



GREENWOOD
STRATEGY

GIPPSLAND YOUTH SYMPOSIUM

Future of our Forests

Prepared for Melina Bath

Member for Eastern Victoria

Final Report 23 October 2019



Contents

Introduction	2
Background	3
Summary	4
Balanced approach to Forest Management	4
Public Access	4
Jobs and the Economy	4
Fire Management	4
Education	4
A message to the Government from the youth of Gippsland	5
Recommendations	6
Overview of Victoria's forests	7
Victoria's Forests	7
Victoria's forest cover	7
Timber harvest	7
Timber harvest comparison – Victoria and Australia	8
Timber harvest comparison – forest types in Victoria	8
Managed values	9
Values managed in Victoria's forests	9
Regulation of forest management	9
How do you connect with forests?	13
How can we protect and improve Victoria's forests for all Victorians?	14
Fire management	14
Sustainable forest management	14
Weed and feral animal control	14
Education and awareness	14
Forest access	15
Indigenous engagement	15
What benefits do you want future generations to gain or enjoy from Victoria's forests	16
Vision	17
What is currently being done well, regarding forest management in Victoria?	18
What concerns you most about the way forests are currently being managed?	19
What could be done to address your concerns and improve the things you value most about our forests?	20
How do you see your future role in forest management?	21
Tell us what you love about our forests?	22

Disclaimer

This report has been prepared by Greenwood Strategy Solutions Pty Ltd as a summary of input and feedback provided at the Gippsland Youth Symposium on the Future of our Forests, held on 2 October 2019 in Traralgon Victoria.

The views expressed in this report are the views of the participants at the symposium and not of Greenwood Strategy Solutions Pty Ltd. Every effort has been made to reasonably and accurately record and reflect the views of participants at the event.

Report details

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Introduction

The Victorian Government, through the Department of Environment, Water, Land and Planning (the Department) is engaged in a community consultation process to inform its review of Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs).

Traditionally Regional Forest Agreements are long-term agreements. The timber industry is a significant contributor to Gippsland's economy. Any changes to RFAs will have long lasting impacts on Gippsland jobs and the regional economy.

On 28 March 2019, the Department held a Youth Symposium in Footscray with young people aged 10 to 25 years to discuss the future management of our forests. Attended by 49 participants from 22 organisations, the Footscray Symposium was criticised for lacking regional representation and being bias against the native timber industry.

Following publication of the Department's report '*Future of our Forests – Feedback Report Phase 1 Engagement*', Member for Eastern Victoria Region, Melina Bath hosted a Gippsland Symposium to provide an opportunity for regional youth to have their say.

The Gippsland Youth Symposium, held at the Premiere Function Centre in Traralgon on Wednesday 02 October 2019 was independently facilitated.

Attended by 30 young people aged between 15 and 30 years, the Gippsland Youth Symposium had representation from secondary and tertiary school students, industry employees, indigenous youth and general interest attendees.

Participants attended from all over Gippsland, travelling from as far east as Bruthen to Drouin in the west. A number of other Gippsland residents attended as observers and subject matter experts.

Attending young Gippslanders were provided with the opportunity to:

- Expand their understanding of Victoria's forests management system
- Provide a voice on the future management of our forests
- Explore their relationships and values associated with forests
- Foster engagement in enhanced forest management.

Background

Forests provide Victorians with a wide range of benefits. Before making decisions on the future management of forests, governments must listen to the opinions of young regional Victorians.

For many Victorian regional communities, the connection with forests, outdoor spaces and the landscape is strong. Forests provide a sense of identity and place, employment, enhanced economic prosperity and opportunities for recreational activity.

This report outlines findings, recommendations and personal insights from Gippsland youth on the future of our forests for consideration of all tiers of government.

In March 2018, the Victorian State Government and Federal Government signed a Memorandum of Understanding to deliver modernised and harmonised RFAs by 31 March 2020.

The objective was to provide for a comprehensive, adequate and sustainable reserve system, to provide for the ecologically sustainable management and use of forest areas in a region or regions and to provide for the long-term stability of forests and forest industries.

Managed by the Department, the engagement process was criticised as being flawed. The *'Future of our Forests Phase 1 Consultation Report'* did not adequately capture the views of a representative cross section of young Victorians.

A majority of participants at the Department's Footscray Symposium represented environmental groups such as the Wilderness Society, the Victorian National Parks Association, Environment Victoria, the Australian Conservation Foundation and similar groups. Students attending the Footscray Symposium were overwhelmingly sourced from metropolitan education providers.

Member for Eastern Victoria Region, Melina Bath raised the issue of bias with the Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change during State Parliament on 15 August 2019.

Summary

The 30 young participants represented a wide range of communities from across Gippsland representing industry, conservation, indigenous, recreational groups and local government youth councillors.

Themes from the Gippsland Youth Symposium included:

Balanced approach to Forest Management

A sustainable approach involving:

- An equal representation of the timber industry, conservation and community access to forests
- Balanced sustainable management of state forest activities for future generations.

Public Access

The importance of continued public access to Victoria's native forests for a range of recreational activities was enthusiastically supported. Young people observed the existing structure of state forests and national parks was appropriate.

Young people valued the ability to 'go bush', immerse in nature and enjoy the tranquillity of Victorian forests. They connected with forests through a range of recreational activities including:

- Bushwalking and hiking
- Hunting
- Fishing
- Camping
- Horse riding
- Mountain bike riding
- Four wheel driving

Jobs and the Economy

The importance of state forests as a source of employment and an economic driver in regional Victoria was seen as a priority. It was recognised that forestry jobs create local employment and downstream timber based jobs. The group endorsed a sustainable timber industry and sought an ongoing commitment from government to provide this.

Young people wanted recognition and support for their recreational activities as legitimate forms of tourism.

Fire Management

Bushfire is considered the biggest threat to Victorian forests and regional communities. Young people identified the need for significant improvement in bushfire management and mitigation activities undertaken by the State Government.

There was strong support for more planned burns to aid in the prevention of bushfire. To combat and suppress bushfire, access tracks must be kept open and well maintained.

There was significant interest around traditional indigenous burning practices to assist with preventative measures.

Education

Young people called for education with regard to current practices of sustainable forest management. Supporting a focus on how native timber industry initiatives safeguard biodiversity through native animal protection, seed collection, replanting and forest regeneration.

A message to the Government from the youth of Gippsland

Young Gippslanders strongly support a balanced forest management system to encompass a range of community and industry benefits and values. Participants supported the opinion that industry, recreation and conservation can coexist.

They want the government to acknowledge and incorporate their regional perspective when considering Regional Forestry Agreements. The government's decisions will have long lasting implications on regional communities.

Gippsland youth are concerned the government is pandering to environmental lobby groups during consultation. Participants are concerned about the negative portrayal of the native timber industry. They felt the government is not listening and fairly representing their interests and jobs.

Young Gippslanders feel connected to their local forest and landscape. They called for myth busting education to promote positive management practices in the timber industry, which includes protection of biodiversity values and carbon storage capacity.

A restriction in public access to forests and a reduction of the native timber industry, would negatively impact individual wellbeing and regional economies.

Recommendations

1. The future management of our forests must incorporate rural and regional views and perspectives.
2. Government should support a native timber industry incorporating sustainable management practices.
3. Government should promote the economic and sustainable benefits created by the native timber industry.
4. Bushfire prevention and suppression techniques should include traditional mosaic burns and maintenance of access tracks to protect forests and safeguard regional communities.
5. Improved weed and pest control measures to protect forest health and biodiversity.
6. Recreational and bush user activities within Victoria's forests should continue without diminished access.
7. Government should promote enhanced engagement with indigenous communities as a mechanism to share, educate and protect cultural values.

Overview of Victoria's forests

Symposium participants were provided an overview of Victoria's forests to introduce the session.

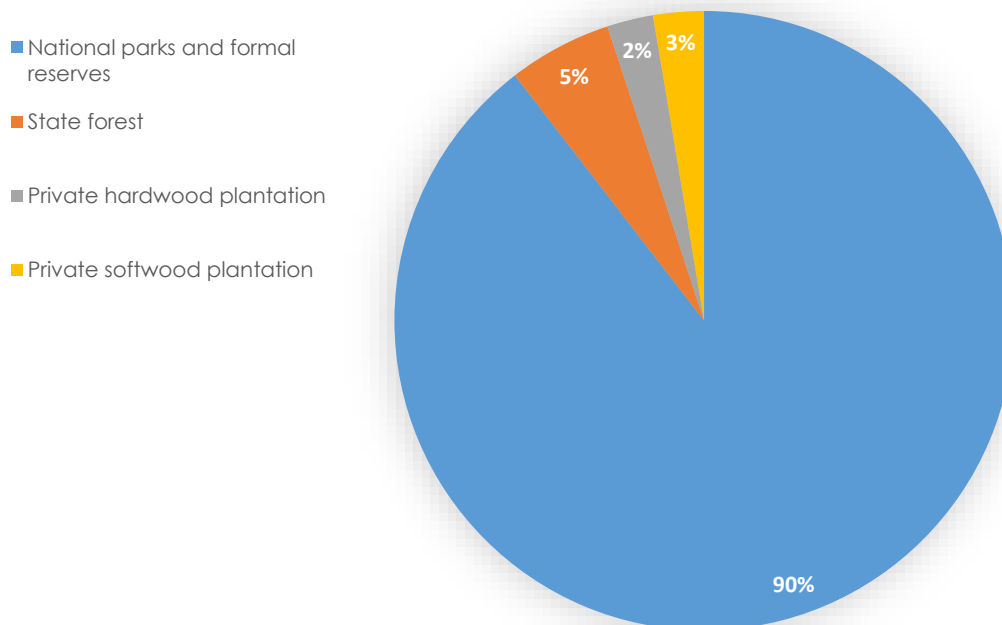
Victoria's Forests

Victorian forests cover about 37% of the state's land area.

Within this area approximately 90% comprises Victoria's world class conservation reserve system, including national parks, state parks and other formal and informal reserves.

The remaining 10% is split between privately owned plantations and state forest, which is potentially available for timber production.

Victoria's forest cover



Source: Victorian Association of Forest Industries; <http://www.vafi.org.au/industry/forest-area/>

Timber harvest

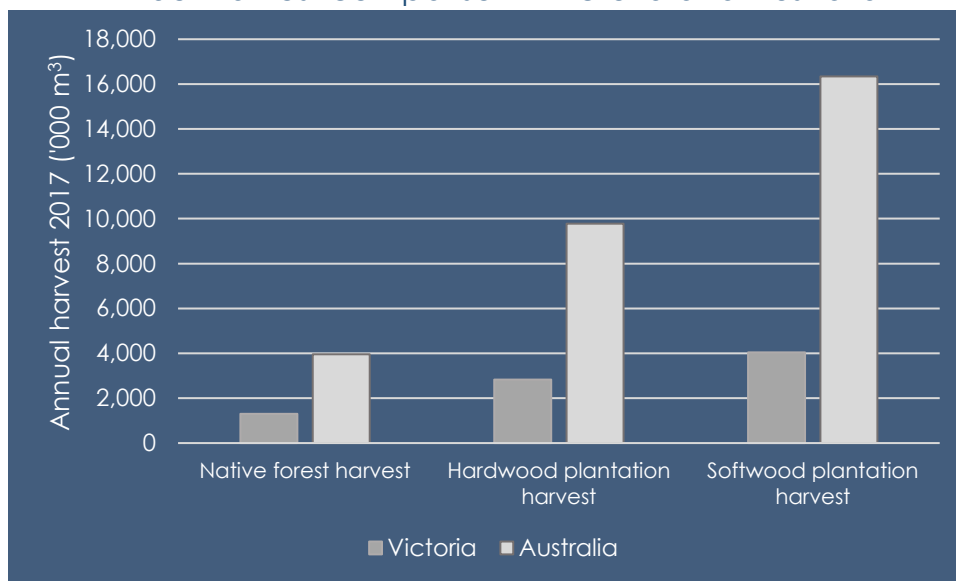
Victoria is Australia's forest products engine room. Approximately 27% of all timber harvested in Australia is harvested in Victoria.

More than 20% of Australia's plantations, both hardwood and softwood, are grown in Victoria.

In addition, 29% of hardwood plantation harvest comes from Victoria, as does 25% of the softwood plantation harvest.

Victoria also represents about 32% of total native forest harvest in Australia.

Timber harvest comparison – Victoria and Australia

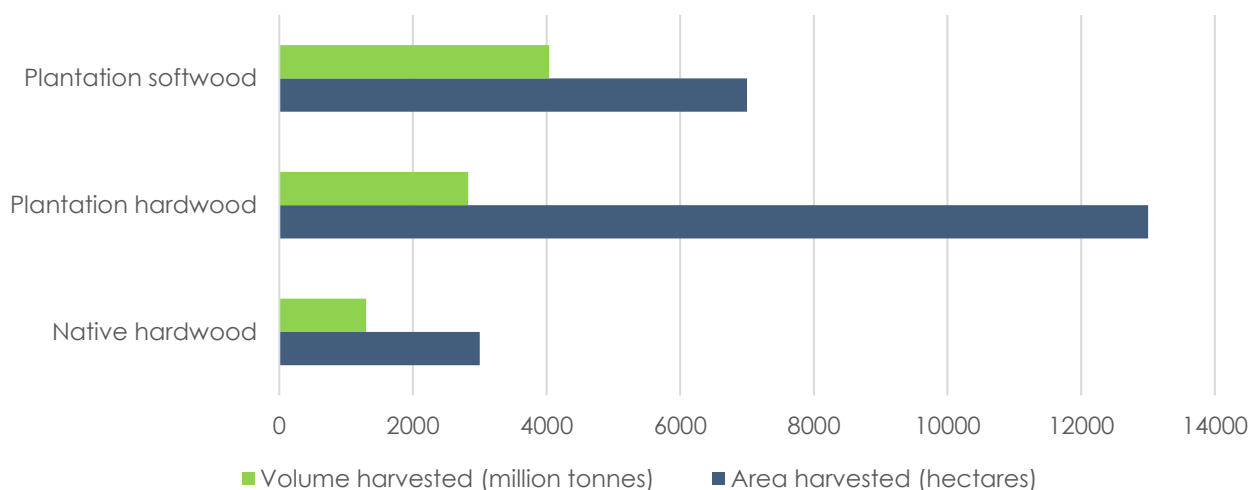


Source: ABARES – Australian forest and wood products statistics March and June quarters 2017

http://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/publications/display?url=http://143.188.17.20/anrd/DAFFService/display.php?fid=p_b_afwpsd9abfe20171107.xml

Timber production in Victoria is weighted towards plantation timber, particularly for commodity timber production, with higher value log products being harvested at lower volumes from public native forests.

Timber harvest comparison – forest types in Victoria



Source: ABARES – Australian forest and wood products statistics March and June quarters 2017

http://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/publications/display?url=http://143.188.17.20/anrd/DAFFService/display.php?fid=p_b_afwpsd9abfe20171107.xml

Managed values

Victoria's forests are managed for a wide range of values and benefits. However, only publicly owned state forests are managed actively and comprehensively for the full range of values.

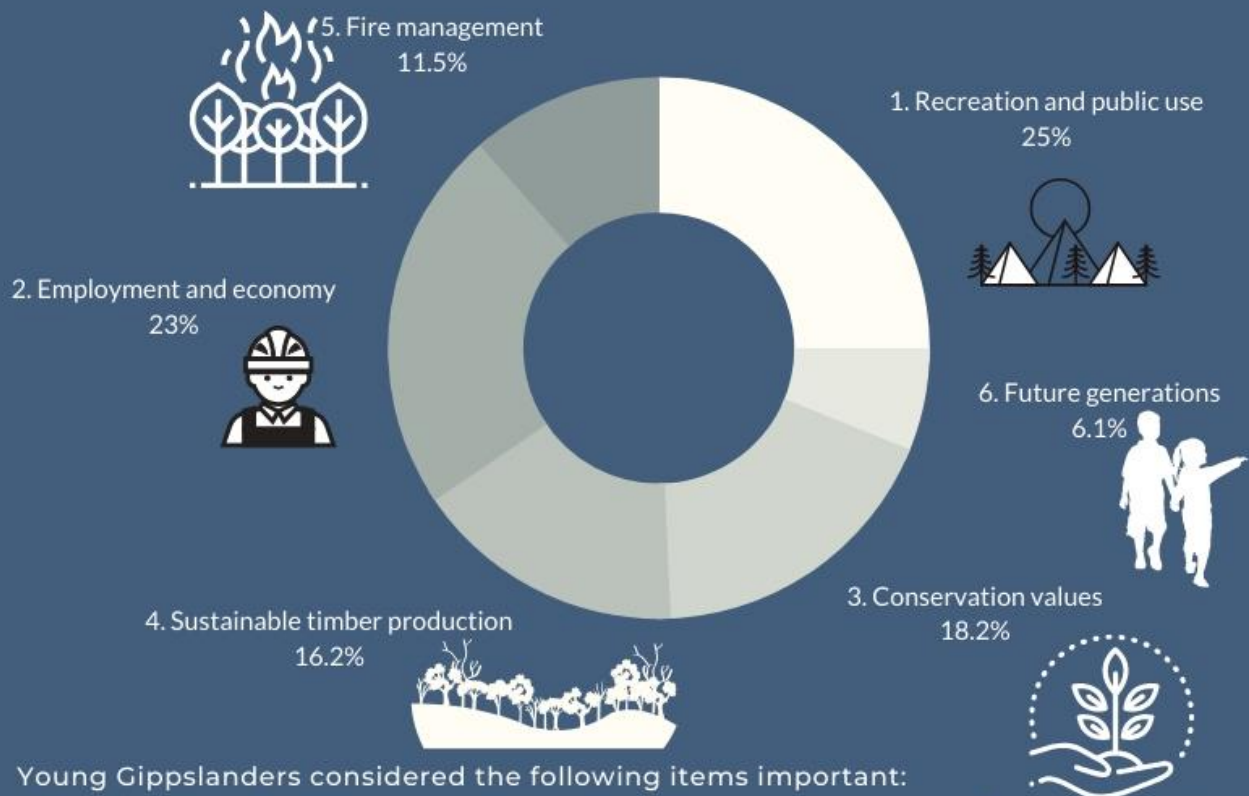
Values managed in Victoria's forests

Values	National Park, state park	State forest	Hardwood Plantation	Softwood plantation
Conservation and biodiversity	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Recreation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
Indigenous and heritage values	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Other community values	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
Timber production		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Regulation of forest management

Victoria's forests are managed within one of the world's most stringent and sophisticated regulatory frameworks. Regulation applies at each level of government – federal, state and local. In addition, all of Victoria's commercially managed forests are subject to independent scrutiny by either one or both of the third party forest management certification schemes operating in Australia – Forest Stewardship Council and Responsible Wood.

What is important to you in terms of our forests?



Young Gippslanders considered the following items important:

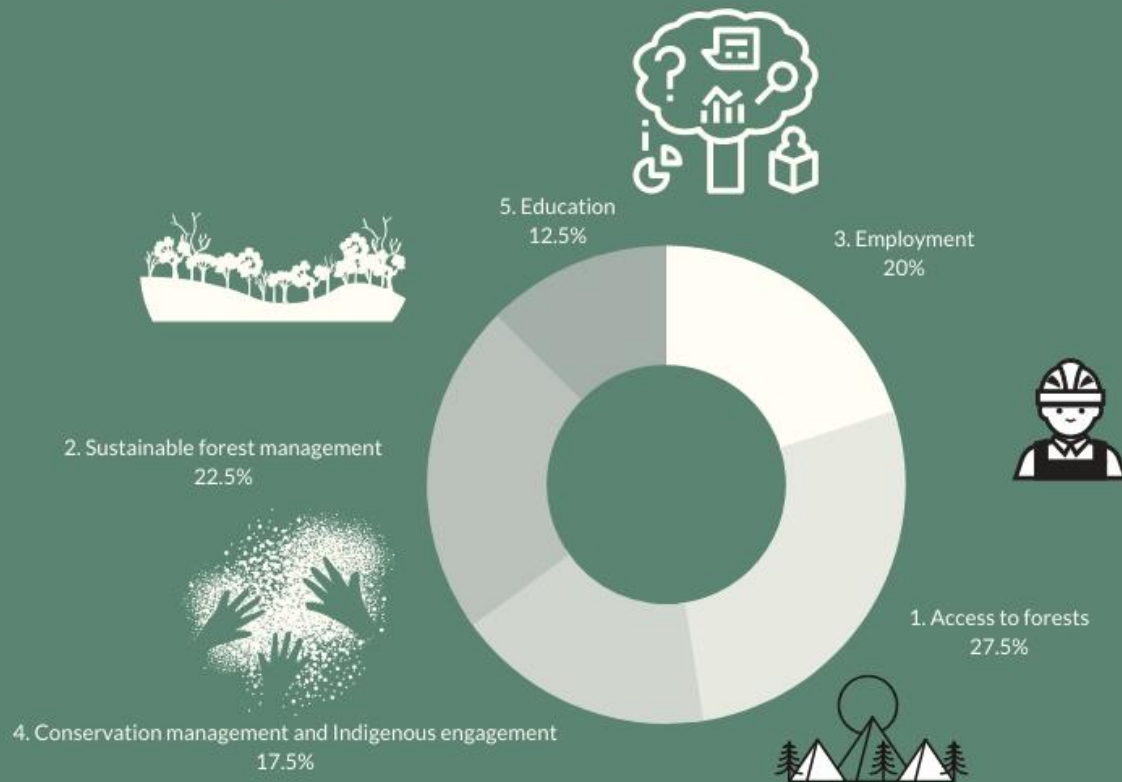
1. Recreation and public use - continued forest access for a range of recreation and public use (25%)
2. Employment and economy - timber industry security to underpin employment and economic opportunity (23%)
3. Conservation values - active management of conservation values including weed and feral animal control (18.2%)
4. Sustainable timber production - commitment to the future of sustainable timber industry (16.2%)
5. Fire management - improved fire management including a commitment to prescribed burning and track maintenance (11.5%)
6. Future generations - balanced management of values for future generations (6.1%)

"Ensuring that forests are able to be accessed for all ... so as many people as possible can enjoy the forests. Allowing safe and sustainable management of forests through selected harvesting and replanting."

"I believe the forest needs to remain open and accessible for employment, fire management, recreation and sight-seeing for everyone. A closed forest has the potential to become a neglected, overrun forest."

"The future of the forest will be suitable shared access. Safety and sustainability. Recreation, tourism. Secure employment. An equally treated industry. Balance the needs of users."

How would you like to see our forests in the future?



Young Gippslanders want forests managed for:

1. Maintaining access for both fire management and recreation (27.5%)
2. Sustainable forest management - active forest management, particularly weeds and feral animals (22.5%)
3. Employment - continued employment in a secure native forest industry (20%)
4. Conservation management and Indigenous engagement - Indigenous engagement in future forest management practices (17.5%)
5. Education - to create awareness about forest management practices, including the timber industry (12.5%)

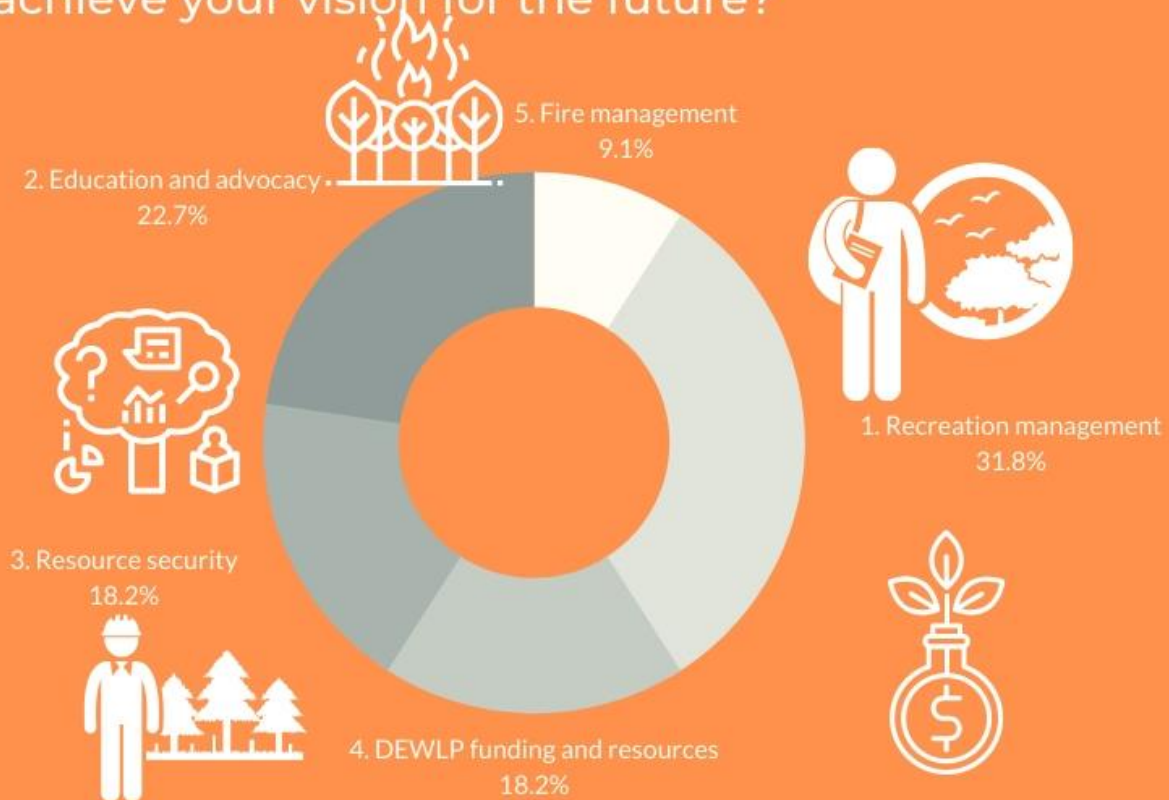
The youth representatives expressed a strong sense of association and connection with their local forests, as well as the need to provide for future generations.

"Good to see industry in the rural community. Proper land management pertaining to fire. Healthy safe landscape similar to the way in which Aboriginal people managed the land. Jobs for rural areas."

"Educating future generations how to sustainably protect our bushland. Allowing access for employment, recreation and enjoyment."

"Access: it is difficult to convince people of the need to conserve a system if they are locked out of it. Locking people out creates anger and distrust and reduces a person's will to care."

What specific actions would you like to see to achieve your vision for the future?



Young Gippslanders consider the following actions important

1. Recreation management - active management of recreation and infrastructure to access (31.8%)
2. Education and advocacy - improve understanding of forest management and the timber industry (22.7%)
3. Resource security - ensuring secure future access to timber resources (18.2%)
4. Funding and resources - increased resources to assist with fire and recreational management (18.2%)
5. Fire management - improving and enhancing fire management capability

Young Gippslanders were strongly of the view that actions relate to active forest management for a wide range of values (9.1%)

"My vision is to have sustainable/responsible forestry as we do now, so future generations can carry on what we do. I would like further education to be provided to people to fully understand what, how and why we do what we do."

"The future should involve sustainable management of logging forests...and these ecosystems should be part of further education (in schools etc)."

"Education into what goes on in the forest such as harvesting and the activities that people do in the forest so that it doesn't get destroyed or affected in any way."

How do you connect with forests?

Young people were asked about their understanding, connection and engagement with forests. The participants felt qualified to provide insight and opinion to government as they live with state forests and National Parks on their doorstep.

Young people's responses fell into two categories –

- Recreational access and connectedness to nature
- Importance of employment and prosperity to individuals and communities

Both categories derived a strong response from young Gippslanders who demonstrated local knowledge, understanding and a passion for forests.

Victoria's forests play an active role in their lives, socially, emotionally and economically.

Participants wrote five ways they connect with forests. The results are captured in the following word cloud.



How can we protect and improve Victoria's forests for all Victorians?

Fire management

Prevention of bushfire is considered vital for the safe management of forests.

Young people spoke of the importance of preparatory burning and timber industry's role in mitigating forest fires through access track maintenance, expert knowledge and rapid response.

There was significant discussion supporting cool mosaic burns across the landscape, a technique practiced by indigenous cultures of the past.

Participants stated well managed preparatory burns were important to protect forest values, including biodiversity, conservation, water quality, recreational access, timber production and community safety.

Many of the participants had vivid memories of past bushfire events including 2018 Gippsland bushfire season and the Black Saturday disaster which affected the region in 2009.

Sustainable forest management

Young people demonstrated a sophisticated awareness of a wide range of forest values and highlighted the importance of managing for all.

The timber industry was recognised as a renewable and carbon capturing resource, operating under high scrutiny and government regulation.

Weed and feral animal control

The impact of weed infestation and feral animals on forest health was a concern. Young people wanted more action on this issue.

Some participants were keen hunters; hunting was recognised as a legitimate method to control non-native animals. Some participants shared recollections and anecdotal evidence of the threat of wild dogs on campers and bush users in Gippsland.

Education and awareness

Young people highlighted a lack of understanding of many urban residents of recreational pursuits, jobs and industry in regional Victoria.

The majority of young participants accessed forests regularly for recreation, while a number were employed in the sector. There was a consensus that the timber industry was suffering an image problem within metropolitan Melbourne and unfairly under attack from environmental groups.

The important role of forestry contractors in bushfire response was emphasised and participants wanted this promoted and better communicated. Timber industry employees were highly respected for their local area expertise and maintenance of bush tracks which act as fire breaks.

Forest access

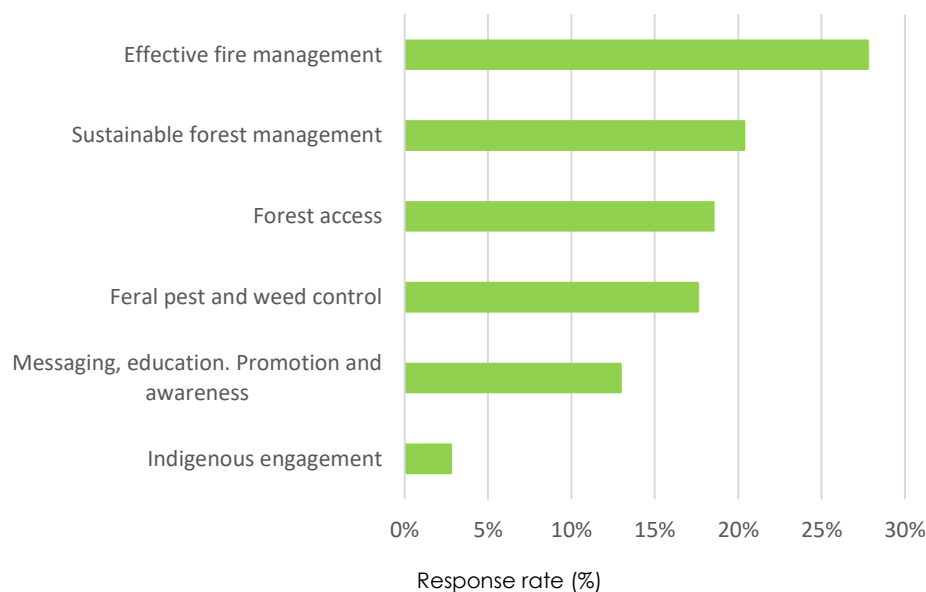
Young people valued forests for the ability to connect with nature and the opportunity to participate in a range of outdoor activities. They supported continued access to forests for recreational activities and understood the difference between a state forest and a national park. While they highly valued national parks, they were enthusiastic about recreational activities such as bushwalking and hiking, hunting, fishing, camping, horse riding, mountain bike riding and four-wheel driving undertaken in state forests.

Gippsland youth did not want to be restricted to experiencing forests from a boardwalk or campground. Participants valued rolling out their swag after a day immersed in bush activities.

Indigenous engagement

There was great respect for Australia's Indigenous culture, heritage and the intrinsic value 'country' has for our nation's first people. Young people were interested in furthering their understanding and appreciation of indigenous culture and heritage values within Victoria's forests.

Discussions on bushfire management strategies included a return to cool burning regimes to manage fuel loads and fire risk.



“Controlled forest fires in Victorian’s forests can reduce casualties in local towns and increase regrowth to make more places for local animals to live. The Victorian forests make jobs for the local communities and is a recreational activities for young and old people.”

What benefits do you want future generations to gain or enjoy from Victoria's forests

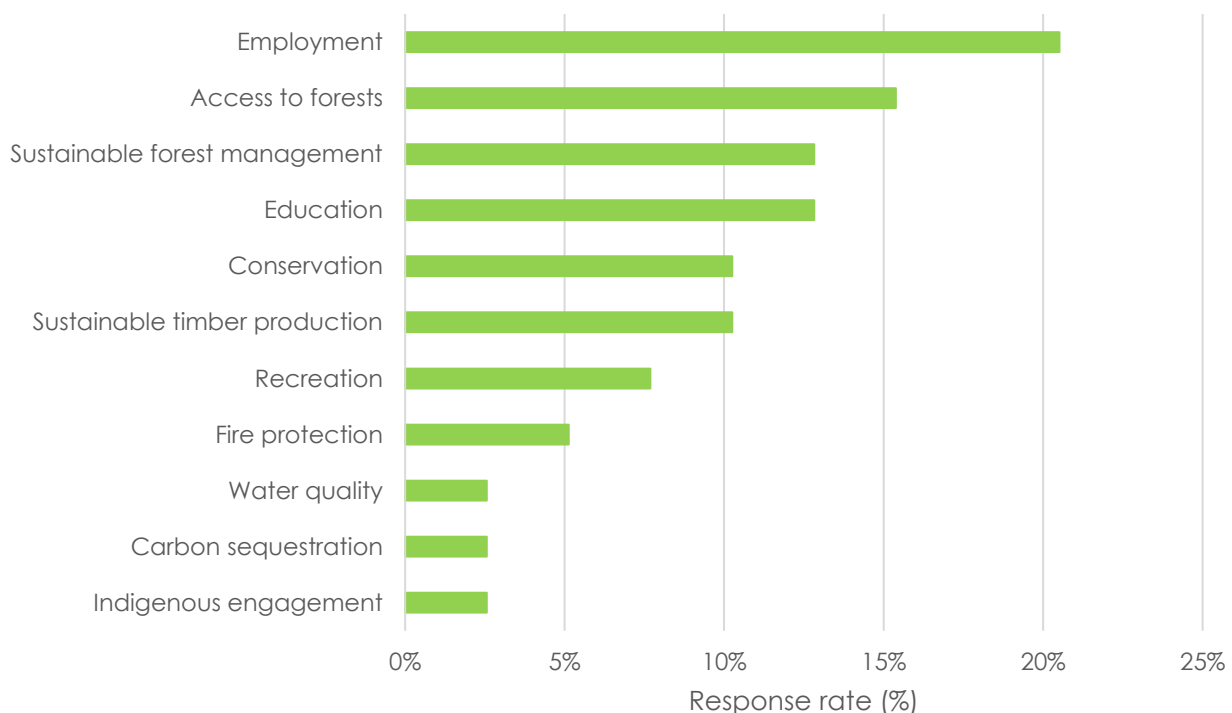
The top three benefits identified by young people were:

- employment
- access to forests
- sustainable forest management.

Young people considered the forestry industry a significant employer. Future employment and community prosperity are dependent on continued resource supply from timber harvesting and sustainable forest management.

Access to forests was important for recreational purposes and fire management.

Education, conservation and sustainable timber production were also key themes.



“Create a sustainable, maintainable forest for future generations. Doing so by encouraging sustainable timber harvesting, recreational use (hiking, 4WD, biking) and support for DEWLP’s back-burning activities.”

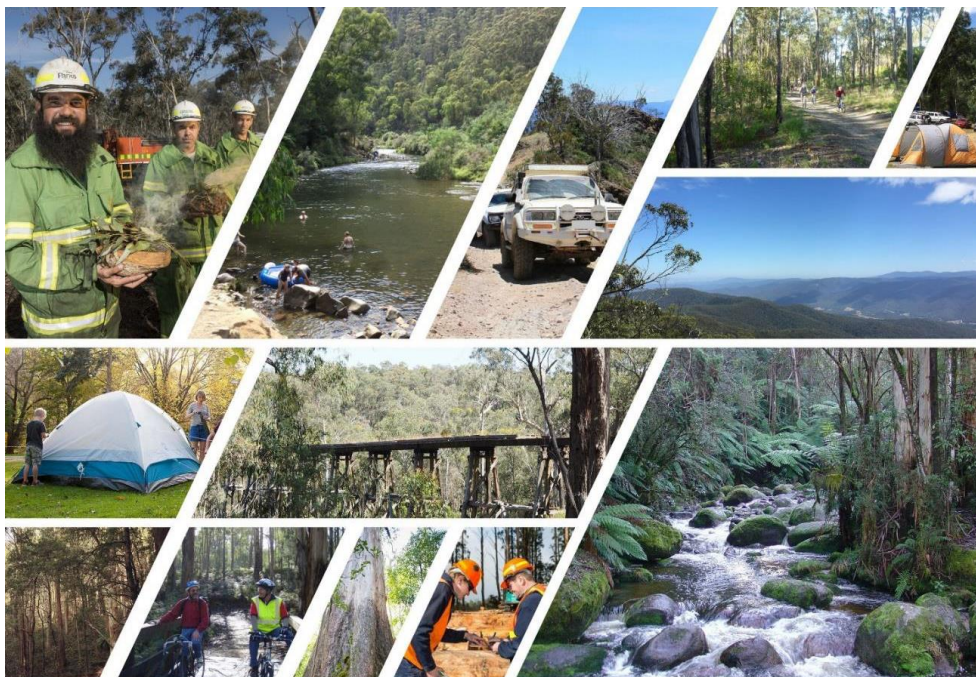
Vision

Participants reflected on the same suite of photographs as the Footscray Symposium and described their vision for Victoria's forests.

Gippsland youth demonstrated a genuine appreciation of forests.

Participants shared their vision which:

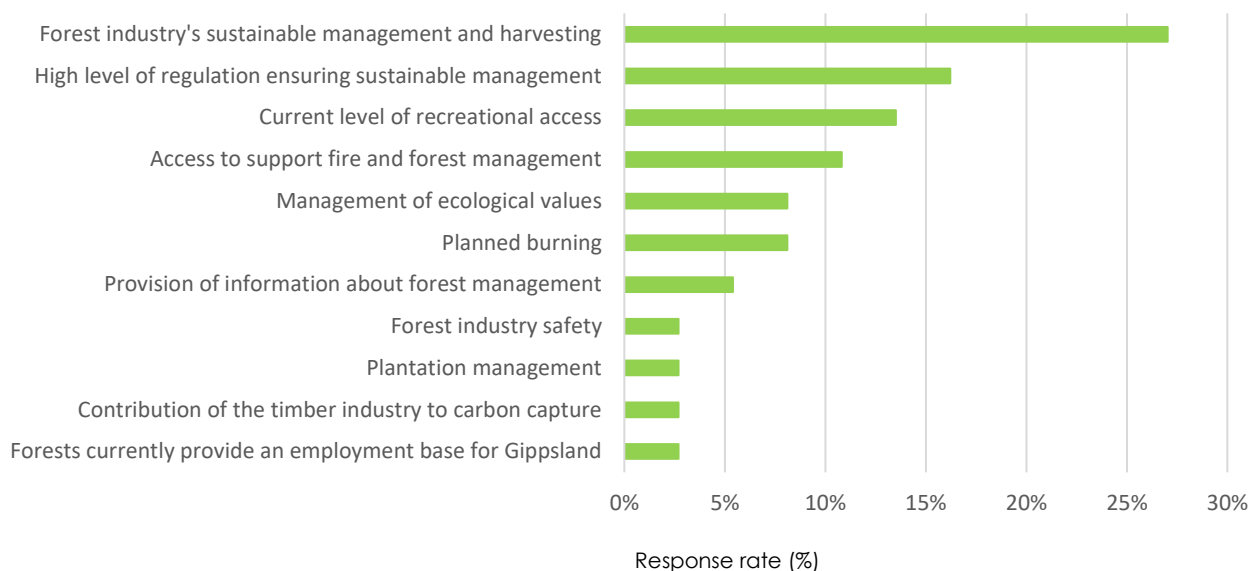
- Included a sustainable timber industry
- Acknowledged the importance of sustainable timber production jobs to the region's economy
- Endorsed and supported continuation of recreation and tourism in a sustainable manner
- Valued conservation, biodiversity, ecological health, water quality, indigenous culture and landscape management.



“The future of the forest will be suitable shared access. Safety and sustainability. Recreation, tourism. Secure employment. An equally treated industry. Balance the needs of users.”

What is currently being done well, regarding forest management in Victoria?

Young people considered that sustainable management and harvesting of the public native forest resource is done well, enforced by strong industry regulation.

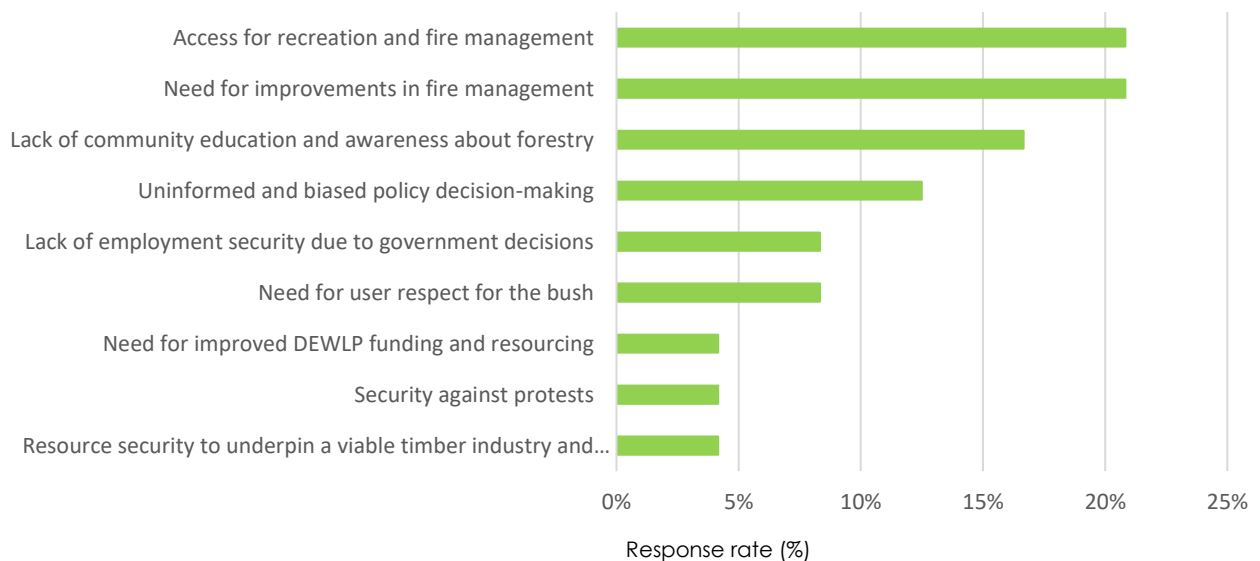


“I want forests to be sustainably managed but ensure there is enough timber available to feed the timber industry. In times where we want to move away from fossil fuels timber is the perfect building material compared to steel and concrete. I don’t want to use imported timber from overseas just because we are not allowed to use our own timber that grows in front of our door.”

What concerns you most about the way forests are currently being managed?

Gippsland youth were most concerned about maintaining access to state forests for recreational activities and improved fire management.

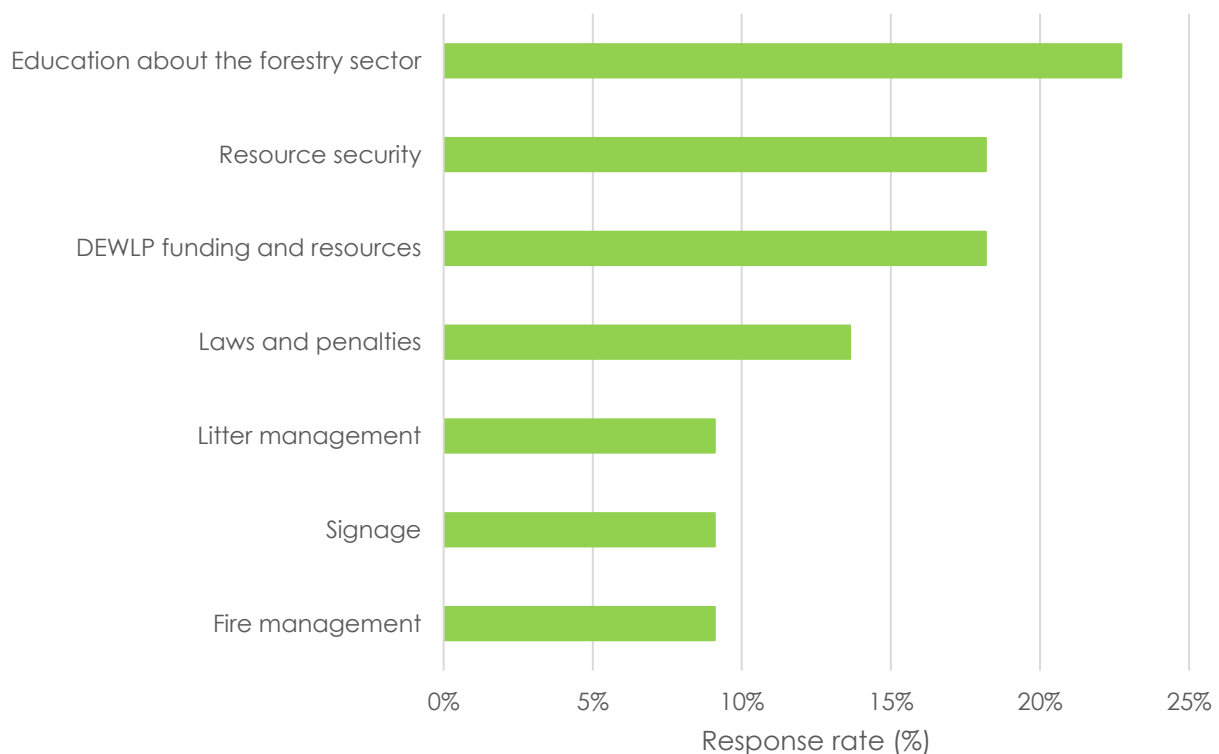
Participants cited a perceived lack of knowledge by Melbourne based decision-makers.



What could be done to address your concerns and improve the things you value most about our forests?

Young people wanted positive education and support to address their concerns in relation to misconceptions about forest management and the native timber industry.

Secure access to future timber resources was identified as an issue. Improved funding and resourcing was seen to add value for both fire management and management of recreational values.

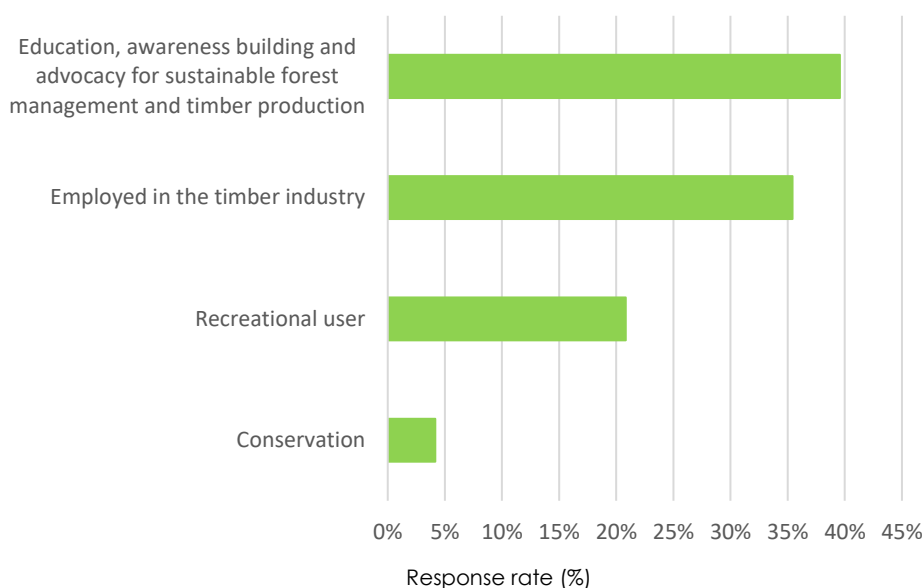


“Education into what goes on in the forest such as harvesting and the activities that people do in the forest so that it doesn’t get destroyed or affected in any way.”

How do you see your future role in forest management?

Young people supported their future role in forest management through education, awareness building, recreation, sustainable timber harvesting and production.

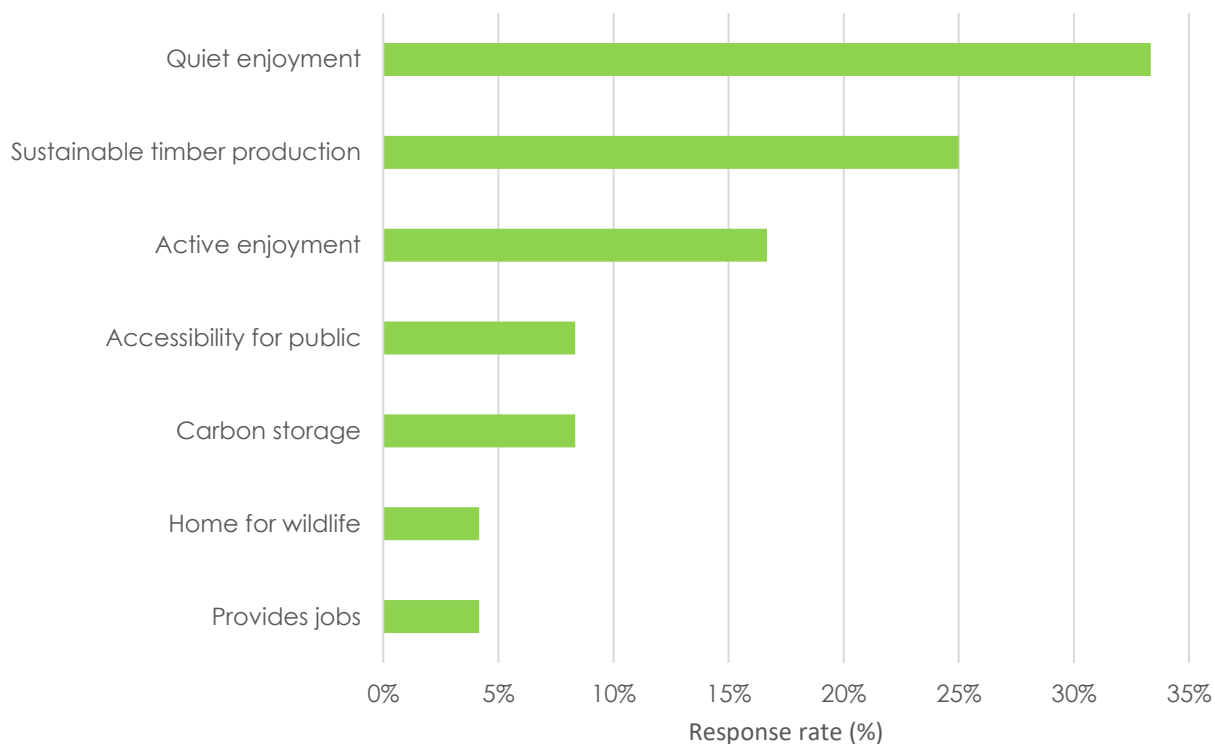
Some participants considered their future role included employment within the forestry and forest products sector. Active recreational use and conservation were other important categories and these were important when maintaining connection and knowledge of our forests.



“Educating future generations how to sustainably protect our bushland.”

Tell us what you love about our forests?

Gippsland youth value active and passive recreational pursuits and sustainable timber production.



**The future of the forest will be suitable
shared access. Safety and sustainability.
Recreation, tourism. Secure
employment. An equally treated
industry. Balance the needs of users.**