Barwon Coast Coastal Management and Beach Usage Research
# Brief Executive Summary

The research study undertaken by Federation University Australia applied a social research approach to explore community perspectives on issues including community identity, domestic animals on beaches, infrastructure demands, ecosystem protection and sustained recreational beach usage. Data was collected through:

- *Survey.* 1636 people responded to the survey with a further 79 survey responses collected as part of the ShareOurShores campaign launch. This resulted in a total number of 1715 survey respondents[1].

- *Focus group interviews and written submissions.* 102 individuals participated in focus groups, with an additional 13 written submissions received from people unable to be part of a focus group.

- *Document and demographic analysis.* Program documentation, population and population profile data and data relating to domestic dogs was examined for data mapping.

- *Site visits.* Site visits were undertaken by FedUni researchers during the project to explore the characteristics of the different beaches included in the research.

- *Email and telephone feedback.* Feedback, including personal narratives, were collected from 25 people across the life of the research study.
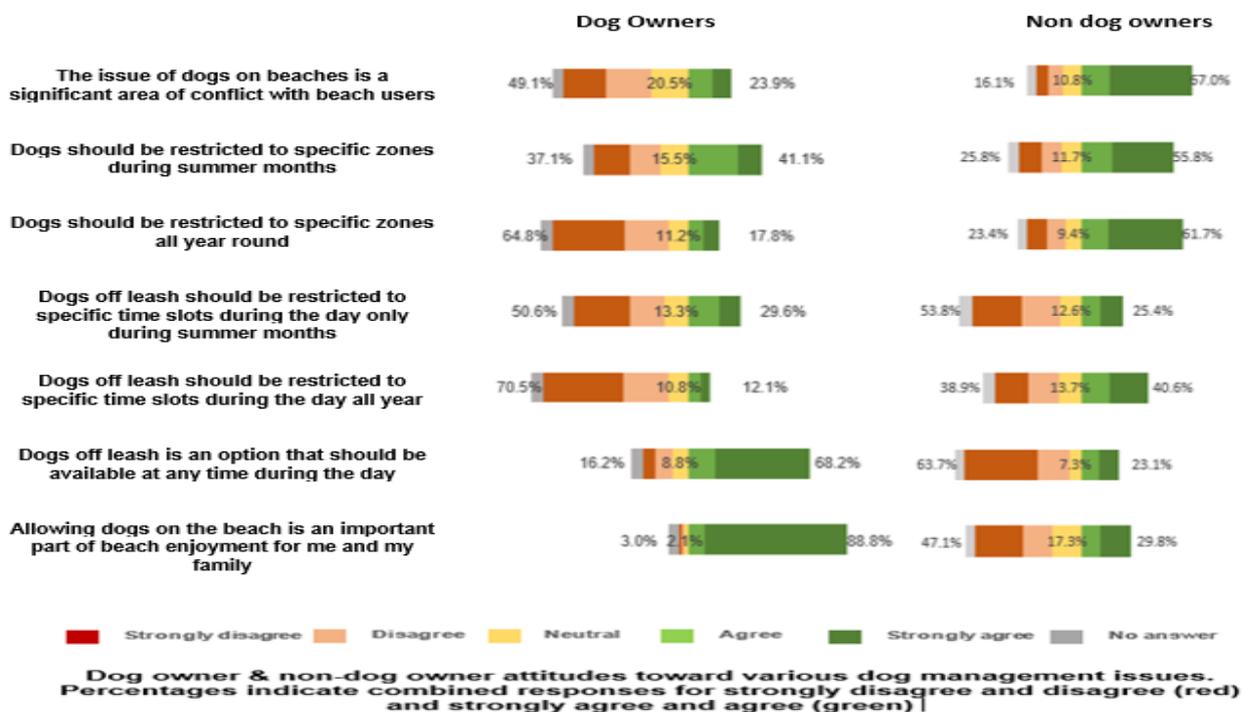
Key Study findings

- Research participants placed great importance on coastal management decision-makers understanding and valuing the key characteristics that defined the community identity across the Barwon Region. These valued characteristics related to maintaining and valuing: notions of place and community; enjoyment and recreation in the natural environment; access to metropolitan centres and proximity to health and education services; a positive family environment and holiday destination; small town (village) feel with relatively low congestion and urbanisation; opportunities for recreation and healthy lifestyles e.g. surfing, swimming, dog walking, bird watching; and, a sense of freedom

- Approximately 45% of participants identified that their beach enjoyment was compromised as a result of coastal management challenges. It was more common for permanent residents to report a compromised capacity for beach enjoyment than it was for temporary residents/visitors.

- Challenges identified by participants included littering, sand dune damage, threats to wildlife and beach overcrowding, with the predominant issue raised that of dog off lease, as shown in the Figure on page 2.

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[1] **It is flagged that there was a high level of dog ownership among research participants, with 72.6% (n=1245) dog owners, 20.9% (n=358) non-dog owners and 6.5% (n=112) declining to answer. This is statistically anomalous when compared to the % of people who are dog owners in the broader population. The impact of this anomaly cannot be readily measured but is overtly noted as a point of consideration**
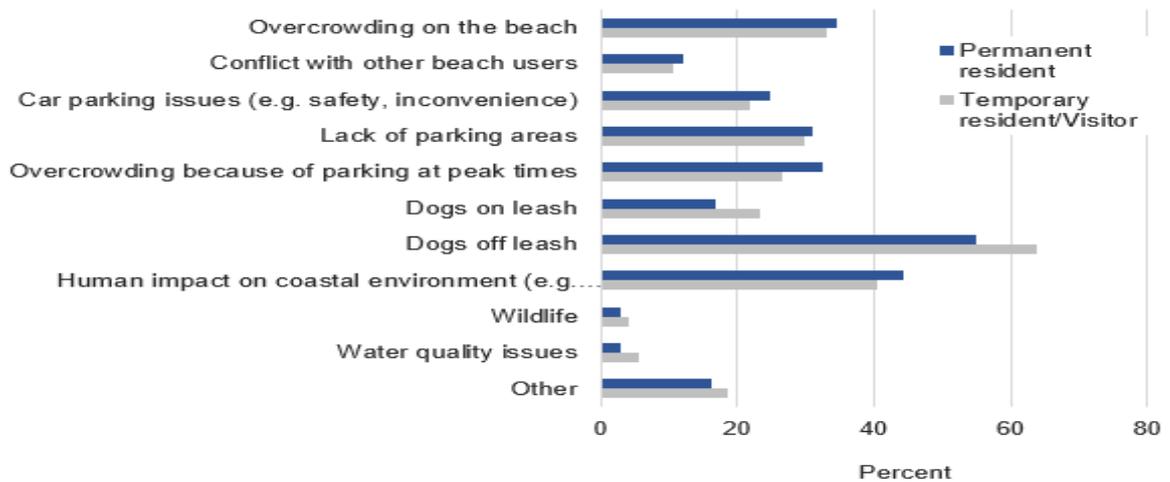
As shown, 'dogs off leash' was the greatest issue of concern raised in relation to compromised enjoyment of beaches. This was found to be consistent, regardless of dog ownership status. Based on ownership status, there were divergent views on dog management issues. Those who were concerned raised issues of risks to community safety and well-being, environmental protection and conservation, individual rights and freedom and conflicts among beach users. The alternative view was that the issue is overstated, that reported dog incidents are infrequent or caused by a minority of irresponsible beach users, and that issues in the community are more complex than simply issues of dog management. These divergent views on dog management are depicted in the following Figure which captures differences in perspectives between dog owners and non-dog owners on a range of management issues.

Dog owner & non-dog owner attitudes toward various dog management issues. Percentages indicate combined responses for strongly disagree and disagree (red) and strongly agree and agree (green)

- Regardless of these divergent perspectives there was a consistent view that dog access to beaches was highly valued by community members and temporary residents/visitors to the region, indicating that dog access is a crucial feature that contributes to a range of individual- and community-level benefits.

  The most consistent view from all research participants was that, to maintain these benefits and decrease community tensions, there needed to be a greater level of enforcement of existing regulations. The ability to regulate successfully was viewed as being negatively impacted by a lack of community understanding of the jurisdictional boundaries of different groups such as Barwon Coast Committee of Management (BCCM), local government and rangers.

  Participants identified the need for better communication of agency roles and responsibilities to the public. There was evident frustration and confusion among both community members and management agencies regarding the roles and responsibilities of agencies operating in the region, particularly in regard to enforcement powers for breaches of rules for the management of dogs on beaches.

- Coastal living and management challenges have, in some cases, created conflicts and tension between different beach users due to divergent uses of the beach area and the way in which issues are being managed. The emergence of divisions between different beach users is something that needs to be proactively countered in the management approach to avoid the development of sub groups in conflict with each other within this community.

- Environmental and wildlife impacts were identified as issues of common concern. Significant environmental issues in the region are: sand dune degradation and threats to Hooded Plover populations. Temporary exclusion zones are considered an effective management strategy (if properly enforced), and these generally have the support of community members.

- Overcrowding was a raised as a significant issue by 35% of survey respondents. This management challenge is placing pressure on public facilities, local infrastructure, traffic movement and car parking. Overcrowding can increase probability of negative beach user interactions and limit the enjoyment of, and access to, dog friendly areas. However, many research participants were adjusted to this aspect of coastal living and visitation and viewed it as an expected, but seasonal, phenomenon in the region.

- Coastal area cleanliness and waste management is an issue of common community and management concern. Coastal area cleanliness is helped significantly by the active involvement of community members collecting rubbish along the beach on their regular walks. Such community involvement is indicative of a strong sense of community and a willingness to protect valued area. Research participants offered the following management strategies to deal with the issues of rubbish in coastal environments: education and information sharing on waste management; providing more bins; increasing the frequency of rubbish collection during busy times; developing a rubbish depot for tourists to reduce risks of illegal dumping.

- Car parking was rated as the most significant infrastructure issue. Other frequently mentioned infrastructure issues were improving walking and cycling trials. Community members showed a general aversion to large scale infrastructure development, fearing a potential loss of town character. There was a desire among research participants to work with BCCM to provide long-term and sustainable solutions to infrastructure problems in the region.

- Approximately 73% of survey respondents considered signage easy to understand and 56.6% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that there is enough signage around the beaches. The focus group discussion were in slight contrast to the survey findings, revealing community members to have the following issues associated with signage in the region: Confusing and lacking clarity; Inconsistent messaging; A lack of signage, particularly at beach access points; Old and dilapidated

signage that made it difficult to read messaging; and, 'Effective control' not clearly defined. Participants also identified that there was capacity for signage to use language that was inclusive rather than directive and that work needed to be undertaken to review how messages were presented. A variety of other issues were raised across the range of data collection methods however they were not raised by large numbers of participants and could not be considered dominant, representative or generalisable themes. These include: Cycling and cycling behaviour; Jet skis; Horses on beaches; Alcohol on the beach; and, Fox (1080) bait.

Recommendations emerging from the research included:

1. That planning into the future take into consideration the maintenance of important characteristic attributes of community and that priority is given to encourage public participation and collaboration between stakeholders in planning decisions.

2. That the current commitment within BCCM to communication and marketing within and across community be continued and expanded.

3. That there is information sharing relating to the jurisdiction, authority and roles and responsibilities of coastal management bodies to increase understanding and knowledge relating to compliance, opportunities for shared input and long term planning in the region.

4. That there is the development of a structured communication plan with community to maximise community involvement in, and understanding of, a range of management and strategic priorities for the region into the future.

5. That current signage stock be reviewed to determine the extent to which the signage is meeting the community goals of: clarity and consistency; use of positive messaging and inclusive language; and, being in good repair

6. That the current commitment of BCCM for the use of inclusive educative strategies on a range of issues be maintained and/or expanded to ensure that issues of relevance to the community be addressed. These include wildlife protection, rubbish management and dog regulations.

7. That a strategy be developed to explore avenues to increase enforcement of regulations and strengthen levels of compliance. This approach should not explore, as a first option, an increase in regulation. Rather there needs to be a strategy that increases capacity for a series of enforcement cycles, using existing compliance tools such as fines, to shift current culture relating to non-compliance.

8. That longitudinal research be undertaken with FedUni to continue to explore and expand on the insights gained through this first wave of research.