



## New Ways of Seeing Regional Issues: Using Information to Move Beyond Stereotypes

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### Introduction

In any debate about regional Australia it is easy to use well-worn perspectives and stereotypes. For policy makers, researchers and media commentators this can be reinforced by the fact that most reside in capital cities. Challenging such stereotypes is an important step in developing and exploring new perspectives on old problems. For example, does population decline mean the 'death' of a town or a region? Why do many economic indicators improve in the face of such decline? And which population are we actually measuring when we determine patterns of decline? Sometimes, our understanding of existing issues can be re-invigorated by introducing information from other fields of research. It can also be enhanced through the development of broader timeframes – both historical and projected.

This article examines a number of regional issues in such ways. It arises from work undertaken by the Victorian Government which has been published as *Regional Matters: An Atlas of Regional Victoria*. This whole-of-government project involved both traditional and new data sources in the production of charts and maps. Its focus is on issues, not just data: it informs us on the basis of what needs to be known rather than what is simply easy to illustrate. And, where possible, it highlights linkages between issues rather than quarantining issues within single portfolios or fields of study. For example, agriculture is as much about economic restructuring, community cohesion and

environmental sustainability as it is about crops and animal husbandry. Regional economic development is not just about industries and employment – it is also about communities, lifestyles and the services needed to attract skilled workers.

Throughout this paper, the term 'regional Victoria' refers to non-metropolitan Victoria, that is, all parts of the State which lie outside the Melbourne Statistical Division. While it is a commonly used geographical construct, it is not a single, homogeneous place, but rather a series of diverse regions with differing landscapes, local economies and communities.

### Regional and Metropolitan divergence

Regional Victoria is home to approximately 1.3 million people and makes a major contribution to Victoria's export wealth through both primary (agriculture, mining, forestry) and secondary (processed or manufactured) products. It has also shown resilience and adaptability through two decades of economic and social change. The economic base of many regions has diversified, new markets have been identified and developed and service-based industries such as tourism have continued to grow. Value-adding rather than simply exporting raw produce is now much more common. Nevertheless, in social and cultural terms, regional Victoria may be seen to have had more difficulty in

responding to change. Modern economies tend to favour large cities where diverse economic and social environments continue to attract young people. Regional areas with more dispersed populations and fewer urban centres may be economically efficient and productive, but may be seen as socially and culturally more isolated than a large city.

Social expectations have changed greatly over the past 30 years – mobility, travel and the internet make us global citizens, a job for life has been replaced by several jobs within a career or several careers within a lifetime, and education is more likely to occur throughout one's life rather than for the first two decades only. In short, people's lives are more subject to change than in the past, and larger centres are able to provide a range of services and attractions allowing flexible and changing lifestyles to be accommodated more easily.

Australia's geography plays a part in this process as well because the major capital cities dominate their respective States with relatively few large cities being found in regional areas. The contrast between regional and metropolitan may therefore be large and can exacerbate perceived and real differences in opportunity and experience between regional and urban living.

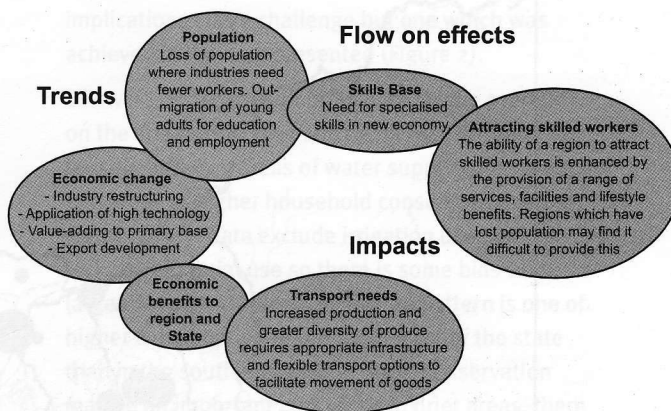
## The importance of linkages

Categorisation of trends and impacts is important for us to understand them. However, the process of categorisation can often lead us to underestimate the importance of linkages – the impact of one factor on another.

Economic change, for example, can have positive effects on the productivity of a region, but may also lead to increasing demand for infrastructure or certain types of skilled labour. In some cases it may be difficult to attract these workers when and where they are needed. Emerging regional industry opportunities like the 'New Mediterranean' olive growing at Boort (north west of Bendigo), or the mineral sands development in the Mallee have attracted international investment but where are the workers to be drawn from? Why aren't people flocking from Melbourne to the Mallee in order to take up these jobs? The reasons for skilled workers

being attracted to a region go beyond the economic attraction of a job – factors such as the physical environment, service availability and social diversity may all come into play (refer Figure 1).

**Figure 1** Impacts arising from economic change in a region



*Source: Victorian Government 2002, p. 7.*

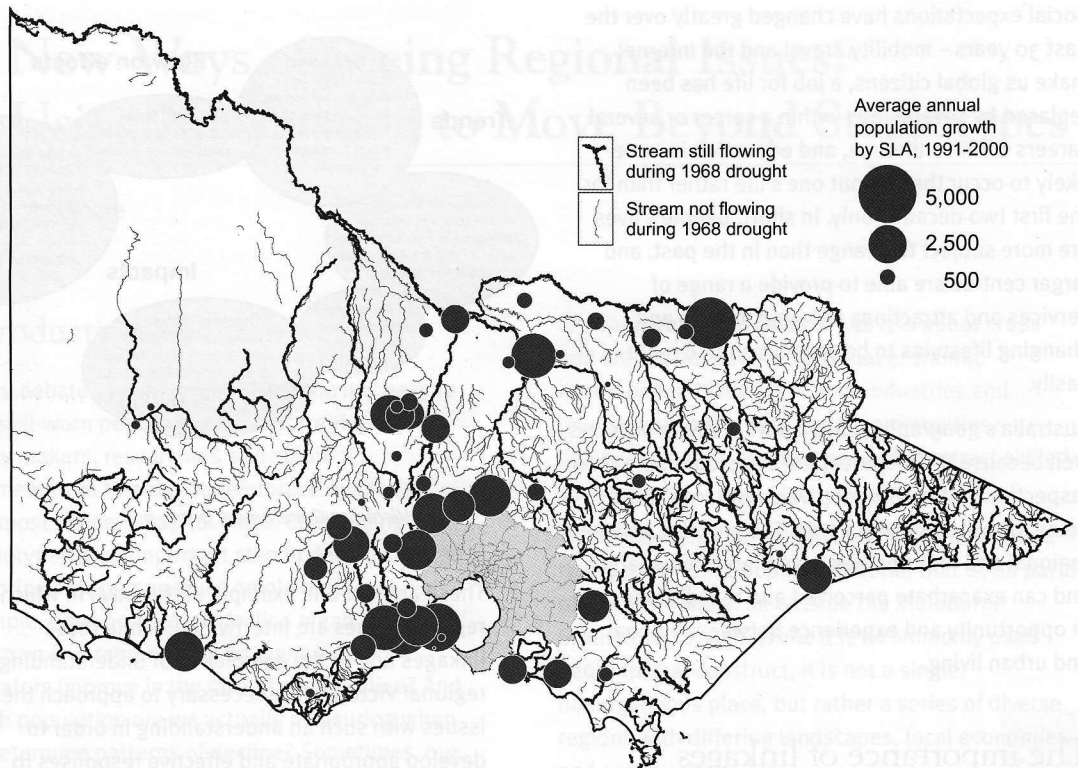
These are just one example of the ways in which regional issues are intertwined. While these linkages add to the complexity of understanding regional Victoria, it is necessary to approach these issues with such an understanding in order to develop appropriate and effective responses to regional change.

## New ways of seeing regional Victoria

### *Mapping Water Resource Issues*

Apart from highlighting linkages between issues, the Regional Atlas aimed, where possible, to give new insights through creative presentation of data and through the juxtaposition of different types of data. This approach was applied to the water resources section of the atlas where socio-demographic information was overlaid on environmental data (refer Figure 2).

**Figure 2** Stream flow during drought (1968) and areas of population growth (1991 to 2000), Victoria



*Sources: Stream flow – Victorian Department of Natural Resources and Environment*

*Population change – ABS Estimated Resident Population Counts*

The base map itself had an interesting history. It had been prepared by hand following the 1968 drought and, having never been repeated or updated, it survived as a 'one-off' finally making its way into electronic format in the Department of Natural Resources and Environment's Geographic Information System.

The map shows Victoria's stream system and highlights those streams which were still flowing at the height of the 1968 drought. Of key importance

is that it gives us a picture of severe drought – an extreme environmental event but one which visited us again in the early 1980s and again in 2002. It is a cyclical event within Victoria's and Australia's variable climate. This map provides a different perspective from *average* streamflow and also presents a point of critical shortfall of supply which is as important to those considering water supply issues as extreme rainfall events may be to those considering flood protection.

The map shows that stream flow was maintained in the south east of the state where streams were still able to be fed from alpine sources. Towards the north west, however, the topographic and hydrographic characteristics of the region result in streamflow vulnerability during severe drought, and consequently water supply vulnerability.

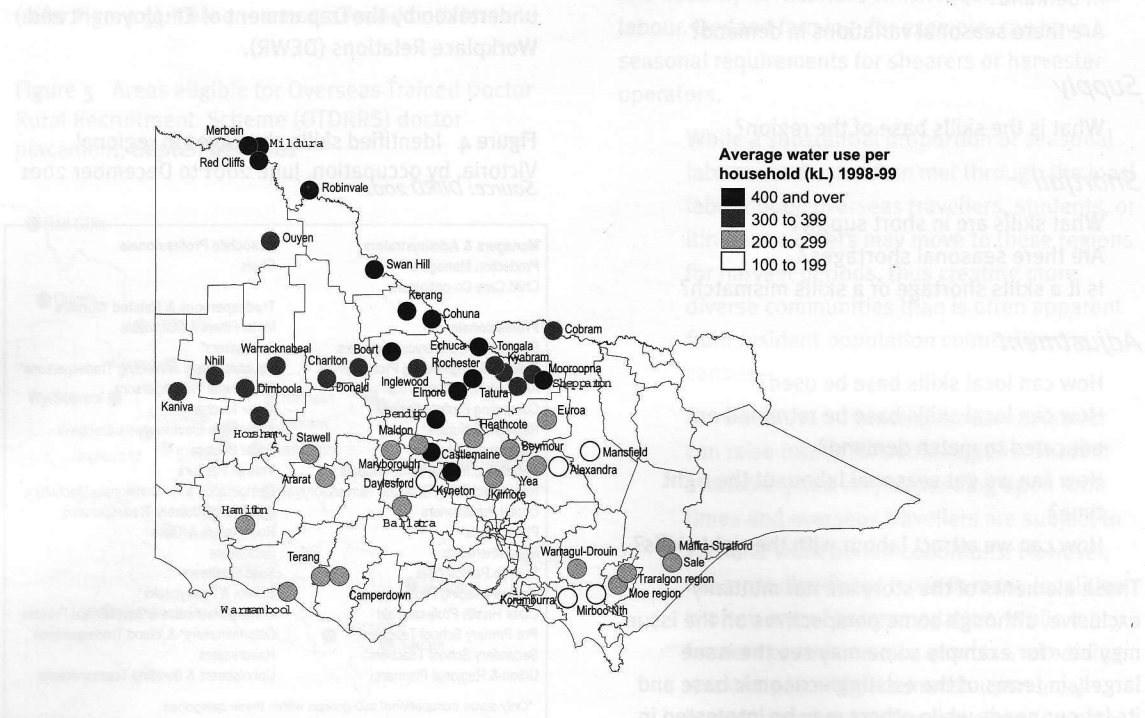
Rather than leaving the map as a picture of water resources, the linkage through to water supply is followed through by considering population growth. During the 1990s the locations in regional Victoria which experienced greatest growth were in the ring of regional centres from Geelong through Ballarat and Bendigo in the west and through to Shepparton and Wodonga in the north. One thing that strikes us immediately is that some of these – Bendigo and Ballarat for example – are growing rapidly.

This growth trend is something that is seen as positive and it is supported through government policy initiatives such as the fast train links. Nevertheless, there is a potential vulnerability which may not be evident this year or next year but which would certainly be evident in a severe drought. In one sense, this is not a new issue. The

water boards of Bendigo, Ballarat and Geelong have voiced concern over issues of water supply and water restrictions for many years. However there is a tendency when such issues are raised to see them in terms of short term problems (inconvenience or cost of water restrictions) or in terms of who is to blame (usually a neighbouring catchment or Melbourne). Communicating the longer term dynamic and the cross-catchment implications was a challenge but one which was achieved in the map presented (Figure 2).

Likewise, water consumption data can be overlaid on the streamflow map and again we can see a tension between areas of water supply vulnerability and areas of higher household consumption (refer Figure 3). The data exclude irrigation use but include industrial use so there is some bias to larger towns and cities. The overall pattern is one of higher consumption in the north west of the state than in the south east. While water conservation may be an important part of life in drier areas, there is still likely to be a higher household demand for water in hotter climates (pools and garden maintenance) as well as higher evaporation rates.

**Figure 3** Household water consumption for selected settlements, Victoria, 1998-99



Source: ABS Regional Statistics, Victoria 2001, pp. 97-98.

## Skills Shortages

Where an issue did not lend itself to a single graphical presentation, the issue was explored through the presentation of 'pieces' of the story. This was the way in which the issue of skills shortages was explored.

The issue of skills shortages has relevance across a number of agencies. The Departments of Education and Training as well as the Department of Human Services raised concerns about attracting professionals to regional areas. The Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development had a broad interest in business development, investment attraction and the matching of skills demand and supply.

Despite the existence of a new interdepartmental industry skills network and the cross-departmental relevance of the issue, it was difficult to pin down the exact nature of the issue and to agree on how the issue should be presented through the regional atlas. The skills issue(s) meant different things across and within departments:

### *Demand*

- What skills are needed in a region or by an industry?
- What existing skills have experienced reduction in demand?
- Are there seasonal variations in demand?

### *Supply*

- What is the skills base of the region?

### *Shortfall*

- What skills are in short supply?
- Are there seasonal shortages?
- Is it a skills shortage or a skills mismatch?

### *Adjustment*

- How can local skills base be used?
- How can local skills base be retrained or educated to match demand?
- How can we get seasonal labour at the right time?
- How can we attract labour with the right skills?

These elements of the story are not mutually exclusive, although some perspectives on the issue may be – for example some may see the issue largely in terms of the existing economic base and its labour needs while others may be interested in what is not there – the skills that cannot be

attracted or the industries that are not locating there because of perceived or real shortages.

As a result of differing perspectives, it was difficult to present a set of data that gave an adequate presentation of the issue. Furthermore, data issues – availability, quality, comprehensiveness and representativeness – became a major challenge. Separately. No one map and no one indicator could get across the complexity of the story. Hence, various facets of the skills topic were presented in order to build up a bigger picture.

## Identified Skill Shortage Lists

Figure 4 presents a list of 'identified skills shortages' for regional Victoria. The list is used in the management of specific immigration schemes. Through Federal Government State Specific Migration Mechanisms (SSMMs) State and Territory Governments can influence the number of skilled migrants settling in particular regions. The State/Territory Nominated Independent (STNI) Scheme enables States and Territories to sponsor skilled independent migrants who are willing to settle in areas where their skills are in demand. Victoria, which participates in the STNI scheme, determines the list of skills which are in short supply on the basis of skill shortage assessments undertaken by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR).

**Figure 4** Identified skills shortages in regional Victoria, by occupation, June 2001 to December 2001  
*Source: DIIRD 2001*

<b>Managers &amp; Administrators</b>	<b>Associate Professionals</b>
Production Managers	Chefs
Child Care Co-ordinators	
<b>Professionals</b>	<b>Tradespersons &amp; Related Workers</b>
Electrical & Electronics Engineers	Metal Fitters & Machinists
Building & Engineering Professionals	Toolmakers*
Accountants	Structural Steel & Welding Tradespersons*
Computing Professionals	Sheetmetal Tradespersons
Registered Nurses*	Motor Mechanics*
Registered Midwives	Automotive Electricians
Registered Mental Health Nurses	Panel Beaters
Registered Devpt Disability Nurses	Vehicle Painters
Dental Practitioners	Refrigeration & Airconditioning Mechanics
Pharmacists	Carpentry & Joinery Tradespersons
Physiotherapists	Roof Slaters & Tilers
Speech Pathologists	Bricklayers
Medical Imaging Professionals	Solid Plasterers
Other Health Professionals	Bakers & Pastrycooks*
Pre-Primary School Teachers	Printing Machinists & Small Offset Printers
Secondary School Teachers*	Cabinetmakers* & Wood Tradespersons
Urban & Regional Planners	Hairdressers
	Upholsterers & Bedding Tradespersons

\*Only some occupational sub-groups within these categories

The list is instructive in so far as it shows that skills shortages are not just about 'new economy'

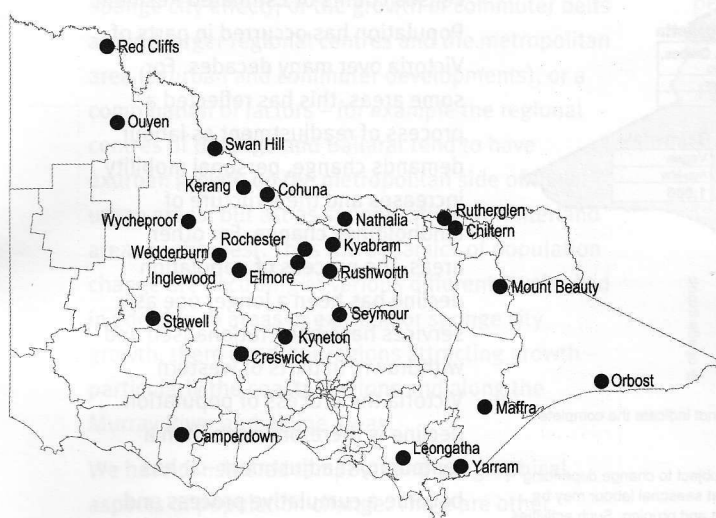
The list is instructive in so far as it shows that skills shortages are not just about 'new economy' professionals and 'knowledge workers'— we are talking about a whole range of trades and professionals. An important linkage here is the shortage of skills in the housing trades – this has implications for the housing shortages which are reported in some areas of regional Victoria.

## Doctor Shortages

Doctors are an example of health care professionals who may be in short supply in some regions. The Overseas Trained Doctor Rural Recruitment Scheme (OTDRS) identifies areas of doctor shortage. In return for agreeing to practice in one of these locations for 5 years, an Overseas Trained Doctor can gain permanent residency. After the 5 year period, the doctor is able to practice anywhere in Australia. Overseas Trained Doctors are only recruited after doctors resident in Australia have been given the opportunity to apply for any vacancy.

In 2001, the areas identified as being eligible to have an overseas doctor placement included a number of towns in north west and north central Victoria as well as in Gippsland and one alpine area (refer Figure 5). These towns are found both in

**Figure 5** Areas eligible for Overseas Trained Doctor Rural Recruitment Scheme (OTDRRS) doctor placement, September 2001



Source: Rural Workforce Agency

areas of population growth as well as population decline. This may reflect a 'turnover effect' as older doctors retire and towns are unable to attract a replacement. Over time, other towns may experience the same problem and become eligible for the OTDRS.

Apart from the OTDRS, there are a number of schemes which also aim to attract doctors to regional Victoria. These include Advanced Specialist Training Posts (ASTRA) and the Medical Specialists Outreach Assistance Program (MSOAP).

## Seasonal Labour Demand

Skills shortages in regional Victoria may occur during particular seasons, especially where primary production (and related secondary processing) requires high labour inputs during particular seasons. Perhaps the most obvious examples of seasonal labour demands are in horticultural industries where seasonal harvests are often labour intensive. Harvest picking itself can require particular skills or training, especially for crops which are easily damaged. Related activities such as pruning, weeding, or factory packing can also contribute to seasonal labour demands.

It is not only horticulture which requires seasonal labour. Dryland farming, for example, can have seasonal requirements for shearers or harvester operators.

While a substantial proportion of seasonal labour needs are often met through the local labour pool, overseas travellers, students, or itinerant workers may move to these regions for harvest periods, thus creating more diverse communities than is often apparent from resident population counts like the census.

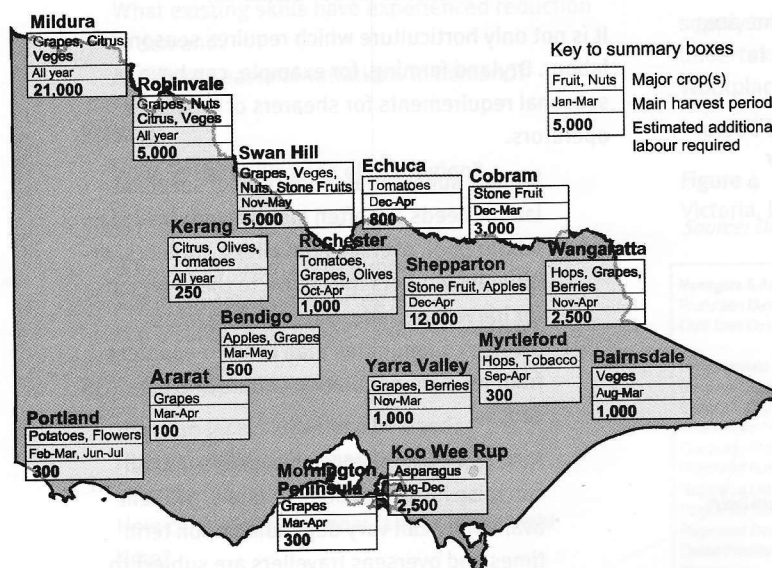
Nevertheless, reliance on seasonal labour can raise issues for some regions. Student availability can vary depending upon term times and overseas travellers are subject to visa and work permit conditions. However, the most significant issue in many localities is often one of accommodation. While many farmers provide on-site quarters, remaining workers place high demands upon local budget accommodation and often compete with tourists for the space. Limited rental

accommodation in most regional towns exacerbates such shortages.

It is inherently difficult to obtain data on seasonal labour because numbers vary from month to month and from year to year depending on harvests, weather, and changes in the application of labour-saving technology. Fortunately, in attempts to attract this very labour, resources for potential casual labour (such as overseas backpackers on working holiday visas) have been compiled or presented on regional websites. A more comprehensive example of this is *Workabout Australia* which is essentially a handbook for overseas backpackers and casual labourers. While still relying on estimates rather than actual counts it nevertheless provides good coverage of seasonal labour needs across the horticultural industries. Figure 6 provides a summary of these estimates for the major harvest regions of Victoria.

The scale of this seasonal labour demand and the length of the season into which it is concentrated provides particular challenges for some regions. As these locations need to find this labour every year

**Figure 6** Estimated labour demands for harvest seasons in regional Victoria, 2000



NOTE 1: The crops listed above are major crops in the respective regions but do not indicate the complete range of horticultural products produced

NOTE 2: The harvest periods and labour requirements indicated above may be subject to change depending upon seasonal climatic variation and changing economic conditions. Note also that seasonal labour may be required at times of the year other than harvest time for activities such as weeding and pruning. Such activities are not included in the information above

Source: *Brebner 2000, pp. 154-187.*

there may be issues of skills shortage or skills mismatch. The availability of labour can also be affected by seemingly unrelated changes – for example, changes in university vacation times have been reported as creating problems for labour availability (DEWRSB 2000, p. 72). The other important aspect of seasonal labour is the flow-on impacts from this scale of seasonal population change – particularly in regards to accommodation shortages, a problem made even worse in places like Mildura where tourists compete with labour for hotel and motel space. As discussed earlier, shortages of skills in the regional housing construction industry may also play a part in the overall package of issues surrounding housing markets, labour supply and seasonal demand.

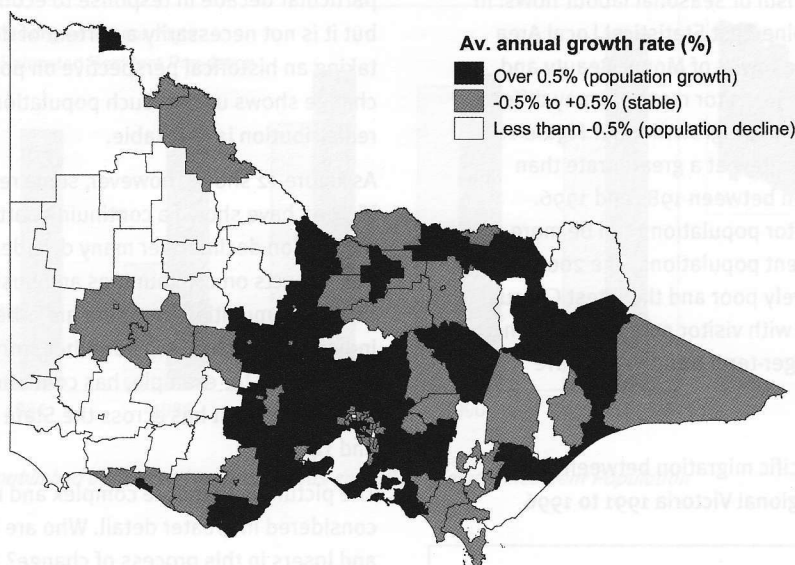
### Challenging regional stereotypes

For those living in metropolitan Australia, perspectives on ‘regional issues’ can be greatly influenced by media representation, stereotypical images and a view of regional areas as being quite homogeneous. Thus an issue such as regional population decline may loom large in people’s minds while the actual patterns of growth and decline may be more complex or dynamic in nature.

#### *Is regional Victoria’s population declining?*

Population decline, as measured by census counts or Estimated Resident Population has occurred in parts of Victoria over many decades. For some areas, this has reflected a process of readjustment as labour demands change, personal mobility increases and the structure of landholdings change. For other areas, the process of population decline has been a longer one as services have been rationalised and withdrawn. In parts of western Victoria the process of population decline is therefore more than a temporary readjustment – it has become a cumulative process and tends to attract the ‘dying towns’ type of headlines. In understanding

**Figure 7** Average Annual Population Growth Rate, ERP, Victorian SLAs, 1991 to 2001



NOTE: 2001 data are ABS preliminary estimates, July 2002

Source: ABS 2002, pp. 41-42.

such population change the temporal dimension is important as causal factors may change over time and entrenchment of trends may occur.

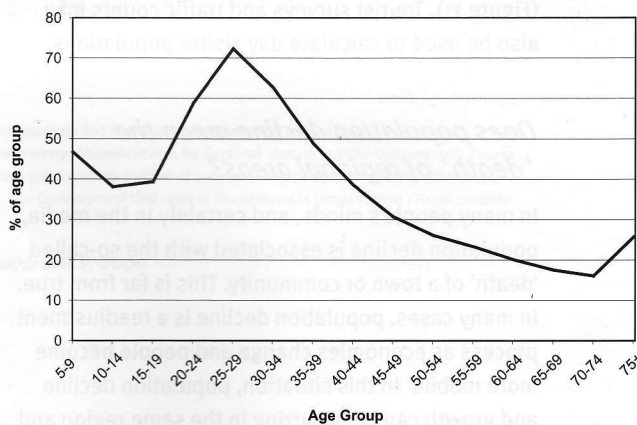
A spatial perspective on the issue shows that population decline is far from being the scourge of all non-metropolitan areas (refer Figure 7). Different scales of analysis can reveal the growth of regional centres within declining hinterlands (the so-called sponge city effect); or the growth of commuter belts around larger regional centres and the metropolitan area (exurban and commuter developments), or a combination of factors – for example the regional centres of Bendigo and Ballarat tend to have exurban growth on the metropolitan side of their urban areas, but act as sponge cities for hinterland areas to the west. Thus the dynamics of population change are occurring at various different levels. And in addition to areas of exurban or sponge city growth, there are other regions attracting growth – particularly the coastal regions and along the Murray River and alpine areas.

We have considered temporal and geographical aspects of population change. There are other aspects as well. Age-specific trends, for example, provide an insight into the structures of population

change. Young adults are the most mobile group within the population (refer Figure 8). The net flows of this age group are therefore an important factor determining population redistribution through migration.

Overall there is a net loss of this age group from regional areas to metropolitan, while there is a net loss of all other age groups (families and older age persons) in the other direction – from metropolitan to regional (refer Figure 9).

**Figure 8** Proportion of people who moved between 1991 and 1996, by age, Victoria



Source: ABS unpublished data 1996



There are also other populations apart from those resident. Many towns have variable populations depending on tourism or seasonal labour flows. In the case of the Alpine-East Statistical Local Area (which includes the towns of Mount Beauty and Bright), the growth in visitor numbers may differ from resident population growth (refer Figure 10). Visitor populations grew at a greater rate than resident population between 1981 and 1996. However, such visitor populations can be more volatile than resident populations. The 2001 snow season was relatively poor and the latest Census results reflect this with visitor populations being lower than the longer-term trend might have suggested.

**Figure 9** Age-specific migration between Melbourne and regional Victoria 1991 to 1996

Age Group	Net migration
5-14	4,434 <i>gain to regional from Melbourne</i>
15-29	16,404 <i>gain to Melbourne from regional</i>
30-44	6,350 <i>gain to regional from Melbourne</i>
45-54	2,909 <i>gain to regional from Melbourne</i>
55-64	4,825 <i>gain to regional from Melbourne</i>
65+	2,675 <i>gain to regional from Melbourne</i>

Source: ABS unpublished data, 1996

Other locations with variable population levels are coastal resorts, however the Census (being undertaken in winter) does not give us a picture of the peak population. Nevertheless, the number of vacant dwellings (mostly holiday homes in these locations) and the supply of tourist accommodation can be used to estimate peak overnight populations (Figure 11). Tourist surveys and traffic counts may also be used to calculate day visitor populations.

### *Does population decline mean the 'death' of regional areas?*

In many people's minds, and certainly in the media, population decline is associated with the so-called 'death' of a town or community. This is far from true. In many cases, population decline is a readjustment process as economies change and people become more mobile. In this situation, population decline and growth can be occurring in the same region and

simply form a process of population redistribution. Other areas may see population decline over a particular decade in response to economic change, but it is not necessarily a portent of doom. In fact, taking an historical perspective on population change shows us that such population change and redistribution is inevitable.

As Figure 12 shows, however, some regions of Victoria have shown a continuing pattern of population decline over many decades. This has had impacts on communities and businesses within those communities. Yet there are other economic indicators which provide another story: agricultural productivity for example, has continued to grow in these areas as it has across the State (Figures 13 and 14).

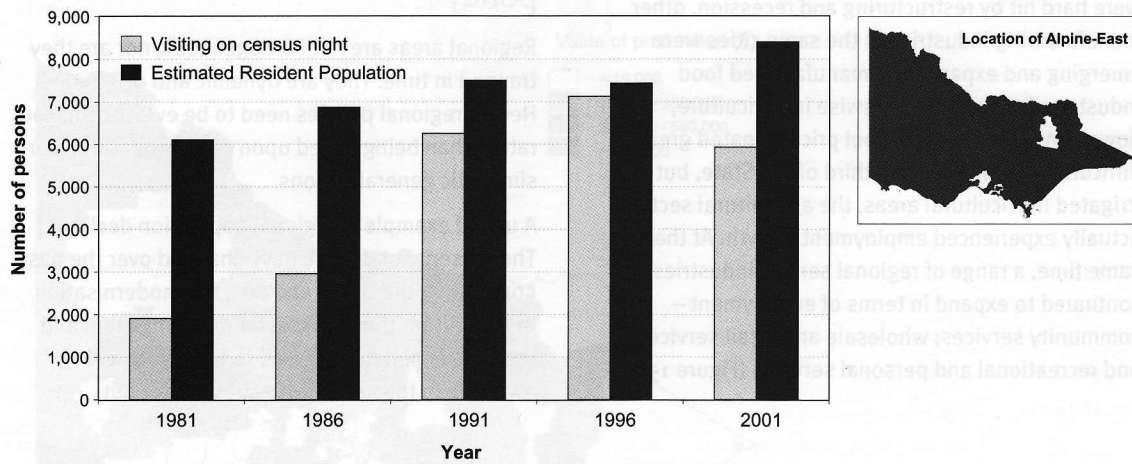
The picture is therefore complex and needs to be considered in greater detail. Who are the winners and losers in this process of change? Are the profits from increased productivity being retained within the region or siphoned elsewhere? How sustainable is continued economic growth if population decline continues? In fact, how large or small does a region's population have to be to support various types of economic activity. The continued economic development of western Victoria over the past 40 years would suggest that only a small population is needed to maintain the necessary economic conditions for growth. At the same time, however, there is growing evidence of skills shortages and difficulty in attracting people to work in these regions which may suggest that ongoing population decline will increasingly cause economic disadvantage for enterprises operating in these locations.

### *Has regional employment declined?*

The late 1980s and early 1990s witnessed major economic restructuring in many of Victoria's regions. In some cases, metropolitan Melbourne also experienced economic change – decline in manufacturing employment and the rationalisation or concentration of many public and private services. In an industry such as agriculture there were also overall losses in employment. However, in all cases, the overall trends hid some important regional variation.

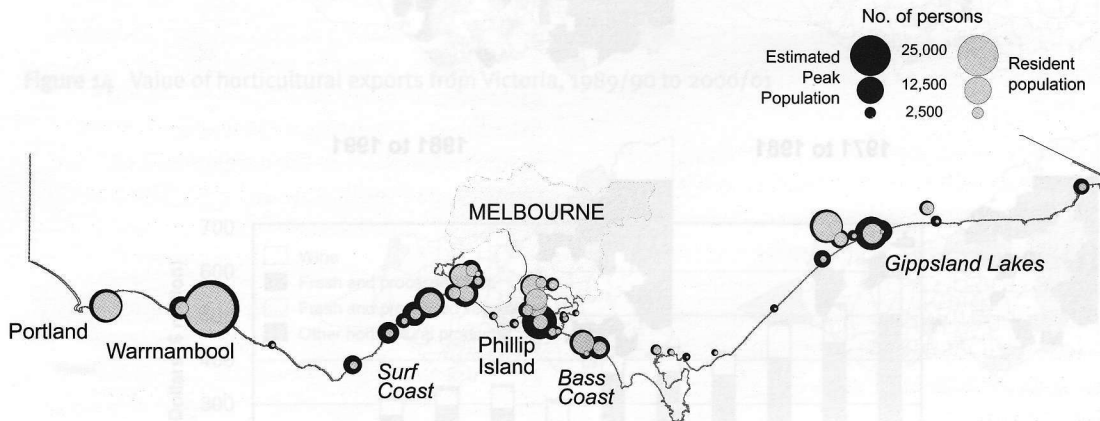
With manufacturing and agriculture, the overall decline in employment hid a more complex pattern

**Figure 10** Resident and visiting population, Alpine-East SLA, 1981 to 2001



Source: DOI unpublished data based on ABS Census and ABS Estimated Resident Population

**Figure 11** Peak Population estimates for selected coastal towns in Victoria



NOTE: Peak population estimates take into account potential population should unoccupied dwellings and tourist accommodation be utilised. A count of unoccupied dwellings is provided by the census and this number has been multiplied by the average household size for Regional Victoria in 1996 (2.6 persons). Tourist accommodation data has been obtained from the RACV *Experience Victoria* accommodation guide and the number of persons in tourist accommodation determined on the basis of either 2 persons per bedroom, or a person capacity where this was stated. The Geographical Unit used in this analysis is Urban Centre / Rural Locality.

Sources: DOI unpublished data based on ABS Census 1996 and 2001; RACV, 2000

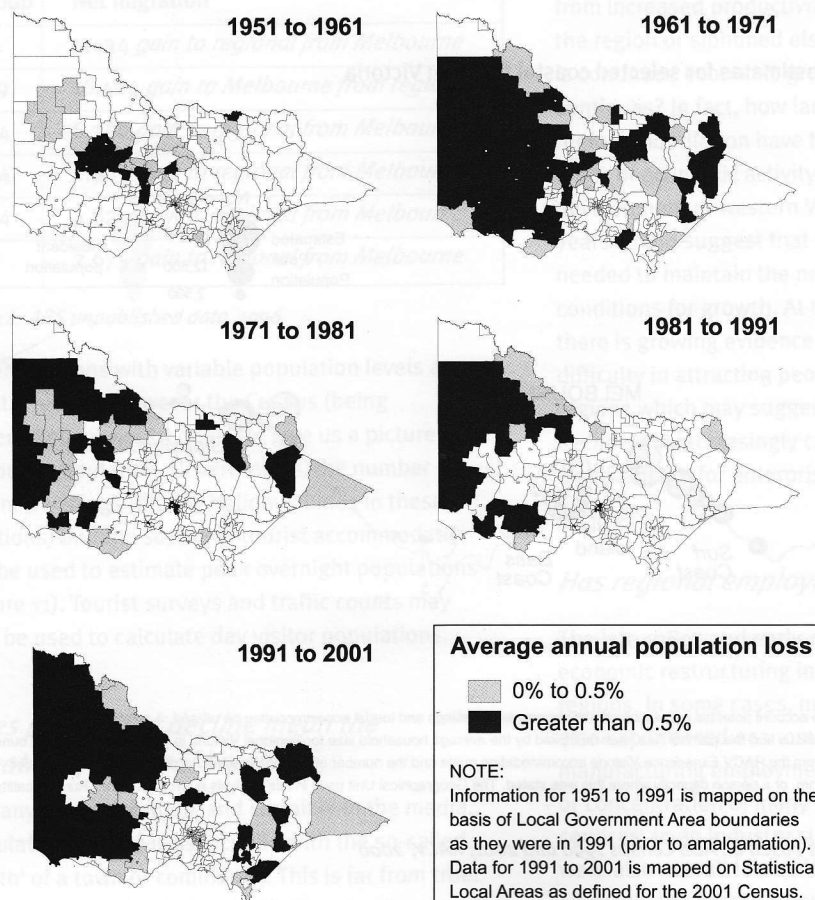
of growth and decline. While traditional manufacturing industries in the regional centres were hard hit by restructuring and recession, other manufacturing industries in the same cities were emerging and expanding – manufactured food industries for example. Likewise in agriculture, downturns in wheat and wool prices created great difficulties for the western third of the State, but in irrigated horticultural areas, the agricultural sector actually experienced employment growth. At the same time, a range of regional service industries continued to expand in terms of employment – community services; wholesale and retail services, and recreational and personal services (Figure 15).

## Using information for regional policy

Regional areas are not homogeneous, nor are they trapped in time. They are dynamic and diverse. Hence, regional policies need to be evidence-based rather than being based upon past assumptions or simplistic generalisations.

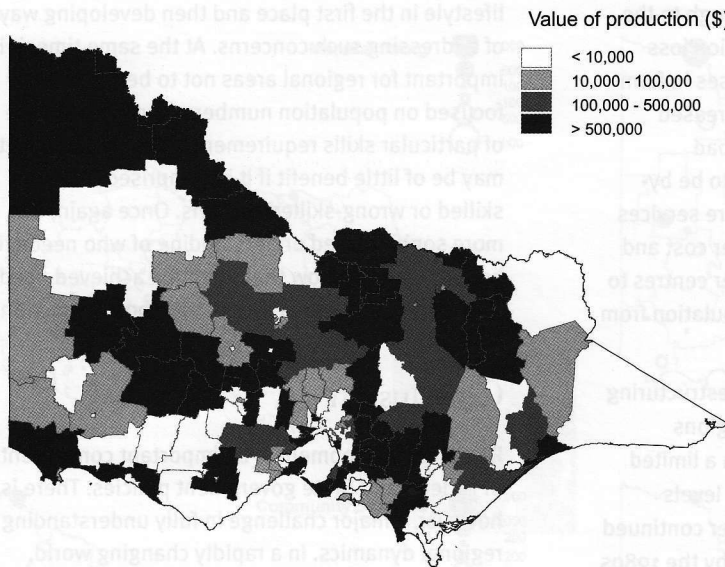
A useful example is regional population decline. The reasons for decline have changed over the past 50 years. In the 1950s and 60s, the modernisation of agriculture through greater mechanisation and increased capital inputs led to fewer jobs being available in the sector with subsequent out-

**Figure 12** Changing patterns of population decline in regional Victoria, 1951 to 2001



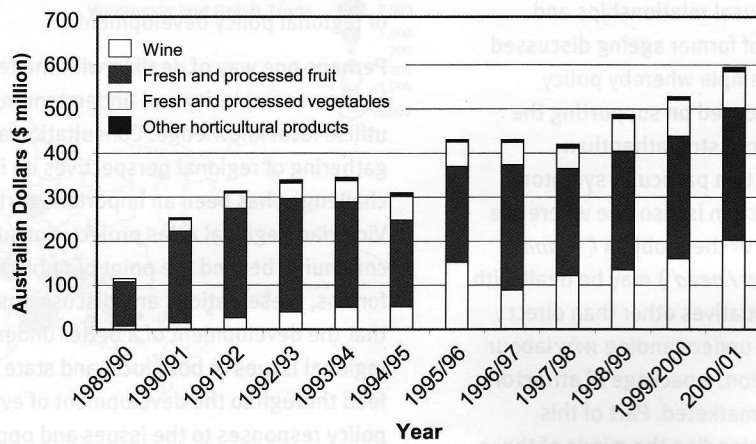
Source: DOI unpublished data

**Figure 13** Value of horticultural production, Victorian Statistical Local Areas, 2000



Source: Dept Natural Resources and Environment

**Figure 14** Value of horticultural exports from Victoria, 1989/90 to 2000/01



Source: Dept Natural Resources and Environment

migration of the working-age population. Ongoing changes in agricultural methods, application of technology, and consolidation of farming properties ensured that this trend continued through to the 1980s. Furthermore, although population loss occurred, there were sustained increases in farm productivity. As individual mobility increased through the use of car transport and road improvements, smaller towns tended to be bypassed in favour of larger centres where services and goods could be purchased at lower cost and with greater choice. This allowed larger centres to attract population while 'draining' population from smaller centres.

Although trends such as agricultural restructuring occurred over many decades, some regions experienced population decline within a limited period of time, after which population levels stabilised or grew. Other areas however continued to experience population decline and by the 1980s and 90s these areas tended to be trapped in a cumulative cycle of population decline. As population levels declined, some businesses and services were no longer viable. Their closure made retention of population more difficult. The different reasons for population decline suggest that policy responses need to be based on an understanding of the dynamics, longevity and region-specific nature of the trend.

Another way in which information and analysis can better underpin regional policy development is through determining causal relationships and linkages. The example of farmer ageing discussed previously is a good example whereby policy approaches could be focused on supporting the economic health of an industry rather than focussing on a solution to a particular symptom. The issue of skills attraction is also one where the most obvious symptom of the problem (*'I cannot attract the skilled labour I need'*) may be dealt with through some policy initiatives other than direct labour market ones. By understanding *why* labour is not attracted to a region, a package of attractors may be developed and marketed. Part of this process involves understanding the minds of those that we are wanting to attract.

Developing a better understanding between regional and metropolitan populations is therefore important. And this is not a one way process of

telling urban dwellers that regional areas offer 'wonderful lifestyle'. It is a matter of understanding why many urban dwellers are not attracted by that lifestyle in the first place and then developing ways of addressing such concerns. At the same time, it is important for regional areas not to become solely focused on population numbers alone. In the face of particular skills requirements, population growth may be of little benefit if it is comprised of non-skilled or wrong-skilled persons. Once again, a more sophisticated understanding of who needs to be attracted and how that might be achieved needs to underpin strategies for skilled labour attraction.

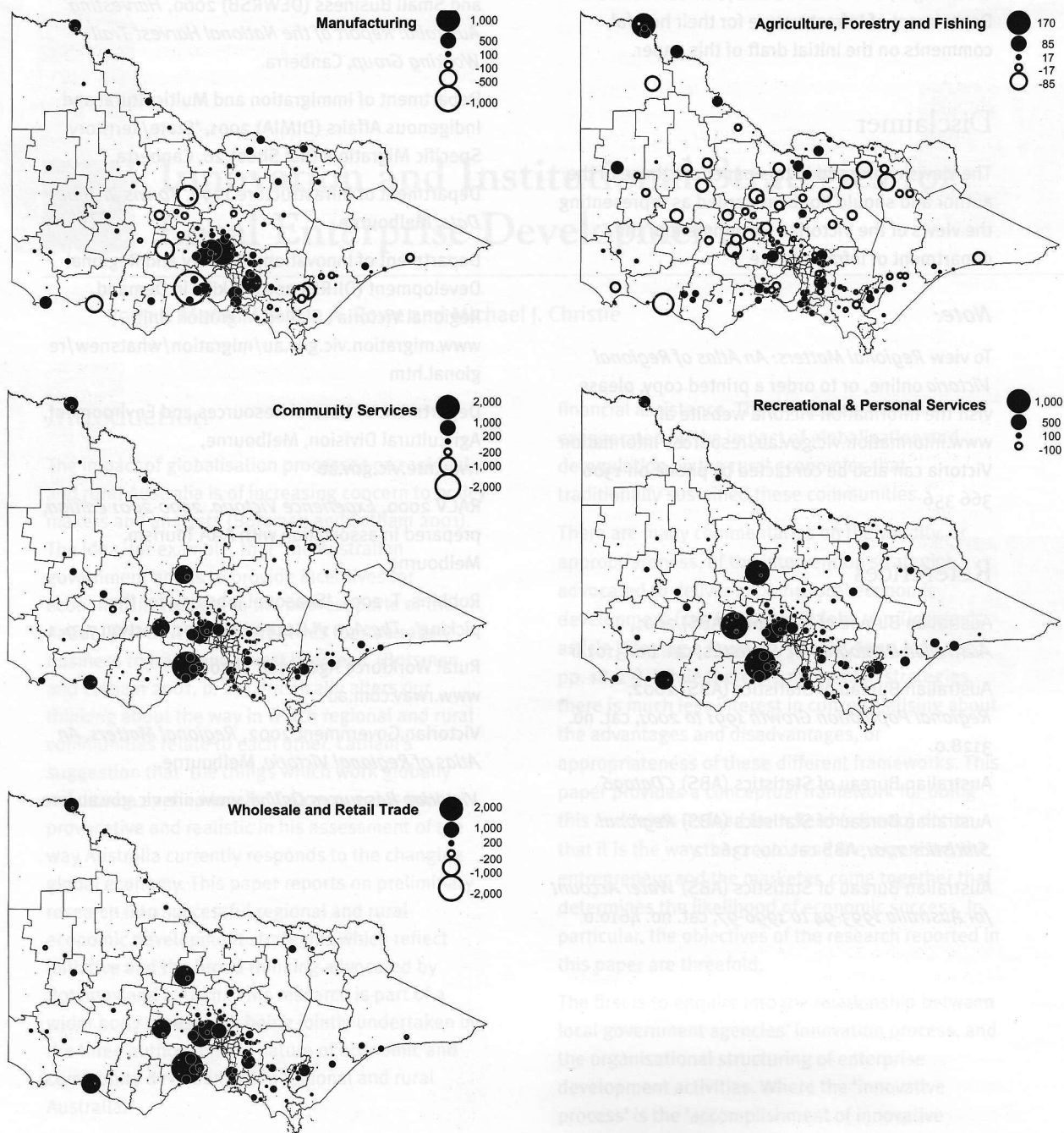
## Conclusion

Regional development is an important component of Federal and State government policies. There is, however, a major challenge in fully understanding regional dynamics. In a rapidly changing world, information and analysis is of key importance, as is an understanding of how issues are linked and how policies might be developed which take creative advantage of such linkages.

The challenge for policy makers is that information is everywhere (although often not in the format or level of detail that we desire) and that complexity is, by definition, hard to understand and communicate. While stereotyping is a natural response to complexity, it can lead to misunderstanding and the development of simplistic policies that are not in the best interests of regional policy development.

Perhaps one way of dealing with the tension between complexity and understanding is to better utilise local knowledge. Consultation and the gathering of regional perspectives on issues and challenges has been an important part of the Victorian Regional Atlas project. Consultation is continuing beyond the point of publication through forums, presentations and discussions. It is hoped that the development of a better understanding of regional issues at both local and state levels can feed through to the development of evidence-based policy responses to the issues and opportunities facing Victoria's diverse regions.

**Figure 15** Employment growth and decline in selected industries, Victorian urban centres and rural localities, 1981 to 1996



NOTE: Data based on ASIC industry categories to allow time-series analysis

Source: DOI, 1999

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Jeremy Reynolds, Chris Wight, Sue Andrews and John Collins in the Department of Infrastructure for their helpful comments on the initial draft of this paper.

## Disclaimer

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and should not be regarded as representing the views of the Victorian Government or the department of Infrastructure

### Note:

To view *Regional Matters: An Atlas of Regional Victoria* online, or to order a printed copy, please visit the Information Victoria website at [www.information.vic.gov.au/resources](http://www.information.vic.gov.au/resources) Information Victoria can also be contacted by phone on 1300 366 356

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