

Towong Shire Hunting Tourism Action Plan – Fact Sheet

What is the Hunting Tourism Action Plan?

Licensed game hunters spend approximately \$1.5million in our Shire each year. The Action Plan identifies opportunities for our tourism operators and farmers to capitalise on the deer population and create a new, managed and well-controlled hunting tourism product. The Action Plan will also go some way toward reducing the number of pest deer negatively impacting on our environment and our farming businesses.

Why do we need a Hunting Tourism Plan?

Because of the strong number of deer across the region, hunters are increasingly coming to Towong Shire. Deer are creating management issues for farmers and landowners. Conflict exist between farmers and some hunters over issues such as the unauthorised use of private land, hunting ethics, safety and liability; there is need for stronger governance.

Hunting tourism has been identified by the Upper Murray and Mitta Valley communities as having strong potential for creating economic growth in the area as well as providing the a means to positively influence hunter behaviour.

At present, hunters travelling to the region have limited access to suitable accommodation and niche hunting tourism products such as guiding.

What will the Hunting Tourism Action Plan do?

The finalised Plan will meet four objectives:

- Establish the Towong Shire region as a destination that supports a thriving hunting tourism industry, and deliver resultant positive social and economic outcomes for Increase visitation and yield opportunities associated with recreational hunting
- Grow employment opportunities associated with hunting tourism, including the development of career pathways
- Build community satisfaction and town pride off the back of a strong hunting tourism market
- Develop a safe framework and environment for hunting activity to occur.

What evidence is there that hunting tourism is successful elsewhere?

In Australia, Bob and Kay Penfold in South Australia successfully implemented a business plan to develop Hunt Australia. Hunt Australia caters exclusively for international hunters and sportspersons wishing to experience high quality hunting. Hunting is guided, with properties in Australia (predominantly deer on a SA property), New Zealand and New Caledonia.

Carmor Wildlife Reserve in the Northern Territory offers a broad range of hunting experiences including guided hunts of feral water buffalo and goats. Additional economic stimulus is created through auxiliary services including trophy preparation (ready for taxidermist), sealed cool room, and rifle rental. A self-contained lodge is a key component of their packaging.

Inland Hunting Properties (IHP) is a successful small business leveraging off hunting across the eastern states. A family run business, IHP matches reputable, highly rated hunters and their needs (camping, accommodation etc.) with rural properties. Through the IHP program, hunters pay a fee to hunt and/or camp on the property. Participating properties receive a minimum of \$300 cash at the gate per booking and all other administration and vetting is undertaken by IHP.

Local business, Red Oak Farmstay, is successfully operating in the hunting space. A fully operational dairy farm with a 'farm-stay' accommodation house; the business owners had issues with hunters illegally accessing the property. By leveraging their already established asset (the farmstay), they set about directly targeting the hunting market. Since, the business owners have seen a significant increase in their accommodation occupancy; 60% of their accommodation income is now derived from hunting, and the average length of stay has increased by 50%. Additionally, illegal hunting on the property has significantly decreased. Offering a high standard accommodation house at a reasonable price, the Red Oak Farmstay case study is an example of how businesses can utilise (what are often) unused assets on farms, to create additional income streams for the farm's core business.

Why are deer being targeted?

The population of deer in the Shire has increased alarmingly in recent decades, causing serious problems. The sheer number of deer in the region are having a destructive impact on biodiversity, including on native fauna, aquatic ecosystems, and macro invertebrate species. They are negatively affecting waterways and endangered peatlands through rutting, wallowing, pugging and erosion.

Deer are heavy grazers or browsers, reducing plant diversity and competing with other native animals. They cause physical damage through trampling, erosion and wallowing, and spread weeds and diseases. Deer create extensive tracks through moist gullies, removing ground cover and assisting the movement of other feral animals.

Deer graze and browse crops, fruit trees and grassy paddocks meant for livestock as well as destroy fencing, causing thousands of dollars damage.

Deer hunting is already popular in the region and one of the few options available to farmers for managing deer numbers. The Action Plan looks for ways to meet the need to manage deer numbers with creating positive economic opportunities. The flow-on effect will assist not only primary businesses such as guiding services, farms which allow hunting and provide accommodation, but also auxiliary services to grow and develop (such as petrol stations, food operators etc).

If farmers are already having issues with hunters, why do we want to encourage more to come to the region?

Increasing the number of hunters coming to the region provides opportunities for farmers to cost-effectively address their pest management issues. The concerns that have been raised by farmers have been addressed in the Draft Plan and will be given stronger recognition in the Final Plan.

The implementation of strategies such as creating more formal opportunities for hunters to access private land (through agreements with farmers), and growing the number of guides in the area will lessen the likelihood of issues recurring.

The more formalised approach to deer hunting plus the increase in number of responsible, well-prepared hunters is very likely to push any reckless and irresponsible hunters to other areas.

What are the benefits for the wider community?

There are more than 50,000 licensed game hunters in Victoria, up 186% in the last decade. Game hunting is worth more than \$282 million each year to the Victorian economy.

More than \$138 million alone is spent annually on deer hunting. Of the \$138 million spent, 40 per cent is spent while on their hunting trip on purchases such as transport, ammunition, accommodation, meals and tours.

Deer hunters spend the most days per year hunting (6.4 compared to 3.7 for ducks). The increasing number of hunters (particularly those with a higher disposable income), the amount they spend on hunting trips and the length of time they spend hunting all create significant opportunities for creating new businesses to cater to this market.

Hunters have a strong connection with the land and the environment, and often undertake other outdoors activities while on a hunting trip, benefiting existing operators. Hunters' connection to the land and interest in outdoor activities presents an opportunity to invoke return visitation to partake in other outdoor pursuits.

What has happened so far?

In 2017, Council commissioned the development of a Draft Hunting Tourism Action Plan based on a facilitated workshop with key government agencies, local farmers and hunting tourism operators, hunting groups and other key stakeholders. The Draft Plan was presented to Towong Shire Councillors in August 2017, where they provided in principle support and authorisation to seek feedback on the Draft Plan from key stakeholders and the broader Towong Shire community.

Council established a stakeholder Steering Group to review and finalise the Action Plan. This includes engaging the community in revising the plan to ensure that it captures all feasible opportunities.

Where is the Action Plan up to?

The Steering Group has developed a comprehensive Community and Stakeholder Engagement Plan to ensure that the final Towong Shire Hunting Tourism Action Plan takes advantage of local knowledge, experience and ideas. The Group has appointed an independent consultant to facilitate three public information sessions.

Once the engagement phase is completed, the document will be revised and submitted to Council for final adoption.

How will the community be consulted?

The Engagement Plan includes, but is not limited to, public consultation meetings, online and hard copy surveys, and the invitation for submissions. Feedback gained will assist in fine-tuning the Action Plan.

Consultation activities will be advertised in local newspapers and through social media. The Steering Group will also organise information displays and make the Draft Plan available on Council's website.

Public consultation will begin in March, and conclude at the end of April.

What is the community being consulted about?

Council has ascertained that development of a Hunting Tourism Action Plan is in the best interests of the Shire. Council will adopt the final Action Plan at a future council meeting.

The strategies and actions within the Plan have not been finalised and this is where the Steering Group is seeking community input. Success of the Plan is dependent on community involvement and support.

Why didn't we get a say in putting together the Draft Hunting Tourism Action Plan?

The Draft Plan was developed based on consultation with Towong Shire Council, Tourism North East, Game Management Authority, North East Catchment Management Authority, Australian Deer Association, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, and local industry that are active in the hunting tourism space.

The Draft Plan provides a comprehensive starting place to identifying existing assets and future opportunities that can create economic benefit from the local pest deer population.

It is essential to gain community input into revising the Plan to ensure practicality, efficiency, effectiveness and local relevance.

Who are the Steering Group?

The Steering Group includes representatives from:

- Community members
- Hancock Victorian Plantations
- Hunters
- Victorian Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources
- Tourism North East
- NSW Department of Industry
- North East Catchment Management Authority
- Towong Shire Council
- Upper Murray Business Inc.
- Landcare
- Victorian Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning
- Parks Victoria
- Victoria Police

What happens after the plan is finalised?

Towong Shire Council will be presented the finalised Hunting Action Plan for adoption. Following adoption of the Plan, a business plan will be developed which will detail the actions from the plan and assign budgets, timeframes and responsibilities. On approval of the Plan, the Hunting Steering Group will oversee its implementation.

How do I find out more?

Information on the Hunting Tourism Action Plan can be found on Council's website:

www.towong.vic.gov.au

For further information, contact Towong Shire Council's Economic Development Officer, Kerissa Heritage on 02 6071 5100 or via kerissa.heritage@towong.vic.gov.au