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Economy and Infrastructure Committee
Parliament House, Spring St
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Submission – Inquiry into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism and events sectors

Victoria Walks is pleased to make a submission to the Inquiry into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism and events sectors.

Walking is highly valued and is by far the most popular, affordable and readily attainable form of medium intensity physical activity of Australians. Australian's passion for walking is not limited to what they do as part of their everyday lives, it is also something they do when on holiday. Interest in walking influences decisions about where and when people travel and the activities they do when visiting a location.

Walking related tourism has a positive impact on communities and regions across Victoria providing jobs and contributing hundreds of millions of dollars into local economies. Yet, the popularity of walking tourism and its many benefits has occurred with little coordinated planning and investment.

Victoria Walks' submission outlines how walking was an untapped market in Victoria prior to COVID-19. The tourism sector has traditionally undervalued the importance of walking, so it is missing opportunities to exploit the potential of walking tourism to play a significant role in restoring jobs and the Victorian economy. As a result, we have been poorly equipped to respond to some of the significant challenges posed by the pandemic and reap the benefits of Australian's interest in walking now and into the future.

The pandemic saw an explosion in walking participation around Australia, much of which continues, and this interest needs to be better understood and supported if Victoria is to realise the benefits that walking tourism may provide.

The submission provides context on:

- The significance of walking in Victoria
- Why walking tourism is important
- Walking tourism in Victoria prior to COVID-19 and opportunities into the future.

Victoria Walks provides recommendations for the Victorian Government to support walking tourism to ensure the Victorian economy and lost jobs are restored.

Recommendations

In order to support walking tourism and assist in restoring Victoria's tourism economy, the Victorian Government should:

1. Partner with organisations outside of the traditional tourism sector that have complementary aims in promoting walking and walking tourism to assist in restoring jobs in areas hardest hit by the pandemic.
2. Support Visitor Information Centres, councils and local organisations, such as development associations, to map and promote local walks to develop walking tourism options to complement regional tourism promotion.
3. Identify which parts of Victoria should be developed as walking tourism destinations and provide targeted investment for trail improvement and walking promotion.
4. Provide funding to Victoria Walks to map walks in an enticing, contemporary and accessible format and promote walking tourism on sub-regional levels in partnership with councils and the tourism sector to increase interaction between locals and visitors and extend length of stay.
5. Ensure Parks Victoria works with the tourism sector and Victoria Walks to provide much more, and better information on walking in parks across Victoria.

About Victoria Walks

Victoria Walks is an evidence-based health promotion charity, that has been leading the move to walkable communities in Australia since 2009.

Our purpose is to inspire more people to walk more every day.

Victoria Walks is funded by VicHealth to enable all types of walking – recreational, incidental and transport related. In everything we do, we demonstrate the critical role walking plays in our health, well-being and economic productivity.

Since 2009, Victoria Walks has provided a focal point for walkers and walking and built a significant following through its walking promotion activities and participation programs. Victoria Walks knows what people want when it comes to walking. The organisation is adept at providing innovative, cost effective solutions to promote walking.

Victoria Walks has a strong presence across numerous social and digital media channels, including a Facebook community in excess of 100,000 followers. It's extremely popular Walking Maps (www.walkingmaps.com.au) sits at the forefront of walking route promotion and is a key website for Victorians looking for places to explore on foot.

Walking in Victoria

Walking is an enjoyable, convenient, affordable and extremely popular activity.

Active recreation is the physical activity most preferred by Victorians – those aged 15 years or more undertake around 612 million hours of active recreation activities each year, compared to 162 million hours in organised sport.ⁱ Walking accounts for 47 percent of the total estimated session time (hours) of all active recreation activities in Victoria and walking for active recreation accounts for around 37 per cent of total physical activity hours each year for Victorians.ⁱⁱ

It is estimated that Victorians contribute \$3.8 billion per year on active recreation tourism.ⁱⁱⁱ It is also estimated that half of Victorian's nature-based physical activity is walking.^{iv}

Participation in local neighbourhood walking significantly increased during COVID-19 'lockdowns.'^v Available data indicates that Victorians have maintained a high interest in walking post lockdown – in June 2020, Victoria Walks' [Walking Maps](#) website saw visits increase by 2.6 times compared to June 2019 as people looked for walks around Victoria. Visits to Walking Maps continue to be much higher than pre-COVID, building on the long-term trend in growth in visits because this high-quality product meets people's needs. People want a one-stop shop when it comes to walking information.

Why walking tourism

The popularity of walking to Australians means it offers enormous potential for assisting the restoration of the tourism economy and lost jobs. Although many visitors may not choose destinations based entirely on walking activities, walking is one of the most popular activities undertaken by tourists when they travel. Subsequently, the popularity of walking to Australians and its potential role in Victoria's economic recovery needs to be better appreciated and supported.

There are significant and multiple benefits of walking tourism that appear poorly recognised within the Victorian tourism sector, but are aptly captured by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO):

“Walking tourism is now one of the most popular ways to experience a destination. It allows tourists to engage more with local people, nature and culture. It also meets recent travellers' need of physical and healthy activities during their travel. Walking tourism can be developed anywhere as a sustainable tourism offer with relatively small investment. It can bring about social and economic benefits to residents and communities if properly developed and managed. Since walking activity is attractive not only to visitors but also to residents to maintain and enhance their wellbeing, a destination can also consider it as a means of its welfare policy and promoting the integration between visitors and residents.”^{vi}

Walking tourism is popular for both people who like walking and those interested in nature and authentic local experiences. UNWTO identifies the three key benefits of walking tourism as:

1. Benefits of walking tourism for the destinations

Walking requires only modest investment and can be combined with other local authentic experiences, providing a product that can have unique selling points. Walking-based offerings encourage visitors to explore less visited areas, spend more and stay longer and help reduce the impacts of seasonal tourist flows. They also can have flow on benefits to the local community by promoting physical activity and discouraging sedentary behaviour among residents.

2. Benefits of walking tourism for the tourists

Walking is accessible to most of the population regardless of age and ability as people can choose walks that fit their own interests and abilities. It can provide contact with the natural environment as well as heritage, landscape, cultural features and allows a deeper interaction with people and the uniqueness of place.

3. Development of walking tourism for the benefits of residents

Walking tourism can lead to increased participation in walking by residents, result in residents learning more about local nature and culture and get them involved in environmental protection. It also increases opportunities for interaction between locals and visitors, which can lead to higher visitor satisfaction.

Walking tourism in Victoria

The importance of walking has been increasingly recognised by the tourism sector which has done well in promoting certain aspects of walking tourism, however there are gaps in how walking has been promoted so that not all the benefits captured by the UNWTO can be realised. In short, the tourism sector has not connected with and built upon the interest Australians generally have in walking as well as it could.

When walking is or has been considered in international and domestic tourism campaigns it has tended to centre on: premium guided walks; iconic walks such as the Great Ocean Walk or Grampians Peak Trail; significant regional walks; or small commercial walking tour operations. Walking has also featured in intrastate campaigns such as 'Wander Victoria' that promoted a slower different type of travel experience where visitors from Melbourne were encouraged to explore and take time to connect. Certainly, this campaign did highlight some of the lesser-known natural destinations in regional Victoria, as did the later 'Your Happy Space' and more recently with 'Stay Close, Go Further'. This type of campaign approach, centring on an overall visitor experience, seems to have been taken up by Regional Tourism Boards.

What has been missing is:

1. The curation of a variety of local walks that integrate various natural, cultural and social attractions to increase the interaction between locals and visitors to extend length of stay.
2. Walks presented in an enticing, contemporary and accessible format that can be easily shared across social media platforms.
3. A willingness to collaborate with partners outside of the traditional tourism sector, particularly those that have developed a large community interested in walking, that could have a supportive and complementary role in promoting walking tourism.
4. An understanding of the multiple benefits of supporting a coordinated approach to mapping and promoting local walks across Victoria upon which the tourism sector can draw.
5. A coordinated approach to identify which parts of Victoria should be developed as walking tourism destinations with targeted investment for trail improvement and promotion to the areas hardest hit by the pandemic.

Victoria Walks has experience in, and is well placed to partner, in addressing these types of gaps to market Victoria as a walking tourism destination. Some of Victoria Walks' experience in supporting walking tourism is outlined in the case studies below. The first two ('Putting council area walks on the map' and 'Making Lakes Entrance a walking destination') describe positive examples of facilitating walking tourism that could easily be expanded with relatively modest investment and the third ('Missed opportunity to partner to promote walking in the Otway Ranges') outlines a lost opportunity to collaborate in promoting walking tourism.

Discussion

The lack of appreciation of the value of walking tourism in Victoria that was evident before COVID is, now, limiting opportunities for economic recovery across the state.

Tourism promotion to date that incorporates walking generally focusses on a relatively small number of well-known walks or locations. It is also highly superficial, oriented towards road-trips that market the idea of walks rather than providing the type of information visitors need to incorporate walking into a visit and extend their stay. The poor promotion of existing walks across Victoria is not unique to the tourism sector. Despite recognising that walking is the most popular activity in parks, the Parks Victoria website generally provides little information on available walks beyond those in highly visited parks. This means that when tourism agencies refer users to the Parks Victoria website, potential visitors may not acquire adequate information inspire them to visit.

The abundance of attractive walks that are dispersed across the state need be better promoted for them to meet a major need of visitors and help disperse the tourist dollars across Victoria, particularly to areas that have been hard hit by the downturn in tourism.

Walking is also an outdoor activity that is not reliant on large groups, so it is resilient to any potential covid restrictions that target larger gatherings or indoor spaces. In the foreseeable future, visitors to Victorian locations will be local or inter-state who may be more open to visiting lesser-known locations than international tourists who, when they return, will generally focus on the most popular attractions.

A significant increase in visits to the many existing and appealing walks around Victoria could be achieved without large capital investment. Potential visitors simply need walking related options nicely packaged and presented – they don't want to hunt for the types of information that should be easily available in a user-friendly format.

Walking tourism marketed to families, women, and retired Australians will reap significant benefits, because walking is accessible and already highly popular among these groups. Promoting walking will build on something people are already interested and predisposed to doing – they don't need motivation, they need information, tracks and trails.

One of the most frequently asked question at many information centres is “are there any good walks nearby?” More people would travel, stay and spend on accommodation, food and cultural activities if they knew they could get in lots of great walking at a destination before they planned a visit or after they arrived.

Councils, Visitor Information Centres, cities and towns, accommodation providers and local tourism bodies do not have the resources to develop assets to promote walks integrated with other local attractions. Many are turning to Victoria Walks for assistance, but this needs to be supported and coordinated if Victoria is to reap the enormous economic gains of walking tourism.

Walking tourism case studies

Three case studies have been developed to illustrate different experiences of Victoria Walks in promoting regional walks. The case studies have helped inform the understanding of what is needed to maximise the opportunities that can be realised by supporting walking tourism in Victoria.

1. Putting council area walks on the map

Councils often find it difficult to market and promote walks in their area to encourage people to visit, stay and explore. It is too costly to develop contemporary digital formats to present walks in an attractive and alluring manner that inspires people to discover the best an area has to offer. This is

why many regional councils are increasingly turning to Victoria Walks' [Walking Maps](#) – a free to use and reputable, government funded web-based destination for walks.

As a positive example, Strathbogie Shire Council contacted Victoria Walks after becoming aware of some nearby municipalities mapping and promoting walks through Victoria Walks and saw the potential in becoming a walking destination.

During the height of COVID, Strathbogie invested in mapping walks around the Shire on Walking Maps to promote its tracks and trails so that when lockdown ended, residents could discover their own backyard, foster community goodwill, and to attract more visitors to the Shire.

Strathbogie has mapped over 40 walks enabling it to better market its walks and Victoria Walks to promote a [Spotlight on Strathbogie](#) and also highlight the walks on its [parent website](#).

The neighbouring Alpine Shire is now also being supported by Victoria Walks to do the same as it has an abundance of high-quality, well maintained walks from short strolls to longer bushwalks, but has limited capacity to promote these walks in a highly visual manner. These walks can be found by searching by location on Walking Maps or via some direct links on the [Victoria Walks main site](#). This complements existing walking promotion [Visit Bright](#) and [static maps for the area](#) or [Visit Mount Beauty](#).

2. Making Lakes Entrance a walking destination

Regional or local towns and cities can struggle to receive the attention and support they need to promote their area as a walking destination – they do not have the resources to promote walks in a coordinated and engaging way.

Victoria Walks has commenced working with Lakes Entrance Action & Development Association (LEADA) to map and promote walks for locals to be physically active and to attract visitors to the area¹. This partnership will address the paucity of easily accessible and inspiring information on walks in the district to promote Lakes Entrance as a destination. A curated list of walks will be presented, suiting people with different abilities and interests intertwined with other social and cultural activities.

This partnership approach is needed because, although there are a few different website listings of walks in the La Trobe / Gippsland region – a very large area that covers approximately 18 per cent of Victoria's landmass – most are somewhat repetitive and provide relatively scant information and appear aimed at long road-trips, rather than more intimate, locally curated selections of walks.

Examples of current walk promotion in La Trobe / Gippsland region include:

- On the Visit Melbourne website there are 18 walks in [East Gippsland](#), 8 in [Central Gippsland](#), 8 in [West Gippsland](#), and 9 in [South Gippsland](#), all with a single image and a short descriptive sentence.
- Visit Gippsland has a [brochure of walks and rides](#) across all of Gippsland and a page of information about [walking and hiking](#) with a number of walks listed, including “Epic hikes” and [strolls under 30 minutes](#). These link through to individual walks, such as [Loo-Errn walking track](#) with basic information as compared to the much more informative [Victoria](#)

¹ Victoria Walks is providing some support to bushfire affected communities to encourage walking as part of a funding agreement with VicHealth. The project with LEADA commenced in March 2021 and expects to commence promoting in mid-2021.

[Walks Loo-Ern map](#). Similarly, the [Tongue Point Walk](#) has basic information compared to detailed information included in the Victoria [Walks Tongue Point map](#).

Victoria Walks is not commenting on the overall marketing approaches of agencies within the tourism sector, beyond noting that there is a great opportunity to build on Australian's love of walking to provide focus of localised walking tourism to aid in recovery from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Missed opportunity to partner to promote walking in the Otway Ranges

Victoria Walks has invested in mapping walks in the Otway Ranges/ Great Ocean Road region but has been unable to create interest from the tourism sector to collaborate in promoting these walks, even though the mapped route information provided by Victoria Walks is generally more detailed, user friendly and visually appealing. Subsequently, Victoria Walks mapped routes generally perform better in search results than the same walks on various tourism websites.

For example, [I am Otways](#) (Great Ocean Road Regional Tourism) has a [static map of walks and waterfalls](#) and basic information on key walks, such as [Maits Rest](#). Whereas the Victoria Walks digital mapped version has photos, information, a link to Parks Victoria and a button for easily attainable directions from a user's current location – [Maits Rest Rainforest Walk, Otway Ranges](#).

When a user searches for "Maits Rest", the Victoria Walks' mapped walk is the second search result, the first being [Visit Melbourne](#) (which incidentally, links to the Victoria Walks walk through clicking a slightly obscure "Website" button). The Regional Tourism's Maits Rest walk does not feature in the first few pages of search results. Victoria Walks has mapped other walks in the region that are not promoted elsewhere including by Great Ocean Road Regional Tourism, such as [Parker Hill and Inlet walk](#), [Cape Otway to Rainbow Falls](#) and [Crayfish Bay, Cape Otway](#).

Requests by Victoria Walks to Great Ocean Road Regional Tourism to provide links to these mapped routes were declined as it prefers to only use its current map interface/platform and plot itineraries and road trips and wishes to "avoid user confusion with different map interfaces within the one site and external links out". While this approach might be understandable for organisations wanting to control their communications, it limits opportunities for collaboration to bring in visitors to the region and/or increase length of visitation.

If you have any queries regarding this submission, 


ⁱ *The economic impacts of active recreation in Victoria*, Marsden Jacob and Associates 2018, prepared for Sport and Recreation Victoria.

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^{iv} *Victoria's nature-based outdoor economy*, Marsden Jacob and Associates 2016, prepared for Outdoors Victoria & Sport and Recreation Victoria.

^v *Our Life at Home Study* (unpublished) IPAN, Deakin University examining changes in movement behaviours before, during and after the COVID-19 related restrictions ease.

^{vi} World Tourism Organization (2019), *Walking Tourism – Promoting Regional Development*, UNWTO, Madrid <https://doi.org/10.18111/9789284420346>.