



The social impact of the SAGE Farmers Market

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June 2016

*A report produced with the cooperation
of the SAGE Farmers Market*

Introduction

In 2015 researchers from the University of Canberra designed and carried out a study to examine the social impact of the SAGE Farmers Market on the Moruya community and the Eurobodalla Shire. The research engaged shoppers, producers and market organisers to explore the role of the market in the community and, specifically, in the lives of shoppers and producers. The study was designed to identify the key characteristics of those who shop at the market, what their motivations are and the key outcomes and impacts of their shopping experiences. The research also focused on the role the market plays in the lives and livelihoods of producers and market organisers. To do this, the data collection focused on key issues including social connections, the lived experience of rural livelihoods and attitudes to local food production.

The research findings indicate that the SAGE Farmers Market plays a significant role in:

- fostering social connections in the community;
- improving and supporting rural livelihoods;
- enhancing producers' skill sets;
- fulfilling shoppers' desires to consume fresh, high quality, local food;
- encouraging consumption and cooking behaviours that respond to seasonal availability of foods;
- and, increasing local economic activity.

Another key outcome of this research is a clearer understanding of where the SAGE Farmers Market fits within the Eurobodalla Shire Council's rural land use plans. In its 2014 submission to the White Paper on Agricultural Competitiveness, the Eurobodalla Shire Council highlighted its intention to:

- Encourage local production for local consumption;
- Improve farm gate returns; and
- Increase the competitiveness of the agricultural sector and its value chains.

These aims were confirmed in February 2016 with the Council's adoption of the Directions Paper on Rural Lands Strategy which sets out the intention to improve the use of rural land and increase production of food and fibre within the Eurobodalla Shire. To do this, the Council signals a commitment to:

- Promote an "open for agri-business" culture in Eurobodalla to support local food and fibre production;
- Support innovative and diverse farming enterprises and activities;
- Encourage and support improvements in local rural skills, practices and marketing methods; and
- Optimise the use of existing public infrastructure and efficiently plan for additional infrastructure to support rural activities.

Both the Rural Lands Strategy and the submission to the Agricultural White Paper indicate the value placed on agriculture and primary production and producers in the Eurobodalla. They also emphasise a focus on small-scale agriculture as well as a desire to diversify income streams and broaden the skill-set of primary producers. The SAGE Farmers Market is playing a significant role in meeting all of these aims. This study has found that the market's capacity to do this is underpinned by its success in creating a sense of belonging that enhances social connections among producers, organisers and consumers, consequently strengthening the local community.

Methodology

This research employed 2 distinct data gathering phases prior to analysis, determination of findings and compilation of the report.



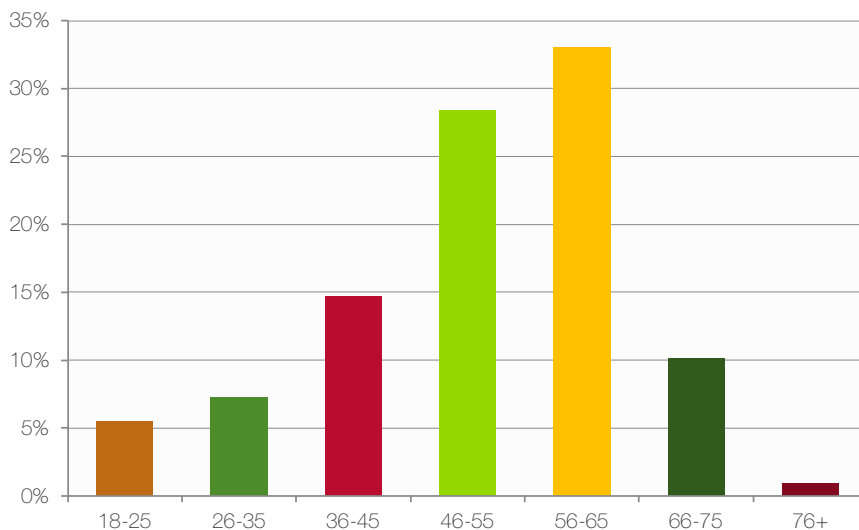
Stage 1: Shopper Surveys

This involved the development, administration and analysis of a survey targeting SAGE Farmers Market shoppers. The survey was made available via the Survey Monkey platform and was advertised on the market’s website and through the SAGE newsletter. Hard copy surveys were also available at the market.

Survey Respondent Characteristics

The survey was open for 12 months, receiving 111 responses. People from the ages of 18 to over 76 participated in the research with the majority (61%) aged 45-65 (see Figure 1).

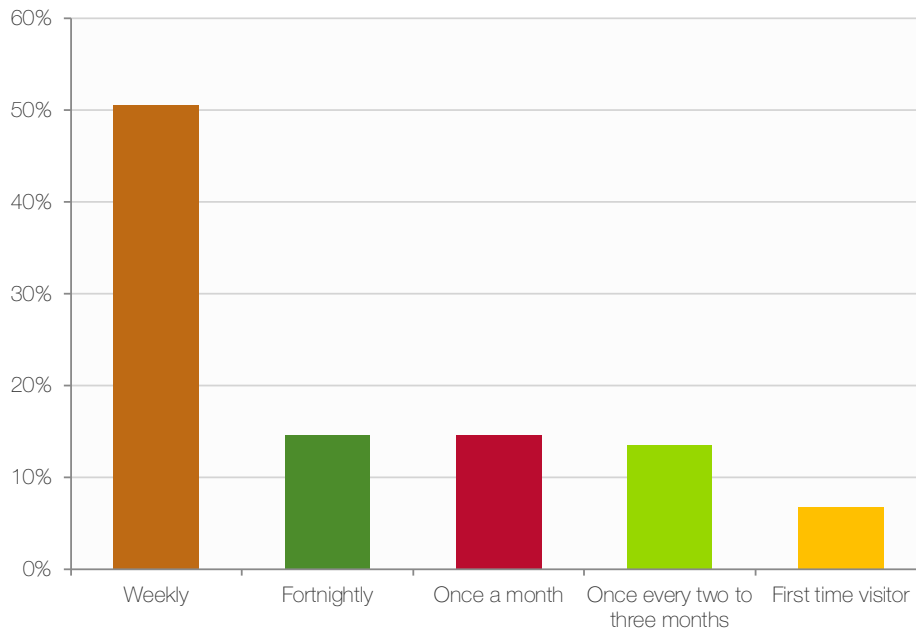
Figure 1 Q2 | What is your age group?



The respondents were primarily women (77%), lived in 2-person households (53%), and were the primary grocery shoppers for their household (86%).

Most (almost 51%) also shopped at the markets on a weekly basis (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Q7 | How often do you shop at the farmers markets ?



Stage 2: Stakeholder Interviews

The second stage of the research employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in the market, namely the producers and organisers. Sixteen interviews were carried out at the market or 'on farm'. These were carried out with 2 organisers, 1 person who was both a producer and organiser, and 13 producers from diverse sectors of the industry including those who sell meat, fish, dairy, vegetables, seedlings, honey, bread and preserves.

Findings

Customer Perspectives

Shopper Motivations: Fresh, quality, local food

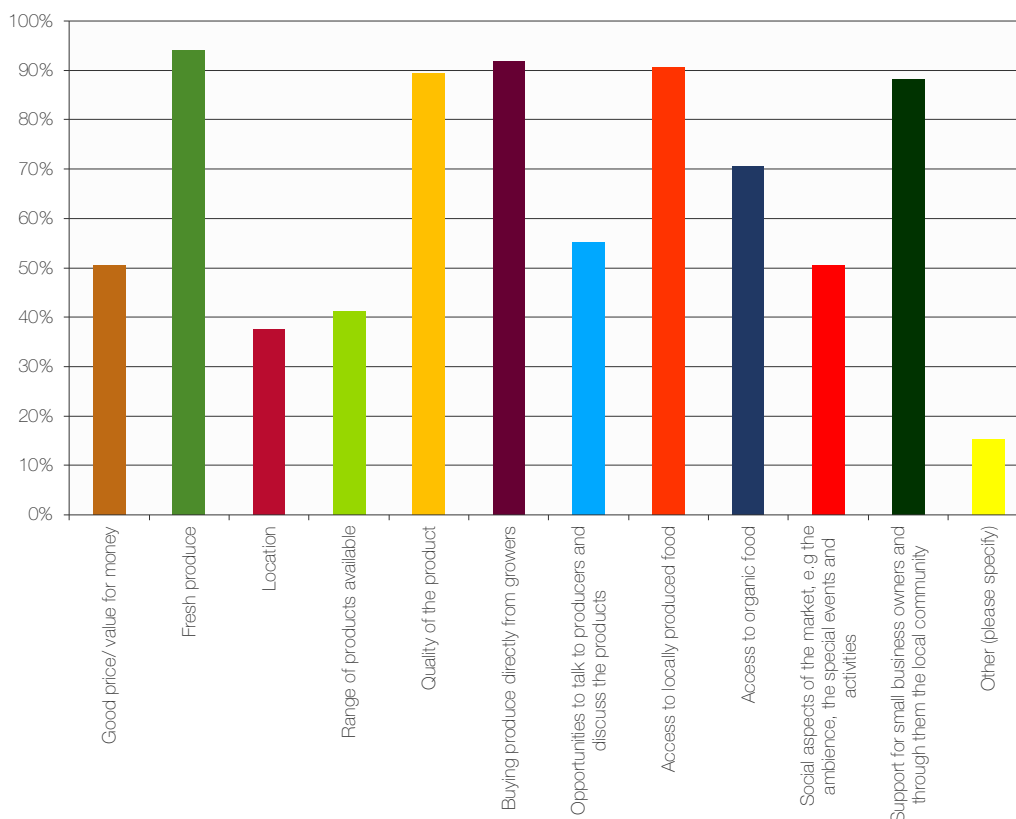
'I like to lead by demonstration so that my children see that shopping at the markets is a normal part of our week. I want them to understand and appreciate how important it is that we support local producers, and how valuable it is to have access to locally produced FRESH wholesome foods, and importantly what the difference is between shopping at the markets and buying from the producer versus purchasing pre-packed, anonymous foods in supermarkets'.

The top three reasons for market patronage were found to be:

- Freshness of produce (94%)
- Buying direct from growers (92%)
- Access to food that is locally produced (almost 91%)

These three were closely followed by the **quality of the produce** (89%) and the desire to **support small business owners and, through them, the community** (88%) (see Figure 3). These categories are not mutually exclusive. Freshness is linked to local production, thus, supporting local businesses and excluding middlemen which reduces the time food is in transit.

Figure 3 Q23 | Why do you shop at the SAGE Farmers Markets?

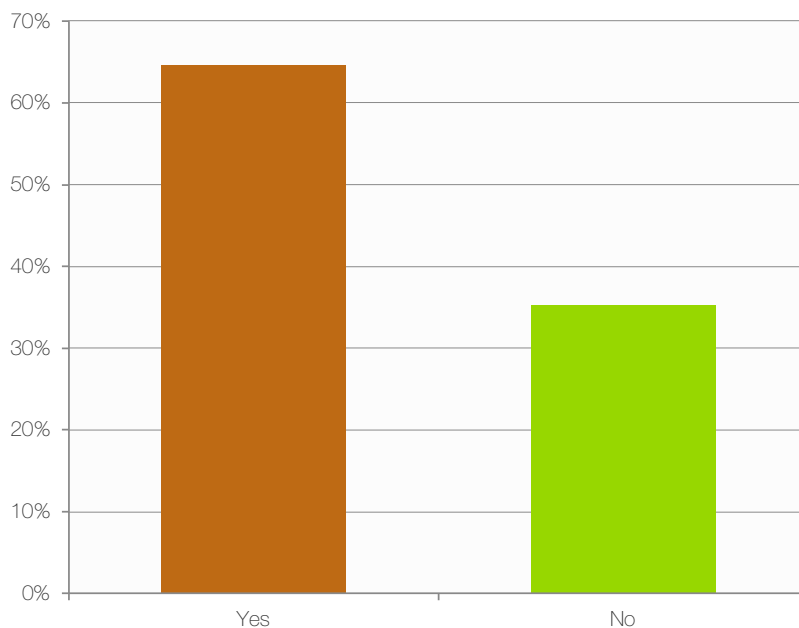


Over 90% of participants state that shopping at the farmers market supports sustainable agricultural practices. The majority of shoppers (89%) also report that direct contact with the producer builds trusting relationships between themselves and the vendors. Direct selling and engagement with the producer is also closely linked to shoppers identifying the market as a social hub (82%) with 84% of people noting they spend some of their time socialising at the market.

Altering Shoppers' Habits: New cooking practices and enhanced food knowledge

Almost 65% of customers report altering their cooking practices as a result of shopping at the market (see Figure 4). The majority of these people now cook meals based on the available produce, with 23% specifically identifying that they had adopted seasonal eating and cooking practices since they began shopping at the market.

Figure 4 Q28 | Has shopping at the Farmers Market changed how you cook?



Wasting food was also avoided, with one participant noting she felt 'bad' when there was waste 'because of the effort' exerted by producers to grow the food. Another noted that shopping at the market provided an educational experience related to natural variations in the appearances of agricultural produce: 'My nieces were extremely happy to see that not all vegetables and fruit look "perfect", it was a good learning experience'.

Shopper Spending: Supporting the local economy

‘For me the drive to Moruya Markets is 40 to 45 mins, 80 to 90 mins round trip. But I do the drive each week because the produce is excellent and I believe in supporting local growers who are concerned about the way they grow their produce. The sense of community is wonderful.’

Our data indicates that the market attracts shoppers to the town leading to 81% of respondents spending at local businesses other than the market (see Figure 5). 59% state that they would not have shopped at these businesses if they had not travelled to Moruya for the market (see Figure 6). Only 47% of respondents resided in the local 2537 postcode. These findings support those gathered in the SAGE Farmers Market Economic Impact Study which found that 50% of shoppers resided in the 2537 postcode and 73% of market shoppers also purchased items from other Moruya businesses on market day.

Figure 5 Q21 | Do you often do additional shopping/eating out in other parts of Moruya when you come to the markets?

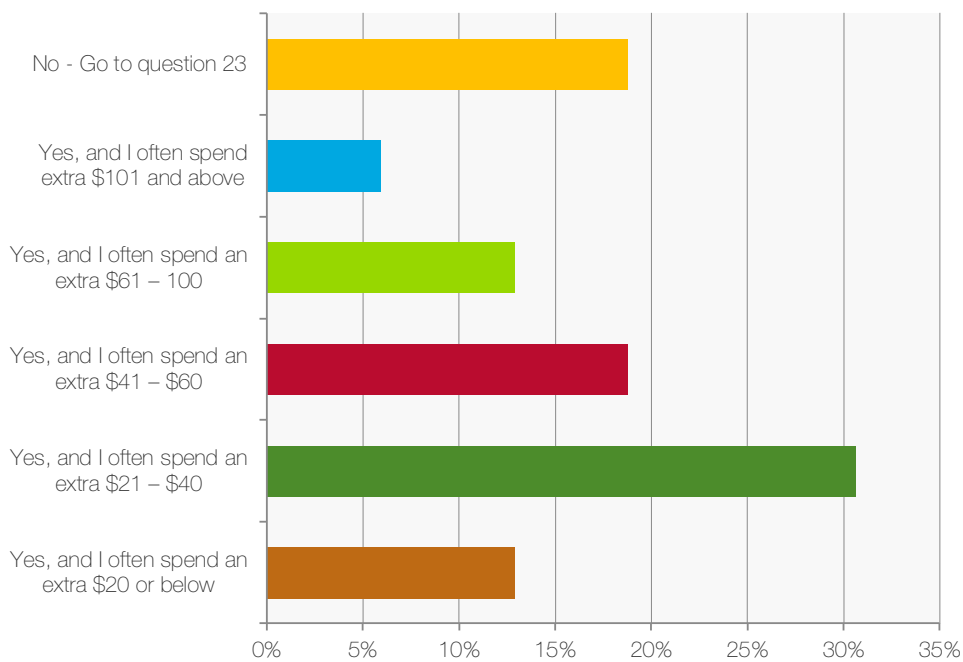
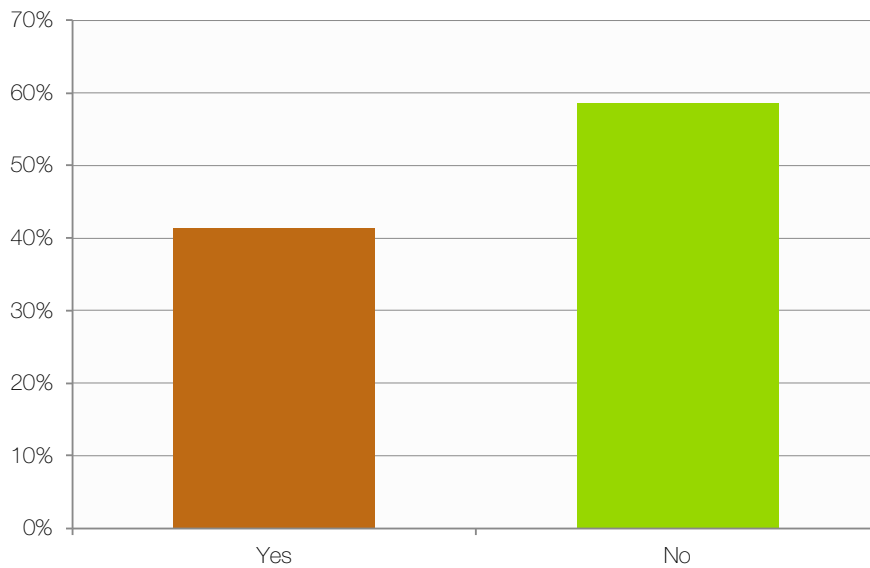


Figure 6 Q22 | If Yes, would you have visited these businesses if you had not come to the SAGE Farmers Market?



The SAGE Farmers Market continues to grow its customer-base. The research found that, while many shoppers have supported the market from its inception, in the 12-months prior to undertaking the survey 43% had increased the frequency of their patronage (only 4% reduced their visits) and 37% were attracted to the market to become new shoppers. These factors indicate that the impact of the market on, and in, the local community has continued to grow since its inception.

Producer Perspectives

Rural Livelihoods

'Without farmers' markets I think a lot of farmers would be a lot worse off... when we're wholesaling we sort of get dictated a price... We can't really say well this is what we need to break even and this is what we need to survive.'

Through the research interviews, producers reported that the SAGE Farmers Market contributes to their agricultural and business practice, their sense of belonging and connectedness within the community, and their ability to achieve sustainable livelihoods. Overwhelmingly, producers reported that the market plays a substantial role in improving and maintaining livelihoods. Many producers highlighted the difficulty of sustaining an agricultural business when selling through a 'middleman,' explaining that if their only outlet was to wholesalers and retailers their businesses would not be viable. Meat and fish producers identified that the market provides them with the opportunity to sell the whole beast or the whole catch – including cuts and by-catch that are much more difficult to sell when dealing with a wholesaler. The opportunity presented by the market for producers to set their own prices and to sell unusual cuts, by-catch and non-standard fruit and vegetables contributes to their ability to maintain their businesses. In fact, several of the producers interviewed have only begun production because of the opportunity to sell at the market. Others observe that the market has enabled them to reduce their need for 'off farm' income and/or increase the number of employees within their business.

The stories of these producers provides evidence that the market is contributing to both maintaining and creating the opportunity for meaningful rural land use and employment in agri-business within the Eurobodalla Shire.

Enhancing Skill-Sets

'I think the market is a very powerful tool for producers. Absolutely.'

Direct selling has also led to an increase in the skill set of many of the producers. Those interviewed highlighted the need to become adept at customer service, merchandising, price setting and time management. Producers also reported that interacting directly with customers has changed some of their agricultural practices. Many market gardeners explained how their planting and harvesting patterns have changed as they interact with customers and receive feedback on produce quality and availability.

Social Connections

'It's somewhere between social and retail. You know it's lovely, it's really nice. People want to be here to buy and I want to be here to sell and have a social outlet for me too, so it is lovely in every sense.'

The local and weekly nature of the SAGE Farmers Market has also increased the social connection among producers. It provides a forum for them to sell their produce but also for regular contact with the community, including other producers. Vendors reported that this has made a significant contribution to their quality of life and has had the added benefit of increasing the amount of skill sharing that occurs as well as the exchange of labour and equipment. Most also viewed their interactions with consumers as positive and supportive. These kinds of connections are invaluable in maintaining rural lives and livelihoods as they help ease social isolation, provide a meaningful retail opportunity and a real sense of community to producers.

Conclusions

This research has found that the SAGE Farmers Market:

- promotes agriculture within the Eurobodalla Shire;
- improves the skills of local producers;
- encourages local production for local consumption;
- provides a support structure for producers;
- increases the economic viability of producers;
- and, enhances the local economy.

The market also enables shoppers from the local area to access fresh, high quality, local food that encourages consumption and cooking behaviours that respond to seasonal availability of foods. Social connections facilitated through direct consumer-producer contact build trust and strengthen community ties that are enhanced by the regular, weekly market event.

Overall, this study indicates that the SAGE Farmers Market has had an overwhelmingly positive impact on the lives and livelihoods of the shoppers and producers that buy and sell food at the market.

