

Shore thing: people's playground under pressure

January 26, 2014

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Everyone loves the beach. But are we loving it to death? As the Victorian government prepares a new strategy for the state's 2000-kilometre coastline, Farrah Tomazin talks to the experts and offers some solutions.

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A good plan

1. Tougher planning guidelines

Every year, 84 per cent of Victorians make at least one day trip to a seaside suburb or town, and the population on the coast has grown at an annual rate of 1.33 per cent over the past decade.

But experts warn that without tougher planning guidelines, our coastline is in danger of being loved to death.

Recent policy changes such as new rural zones and sea-level benchmarks have helped to guide development, but other changes are also worth considering.

These could include the introduction of a coastal conservation zone; buffers that prevent development within 100 metres of sensitive wetlands and estuaries; or purchasing private land to ensure it is properly protected and restored for coastal use.

As Victorian National Parks Association spokesman Simon Branigan puts it, something has to give.

"We now face new pressures such as major port expansions at Western Port and Port Anthony, a breakwater at Mallacoota's Bastion Point, the spread of coastal towns and the opening up of national parks along the coast to large-scale commercial developers," says Branigan.

"The rate of coastal urban sprawl is alarming."

Manage it

2. Overhaul the way coasts are managed

Managing almost 2000 kilometres of coastline is a complex business.

More than 60 organisations oversee the coast, from Parks Victoria and other government departments, to local councils and committees of management.



Under pressure: Protesting at Bastion Point. Photo: Michael Rayner



Different needs: Elwood beach. Photo: Angela Wylie



Building up: Fairhaven Surf Lifesaving Club. Photo: Justin McManus

The result is a fragmented system that often leads to inconsistent planning.

"There's always been so many different managers – and that's fine if everyone has the same objectives, but there can be a lot of push and pull," says Planning Institute executive officer Liz Johnstone, a former member of the Victorian Coastal Council and the Municipal Association of Victoria.

Under the current system, some committees are able to generate significant revenue while others have little, even though they have greater investment needs.

One idea is to amalgamate more committees, so there are fewer managers, with each group responsible for a larger area of coastal reserve. This would enable funds to be distributed more widely and ensure programs are better targeted.

Paying the way

3. Special rates to fund new buildings and infrastructure

Together with population growth, the impact of climate change — rising sea levels, more frequent storms, changing sea temperatures — will inevitably place growing pressure on coastal infrastructure.

According to one recent government report, parts of the Rosebud foreshore could be completely submerged by 2100 during coastal flooding, sections of Point Nepean Road would be regularly cut off during storms, while residents around Elwood's flood-prone canal face massive damage bills if the government and local councils fail to act. But building and renewing infrastructure isn't cheap.

A draft strategy prepared by the Victorian Coastal Council suggests setting special council rates to generate revenue from private landholders and local communities along the coast who would benefit from protection works, such as sea walls or beach restoration.

The idea is based on the "beneficiary pays" principle: if public expenditure is to benefit private landowners, then private landowners should contribute.



Funding volunteers: Coastcare tree planting at Warrnambool. *Photo: Damian White*



Competing interests: Summer in Torquay. *Photo: Simon O'Dwyer*

Work cut out

4. Proper funding for volunteers and conservation programs

According to research by the Victorian National Parks Association, more than 70 per cent of the 95 habitats found within 500 metres of the shoreline are either endangered or vulnerable.

Environmental consultant Chris Smyth, who wrote the report, puts it down to "coastal squeeze": nature being squeezed by rising sea levels on one side, and coastal development on the other.

Upkeep relies on volunteers who run nature conservation programs such as Estuary Watch (which records data on estuary conditions and water quality) and Coastcare (which tackles problems such as dune erosion, weed control, and stormwater pollution).

The problem, however, is resourcing. The state government recently cut the number of Coastcare workers as part of its public sector job cuts, and funding – both state and federal – tends to be irregular and inadequate.

"There needs to be a much stronger financial commitment to the coast, either through supporting volunteer projects, or paying people on the ground," says Smyth.

Make it happen

5. Implement the Victorian coastal strategy

In 1995, then state environment minister Mark Birrell told the Parliament that Victoria's coastline would come under inevitable pressure.

"The challenge is to ensure that its many attributes are managed in a sustainable fashion," he said, "and that decisions about competing uses are balanced in the interest of all Victorians."

Eighteen years later, the Napthine government is grappling with the same problem.

The Victorian Coastal Council is currently reviewing the state's coastal strategy, which will give planning guidance along the 2000-kilometre coast in the face of rising sea levels, urban sprawl, ageing infrastructure and competing interests.

It's a good move, but as former council chairwoman Libby Mears points out, there's no point having a strategy if it sits on a shelf gathering dust.

"It's fantastic that we have a strategy, but I guess my wish is that it would have more teeth, and actually have a level of credence when certain decisions are taken," says the former Surf Coast Shire mayor. "We need to have the will to put the money and structures in place to actually deliver it."