

Mount Alexander {Lianuk}
in 2040: the Warrarrack
economy

Warwick Smith

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The Castlemaine Institute is dedicated to building sustainable and regenerative economies. Our work addresses many of the pressing issues impacting Australia's capacity to thrive into the future, including climate change mitigation and adaptation, health and wellbeing, democracy and civil society, housing and land use, biodiversity conservation, arts and culture, and economic diversity and resilience.

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Warwick Smith is co-founder and economist at the Castlemaine Institute. His work is focussed on employment, regenerative economics, social justice, gender economics, climate change and the history and philosophy of economics. He is also an honorary fellow at the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne and has a background in ecology and evolutionary biology.



This paper has been prepared by invitation from the Mount Alexander Shire's Community Transition Planning project. Facilitated by the Council in partnership with leading local sustainability organisations the project is working to support broad community involvement in designing the ways we can reduce our emissions to zero and adapt to climate change.

As a future scenario it offers one lens through which to imagine and shape the ways we might respond to climate change. As one person's vision, this paper is intended as a provocation towards an expanded conversation with the community.

Comments and responses

In the spirit of co-design that the planning project invites, the community's comments, responses and alternatives are welcome. To assist this process, the paper will be posted on the project's discussion forum which is open until end of March 2021:

<https://oursay.org/znetmountalexandershire>

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Warrarrack is the Silver Wattle. Among many traditional uses, its sap can be used as a glue, a binding agent. Back in 2020, Uncle Rick Nelson and Aunty Julie McHale suggested we use it in all of our local climate transition work to represent the binding of people with Country and with each other. This recognition of Country, of our emergence from and dependence on our place, informs all of our thinking about how we best live on this land.



Mount Alexander in 2040: the Warrarrack economy

In 2040 the local economy of Mount Alexander Shire (Lainuk) is vibrant and diverse.

There's a large manufacturing and repair industry that reuses, recycles, repairs and repurposes many of our material goods. Manufacturing and repair businesses are all worker owned cooperatives, meaning that priorities and profits are directed wherever the workers decide. Many opt for shorter working weeks and by 2040, most people in the shire are working 30-hour weeks on full time pay. Landfill waste has been almost completely eliminated and is now primarily used for items produced in the 2020s and earlier.

We have a local currency, the Warrarrack.

This currency's initial purpose, when it was launched in 2022, was to employ all of our local unemployed people, giving them jobs useful to the community or to Country, like improving the energy efficiency of our homes, planting trees to shade our towns, restoring degraded lands, and making our streets beautiful and vibrant community spaces. They even help to build public housing using local materials on unused or underutilised land. As a result of the creative use of the Warrarrack, everyone in the Shire who wants a job has a job and can make a meaningful contribution to the community. Those who cannot engage in paid employment are well supported. Everyone who needs a safe place to call home has access to one.

But the Warrarrack has since done a lot more than that.

By accepting the Warrarrack as part of local rates payments, the Council was able to underpin its value and then use it to stimulate a rapid transition to a carbon negative economy. Carbon neutrality was achieved in late 2030 and since then other parts of Australia have been paying us to store their carbon, which we're doing mostly on our agricultural land through regenerative farming practices. Continuing on from the transformative benefits of no-till farming, our local farmers, working with the Country and local Aboriginal people, built on and shared the knowledge to radically improve productivity, water retention and carbon storage in our agricultural landscape. Farmers from around the country have been coming here for the last decade to observe and to learn.

Carbon negative economy

Employment

Local unemployed workers can easily get decent paying jobs on farms thanks to the income from combined carbon farming and conventional food and fibre production. Labour intensive, high diversity and high yield market gardening is now cost competitive

with broad acre monocultures thanks to the combination of the Warrarrack, carbon farming, and the creative use of urban storm water. This form of agriculture uses less chemical inputs, less water and results in more nutritious fresh foods.

Food

Most people buy their food using Warrarracks from the farmers, either directly or through the local Food Hub that was developed in 2025 in consultation with the Open Food Network. The purpose of the Food Hub is to scale up and support local food systems, aggregating for processing, storage and ease of (low carbon) access. The result is our money, the product of our work, staying in our local community and generating wealth, jobs and prosperity. The supermarket is still there but it's smaller than it used to be and mostly sells things we can't grow or make locally.

Energy efficient housing

Council regulations passed back in 2023 mean that you can only build solar passive housing now in the shire. Our new houses need almost no energy for cooling or heating and stay comfortable all year round. The extra cost of building solar passive homes was paid for by council with Warrarracks and new owners pay it back with the money they save on energy bills, so there's no increase in house prices. Most of the older housing stock have had energy efficiency upgrades. In some instances, entire new facades were put on existing housing. These facades are manufactured in the same pre-fabrication factories that also build pre-fabricated new solar passive homes. These factories have been renovated and repurposed from those built for our region's first industrial age.

The heat related death of our elderly citizens is mostly a thing of the past. Nobody is cold in their homes in winter or too hot in summer and our domestic energy use is a fraction of what it used to be.

Energy generation

We have our own community-owned energy company that links local households and businesses together in interconnected micro-grids backed by local energy storage. Rooftop solar creates most of the energy we need. Households buy and sell power from each other, paying in Warrarracks, or simply share with friends and extended family. There are a few larger scale wind and solar plants but these days they mostly export energy. Selling our excess energy to surrounding communities generates income that can be used to improve our energy production, energy efficiency or be redistributed to the community as a dividend – whichever the community decides is needed most at that time.

Transportation

Walking and cycling are the default for most residents of our towns, thanks to improved infrastructure and reduced working hours. Electric bikes are made locally and are subsidised by council as part on of the Warrarrack initiatives. The reduced impact on roads saves the Council hundreds of thousands in road maintenance expenditure. A relatively small fleet of lightweight, self-driving electric vehicles meets almost all our motorised transportation needs. The car batteries also serve as energy storage for the community owned power company.

Infrastructure

The press of a button calls one of these cars to your door and by the time you've picked up your wallet, shopping list and keys, it's there in your driveway waiting to take you to your destination. Owning cars is still possible but, if you live in town, it's so much more expensive and time consuming than being a member of the community owned car pool that most people eventually give it up.

We don't need much parking in our towns anymore because most people are on bikes and the self-driving cars can go and park out of the way until they're needed again. Almost all of the car parks have been turned into public space or used to build public buildings. The result is a lot more trees, places to sit, places to play as well as shade and cooler microclimates in the centre of our towns.

Arts and culture

The local creative sector, our artists, musicians and makers are thriving. Many local businesses are worker owned cooperatives and, through a program subsidised as part of the Warrarrack initiatives, most have an artist in residence, sometimes more than one. The Castlemaine State Festival is still a massive event every two years and is strongly connected to Country and more focussed on our prodigious local talent. The creative, vibrant and experimental culture that continues to develop means that Central Victoria becomes a centre of innovation in many fields.

Wellness

Preventative and community health services are our major health services, reversing the current situation. Treatment based health services are there as a backup to the preventative programs. Community health and mental health programs are fully funded using Warras to make up gaps in Commonwealth and State funding. The result is a dramatic improvement in overall health and wellbeing and a fitter, healthier, more active population.

All of the above initiatives were developed through deliberative democracy processes that are integrated into local decision making.

Jaara elders

Regular forums are run to determine what the priorities are for our communities and how we can best achieve them. Elders are aware and Aboriginal people are at the heart of these processes, bringing their wisdom, patience, and a timeless connection to this land to bear on resolving the issues of the day. Deliberative decision-making juries are set up for important decisions with members selected at random from the population – paid in Warrarracks if they have to miss work for their civic duty.

Citizen juries

Deliberative processes take the time to examine the evidence and arguments on all sides, they're informed by experts, but the decisions are made by ordinary citizens. Time and time again these processes have proven that, if given time and the right resources, citizen juries make great decisions. Not only are they good decisions but inclusive decision-making means that the whole community understands what's being done and why.

Dhelkunya Dja, the Dja Dja Wurrung Country Plan, 2035-2055, continues to be one of the region's key guiding documents. With the full resourcing of the first (2014-2034) plan and the formal adoption and implementation of a community wide reconciliation and recognition plan through the Warrarrack initiatives, our region is a national leader in race relations, reconciliation and Indigenous led care of Country. Despite all of these achievements, the monthly ceremonial fire in Victory Park in Castlemaine, that's been happening since 2021, always reminds of the work still to be done and that care of Country and community is a never-ending task.

Based on strategic plans developed through deliberative processes, Council works with local industry groups to diversify our economy. This diversity makes us resilient to external shocks and self-sufficient in many of the essentials of life. The circular economy cooperative helps residents make decisions about products that are built to last and to be repaired. Expensive up-front purchases for high quality goods are enabled through rental or rent-to-buy schemes so that low income households can also afford high quality goods that will last a lifetime.

Community resilience

Instead of relying on the mantra of jobs and growth, local government sets its priorities around community priorities and the entire community works together to lobby state and federal governments to contribute to and facilitate local strategic plans. The success of this community led model is contagious, first spreading throughout Central Victoria and then further afield.

Community-led strategy

By 2035 local governments have taken state government power over most planning and regulation of businesses. The result is a culture of experimentation, collaboration and innovation. We can afford to experiment, to fail and to learn from our failures because our diverse and creative economy has made us resilient, with built in redundancies.

Caring for Country

Networks of interlinked gardens provide habitat for our diverse range of wildlife and native plants, with the towns providing arks for them through the worst extremes of climate change. Led by the Dja Dja Wurrung people and resourced through the Warrarrack initiatives and employment schemes, our Country is well cared for. Our natural places are valued by the community and actively managed for their natural and cultural heritage. The Jaara are our respected leaders, teachers and knowledge bearers, connecting the entire community to Country.

Success

All this might sound utopian, but it's all based on things we knew how to do way back in 2020. And it's not a utopia here in 2040. We still have divisions within the community, we still have local disputes between blow-ins and old timers, we still have to deal with a warming climate and the associated droughts, heatwaves and fires, but we're much more capable of dealing with these things because we have built in ways to communicate with each other, to discuss and debate safely and with respect. The biggest thing that's changed is the community is in control of its own direction and people are able to have their voice heard. People don't feel powerless like they used to.