Sporting and active recreation activities can be the glue that holds communities together.

- People who play sport during adolescence are much more likely to be physically active adults.¹
- Sports clubs and activities can play a major role in building social capital, especially within rural communities.²
- 69.2% of Australians aged over 15 years participate in exercise, recreation or sport activities once a week or more.³
- The most popular ‘organised’ activities for adults are aerobics, swimming, cycling, tennis, running and golf.³
- The most popular ‘unorganised’ activity for adults is walking.³
- An estimated 1.6 million (63%) of children aged between 5-14 years participated in sport, outside of school hours, which had been organised by a school, club or association from 2000-2003.⁴
- Boys have a higher participation rate in sport (70%) compared to girls (59%).⁴
- The most popular sports for boys are outdoor soccer (20%), swimming (17%), Australian Rules football (14%), tennis, outdoor cricket and basketball (9%).⁴
- The most popular sports for girls are swimming (18%), netball (17%), tennis (8%) and basketball (7%).⁴

What is sport?
Sport can be defined as physical activities that are competitive, organised, involve observation of rules and may be participated in either individually or as a team. This definition refers primarily to those participating in sports as amateurs.⁴

What is active recreation?
Active recreation is generally unstructured activity that individuals freely pursue in their uncommitted time (leisure time) for a personal sense of enjoyment that also benefits their physical, social or emotional wellbeing.⁵

What do we know?
Australia has a reputation of being a strong sporting nation. As far back as the 1870s, comments were made that in Australia sport appeared to be “a national necessity”.⁶ Australia’s performances in international sporting competitions such as the Olympic Games and Commonwealth Games is evidence of the importance of sport to our cultural identity.⁷

Historically, Australians have fought hard for their right to leisure time. When, in 1856, Victorian Stonemasons won the right to an 8 hour working day, this success was seen as a world first in the struggle for improved working conditions and the fair split between work, rest and play.⁸

¹ www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/physicalactivity
Leisure time is now highly valued by most people, with high participation rates by both children and adults in a wide range of sporting and recreational activities. Active participation is encouraged and underpinned by public policy such as the Commonwealth Government’s Backing Australia’s Sporting Ability which encourages involvement in sport and active recreation activities and the Victorian State Government’s Go For Your Life Strategy.

**Participation rates**

In 2004-2005, 83.3% of Australians aged 15 years and over participated in at least one physical activity for exercise, recreation and sport. For males, the most popular activities participated in at least once during the 2004-2005 period were walking (26.7%), aerobics/fitness (14.7%), cycling (13.4%), swimming (12.5%) and golf (11.6%). For females, the most popular activities were walking (47.9%), aerobics/fitness (22.3%), swimming (16.4%), cycling (7.2%) and tennis (7.1%).

69.2% of Australians aged over 15 participated in exercise, recreation or sports activities at least once per week in 2004-2005. The most popular organised activities were aerobics (9.4%), golf (3.7%), tennis (3.4%), netball (3.5%), outdoor soccer (2.7%) and Australian football and basketball (2.4% each).

Of children aged between 5 and 14 years, 1.7 million (63%) participated out of school hours in sport that had been organised by a school, club or organisation. The most popular sports for boys were outdoor soccer, swimming, Australian Rules football, tennis, outdoor cricket and basketball. The most popular sports for girls were swimming, netball, tennis and outdoor soccer. The most popular unorganised activities after school hours for children were bike riding (68%) and rollerblading or skateboarding (24%).

**Benefits of participating in sport and active recreation**

**Physical health**

The health benefits of being physically active are numerous and well documented. Regular physical activity decreases the risk of heart disease, lowers blood pressure and decreases the chance of developing Type 2 diabetes. It can be protective against some forms of cancer and can improve mental wellbeing by reducing feelings of anxiety, stress and depression. Weight-bearing exercises such as walking, running and weight training strengthen the musculoskeletal system, which can decrease the likelihood of developing osteoporosis and, in the elderly especially, lessen the risk of having a fall.

**Mental health**

Being part of a sporting club or participating in active recreation can provide significant mental health benefits. Participating in sport has been linked to positive social and psychological outcomes such as increased self-esteem, better development of life skills, decreased involvement in risky behaviours such as drug-taking, and increased academic achievement.

Adolescents who play sport also have lower rates of cigarette, alcohol and illicit drug use than non-participants. Playing sports during adolescence can also help lead to life-long healthy exercise habits. People who participate in sporting activities during school years are much more likely to still be physically active well into adulthood.

Sporting and active recreation activities can be the glue that holds communities together. Sport builds social capital by providing a sense of unity. It is a social leveller, fostering a sense of trust amongst participants and members and contributing to greater social cohesion. In many communities, sport is seen as a means of building community pride and loyalty, with sporting events providing a meeting place and a means of uniting people across age groups. Sport and shared recreation activities offers people the opportunity to be involved, which provides them with a positive sense of self worth.
Economic health

There are many economic benefits to having a physically active population. A more physically active community is healthier and reduces demand on health services. Fitter and healthy workers are less stressed, are more productive in the workplace and less prone to injury. This results in reduced compensation claims and decreases pressure on insurance premiums for employers.²

Sporting clubs and active recreation activities can also play a major role in boosting the economies of local communities.¹⁴ Sporting activities and events not only boost retail industries in the surrounding areas, but also provide increased employment opportunities in tourism, transport, entertainment, construction, education and training, media and manufacturing industries.²

In 1996–97 Australians spent an average $693 each participating in organised sports and physical activities. Clothing and equipment accounted for almost 30% of this expenditure.¹⁴

References
6. Tower, J & Wood, L, Adapted from Developing Recreation and Health Partnerships. Victoria University
2001 [cited 2006 16th August].