

**Towong Shire
Hunting Tourism Action Plan
Draft**

**Prepared by Tourism North East
for Towong Shire Council**

1. Introduction

Towong Shire attracts 124,000 visitors per annum who are drawn to the area by its expansive natural assets and the variety of activities that this diverse landscape supports. These visitors generate a total tourism output of \$23million¹ and therefore make a significant contribution to the local economy. As such, tourism is acknowledged as being a priority industry for Towong Shire, however one where there is significant scope for growth.

With this in mind, Towong Shire Council and the Towong Shire community are interested in pursuing new tourism opportunities that have the ability to increase the number of people visiting the area and their associated yield, and generate new tourism-related employment opportunities for locals. As an outcome of the Upper Murray 2030 consultation process and discussion with Mitta Valley residents, hunting tourism has been identified as an activity with strong tourism potential; capable of leveraging Towong Shire's abundant deer population, scenic natural environment and strong community support for the activity.

This action plan has been developed to better understand the hunting tourism landscape specifically associated with deer, and the actions required by Towong Shire Council and other parties to capitalise on opportunities in this space. This plan has been developed based on consultation with Towong Shire Council staff, Tourism North East, Game Management Authority, Catchment Management Authority, Australian Deer Association, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, and local industry that are active in the hunting tourism space.

¹Remplan, Tourism Research Australia as noted in: Urban Enterprise (2016), *North East Victoria Cycling Optimisation Interim Report*, commissioned by Tourism North East.

2. Strategic Context

2.1 Sustainable Hunting Action Plan

In December 2016, the Victorian State Government released its *Sustainable Hunting Action Plan 2016-2020* to guide the long-term growth of responsible game hunting. The Plan outlines the following framework and associated priority areas:



The plan emphasises coordination and collaboration between relevant agencies with a view to ensure that hunting continues to be safe, sustainable and responsible.

While hunting tourism is not a focus of the plan, it does acknowledge that facilitating hunting tourism will be a component associated with growing the social and economic benefits of hunting more broadly. It also highlights a number of actions that hold relevance to the Towong Shire context. That is, the plan is looking to:

- Promote regional hunting opportunities through targeted communication with relevant regional agencies and organisations
- Facilitate game meat processing by investigating and reducing barriers to the processing of wild harvested game meat to allow optimal use of game harvest
- Provide better hunting access by improving physical access to State Game Reserves
- Provide better access to information through a single, comprehensive hunting website, an improved distribution network for a new hunting manual, and the upgrading of the game licensing system to allow for more targeted messaging to hunters.

Upper Murray Tourism 2030

The *Upper Murray 2030 Vision Plan* looks to identify opportunities to grow tourism in the Upper Murray – a region that encompasses a significant portion of the Towong Shire. Driven by the local community, this plan points to the development of a new range of year-round tourism products. It recommends developing a tourism offering that:

- showcases the region’s considerable natural assets
- motivates visitors to travel the extra distance required to reach the Upper Murray from key populations
- maximises economic outcomes through the provision of jobs and other associated opportunities.

Hunting is identified as a key opportunity area for the Upper Murray, including the potential to offer community-led guided hunting and hunting tours, and the development of an integrated wilderness lodge that can be used as a base for nature-based activities in the region, including hunting.

The plan acknowledges that the largest current constraint for tourism is the distance to major cities and tourism markets – a barrier than can be addressed through the development of unique and engaging tourism experiences, and through consideration for opportunities associated with targeting regional centres like Albury Wodonga and Wagga Wagga.

2.2 ‘Our Valley, Our Future’ Mitta Valley Community Plan

The *‘Our Valley, Our Future’ Mitta Valley Community Plan 2013 – 2016* looks to create a strong, sustainable and vibrant community for everyone. This plan identifies the greatest challenges and opportunities facing the Mitta Valley, with tourism identified as key area with much potential. Community research identified a lack of tourism activities and accommodation as local tourism barriers, and felt that a vibrant and sustainable visitor economy could be achieved through the development of a valid ecotourism product.

3. Victorian Hunting Industry

3.1 Recreational Hunting

There are now more than 50,000 licensed game hunters in Victoria, which is an increase of about 8,000 hunters in the last five years, and a 186% increase across the last decade. According to research commissioned by the Victorian Department of Environment and Primary Industries (DEPI)², the total expenditure of game hunters - those who have a firearm for the purpose of recreational hunting rather than pest control - is estimated to be worth \$282 million per year to the Victorian economy.

Over \$138 million alone is spent on deer hunting, which is the highest yielding animal category. Most of this expenditure is realised in Melbourne, followed by the LGAs of Wellington (\$9.0m), Mitchell

² RMCG, EconSearch and DBM Consultants (2013), *Estimating the economic impact of hunting in Victoria in 2013*, commissioned by the Victorian Department of Environment and Primary Industries

(\$8.1m), Mansfield (\$7.5m), Latrobe (\$6.6m) and Baw Baw (\$5.1m). Towong ranks 13th in the list of LGAs relative to yield associated with deer hunting, attracting \$1.5million in annual spend. Analysis of total expenditure per LGA is important in that it demonstrates the prevalence of deer hunting in particular areas, including local support for the activity.

However, the expenditure that is most relevant to this plan is the 'on trip' spend, which reflects money that is being spent in-region during a hunting trip. Of the \$138million spent on deer hunting each year, 40% can be attributed to items that visitors purchase while on their hunting trip like transport, ammunition, accommodation, meals and tours. In this way, the 'on trip' spend of hunters can be likened to tourism expenditure.

Deer hunters on average spend the most amount of days per year hunting (6.4 versus 3.7 for ducks and 0.8 for quail), which contributes to their strong yield potential and identifies them as an attractive and potentially valuable market for the tourism within the Towong Shire.

4. Game Hunter Profile

4.1 Traditional Profile

Hunting tourists are acknowledged as holding great potential for relevant destinations as they are willing to commit high levels of spend in pursuit of their chosen game. They are willing to travel long distances to reach particular game and landscapes³, which includes both domestic and international travel amongst specific customer segments.

The aforementioned DEPI research provides strong insights into the profile of the game hunter. That is, they are primary male (98%), Australian born (non-Indigenous), and aged between 35 and 59 with a skew towards those aged 40-44 and 50-54. The majority of hunters (82%) live in a household with their family, with 46% of them living with their partner and having children over 15 living at home, and 35% having kids under the age of 15. Most hunters have full-time paid work and have a household income of \$78k or above.

When asked why they hunt, the top three responses were:

- To get food for myself or my friends/family 70%
- To spend time in the outdoors 66%
- The sport of hunting 52%

When respondents were asked to rate on a scale to what extent they agreed with certain social outcomes associated with hunting, key findings were as follows:

- Benefits associated with being outdoors and connecting to nature and special places were most commonly reported, with 92% of respondents reporting their hunting trips let them enjoy nature, 90% that they help them connect to special places, 90% that they let them connect to nature, and 87% that they help them spend more time outdoors than they would otherwise

³ G.McL. Dryden and S.J. Craig-Smith (2004), *Safari Hunting of Australian Exotic Wild Game - A report for the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation*, commissioned by Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation

- Benefits associated with experiencing a break in routine were experienced by 90% of respondents
- Benefits associated with strengthening social ties, with 87% reporting that hunting enabled them to spend time with people who have a similar outlook, and 83% that it enabled them to spend time with friends, suggesting that hunting reinforces existing social ties with likeminded people.

In terms of where they hunt, most hunters have a strong attachment to particular locations, with the majority usually hunting in the same place each season. However, 39% of respondents commented that they regularly change where they go hunting, which points to opportunity for hunting tourism in the Towong Shire as a relatively untapped hunting destination.

Hunters feel more strongly aligned with the type of game they hunt, with 83% saying that that are committed to hunting a particular type of game and unwilling to change to a different animal. Considering that the deer hunting market is the most popular in Victoria, and aligns with the offering available in the Towong Shire, this is a good indicator for the local area.

In terms of other activities that hunters enjoy, they tend to be other outdoor pursuits with the most popular activities being camping (88%), fishing (87%) and four-wheel driving (66%).

4.2 Changing Profiles

While most hunters align with the profile outlined in 4.1, there have been a number of growth trends in the hunting tourism market that point to new opportunities for destinations capable of capitalising on them.

There is a growing contingent of female hunters, and also a growth in the family market. However, the most significant growth has been in a younger demographic of hunting tourist. That is, while the traditional hunter has been in the 40-54 age bracket, there has been a recognised growth in 30-35 year old hunting tourist. Observations show this segment tends to be professional with higher service expectations than traditional hunting tourists, which they can afford due to a higher level of disposable income. Their need of ancillary hunting tourism services stems from their lack of connection and experience with the land and wilderness environments.

This shift in the market points to changing demand for hunting tourism experiences, such as a growing demand for accommodation versus camping options, and an interest in other complementary activities to meet the requirements of different interests and ages of these groups.

5. Competitive Landscape

5.1 Hunting Destinations

There are a number of Victorian destinations that have active hunting markets that are driven by both community and visitor involvement in the activity. Those with the highest dollar share of the market enjoy close proximity to Melbourne and also offer a critical supply of hunting services to support market demand. In terms of deer hunting expenditure, the highest yielding local government areas are Wellington, Mitchell and Mansfield shires, which are all 1-3 hours drive from Melbourne.

Mansfield, which is also located in the High Country region and could therefore be considered a direct competitor for any hunting tourism product developed by the Towong Shire Council and community in this space, features two hunting/fishing shops, operators offering Sambar packages (accommodation, hunting on private land, transport on site and guidance for novices), and access to remote locations via helicopter. However, Mansfield is not actively promoted as a hunting destination.

Around Australia, there are also some great examples of well developed, multi-faceted hunting tourism offerings:

Watervalley Game Ranch and Hunt Australia, SA

Watervalley Game Ranch in South Australia is a working cattle and sheep ranch of more than 300,000 acres, which also features six species of free roaming deer. Hunt Australia, a safari outfitter established in 1980, actively targets international tourists with this property, offering packages that can be customised featuring the following components:

- Guides
- 4WD vehicle access to hunting areas
- Cottage accommodation on the ranch
- Meals and alcohol
- Rifle hire
- Pre-arranged entry permits for international guests looking to bring their guns into the country
- Airport transfers.

As a business with market longevity, Hunt Australia is a great example of the benefits of offering a customisable, and diverse hunting tourism offering.

Carmor Plains Wildlife Reserve – Australia Wide Safaris, NT

Australia Wide Safaris own and manage Carmor Plains Wildlife Reserve, a 100,000 acre privately owned game reserve beside Kakadu National Park. A variety of game is available on-site including water buffalo, wild goat and cattle, waterfowl, banteng and some of the highest populations of wild boar in the country. Australia Wide Safaris offers a similar experience to Hunt Australia, with some additional services including trophy preparation, packing and shipping (ready for a taxidermist), skull mounting, a sealed cool room, air boat (hovercraft) tours and crocodile harvesting.

Examples like these assist with identifying an industry benchmark for operators and destinations looking to be competitive in this space.

5.2 Critical Success Factors

Industry consultation and a review of the competitive landscape allows for the identification of critical success factors – the elements that are vital to any destination looking to establish itself as a successful hunting tourism destination. These critical success factors have been recognised as follows:

- Reliable and quality game
- A range of hunting services
- Ease of land access
- Strong community support for recreational hunting
- A safe hunting environment with no hunting-related fatalities
- A strong destination brand with awareness amongst the hunting market.

6. Towong Shire Situation Analysis

6.1 Current Offering

Towong Shire as a hunting destination is in strong position relative to many of the critical success factors listed in 5.2, with solid opportunity to build strength in the areas where it currently under-delivers.

Towong Shire as a locality boasts a reliable and accessible mass of deer both on public and private land. A good proportion of the deer population is considered to be of trophy status, with the area having not been over hunted and hence, an abundance of older stags obtainable.

Hunting is already well established in the region as an accepted sporting pursuit. The Towong Shire community appears to be very supportive of the hunting tourism concept, seeing it as a product that can deliver a sustainable visitor economy with tangible benefits to the local community.

Already recognised as a prime destination for deer hunting, Towong Shire Council and the Towong Shire community have a sound foundation on which to build a hunting brand to take to the increasing market. Unfortunately one fatality has occurred in recent years within the Towong Shire area, which has heightened awareness of authorities and the community that there is a need to govern current hunting movement within the region.

There are currently four local operators who actively support the hunting tourism market, with Red Oak Farm Stay in the Mitta Valley being an excellent example of a business that has tailored its offering to suit the needs of this market; offering accommodation on a property supported by exclusive on-site hunting. As a result of its efforts in this space, hunting tourists are now driving accommodation capacity in traditionally quiet periods, now accounting for 50% of its business between May and August.

The Dartmouth Motel in the Mitta Valley also accommodates and provides meals for hunters, as well as offering hunting guiding services. Its focus in this space has seen hunting tourism grow from 6% to 30-40% of its business, pointing to huge potential for a multi-faceted hunting tourism offering across the destination.

6.2 SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community embraces hunting and is keen for hunting tourism growth/development Strong deer population capable of supporting a sustainable hunting tourism market No bag limit on deer Strong local hunting knowledge Appealing natural landscape Existing tourism businesses have capacity to support increased tourist numbers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited hunting tourism product and experiences Destination distance from Melbourne Limited funds to drive category ownership (product development and marketing) No lead entity identified to own/coordinate hunting tourism efforts
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For Towong Shire to be known as a leading deer hunting destination To support hunting on private land to drive availability of hunting opportunities (including exclusive experiences) Hunting experiences can leverage broader destination and regional tourism offer To link hunting tourism to food production if legislation changes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Other destinations with stronger hunting markets and closer proximity to Melbourne threaten Towong Shire's success in this space Negative perceptions associated with recreational hunting negatively impact non-hunting tourism opportunities

It is important that Towong Shire Council and relevant operators look to implement strategies to leverage its strengths to capitalise on opportunities, and actively look to address its perceived weaknesses.

7. Hunting Tourism Objectives

Towong Shire Council is looking to establish Towong Shire as a destination that supports a thriving hunting tourism industry, which delivers positive social and economic outcomes to local communities. In order to realise this vision, Towong Shire Council is looking to meet four key objectives:

- To increase visitation and yield opportunities associated with recreational hunting.

- To grow employment opportunities associated with hunting tourism in Towong Shire, including the development of career pathways
- To build community satisfaction and town pride off the back of strong hunting tourism market
- To develop a safe framework and environment for hunting activity to occur within Towong Shire.

The plan recommends a two-pronged approach in order to deliver on these objectives: the enhancement/development of hunting tourism products to meet current and potential visitor demand, and taking this offering to market via a dedicated campaign that enables Towong Shire to take a leadership position in the Victorian deer hunting market.

Much of the data relating to hunting directly in Towong Shire is anecdotal. As an initial action, the current Towong Shire hunting scenario will require surveying to provide a benchmark and ensure the identified key objectives are measurable.

8. Product Development Opportunities

8.1 Accommodation Customisation

The nature of recreational hunting means that participants have a natural proclivity to camp, fully immersing themselves in their wilderness experience. However, campers – who are often self-sufficient and bring many of their own supplies from home – present limited yield opportunities to regional communities.

While Towong Shire Council must look to better service and leverage campers, it needs to also develop strategies to convert them from low to high yielding tourists through accommodation spend. Accommodating hunters in pubs, hotels and lodges will provide a strong base for the local economy that looks to utilise and leverage existing assets and drive capacity among current businesses. The provision of accommodation can also facilitate other potential commercial opportunities, like the packaging of accommodation with food hampers, meals, alcohol and other services, ensuring that hunting tourist spend is maximised within the Towong Shire.

If accommodation opportunities amongst hunting tourists are going to grow, then it is important that associated operations are customised meet the needs of and attract this type of customer. Industry consultation suggests that key to these efforts is the installation of facilities for meat storage, which allow for game to be quickly cooled and stored to avoid meat spoilage - an important consideration for hunters.

The installation of such storage is a clear indication that the accommodation provider is serious about its commitment to hunting tourism and servicing its clients. Such a facility also allows hunters to stay longer at any one destination.

Another consideration is the provision of gun storage, which is effective in both safeguarding expensive pieces of equipment and ensuring the safety of the travelling group and wider community. Properly servicing a guest's information needs both within and outside of the hunting space is also deemed important.

In order to lift and regulate the accommodation experience offered to this market, Towong Shire Council should develop an accreditation program that requires participating accommodation providers to meet a certain set of criteria in order to leverage associated marketing exposure.

Indeed, there are existing regional models – like those developed to identify cycle friendly businesses – that could be applied to the hunting tourism industry in the Towong Shire context. Such programs create a point of difference for the destination, reinforce perceptions of Towong Shire as a destination with category ownership position in the hunting tourism space, and ensure the destination better services customers.

In addition to working with the existing accommodation offering, the development of a new, purpose-built wilderness lodge (as per the *Upper Murray 2030 Vision Plan* noted in Tourism 2.2) has the potential to act as a hero offering amongst the hunting tourism market – one that also drives awareness for the affiliated accommodation offering in the region. Aside from being a standalone visitation drawcard, it also has the potential to fill a perceived gap in the current regional tourism offering for unique accommodation located within natural surrounds. That is, in forests, near water or showcasing natural assets to enable visitors to feel closer to nature⁴, ensuring broad mass-market appeal.

Recommended Actions:

- Work with the Australian Deer Association to survey its database to better understand and prioritise the facilities/services that it would most value in a ‘hunting friendly business’
- Using this survey, determine criteria for a ‘hunting friendly business’ program and any associated processes and controls
- Identify Towong Shire based accommodation operators that have an interest in attracting hunting tourists, and also have capacity to diversify their offering. Work with these businesses to meet the identified criteria
- Scope the potential for a group buy of storage cool rooms/meat storage and gun storage within the context of the hunting friendly business program
- Consider government funding that might be available to subsidise a group buy if required.

8.2 Auxiliary Product Development

In addition to accommodation propositions, a strong Tourism Hunting Industry and Brand in Towong Shire offers a wealth of new small business development opportunities. Taxidermy, 4WD hire, hunting supply stores and kennels have all been identified as areas for growth.

Existing Businesses would be presented with an opportunity to diversify their income streams:

- Property owners charging land access fees
- Accommodation operators charging for use of a facility to store ammunition
- Accommodation operators offering kennels for hunting dogs
- Food establishments providing pre-delivered hampers to cater for the duration of hunters’ stay.

⁴ Tourism North East (2016), *Victoria’s High Country Destination Management Plan 2013-2023*

The potential direct and subsequent economic development opportunities from an effective Tourism Hunting strategy in Towong Shire are substantial.

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8.3 Hunting Guides

a) Guiding

There are two primary occupations associated with commercial hunting⁵:

- Outfitters are the individuals and organisations who advertises the availability of hunting, receive enquiries from potential clients, and coordinate the various components of their hunting experience
- The guide, who facilitates the hunting experience, taking customers to find and capture game, and meet their expectations for the quality and number of game taken.

These roles can either be delivered by separate entities, or encompassed within the one organisation.

Hunting guides are important because they are key to the tourism product, providing local expertise that assist all levels of hunters in optimising their hunting experience. This includes leading novice hunters through a safe and enjoyable hunting experience, and assisting them with navigating a land to which they have no affiliation. For experienced hunters, guides are important in helping to meet their expectations about the quality and number of game taken.

Guides are particularly important as they provide a level of control for recreational hunting in terms of ethical treatment of animals, safe gun practices and correct land access. They also offer an additional yield generating activity associated with the tourism offering.

Guiding is still relatively in its infancy in Victoria, with only a limited number of operators servicing the market. This points to opportunity for the industry in Towong Shire to build strength in this space, which would deliver a number of benefits:

- Reiterate Towong Shire as a destination that is committed to hunting tourism, providing a range of services that meet current market needs
- Servicing the needs of the growing entry level hunter market, particularly considering Sambar Deer are difficult to locate and challenging to hunt
- Providing job opportunities for the local community
- Creating potential to access greater amounts of private land through the delivery of a controllable hunting offering.

It is envisaged that this type of offering would largely appeal to the new but very lucrative growth markets, particularly families, youth and growing professional segments.

Diversification of the offering will assist in driving the commercial success of these guiding operations. That is, in addition to supplying hunting tours they could offer guided tours associated with wildlife observation, photography and environmental education, which involve the same knowledge and skill-set of finding animals in a diverse ecosystem to meet the needs of visitors. Demand for these types of nature-based pursuits has grown steadily in recent years, and operators in the Towong Shire – with its abundant natural assets – are well positioned to meet this interest.

⁵ Safari Hunting of Australian Exotic Wild Game - A report for the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation

b) Guide Accreditation

The guide industry is currently un-accredited with no representation from a peak body or professional association. Towong stakeholders feel that accreditation is important in establishing a credible guide industry that local tourism operators and potentially landholders would feel confident supporting (see 8.3).

The Game Management Authority is looking at developing an accreditation program, which Towong Shire Council should look to support rather than lead, with a view that this is likely to become a State-wide or national standard. However, opportunity exists for the Towong Shire to become a pilot location for such an accreditation program, aligning with this statutory authority to drive the development of an industry standard and in doing so raise its profile in the hunting market.

Recommended actions:

- Advocate for standardised guide accreditation with particular consideration given to leveraging State Government focus on improving hunting opportunities and promoting responsible hunting
- Formally approach the Game Management Authority about trialling an accreditation program in Towong Shire
- Scope what Towong Shire Councils role could be within the pilot program with assistance from existing local guides, with consideration for how a partnership with HVP could assist with the process
- Identify ways in which to grow and enhance the guide offering in the Towong Shire, including developing a view of how the industry could support career pathways for local youth and support entrepreneurial efforts for businesses interested in this space.

8.4 Land Access

Even when people undertake hunting without the assistance of a guide, there is still the opportunity to generate revenue from them in the form of land access fees. For the hunter, the attraction of private land access is exclusivity and access to new terrain and game. For the landholder, active hunting on their property can result in a cost-effective way to manage pest species.

However, a number of landholders are hesitant to allow hunters onto their land due to poor experiences with poachers (ie/ those people who access their land and remove game without permission), safety and liability concerns, and concerns over how to manage and monitor said access.

The ability to improve land access would ensure greater opportunity and choice for hunting tourists, and also increase dispersal and yield opportunity associated with these visitors throughout the Towong Shire.

Some potential approaches to mitigate current issues associated with illegal land access, and also develop a coordinated product for tourists, include:

a) Create a network of existing private land available for hunting:

Create a network of properties who would be willing to provide controlled land access to hunters. Then develop a pass system that entitles hunters to access this network for a fee. A set

of criteria would need to be established to determine whether the hunter should be issued such a pass, and numbers would likely need to be capped to minimise capacity issues.

This could be an annual pass that provides access to all listed properties, with the revenue split equally between the associated landholder networks. Alternatively, annual passes could be issued for specific properties, with some options bound to be favoured and used over others and therefore deserving of a greater level of return. Short-term pass options could also be considered if supply exceeds demand.

b) Create a network of private land that can be accessed via accredited guides:

Establish a group of accredited local guides (see point 8.2b) and create a network of landholders who are willing to permit land access to hunters accompanied by these guides. Aside from assisting with growing and controlling land access, this approach would assist in bolstering commercial opportunities for guides as it would provide them with an exclusive hunting tourism offering. This would generate both business-to-consumer and business-to-business (via outfitters) revenue opportunities.

Guides could buy a commercial annual property pass (at a premium) that would need to be factored into their ongoing operational costs, that again could apply to a whole network or specific property. Alternatively, they could follow existing Crown Land models and pay an annual licence fee accompanied by a per-head fee for each person it brings on the land.

A combination of these options would optimise opportunities for land owners and guiding operators in the Towong Shire.

Recommended action:

- Determine and implement a model to facilitate both immediate and long-term access to greater amounts of private land for hunting tourism
- Unify and promote this network as part of a concerted marketing effort, looking at how it can be positioned as a destination strength for Towong Shire.

8.5 Hunting Season Opening

Recreational hunting is still an activity that is not seen in a positive light by large segments of society, which can make it difficult for hunters looking for destinations to enjoy their sport. However, there are indications that the Towong Shire community is very supportive of the activity. It is a rural community with strong agricultural ties, where hunting is a part of everyday life and therefore socially acceptable.

As a result, the Towong Shire community has flagged a desire to embrace its hunting heritage in order to explore new tourism opportunities, which is a unique and important strength of the Towong Shire as a locality. This places it in an ideal position to create a destination that holds strong appeal to the hunting tourist.

To signify the support that Towong Shire Council and its community holds for hunting tourism, it is recommended that it mark and celebrate an official start to the hunting season. This would serve several key purposes:

- Provide a focus for marketing and advertising efforts; one that is not strongly recognised by other deer hunting destinations
- A physical gathering in one or more key Towong Shire towns would provide hunters with a purpose to come into and spend time in the town, offering new yield opportunities
- An event allows for greater engagement with these visitors and opportunity to educate them about the entire Towong Shire tourism offering, both within and outside of hunting tourism space, more effectively tapping into a captive market
- It would offer an ancillary activity for families/friends accompanying hunters on their trips.

The size of the offering could be scaled according to budget but could feature a free BBQ, retail/promotional stands (hunting and general town offerings), musical performances, family entertainment, fireworks, and so on. There could also be a hunting competition for the opening weekend.

While deer, particular Sambar Deer, enjoys a year-round hunting season, the peak offering is available between late March and October. With this in mind, the official season opening could mark the start of the peak hunting period.

Recommended actions:

- Set a formal hunting season within Towong Shire
- Develop a three-year scalable event plan to officially launch and celebrate the start of the season
- Support the launch of the season and any associated festivities with concerted marketing effort
- Leverage State Government commitment to using social media and other technology to promote seasonal hunting arrangements.

8.6 Game Meat Processing

The Victorian Meat Industry Act, 1993 (MIA) prescribes game as rabbit, hare, kangaroo, pig and goat that are living in a wild state. The animals can be shot in the wild and then processed at a licensed Game Meat Processing Facilities within 24 hours of harvest. As wild deer are not defined as game by this Act, they may not be processed or sold for human consumption or used even for pet meat.

The Australian Standard for the Hygienic Production of Wild Game Meat for Human Consumption (AS 4464:2007) defines the compliance requirements for harvesting and processing of wild animals. Recognising that game meat is not subject to pre-slaughter inspection and therefore potential subject to disease, this standard includes comprehensive and sometimes onerous requirements for conduct specific activities associated with mitigating food safety risks.

The Victorian Government has committed to removing the barriers associated with game meat processing in its new Action Plan, and Towong Shire Council has a role to play in assisting government with this objective, providing feedback into its work in this space.

If local suppliers in Towong Shire were able to take the game captured by visitors and convert it into food by-products, a new range of opportunities would present themselves to the destination. It would:

- Enable Towong Shire operators to capture existing demand for this type of service
- Extend the tourism offering, creating enhanced value for the associated with the hunting experience
- Create another yield generating service for community to provide
- Better position Towong Shire Council and operators to connect with and leverage the broader regional food and wine offering, which is considered to be a significant strength of the High Country
- Tap into current consumer demand for a 'paddock to plate' offering that may appeal to other tourism markets outside of the traditional hunting space.

Recommended actions:

- Work with peak industry bodies and Government (as per its *Sustainable Hunting Action Plan*) to advocate for the facilitation of local game meat processing
- If legislation changes, look to take the lead in developing this as supporting hunting tourism service, and consider how Towong Shire Council and operators can leverage broader regional efforts and their focus on the food and wine sector.

9. Promotional Opportunities

9.1 Destination Positioning

The Towong Shire area offers some of the best Sambar Deer hunting in Australia, both in terms of quality and quantity of game, as well as ready access to it. This places the industry in Towong Shire in a strong position to own this market, using its Sambar Deer product and associated hunting tourism offering as a clear destination differentiator. Importantly, it is also a source of sustainable competitive advantage due to the large year-round pest numbers.

Furthermore, a unique selling proposition like this significantly strengthens the appeal of Towong Shire as a destination among this market, assisting with overcoming barriers associated with Towong's distance from major metropolitan centres.

With this in mind, Towong Shire Council's hunting tourism positioning statement could be as follows:

Towong Shire in North East Victoria offers recreational hunters the best Sambar Deer in Australia. With premium game quality and quantity, unparalleled access to public and private land, a community that shares a passion for hunting, and a broad range of support services, the hunting experience at Towong Shire is worth travelling for.

At this stage, such a statement is aspirational for the Towong Shire industry but provide strong focus for its product development and marketing efforts.

As deer are seen as an introduced species and recognised as a pest, owning this positioning should not have significant impact on other aspects of the Towong Shire tourism offering.

9.2 Marketing and Promotion

The development of a comprehensive hunting tourism product must then be taken to market via a dedicated hunting tourism campaign – one that aligns with the aforementioned positioning statement.

Hunting is unique in the domestic visitor landscape in that it is not promoted through traditional tourism or sales channels. As such, word-of-mouth promotion is key amongst current and potential tourists, particularly advice and information provided by hunting retail outlets and even via hunting shows and expos. In line with this, social media – which facilitates word of mouth promotion between friends, family and colleagues – is also recognised as an important channel for this market.

The websites, publications and communications of agencies associated with recreational hunting are also seen as important and credible sources of information, in particular, the Australian Deer Hunting Association and Game Management Authority.

There is currently a low-level of awareness of the Towong Shire as a hunting tourism destination, which is to be expected considering the destination has not actively pursued this market. Lack of awareness points to the need for concerted marketing effort so that potential hunting tourism visitors understand the quality of the offering available in the Towong Shire and are motivated to visit. These efforts are also important in differentiating Towong Shire as a destination from competing and often more established hunting destinations.

If Towong Shire Council and the local industry is looking to own the hunting tourism space, the following components should be considered:

- An effective online presence. Ideally, this would take the form of a hunting specific website that features all the information and operators associated with the hunting tourism experience, offering a simple one-stop-shop to prospective visitors. At a minimum, a dedicated hunting tourism section on Towong Shire Council's relevant destination websites
- Working with peak industry bodies to utilise their communication networks – particularly their websites, social media pages and databases – to promote the offering in the Towong Shire. Preliminary discussions with entities in this space indicates a willingness to assist, particularly as Towong Shire Council and its community is looking to do something that no other destination has attempted to do
- A destination presence at key hunting and/or outdoor expos and shows, where Towong Shire Council and operators would have direct access to a mass market of potential visitors. While the Victorian market should be a priority, consideration should also be given to significant interstate opportunities particularly in NSW and the ACT
- Run targeted destination advertising, with consideration for hunting industry titles but also suitable digital/social channels that allow for targeted and cost effective campaigns
- Drive a concerted PR campaign aimed at driving destination awareness among target markets, and keeping Towong Shire front of mind with current and potential visitors
- The installation of large scale signage throughout the Towong Shire that points to its hunting tourism offering and ownership, so that when hunters come to the area – either for hunting or other activities – they are informed and influenced.

Marketing efforts should focus on the Victorian market, ideally encompassing Melbourne where there is already a very strong hunting marketing that can be leveraged for visitation to the Towong Shire. However, this is also a very competitive market with other regional hunting destinations in

close proximity also vying for the hunting dollar. As such, there must also be consideration for activities targeting close regional centres, like Albury Wodonga, where travel time is not an inhibitor to visitation.

Towong Shire's close proximity to Albury Airport and current plans to upgrade Corryong Airport also place the destination in an ideal position to service interstate markets. As such, promotional efforts should also be considered for NSW and the ACT.

Importantly, promotional activities should be sustained for at least three years in order to impact on market behaviours.

Recommended actions:

- Following the development of the hunting tourism product noted in section 8, develop a three-year marketing and communications strategy to take the offering to market, which encompasses the aforementioned components (at a minimum). This strategy should consider the targeting of messages and products in line with the hunting tourist profiles outlined in section 4 of this document
- Leverage any State Government initiatives associated with its *Sustainable Hunting Action Plan* that support improving hunting information (including mapping), driving awareness of hunting locations, and promoting regional hunting opportunities through targeted communication.

9.3 Packaging

While the development of new product covered in section 8 is key in meeting current and emerging demands of the hunting tourism market, just as important is packaging this product to make it easy for visitor to digest and purchase. Packaging is the grouping of tourism products and experiences to sell them to customers as a single purchase item. The package must provide one or more advantages to the customer such as convenience, additional value, ease of budgeting, and simplifying the research and purchase process.

There are several different types of packaging available:

- Packaging of products within the one tourism business in a single location – eg/ accommodation, meal and a bottle of wine
- Packaging of products involving multiple businesses in a single location eg/ transport, accommodation and an activity
- Packaging of products involving multiple businesses in multiple locations eg/ accommodation in Tallangatta, accommodation in Corryong, and a hunting guide in the Mitta Valley or Upper Murray.

Packaging is important as it has the potential to:

- Enhance the appeal of a product by associating it with other desirable products, and through the creation of perceived value for visitors
- Increase visitor yield both within businesses and the Shire
- Improve target marketing by appealing to new and niche markets

- Increase length of stay
- Prompt advance bookings and upfront payments which provide greater financial security to tourism businesses
- Offers cooperative promotional opportunities that could not be afforded independently.

The hunting tourism industry based in Towong Shire has the ability to again differentiate itself from competitors by offering a consistent, relevant and targeted hunting tourism product. These packages can incorporate components like airport transfers, accommodation, guiding, slaughtering and cooling facilities, meals and more. This type of 'one-stop-shop' packaging will resonate with the more novice emerging markets, and present new opportunities for growth within established markets.

These packages could also encompass a range of complementary, non-hunting activities to enhance yield opportunities and awareness of the broader Towong Shire's tourism offering. To ensure relevance, consideration should be given to activities already noted as being of interest to hunting tourists as noted in 4.1.

Recommended actions:

- Identify a network of existing operators who have complementary product for the hunting tourists
- Work with Tourism North East to deliver packaging workshops to assist businesses in developing product in this space
- Determine the potential for the development of a single call to action for this offering, which could be managed in-region, online or via a partnership with an established outfitter or tourism operator
- Bring new operators into this space as the product development activities listed in section 8 come to fruition.

9.4 Outfitter Partnerships

Traditional tourism products are sold via comprehensive sales channels that involve a network of inbound tour operators, wholesalers and travel agents. While the hunting tourism product is not currently dispersed through this type of network, it is important that Towong Shire operators consider pathways to market other than direct to the consumer.

For instance, there are approximately 70 outfitters who advertise commercial hunting throughout Australia, with 80% of them based in Victoria.⁶ Towong Shire Council and relevant operators should look to engage these operators with a view to ensuring that the destination's hunting tourism offering is available and being sold by organisations that are active and recognised by the market.

Once the product has reached a certain level of maturity, opportunities offered via traditional sales channels may be considered.

Recommended actions:

⁶ Safari Hunting of Australian Exotic Wild Game - A report for the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation

- Identify the top outfitters servicing the Victorian market and work with them to ensure that the Towong Shire hunting tourism offering is included and well represented within their portfolio
- Consider an incentive program designed to encourage outfitters with a multi-destination portfolio to prioritise visitation to the Towong Shire.

10. Funding

Budget and resource is required to realise the product development and marketing recommendations of this plan. Funds for this purpose could be sourced from a range of channels:

- Leveraging State Government funding opportunities associated with its *Sustainable Hunting Action Plan*, as many of the recommendations identified in this document are consistent with its own objectives and commitments
- Developing relationships with major hunting brands that have the ability to generate sponsorship partnerships (cash-based), cooperative marketing opportunities (sharing the cost of market exposure through co-branded efforts) and advertising funding (selling them advertising such as prominent in-town signage that is consistent with the Towong Shire Councils hunting tourism positioning)
- Support from Towong Shire Council, who should recognise the economic and social benefits that can be realized via hunting tourism growth
- A 'pay to play' approach for industry players who are keen to drive growth in this space and looking to be involved in destination driven product development and marketing opportunities
- Buy-in from community groups who see value in developing a new tourism product for the Towong Shire.

It is recommended that Towong Shire Council pursues a combination of these revenue streams so that it has adequate budget to deliver on the actions identified in this plan. In particular, Towong Shire Council should be actively engaging with State Government due to the timely release of its Action Plan and potential for it to receive some early and tangible wins in this sector.

11. Next steps

This Plan identifies a range of opportunities and actions that are applicable to Towong Shire Council and its community's aspirations in the hunting tourism space. It is designed as a starting point for the destination's work in this sector, and needs to be reviewed at a local level to ensure suitability and applicability to business and destination direction.

If recommended actions are supported, they must then be prioritised and assigned to specific entities and organisations to explore and implement, with particular consideration given to short, medium and long-term funding requirements.

Recommended actions:

- Towong Shire Council develop a Hunting Tourism Working Group to review and endorse the recommendations of this strategy
- The Working Group should develop a supporting business plan that prioritises and timelines the actions highlighted in this document, as well as identifying key action proponents
- The proponents should then properly scope and cost each action, and report back into the Working Group
- The Working Group should then lead efforts to secure budget and support for prioritised actions.