

“SEACHANGE”, FACT OR FICTION? (A study of demographic changes on the Bellarine Peninsula)

Keywords

Demographics, patterns of growth, housing, services, infrastructure, planning, “baby boomers”, life style, Sea Change

Abstract

Did the TV show “Sea Change” really change people’s life styles, or was it written in answer to an already existing trend? Demographic changes are happening in Victoria. This paper examines those changes by focusing on the stretch of coastal Victoria where “Seachange” was filmed, the Bellarine Peninsula. There is no question that these coastal regions have seen expanding growth in the housing market since 2000. New housing, high market turnover and rising prices can be attributed to a number of reasons, including increased demand for holiday houses, natural growth (in line with Melbourne), or a real change in demographics due to the phenomena known as a “sea change”. The implications of increased population in coastal areas places increased pressure on already limited resources, both natural and created. If, these demographics changes are predominantly the over 50s (baby boomers) group, the implications are concerning.

This paper examines the available data and aims to identify the underlying forces driving growth along coastal Victoria. What are the implications of these emerging demographic trends for the residential property market and communities? How are the authorities meeting the challenge that these changes place on the required services, such as age care, child care, education, health care, recreation etc? Now is the time to examine the population structures and now is the time to plan for increased demand in all the related service areas and infrastructure.

Introduction

“Sit back, relax and imagine that you are sitting on the sand at your favourite beach, listening to the hypnotic crash of the waves breaking on the sand.” How often has this, or similar statements, been used by professionals as a relaxing technique. Most of us have hankered after our own private “sea change”, or “tree change”, at some time in our lives. Many actually put it into practise. Sea change is happening in South Australia, Southern and Northern Western Australia, Tasmania, but mainly in Victoria, Queensland and New South Wales. (Burnley and Murphy (2004)

This paper examines demographic changes to a small Victorian coastal area known as the Bellarine Peninsula on the western bank of Port Phillip Heads, the seaway to Melbourne. (**Appendix 1**) Coincidentally the home of the ABC’s Sea Change TV program, the Bellarine Peninsula is made up of ten towns, two inland (Drysdale and Leopold) and eight coastal (Clifton Springs, Port Arlington, St. Leonards, Indented Head, Queenscliff, Point Lonsdale, Ocean Grove and Barwon Heads). It has a mix of properties, from large expensive houses to humble shacks. Demographically the ten towns are very different.

Leopold, a satellite centre for Geelong, is made up almost totally of new subdivisions. Drysdale, on the other hand, is the service area for the coastal towns of Clifton Springs and Port Arlington. The peninsula has frontage to Port Phillip Bay and also to the open seas of Bass Strait. The environments are quite different and are reflected in the type of town and resident. Clifton Springs, Port Arlington, Indented Heads and St Leonards are coastal towns inside the Bay and as such are on the sea, but not on the ocean. Queenscliff is unique as a historical classified town and Point Lonsdale, Ocean Grove and Barwon Heads are all outside the Heads, on the surf.

Sea Change is not a new phenomenon, but what is new is where the Sea Change is occurring. The Bellarine Peninsula is happening now. The Australian population is growing at approximately 1.6% per annum. Over the period 1996-2001, Indented Heads population increased by 6%, Leopold and Barwon Heads by 4%, Drysdale over 3% and all the other areas, except Queenscliff and Point Lonsdale were above the National Average. The Bellarine Peninsula is experiencing a Sea Change effect with some 60-70% of all property sales derived from Melbourne residents. (The City of Greater Geelong, 2004a)

Background

The study of the movement of people from metropolitan areas to country areas has been a topic of research since the 1970's. International researchers (Beale, 1975; Berry, 1976) talk about a sustained trend in the 1970's dubbed "counterurbanisation". A number of researchers believe that for many western countries, especially the USA, Canada, Britain and Australia this trend died in the 1980's, which was a period of renewed urbanisation, and re-emerged in the 90's. (Fuguitt and Beale, 1996; Glasgow, 1991; Burnley and Murphy, 2004) Not all Western societies have this pattern however; Swedish demographics suggest a polarisation, with young people moving to the cities, the middle-aged to the country and the retired to country centres (large regional towns). (Westlund, 2002)

Concentrating on other English speaking countries (Britain, USA, and Canada) where the pattern is similar to Australia, the term used to describe the out-migration from cities in the 90's is "downshifting" (Hilpern, 2004; Nicholson, 2004; Burnley and Murphy, 2004) "Sea Change" is the Australian version of "downshifting". Both are terms that refer to lifestyle changes. We call these population shifts Sea Changes, not because of the television show, but because historically this is where most of the out-migration from Australian cities has occurred. (Haratsis, 2004; Kaplan, 2003; Burnley and Murphy, 2002; Salt, 2002; Walmsley, Epps and Duncan, 1998)

The technical term for these changes is population turnabout and is used to describe the last 35 years of demographic change in most western countries, where non-metropolitan areas have achieved higher national population growth than cities. Since 1970, nearly 500,000 people have left Melbourne for less populated areas in Victoria. (Burnley and Murphy, 2004) It is estimated that 200,000 British workers will downshift in 2004 and the trend is common in Canada. (Hilpern, 2004; Paquette and Domon (2001)) Research

has found that people have always been seeking to change their lifestyle and have been doing this in large numbers since at least the 1970's. (Gleeson, Hugo 2004; Burnley and Murphy, 2004; Anderson, 2004; Hurrell, 2001)

Burnley and Murphy (2004) describe two geographic types of shift:

- If the move is geographically close to a metropolitan area (commuting distance), then they call this perimetropolitan.
- If more remote, they call it a high amenity growth area or population turnabout.

(Appendix 2)

As well as geographically defining the areas of population turnabout in Australia, they have also developed definitions to describe the demographics of the Sea Changer. They maintain that out-migration from Australian cities to rural, or coastal areas, have been largely made up of three groups of people.

- Free Agents
- Forced Relocators
- Periodic populations

Free Agents - are those who choose to seek a "sea change". They may have passive or high incomes, or may simply wish to downshift for a lifestyle change. This group is made up of two socio-economic types.

- Retirees – This group generally sells their large family home in the suburbs and move to allocation of their choice to enjoy their twilight years. When I purchased my first holiday home in the 1970's the real estate agent told me that Point Lonsdale was known as "God's little waiting room" and nothing much has changed today. They may only represent a small proportion of a city's aging population, but they present a large proportion of many Sea Change locations.
- Alternative Life stylers – This group is ever expanding, are still in the workforce and are aided by flexible working hours, increased ability to work from home and the increase of home based businesses, improved telecommunications and extensive use of the internet. They are also attracted by the increasing need for additional services in these areas because of the increases in retirees and tourism. Such things as vineyards, restaurants, B&B's and Art Galleries. This group represents 70% of the Free Agents who move to rural or coastal areas of Australia. (Burnley and Murphy, 2002)

Forced Locators - are those groups on low-incomes who move to perimetropolitan or turnabout areas in search of affordable housing a cheaper cost of living. They are often people on some form of income support. The unemployment rate of many of these areas is three times the National average and single parent household represent 6% of the population, as against 4% for Australia as a whole. (ABS, 2004a)

Periodic Population - is the term used to denote the group who own or rent homes in these areas that they visit at weekends and during holidays. This term can also be applied to people whose life style allows them to live in two places. A term the Labor

Party candidate for Corangamite, Peter McMullin, used to describe himself and others of this ilk is the “three/fours” or the “four/threes”. (Legge, 2004)

The problem with identifying the type of resident living on the Bellarine Peninsula is compounded by the relative proximity to Melbourne and Geelong. This introduces a fourth group of people who live in the area under study.

Commuters - is the term chosen to represent the large proportion of the population from the Bellarine Peninsula, who commute to either Geelong or Melbourne, 3/5 days a week for work.

Reasons for Movement

People move for a variety of reasons and the four above groups encapsulates the reasons fairly well. The Australian Bureau of Statistics has conducted a number of satisfaction surveys in Sea Change areas and this enables us to enlarge on the definitions given above. Although people may fall into one of the four socio-economic groups above, they move for a variety of reasons and no one household is ever the same. The main reasons people move to the Bellarine Peninsula are:

- Housing affordability and excellent transport access. The City of Greater Geelong has many new subdivisions 75 minutes by car from Melbourne, the infrastructure to support this, such as good access roads, public transport, schools, shopping centres and even a Hospital. This makes it an attractive alternative for all four groups.
- Many of the towns offer the opportunity for lifestyle changes, but still are close enough to Melbourne and Geelong for shopping, work and social activities.
- Many move for personal reasons, such as divorce, death, job and career dissatisfaction, environmental reasons and the search for sense of community. The electoral role sample survey of Sea Change areas (2000) found that 15% moved for work related reasons, 11% retirement, 8% housing, 45% environmental, 5% for changed situation and 16% not stated. The survey also found that 50% of the population in these towns were involved in community groups and 60% involved in sporting groups. 72% of respondents said they were better off after the move and 41% felt that they were much better off. The lowest indicators of satisfaction were for transportation, shopping and restaurants. All of which are readily available for most of the Bellarine Peninsula. (ABS, 2004a)
- Another hypothesis concerning downshifting has been the group who rely on some form of Welfare payment. It is alleged that this group often move out of the metropolitan areas in search of cheaper housing. A survey by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services (2001) found that although out-migration of welfare recipients from Melbourne occurred (over 15,000), less than 2,500 relocated elsewhere in Victoria. The majority of these out-migrants were chasing the sun in Western Australia or the northern state.

The 2001 Census shows that the official unemployment figure for the Bellarine Peninsula was 5.4%, while Victoria was 6.3%, which does not support this reason for “downshifting” to the Bellarine Peninsula. (ABS, 2004b)

Research Questions

How will Baby Boomers affect development on the Bellarine Peninsula?

What drives the increased housing growth and prices on the Bellarine Peninsula?

What are the implications of this growth on the communities of the Bellarine Peninsula?

Methods

The aim of this paper is to provide a demographic picture of one seaside area of Victoria and to examine this area in relationship to the above research questions. To examine the situation on the Bellarine Peninsula extensive use has been made of available data from three major sources, the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the City of Greater Geelong and The Valuer General’s Office of Victoria. In addition, interviews were held with relevant industry professionals.

The limitations of this research are:

- There are no guarantees that the conclusions the author draws from this data are in fact true.
- By using average sale prices any extremely high or extremely low house prices will distort the data and not be observed.
- The author relies on extensive knowledge and experience of the Peninsula (25 years).
- Without supporting surveys and more extensive interviews much anecdotal material is missed and reasons why people move can only be suggested.

Results

Geelong is Victoria’s second largest city and is located on the shores of Corio Bay approximately 75 kilometres south-west of Melbourne. The Bellarine Peninsula falls with the City of Greater Geelong, east of Geelong, to the Port Phillip Heads. The City of Greater Geelong is Victoria’s largest municipality, with a population of greater than 185,000 people (2001 census) and covering 1.240 square kilometres. (**Appendix 3**) The City of Greater Geelong has a number of growth strategies in place and three of them are for areas on the Bellarine Peninsula. In every case they are consulting extensively with the local residents to ensure that growth can occur in a sympathetic manner with the environment. (Wright, 2004)

The Bellarine Peninsula had a population of over 42,000 permanent people on the night of the 2001 census, which is approximately 23% of the total population of the City of

Greater Geelong. The lure of the Bellarine Peninsula is in its variety. Every town is different and between them they offer something for everyone. (ABS, 2004a)

Drysdale: Lies 20 kilometres East of Geelong on the road to Port Arlington, overlooking Corio Bay and has a population of approximately 2,000 people. Drysdale is the last stop for the Queenscliff steam train and is the shopping centre for Clifton Springs, Port Arlington, St Leonards, Indented Heads and the surrounding rural properties. Drysdale is essentially a rural town, where most of the residents service the other towns on the Peninsula, or work in Geelong. There are a number of small rural holdings of 4–30 hectares, due to much of it being old Crown Law allotments. These small rural properties support a number of vineyards, the most well known being Scotchman’s Hill and Spray Farm. These small allotments are much sort after and many of these rural holdings have been purchased by wealthy Melbourne “Baby Boomers”, seeking escape from the stress of high powered city careers. Rural land on the Bellarine Peninsula is currently reaching \$30,000 a hectare, whereas elsewhere in the Geelong area it is more like \$3,000 a hectare. (Hedditch, 2004) The population continues to increase by over 3% per annum and it is a rural Sea Change location. It is not the subject of any City of Greater Geelong strategies. (ABS, 2004a)

Clifton Springs: One of the early failed developments of the 1960’s. This town was to be the place where everyone wanted to move to. Over 40 years later the settlement looks tired. The entrance gates have no water in the fountain and need repainting. Clifton Springs is home to over 7,000 people and is experiencing growth at 1.9% per annum. This could be a Sea Change destination because houses are affordable in Clifton Springs. The houses are substantial and suburban, many with glimpses of the water, which would appeal to many retirees. (ABS, 2004a)

Port Arlington: An historical coastal town perched overlooking the Melbourne skyscrapers. Originally a holiday spot for Geelong residents, it is now becoming more of a tourist destination, due to events such as the annual Celtic Festival. The town has a number of restaurants and a very extensive and attractive caravan park on the foreshore. Port Arlington is the closest point to Melbourne, being only approximately 30 kilometres across the Bay. Last summer a passenger ferry commenced daily trips for commuters, but demand was insufficient at that stage. The population is growing at just over 2% per annum and it is a Sea Change location. (ABS, 2004a)

St Leonards/Indented Heads: Is a pretty coastal backwater. It is the furthest town on the Peninsula from Geelong and lies midway between Port Arlington and Queenscliff, on Swan Bay. Many of the older homes are overlooking the water and it is a strange mix of 1920’s houses and modern suburban brick homes. The population at the 2001 Census was 1,400, with a growth rate of 1.8%. St Leonards is one of three strategic design centres on the Bellarine Peninsula. The overarching aim is to maintain St Leonards as a small coastal town, separate from adjoining towns. This is after extensive meetings with residents. It was agreed that the St Leonards area had sufficient vacant land for the foreseeable future. Building approvals were 42 in 2001, 40 in 2002 and 71 in 2003, with only one in the first quarter of 2004. There are currently almost 600 lots available for

sale on three separate subdivisions (one even called Sea Change Estate) and the strategy recommends that there is no need for further rezoning. An interesting component of the St Leonards report is that they mention an Urban Growth Strategy of 24% of Greater Geelong's housing stock to be made up of high density construction (non-detached). They are a long way from this target and any proposals that support this aim would be encouraged. St Leonards is a Sea Change area, particularly for retirees. (ABS, 2004a; The City of Greater Geelong, 2004b)

Leopold: This is the second inland town and is seen as a suburb of Geelong. Most shopping services are only available in Geelong, which is approximately 10 kilometres away. Leopold is also a town which forms one of the Urban Strategy areas. The population of Leopold at the 2001 census was 6,800, living in 2557 dwellings. Leopold has some interesting demographics, a very high incident of tradesmen and clerical sales and services for women. 90% used a car to travel to work and the predominant resident type is young families. There are only 7% retirees, compared to 11% for the whole peninsula and single households represent 15% of residences compared to the regional average of 26%. The typical Leopold resident is married with 1-3 children under 15 years, works as a trade person, or in the retail service area in Geelong. Leopold is growing at a rate of 4.32%, not as a Sea Change area, but as a commuter town for Geelong. The report states that by 2030, the population of Leopold is estimated to be more than double the 2001 census figure and under current zoning they have sufficient residential land for the next seven years. (ABS, 2004a; The City of Greater Geelong, 2004b)

Queenscliff: A town of 1,000 people (2001 Census) and no extra land for development. This town is heritage listed and many buildings are covered by a very strict building code. It is a tourist town of great historical significance and is the ferry port for the Sorrento to Queenscliff ferry. This large car and passenger ferry operates all year and runs every 30 minutes during peak times. This town is a major Sea Change location, with retirees, downshiffters operating and working in the associated tourist venues and commuters from Geelong and Melbourne. Because of the inability for the number of dwellings to increase and the increase in the number of single households, Queenscliff is actually experiencing negative population growth of 1%. Queenscliff is surrounded by Swan Bay, a protected marine area and is a centre for marine research. (ABS, 2004a)

Point Lonsdale: Is the surf beach town for Queenscliff. With only just over 1,000 people (2001 Census) it is the smallest town on the Peninsula and has a few essential stores and restaurants, but no hotel. This makes it very attractive for older people and young families. Like St Leonards/Indented Heads, Queenscliff/Point Lonsdale is the same centre and most of the two towns make up the separate Borough of Queenscliffe. Being located at the Port Phillip Heads, across from Point Nepean, Point Lonsdale has both Bay and Ocean beaches. It is a very popular holiday location for this reason, as it caters for all ages and needs. Point Lonsdale is predominantly a town of retirees and holiday homes for Melbourne and Western District families and downshiffters. Although the population was only 1,000 on census night there are many more dwellings than this

and vacant ownership could be as high as 60-70%. (Hedditch, 2004) This is definitely a Sea Change location, with very few commuters. Two future residential sub-divisional plans have sparked local owners' anger and that is a proposed redevelopment by the Lonsdale Golf Club and a proposed new subdivision of 1,000 blocks on the outskirts of the town. (ABS, 2004a)

Ocean Grove: Is situated 11 kilometres west of Point Lonsdale, on the surf coast east of the Barwon River. It is a commuter town for Geelong (being less than 20 minutes by car) and a holiday destination. It is expanding at a very fast rate and transport links from Geelong are excellent and land is cheap and plentiful. In 2001, growth was listed at 2% and the population was 10,000, but since then new housing starts have continued to mushroom in the area closest to Point Lonsdale, called Collendina. There is also an almost completed large shopping complex, to service this end of Ocean Grove and Point Lonsdale/Queenscliff. Although not a Baby Boomers' destination, the rural areas around Ocean Grove, through to Drysdale, are heavily sought after by this demographic. One such case is a restaurant/accommodation/vineyard on 70 hectares on the outskirts of Ocean Grove, purchased for a record price. The husband commutes three days a week to Melbourne to run a very successful business and the wife manages the daily running of the local business. There are many of these stories on the Bellarine Peninsula, as there are on the Mornington Peninsula. (Hedditch, 2004; ABS, 2004a)

Barwon Heads: This is the last town on the Bellarine Peninsula travelling via the Port Arlington Road, or the first if you travel via the Great Ocean Road. It is a town of 2,600 people, (2001 Census) with population growth of over 4%. Barwon Heads is the site of the ABC "Sea Change" series, on the north side of the mouth of the Barwon River and the famous bridge links it to Ocean Grove to the south. It is a beautiful town and Diver Dan's beach hut is now a successful restaurant. Barwon Heads is the third town in the City of Greater Geelong strategies for the Bellarine Peninsula. The steps in the process were to form a very representative steering committee of all stakeholders and a series of six meetings were held over a twelve month period during 2002-3. They also held a three month "Idea" exhibition over summer 2003 and questionnaires were undertaken. The town has been altered in line with the findings and is fast becoming a very attractive Seachange location. New development is being undertaken on the Geelong side of Barwon Heads. A second golf course has been constructed at 13th Beach and most of the subdivision backs onto and has free membership of the golf course. (ABS, 2004a; the City of Greater Geelong, 2004b)

Why the Bellarine Peninsula?

Table 1 – Statistical Comparisons

	Bellarine Peninsula	Victoria
Home Ownership	72.5%	70%
Post Graduate & Undergraduates	2.3%	3.6%
Health & Community Industry Workforce	11.5%	10%
Manufacturing Workforce	17%	15.3%
Trades People	15%	12%
Population 70+	10%	8%
Total Population	42,000	4,645,000
Unemployment Rate	5.4%	6.3%
Single Person Households	23-32%	23%
Median Weekly Income	\$340	\$380

The Bellarine Peninsula Basic Statistics as compiled from 2001 Census Data, compared with Victoria as a whole. (ABS, 2004b)

- As can be seen from **Table 1**, the Bellarine Peninsula has a slightly higher home ownership rate, a greater proportion of workers in industries where Australia is suffering shortages and has a lower unemployment rate than many other parts of Victoria. These are all positive and important reasons for why people might consider relocating to this area.
- The City of Greater Geelong appears to have excellent strategies in place to sympathetically develop the area and yet still retain its unique identity. (the City of Greater Geelong, 2004b)
- It is close to two metropolitan areas, Melbourne and Geelong (1 1/2 hours by car, 2 hours by bus and train) with an excellent transport infrastructure, very good community and health resources in the towns and a hospital less than 30 minutes away.
- Recreational activities are excellent, with seven sand belt golf courses and every activity from football to Kick Boxing.
- The area has a moderate climate and is warmer than Melbourne in the winter and cooler in the summer.

- The Bellarine Peninsula has a range of different towns to choose from, representing different socio-economic groups and differing house types and prices. In other words, lots of choice. With the exception of Queenscliff and Point Lonsdale, housing prices are very affordable by Melbourne and Geelong standards and would be very attractive for first home buyers. A comparison of house prices for the Bellarine Peninsula is found in **Table 2**.

Table 2 - Housing Price Comparison

Towns on the Bellarine Peninsula	1993 \$	2003 \$
Drysdale	110,000	300,000
Clifton Springs	100,000	220,000
Port Arlington	130,000	270,000
St Leonards	95,000	240,000
Indented Heads	85,000	200,000
Queenscliff	200,000	425,000
Point Lonsdale	180,000	500,000
Ocean Grove	125,000	250,000
Barwon Heads	140,000	320,000
Leopold	120,000	260,000

The Bellarine Peninsula Housing Prices as compiled from Land Victoria, 2004.

- The Bellarine Peninsula offers the chance to “downshift” or retire, but still be close enough to family and friends in the Melbourne, without having to buy a city residence.
- Each town is different and therefore attracts different demographics. Development on the Bellarine Peninsula is polarized and this is more likely to be the picture of future world development. The comfort of living close to people who are more like yourself.

The residential property market may be in a lull now, but as housing prices remain high in Melbourne and as the Baby Boomers face retirement (25% of the Victorian population), the Bellarine Peninsula will become one of the most sought after places to live by 2030. This is when the State government predicts that Melbourne will have grown by, 1,000,000 people. How many of them will want to take a Sea Change to a place as beautiful as the Bellarine Peninsula?

Discussion

Although statistics appears to show a slowing down of increased out-migration in NSW (Burnley and Murphy, 2004), this does not appear to be the case on the Bellarine Peninsula and other areas of the Geelong region, such as Jan Juc (growth of over 7%), Torquay (over 5%), Waurin Ponds (over 6%) and Ceres (almost 13%). Since the completion of the upgraded Melbourne to Geelong Freeway in 2003, housing estates are continued to expand in the Werribee/Laverton area, Waurin Ponds, Ocean Grove and Leopold. But these are commuter areas, the first for Melbourne and the last three for both Melbourne and Geelong. It would appear that the second home market and retiree market on the Bellarine Peninsula may have temporarily slowed down. Auction clearance rates for most of 2004 have been low and were actually 0% for one week in October in Point Lonsdale. However vacant land in St Leonards, Port Arlington, Ocean Grove and Barwon Heads were still selling at the rate of over 10 per month up until July 2004. People are investing in the Bellarine Peninsula, but for future development, not necessarily for now. There could be a number of reasons for this:

- Retirees can downsize within the metropolitan area of Melbourne in a high/rise, or similar high density site.
- The property market uncertainty may have dampened the desire to expand borrowing for a second home.
- Many people are not retiring early as it was expected, for any number of reasons, including job satisfaction, fear of superannuation shortfalls, the high cost of living etc. (Burnley and Murphy, 2004)

Even if we accept that expansion at the moment is limited to the new housing market for the commuting and first home buyer groups on the Bellarine Peninsula, the fact is that the Baby Boomers (now in their 50's), will start retiring over the next ten years. The question is, will they seek a Seachange, and if so, will it be on the Bellarine Peninsula? I believe yes, because the Bellarine Peninsula has something for everyone. If so, what services are available to them when they are looking to make this decision? Clearly Greater Geelong is targeted as a growth area. A new Geelong bypass has received Commonwealth funding and is currently out to tender, a 1,000 housing site development is being proposed for Point Lonsdale, a new shopping centre is being constructed at Ocean Grove. These are just a few of the new projects. Growth will happen and it may even be that the City of Greater Geelong is ready for it.

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