



Getting real about park management

One of the most effective things we can do to reduce the impacts of climate change on biodiversity in Victoria is to give our natural systems added resilience by effectively managing existing threats to our parks, reserves and other natural areas.

While there are many good management programs in place, and volunteer groups continue to do excellent work across the state, there are many management problems that are either inadequately funded or not resourced at all.

Others have been left unnecessarily stranded in the too-hard basket. For example:

Feral animals

Many feral animals are rampant across much of Victoria, and the damage they do is often considerable.

Feral horse numbers, which fell after the 2003 fire, are again out of control in the alps.

They are having a considerable effect on peat beds and wetland areas around the Cobberas and Limestone Creek areas, near the NSW border.

Current management efforts are concentrated on the smaller (but more visible) population on the Bogong High Plains, leaving the bulk of the damage unattended. The alps are internationally recognised as highly vulnerable to climate impacts.

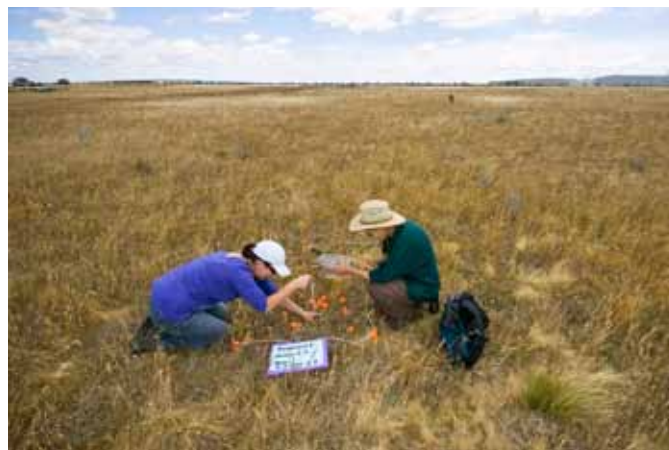
Sambar Deer, in the high tens of thousands, are on the march across eastern Victoria – throughout the Central Highlands, the alps and into East Gippsland. Current management arrangements that Parks Victoria has with deer hunting associations are not stemming the tide.

Sambar Deer have recently been listed as a Threatening Process under Victoria's Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act. They particularly damage moist rainforest pockets, which are highly vulnerable to climate impacts.

Other feral animals, such as wild pigs, goats, dogs and cats, also need committed action across the state.

Phytophthera

Action on Phytophthera, the damaging pathogen that



Monitoring is an important tool in understanding how ecosystems will react to climate change.

Photo: Michael Williams

has been making its way through natural areas in Victoria for many decades now, remains inadequate and, at times, a bit of a token gesture.

Fire management

There are many issues with current fire management in Victoria. Most particularly, an over-reaction to recent large fires has led to unprecedented levels of fuel-reduction burning across the state, accompanied by almost no ecological monitoring.

Hundreds of kilometres of fire-breaks, initially designed to protect water catchments, will soon be extended over most of natural Victoria.

This fragmentation of ecosystems will exacerbate climate impacts.

Monitoring

There is no effective condition assessment for national parks and other natural areas across Victoria, and no established standards of ecological integrity for managers to work to.

Monitoring of natural systems, and the effects on them of management actions such as control burns or weed eradication, is essential if we are to understand

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A “Weed of National Significance” Bridal Creeper is one of the worst weeds in Australia because of its potential to spread into uninfected areas and its economic and environmental impacts. Photo: courtesy CSIRO

how our natural ecosystems work, how they respond to management actions and, importantly, how they react to climate change.

Weeds

Faced with the prospect that even our most intact ecosystems, in our finest national parks, will be greatly stressed by climate change, the VNPA is determined to see that they have the best protection possible.

Clearly, we have to do all we can to build maximum resilience into the system, both by linking natural areas with broad, connecting rehabilitated ecosystems (see centre pages), and by making sure we successfully manage existing threats to biodiversity, such as weed invasions.

To shed some light on possible solutions, the VNPA asked Biosis Research to make an independent assessment of weed management in Victoria’s parks.

Biosis interviewed rangers in three different parks (Wilson’s Promontory and Great Otway national parks and Warby Range State Park), as well as Parks Victoria head office staff.

They came up with one particularly clear recommendation: management of environmental weeds needs reliable, recurrent annual funding, and this funding has to increase significantly if all treatable weed infestations are to be dealt with.

Parks Victoria staff said they were far more likely to attack a weed problem if they were confident that funding would be available for follow-up works in ensuing years. One-off initiative funding can be useful in some circumstances, but adequate, reliable, recurrent funding must be the mainstay of management programs.

Among the main findings were:

- Resourcing for weed control in Victoria’s national parks and reserves is currently inadequate, leaving many weed infestations untreated or inadequately treated.
- There is a need for an increase in skilled staff to

manage the weed problem in national parks. Weed management sometimes fails when other priorities take over, such as high visitor periods, or fire activities.

- Effective weed control requires reliable ongoing funding, rather than special initiative funding.
- We do not have comprehensive baseline data for the extent of weed infestations in Victoria’s park system.
- Monitoring of ecological systems must be greatly increased before we can measure the effectiveness of any weed control programs.
- There is a need for greatly increased research into methods for biological control of environmental weeds.

Probably the most challenging of the recommendations is the issue of monitoring ecological systems.

Biosis found that park staff were generally familiar with the weed they were trying to control, but not always as familiar with the ecology of the area the weed was invading.

That leaves open the possibility that some control programs could be doing as much damage to the natural values of the area as the weed itself.

The report recognises that many of the pest plant control programs in parks and reserves are well run, and very effective, and that Parks Victoria’s “Levels of Protection” program intelligently sets priorities across the State. But those priorities are largely the response to a lack of resources, leaving a great many treatable infestations inadequately treated or untreated.

It is important, however, to remember that while resourcing for environmental weed management in our national parks is inadequate, it is well ahead of resourcing for weed control in areas of state forest and other public land.

The full Biosis Research report is available on the VNPA’s website www.vnpa.org.au.