



NATURE CONSERVATION REVIEW: ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

Six years in the making, the VNPA's fourth Nature Conservation Review, Natural Victoria – Conservation priorities for Victoria's natural heritage, 2014 was released.

The focus of chapter 5 is environmental governance issues that underpin problems faced across all environments. Environmental governance is the system of laws, implementation mechanisms, accountability regimes, and institutional arrangements necessary for environmental protection and conservation of biodiversity. Governance is not the same as government – it also encompasses actors such as communities, businesses, and NGOs – but the focus here is primarily the Victorian government, for it is the primary administrator of the laws, policies and programs that influence people's actions in the Victorian environment.

There is a particular focus on modernising and integrating environmental laws and developing optimal institutional arrangements for environmental regulation and management. Some areas of reform essential to all environments considered in previous chapters, such as adapting to climate change, protecting threatened biodiversity and managing invasive species, are also considered. There are a range of ideas, suggestions and recommendations for consideration by the community and decision makers.

The first part of the report outlines the patterns of governance failings in Victoria. The following sections outline the priority reforms needed for environmental laws, institutional structures and processes, federal involvement in protected areas, planning, climate change adaptation, funding and knowledge.

KEY DIRECTIONS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

Victoria has the knowledge, wealth and capacity to arrest most threats to nature and restore environmental health.

But because of flawed government systems, the processes and measures to achieve environmental objectives have not yet been implemented. The first part of the report outlines the patterns of governance failings in Victoria and reviews the recommendations in various reports, including eleven Victorian Auditor General and two State of the Environment reports produced on

environmental management between 2009 and 2013

Page 243: "...there emerges a consistent pattern of failures to effectively establish and implement the processes and measures needed to achieve environmental objectives, such as comprehensive planning, meaningful target-setting, risk assessments, adequate data collection and monitoring, relevant performance reporting, robust enforcement and sufficient funding".

Key governance failing and deficiencies identified include:

- Lack of integration of laws, administration, programs and plans.
- Poor leadership and coordination.
- Weak laws and inadequate enforcement.
- Low political commitment to the environment.
- Funding is extremely inadequate, and environmental progress made under earlier reforms is slipping back.

There need to be changes to remedy these failings, including the following:

- **Modernise and integrate environmental laws.**
- **Reform institutional structures and processes**, reform how agencies and institutions are organised, and examine federal-state relations in relation to protected areas.
- **Improve planning and priorities**, particularly in the face of the anticipated impacts of climate change on natural areas.
- **Funding** – ensuring there are the resources needed to do the work required.
- **Knowledge needs** – managing nature needs good knowledge and expertise.

A new structure is needed for Victoria's environmental and sustainability agencies. These agencies should be based on the following principles:

- Lines of responsibility should be defined so that each

agency has clear objectives, functions and targets.

- Regulatory roles should be separated from policy setting and management to avoid conflicts of interest.
- Environmental regulators should be independent.
- Ecological sustainability and biodiversity conservation should be core principles in all government departments.
- Accountability should include regular reporting and independent audits.

Because local governments now have considerable environmental responsibilities, they should receive the funding and resources to implement their obligations.

Because the Commonwealth has no direct legal means to intervene when state governments disregard their management obligations or undermine the integrity of national parks, environmental groups recommend that national parks should also be protected under federal environmental laws. As well, there should be federal government funding to fund special park management programs, for works which are beyond the duty of care of individual state governments.

FUNDING

The failure to invest sufficient public funds to arrest environmental decline in Victoria is exacting enormous economic as well as environmental and social costs. There needs to be much greater recognition that the natural environment provides essential services, and directly and indirectly sustains the Victorian economy. Otherwise, future Victorians will inherit a further loss of natural capital and spiralling costs for restoration and threat mitigation.

Only a small proportion of the Victorian budget goes to support nature conservation, and government agencies are unable to meet their fundamental environmental obligations. Parks Victoria receives only 0.6% of the state budget to manage 17% of the state's land area and 5% of its marine area.

“The total cost of management of Victoria's national parks and conservation estate equates to about the cost of one cup of coffee per citizen once a month.”

– Page 45 Public Summary.

Of that budget, a significant portion is spent on metropolitan parks and on managing visitors and facilities. This means that less is allocated to conservation programs, such as pest control in rural and remote national parks.

Because knowledge of Victoria's biodiversity and how to manage it is still poor, there is a great need for funding to improve this knowledge. Funding decisions for the environment should:

- Fund core programs and not rely on external outside funding.
- Allocate guaranteed long term funding to deal with long term problems.
- Not fund programs that undermine environmental objectives.
- Allocate funding to support and train volunteers.
- Be transparent and available for public review.

This review proposes the establishment of a Victorian Biodiversity Fund to support programs necessary to build the resilience of Victoria's ecosystems, and includes a discussion of various options to fund this.

The last section looks at 'Priority Landscape Clusters': that is, indicative long term focus areas across Victoria in need of better protection. The long term focus in these area includes:

- **Completion of the reserve system on public lands.**
- **Encouraging conservation management for private lands.**
- **Creating a focus for community action.**

The review is presented in two forms: a Public Summary of 50 pages, which is an overview of the whole report, and the full report of about 300 pages and is fully referenced. It includes a consolidated list of 163 recommendations across marine, coastal, freshwater and terrestrial environments.

Background reports are found in eight appendices. Both versions of the review are available on line.