



**MIRBOO NORTH
IMMEDIATE PROTECTION AREA**
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

April – May 2022



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

MosaicLab and the Eminent Panel for Community Engagement would like to acknowledge the Gunaikurnai people, the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we met.

We acknowledge and respect their continuing connection to the land, water, culture and the contribution they make to the life of our community.

We pay respect to their past and present Elders and their emerging leaders, and extend this respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Eminent Panel for Community Engagement was appointed to independently assess and make recommendations on the future uses of the Immediate Protection Areas in the eastern part of Victoria.

As part of Phase 1, the Panel conducted a community engagement process on the Strathbogie Ranges and Mirboo North Immediate Protection Areas throughout April – May 2022. This report, prepared by MosaicLab, a facilitation and engagement consultancy, captures the key findings from the engagement for the Mirboo North Immediate Protection Area.

THE APPROACH



28
TARGETED
CONVERSATIONS



115
DROP IN
PARTICIPANTS

ENGAGE VICTORIA



8860
total page
views



2990
unique
visitors



716
responses



24%
response
rate



95
responses to
the Mirboo
North map



142
responses
to the
Mirboo
North
feedback
form

**TOTAL
HOURS**



31 hours of conversations

The key themes to come out of the engagement included:

PROTECTION AND CONSERVATION – 25% OF THE COMMENTS



The protection and conservation theme for the Mirboo North Immediate Protection Area (IPA) was important across all forms of engagement. Protection of key conservation sites was discussed and there was a strong connection to the native and endangered species in the area. The Strzelecki koala was a native species to the area that participants also want to preserve and protect. Participants talked about the small size of the IPA, however when combined with the other parcels of forest across the Mirboo North landscape, there is opportunity and hope for preserving the broader forest and waterways for the future generations.

RECREATION AND LOCAL USE – 24% OF THE COMMENTS



The Mirboo North IPA and other forested areas are easily accessible and connected to local townships. Recreation and leisure opportunities are enjoyed in the area by the local community, sometimes on a daily basis. The area is also a destination for day trippers who like to participate in either mountain bike riding, trail bike riding and four-wheel driving or the quieter and more peaceful, walk in the forest. This theme brought together a range of divergent views, including support for recreational activities for all to enjoy. There were discussions about expanding recreational activities into adjacent available land, so that conservation areas could have greater protection, and comments that felt that harm to the forest should be minimised at all costs. One idea that did stand out from a number of conversations is that people who recreate in the forest should be part of the solution and to work actively with the local community and the Traditional Owners.

LAND AND FOREST MANAGEMENT – 19% OF THE COMMENTS



Land and forest management in the Mirboo North area involves a highly active group of volunteers across multiple community based organisations. Some work closely with the land managers in the region, whilst others move forward with their own ideas, in some cases backed by knowledge and research. There is huge community investment in the land and forest, however the participants reported seeing little or no presence of land managers. There is support from some community members to see a greater role for Gunaikurnai in managing Country, including cultural burning, and to look at different management models such as collaborative management.

INDUSTRY – 10% OF THE COMMENTS



There is still some concern and comments about timber harvesting for commercial use adjacent to the IPA (or the surrounding areas where the plantations are based) and the damage created to habitats of the endangered species and native animals in the area. Other areas of industry that are supported in the local area are apiary (based on adjacent private land) and possible tourism ventures (recreation, environmental and cultural) that could also support local businesses in town.

INFORMATION AND AWARENESS – 7% OF THE COMMENTS



Connecting people to the forest and providing experiences to connect with nature was seen as a way to educate and create awareness of the things that they might see as important. This was presented predominantly through a lens of preserving the forest and important habitat. In some cases this talked to the interest and opportunity of citizen science and building knowledge by working with the forest and through improvements in signage, such as interpretive signs talking to key conservation areas.

TRADITIONAL OWNER INTERESTS AND SUPPORT – 2.5% OF THE COMMENTS



There is interest from some community groups and individuals to support Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation to be a part of the decision-making in how their Country is managed. There is recognition that this may take time and support and there is a willingness to work closely with the Traditional Owners to learn about their culture and connection to the land and waterways.

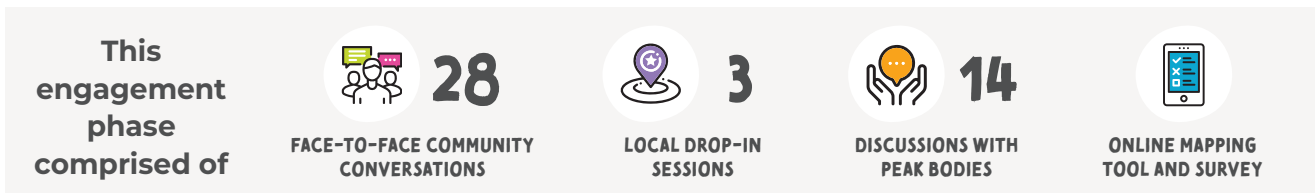
The other key themes captured throughout the engagement included 'Wellbeing benefits of the forest' (4%), 'Leave the forest as it is' (2%), 'Finance and resourcing' (2%), 'Local ownership and effort' (2%) and a category of 'Other'.

All ideas, feedback and comments from across all of the engagement activities were presented and shared with the Panel ahead of the sense-making sessions to develop the recommendations for the Mirboo North Immediate Protection Area.

2. ENGAGEMENT DESIGN

2.1 OVERVIEW

This report includes the findings of the first phase of the community engagement for the Mirboo North Immediate Protection Area.



MosaicLab has prepared this report to provide a record of these inputs. This report was provided to the Eminent Panel for Community Engagement (the Panel). The Panel considered this report, alongside a wide range of other inputs, in their recommendations to the Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change.

2.2 PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of the Panel's engagement was to seek and understand local knowledge and everyday uses that impact the Mirboo North forest along with the rights and interests of the Traditional Owners, Gunaikurnai.

The Panel outlined the following set of objectives for engagement:

- To create lasting relationships with Traditional Owners and work in partnership throughout the engagement process.
- The community feel listened to, have had a chance to be part of a dialogue with the panel and feel their input was valued and used to inform the panel's recommendations.
- To build greater local understanding of the forest and its needs for the future.
- To support sharing of many different perspectives and give participants the opportunity to access and discuss new ideas and information.
- To ensure a variety of community members and stakeholders from across many perspectives can participate.

2.3 PROCESS

The process of engagement was comprehensive and complex. It considered Traditional Owner cultural values, economic, environmental and social values, and a balance of diverse and divergent views from across the community.

Importance was placed on working with local communities and understanding the issues and opportunities from those who frequent the forest. Equally as important was making sure that the Victorian community had a chance to participate and provide input into the future uses of the forest.

The Panel's role was to provide recommendations and a timeline to the Victorian government on each of the Immediate Protection Areas, as part of the plan for how state forests are managed as native timber harvesting ceases in 2030.

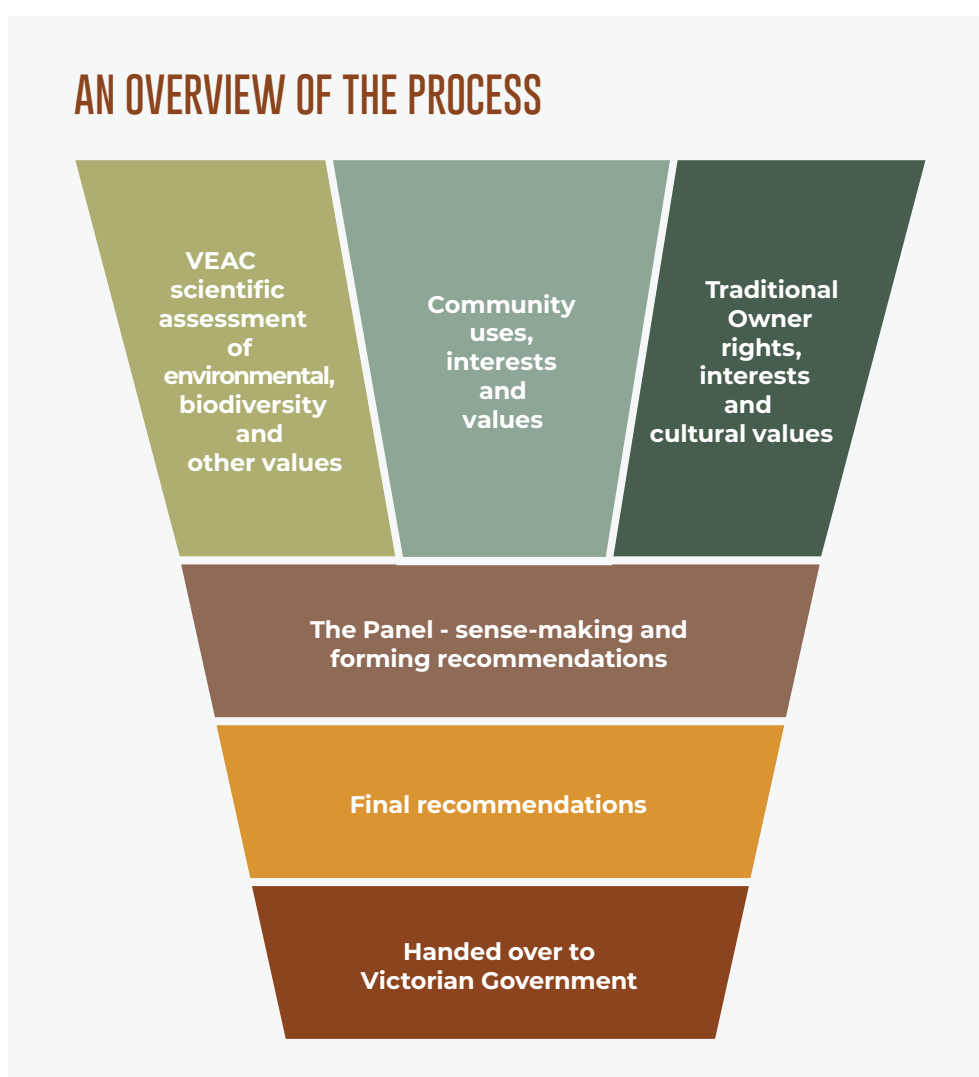


Figure 1 – Overview of process for the Eminent Panel.

2.4 COMMUNITY AND STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION

The Panel engaged with a range of stakeholders and community groups. Strategies were developed to drive successful engagement with each stakeholder and community group. Some of the key stakeholders and groups are outlined below, with a full list of organisations directly engaged included in Appendix A.

CATEGORY	GROUP
Partners	Taungurung Land and Waters Council
	Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation
Critical friends	Local Government
	Land managers
	Strathbogie Ranges and surrounds interest groups – cultural, environmental, industry and recreation
	Mirboo North and surrounds interest groups – cultural, environmental, industry and recreation
Critical communities	Local townships
	Landowners adjacent to Strathbogie Ranges and Mirboo North
	Traditional Owner communities - rights holders
	Young people – future perspective
	Existing community and stakeholder groups
	Regular leisure and recreation community
	Small scale local industries
	High risk fire communities
Peak bodies and industry	State based interest groups - cultural, environmental, industry and recreation
	State Government - Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions
	Businesses with interests in Strathbogie Ranges and Mirboo North
Victoria wide	Wider Victorian community
	Holiday makers

Figure 2 – Stakeholder categories, groups and levels of influence for Phase 1.

2.5 TIMELINE

Phase 1 of the engagement process began in March 2022 with on Country meetings with Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation.

Engagement and communications planning occurred in March, followed by a series of meetings with critical friends.

Local engagement activities took place from April to May 2022 and included public drop-ins and small group discussions with special interest groups and individuals from the local area.

The Panel then met face to face and online with peak body organisations in late May 2022.

From 3 – 29 May, the Engage Victoria site was live and provided an opportunity for the wider community to put forward their ideas and feedback on the future use of the Mirboo North IPA.

The Panel undertook sense-making workshops in June 2022, in preparation for their recommendations to be delivered to the Minister.

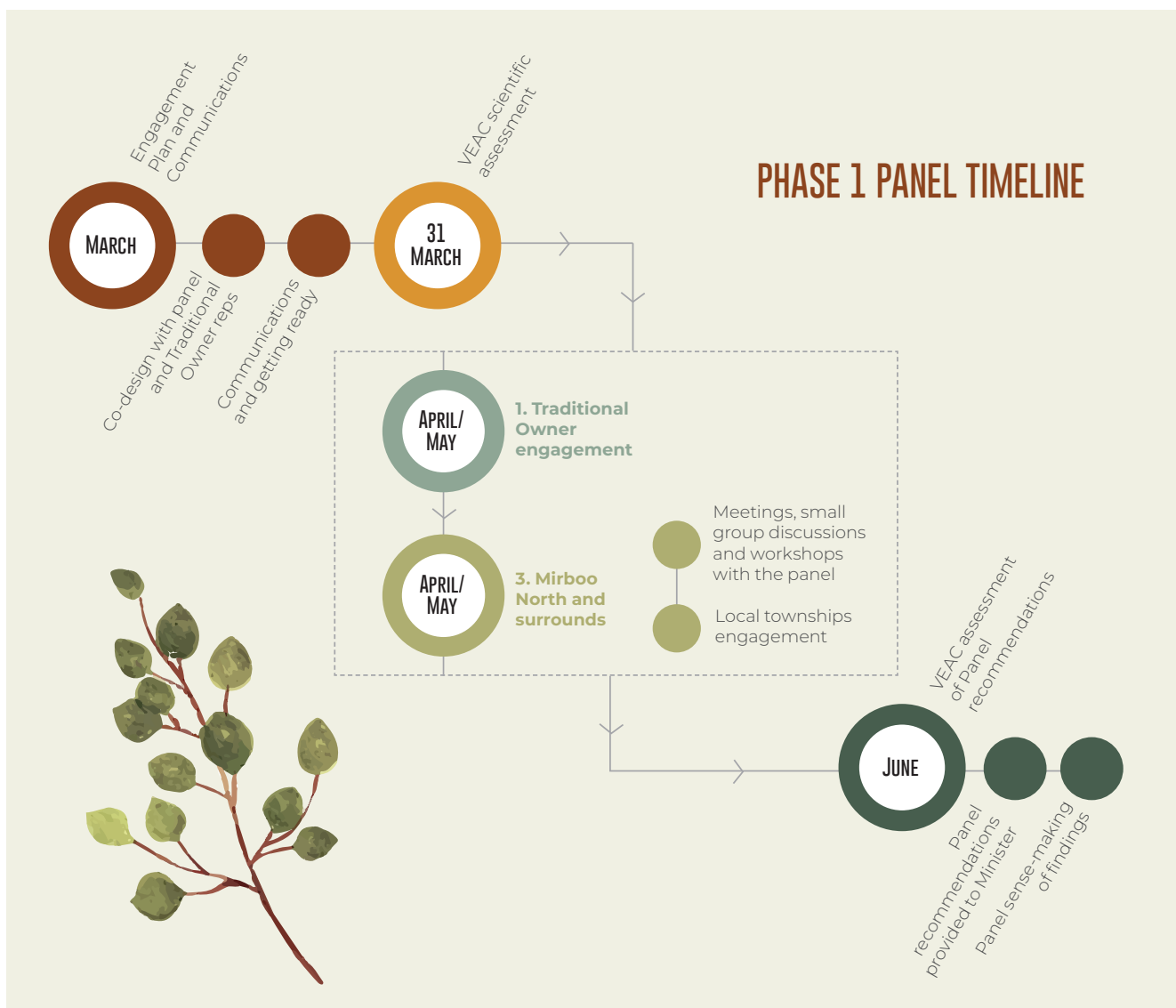


Figure 3 – Phase 1 panel timeline for the Mirboo North region.

2.6 ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

A range of engagement methods was used to seek and identify local interests and values of the forest, and to gather input into strategies for future use and management of the IPA in the Mirboo North.

The engagement activities included:

- on Country meeting with Gunaikurnai
- targeted small group and individuals conversations and workshops
- local drop-ins
- Engage Victoria online survey
- peak body conversations
- forest and site visits with local industry and residents.

These activities enabled the Panel to meet with representatives of each stakeholder, community group or peak body, in order to:

- discuss the role of the Panel and the engagement process for the Immediate Protection Areas
- listen to participants' interests and concerns for the Mirboo North IPA and surrounding areas
- outline the next steps of the process and discuss timings for key stages.

A summary of meetings is outlined below, and a detailed list of organisations can be found in Appendix 1.

Monday 2 May	Special interest conversations
	Drop-in session
Tuesday 3 May	Special interest conversations
Wednesday 4 May	Special interest conversations
	Drop-in session
Thursday 26 May	Council site visit
	Industry site visit
	Special interest conversations
	Drop-in session
Friday 27 May	School visit
	Special interest conversation
	Workshops – working through solutions

MosaicLab, an independent facilitation and engagement consultancy, was responsible for supporting the Panel in the delivery of the engagement and capturing the conversations with organisations and at the drop-ins. At the end of each session, summary points were drafted as key outcomes of the conversation and shared back with the participating organisation before being shared with the Panel.

2.7 ANALYSIS AND THEMING

MosaicLab analysed the data across all the engagement activities. The results are included in this report. Where possible, the data has been displayed visually to show the recurrence of themes in the conversations. It is important to note that some themes were discussed more than others, even though every effort was made to hear from a balance of perspectives. The process for analysing the data involved examining 'common' or 'like' themes and grouping them together. The themes were then analysed based on the frequency and type of comment and explained with a narrative to provide differing perspectives.

The number of comments and percentages against each theme were calculated based on the total number of comments received in relation to that specific area of interest, activity or, in some cases, the frequency within the theme.



3. ENGAGEMENT FINDINGS

3.1 COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

WHAT WE DID (PROCESS)

Local special interest groups in the Mirboo North area were invited to participate in an initial meeting with the Panel to share information and discuss their experience and ideas about the Mirboo North IPA. The majority of these meetings were held in person, close to the IPA and included a range of views and interests from cultural, social, environmental and economic backgrounds.

For more detail on the number of meetings held and the participating organisations, please refer to Appendix A.

KEY THEMES

Based on conversations the Panel had with 28 organisations, these are the key themes:

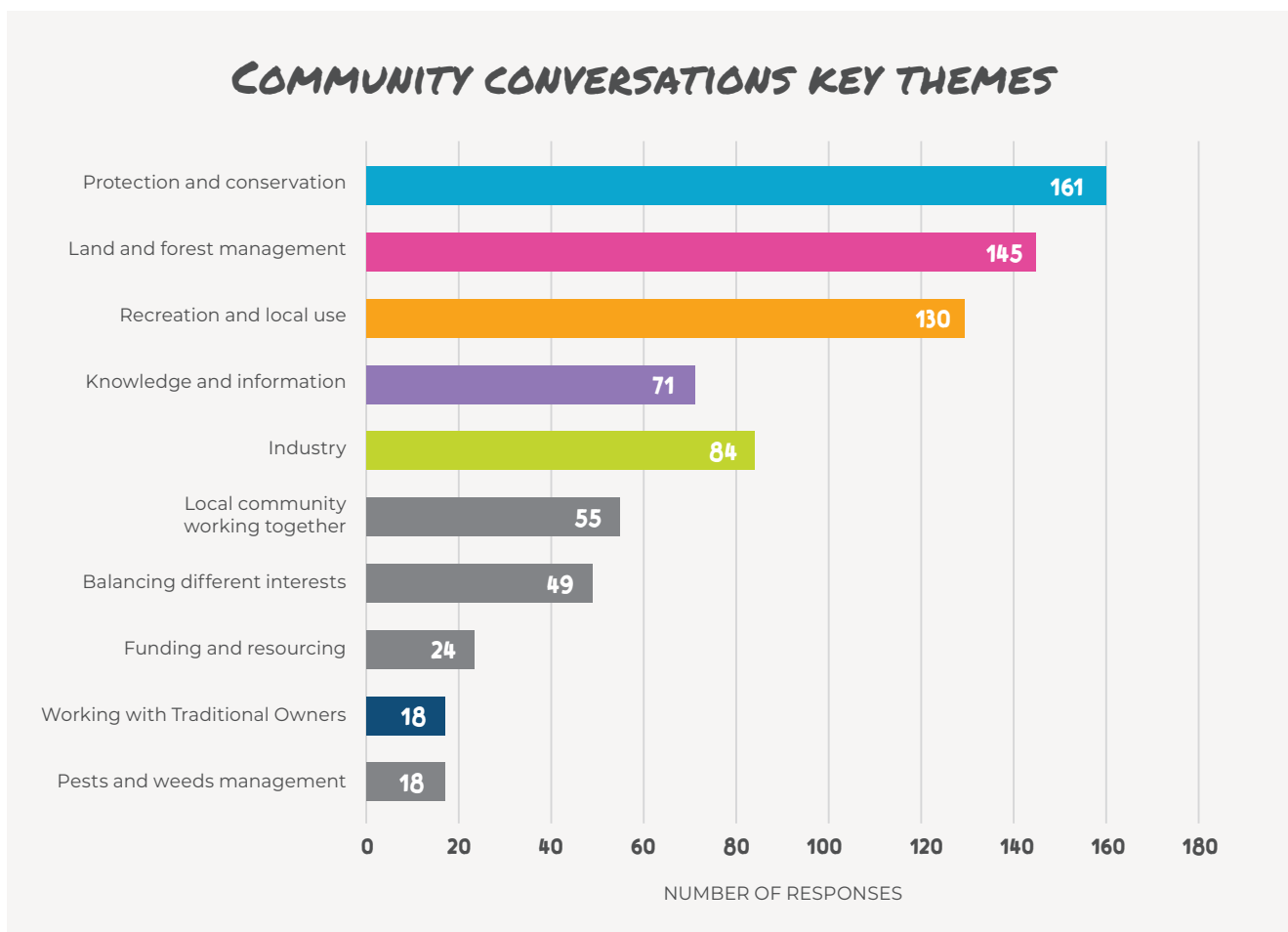


Figure 4 – Graph showing the key themes from the community conversations.

THEME 1 – PROTECTION AND CONSERVATION

The protection and conservation theme emerged from responses relating to protection and conservation of specific forest sites, important native flora and fauna such as the Strzelecki koalas, maintaining biodiversity, protecting the water quality in the Mirboo North water catchment and creating wildlife corridors.



“Want to look at the high levels of protection - conservation park.”

“Greenhood orchid is very rare and in the area. They are so insignificant and tiny but unless you are aware of them, you just wouldn't know.”

There is strong sense of protection and conservation emerging above all other values however there is still an interest in maintaining a level of activities in the forest so that people can experience and enjoy nature.

“We do not want to see it locked up and are keen to understand the management options to allow for the protection of the forest and still have community use.”

The strongest sub-theme emerging from the comments in the ‘protection and conservation’ theme related to the native species and protection of wildlife in the area, with 52% of comments reflecting this.

“We have got iconic and regionally important species - South Gippsland Koala.”

“Another important species is the locally adoptive species is the superb lyrebird and the namesake of the Lyrebird Walk.”

“Bush around here that is new growth. We need to understand the older hollow bearing trees and how important they are for the Greater Glider community. It is important that there is a source of food (Eucalypts).”

THEME 2 – LAND AND FOREST MANAGEMENT

Land and forest management activities, the role of government, fire practices and bushfire management, track and trail maintenance and creation, private land access and use, park infrastructure were all captured within the 'land and forest management' theme. The management of Mirboo North IPA and surrounding forest and parks includes a complex and varied management model with multiple land managers and active volunteer groups working in the area.



"70km of shared trail and rail trail - multiple landowners and volunteer groups."

"Maintenance of these areas is really important. There is a gap."

There were comments relating to the current land and forest management, however it wasn't all related to the Mirboo North IPA. With forest so closely connected to the township of Mirboo North and multiple pockets in close proximity, there were a number of comments that talked to more presence of the land manager being needed. 33% of the comments in this theme related to current land and forest management.

"Should have a crew every week here in Mirboo North. Lots of tracks to keep a crew busy. Need the tracks in so they can see what is there. Very important to keep the tracks open if you want the public to understand and appreciate the bush."

There is an active community in the Mirboo North area who have delivered community initiatives for the town. Given this, there were some comments relating to the connection to local issues, with suggestions that these require a local approach and that the community needs to be part of decision-making. Overall participants identified with mixed experiences in interacting with state government regarding local issues and it was 17% of the comments in this theme.

"Concern that state based programs do not think about the local need or issue."

"DELWP set up area around Bunyip for motor bike riders, including Heli pad, parking, access to keep motor bike riders in that spot - something like that here would keep them in the one place."

"Tried to approach DELWP and got a 'talk to the hand' approach."

Some participants shared their concerns about bushfire management and the safety of towns, and the impact of burning practices (6% of comments in this theme). There was concern about the current planned burning program and the impact that this has on the wildlife habitat, particularly hollow bearing trees.

"Bushfire management and what just happened in Gippsland is front of mind. We are surrounded by bush and it has been a while since we have had a fire. The bush comes right into town."

"Old trees and hollows are places for native fauna and there was a recent burn, where the burning of a hollow tree was filmed. It was surprising as this didn't seem to support the native habitat."

THEME 3 - RECREATIONAL USE AND LOCAL ACCESS



Recreational use and local access to the forest, parks and reserves is important to the local community and is also a reason why people visit the Mirboo North area. Participants identified access and use of the forest areas for a range of motorised and non-motorised recreational activities such as walking, hiking, camping, mountain bike riding, dirt bike riding, and firewood collection.

There are divergent views on the types of recreational activities that should be supported in the IPA with both viewpoints emerging through specific subthemes. 50% of comments in the theme talked to the use and access of motorised vehicles in the area however within that sub theme there were two distinct comments; those that support access and those that don't.

"Land use categories commensurate with the IPA should support passive recreation."

"There is a real push for established tracks for motorbikes as well."

"There are some examples of motorbike access for locals where they do not have to load the bikes on the trailer, they just ride there. So close to town makes it completely accessible."

"... Very important to keep the tracks open if you want the public to understand and appreciate the bush."

"There are just designated areas for motorbikes and horse riders. Trail bike riders get bored and go everywhere."

Mountain bike riding is popular in the area and there is exploration underway to develop a number of trails for the sport. There were 19% of comments dedicated to mountain biking and there were reflections from some of the groups the Panel heard from that are utilising adjacent private land for tracks.

"Mountain bikes need specific area, dangerous for others on the track, tracks can be dual purpose, but riders need to show respect. Don't know why tracks need to be dedicated to just mountain bikes?"

THEME 4 – INDUSTRY



The industry' theme is wide and varied and discussed opportunities for expanding tourism, commercial apiary, timber industry and commercial recreation organisations.

Apiary in the region is supported by a range of commercial and community enterprises. There is interest in maintaining support for apiarists for the biodiversity of the area, however there are some concerns on the impact of European bees on the native species. Currently the active bee sites remain on private land and some are adjacent to the IPA. 33% of comments in the 'industry' theme related to apiary.

"We need to keep the bee sites but they need to be protected to reduce access. Need to develop a security plan and manage access. It will need to be viable."

"Preference is limited to approved apiary due to the conflict of European and Native bees. The native bees are getting pushed out and European bees start to go into hollows and pushing out the gliders."

The timber industry is managed by HVP plantations in the area. There are divergent views from participants on the existing timber harvesting practice and what they see as the damage to the ecosystem and habitats for native species. The other view that is emerging from the conversations is the work that the timber industry is doing in the local area to support future developments, like the Delburn wind farm. 9% of the comments related to the timber industry through a variety of relationships mentioned.

"The plantations place signs up when the sites are in use so that residents know when there will be more traffic. It wouldn't be hard to extend access to groups such as the trail bikes."

"Motorbikes can go off into the forestry areas (plantations)"

With the interest in recreational activities in the area, there is an opportunity to further explore how Mirboo North might evolve as a tourist destination and support the local business in servicing the visitors. There was also a range of ideas about environmental and cultural tourism opportunities and how this might connect into the Traditional Owners, Gunaikurnai to provide cultural walks in the forest. 19% of comments related to the tourism opportunities in this industry theme.

"Putting Mirboo North as a tourism town."

"Cultural tourism and a connection to Gunaikurnai would be a lovely connection. Horse riding is popular and there is a tourism opportunity - it needs to be made clear where they can go."

THEME 5 – KNOWLEDGE AND INFORMATION

Providing opportunities for people to experience the forest and walk through and build their knowledge is seen as a way of educating about the importance of our natural environment. 46% of comments in this theme supported ways to increase education and awareness of the forest.



“Education is key.”

“Mixed groups/people in the community, people’s attitudes change when they start walking around the forest more regularly, they become passionate about the forest and notice things, things become important.”

There is a sense of ownership about the knowledge and information that participants have on the Mirboo North IPA and surrounding forest. There have been some significant research and citizen science processes that have formed the ideas of some of the groups to what is needed moving forward with the IPA. 20% of comments in this theme related to citizens science and research.

“Data whilst being expensive to collect, it is helpful with protection, contacting local orchid clubs, bird watching clubs, to collect data - citizen scientists.”

“Spending 2-3 days per week on this, want to show solidarity to this group, support people of this area, love to be the pilot of a program, test the water, sign us up for it, we have the people, land and contacts.”

“Thinking about local communities and people connected with Mirboo North is the way to go to support education, it’s about presence.”

Additional themes

Other themes included:

- Working with Traditional Owners to better understand the cultural values and interests in the Mirboo North IPA and to partner with Gunaikurnai
- Local community working together to support local decisions and local action
- Balancing different views, interests and needs when it comes to providing a forest for all to enjoy
- Funding and resourcing the effective management of forests and to consider the role community plays in delivery
- Management of feral pests and weeds

3.2 LOCAL DROP-INS

WHAT WE DID (PROCESS)

The Panel visited the Mirboo North forest to undertake wider community drop-in sessions in Mirboo North on 2, 4 and 26 May. Across this time, 115 individuals and family groups came in to share their ideas about the future IPA.

2 May 2022 4:00 – 8:00pm Grainstore, Mirboo North	4 May 2022 8:30 – 11:00am Grainstore, Mirboo North	26 May 2022 4:00 – 8:00pm Grainstore, Mirboo North
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Participants were invited to respond to the following questions:

- Share your ideas on how a healthy forest can be created and maintained for everyone.
- What activities do you currently participate in?
- What do you imagine future generations will want to be reminded of when they visit the forest?
- How do you think future generations will want to enjoy the forest?

Their responses were captured on sticky notes and butchers' paper and analysed into key themes.

KEY THEMES

Based on conversations with the drop-in participants, these are the key themes:

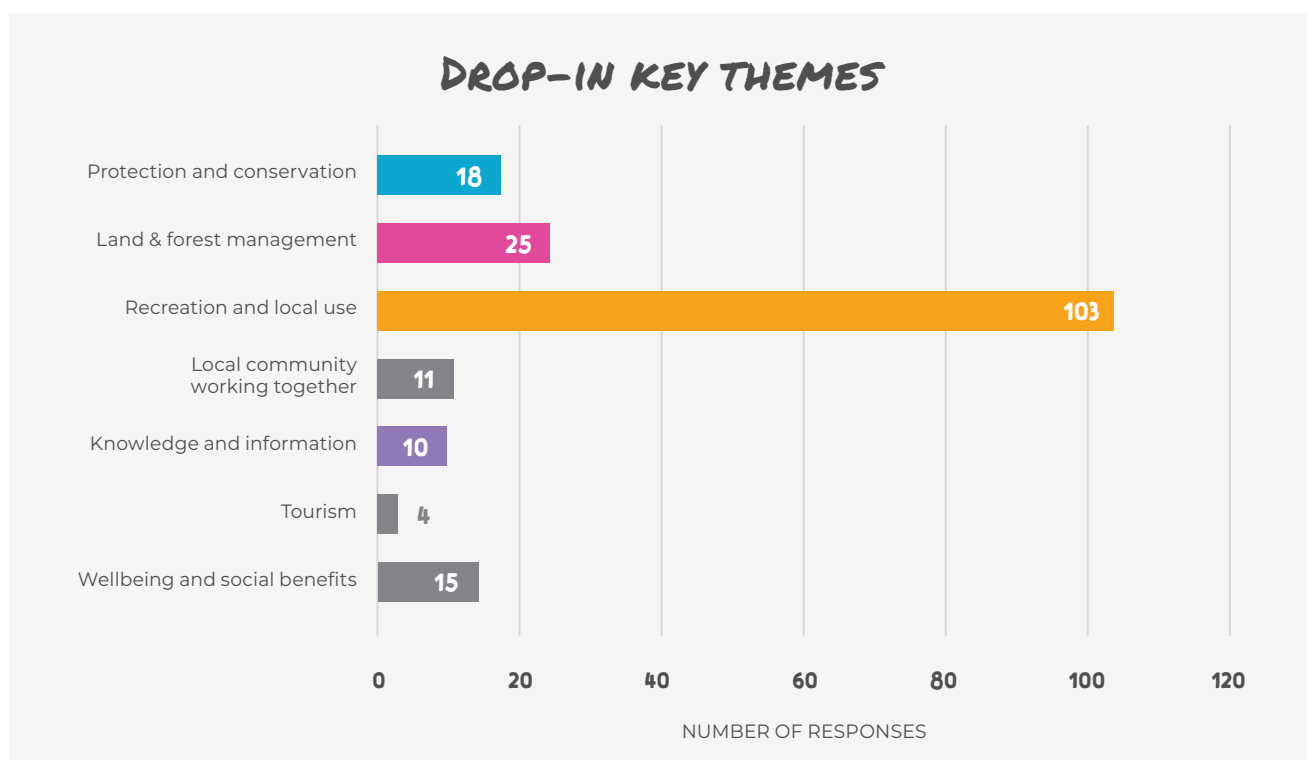


Figure 5 - Graph showing the key themes from the drop-in activities.

THEME 1 – RECREATIONAL AND LOCAL USE AND ACCESS



More than half the participants shared their interest for recreational activities, accounting for 55% of comments received across the three drop-in sessions. At the last drop-in session, over 100 people attended with the majority expressing a recreation interest. This provides insight into the level of support and energy for recreation activities in the area and also for the spike in the recreation based data for the drop-ins. Participants talked about access for motorised recreation activities and access for riders of all ages. Safety was also raised as an issue, with concern for keeping locals and pedestrians safe.

“Motorbike riding access - to reduce riding in protected areas.”

“Need place for older age riders.”

“Safer to ride on single tracks, reduces speed.”

“Driving in the bush four-wheel driving, barbecue with family, forest gets regular use and is popular with locals. Good for kids to see nature animals and plants.”

“Would use a dedicated motorbike track.”

“Maintain trail bike and horse-riding access.”

“We would like our children to grow up using the forest for recreational use, growing up like we have used it.”

There were a number of comments that supported the idea of access for multiple uses (23% on comments). There was emphasis on balancing the motorised and unmotorised activities so that everyone can enjoy the forest. Other recreational activities were noted, such as horse riding (14% of comments), mountain biking (11% of comments), and camping (5% of comments).

“Trail bike riding and horse riding and access to the local bush.”

“Horse riding is popular and there is a tourism opportunity - it needs to be made clear where they can go.”

“No current campsites - opportunity for a campsite, low-key.”

A number of responses (4%) related to concerns about the impact of certain activities, including the introduction of weeds into the forest and damage to the forest and waterways.

“Keep horses out – invasive seeds, there is the rail trail.”

“4WDs damage the forests. Need to look at other areas.”

THEME 2 – LAND AND FOREST MANAGEMENT



The emerging subthemes included the management of the forest and surrounding areas, with comments relating to track and trail maintenance (32%), park signage and infrastructure (20%), pests and waste on forest sites (36%), and bushfire risk management (12%).

“Keep tracks open to protect from bushfire.”

“Locals actively ‘track clear’ to keep people on tracks (not going around fallen trees).”

“Rubbish from campers is an issue.”

Others shared ideas for improvements or additions to park signage and infrastructure.

“Wildlife information boards.”

“Viewing platform in the trees.”

“Improved walking trails signage.”

THEME 4 - WELLBEING AND SOCIAL BENEFITS

Participants spoke of the importance of forests to wellbeing. Forests are valued as a place for spending time with family and friends, providing opportunities to support mental wellbeing, and a space to engage in social activities. 8% of comments in this theme related to wellbeing and social benefits.



"A place for families to still enjoy riding bikes."

"Healthy active recreation for children."

"Mental health - quiet areas."

Additional themes

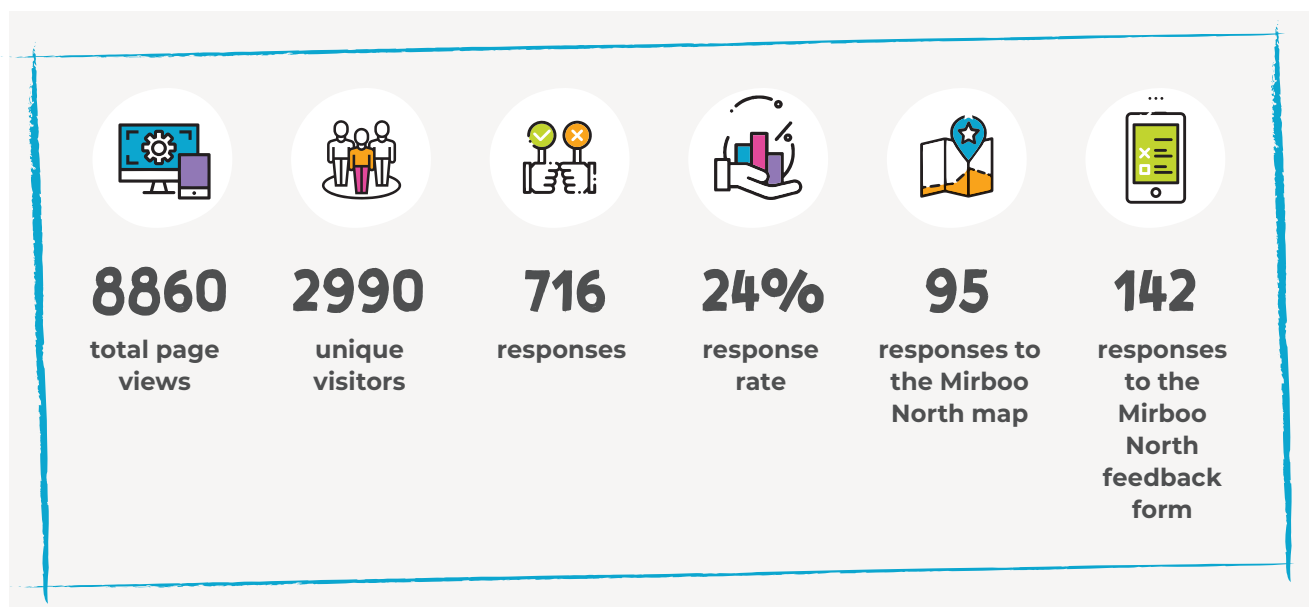
Other themes included:

- Local community working together
- Knowledge and information
- Tourism
- Some participants indicated their wish to maintain access for firewood collection

3.3 ENGAGE VICTORIA ONLINE PLATFORM

The wider Victorian community provided feedback on the future uses of the Strathbogie Ranges and the Mirboo North IPAs through the Victorian Government's online engagement platform Engage Victoria. The website included background information, details on the role of the Eminent Panel for Community Engagement and an overview of the engagement process. It went live on 3 May 2022 and closed on 29 May 2022 and brought together a map survey and feedback form for both the Mirboo North and Strathbogie Ranges IPAs.

Across the four weeks it was live, the site received:



WHAT WE DID (PROCESS)

The community was provided with an introduction and clear call to action about how they were able to participate and provide ideas for the future use of the IPAs.

People were invited to participate in multiple ways:

- Looking at the maps and dropping a pin to tell us why this part of the forest was important to them.
- Completing a short feedback form.
- Visiting the panel at one of the pop-up locations in May.
- Reading the background information (Engage Victoria)."

The site provided links to the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning's webpage on the IPAs, links to the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council's land and cultural value assessments of the IPAs and FAQs.

The key findings below are based on the responses received for the Mirboo North IPA.

MAP SURVEY - KEY FINDINGS

Participants placed a pin on the part of the forest that was important to them and shared why this area was important. People responded to the type of activities they participated in (56% of the responses), which included four-wheel drives, trail bikes, horse riding and walking. Protection and conservation of particular areas were highlighted (10% of the responses) and opportunities for connection to local communities and the township of Mirboo North were mentioned (25% of responses). The final category of responses reflected feedback on land and forest management (8% of responses) of the Mirboo North IPA and local area.

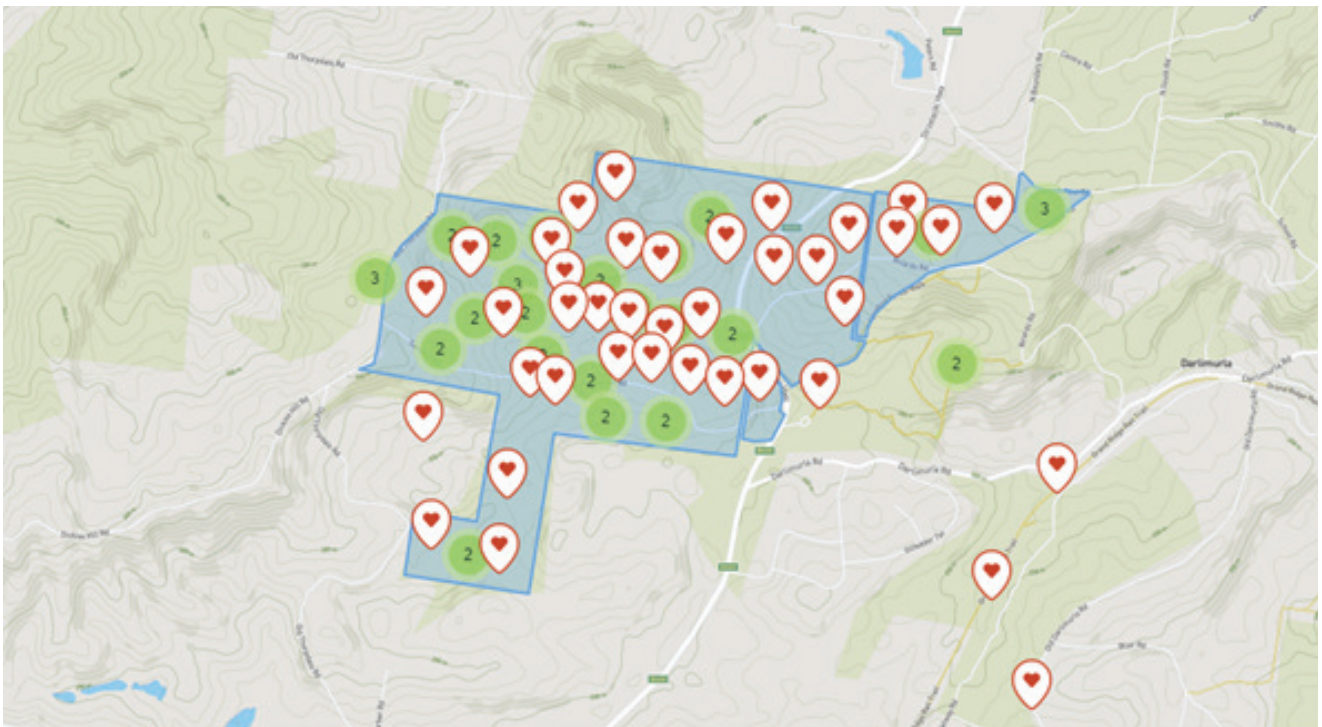


Figure 6 - Map showing the spread of comments on Engage Victoria.

SURVEY QUESTIONS – KEY FINDINGS

In addition to the map survey above, a separate survey asked four questions to understand current and futures uses within the IPA (quantitative questions one and three) and future based questions that drew out the values of what was important to people when thinking about managing the Mirboo North IPA (qualitative questions two and four).

1. What activities do you currently participate in?

Overall 142 participants responded to the survey. Question one was designed to understand the current level of interest and activity in the Mirboo North IPA. The activities were provided as options with a further “other” category and multiple answers were able to be selected.

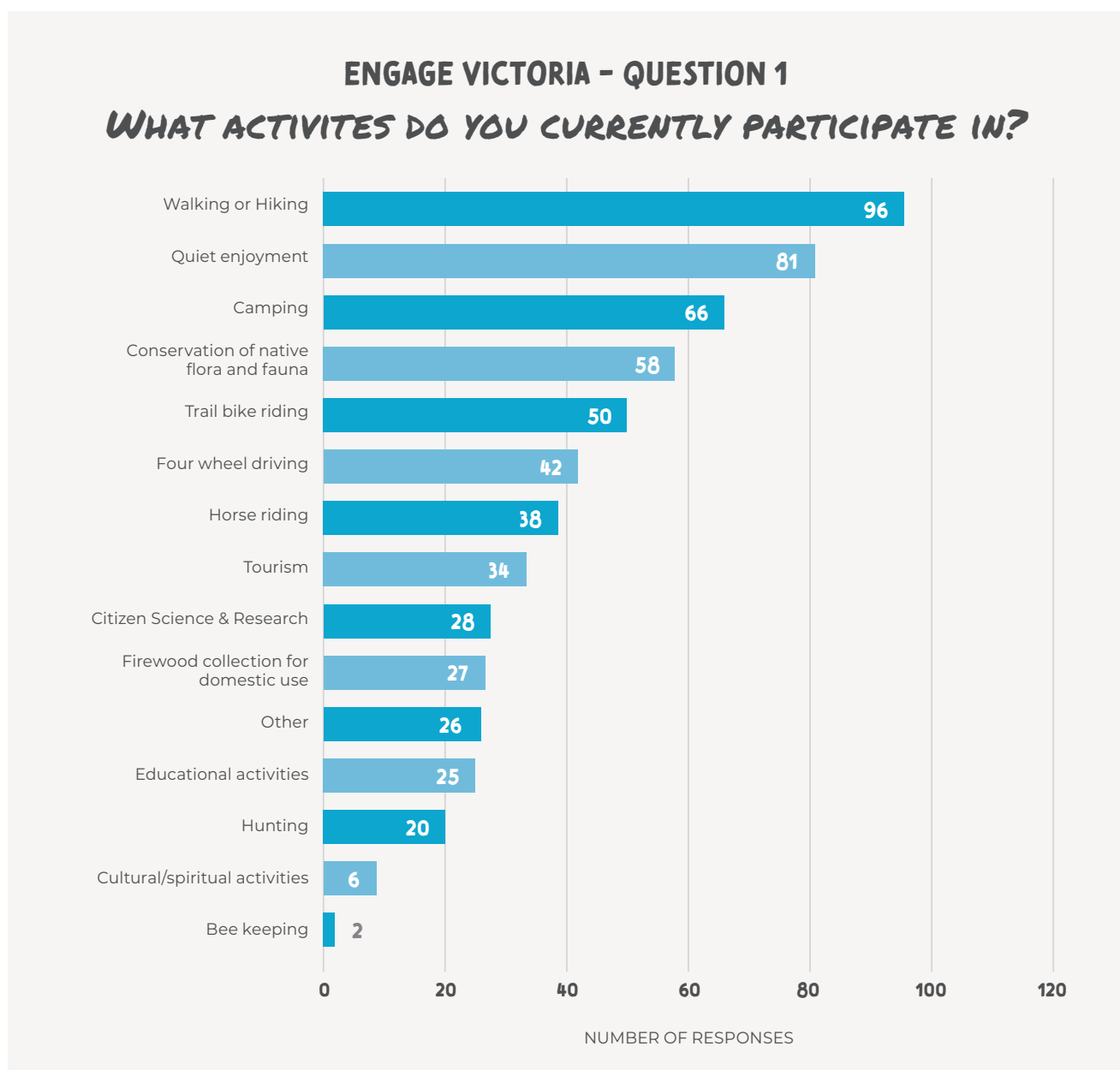


Figure 7 - Graph showing the current spread of activities in Mirboo North

2. Share your ideas on how a healthy forest can be created and maintained for everyone

Question two was designed to better understand the wider community sentiment on what a healthy forest would look like and how it could be sustained over time. The question also gave participants an opportunity to explore the idea of a forest for 'everyone' and what it would take to balance multiple uses.

From the 142 responses, these are the key themes that emerged from participants' answers to question two:

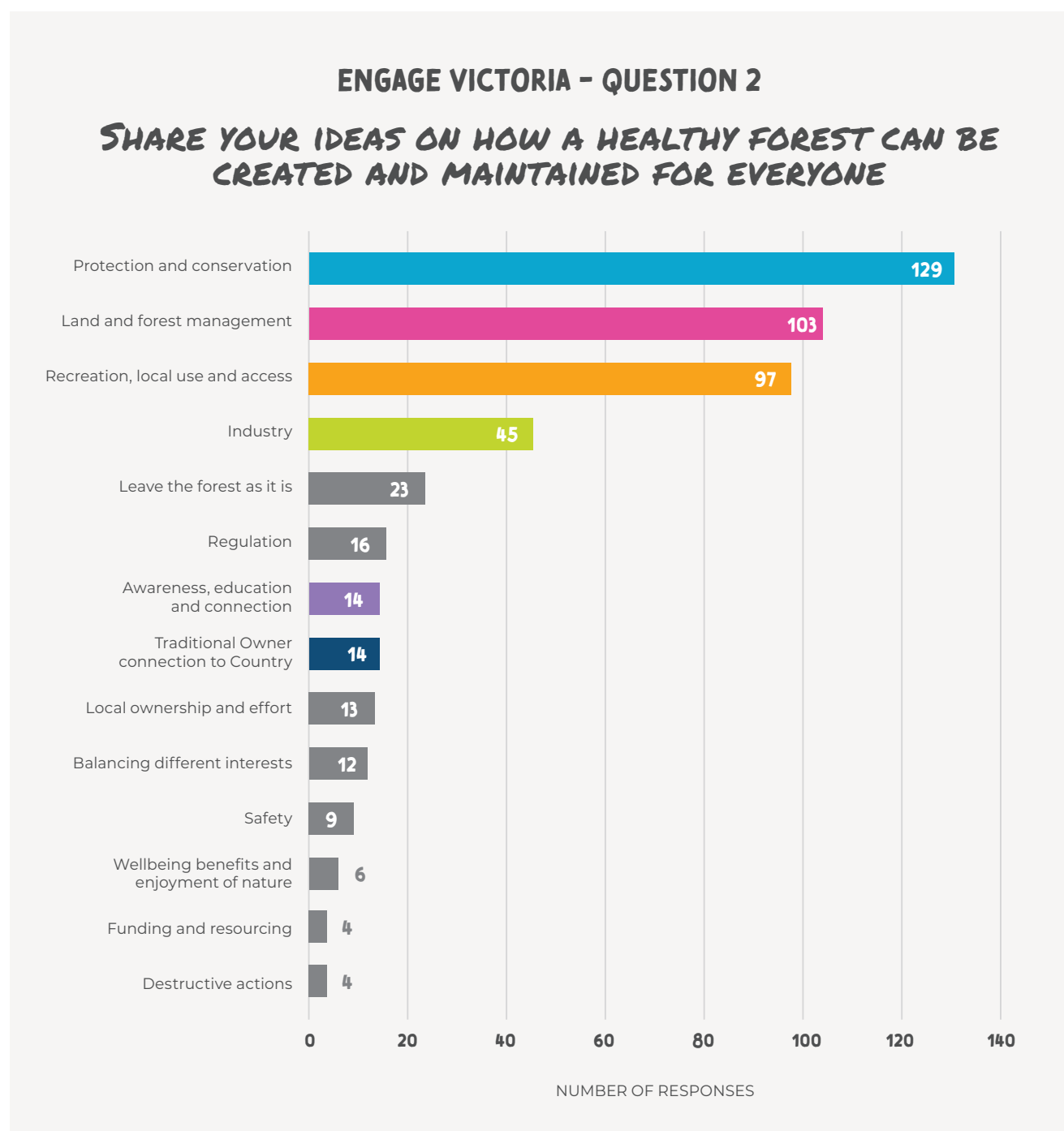


Figure 8 - Graph showing the key themes from Question 2, Engage Victoria.

THEME 1 – PROTECTION AND CONSERVATION

A wide range of views and concerns relating to protection and conservation of native habitat emerged from this theme. Maintaining biodiversity and building ecosystem resilience was significant with 49% comments relating to this theme.



“All forest users rely on a healthy, functioning forest ecosystem. Therefore, the primary focus of the IPA should be to protect quality habitat, maintain biodiversity, and improve the outlook for threatened species. Only this will build ecosystem resilience and protect the forest for all users and generations to come.”

“These remnant forests are special and need to be protected for their conservation values.”

“Providing protection of its biodiversity and the Mirboo North water catchment and water.”

Enhancing connectivity between forests and creating wildlife corridors was considered something that was important to establish in order to protect native flora and fauna (26% of comments).

“Healthy forests require adequate buffer zones with varying restrictions on human activities and effective corridors providing connectivity for the movement of species between habitat patches, they cannot be disconnected island habitats.”

“...protect the forest for future generations and provide safe air for them to breathe”

The use of scientific and evidence-based methods, including engaging citizen science, and recognising the links between the forests and climate action, emerged as a sub theme with 12% of responses.

“Continuing to support citizen-based and professional scientific investigation, education and understanding of Mirboo North’s native forests and the Strzelecki Ranges bioregion.”

“Immediate protection under the National Parks Act of native forests in the Mirboo North IPA is needed, particularly protection from logging, to ensure preservation of biodiversity, which is a critical element of resilience to the damaging effects of climate change.”

THEME 2 – LAND AND FOREST MANAGEMENT

The land and forest management theme related to cultural practices, fire management and the impact of feral pests and weeds.



There is a desire to respect, learn and understand how Gunaikurnai managed Country and what this might look like going forward.

“Showing recognition and respect for the Gunaikurnai people as the Traditional Owners enabling their full participation in the Reserve’s development, cultural planning, and ongoing management.”

Fire management was on the minds of some people who responded (25% comments in the theme). A range of management processes to prevent and manage bushfires were suggested, such as keeping fuel loads low, opting for cool burns, and access to tracks for fire management.

“Regular cool season burns are required to mitigate wildfire risks and ensure the long term survival of native animal and plant life.”

“There has been much bushfire damage in this area e.g. near the Lyrebird walk. Any further control burns must be based solely on ecological criteria to support the forest, not as part of quotas of burns required by the department.”

A range of management processes have been suggested, including collaborative approaches to managing the forest and valuing indigenous knowledge. Some respondents suggested the assistance of volunteers in land management.

“Forests are dynamic and diverse. We know they have been formed from 60,000 years of indigenous management and management long term is required to maintain those but also balance the emerging threats of pests, fuel loads and climate change. A mix of respectful tourism, forestry and community involvement creating protections appropriate to the item being protected but balancing other values must be considered. There is no one solution for all forest types. A good solution is one that accepts forests are dynamic and mean various things to various stakeholders.”

“By utilising volunteers to assist land managers give the users a feeling of ownership by employing their assistance to maintain the forest while reducing required funding.”

Feral animals and weeds are of concern to some people who participated in the drop in activities. 18% of comments related to active management of invasive species.

“Keep the forest weed and pest animal free.”

“Allow hunters to hunt for feral animals seasonally to help protect native fauna.”

THEME 3 – RECREATIONAL AND LOCAL USE



Theme three captured divergent views about the type of recreation activities that could be supported in the Mirboo North region, consistent with what was captured in the community conversations and drop-ins. There were a range of comments that talked to open access for a range of users (36% of comments in the theme) and the importance of maintaining tracks and trails (20% of comments in the theme).

“Access for all, if wet, seasonal closure for 4WDs, shared pathways, bikes, motorbikes, horses, hikers.”

“Public access is important for adventures, and keeping tracks maintained and clear of debris.”

“Dedicated trails for those who like to trail bike through the area and those who like more quiet enjoyment. Educational information on the trails on native flora and fauna. Information on how the traditional owners used the area.”

There were mixed reactions about specifically designated areas for particular activities with 15% of comments captured relating to this theme. It was thought of as a way to manage the competing uses and potential safety concerns. On the other hand, some people thought that designated areas would be overused and worn out and wondered where they would be located next. The participants indicated that they recognise the complexities involved in balancing multiple recreational activities whilst also managing the conservation of the forest.

“We should protect flora and fauna, but we all live in this part of the world because we enjoy it. Some of that enjoyment is through leisure activities. Make safe roads and tracks and trails for different ways to enjoy this wonderful area.”

“I find it ironic and worrying that this parcel of forest, which local people from the local community fought hard with petitions; flora and fauna surveys ... now have to justify the continued use of the very same forest from mainly low impact daylight activities. It is one of the few safe areas where local horse riders, cyclists and walkers can get off main highly trafficked roads; Old Thorpdale Road ...some of us have been horse riding/ bike riding here for over 40 years ...”

There was support for low impact and/or unmotorised leisure and recreation activities, with 12% of comments captured relating to this theme. Some consideration was given to possible restrictions on some activities.

“It’s working at the moment for passive activities including horse riding, cycling and bush walking. We need to share these places for all that want to use them.”

“... The restriction of bike trails and horse riding in areas of old forest, that are vulnerable to damage from these activities.”

THEME 4 – INDUSTRY

There are differing views about the timber industry and harvesting of the forest with 66% of comments captured relating to the industry theme. Some people responded with ceasing the industry altogether, through to a need for active management and regeneration of the plantations. There were some comments that spoke to supporting a sustainable timber industry, including regulations that encourage the repair and regeneration of the forest.



“Stop unsustainably exploiting it (particularly for timber) and spend the money to adequately manage this high biodiversity value area against the myriad threats it faces including lack of hollow bearing trees, invasive species, fragmentation and inappropriate fire regimes.”

“Sustainable timber felling as part of the fuel management mix.”

“Stop logging and prescribed burning and let the forest become ‘old growth’ for the health and benefit of the flora and fauna that live there...”

Interest in supporting local economic opportunities and activities that promote tourism was supported in 18% of the comments. Others acknowledged the complexity of the decisions that need to be made and an opportunity to draw on community values and heritage.

“... I would also like to see local forest areas be able to be used and certified as forest bathing (Shinrin-yoku) locations. Such things can also add great value to local economies through tourism and therefore to the wellbeing of local communities through employment and a sense of connection to place.”

“I acknowledge that this is a comprehensive and complex process to attempt to achieve a balance of outcomes between the environmental, social, cultural heritage, recreational, nature-based tourism and other economic considerations that reflect community thinking and values for this area.”

Incentives for industry workers to retrain or explore other job opportunities were suggested in 15% of the comments captured within this theme. Supporting tourism and smaller industries in the area is seen as a way of creating local jobs and opportunities for the community.

“Incentives for logging communities and personnel to retrain/move/explore tourism opportunities, etc.”

“Alternative job training.”

THEME 5 – LEAVE IT AS IT IS

Maintaining the forest as it is without imposing any restrictions on access or over management was reflected in 23 comments and was its own theme. Within the theme, there were still differing views on the level of management or the effectiveness of the management to date.



“Leave it the way it is, it is being looked after fine.”

“Keep it unlocked for all to enjoy use and maintain.”

“It’s fine the way it is, just maintain the fire tracks.”

“Locking up forest should not be used as a contrasting argument to offset poor land management, this is overwhelmingly seen within the agriculture sector and in fact encouraged by the planning schemes.”

Additional themes

Other themes included:

- Formal regulation and compliance
- Traditional Owner management and connection to country
- Awareness, education and connection
- Local ownership & efforts
- Balancing different values, interests and needs
- Safety
- Wellbeing benefits and enjoyment of nature
- Funding and resourcing
- Objection to destructive practices

3. How do you think future generations will want to enjoy the forest? What will they do here?

Question three was designed to understand how people saw future generations enjoying the forest in the Mirboo North IPA. The activities were provided as options with a further category for 'other'. Multiple answers were able to be selected.

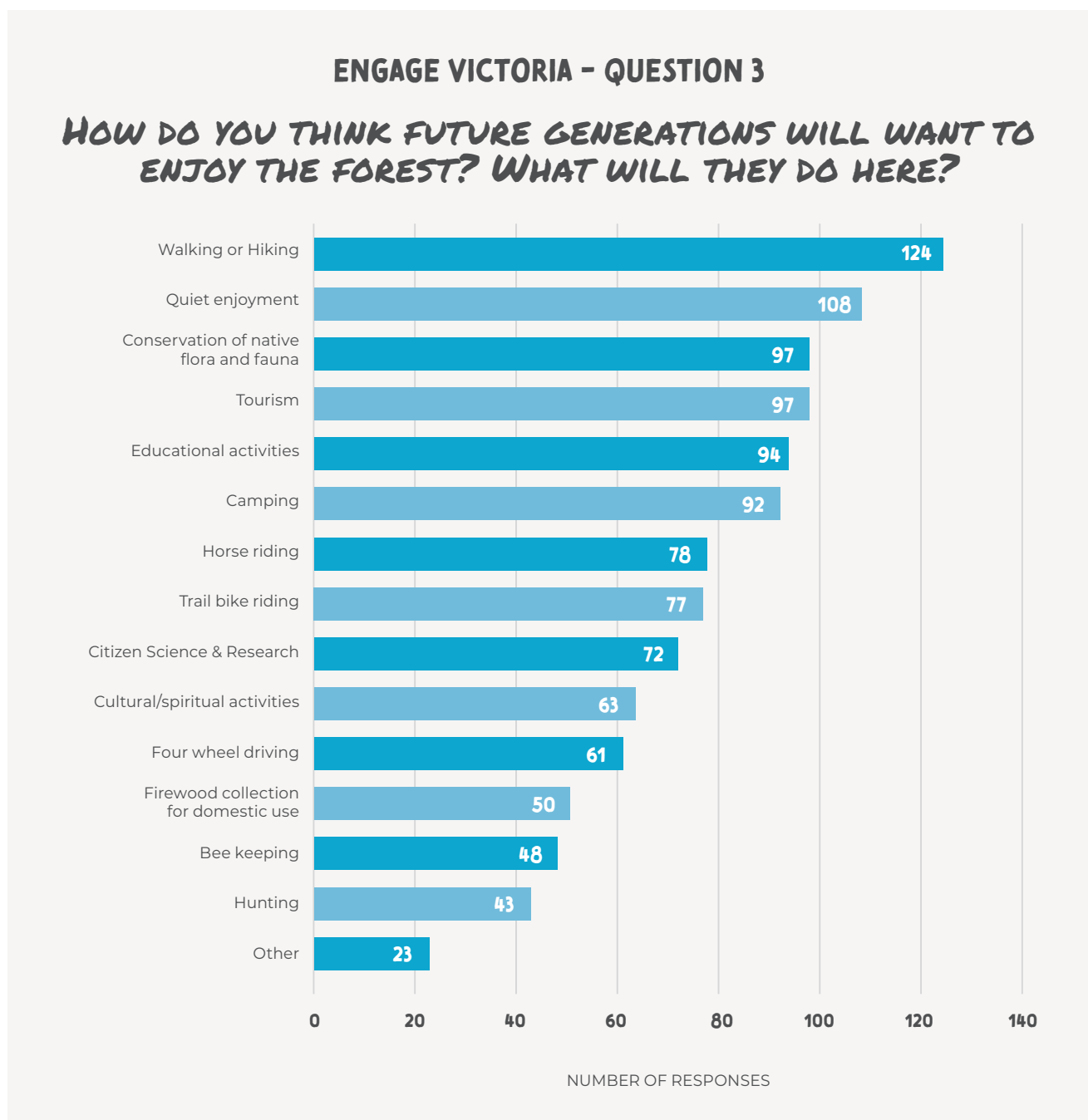


Figure 9 - Graph showing the key themes from Question 3, Engage Victoria.

4. What do you imagine future generations will want to be reminded of when they visit the forest?

Question four was designed to better understand the values participants think are important to maintain. This question captured wider community sentiment around what people see as the legacy as future generations visit the Mirboo North region.

From the 142 responses, these are the key themes that emerged in response to question four:

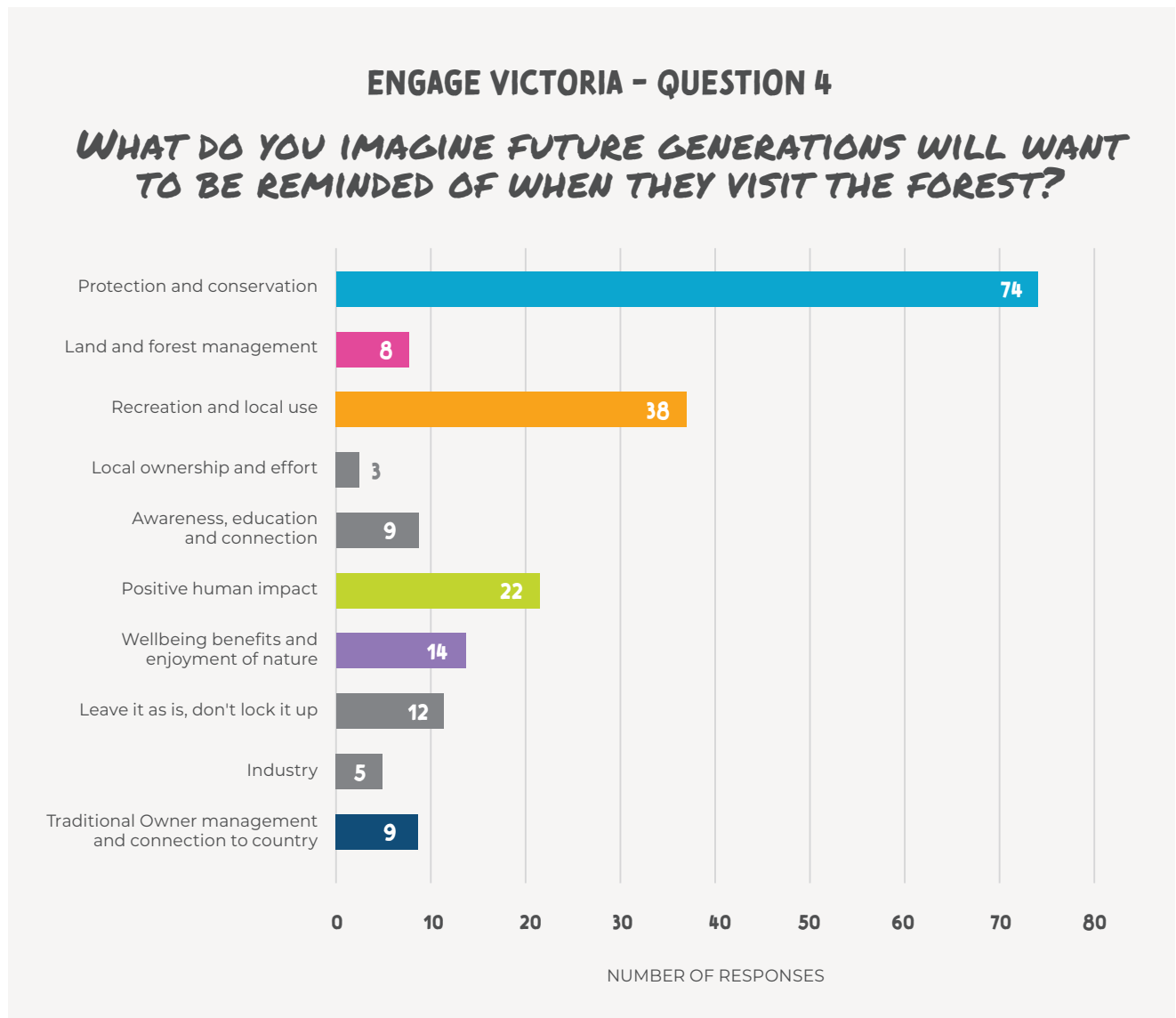


Figure 10 - Graph showing the key themes from Question 4, Engage Victoria.

THEME 1 – PROTECTION AND CONSERVATION



Participants felt that there needs to be great effort to preserve the ecological values and biodiversity now for future generations to enjoy. The uniqueness of the area was described in a positive and uplifting way with 58% of comments captured relating to this theme.

“... they will be amazed at the size of the enormous trees and natural beauty of the flora and fauna that exists in this small pocket of forest ...”

“Future users will be grateful this ecosystem was finally protected, supporting fundamentally important assets like biodiversity, connection to Country, clean air and water, and a place to simply be in nature ...”

“The bush here in rural Victoria is some of the most beautiful in the world.”

Among the responses to this theme, there was a desire to respect, learn and understand how Gunaikurnai managed Country and what this might look like going forward.

“It will provide a place where Traditional Owners can gain an understanding of how their ancestors connected with Country.”

“This land is spiritual in so many ways.”

“They are places with a rich Indigenous heritage which needs to be acknowledged and valued.”

Greater protections for the Mirboo North IPA were desired by a number of respondents and it was suggested that future generations will pass judgement on how the current generation has managed the natural environment.

“What the natural state of vegetation looks like and the different species that cooperate in it. If the area is not extended as far as Boolarra at the very least, in the very near future our future generations will be dissatisfied with the fact that we did not protect these spaces.”

THEME 2 – RECREATION AND LOCAL USE



Maintaining access for recreational users was important among respondents with 71% of comments in this theme talking to access to all. There was an acknowledgement of the efforts of local communities in preserving the forest so that it could be used by locals.

“The forest is multiple use and people should not be locked out.”

“That the locals fought hard to keep it as a forest that could be used by locals for low impact daylight activities such as cycling, walking and horse riding.”

“Still here for all to enjoy.”

“How great a forest is that is open for lots of people with different interests to all enjoy.”

“To be able to access the land for trail bike riding.”

THEME 3 – POSITIVE HUMAN IMPACT AND ACTION

Like theme one, theme three reflected a hopeful outlook on the future. Respondents hope that future generations will recognise the efforts of the current generation on working together to create positive impacts on the environment.



“How this current generation cared enough about the forest that they took action to protect it.”

“I would hope they would be reminded of how caring & forward thinking and planning the current custodians of the forest were in preserving such a vital asset & wild life habitat”

THEME 4 – CONNECTION AND WELLBEING BENEFITS

Future generations enjoying the natural beauty of the forest emerged as a theme from the future focused question. Comments were captured about the opportunity the forest provides for enhancing wellbeing and social connections. Some comments reflected the importance of sharing the experience of being in the forest across generations.



“... what healing - personal, spiritual, communal-comes from nature, intact, within a forest environment in which there is less humans rather than more evidence of humans ...”

“How to connect with nature, take time away from the busy every day, a natural environment.”

“It is our second home and a place to create memories and keep the kids out of trouble. I would like to think that one day they can do the same for their kids and grandkids”.

A sub-theme that identified was the enjoyment of the forest for all. It brought together a focus on quiet enjoyment within nature through to recreational activities so people can enjoy the forest in multiple ways.

“Future generations will want to be reminded of the value this generation placed on natural assets such as the forest and its wildlife. They will want to be able to enjoy it by visiting and undertaking quiet pursuits.”

Additional themes

Other themes included:

- Traditional Owner connection to Country
- Awareness, education and connection
- Land and forest management
- Industry
- Local ownership and effort

3.4 PEAK BODY CONVERSATIONS

OVERVIEW

Peak body conversations were conducted with representatives of 14 state and national peak bodies.

The peak bodies included, but were not limited to, Traditional Owners conservation and environment groups, recreation associations, commercial interest groups, and land managers. The organisations represented are outlined in the table below, with full details provided in Appendix A:

	Australian Motorcycle Trail Riders Association
	Australian Trail Horse Riders Association
	Bushwalking Victoria
	Federation of Victorian Traditional Owners
	Four Wheel Drive Victoria
	Motorcycle Victoria
	Outdoors Victoria
	Parks Victoria
	The Wilderness Society
	Trust for Nature - Mirboo North
	Trust for Nature - Strathbogie Ranges
	Victorian Apiarist Association
	Victorian Hound Hunters Association
	Victorian National Parks Association

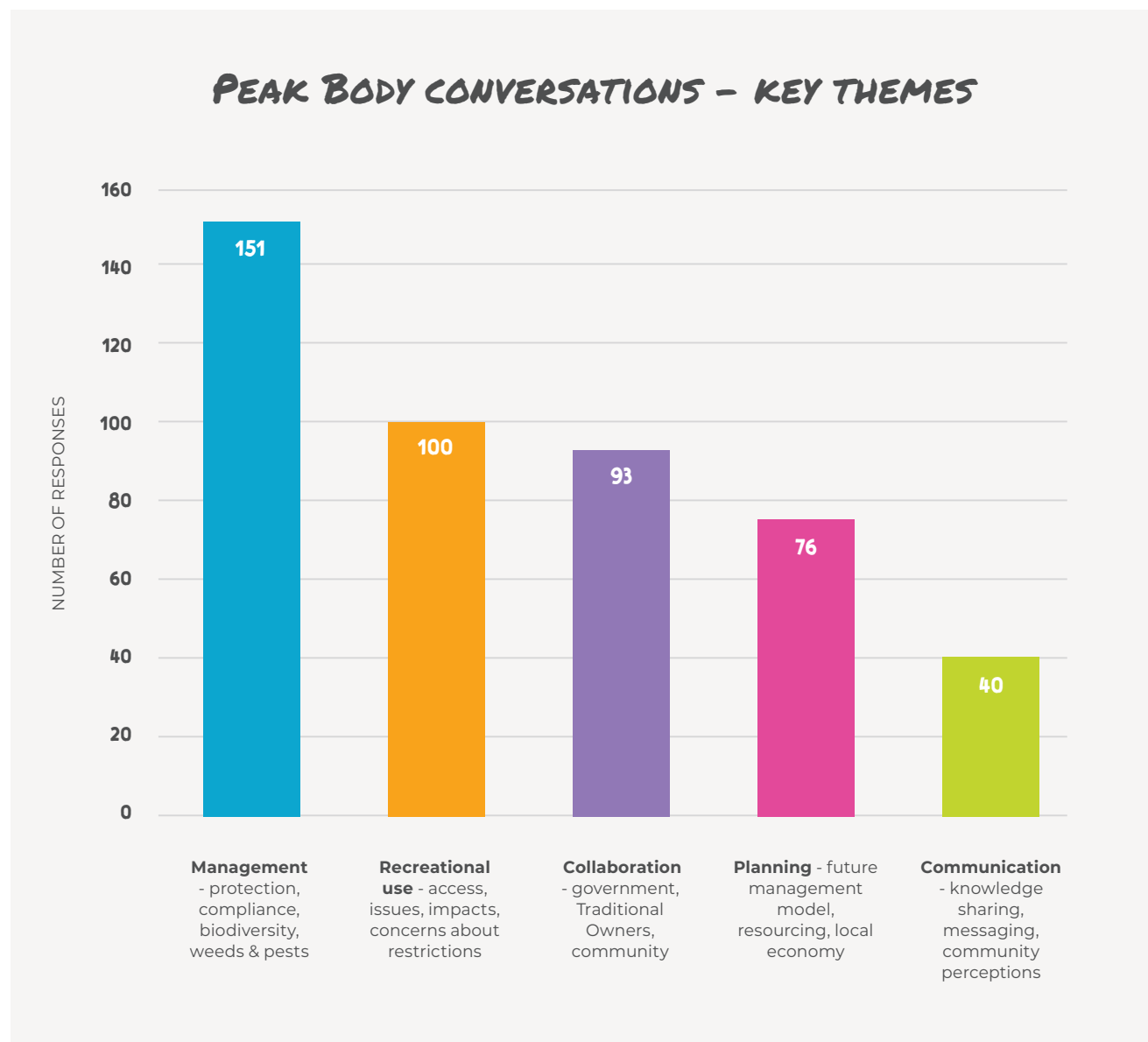
The meetings were conducted face-to-face and online, and each conversation took place over a 1-2 hour period.

The participants were invited to share their insights, knowledge and considerations with the Panel. These were recorded within the sessions and the data analysed for key themes.

A small number of individual peak bodies provided additional information or formal contributions through Engage Victoria. These were provided to the Panel and a list of who provided further information is included in Appendix C.

KEY THEMES

The peak body conversations identified knowledge and interests across five key themes:



THEME 1 – MANAGEMENT AND PROTECTION OF THE FOREST



Conservation and forest management was the most prevalent theme among the peak bodies. Of the 460 comments from peak body representatives, 33% spoke about the threats to the environment and the need for greater protections, increased investment in habitat corridors, and managing the forest ecosystem as a whole.

“The IPA’s state-wide context have significant importance ... iconic species deserve long term protection to allow these species to continue”

“Habitat corridors are important and should be included in further VEAC assessments.”

“Interested in looking at areas as a whole and to consider the whole system protected areas always have an impact.”

Many peak bodies spoke about the need for tighter regulations and increasing compliance among forest users, however, there was a view that decisions made to regulate parts of the forest were not clearly understood or communicated, which leads to some forest users disregarding the rules.

“The threats of off-road recreational vehicles and illegal firewood collections. Off road vehicle use is out of control across this whole landscape - there are YouTube clips of people in the IPAs”

“Closing tracks, being locked out, there’s never any science to these decisions, may be poor management decision, people don’t understand why, so they ride either side of closed track.”

“We need to police the people that do not do the right thing.”

Peak bodies that met with the panel identified the significance of habitat and biodiversity, with regard to native species in the forest and surrounding regions.

“IPA’s state-wide context have significant importance, especially Strathbogie greater gliders, powerful owl, bushfire maintenance, suitable habitat, iconic species deserve long term protection to allow these species to continue.”

“These forests are important for bee keepers who live locally, across the state and maybe even interstate. The importance of the pollen and nectar sources make these forests incredibly productive.”

Participants spoke about the impacts of feral animals, weeds from surrounding areas and the potential for peak bodies to work with government departments and other peak bodies in management strategies.

“Bit of difference around pests and weeds, weeds from farms going into forest, pests coming out from forest, different thresholds for ecological management, levels will be different for different purposes.”

“Deer are in the area but there are not a lot of them. I didn’t read anything about deer in the VEAC report however I think it needs to be included and managed.”

“We have noticed that a huge problem is blackberries. Areas of the bush that are completely over grown with blackberries. This is an incredible environmental threat.”

“Our members feel they have a valuable role to play to manage the deer problem if the government was open to it.”

An opportunity was raised to consider higher impact recreational activities to be diverted to the timber plantations in the area. It was reported that some trail riders currently ride in the plantations however there are differing views on how the plantation managers would view this or for it to be possible.

“We need to look at the areas around the sites, why can’t we use the plantation areas and put in single use tracks? Any damage we will do will be negligible to what the foresters will do.”

“Mixed message being sent to riders from plantations.”

Fire management was discussed by 5% of respondents, with interest in cultural burning to be considered as part of the management strategy.

“Good examples of collaborative approach to culture fire strategy and cultural landscape strategy, seen state work well together. One concern is timing in Public Land Act, make sure governance arrangement being put forward will still exist in the future.”

THEME 2 – RECREATIONAL USE

One hundred comments (22%) related to access for recreational use along with the impacts on forest due to some recreational activities. Many peak bodies spoke about issues or challenges faced by their organisation, in terms of access, community perceptions and infrastructure.



“We have lost access to where we used to be able to ride, due to expansion of Melbourne, areas where we used to ride are now populated.”

“Land managers do need to understand horse riders want a variety of experiences, we are currently being lumped with 4WD’s and trail bikes, perception of environmental damage, horse riding is conceived as high impact. Don’t understand why we are lumped in with 4WD’s.”

“Built infrastructure is an issue for us, and accommodation. More jobs in service provision”

Many peak bodies discussed their interest in having access to the forest for recreational use, and some spoke of the challenges in existing forest areas. Some groups recognised that recreational activities need to be planned and designed, and that the designated areas are not always conducive to some types of recreation.

“Recreational use is good but it needs to be planned, the location not always foreseeable for recreational use.”

Some participants shared the importance of creating connections with the forest, especially from an early age. Some spoke of the experience of accessing the forest across generations.

“Kids introduced to the natural world stay with it, fall in love with.”

“Lots of riders that have ridden the tracks with their fathers, they want to be able to do these rides with their kids.”

A small number of peak bodies discussed the impacts of certain recreational activities, with included damage to native habitats and existing tracks and trail, and rubbish left behind by some forest users.

“... we will work with any land manager, inform them, work through issues, it’s not about the activity you are doing, it’s the flow on effects.”

“We feel that the forestry and management of the forest does more damage than the 4WDs and the motor bikes.”

There is a concern from some peak bodies about being locked out of the forest. Some acknowledged the tension between the purposes of the IPA, and others spoke of inconsistencies with decision making.

“We congratulate the government for preserving and protecting the forest but we do not want to be shut out.”

THEME 3 – COLLABORATION



An interest in working more closely with government and other peak bodies, and in collaboration with Traditional Owners, was identified in 20% of comments. The peak bodies commented about the importance of collaboration as a driving principle, while recognising the limitations of their capacity due to governance models and resourcing.

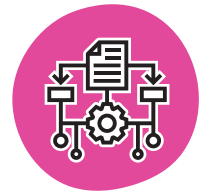
"... ensure Traditional Owner's rights and interests are reflected in the management of public land."

"Will invest our time and resources where we can, we have limited resources ... we welcome government investment."

"Whatever tenures you get need management plans as a requirement, joint or collaborative, Traditional Owners have some status, categories don't always drive it."

"Supportive of Traditional Owner joint management."

THEME 4 – PLANNING AND RESOURCING



The importance of short and long term planning, including consideration for the forest management model, was evident in 17% of responses. Peak bodies identified the challenges within current governance structures, and the tensions among user groups and the community around how the forest should be managed and used. For some peak bodies, the purpose and definitions that inform the management structure are most important.

"Important to get the purposes right, things change over time, how do you keep them accountable? The terms 'uses' and 'management' are treated the same but are slightly different in definition."

"Some tension around infrastructure on park, with those who don't want any more visitation in our parks, with those who want more visitation rights, protect nature but offer more experiences, constant tension, angst against change, can be complex, stakeholders can be varied, changes be welcomed by some and not from others."

"... purpose of reserves is important, this should dictate the management. Really confusing currently, one in crown's land reserves act and one in forest act ... prefer bushland reserves, better definitions."

"Future planning management and governance be discussed in-depth with VEAC, how we can better explore in the future. Big opportunity here, needs to be seen within context most important voice is Traditional Owner voice of whose country it is. "

Funding and resourcing of the management body was also identified in this theme. Peak bodies welcome investment in infrastructure and the flow on effects for the local economy & tourism.

"There needs to be sufficient funding to support the management, it is so important."

"Mirboo North is straight forward; state park makes sense to us. Regional Parks have issues, lack of management plans, important to ensure protection, regional park needs proper management plan to balance values."

"It is an area that hasn't had a lot of funded work and engagement."

"There is a licensed tour operators review with DELWP, approx. 500 business across Victoria. We'd like it to feed into the sector, minimize red tape and costs so those businesses can grow, businesses that take kids to outdoors. Independent campers & schools need to record with land managers where they are going, so we can build in personnel and infrastructure around those sites."

THEME 5 – COMMUNICATION AND EDUCATION

Education and knowledge sharing was identified as a theme in 9% of the comments. This included the way peak bodies are represented in media, the need for greater communications around the value and purpose of the forest. Peak bodies also spoke about the perceptions of their organisation in the wider community, and a need for targeted messaging. Others are concerned that their messages are not being heard.



“Comes back to education, how do we get the message out – social media, all about punching out right message. Like to see more TV, some people don’t like authority, message should be around what the ramifications are, e.g. unattended fire then becomes bush fire. Need to punch out the message.”

“We are wacked on social media a lot, people telling us what they think.”

“We are frustrated around the messages we are trying to get across. We have been arguing the case around the importance and the link to bee keeping access to our native forests and food security.”



4. APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: LIST OF PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS

Community conversation groups
Hilltop Hives
South Gippsland Beekeepers
Latrobe Valley Beekeepers Association
Gippsland Mountain Biking (MTB)
Destination Gippsland
Latrobe Valley Field Naturalists Club
Friends of Lyrebird Walk (Wednesday Warriors)
Yinnar South Landcare Group
Delburn Wind Farm
Mirboo Country Development Inc.
South Gippsland Conservation Society
Mirboo North Night Owls (Country Women's Association)
Preserve our Forest
South Gippsland Bushwalking and Adventure Club
Business - Horse Trail Rides
Australian Trail Horse Rides Association – local contact
Strzelecki Koala Research
Friends of the Earth
South Gippsland Shire Council
HVP Plantations
West Gippsland Catchment Authority
Mirboo North and District Community Foundation
Mirboo North Secondary College
Local advocate - trail bike rider
Landholder – site visit to property adjacent to IPA

Peak body organisations
Australian Motorcycle Trail Riders Association
Australian Trail Horse Riders Association
Bushwalking Victoria
Federation of Victorian Traditional Owners
Four Wheel Drive Victoria
Motorcycle Victoria
Outdoors Victoria
Parks Victoria
The Wilderness Society
Trust for Nature - Mirboo North
Trust for Nature - Strathbogie Ranges
Victorian Apiarist Association
Victorian Hound Hunters Association
Victorian National Parks Association

APPENDIX B: EXAMPLE OF QUESTIONS – DROP INS AND ENGAGE VICTORIA

The drop ins were held:

2 May 2022 4:00 – 8:00pm Grainstore, Mirboo North	4 May 2022 8:30 – 11:00am Grainstore, Mirboo North	26 May 2022 4:00 – 8:00pm Grainstore, Mirboo North
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The questions that the community were asked at the drop in were:



Questions asked on the Engage Victoria platform for the Mirboo Ranges IPA engagement included the following:

Drawing on your knowledge and interests on the Mirboo North Immediate Protection Areas:

1. What activities do you currently participate in?

Tick all options that apply

- ☐ Conservation of native flora & fauna
- ☐ Bee keeping
- ☐ Ancestral Storytelling and other related cultural/spiritual activities
- ☐ Citizen Science & Research
- ☐ Educational activities
- ☐ Tourism
- ☐ Trail bike riding
- ☐ Horse riding
- ☐ Camping
- ☐ Walking or Hiking
- ☐ Four wheel driving
- ☐ Quiet enjoyment
- ☐ Firewood collection for domestic use
- ☐ Hunting
- ☐ Other

2. Share your ideas on how a healthy forest can be created and maintained for everyone

In 500 words or less.

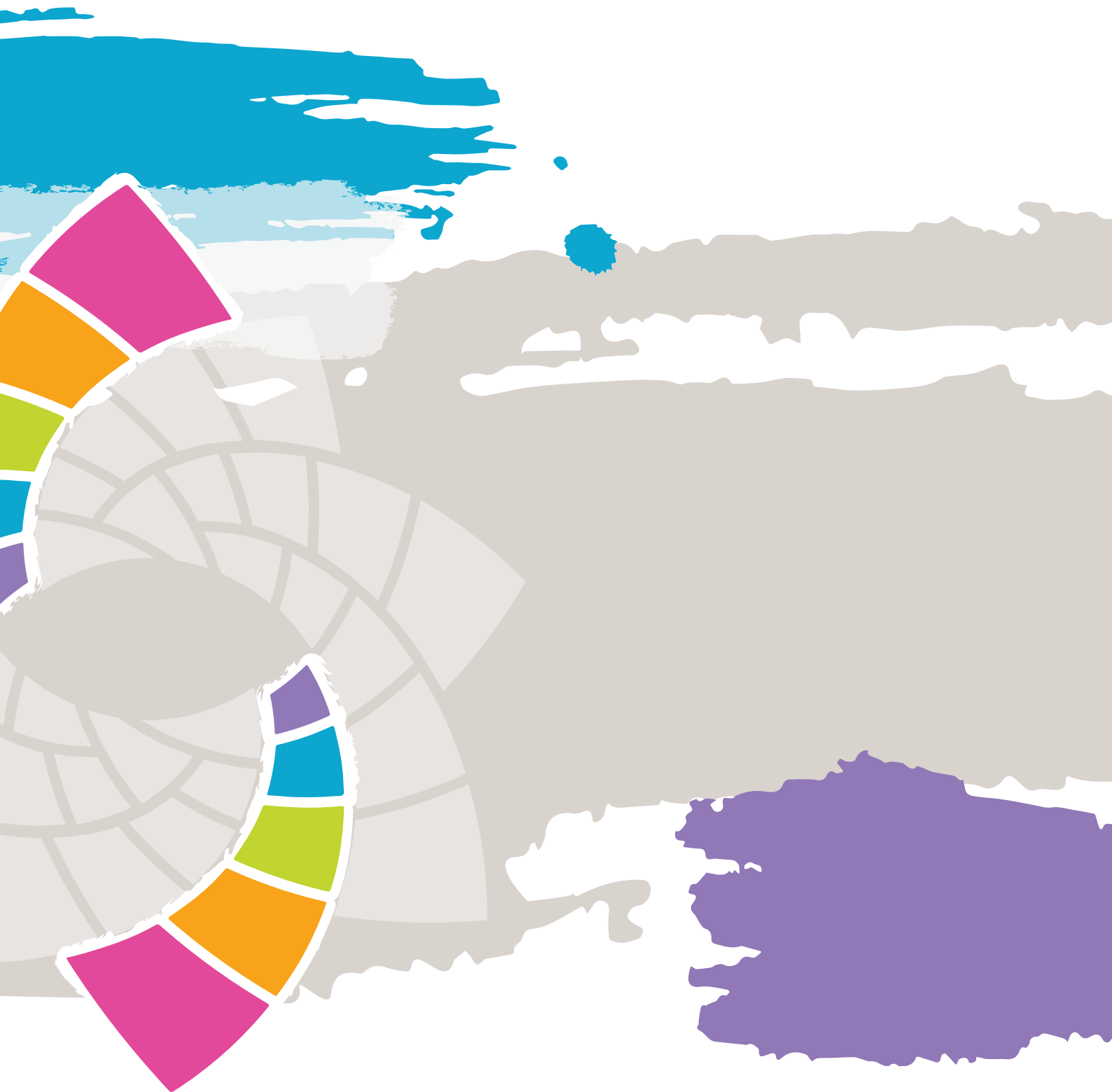
3. How do you think future generations will want to enjoy the forest? What will they do here? Required

Tick all options that apply.

- ☐ Conservation of native flora & fauna
- ☐ Bee keeping
- ☐ Ancestral Storytelling and other related cultural/spiritual activities
- ☐ Citizen Science & Research
- ☐ Educational activities
- ☐ Tourism
- ☐ Trail bike riding
- ☐ Horse riding
- ☐ Camping
- ☐ Walking or Hiking
- ☐ Four wheel driving
- ☐ Quiet enjoyment
- ☐ Firewood collection for domestic use
- ☐ Hunting
- ☐ Other

4. What do you imagine future generations will want to be reminded of when they visit the forest?

In 500 words or less



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