

9 Swifts Creek

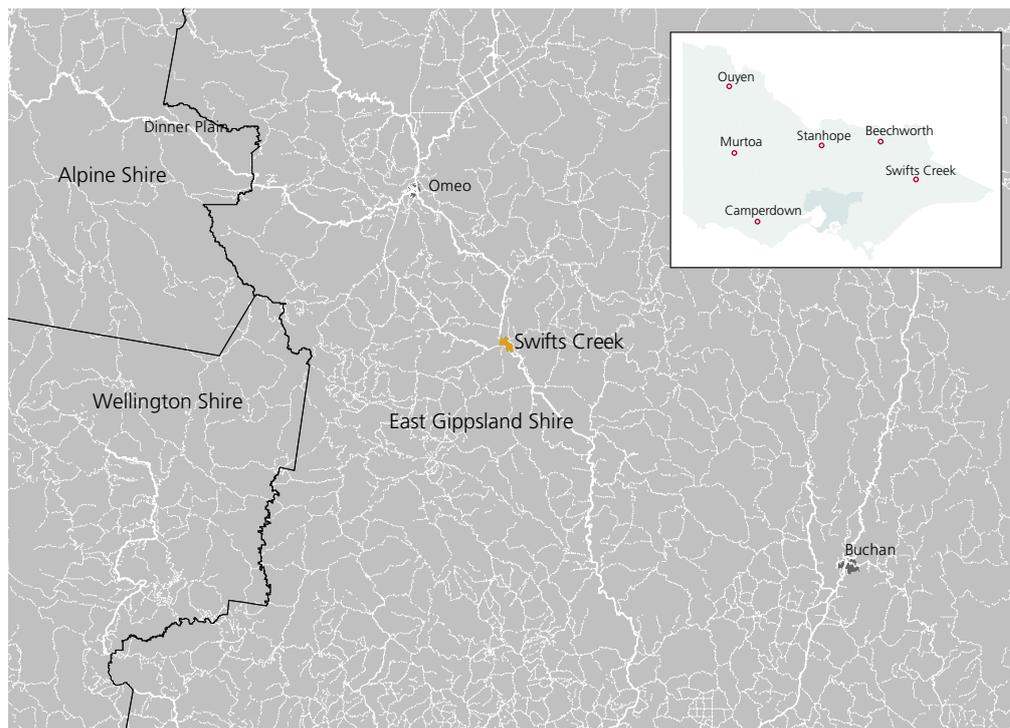
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Introduction

Swifts Creek has been affected by a variety of events since 1988, including the three Australian 'icons' of drought, flood and fire. Primary industry issues including an outbreak of Ovine Johne's Disease, a government-initiated buy back of farms deemed to be unviable, and those relating to the town's major private sector employer (the timber mill) have also had significant impacts on the town. Even that institution of small towns, the local pub, burnt down and then operated for some time out of a shipping container before being rebuilt.

These issues may have generally affected an area far greater than just Swifts Creek. Each has created change, opportunities and, at times, much coverage from the metropolitan daily press, not all of it presenting a particularly positive image or impression that one gets from visiting the town and talking to a broad cross-section of the locals. The people of Swifts Creek—whether 'new-comers' or 'old-timers', and whether younger or older—almost without exception are passionate and positive about their community and 'place', and optimistic and realistic about the future.

Figure 9.1 Location of Swifts Creek



Source: Department of Sustainability and Environment



Location and township role

Swifts Creek had a population of around 164 persons at the time of the 2001 Census and is located about 374 kilometres from Melbourne in the East Gippsland Shire. The town is about 94 kilometres north of the regional centre of Bairnsdale and 26 kilometres south of the township of Omeo. Victorian local government amalgamations in the 1990s moved the shire headquarters from Omeo to Bairnsdale.

While Swifts Creek's main business area remains much as it was in 1988, there have been a few changes. The hardware and butcher shops have closed, but the gallery and bookshop have opened and the hotel has been rebuilt. Businesses in the town comprise:

- a general store
- a baker
- a petrol station
- a hotel
- a bank
- a post office
- a bookshop
- a café
- a second hand/collectables shop
- a community owned art and craft gallery.

The town has a number of small offices and services including those provided by the Department of Sustainability and Environment, the Department of Primary Industries, a bush nursing centre and a community centre. The timber mill and the primary and secondary schools are also located close to the town centre, as are a range of community facilities such as churches, a kindergarten, a caravan and camping ground, and various sports facilities. A number of private enterprises also operate within or close to the town including an antenna installer, an electrical services provider, a winery/ brewery, an olive grower, and a number of bed and breakfast establishments.

Swifts Creek remains not only a small service centre but also a focal point for an area that extends some kilometres in each direction. The role of the township is not measured simply by the government services or private businesses provided; it extends to that immeasurable role of 'community'.



Population levels and trends

Some inherent difficulties exist in making comparisons of population levels between 1988 and 2005.

The amalgamation of Victorian local governments changed some boundaries making it difficult to extract population for the same geographic areas; the census data is now five years old whereas it was only two years old in 1988; there has been significant population movement in rural Victoria since the last census; and because the recoded population of the Swifts Creek township has dropped below 200, the Australian Bureau of Statistics provides far less detail for these smaller communities.

From the available figures, it can be seen that the population of Swifts Creek has varied over the last 20 years. According to census figures for the period 1976–81, the town had a population growth of 30 people (Table 9.1) at an average annual rate of 2.1 per cent (Table 9.2). This was followed by a decline from 1981 to 1991. The early to mid-1990s saw an increase (2.9 per cent per year), followed by a late 1990s decline of 74 people (6.37 per cent per year). No figures are available for the period 2001–05.

Table 9.1 Population numbers in Swifts Creek and Omeo, 1976–2001

Locality	1976	1981	1986	1991	1996	2001
Swifts Creek	270	300	270	198	228	164
Omeo	290	280	295	274	298	263
Balance of East Gippsland	na	28,928	33,482	36,269	37,893	38,028

Sources: Henshall Hansen and Associates report 1998, p. 201 (for 1976 figures); Department of Sustainability and Environment Towns in Time data (for remaining figures).

na=not available.

Table 9.2 Population change in Swifts Creek and Omeo, 1981–2001

Locality	1981–86	1986–91	1991–96	1996–2001
	Average annual rate of change %			
Swifts Creek	–2.1	–5.5	2.9	–6.4
Omeo	1.1	–0.8	1.7	–2.5

Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics census data; Department of Sustainability and Environment Towns in Time data.



Table 9.3 Population summary data, Swifts Creek, 1981–2001

	1981	1986	1991	1996	2001
Total population	300	270	198	228	164
Visitors on census night	17	13	0	14	3
Population in non-private dwellings	9	0	0	3	0
Male/female population ratio	55/45	54/46	53/47	52/48	53/47
Population living at same address five years ago	145	145	124	126	99
Proportion of LGA* population (%)	1.0	0.8	0.5	0.6	0.4
Rank by population size	248	269	306	300	361

Source: Department of Sustainability and Environment Towns in Time data.

*LGA=local government area.

na=not available.

Notes

Differences in population figures between tables 9.3 and 9.4 are due to the different methods used to calculate population by the Department of Sustainability and Environment (Towns in Time data) and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (census data).

Table 9.4 Age structure of the Swifts Creek population, 1981–2001

Age group (years)	1976		1986		1996		2001		1976–2001	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
0–14	89	33.7	72	27.9	69	30.0	37	25.3	–52	–58.4
15–19	12	4.5	21	8.1	13	5.7	9	6.2	–3	–25.0
20–29	29	11.0	42	16.2	22	9.6	16	11.0	–13	–44.8
30–39	31	11.7	40	15.4	51	22.2	18	12.3	–13	–41.9
40–54	49	18.6	48	18.5	33	14.3	24	16.4	–25	–51.0
55+	54	20.5	36	13.9	42	18.3	42	28.8	–12	–22.2
Total	264	100.0	259	100.0	230	100.0	146	100.0	–118	–44.7

Source: Department of Sustainability and Environment Towns in Time data.

Note

The level of demographic detail available for Swifts Creek was reduced when its population dropped below 200.



The loss of young people (up to 19 years of age) common to all rural communities is reflected in Swifts Creek (Table 9.4). It is also evident that while there has been a decrease in the numbers in each age grouping, the percentage for the over 55 years age group is increasing. Again, this is common in most small rural communities across Victoria.

Table 9.5 is an update of the 1988 study table of population levels for the towns around Swifts Creek. It is difficult to accurately record the changes in smaller townships because the Australian Bureau of Statistics does not record detailed demographics for towns with populations less than 200. All of the smaller towns for which there is data,

however, show a decline in population for the period 1976–2001, even though most have had periods of increasing population in that time. And as is occurring across Victoria, regional centres such as Bairnsdale have increased their population over the same period.

When the researchers met with five randomly selected Swifts Creek students from Years 7–10, they discovered that none of these young people were born in Swifts Creek. All the families had moved to the town when these young people were less than seven years old. The families had predominantly moved from Melbourne but also from other areas of Gippsland. Not all had family connections to the area but all

had become long term residents. This mobility is borne out by Table 9.3, which shows that at each census year since 1981, almost half the population changed address in the previous five years, with possibly a sizeable proportion moving from outside the area. Discussions with members of the community support this phenomenon, with many of the people interviewed having moved into the area. While this information goes against the commonly held view that small rural communities are full of people who have lived there all their lives, many of the people who participated in the 1988 study are still living in the area.

Table 9.5 Population levels in Swifts Creek and other towns in the district, 1976–2001

Town	Number of people						Change 1976–2001	
	1976	1981	1986	1991	1996	2001	No.	av. % p.a.
Swifts Creek	270	288	263	198	228	164	–106	–1.9
Omeo	280	272	285	274	298	263	–17	–0.3
Ensay	na	na	150	na	na	na	na	na
Benambra	na	na	150	na	na	na	na	na
Bruthen	568	449	526	614	601	526	–42	–0.3
Bairnsdale	9,130	9,459	10,328	10,770	10,890	10,667	1,537	0.6

Sources: Henshall Hansen and Associates report 1998, p. 203 (for 1976 figures); Department of Sustainability and Environment Towns in Time data (remaining figures).

na=not available.



Anecdotal evidence suggests that many of the births in the area are to parents over 30 years old, again challenging the view that women in rural areas all have babies at a younger age. And while the population within the township has been decreasing, anecdotal evidence also suggests that there has been an increase in population within the area that identifies itself as being 'Swifts Creek', for example, on the Cassillis Road. It is not possible to corroborate this with statistical information and possibly not worth attempting anyway because such information is now five years old. Even though census and other data suggest a major population decrease, not one person interviewed raised the issue of decreasing community population.

The secondary college noted a decrease in numbers over the past few years, but this decrease may not be entirely due to a decrease in population in the area. It is worth noting that the college was optimistic about an increase in numbers in the near future. The young people interviewed at the secondary college attributed the reduction in school population at least in part to the number of families who sent students away to study, often to board in Bairnsdale and attend Nagle College, a private school. Comments from the students included that 'there are only two of us left in school from the group that started out in kinder. Lots of them have gone to Bairnsdale to school'.

This situation has a major impact on friendships among young people. If a young person boards in Bairnsdale during the week and their family lives outside Swifts Creek on a farm or in Omeo, for example, there is almost no opportunity for friends to socialise. This aspect possibly contributes to the movement of young people away from the community as their links to the community become increasingly tenuous. Even if they continue to play sport, they are unable to train with the team.

All the young people interviewed at the secondary college believed they would leave Swifts Creek at the end of their secondary schooling (generally Year 12). The predominant destination was to Melbourne, although one young person was seeking an apprenticeship in East Gippsland. Those looking to move to Melbourne were seeking a mixture of employment and further education. All were comfortable with the idea of moving, possibly because they had all moved to Swifts Creek and had relatives in Melbourne and some knowledge of living in a city. The movement of young people from smaller rural communities at the end of Year 12 has been common across rural Victoria for at least 20 years.²

The young people expressed somewhat contradictory feelings in relation to the community, for example, they all liked living in Swifts Creek but felt there were a lack of young people to socialise

with. All expressed the need to leave after completing schooling in order to access employment and educational opportunities. All were looking forward to leaving, yet all commented on the (often) narrow world-view of people from Melbourne (that is, how Melbourne people knew nothing of rural life whereas they knew about both rural and urban life). They commented on the air and noise pollution of Melbourne compared with rural areas, and all felt that they would at some point return to living in a rural area. Again, these views have been well documented and are common across rural Victoria.

It is difficult to reach a simple conclusion about the importance of the changing demographics (or perhaps even how much the demographics have changed) to the people of Swifts Creek other than to note the underlying recognition that the population has an impact on local businesses, institutions such as sporting teams, and schools.

² Refer to (for example) Arnold, C 1991, Three times less likely, Country Education Project; Breen, K 1987, Our biggest export business is kids, Youth Accommodation Coalition for the Victorian Youth Policy Development Council; Owen, F and O'Connor H 1994, Way to go rural youth transition project consultation report, East Gippsland Access Project and Victorian Country Youth Services Inc.; Smith, N 1995, Way to go rural youth transition project community resource manual, East Gippsland Access Project and Victorian Country Youth Services Inc.



Labour force and employment patterns

The original study noted that Swifts Creek in 1986 tended to have a higher proportion of wage and salary earners (74.1 per cent) compared with the non-metropolitan average (almost 69 per cent), and a smaller proportion of self-employed/employers (15.5 per cent compared with 22 per cent). The study noted that this distribution reflected the sawmill's importance in terms of the town's employment structure. This statistic is not available for 2001 or 2005.

The 1988 study also noted that Swifts Creek had a public/private sector distribution in its resident labour force (reflecting the average for non-metropolitan Victoria), with about 72 per cent engaged in the private sector and the balance within the public sector. Public sector employment for residents in 1986 was entirely in State Government departments and agencies. It is noted from the 1986 Census that no residents were employed in federal or local government jobs at that time.

Table 9.6 Labour force status of Swifts Creek residents, 1976–2001

	1976	1986	1996	2001	1976–2001
	Number				% change
Wage and salary earners	84	86	na	na	na
Self employed	27	12	na	na	na
Employer		6	na	na	na
Unpaid helper	2	6	na	na	na
Total employed	113	110	91	na	–39.0
Unemployed	2	6	10	4	2.0
Total labour force	116	116	101	78	–38.0

Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics census data; Department of Sustainability and Environment Towns in Time data.

na=not available.



Table 9.7 shows that the percentage of the work force employed in every sector category changed substantially between 1986 and 2001. Areas such as agriculture (10.5 per cent to 27 per cent), transport and storage (9.8 per cent to 8.1 per cent), wholesale and retail (10.5 per cent to 18.9 per cent) and community services (15.2 per cent to 22.9 per cent) increased their percentage share of employment in the town.³ In contrast, sectors such as

manufacturing (41.9 per cent to 8.1 per cent) and public administration (6.7 per cent to 0 per cent) suffered a decline. The recorded number of overall jobs decreased from 105 in 1986 to 74 in 2001, but the researchers found there to be an extra nine jobs in 2005.

³ It is always difficult to draw conclusions about the changing percentages of employment attributed to sectors because these changes may reflect jobs being seen in different sectors between census periods, for example, between primary industries and manufacturing.

Table 9.7 Employment by industry sector for resident labour force, Swifts Creek 1976–2001

Industry sector	1976		1986		1996		2001	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Primary								
Agriculture	41	36.3	11	10.5	9	9.8	20	27.0
Mining	0	0.0	0	0.0	5	5.9	0	0.0
Subtotal	41	36.3	11	10.5	14	15.7	20	27.0
Manufacturing								
Intermediate services	30	26.6	44	41.9	15	16.5	6	8.1
Electricity, gas & water	4	3.5	4	3.8	0	0.0	0	0.0
Construction	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	3.0	6	8.1
Transport, storage	4	3.5	4	3.8	3	3.0	6	8.1
Communications	4	3.5	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	4.0
Subtotal	12	10.5	8	7.6	6	6.0	15	20.3
Financial services								
Wholesale & retail	13	11.5	11	10.5	31	34.0	14	18.9
Financial, property & business services	3	2.7	2	1.9	3	3.0	0	0.0
Community services	6	5.3	16	15.2	8	8.8	17	22.9
Recreation, personal services	4	3.5	2	1.9	3	3.0	3	4.0
Public administration, defence	2	1.8	7	6.7	11	11.9	0	0.0
Subtotal	28	24.8	38	36.1	56	60.7	34	45.8
Other/not stated	2	1.8	4	3.9	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	113	100.0	105	100.0	91	100.0	74	100.0

Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics census data; Department of Sustainability and Environment Towns in Time data.

* Henshall Hansen and Associates small town study report. # Department of Sustainability and Environment Towns in Time data.



1976–86 change		1986–96 change		1996–2001 change		Victoria % distribution		
No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	1986*	1986#	2001
-30	-72.5	-2	-18.1	11	122.0	14.9	4.8	3.6
0	0.0	5	500.0	-5	-100.0	0.6	0.3	0.2
-30	-72.5	3	27.3	6	42.8	15.5	5.1	3.8
14	46.7	-29	-65.0	-9	-60.0	13.9	19.3	15.7
0	0.0	-4	-100.0	0	0.0	3.4	2.2	0.6
0	0.0	3	300.0	3	100.0	6.8	6.5	6.7
0	0.0	-1	-25.0	3	100.0	4.0	5.0	3.9
-4	-100.0	0	0.0	3	100.0	1.7	2.2	2.0
-4	-33.3	-2	-25.0	9	150.0	15.9	15.9	13.2
-2	-15.3	13	127.3	-17	-54.8	16.8	22.5	25.2
-1	-33.3	1	50.0	-3	-100.0	5.5	11.1	15.7
10	166.7	-7	-43.7	9	112.5	17.6	15.6	17.2
-2	-50.0	7	350.0	0	0.0	5.3	4.6	6.0
5	250.0	4	57.1	-11	-100.0	5.8	5.8	3.0
7	19.4	18	47.3	-22	-39.2	51.0	49.6	67.1
2	100.0	-4	-100.0	0	0.0	3.7		
-8	-7.1	-14	-13.3	-17	-18.7	100.0		



Table 9.8 Estimated employment by equivalent full time position (EFT) located in Swifts Creek township, 1988 and 2005

Employer	Employment EFT	
	1988	2005
Timber mill	55	17
Secondary college	24	19
State Government (currently Department of Sustainability and Environment; previously Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands)	21	30
Local businesses	20	5
Telecom	4	0
State Electricity Commission of Victoria	4	0
Primary school	4	7
Police	1	1
Bush nursing centre	1	1
Post office	1	1
Community centre		2
Total	135	83

Sources: Henshall Hansen and Associates small town study 1988; Reported employment numbers during 2005 visit.

The timber mill

The timber mill was noted as being a major part of Swifts Creek in the 1988 study; this is still the case in 2005. The mill's location on the highway (the town's main street) makes it constantly visible. Its history since the 1988 study simply reinforces that visibility. It remains the largest private sector employer in the community.

Shortly after publication of the 1988 study, the mill (then known as Ezards) was closed. It was subsequently

reopened when bought by another company, but closed again in 2000. The mill again re-opened in February 2001 under the ownership of Dormit Pty Ltd (a company based in Dandenong). Between closing in 2000 and re-opening in 2001, all machinery had been sold and the new owners took over essentially empty buildings. The new owners have installed state-of-the-art equipment and currently mill low (E) grade logs into components for pallets, which are transported to a Dandenong site for manufacture.

While initially running two shifts, the mill now runs one shift. There are 17 staff plus some casuals, all but three of whom are locals. Three of the management staff have relocated to Swifts Creek from Melbourne and now live locally. There is also one local apprentice; this is the first time Dormit has put on an apprentice and it is also one of the very few local apprenticeships.

Dormit uses Forestech (East Gippsland TAFE) for some of its staff training, and the company supports a number of local



organisations and events such as the primary school and the Lions Club. It also supplies wood chip mulch to both schools. Offcut timber is used by many in the community as a source of firewood, and as the owners of the only forklift in town, Dormit provides assistance to other local businesses and community organisations when there is a need for a forklift.

Dormit sees itself as sustainable and as being in Swifts Creek for the 'long haul'. The company is experimenting in a small way with other potential value-added products from the low grade logs and has recently installed a small drying kiln.

Government services

The earlier study noted that Swifts Creek played an important role, particularly in relation to two key public services—the secondary college and the (then) Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands. The secondary college was the largest public sector employer (24 jobs) while the Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands employed 21 people. The secondary college employed 13 EFT teaching staff plus six other staff (19 EFT) in 2005 and the Department of Sustainability and Environment reported that it had about 30 full time staff plus about another 15 staff on the summer (October to May) crew.

Of the other services providing local employment at that time, the small State Electricity Commission depot has closed (the building has been converted to accommodation by the hotel), the primary school currently employs seven EFT, the police station is still operational (and has been expecting an upgrade for some time), and the bush nursing centre retains its important role in the community. Positions funded by the TAFE and the State Government at the community centre are also important functions within the community.



Community initiatives

Like many innovative small rural communities the subregion that encompasses Swifts Creek and includes Benambra, Omeo and Ensay is always looking for opportunities to strengthen local employment.

The Students at Work Program emerged as an innovative response to the need to find after-school jobs for young people in an area without the opportunities provided by 'traditional' part time employment such as retail outlets, cafes and fast food operations. The program was initiated locally, auspiced by Omeo Health Service and initially supported financially by a small grant from Kilmany Uniting Care. It matches young people with a local employer and includes a wage subsidy. A further feature is that entrepreneurship among young people is fostered through a small business competition where the best ideas can attract seeding funds of up to \$1,000 and a business mentor to guide business operations. The program is not just about a way for young people to earn extra income. It is about giving young people who choose to move to Melbourne for educational opportunities a work history to assist them find part time employment. It is also about creating new jobs within the community for young people who choose to stay.

About 80 students from an annual school population of 68 to 75 have enlisted in the program since its inception in 2001. Some 24 employers from approximately 60 local community businesses (excluding farms) have participated. The geographic catchment for the program is approximately 5,000 square kilometres with a population of around 1,500. The program has a one-day per week coordinator, and since 2001 has received \$87,500 in funding from community organisations and government, \$9,000 of which has been used as seed funding for entrepreneurial ideas.

An excerpt from the evaluation of the Students at Work Program demonstrates its success:

The program has been an outstanding success, benefiting communities, employers and young people. It symbolises the spirit of independence and regeneration that is the hallmark of these communities and exemplifies the strong desire of the region to create a future for their young people.



Farming

According to one person interviewed, 'up here what we like to talk about is not so much the viability of a farm but the viability of a farming household'.

The 1988 study noted that agriculture has periodic downturns through falling commodity prices, increasing costs or difficult weather conditions. Swifts Creek and surrounding areas have continued to experience all these issues since 1988, including drought, flood, disease, and fire. The 1990s were particularly difficult. Over the two or three decades up to then, the area had established itself as a producer of fine merino wool. Like other wool producing areas, however, Swifts Creek was heavily affected by the drop in the wool floor price that saw it halve in nominal terms. Australia's sheep flock also nearly halved.

The difficulties created by drought in the early- to mid-1990s were exacerbated by an outbreak of Ovine Johne's Disease, a sheep wasting disease. Most farmers had to de-stock and quarantine their properties from sheep for three years. Consequently, the number of sheep flocks in the area has dropped from around 43 to just five.

Following the 1998 floods, the State Government introduced a number of programs to assist the area recover. One of these was the \$10 million buy back scheme to assist unviable farmers leave the industry. In all, 18 properties were sold to the Government; after rehabilitation, 16 were re-sold to adjoining property owners and two to farmers new to the area.

One outcome of these impacts has been a major shift in the focus of 'mainstream' farming, going from a wool producing area to a meat cattle producing area. One estimate suggests that the 80–20 ratio of sheep (wool)–beef has now become beef–sheep (meat and wool).

The buy back was controversial to begin with, but there is now some support for the scheme because it has reduced the average age of farmers in the area, changed (for the better) environmental practices such as 'off site' watering (to protect streams), and given some people a dignified exit from the industry. It was commented that much Government support is around the viability of the farm (hence support is directed toward those farms that do not have a source

of off-farm income) rather than around the viability of the farming household. A viable farming household is much more likely to be 'doing the right thing' environmentally and within the community. To this extent, residents commented that a proper rural policy that included farming and rural communities and businesses was needed to provide better outcomes.

A number of government funded consultant's reports into the subregion around Swifts Creek (Omeo, Ensay and Benambra) made mention of alternate agricultural opportunities for the area. Some experimentation has occurred, for example, an olive grove has been planted.



Tourism

The 1988 study and a number of more recent ones listed tourism as providing growth potential for the area. Yet apart from a few annual events such as the ride-on lawn mower races, not a lot has been introduced to the Swifts Creek tourism calendar. The only real changes since 1988 include the establishment of some bed and breakfast establishments in the area and the highway being designated the Great Alpine Way.

A number of people commented that both the floods and the fires have affected tourist numbers in the area, and that numbers had not recovered since the fires. People also commented on the difficulty of getting passing traffic to stop in the town, because most seem intent on reaching their destination rather than on being tourists.

One recommendation of the Arup Report (2000) was to undertake major streetscape improvements in Swifts Creek, Omeo, Benambra and Ensay. A consultant's study (Urban Design Framework) was released in 2004 but no major streetscape works have commenced in Swifts Creek. Five years after the 2000 Arup Report, it appears that the implementation of a number of the recommendations is still some time away.



The community

Swifts Creek, like a number of communities in East Gippsland, has been poked and prodded by consultant and government reports for more years than most residents care to remember. Local people criticised this way of working by government, not because they knew everything; they are keen to hear ideas and learn new approaches, but were not supportive of having things done to them.

During the town meeting arranged for the researchers to meet the community, mention was made of the lack of control over local resources and decision making, exacerbated by the shire offices being moved from Omeo to Bairnsdale, by the removal of government offices from the area, and by the loss of previous programs such as the Country Education Program. The impression that

can be gained is not of a Government seeking to assist but of a community getting on with its life and future despite government intervention. Such approaches tend to take ownership away from a local community and ignore the contribution of a large percentage of the population.