Executive Summary
Coastal and Marine Environment
Community Attitudes & Behaviour
(Wave Four)
REPORT

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Project Contact: Jennifer Brook and Daniel Pole

Office address: Level 4, 493 St. Kilda Rd

MELBOURNE VIC 3004

Office phone: (03) 9946 0888

Email: jennifer.brook@ipsos.com
daniel.pole@ipsos.com

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 Research context

The Victorian Coastal Council (VCC) is the peak advisory body to government on coastal and marine issues in Victoria. Its role is to provide strategic direction for the planning, management and protection of the Victorian coast for present and future generations. As a key element of its mandate, the VCC is responsible for developing the *Victorian Coastal Strategy* (VCS).

The VCS is established under the *Coastal Management Act 1995* and is the State Government's policy commitment for coastal, estuarine and marine environments in Victoria. It provides a long-term vision for the planning, management and sustainable use of our coast, and the policies and actions Victorians will need to implement over the five year term of the Strategy to help achieve that vision. The Strategy identifies three significant issues facing our coast that require our specific attention. These are:

- climate change which will result in impacts on the coast, including sea level rise;

- rapid population growth in coastal areas; and

- the health of our unique and valued marine environment.

The VCC, in partnership with the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE), periodically commissions social research on community attitudes and behaviours on the Victorian coastal and marine environment in order to inform the strategic review and development of the VCS. Three previous waves of research have been conducted from 1995 to 2011. The *Coastal and Marine Environment Community Attitudes & Behaviour (Wave Four) Report* records the process and outcomes of the recently completed fourth wave of research.

This fourth wave of research was designed to provide insight into public attitudes towards the coast and the value it delivers. The research also aimed to assess levels of usage of coastal areas, as well as track how attitudes and behaviours have developed over time compared with previous waves of research.

1.2 Methodology

A two-stage quantitative-qualitative methodology was employed. For the quantitative stage, a survey was administered to 1,001 Victorian households selected at random, along with quotas set for gender, location (Melbourne / rest of Victoria) and proximity to the coast (within five kilometres or further than five kilometres). The data was weighted according to ABS 2006 Census data for location, gender and age. The survey instrument can be found in Appendix B.

The second stage of the methodology was qualitative research. Eight focus group discussions were held, four in Melbourne, two in Inverloch and two in Warrnambool. A discussion guide was used to help direct the conversation during the groups (see Appendix C). The group discussions explored participants' interactions and perceptions of threats, management and development of the coastal and marine environment and coastal towns.

1.3 Key findings and conclusions

Use of the Victorian coast

- The coast is an important part of the lives of most Victorians. Victorians make a substantial number of trips to the coast on a yearly basis, over four-in-five (84%) reported having made at least one day trip to the coast in the last twelve months with the average number of day trips in the last twelve months being 23.4 trips.

- Over half (57%) of Victorians had made an overnight trip to the Victorian coast in the last twelve months. The average number of overnight trips within the last twelve months was 5.6 trips.

- The most frequently visited locations along the Victorian coast were Phillip Island (7%); Sorrento (6%); Lorne (5%); Torquay (5%); and Apollo Bay (5%).

- Those living within five kilometres of the coast reported visiting their local foreshore frequently, over a quarter (26%) said that they visited daily, and 86% report visiting their local foreshore at least once a month.

- Overall, Victorians appeared to be satisfied with their coastal experience: 87% gave a rating of either *Excellent* or *Very good*.

- All of those who visited the coast were asked what the most enjoyable aspect of the trip was. The most popular answer, given by just under a fifth of respondent (19%) was *enjoying the atmosphere / scenery / just being there* followed by *spending time with friends / family* and *walking / hiking* (11% for both).

- According to Victorians, the top three things that contribute to a good coastal or marine experience all relate to a clean and unspoilt environment. These contributors included *clean / clear water* (37%); a lack of *litter / rubbish / debris* (37%); and a *pristine / unspoilt / undeveloped / natural environment* (22%).

- Among those who made visits to the coast, the most commonly mentioned activity was *walking or hiking*, (by almost two thirds, 63%). *Swimming* was the next most common activity (52%), then *nature-based activities / appreciation* (31%).

Planning for sea level rise

- Overall, Victorians considered climate change and sea level rise to pose a (current or future) threat to the Victorian coast. Over two thirds (67%) of Victorians reported they agree with the statement *climate change is causing sea levels to rise leading to coastal erosion and flooding in vulnerable, low lying areas of Victoria's coast*.

- However, the qualitative research revealed that despite agreement that the Victorian coast was likely to be (or currently is) affected by sea level rise, the implications of a one metre sea level rise were not well understood, particularly in terms of magnitude. Participants found it very challenging to visualise the implications of this scenario. One metre was considered by most to be quite negligible in terms of impact since it would most likely occur via a 'slow creep' that would mean people would be able to adapt to that change. A minority of participants perceived one metre sea level rise to be significant and mentioned implications for things such as land, stormwater and flora and fauna. There were many questions raised relating to flood and storm events and what was or wasn't 'natural cycles'.

- The responsibility for responding to the impacts of climate change and sea level rise in Victoria was thought by 29% of respondents to rest with the Victorian State Government. The second most common response was Federal Government (24%), and third was local government (15%). The perceived role of State Government was reflected in the agreement with the statement *I believe planning laws for the coast should limit development in areas likely to be affected by sea level rise*, the mean agreement rating being 7.4 (on a zero to ten scale).

- Both the quantitative and qualitative research show that Victorians were unsure over the role individuals should play in terms of taking responsibility for risk posed to them by sea level rise. Respondents had mixed feelings about the statement *Individuals who live in coastal areas likely to be affected by sea level rise should be responsible for managing their own risk*, with a mean agreement rating of 5.0 (on a zero to ten scale). Although participants in the discussion groups felt strongly that if people chose to live in property that had clearly been identified as at risk of flooding they should manage their own risk,

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they also acknowledged the confusion and lack of knowledge that was likely to exist regarding risk.

- Communication from those who possess knowledge about anticipated sea level rise (most likely assumed to be State and Federal Governments) was identified as critical in helping people to manage their own risk.

Population growth and coastal development

- From both the qualitative and quantitative research it was apparent that the character of coastal settlements is highly valued. The majority (63%) of Victorians agreed with the statement *I am concerned that our Victorian coastal towns are increasingly looking more like ordinary Australian suburbs or parts of the city*. Participants from the focus group discussions were able to describe easily a 'typical' Victorian town: small, laid-back places with friendly locals and little traffic. Typical coastal towns were usually framed as opposite to Melbourne. The Gold Coast and Surfers Paradise were mentioned frequently as examples of inappropriate development on the coast.

- Victorians had some concern that coastal towns look too much like Melbourne suburbia, and the discussion groups revealed that people have very definite ideas about how coastal towns should not look. Victorians were keen for coastal towns to retain their (often long-standing) sense of character and not develop into sprawling or high-rise metropolises with too many people.

- The consideration of moving to the Victorian coast appeared quite low with seven percent (7%) of those living further than five kilometres from the coast reporting that they were considering this within five years, however, this equates to a large number of Victorians (an estimated 300,000 persons).

- Seventeen percent (17%) of respondents reported that they have access to a Victorian beach house owned by themselves or family. Qualitative research indicated that many have access to beach houses owned by friends.

- In the discussion groups, there were obvious concerns about the development of some areas of the Victorian coast and this was reflected quantitatively, just over half (52%) said they were not confident in Government planning and building guidelines capacity to protect Victorian coastal towns' character and feel.

- Victorians appeared to have mixed feelings regarding how to best accommodate increased demand for housing along Victoria's coastline. In the quantitative research, when asked to choose between two simplified options, just over half (52%) reported a preference for *allowing towns to expand outwards*, and 39% preferred *increasing the density of housing*

in existing town boundaries (9% were unable to chose). The qualitative research demonstrated that the dilemma of expansion out or increasing the density was more complex. The majority of the qualitative research participants felt that coastal towns should probably increase in density rather than sprawl outwards. The community felt that there were firm caveats with both scenarios; expansion was tolerated as long as there were parameters on that sprawl and increased density was tolerated as long as buildings remained relatively low-rise. For any growth to be deemed appropriate, the character of the coastal town has to be retained. Where expansion was thought to need to occur, there was strong support for developing inland rather than creating a continuous stretch of development along the coastline.

Natural coastal and marine environment

- The natural features of the Victorian coastal and marine environment were extremely important to Victorians. There was strong agreement with the statement *The flora and fauna that live in marine environments are important to all Victorians* (with a mean rating of 8.4 on a zero to ten scale). However, there was a more varied response to agreement with the statement *I feel I know a fair bit about Victoria's coastal and marine environments* (with an overall mean rating of 5.3).

- There was relatively strong disagreement with the negatively framed statement *The coastal and marine environments are unimportant to my lifestyle* with a mean rating of 2.8 overall (on a zero to ten scale). The sentiment of feeling that coastal and marine environments are important to Victorians' lifestyles was also reflected in the qualitative research. Participants spoke of visiting the coast quite frequently, or if they did not currently visit the coast often it was almost always a significant part of growing up and family holidays

- From the qualitative research, it is evident that amongst those living in coastal areas there is a clear sense of pride in the local coastal and marine environment.

- Top-of-mind associations with the Victorian coast are usually focused on the iconic features of the coastline including the Great Ocean Road, the Twelve Apostles, Phillip Island and the penguins. Sandy beaches were the classic association with anything coastal; however, there were sometimes mentions of the less obvious features of the coastal and marine environment including fish, birds, marine mammals, invertebrates, estuaries, mangroves, and wetlands.

- Just under half of Victorians (48%) reported concerns or annoyances with Victorian coastal or marine environments (consistent with Wave Three). The biggest cause of concern was *rubbish / litter / cigarette butts* (mentioned by just over a third), followed by

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overcommercialised coast / inappropriate development (11%) and *antisocial behaviour / drunks / hoons* (8%).

- Although a few participants were concerned that the Victorian coast was currently under threat, the general consensus was that it was healthy.

- When asked what threatened the coast, participants in discussion groups were most likely to cite quite broad threats initially, and then litter and pollution. When pressed, participants named a range of other threats such as erosion, population pressure, pressure of recreational use, and dredging. Threats to the coast were either considered to be due to people's proximity to the coast or more indirectly via climate change.

- The majority (83%) of Victorians reported that they have heard of Victoria's Marine National Parks and Marine Sanctuaries. Awareness was higher than in Wave Three (72%). Support for Marine National Parks and Marine Sanctuaries remains high in Wave Four, (93%), with no notable difference to Wave Three.

Coastal management

- The majority of Victorians agreed that the Victorian coast is well managed (67% agreed); however, this measure has declined since the previous wave of research in 2007 (when 74% agreed).

- Despite this agreement that the Victorian coast is well managed overall, Victorians appeared to be unsure about whether specifically *the government* is doing a good job of managing the coastal and marine environment. The majority of respondents (58%) rated their agreement with the statement *The government is doing a good job of managing the Victorian coastal and marine environment* as around midway on the zero to ten scale (on average, the agreement rating was 5.2).

- From the qualitative research it is clear that coastal and marine management is generally not 'visible' to the community (other than development on the water's edge), leaving most unsure as to what is involved in actively managing these environments.

- Victorians generally did not feel well informed about coastal planning and management. This may be why there has been a decrease since Wave Three on agreement that the coast is well managed. Group discussions also implied this link. When people were unsure about who managed the coast, there was a greater tendency to assume that it was not being well managed.

- There was scepticism over the ability of communities to influence the development of their local areas. Just over a third (35%) of Victorians agreed that local communities have enough say in government planning decisions affecting their local area.

- The top four mentions when asked what, if any, are the issues affecting the Victorian coastal and marine environment that the government should respond to were overfishing / illegal fishing (29%); pollution (21%); development (14%); and pollution from stormwater (12%).

- Interest expressed in volunteering to help improve and protect the coast was similar to previous waves, with almost one-in-three Victorians in agreement with the statement *I would be interested in joining a volunteer group to improve and protect the coast*.

- Seventeen percent (17%) of respondents said they had definitely heard of the VCC (similar proportion in Wave Three in 2007); the majority, 73%, said they had not (76% in 2007). A majority (80%) of Victorians have not heard of the VCS, 11% said they had definitely heard of the VCS, 9% thought they probably had.