and/or require additional reports concerning the research project as part of the requirements for monitoring, as set out in the National statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.
9. The Ethics Team must be notified of any changes to contact details for any member of the research team. This may include, but is not limited to address, phone number and/or email address.
10. Failure to comply with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007 and all updates, and/or with the conditions of approval, will result in suspension or withdrawal of approval.

If you require any further information, if something is not clear or you would like to provide feedback, please contact the Ethics Team via email at research.ethics@federation.edu.au or call +61 3 5327 9765.

Kind regards,

Research Ethics Team
Research Services | Research and Innovation

Federation University Australia
research.ethics@federation.edu.au
federation.edu.au/research/support-for-students-and-staff/ethics/human-ethics

Federation University

APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Can you tell me a bit about your living situation and who you live with?

What is your role in bringing visitors to Heyfield?

What opportunities currently exist in Heyfield and District for the community and visitors to participate in adventure activities?

What is/has previously worked well in your sector for communities to improve the local economy through attracting visitors, while maintaining the integrity of the local culture?

What is/has previously not been working well in your sector for communities to improve the local economy through attracting visitors, while maintaining the integrity of the local culture?

What should be done to improve access for community members and visitors to participate in adventure activities?

What stakeholders/agencies can help improve access for community members and visitors to participate in, enjoy, and build competence and confidence in a wide range of outdoor activities?

How could different stakeholders/agencies work together to help improve access and attraction for community members and visitors to adventure activities?

If there were a lead agency coordinating a project to improve the local visitor economy, who should it be, and why?

Any other comments, or suggestions?

Federation University | Collaborative Evaluation & Research Centre (CERC)

Office 1E220 | Building 1E | Gippsland Campus
PO Box 3191 Gippsland Mail Centre Vic 3841
T 03 5122 6508 M 0412 142 055
CERC@federation.edu.au

Federation University Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters where its campuses are located, and we pay our respects to Elders past and present, and extend our respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and First Nations Peoples.