

Great Ocean Road Taskforce – Submission from Wye River, Separation Creek and Kennett River Renewal Association

1. Introduction

WSKRA Inc (Wye River, Separation Creek and Kennett River Renewal Association), [REDACTED], was established shortly after the Christmas Day 2015 bushfire to support the recovery of our community from the fire and the 2016 landslips. Initially known as the Community Resilience Committee, WSKRA consists of representatives of the major community organisations (Wye River CFA, Kennett River Association, Wye River and Separation Creek Progress Association, Wye River Surf Lifesaving Club) and independent community representatives. Current co-chairs are Paul Greene and Joanne Tyler.

Our experience makes us particularly aware of issues of emergency management. That the fire occurred on Christmas Day was fortuitous as the number of tourists in the area was well below summer peaks and due to a well-rehearsed evacuation plan no lives were lost. A couple of days later the story could have been quite different.

2. Current Concerns

We are concerned about:

- Large numbers of tourists being in our area on days of very high fire danger rating and above, without induction into emergency protocols, and stretching the capacity of emergency services. The GOR should not be open to tourist buses on these days, due to both visitor volumes and the chance of blocking the road in an emergency. Between Lorne and Apollo Bay the best access to the smaller towns is limited to the GOR. Smaller roads are unmade and usually impassable during fires and wet weather. Accommodation providers must take responsibility for advising guests of measures they are responsible for to maximise their own safety and that of those around them. Climate change makes this a major issue. Rising sea levels also should be an ongoing consideration.
- The very real potential exists for changed demographics due to increased investment by absentee landlords renting properties through Airbnb and similar for much of the year. This will lead to a decrease in community members as permanent residents become priced out, permanent rentals unavailable, and property investors potentially have less engagement and affinity with the community. In turn this will lead to less volunteers for emergency services such as the CFA and Surf Life Saving Club, and other community organisations that constitute the fabric of our community. It is beneficial to consider measures to support community diversity such as community/social housing. Similarly ocean side camping grounds are important to supporting the CFA and Surf Club membership, with volunteers in general being priced out of holiday rentals. In considering aspects of community and place along the GOR the Taskforce should be mindful that 'one size does not fit all'.
- Safety issues also include the importance of educating tourists about safe practices in the surf prior to arrival. Similarly inexperienced drivers of hire cars are creating significant hazards for all road users. Tourist bus impacts on Kennett River and its wildlife need to be appropriately managed to create a positive experience for all parties. Registration and

training for bus/mini bus drivers, international tourists in self-drive vehicles and passengers to maximize safety, and minimize environmental and negative community impacts need to be in place.¹

- Reliable and high volume mobile phone and internet access is essential.
- In other parts of the world (and at many Australian sites) it is common to have to book and pay to see places of national significance. We are concerned that uncontrolled visitation will destroy what it is that people come to see, our communities and our environment. Better management of tourism will generate funds which can support our region and its unique characteristics. Income should be managed locally and not be absorbed into Treasury funds.
- It is incumbent on providers of tourism transport to ensure that vehicles are equipped with rubbish containers and that these are used, and that toilet stops are planned for public facilities. Similarly there is a need to fund adequate toilet facilities in the area to maintain public health and a positive visitor experience.
- Tourism traffic needs to be managed, and residential areas and private properties must be no-go zones for commercial operators. The natural beauty of our area can be enhanced by small scale and informal facilities, sympathetic to the environment and of minimal impact.²
- Indigenous heritage should be highlighted and preserved
- Rethinking the coast provides an opportunity for disability access issues to be given appropriate priority.
- We support sustainable tourism including linked walks covering the distance from Apollo Bay to Torquay, walking tracks in Wye River along former logging, rail and more recent fire tracks (including the Rail Trail Loop adjacent to Wye River), a walk in view of the coast from Wye River to the Jamieson River camping reserve, and a walk between Wye and Kennett Rivers, again along the coast, symbolically linking our communities.

3. Governance of the GOR

Participation of and accountability to the community needs to be strengthened under any change to the governance and management of the GOR and its environs.

- There is concern that a large authority will mean that the participation of and accountability to communities along the GOR will be lost. While a new body needs to be able to make decisions, it also needs to involve communities and be accountable to them – what would be the process for this? A new body could not be funded by ratepayers.
- We would not want decisions made and enacted consequent to substantial community input to be overturned. For example Wye River, Separation Creek and Kennett River have a planning scheme with agreed parameters following significant community input and consultation. This includes the Neighbourhood Character Overlay, which ensures that new buildings and works respect the nationally significant Great Ocean Road Region landscape.
- Similarly we do not wish to see any alteration to our town boundaries. We are in an area of extreme bushfire risk, and our topography makes reticulated sewerage and water

¹ Renewal Plan for Wye River, Separation Creek and Kennett River 2018 -2019

² ibid

impossible. Our delicate environment cannot sustain a change in the boundaries or an increase in the density of development. .

- We are very appreciative of the efforts of many agencies to deal with the fire and its aftermath. However we have at times observed a lack of co-ordination which may well have increased costs. The Paddy's Path hillside is the most obvious example – significant funds are being expended in order to produce a good outcome, but it is not clear to us or the agencies involved who is in charge. Similarly in the early recovery period privatised essential services were problematic and, in our experience, did not mesh well with government agencies and community expectations.

We thank the taskforce for visiting Wye River. We were pleased to have the opportunity to organise a meeting to enable the Taskforce to speak with about 45 of our community members. This was important both for the community and the Taskforce, given its terms of reference relating to our experience of the fire and of agencies involved in the subsequent (and ongoing) recovery effort. We welcome the establishment of the Taskforce, and look forward to continuing to have a positive experience in our towns as full and part time residents, campers, and regular visitors, while welcoming tourists.