

Factsheet

Valuing Victoria's professional fishing: measuring economic and social contributions in Far East Victoria



The far east region of Victoria, which includes East Gippsland, is the most productive fishing region in Victoria. The industry built the communities of Lakes Entrance and Mallacoota, and they remain economically dependent on fishing today.

These two main home ports support a diversity of professional fisheries in the far east. Lakes Entrance, the largest fishing port in Victoria, lands Southern Rock Lobster, octopus, bait, purse seine (sardines and Australian Salmon), scallop, mixed-species inshore trawl, Southern and Eastern Scalefish and Shark, and Southern Squid Jig. In Mallacoota, the fisheries include abalone and sea urchin harvested by divers, along with live Wrasse and Morwong. Professional eel fisheries are to be found inland.

Along the supply chain, the Co-op in Lakes Entrance processes, wholesales and retails fresh local seafood, while Mallacoota processes abalone. Lakes Entrance lost a key fishery in 2020 when the sustainable, small-scale net fishery in Gippsland Lakes was shut to make way for recreational fishing. This fishery had served the local region and Melbourne for over 170 years. An annual catch of about 200 tonnes a year of high-quality and diverse finfish is no longer available to consumers.



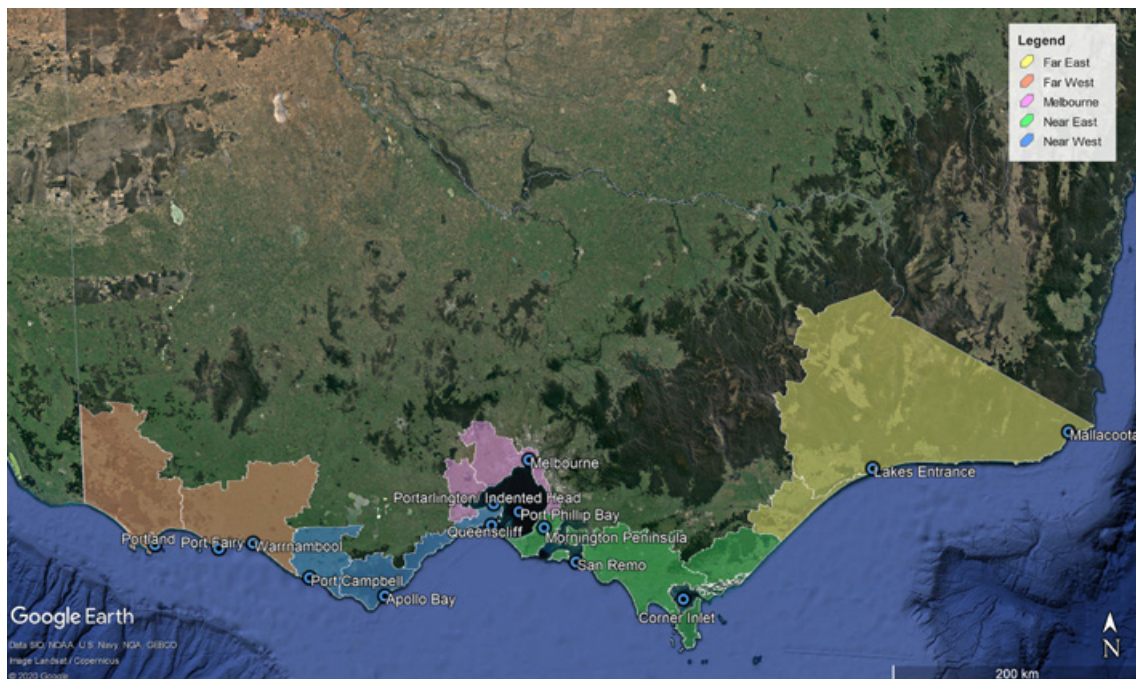
About the Study

This research project, conducted by the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), for the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation, investigated how the Victorian fishing and aquaculture industry contributes to the wellbeing of regional communities, and to Victoria overall.

This summary presents findings relevant to the professional fisheries and communities in the far east region. The study found the industry contributes to regional community wellbeing in five main ways:

- economic diversity and resilience
- food supply
- tourism and recreation
- environmental health
- social fabric

The project explored these contributions over two years and involved economic surveys of the fishing industry; in-depth interviews, workshops and surveys in regional communities; a large phone survey of the Victorian public; and surveys of tourism, hospitality and other businesses in seafood supply chains. The research also explored challenges and opportunities for the fishing and aquaculture industry in regional communities.



Economic diversity and resilience

Far east fisheries make significant economic contributions to the region

- Professional fisheries generated \$76 million of added value – the wider economic contribution beyond just the landed catch – for the far east region in the 2016/17 financial year.
- Professional fisheries accounted for 810 full-time jobs in the region in that period.
- This was the largest regional economic contribution, compared with other Victorian coastal regions.
- Far east fisheries provide important flow-on economic activity and employment, including through the Lakes Entrance Co-op and the abalone factory in Mallacoota.
- Far east fisheries also provide important flow-on economic activity and employment in Melbourne, in the processing, wholesaling and retail sectors.

Far east fisheries provide diverse employment opportunities

- The industry supports a range of business and job opportunities, from on-the-boat work to associated businesses including those providing inputs into seafood production, post-harvest businesses that transport, process and sell seafood products, and tourism and hospitality operations.
- It requires diverse and often high-level skills, but also provides entry-level jobs.
- It generates satisfying work for people who might otherwise find it hard to find jobs.

Far east fisheries contribute to economic diversity and stability

- The industry contributes to diversity of economic opportunity – critical for economic resilience.
- The industry generates employment in places with few alternative industries. Lakes Entrance and Mallacoota are more remote communities where tourism is the only other large industry.
- The fishing industry contributes to economic stability by providing activity throughout the year, whereas industries such as tourism operate seasonally or intermittently. This is particularly the case for Lakes Entrance and Mallacoota, where the tourist season is short.

Coastal communities recognise the economic importance of the Victorian fishing industry

- Residents of fishing communities surveyed say they recognise the economic importance of the fishing industry to their region.
- 81% believe the industry supports their local economy and provides jobs
- 85% believe the industry helps create economic diversity in their community
- 76% believe the industry is important for supporting their community during the tourist off-season
- 68% are very or extremely concerned about job losses should fisheries be further restricted

Food supply

Professional fishers provide access to a food source otherwise not available to non-fishers

- Far east fisheries catch the greatest volume of seafood in Victoria. Some 45% of seafood professionally caught in Victoria in 2016/17 came from the far east.
- The size of the Lakes Entrance industry means a wide diversity of species is available to consumers.
- Far east fisheries provide food important to ethnic groups, such as abalone, sardines and sea urchin.
- Victorians and tourists travel to buy and eat the local seafood available in Lakes Entrance.

Victorians and coastal communities prefer local seafood

- 85% of Victorians prefer Australian seafood and 24% prefer Victorian seafood.
- The preference for Victorian seafood is even stronger for residents of coastal fishing towns, where 40% of respondents preferred seafood from their town or region.
- 74% of Victorians feel it is very or extremely important to know where their seafood comes from.
- 90% of Victorians believe it is important to produce seafood in Victoria and reduce reliance on imports, which account for over 70% of seafood consumed in Australia.
- Victorians prefer local seafood because:
 - They believe it is fresher and higher quality
 - They want to support the Australian economy and fishers
 - They believe it is safer to eat, and it is from cleaner waters

The hospitality sector experiences high demand for local seafood

- 62% of the hospitality sector surveyed says demand for local seafood is growing.
- 80% of those surveyed say demand for Victorian seafood is greater than for imported seafood.
- 58% of say demand for Victorian seafood is greater than for seafood from other states.



Tourism and recreation

Victorian coastal communities believe the fishing industry contributes to tourism

- 67% of residents surveyed in coastal towns believe the most important contribution the seafood industry makes to communities is through the interactions with and benefits flowing to tourism.

Consuming seafood is part of the travel experience along the Victorian coast

- 81% of Victorians surveyed say eating local seafood is an important part of their holiday experience.
- 88% of Victorians expect to eat local seafood when visiting the coast.
- 90% of Victorian tourism operators surveyed say tourists expect to eat local seafood.
- International visitors, particularly from Asia, are the group most interested in local seafood
- Victorian seafood producers have a particularly desirable product for international visitors, offering cultural delicacies such as abalone and rock lobster along with a clean environment.

The fishing industry is important to the character and appeal of coastal towns

- Professional fishing is intrinsic to the character of Lakes Entrance and has attracted tourists.
- 88% of Victorian tourism operators surveyed say the fishing industry adds to the character of towns.
- 86% of Victorian operators say the history of fishing is an important part of the tourism offering.
- 69% of Victorians holidaymakers surveyed enjoy watching commercial fishers at work.

Seafood experiences contribute to developing regional tourism

- Mallacoota hosts a fishing festival, the Wild Harvest Seafood Festival, attracting about 2000 people.
- In Lakes Entrance, visitors buy locally caught seafood from boats along the wharf.

The professional fishing industry also benefits recreational fishers

Professional fishing and recreational fishers are often portrayed as being at odds. However, the study found evidence throughout the state that professional and recreational activities positively intersect.

- 82% of recreational fishers are very or extremely interested in professional fishing.
- Recreational fishers are more likely than non-fishers to want to buy fresh and local seafood, with 82% saying they consider origin 'very' or 'extremely' important versus 72% of non-fishers.
- Over 80% of recreational fishers surveyed prefer to use local, commercially caught bait.
- Infrastructure (such as wharves) servicing commercial fishing is also used by recreational fishers.
- Professional fishers often provide advice on fishing and sea conditions to recreational fishers.
- 58% of professional fishers surveyed had helped recreational users of the sea in distress in the past 5 years.



Environmental health

The far east industry contributes to managing Victorian fish stocks and the marine environment

- Data collected as part of regulatory oversight and management is used for managing commercial and recreational fisheries sustainably, and for monitoring ecosystems.
- 82% of Victorian fish stocks assessed are classified as 'sustainable' or 'recovering'.

The far east industry undertakes voluntary practices to improve fish stocks and the marine environment

- Voluntary activities aimed at improving fish stocks and protecting the marine environment include:
 - Gippsland Lakes fishers were instrumental in developing a voluntary code of practice for Victorian bay and inlet fisheries.
 - Southern and Eastern Scalefish and Shark fishers are trained in minimising wildlife interactions.
 - Devices have been installed for avoiding seabird interactions in the Southern and Eastern Scalefish and Shark fishery.
 - Southern Rock Lobster fishers participate in the Clean Green Program for sustainable rock lobster supply management.
 - Mallacoota abalone divers are restoring reef habitat by removing invasive sea urchins.
- The Far east fishing industry voluntarily collaborates in research, including
 - Collecting samples for researchers.
 - Providing logistics and local knowledge.
 - Sitting on advisory groups and research committees.
 - Sharing accumulated local ecological knowledge gained through experience of fishing.

Social fabric

Fishing contributes to the sense of identity in far east coastal communities

- 83% of residents surveyed in coastal towns agree fishing is important to heritage and identity.
- In Lakes Entrance, 'fishing is the heart of the town', in the words of one study participant, and there is a long history of fishing family connections.
- In Mallacoota, the fishing industry established many of the town's clubs and activities.

The fishing industry plays an important role in community life

- 79% of residents surveyed agree local fishing families are active community members
- In Lakes Entrance and Mallacoota, the industry is deeply involved in every facet of community life.
- The far east industry donates to causes and sponsors local events, clubs, schools and charities.
- In Mallacoota, the industry takes school children on excursions and gives talks at the local school.
- In far east communities, most people know someone attached to the fishing industry in some way. Many have worked in a job related to the industry.
- The fishing industry provides work, a support network and role models for vulnerable young men.



Challenges and opportunities

Increasing local production and community access to local seafood

Communities in the near east have reasonable access to local seafood but it could be far greater.

- Advocacy is needed for new, sustainable wild catch fishing opportunities, targeting under-utilised and affordable species that offer a viable and sustainable business model.
- Branding could be built around the provenance and unique selling points of local, far east seafood.
- New relationships should be developed between producers and interested local businesses.
- Greater processing capacity could be built in the Lakes Entrance region.

Getting more local seafood on local menus

Far east restaurants say accessing local seafood is a challenge – 90% of Victorian hospitality businesses surveyed say the price of local seafood has increased in the last few years and 78% say it has been difficult to source local seafood. Restaurants say local seafood is more expensive than imports and, beyond boutique restaurants, there is a lack of comfort with cooking seafood. Possible solutions include:

- Collaboration between fishers, wholesalers and the hospitality sector to improve local supply chains.
- Strengthening the hospitality industry's capacity to source and work with local and seasonal seafood.

Developing fishing and seafood tourism experiences

There is an opportunity to further develop tourism experiences in the far east – 54% of tourism operators surveyed agree that the local tourism offering suffers from a lack of access to local seafood and that there are limited fishing tourism activities. Possible responses include:

- Increasing collaboration with tourism stakeholders and local councils to promote local seafood.
- Creating partnerships with tourism operators who can generate 'seafood experiences'.
- Opening a visitor centre in Lakes Entrance focussed on the fishing industry and telling its stories.
- Establishing a seafood/fishing festival in Lakes Entrance.
- Creating visitor tours centred on the abalone industry in Mallacoota.

Increasing fishing industry engagement with communities

The fishing industry isn't always well understood among the general public – whether in metropolitan areas or in coastal communities themselves. Improving engagement with the public could help address misperceptions, reduce tension and conflict, build support for the industry and strengthen its future.

Industry-led engagement activities with communities could improve awareness of the fishing industry in the far east, by fostering cross-sector and cross-industry relationships within communities and regions.

This is particularly important for Lakes Entrance, where the study found a high level of misinformation regarding the sustainability of the industry and a lack of knowledge of the contribution to healthy marine environments. In Lakes Entrance, greater interaction between the fishing industry and the public would be fostered by reconnecting the wharves and jetties that are currently inaccessible to the community.



