

CLIMATE ADAPTATION PROJECT

Research paper 6

Where is safe in a warming Australia?

Clive Hamilton¹

This research paper is the sixth in a series reporting the results of a new public opinion survey exploring what Australians think and how they feel about life on a warmer planet, and how to prepare for it. Carried out by Roy Morgan Research for Clive Hamilton, Professor of Public Ethics at Charles Sturt University in Canberra, the survey sampled the views of almost 2,000 adults, chosen to be representative of the Australian population. An overview of the survey method can be found at the end of this paper, with full details available in a separate technical report.

Summary

This paper is the first to report on where Australians believe will be the safest places to live as the climate changes. It is difficult for members of the public to make an informed judgement because information is scattered and not always easy to interpret. But when asked which state will be the safest as the Earth warms and extreme weather events become more frequent, Tasmania is the clear winner. Two in five Australians (41%) choose it, with other states falling well behind. Climate change scientists have pointed to Tasmania as the safest place, along with southern Victoria and the ACT.

Australians who say they expect the climate to be much warmer by 2050 have a much stronger preference for Tasmania than those who expect no warming or only a little. If there is an exodus from the mainland to Tasmania it will be led by those most concerned about climate change. The survey results show these are people with high levels of education and more progressive political views.

When respondents were asked which area or region of their preferred state will be safest, three out of five choose cities or towns (perhaps contrary to the popular image of off-grid, self-sufficient farms). Only one in five opt for a rural property or remote area. Another one in

¹ To cite: Clive Hamilton, 'Where is safe in a warming Australia?', Research paper 6, Climate Adaptation Project, Charles Sturt University, December 2025.

five think it is too hard to say. Younger adults are more inclined to choose suburban and outer urban living while older Australians are more likely to favour country towns.

Introduction

As the planet warms and climate hazards multiply, all parts of Australia will come under increasing stress, but some more than others.² This paper is the first to report on where Australians believe will be the safest places to live.

Moving is a big decision. We saw in Research Paper 5 that nearly a quarter of Australians who intend to move in the next 12 months say their decision is, at least in part, influenced by climate factors. And when asked whether they think about moving because they are worried about the climate changing where they live, more than a third of Australians say they do.

There is a lot to think about. Is the area or the home you would like to move to flood prone? What is the bushfire risk? Is the area in a worsening drought zone? Will the family have to spend summers indoors because it's too hot? And would the local community come together if a disaster did occur?

Which state?

We asked Australians to nominate which state or territory they believe will be the safest to live in as the world warms and brings more severe weather. The question raises another: On what basis can Australians make an informed judgement about where it will be safest to live? In other words, for those who are beginning to think seriously about it, where do they get the information to make a good decision?

There is a large amount of good information available but it is scattered around in reports of organisations such as the CSIRO and the Bureau of Meteorology, alongside state government websites, expert studies, reports from NGOs and so on. It's hard for non-experts to find it, understand what it means, and put it together to make decisions.

So if Australians looking to the future want to know where to move, they will be feeling their way in semi-darkness. It is not surprising, then, that when asked which state will be the safest to live in as the Earth warms and extreme weather events become more frequent, almost a third (31%) ticked the 'Don't know/hard to say' box. This may be the most justifiable answer

² CSIRO & BOM, *State of the Climate 2024*, Australian Government 2024.

because it is hard to say—even if certain things are obvious, like don't move to Darwin where it will be intolerably hot. Nevertheless, we set aside those who said they don't know and in Table 1 report the percentages of those who made a choice.

Table 1 (Q12) If global temperatures keep rising bringing more extreme weather, which state or territory of Australia do you think will be the safest one to live in? (n = 1343) %

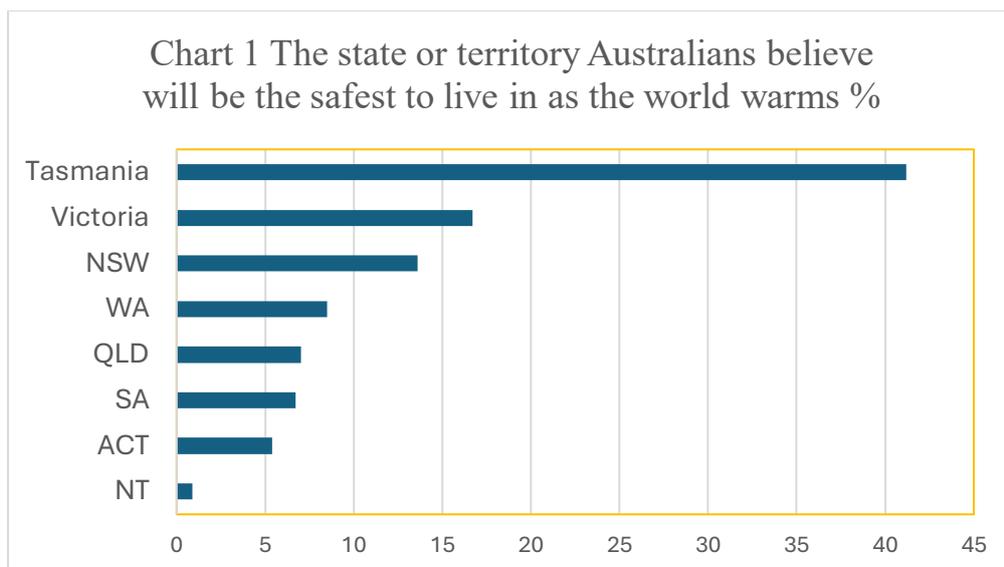
	Safest state	Share of Aust'n pop'n	Own state preference	Age	
				Under 40	60 & over
ACT	5.4	1.8	37	<u>7.7</u>	<u>3.6</u>
New South Wales	13.6	31.3	23	15.2	15.4
Victoria	16.7	25.6	32	<u>19.9</u>	<u>12.5</u>
Queensland	7.0	20.5	22	6.7	8.3
South Australia	6.7	7.0	30	7.5	5.3
Northern Territory	0.9	0.9	10	0.5	0.4
Tasmania	41.2	2.2	89	<u>32.4</u>	<u>48.1</u>
Western Australia	8.5	10.8	34	10.1	<u>6.3</u>

Notes: Underlined numbers are significantly different from the mean at the 95% level. Those who answered 'Don't know/Hard to say' (31.3%) were excluded, giving n = 1343. Own state preference = percentages of those in each state who think their own state will be safest.

Chart 1 makes it plain that Tasmania is the clear winner. Although it has only a little more than 2% of the nation's population, two in five Australians (41%) choose it as the safest place to live. Other states fall well behind, although the ACT would triple its population if everyone moved to their preferred state. Queensland and NSW, and less so Victoria, would see a huge net out-migration. Tasmania could not possibly absorb the influx, even over decades.

The data suggest a bias towards choosing one's own state or territory, so we show the extent to which residents prefer their own state or territory. Tasmanians have been taking notice of expert opinion, with 89% saying it is safest for them to stay put. Queenslanders and Northern Territorians may also be well-informed with large majorities (78% and 90% respectively) saying it might be best for them to find another state to live in.

Table 1 shows that if we break down preferences by age group, more older Australians identify Tasmania as the safest state. (The percentage for those 40-59 years is the same as for those over 60).



It is perhaps surprising that only 41% of Australians nominate Tasmania as the safest place to live. Anecdotally, it is the place usually mentioned. And, although no location is risk-free, expert opinion mostly favours Tasmania. It is expected to have the least severe combination of heat, fire, flood, drought, and severe storms. The weather charts on television every night tell viewers that Tasmania will be the coolest state no matter how hot the Earth becomes. Several studies and a variety of experts have identified the state as one of the best places to be ‘when things go pear-shaped.’³ A 2021 global survey included Tasmania among the five best places in the world to survive a global collapse brought on by warming.⁴ Experts also point to southern Victoria and the ACT as likely to remain safer than other parts of the continent.

Table 2 cross-tabulates the safest state preference by respondents’ expectations about the amount of global warming by 2050. It is immediately apparent that those who expect the climate to be much hotter show a much stronger preference for Tasmania compared to those who believe the Earth will not warm or will warm only a little. Those who expect the climate to be much hotter are also more likely to avoid NSW, Queensland, and Western Australia. Their expectations about warming are more consistent with expert advice.

The state preferences, especially for Tasmania, expressed by those who believe it will be much hotter are very similar to those who say they often or very often experience climate-induced feelings of insecurity and to those who say they are very or extremely concerned

³ Fiona Blackwood, ‘Tasmania among best places to survive global societal collapse, new study finds,’ *ABC News* online, 30 July 2021.

⁴ Nick King and Aled Jones, ‘An analysis of the potential for the formation of “nodes of persisting complexity”,’ *Sustainability*, 2021, 13(15): 8161.

about climate change. Therefore, to the extent that there is an exodus from the mainland to Tasmania in coming years, it will be overwhelming from among those people on the mainland who are most engaged with and most worried about the future of Australia under global warming. We saw in Research Paper 1 that these people also tend to be more highly educated and have progressive political views.

Table 2 (Q12) If global temperatures keep rising bringing more extreme weather, which state or territory of Australia do you think will be the safest one to live in? (n = 1343) %

	Average	How much warmer in 2050?			
		About the same	A bit warmer	Somewhat warmer	Much hotter
ACT	5.4	4.0	3.6	7.1	5.4
New South Wales	13.6	17.1	<u>21.9</u>	11.2	<u>10.5</u>
Victoria	16.7	16.2	17.7	18.1	15.7
Queensland	7.0	<u>15.4</u>	9.8	6.1	<u>3.0</u>
South Australia	6.7	7.7	5.9	7.2	6.1
Northern Territory	0.9	1.8	0.0	1.4	0.5
Tasmania	41.2	<u>27.5</u>	<u>25.4</u>	41.2	<u>53.4</u>
Western Australia	8.5	10.4	<u>15.6</u>	7.8	<u>5.4</u>

Town or country?

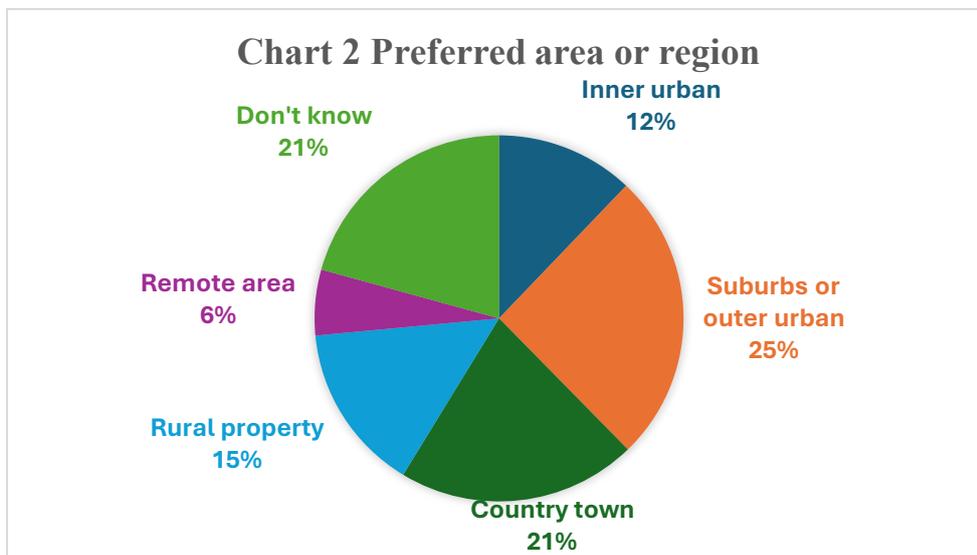
The larger states of Australia each have several climatic zones, so picking a state or territory (other than the ACT) is a blunt instrument for deciding where to live most safely. In our survey, it was not feasible to divide each state into climatic zones, but it was feasible to ask which area or region within the respondent’s preferred state they believe will be safest. For the respondents, this question is likely to bring to mind factors in addition to climate conditions, such as whether it will be safer to live near well-developed infrastructure and urban services. The results are shown in Table 3.

Contrary to the popular image of retreating to eco-villages or off-grid, self-sufficient farms, three out of five Australians believe that staying together in cities or country towns would be safest. Only one in five would opt for a rural property or remote area. And one in five think it is too hard to say. Chart 2 provides a clear picture of preferences.

Table 3 (Q13) Which area or region of [preferred state] do you think will be the safest to live in? (n = 1343) %

	Preferred state	Safest area or region of preferred state					
		Inner urban	Suburbs or outer urban	Country town	Rural property	Remote area	DK/Hard to say
ACT	5.4	27.8	31.8	3.6	10.7	0.9	25.3
NSW	13.6	10.6	39.0	19.2	14.2	2.1	15.0
Victoria	16.7	17.5	35.1	20.8	9.8	3.3	13.4
Queensland	7.0	13.6	23.9	28.5	12.8	6.5	14.6
SA	6.7	19.4	21.8	25.6	8.4	9.3	15.4
NT	0.9	0	29.4	3.7	6.9	39.2	20.7
Tasmania	41.2	7.2	16.4	21.4	19.2	7.5	28.3
WA	8.5	11.4	30.5	25.9	14.0	4.3	13.8
Average		12.1	25.6	21.0	14.8	5.8	20.7

Notes: Those who answered ‘Don’t know/Hard to say’ to the preferred state question were excluded but those who answered ‘Don’t know/Hard to say’ to the preferred area question are included.



There are, however, differing opinions across age groups, shown in Table 4. Suburban and outer urban living is preferred by under 40s (31%) compared to those 60 and older (20%), while country towns are favoured by older Australians (33%) compared to younger adults (12%).

Relocation preferences differ depending on level of concern about climate change, although they may mostly reflect existing geographical distributions (bottom two rows of Table 4).

Nevertheless, compared to the average those least concerned about climate change favour country towns over inner urban living, while those most concerned are less inclined to choose country towns and more likely to choose inner urban.

An interesting difference, shown in Table 4, is that those who are most concerned about climate change are more uncertain than the unconcerned about where it would be safest to live, with 25% ticking ‘Don’t know/Hard to say’ compared to 15% of the unconcerned. This is counter-intuitive because we would expect those most concerned to have gathered more information and thought about it more deeply. Perhaps after assessing the information their well-informed opinion is that it is too hard to say. Or perhaps they have concluded that there will be no safe refuge.

Table 4 (Q13) Which area or region of [preferred state] do you think will be the safest to live in? %

	Safest area or region of preferred state					
	Inner urban	Suburbs or outer urban	Country town	Rural property	Remote area	DK/Hard to say
Under 40	14.1	<u>31.3</u>	<u>11.9</u>	14.3	6.9	21.5
40-59	10.5	23.8	21.1	16.9	5.9	21.8
60 & over	10.9	<u>19.8</u>	<u>33.0</u>	13.5	4.1	18.7
Average	12.1	25.6	21.0	14.8	5.8	20.7
Not at all concerned	<u>4.7</u>	24.1	<u>30.8</u>	16.5	9.0	<u>14.9</u>
Extremely concerned	14.7	22.3	<u>16.3</u>	14.3	7.7	24.7

Implications

Moving home to a climate ‘safe zone’ can turn a lingering dread into concrete action, which can feel empowering. It’s an option being taken by a growing number of Australians, as we saw in Research Paper 5. However, when responses to climate change are left to individuals and families, protecting the nation from extreme weather is outsourced to the market, absolving governments of responsibility for building resilience. The social contract is being quietly rewritten. The well-educated and well-heeled who can afford to move do so, pushing up property prices and demanding a greater share of public funds. The rest of the population

is left to rely on whatever public resources remain. In a worst-case scenario, we could end up with a patchwork of safe zones for richer Australians surrounded by increasingly vulnerable regions with no insurance and unsaleable properties. Whatever the case, climate-driven internal migration is likely to reinforce existing socio-political cleavages, with the most informed, most concerned, and most active segments of society leading the demographic shift, while less-engaged groups remain anchored to riskier localities.

When a region is tagged in the public mind as a climate refuge, the label becomes a marketable brand. In Tasmania, the state is being promoted as a climate sanctuary. Such branding can attract investment, drive up property prices, and reshape labour markets, effectively turning perceptions of climate change into an economic engine. We can expect to see a feedback loop: the more a region becomes entrenched in the public mind as safe, the more regional disparities are deepened.

Contrary to images of solar-powered, self-sufficient farms, most survey respondents envision finding safety within existing towns and cities. This points to a preference for the economic and social benefits of community life—availability of schools, hospitals, cultural venues, and networks—rather than fragmenting into isolated rural pockets. Collective identity and shared services are viewed as essential buffers against climate anxiety and the reality of life in a changing climate.

Survey method summary

The survey, carried out by Roy Morgan Research, had an overall target of 2,000 completes, aiming for a mix of 1,700 completes broadly representative of the Australian population by age, gender, and region, and 300 additional completes from Australians living in areas affected by one or more extreme weather events since 2019 (see below). Non-interlocked quotas were set for the sample based on the distribution of the adult Australian population for each of age, gender, and region.

Participants were invited to participate in the survey online via e-mail and SMS with a personalised link. A total of 2,099 respondents completed the survey, reduced to 1,955 after cleaning the data set to exclude poor-quality responses. The survey was carried out between 22 May and 22 June 2025.

To better assess the effects of direct exposure to extreme weather events, additional respondents were sought from Australians living in postcodes that had been affected by extreme weather events since 2019 (before the Black Summer Bushfires). The National Emergency Management Agency database, which lists severe events (floods and bushfires only), was used to define the areas so affected.

The average interview length for the survey was just under 10 minutes. Participants were given an incentive to complete the survey through a combination of ‘panel points’ redeemable in gift-vouchers and entry to a quarterly prize draw.

Full details of the survey methodology and the questionnaire can be found in the technical report posted on this website.

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