



Unlocking Victorian Tourism: Draft Inquiry Overview and Recommendations, March 2011

Submission by the Victorian National Parks Association:
April 29, 2011

The VNPA welcomes the opportunity to present a submission on VCEC's *Unlocking Victorian Tourism: Draft Inquiry Overview and Recommendations*.

There are many important issues in the draft. Some should prove very useful if implemented, but others have the capacity to permanently compromise Victoria's magnificent and hard-won system of national parks and reserves.

We welcome any opportunity to discuss these issues further, particularly those relating to leases in national parks, and any revision of planning provisions.

Overview

The draft *Unlocking Victorian Tourism* report has taken a strictly economic view of possibilities for developments in national parks. It appears to be informed primarily by sections of the tourism industry which have, for some time now, been lobbying for privileged access to development opportunities within national parks.

The report should also be informed by reputable assessments of the predicament facing Victoria's biodiversity and natural areas. Sir Gustav Nossal, chair of the Scientific Reference Group for the recent Victorian *Biodiversity White Paper*, said in his introductory message to that white paper (p iii):

"The scientific reference group is deeply convinced that the time for 'business as usual' is over, and the need for action to stem ecological decline is urgent."

The white paper noted (p.5)

"More than a thousand of Victoria's native species are known to be threatened with extinction. Whole communities of native plants and animals... are at risk due to a variety of threatening processes."

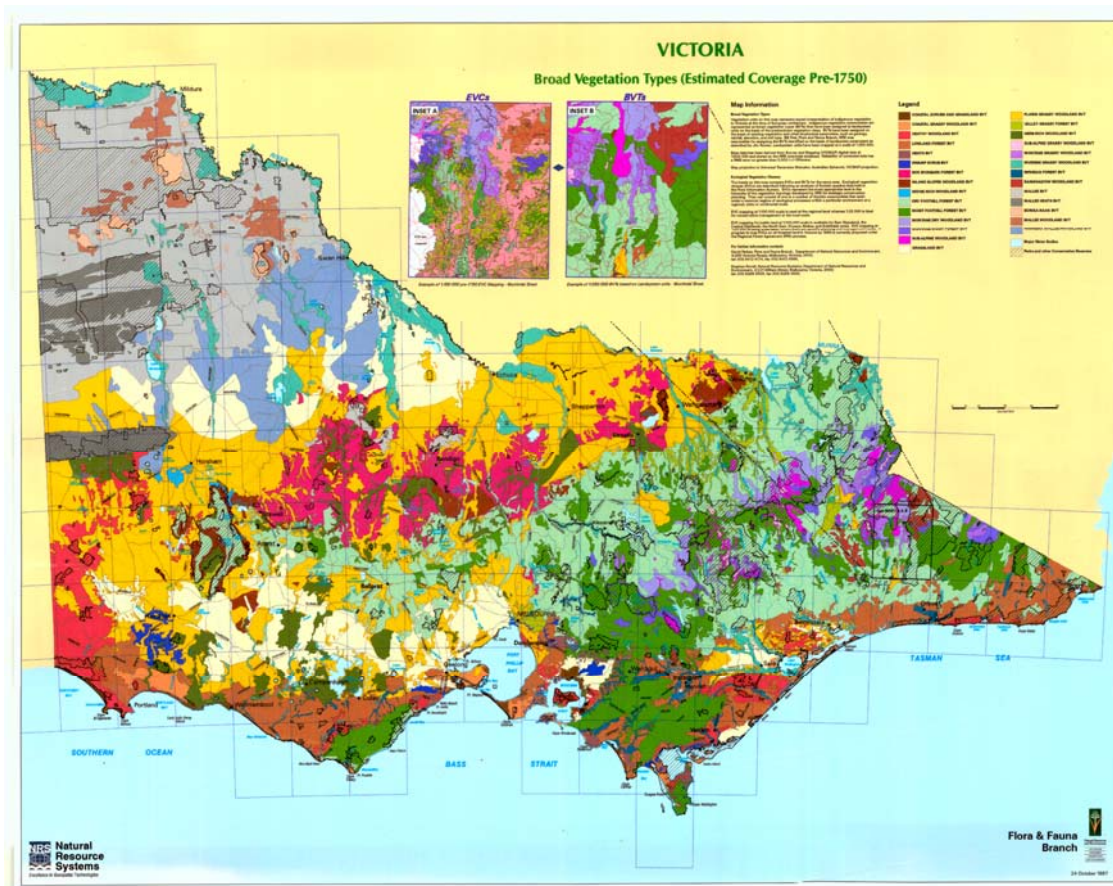
and highlighted (p. 88) the need to:

"...build the ecological resilience of formal conservation reserves through an increased emphasis on the management of their natural values and ecosystem processes."

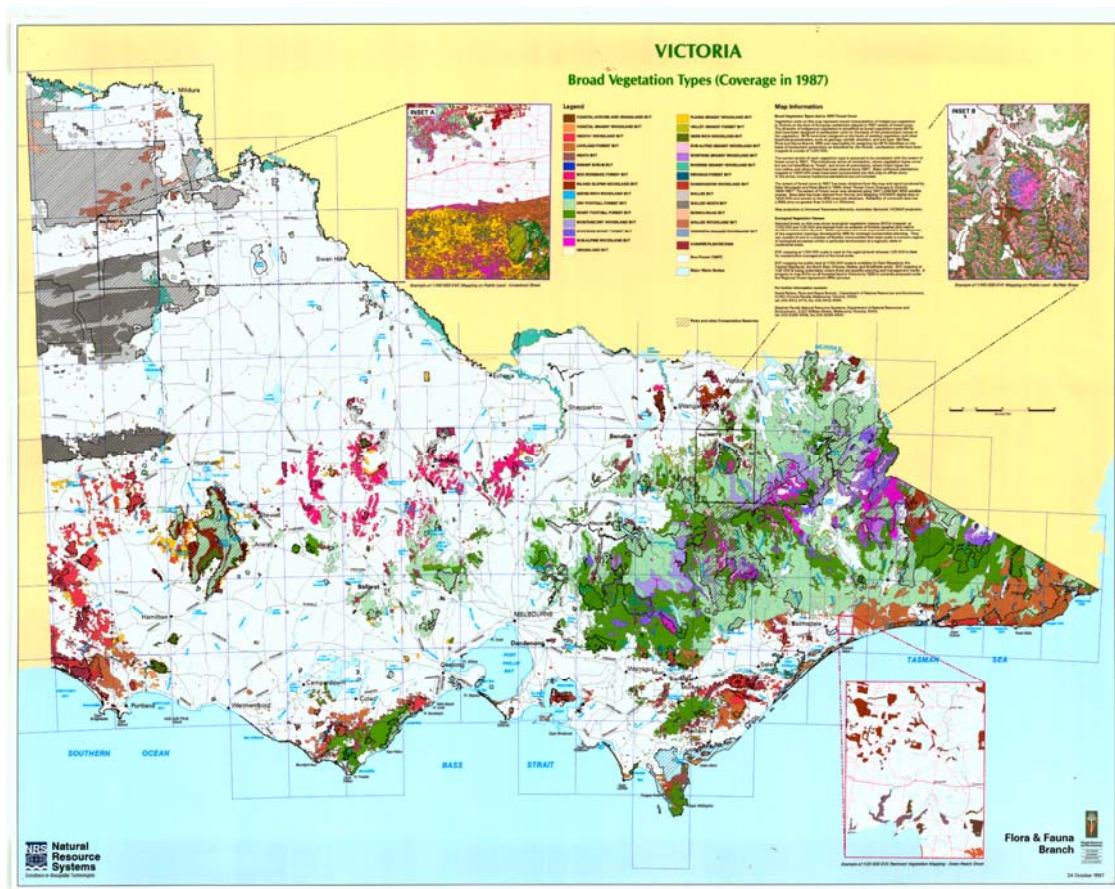
Importantly, Victoria has cleared a far greater area of native vegetation than any other Australian state, leaving many ecosystems highly fragmented and suffering difficult to control pest plant and animal invasions. This predicament will be exacerbated by climate change.

The forward to the comprehensive 2008 State of the Environment Report makes the following point *"The State of the Environment Report reflects the simple fact that most areas of the state are highly stressed. Most natural vegetation, waterways, wetlands, coasts and rivers are reported in parlous condition"* (ii CES 2008).

The following maps illustrate the predicament Victoria faces.



Map of Victorian vegetation types pre 1750 (DSE)

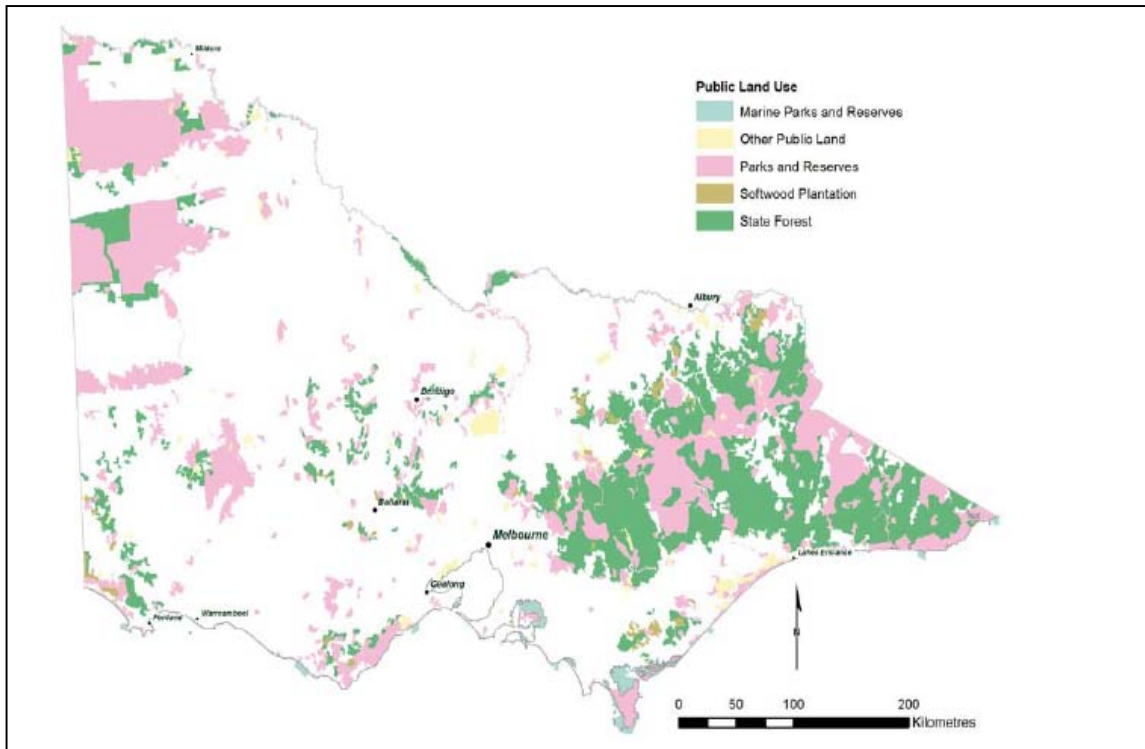


Map of remaining native vegetation types (DSE). White areas represent cleared (agricultural) land. The map clearly shows that many ecosystems in Victoria have been almost entirely removed over the last 200 years, and most of those which remain are highly fragmented. This leaves Victoria with Australia's most serious biodiversity conservation predicament. Vigilant management of our remaining natural areas is essential if we are to maintain our biodiversity over the long term.

Approximately 39% of Victoria (8.9 million ha) is public land - of which 3.96 million ha are in parks and reserves and 3.18 million ha in state forest - the remainder (and lion's share) of the state, 61%, is private land largely used for agriculture. Agriculture occupies appropriately 13.25 million ha of land in Victoria, or 3.5 times the area of national parks and reserves, yet these seem to attract undue to attention for development.

Healthy national parks are not the whole answer to the conservation dilemma, but they are the keystone for ecological systems in the state National parks are a relatively small part of overall state land use (17.4 %) and are the 'jewel in

the crown' and cornerstone of protecting our natural heritage and ecosystem processes. On a statewide scale they are largely habitat islands in a sea of farmland. If we lose their ecological integrity, we lose the battle. The improvement of their ecological condition is essential if Victoria's biodiversity is to be around for future generations to enjoy. Importantly, it is now clear that all sections of the Victorian community must be cognizant of, and actively engaged in, strategies to protect ecological systems.



For this reason we strongly agree with *Victoria's Nature Based Tourism Strategy* (p. 37), that:

"Private investment into any new large scale facility, particularly accommodation other than adaptive re-use of existing infrastructure, should be sited outside of the park."

We support planning amendments that facilitate suitable developments on private land adjacent to national parks, in appropriate areas.

Note that there are opportunities for developments outside parks in sites of low conservation value to actually improve both the conservation value, and the ambience for tourism, of the area. This should be encouraged.

While national parks should have appropriate levels of, and designs for, base infrastructure such walking tracks or interpretation signage, this should be done to minimize environmental disturbance and aim to consolidate existing infrastructure such as roads and tracks to maximize both access and

conservation, and be developed on a case-by-case basis as part of the detailed park planning process.

It is clear that a change in tenure, improvements in small-scale base infrastructure, marketing and, importantly, on-ground staffing do improve tourism outcomes (see Red Gum National Park - Case Study below). There is no evidence that this improvement is dependent on large-scale private infrastructure within parks - in fact, there is significant evidence which points to the opposite.

Likewise, arguments that large-scale private infrastructure is needed to improve access for a wider range of people, or people with disabilities, are also largely based on false assumptions. Improved access is more likely to be driven by improved or specialist service provision, such as eco-tours and the like, rather than being dependent on a large scale infrastructure base in the park.

It is important that the prime purpose of national parks - the protection of nature - is held paramount. This prime purpose has been supported by the community for generations now, and that support continues for good reason.

Environmental, statutory and community considerations should be considered and evaluated, and the purposes and uses of national parks and other protected areas should be respected and clearly acknowledged.

Red Gum National Parks - case study

In 2008, the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) produced its final Riverine Red Gum investigation report following a three year investigation into the public river Red Gum wetland and forest estate across northern Victoria.

VEAC advocated an approach consistent with that of Tourism Victoria's Nature-based Tourism Strategy that would see additional tourism accommodation needs serviced by the considerable private land adjoining the River Murray and its new national parks. National parks along the Murray and other Victorian rivers, such as the Goulburn and Ovens, are linear in nature and often relatively narrow. There are already considerable private visitor and accommodation facilities on private land servicing many users of the areas. The report states the following:

Recreation and tourism

The tourism industry relies on the River Murray and its environs and offers a wide variety of built accommodations and activities such as paddleboat tours, houseboat hire, golfing holidays, visiting food and wine outlets and cultural heritage sites; horse-riding and canoeing tours.

Tourism Victoria's Nature-based Tourism Strategy 2007- 2011 depends on the healthy and sustainable use of the River Murray and associated public land.

The Strategy will encourage additional public and private sector investment in higher yielding tourism experiences that focus on high quality visitor facilities and access to a range of recreation opportunities associated with parks. This will be serviced by a range

of accommodation types, including camping in parks, and nature retreats and eco-lodges adjacent to parks. VEAC final report 2008

VEAC made a specific recommendation that was accepted by the Victorian government:

River Murray Strategy - VEAC Recommendation R 37

That a River Murray Strategy be developed within three years of government acceptance of these recommendations, in consultation with relevant Victorian and New South Wales government agencies and relevant planning bodies to provide a long term framework for the co-operative use of the River Murray and environs on a sustainable basis for recreation, conservation, tourism, commerce and similar uses.

It is worth noting that extensive modelling carried out by VEAC in its socio-economic analysis of the proposed changes to land tenure found that new national parks would actually increase recreation and tourism in the region.

It is estimated that approximately five percent of all tourist visitors to the region actually visit the River Red Gum parks and forests. A change in status from state forest or state park to national park is likely to increase recreation and tourism visits. (P101 VEAC report)

The report goes on to state that increased visitation due to national parks is documented elsewhere in Victoria

Based on the recorded increased visitation following creation of the Grampians, Murray–Sunset and Yarra Ranges National Parks, the consultants have conservatively predicted a 20 per cent increase in visitors to Barmah, Leaghur–Koorangie, Gunbower, Lower Goulburn River and Warby Range–Ovens River National Parks, and smaller increases for other parks. This indicates considerable scope for product development, marketing and park interpretation programs to increase the numbers of people visiting the investigation area once the parks are created.

In 2008, Pricewaterhouse Coopers produced a report titled *Economic value of River Red Gum National Parks*. This report was commissioned by the Victorian National Parks Association, Tourism Alliance Victoria and the Wilderness Society.

Increased tourism – new tourism is likely to be nature-based. New park infrastructure will be critical in promoting nature-based tourism

Environmental values – the VEAC proposals should allow the forests to rejuvenate, leading to healthier eco-systems and an increase in indigenous flora and fauna.

This proposal is also expected to support an additional 23 jobs per annum.

The estimated benefits of the VEAC proposal are \$16.5 million in year one, and a total of \$152.4 million over 10 years in NPV terms. This comprises two key types of benefit:

Use benefits – the use benefit, derived from tourism, is estimated at \$1.8 million in year one, and \$26.0 million over 10 years in NPV terms

□ *Non-use benefits – the non-use benefit, derived from the value that people place on forest conservation, is estimated at \$14.7 million in year one, and \$126.4 million over 10 years in NPV terms.*

Bringing together the forecast benefits and costs, the benefit-cost ratio is estimated to be 3.55 (i.e. \$3.55 of benefits for each \$1 of cost).

These outcomes are predicated on the establishment of additional accommodation in the vicinity of or adjacent to the parks. As well, it assumes that the protection afforded to the river red gum forests by the establishment of the national parks will be a driver of additional new tourism.

National parks legislation, and international recognition

National parks in Australia are established under the jurisdiction of each state and territory. Their protection and management is governed by statutes and they conform to a set of international standards established by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), a component of UNESCO.

The primary purpose for national parks is to 'To protect natural biodiversity along with its underlying ecological structure and supporting environmental processes, and to promote education and recreation' (<http://www.environment.gov.au/parks/iucn.html#II>).

Victorian State legislation requires national parks to be managed with the overriding direction being to protect biodiversity, with other uses such as 'enjoyment, recreation or education' to be secondary uses (Section 3, National Parks Act 1975).

An important hallmark of national parks is the concept of their protection in perpetuity. This involves taking a long-term view of management and conservation, to ensure their protection is not compromised. In 1971, Victorian Liberal Conservation Minister Bill Borthwick invoked this responsibility when he told the councillors of the new Land Conservation Council to make their recommendations on the use of public land "as if for a thousand years" (www.veac.vic.gov.au/about-us/40th-anniversary).

A long-standing Victorian policy with significant public support

Governments and park management agencies have developed policies and plans that give effect to long-established statutory requirements. A key thrust has always been to find ways that enhance visitor experiences and tourism without undermining the long-term security of the park. Thus Victoria's Nature-based Tourism Strategy seeks to make best use of Victoria's natural assets, while ensuring the assets remain protected. A major way this is achieved is by

requiring that commercial developments occur on the fringes of parks, not within parks.

The first Victorian national parks, Mount Buffalo and Wilson Promontory, were established in 1898 to protect significant natural areas. Since that time there have been many applications to develop commercial tourism infrastructure in parks. The type of visitor infrastructure Victorian governments have placed in parks has overwhelmingly been designed to blend in with the natural environment and have a minimal impact on environmental values. These developments have not had a commercial (i.e. profit making) focus but have been constructed to meet the public enjoyment and education requirements of the Act.

Over time, pressure has come from entrepreneurs to enhance tourism by applying a more commercial focus - by constructing more extensive and more upmarket facilities, including hotels and restaurants, and seeking leasing conditions more favourable to development. Such applications have generally been vigorously resisted by the community and denied by governments of all persuasions.

This background demonstrates that there is an extensive body of policy and a legislative framework that has been purposely designed to ensure that Victoria's national parks are able to be protected in perpetuity. Victoria's park objectives are in keeping with national and international standards. Park leasing and licensing provisions are specific for Victorian parks to meet their unique nature and size.

None of Victoria's parks are far from transport or cities and towns or private land areas. In this regard there are many more opportunities for tourism development outside parks compared to certain other states and territories where development has occurred within a park.

Most significant infrastructure facilities within national parks in Victoria are anomalies, some incorporating historic buildings from a bygone age, such as the Mount Buffalo Chalet. The Tidal River village at Wilsons Promontory was initially a commando training camp set up during the Second World War.

Other development zones, such as the Falls Creek and Hotham Alpine Resorts, are adjacent to, but outside, the park boundary.

VCEC has not acknowledged the public's role in national parks. The public has a great love affair with its national parks, and the public's ability to rise to the occasion to protect parks from inappropriate development has been demonstrated on many occasions.

The background discussed above provides important context for the policy to site major tourism developments outside national parks. VNPA is concerned that the VCEC report has not referred to such information which is readily available in the public domain.

The VNPA is also concerned that VCEC had made no reference to the 'precautionary principle' which is enshrined in the 1992 Intergovernmental Agreement on the Environment. All Australian governments are to adopt the 'PP' to inform decision-making, particularly in environmental matters.

The VNPA submits that the legislated objectives for national parks, coupled with the precautionary principle and the public interest, provide an important framework for regulating tourism development in national parks that has not been recognized in VCEC's report

VNPA responses to draft recommendations

Draft recommendation 3.1

That the Victorian Government revise its objectives for tourism development and incorporate them in the State Planning Policy Framework. In doing so, the Government should indicate the outcomes it expects from the administration of land-use planning regulation, such as the facilitation of tourism investment in particular areas of the State and/or particular types of product (such as nature-based tourism).

VNPA response to 3.1:

VNPA supports the need for clarity within the State Planning Policy Framework to facilitate tourism uses on private land. However, this needs to be done with care as there may be perverse outcomes if one use is favoured over the other without good reason - e.g. farming vs tourism.

We are aware of a number of examples whereby significant tourism development adjacent to national parks has failed due to impediments in the planning process.

A classic Victorian example is a proposed private development immediately outside the entrance to Wilsons Promontory National Park. Despite years of planning for the Wilsons Promontory Nature Retreat, and considerable private investment in rehabilitating coastal wetlands on the property concerned, planning regulations have stymied construction of the proposed tourist accommodation.

Also, it should be made clear here that there is no need to re-establish nature-based tourism priorities across the state. A strategy for facilitation of tourism investment in particular areas of the state is covered well in *Victoria's Nature Based Tourism Strategy* (p. 57 ff.), where a series of prioritised 'clusters' are identified across the state. Five regional areas are grouped into three priorities for development:

- Phase 1 - the Great Ocean Road and Grampians;
- Phase 2 - Phillip Island and Gippsland; and
- Phase 3 - Victoria's High Country.

This strategy should be followed, allowing certainty and continuity of investment, rather than causing confusion in the industry by introducing a new set of priorities.

VNPA submits that VCEC should review the progress made in implementing these cluster proposals, and determine what progress has been made and whether there are planning scheme impediments affecting implementation.

Draft recommendation 3.2

That the Victorian Government implement a strategic approach to land-use planning for tourism, so as to:

- *address tourism issues in any regional strategic land-use plans*
- *engage councils and the tourism industry in the development of regional strategic land-use plans*
- *ensure local planning objectives are clarified and consistent with the State's objectives*
- *revise the application of land-use controls and approval processes to identify opportunities to fast track approval for projects that support State and local objectives for tourism.*

VNPA response to 3.2:

In general, we support this set of recommendations, so long as the strategic approach to restrict development to areas adjacent to parks and reserves remains consistent with long-held objectives to retain and improve the integrity of land of high conservation value.

Draft recommendation 3.3

That the Victorian Government provide more flexibility for tourism-related investment in the Farming Zone, the Rural Conservation Zone and the Green Wedge Zones by:

- *clarifying the purpose of the zones*
- *removing the requirement that tourism-related activities are undertaken 'in conjunction with' agricultural activities*
- *allowing a wider range and scale of activities in the zone.*

VNPA response to 3.3:

Land use planning is often a complex task. It invariably needs to balance economic, social and ecological issues at various scales. Green Wedge, Farming and Rural Conservation Zones have all been put in place to protect either economic activities, such as farming, or important conservation assets,

such as rural conservation zones or open space in the context of Green Wedge zones. Some zones have multiple objectives.

The commission notes in its 'Draft Overview and Recommendations' that widening the uses within the Farming Zone, the Rural Conservation Zone and the Green Wedge zone should not require tourism-related activities to be 'in conjunction with' agricultural activities.

This is complex, and if the intent is to strategically develop tourism developments in low conservation value areas it may be preferable to develop an alternative zone which is applicable only to select areas such as tourism cluster areas (as above). Likewise, the process could be enhanced and give certainty to tourism development, agriculture and conservation by having explicit zones with clear objectives for each specific use, and applied on a strategic basis rather than a broad-scale opening up of zones.

For example, VNPA believes that certainty could be enhanced if native vegetation and high conservation areas to be retained could be zoned 'Conservation'. It would provide immediate security for these areas, regardless of who became the eventual manager. Most such areas begin as private land and become public land many years after the initial planning. Victoria does not have a conservation zone that can apply to both private and publicly owned land. The VNPA believes developers would welcome the creation and use of such a zone because, it would provide clarity if they were required to excise such an area from their development for conservation purposes. .

A clear case for caution here is any revision of planning zones, etc, in coastal areas. Victoria, despite the large population living in or near coastal areas, has managed to maintain large areas of natural coastline. Our enlightened Coastal Strategy is the envy of many states, and has allowed Victoria's coast to be a significant drawcard for local as well as international tourism.

Any inappropriate loosening of planning regulations could indeed prove to be the classic case of *killing the goose that lays the golden egg*. It is very easy for an ill-conceived policy change to undo decades of good planning, and very hard to reverse any such decision when developments take hold. A case to remember in this regard is the long, painful and expensive buy-back of land subdivision around Philip Island's Penguin Parade and Nobbies area.

We note also the recent national heritage listing of the Great Ocean Road, something that would not have been possible without many decades of enlightened policy and planning provisions.

On another point, inappropriately designed developments near or adjacent to parks and other natural areas can have an adverse effect on nature-based or culture-based tourism, sometimes significantly compromising the value of environmentally and culturally sensitive developments by neighbouring tourist

operators. It would be useful in this regard to build into the recommendations a requirement to adopt the *Draft Design Guidelines for Nature Based Tourism* (the Draft Design Guidelines are on DSE's website at:

<http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/DSE/nrenrt.nsf/LinkView/B35447BFD3AE3806CA2576250022D0A1C3413CF40B20387A4A2567BD002720F1>

There are many examples of poor facility design in areas adjacent to national parks. Among the most insensitive developments are those at the Falls Creek and Hotham Alpine Resorts. These Alpine Resorts, though on public land, largely act as private development zones. (In Victoria, the Alpine Resorts are on separately zoned land deeply embedded in the national park, but not actually part of the park. In NSW, the resorts are actually within the park boundaries, a situation which produces ongoing conflicts.)

Unfortunately, the privileged location of Victoria's prime alpine resorts has been somewhat abused by a succession of poor planning decisions. These decisions may serve the resorts well enough in winter, when snow covers a multitude of sins, but are acting against summer occupancy.

Most significantly, the large supermarket-style carpark at both Falls Creek and Hotham, occupying the prime landscape viewing spots of each resort, would scarcely be tolerated in resorts elsewhere in the world.



Section of the carpark at Falls Creek Alpine Resort.



The Hotham Alpine Resort carpark and treatment dam (above) mask the view to Mount Feathertop, Victoria's finest easily accessible alpine landscape (see below).



Mt Feathertop, and the Alpine National Park, from just below the Hotham Alpine Resort carpark.

Clearly, there is little attempt here to provide visitors with the ambience they might expect from a nature-based tour of Victoria's alps.

The capacity of the resort's promoters and developers to guarantee experiences sympathetic to the alpine landscape is further illustrated by the condition of the area through which athletes from around the world, participating in a high altitude training camp, run (see below).



Runners at Falls Creek training camp

Resort operators sometimes appear to be perplexed that their attempts to develop facilities in the adjacent national park (below) are not met with sympathy.



The Alpine National Park, adjacent to the Falls Creek Alpine resort.

In summary, there are ample opportunities to develop excellent facilities adjacent to, and in sympathy with, national parks. Victoria is in real need of

such facilities. We do not believe Victoria is in need of developments that further compromise its few remaining relatively intact natural areas.

Draft recommendation 3.4

That the Victorian Government encourage a consistent approach to administering the new zones, by providing guidance and other support for councils to effectively and consistently implement the modified zones. This guidance may include the information required in an application, as well as model conditions.

VNPA response to 3.4:

As for 3.2 and 3.3 above, including the reference to the *Draft Design Guidelines for Nature Based Tourism*.

Public land regulation

Draft recommendation 4.1

That the Victorian Government remove regulatory obstacles to private sector investment in tourism infrastructure in Victoria's national parks so that from 1 January 2012 private sector investment is permitted and businesses are allowed to:

- *propose developments in national parks provided there is a net public benefit and they complement environmental, heritage and other values*
- *lease land within a national park for this development, provided they meet a set of guidelines and agree to a standard operating contract (see draft recommendation 4.3).*

The Victorian Government should publicly announce this new policy approach.

VNPA response to 4.1:

We strongly oppose this recommendation.

The above recommendation seeks a new policy to allow across-the-board commercial access to all of Victoria's national and state parks. The summary report notes:

"The Victorian Government should publicly announce that the private sector will be allowed to propose developments in Victoria's national parks when there is a net public benefit, with regard to economic, environmental and social impacts"(page 27).

The blanket approach being proposed is akin to using a sledgehammer to crack a walnut. It is particularly puzzling as VCEC's report clearly identifies that only

a handful of Victoria's national parks are of interest to the tourism industry. Of concern is that VCEC does not appear to have evaluated *Victoria's Nature Based Tourism Strategy* and the work stemming from this to identify specific development clusters and potential development sites on public land outside parks.

The commission notes that there should be criteria for approval and appropriate guidance which may include broad areas of the state where it "... would be willing to consider proposals for private tourist developments in national parks"

But the Commission fails to justify why national parks should be the overriding priority for tourism development, other than citing the current difficulty of undertaking development on private land. Likewise, no attempt has been made to outline what a 'net public benefit' would look like for an environmental or ecological outcome.

The VNPA is not aware of any development in a high conservation value area which has a net benefit in ecological or environmental terms. Generally, such benefits are grossly over-stated for commonly cited examples. Any benefits have largely been economic or social. Likewise, the concept of 'net public benefit' is a watering down of 'ecologically sustainable development' or 'net gain' which are both principles used in existing government environment policy.

Many groups run the idea that, as national parks are funded from government budgets, taxpayers must be able to use them as and where they like. For many community associations they are seen as excellent open spaces for sporting competitions such as rogaining, cross country running and endurance events; for private pursuits such as mountain biking horse riding, 4W driving and car camping; and for more aggressive activities such as shooting and pig hunting. The phenomenon known as 'tragedy of the commons', first expressed in 1968 by G. Hardin, describes the sense of grievance such groups vocalise when activities are excluded from national parks. "If others can go and do their thing in a national park, why can't we?"

This has led to a government focus on measuring and recording human activity in parks at the expense of measuring their conservation value.

- i. Increases in visitor numbers are a primary criterion for performance pay for senior park management executives in NSW.
- ii. The quality of the visitor experience is the only performance indicator specified in the 2010-2011 ACT Budget papers for its national parks and nature reserves. There are currently no robust performance indicators on its conservation or natural management objectives of the various management plans for each of the reserves; none on weed or feral animal control; and none on compliance with

management plans for species listed under State or Federal legislation.

- iii. Visitor numbers are a key quantity measure in the Victoria Budget Papers (service delivery) for Park Victoria's performance, along with community satisfaction. While there is a vague measure for threatened species protected in parks and reserves, there is no measurement within the budget papers of the condition or integrity of parks

We refer you to our introductory remarks that describe how national parks have been set aside to protect natural systems, and as such should not be compromised by development proposals.

The VNPA strongly supports the long tradition in Victoria that private developments should not take place inside national parks, and strongly supports the current policy that such developments should occur on private land, or low conservation value public land, outside national parks.

Some of the reasons behind the policy are outlined below:

- Victoria is a small, highly populated state, largely cleared of native vegetation. Victoria's national parks are almost all adjacent to, or close to, sizeable townships or regional centres. There is ample opportunity for easy-to-manage accommodation and other infrastructure on private land near or adjacent to parks
- Any perceived need for accommodation within national parks in Victoria is not as great as for some more remote parks in other states and territories, for example Kakadu.
- Victoria's parks are generally smaller than those of other states, and many are linear in shape (e.g. Port Campbell NP) due to topography and past land allocation. Such features not only militate against tourism development, but make biodiversity protection even more compelling.
- Tourism developments constructed outside, but adjacent to, national parks are more likely to be financially viable in the long term, particularly if future viability requires an expansion of the initial project.

The VNPA notes that *Victoria's Nature Based Tourism Strategy* includes an action to identify and establish a prioritised land bank of sites on public land outside parks for a variety of nature-based tourism developments (see page 43). In many cases the state forest adjacent to a national park as identified in the land bank investigation will be largely indistinguishable from the park, and may be better suited for tourism development. (State forest and other categories of Crown land are also important for conservation.) This represents an important plank in the strategy to maximize protection of national park

areas, while still facilitating tourism. The VNPA submits that this is an important component of the policy that VCEC should follow up.

The following case studies reinforce the need for an overriding principle excluding development in parks.

(a) Tidal River, Wilsons Promontory National Park

The Tidal River Village in Wilsons promontory National Park is a classic example of creeping development. It would not be there at all except that a commando training camp was set up at Tidal River during the Second World War. Those buildings became accommodation for park visitors after the war, and soon generated a need for a café, sewerage treatment and water purification works, power generation and, inevitably, more accommodation, etc.

Despite clear constraints in recent years on extending the accommodation in Tidal River, there have been recurring proposals to greatly increase accommodation there. In 1996, proposals for a hotel at Tidal River were abandoned after strong opposition from the Victorian (and local) community.

(This situation should be compared to a sensible, and environmentally sensitive, private proposal adjacent to the entrance to the Prom, which is still stymied by planning regulations)

(b) Mount Buffalo National Park

Similarly, the Chalet at Mount Buffalo National Park, constructed in the early years of the park to replace an older pre-park chalet, has spawned a range of accommodation wings and other facilities over the years. Many of these have been requested so as to improve the commercial viability of the existing infrastructure. We are now in a situation where, on many days, there are more buildings on Mount Buffalo than there are park visitors. (Mount Buffalo Chalet has been out of action for a number of years, largely because there is no suitable proposal for a private developer to take on the significant maintenance costs, and power supply problems. These issues, particularly the power supply issues, would be more manageable if the chalet had been located off the plateau, adjacent to the park.)

Claims that tourism infrastructure in parks will help to fund park management are generally not sustainable. Indeed, any such impost on a business in a park simply adds to the already considerably higher costs in maintaining and running such an enterprise within the constraints imposed within a national park.

Also, developers who have already been establishing accommodation adjacent to parks are likely to be compromised if late-comers take privileged advantage of opportunities in national parks, should the policy be changed as recommended in the draft.

c) Little Desert Lodge, on the edge of Little Desert National Park, is an excellent example of the benefits of development adjacent to parks.

The Little Desert Nature Lodge was established in 1969, beginning with 4WD tours into Little Desert National Park to raise awareness of the unique local flora and fauna at a time when the Government was looking to subdivide the remaining natural vegetation for additional pastoral leases.

The owner Whimpey's love of the local region, as well as his passion for the Malleefowl which live in the Little Desert region, drove him and his wife Maureen to begin one of Victoria's unique attractions. Over the years the Lodge has seen much growth and now comprises 24 ensuite rooms, 16 bunkrooms and a large dining room. The Lodge hosts a large number of schools, coach tours and international guests annually.

The Little Desert Flora & Fauna Foundation was established in 2000, and now runs the Lodge. Its aim is to promote an appreciation of the Little Desert, situated in the Wimmera region of western Victoria.

The Foundation also promotes environmental research into the flora and fauna of the region, including ongoing research into endangered Malleefowl. Environmental and cultural education is a major focus for the Foundation. It actively achieves this through the comprehensive education program provided by the Little Desert Nature Lodge, which is owned by the Foundation, along with the nearby property known as the 'Malleefowl Sanctuary'. Both properties have been vermin-proof fenced, demonstrating the conservation commitment of the Foundation. The Foundation is registered as an 'Environmental Organisation' and can receive tax-deductible donations.

The Foundation is now embarking on a course of action to secure the financial and environmental sustainability of the Little Desert Nature Lodge and has developed a new master plan, which incorporates high end accommodation and enhanced interpretation and education elements.

The Lodge is a prime example of a tourism development which adds value to the integrity of the national park by having a research and restorative purpose as well as a commercial one.

Draft recommendation 4.2

That the Victorian Government:

- *increase the maximum duration of leases on land managed under the National Parks Act*
- *identify and address any provisions in public land leasing requirements and practice that undermine commercial interests without also delivering substantial offsetting benefits to land managers*

- *identify and address any other regulatory barriers that exist in land use planning and public land regulation that may be inconsistent with private investment.*

VNPA response to 4.2:

The VNPA opposes this recommendation. As indicated in our response to the previous recommendation, VCEC is using a blanket approach covering all parks. The lease terms available in the National Parks Act have allowed governments to match the nature of any development with the primary objectives of the Act. Where there has been a specific case for a longer lease term, governments have chosen to amend the Act specifically to allow for that development. This approach was adopted for the Chalet at Mount Buffalo NP and the Act was amended in 2010 to provide for this. Similarly in 2009 a park-specific amendment was created to provide for tourism leases at Point Nepean NP.

The process outlined above has allowed for public scrutiny of the new leases provisions via the Parliamentary process, which is an important safeguard for national parks that are to be protected in perpetuity.

In 2010, leasing provisions on Crown Land and State Forest were extended to 65 years to facilitate tourism development outside parks.

The VNPA submits that the two approaches, facilitating development on public land outside parks and specific case by case amendment to leasing provisions in the National Parks Act, are effective means to assist nature based tourism on public land.

An important case study of leasing at Mount Buffalo is described below.

In 1975, the State Government bought back the Tatra Development lease in Mount Buffalo National Park for nearly \$1million, as the company's development came increasingly into conflict with national parks management. *The Age* editorial of the day (21 May 1975) said:

"The comment of the Conservation Minister, Bill Borthwick, that the originally planned development was no longer in keeping with community wishes is a fair judgement...buying back a long lease which should never have been granted is just another sharp reminder that conservation policies must be far sighted and well founded. A trickle of ill-judged compromise soon becomes a lake of regret."

A lease was re-issued more recently, but when Tatra Inn (renamed Buffalo Lodge) burnt down in 2003, park managers and the government were united in their commitment that the problematic complex in such a sensitive area would not be reconstructed.

4.3, 4.4, and 4.5:

Draft recommendation 4.3

That the Victorian Government introduce a streamlined development approval process for public land, which:

- *progressively reduces uncertainty about the overall outcome, and sharpens the focus on key issues of uncertainty*
- *separates responsibility for developing policy and administering the approval process*
- *provides more certain timeframes for assessment, such as binding or negotiated time limits, and public reporting against these limits*
- *provides a more integrated decision making process.*

Also, that the Department of Sustainability of Environment release revised guidelines that identify:

- *the steps involved in any revised development approval process*
- *the relevant contacts at each stage of the development approval process*
- *criteria for assessing proposals.*

The Department of Sustainability and Environment would develop the approval process and associated guidance material in consultation with the tourism industry, Parks Victoria, Tourism Victoria, local government and the Department of Planning and Community Development.

Draft recommendation 4.4

That the Victorian Government clarify the roles and responsibilities of the Department of Sustainability and Environment in developing and administering public land regulation. The Department would take the lead on:

- *advising the Minister on policy and regulation for private tourism investment in facilities and operations on public land, in consultation with other bodies such as Parks Victoria*
- *developing processes and guidance for assessing proposals to develop private facilities on public land (associated with recommendation 4.3)*
- *monitoring the administration of the development approvals and licensed tour operator systems.*

Responsibility for regulating private sector investment on public land would rest with Parks Victoria and, where relevant, with Committees of Management.

Draft recommendation 4.5

That the Victorian Government clarify the roles and responsibilities of Parks Victoria for the administration of public land regulation and private sector access to public land. Parks Victoria should aim to become a sophisticated landlord for the parks and take the lead on:

- *identifying opportunities for private investment in tourist facilities on public land, including national parks*
- *facilitating applications to develop private tourist facilities on public land through the approvals process*
- *regulating private activities on public land to ensure compliance with the Licensed Tour Operator system and leasing policy.*

VNPA response to 4.3, 4.4, and 4.5:

The VNPA has no objection to refining and streamlining decision-making processes, as long as proper transparency and consultation are undertaken.

However, the above recommendations should all be revised to clearly accommodate a preference for developments preferably on private land, near or adjacent to parks, and certainly not within national parks and other prime conservation areas.

Importantly, it is quite inappropriate that Parks Victoria should become '*a sophisticated landlord*' as proposed in recommendation 4.5. DSE should clearly remain as landlord on behalf of the Crown and the people of Victoria.

It is very important, given the threats to Victoria's native biodiversity and ecological systems, that Parks Victoria focus increasingly on its prime role - managing the natural values of the park system. Parks Victoria already has a great range of 'extra-curricular' duties imposed on it, such as managing existing leaseholds, managing ports and jetties around the state, recreation on the Yarra and Maribyrnong rivers etc.

Parks Victoria clearly needs to return its focus to its important, and substantial, primary role - the protection of natural systems in Victoria's national park estate.

A note on aviation policy:

There are increasing plans for helicopter flights over national parks. In places like Port Campbell National Park, they already greatly impinge on the 'shipwreck coast' wilderness ambience for the majority of visitors. There is no clear policy on this growing activity which, while providing a business opportunity for some, has the capacity to impact on opportunities for other tour operators, and spoil experiences for many park visitors.

Jasper National Park in Canada is at least one national park with a clear and sensible policy in this regard. The regulation of flight paths for helicopters in Victoria is currently a very confusing process. Enlightened policy development, clear accountability, and sensible permit and flight path approval processes, are sorely needed here.

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