

PARK WATCH



ANDREWS GOVERNMENT CONSERVATION ACTIONS
PARK CAMPSITE BOOKINGS AND FEES
ECOLOGICAL DEBT
WESTGATE FRIENDS
CAPE SCHANCK
PROTECTING NATIVE VEGETATION
BENEFITS OF BUSHWALKING

MARCH 2015 NO 260



**VICTORIAN
NATIONAL PARKS
ASSOCIATION**
Be part of nature



Be part of nature



FORESTS FOREVER EASTER ECOLOGY CAMP

3-6 April 2015

Goongerah, East Gippsland.

For details please see back cover.

PRESIDENT Russell Costello

DIRECTOR Matt Ruchel

Level 3, 60 Leicester St, Carlton, VIC 3053

ABN 34 217 717 593

Telephone: (03) 9347 5188

Facsimile: (03) 9347 5199

E-mail: vnpa@vnpa.org.au

Web: www.vnpa.org.au

VNPA'S VISION

We share a vision of Victoria as a place with a diverse, secure and healthy natural environment cared for and appreciated by all.

EDITORIAL COMMITTEE

Matt Ruchel, Philip Ingamells, Michael Howes.

ADVERTISING

Emily Clough, Emilyc@vnpa.org.au

GETTING INVOLVED IN VNPA

Everyone can help in the conservation of Victoria's wild and beautiful places. You can:

- make a donation
- become a regular giver or member
- volunteer. You'll be welcome in the office, on a campaign or in a park
- leave a bequest to VNPA in your will.

PUBLISHING POLICY

All advertisements should be compatible with VNPA policies. Publication of an advertisement does not imply endorsement by the VNPA Inc. of the advertised product or service. The VNPA reserves the right to refuse any advertisement at any time.

Park Watch may be quoted without permission provided that acknowledgement is made. The opinions of contributors are not necessarily those of the VNPA Inc.

GUIDELINES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

You're always welcome to contact the editor to discuss ideas for articles. Phone the VNPA or email michaelh@vnpa.org.au. Articles may be submitted by email, on disk or as hard copy. Include your contact details and brief biographical information. Photos, maps and drawings are needed too. Digital photos should be 300dpi and around 8cm by 12cm.

COPY DEADLINE for June 2015 *Park Watch* is 1 May 2015.

DESIGN Mary Ferlin **PRINTING** Adams Print

FRONT COVER

We hope these brilliant everlastings near Mount Loch in the Alpine National Park symbolise the start of a new era for parks and conservation in Victoria. Photo: courtesy David Tatnall.

Park Watch ISSN 1324-4361

CONTENTS

3	From the President
3	From the Editor
4-5	Conservation initiatives for the Andrews Government
6-7	Paddling the Lower Glenelg
8-9	Park camping fees hike
10	Higher camping fees may lock families out
11	The skills we need
12-13	From grasslands to rainforests: Protecting terrestrial ecosystems
14	Lake Wishful Thinking
15	Burn target gets a welcome review
16-17	Ecological debt and deficit
18-19	Brighter future for Victoria's seas and shores
20-21	With a little help from its Friends
22	Nick Roberts reflects
23	Where are the Growlers?
24-25	In Parks: Cape Schanck – a magnificent coastline
26	Reframing the planet
27	Native vegetation protection and offsets
28	Outstanding Grampians park manager retires
28	Congratulations!
29	Thelma Grace Argall – a tribute
30-31	A place that keeps giving
32-33	The Prom – an artist's inspiration
34-35	For your mental health, get back in touch with nature
36-37	Rambles on a Monday
37	Book review: Dexter, the Courageous Koala
38	Bushwalking: Bring a Friend for Free!
38	Boneseed blitz





From the President

Is this the dawn of a new era? It seems we've been fighting forever just to protect nature and our park system against government attempts to exploit and massively under-resource them.

It's been at least four years since we had a Minister FOR the Environment! Can we now focus on trying to achieve positive things for the environment again?

The signs are good. In the first month, new Minister Lisa Neville has ended the ludicrous 'scientific' cattle-grazing trial in the Alpine National Park and moved to end the shonky last-minute deal to 'sell off' part of Point Nepean National Park with a 50+50 year private lease. Excellent work!

While in Opposition, Ms Neville also led her party skilfully to challenge and defeat the unwieldy, unworkable Native Vegetation Credit Market Bill (the 'offsets bill') last year. This bill had a multitude of complex equations for the works needed to offset any proposed clearing of native vegetation.

The warning is this. Though the government that put this appalling legislation forward is gone, the 'complexophiles' who

dreamt it up are still in the Environment Department's head office. They still have their focus on offsetting rather than protecting native vegetation, and they still seem to want the decision-making within their central control.

In this *Park Watch*, there is a great article by George Monbiot about how new offset methodology in England is allowing an ancient woodland to be destroyed for development. He rails against mechanically 'valuing' priceless natural and historic beauty. It rings true when he says: "The natural world will be reduced to a column of figures".

Sounds familiar? As in Victoria, the UK 'environmental watchdog' has set up an Environmental Bank (BushBroker?) to trade environmental works and offset environmental destruction. Ancient forests can be 'replaced' by lots of new seedlings.

In Victoria, real losses of native vegetation are mostly offset with legal promises by others not to do bad things to their own native vegetation. There is usually little or no actual physical gain in the extent or quality of native vegetation. Increasing the extent of native vegetation is not valued much at all, even when it makes remnants viable.

The now-superseded 2002 *Victoria's Native Vegetation Management – a Framework for Action* had it fundamentally right, though it also over-complicated things. It said "all native vegetation has value" and set out an on-ground process for prioritising that value. It also said that all clearing proposals should follow the three-step approach: avoid or minimise losses, then think 'offset'.

In practice, this meant: In all cases, take practical and reasonable steps to avoid clearing native vegetation, or at least minimise unavoidable losses, and only then consider offset measures.

In 2013, we moved away from this principle with computer-generated maps – valuable at a regional level but so dodgy at site scale – making the decision to clear with offsets in the majority of cases. Local offset schemes, like the innovative one by the Shire of Yarra Ranges, have been gazumped by BushBroker's centralistic ambitions.

The test will come when the promise to overhaul this flawed system is given legs. Will it be the same non-consultative, complex, centralist, secret laboratory that gave us the present scheme doing the revision, or will the task be given to a body like VEAC, with no vested interest in seeing BushBroker a financial success? • PW

Russell Costello, VNPA President



From the Editor

Welcome to the first *Park Watch* for 2015! In terms of parks and conservation, I think we're all feeling much more optimistic and energised about the future.

I'd like to thank Evelyn Feller and Jenny Norvick for their generous help with this issue, and also 'new' contributors Carlota Quinlan, Lynn Gunning, Barbara Vaughan, Gabrielle Bridge, Neil Moorhouse and Pamela Ashcroft – great to have you writing for us! Thanks too to journalists George Monbiot and Ross Gittins for allowing us to reprint their excellent articles, and to all our regular contributors.

I'm taking some leave this year, so the next (June) *Park Watch* will be edited by marine and coastal campaigner Chris Smyth, who has extensive experience with publications. Please support him by contributing stories and photos! • PW

Michael Howes

Conservation initiatives for the Andrews Government

VNPA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
MATT RUCHEL REVIEWS
THE NEW GOVERNMENT'S
ENVIRONMENT POLICIES.

The VNPA congratulates Daniel Andrews and his party on their victory in the 31 November state election. In particular we welcome Lisa Neville, the new Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water. We look forward to working constructively with the new government.

The environment policies of the new Labor Government will reverse many of the Baillieu/ Napthine Government's retrograde moves that have downgraded the protection of our unique natural areas and magnificent national parks.

The VNPA is committed to working with the new government to make sure that it does more than just reverse those backward steps. We need to make Victoria once again a leader in nature conservation, as it has been in the past.

Ten conservation actions to which the Andrews Government has committed are:

1. **Ban** cattle grazing in the Alpine National Park and River Red Gum national parks.
2. **Rule out** large-scale private development in national parks, and cancel the Victorian Government's ability to grant 99-year leases in parks.
3. **Review** lease arrangements for a hotel and spa development at the Quarantine Station (Point Nepean National Park).
4. **Review** the Coalition's flawed native vegetation regulations.



Protest against Point Nepean lease, 26 October 2014.

5. **Review** the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act, and institute a statewide biodiversity strategy to protect Victoria's habitats and wildlife.
6. **Add** the nationally significant Anglesea Heathlands to the Great Otway National Park.
7. **Develop** a new Marine and Coastal Act, and institute five-yearly State of the Bays reporting to monitor the health of our coasts, bays and waterways.
8. **Develop** a strategy to improve our riparian land and rivers, and establish a Yarra River Protection Act.
9. **Support** Trust for Nature to facilitate private land protection and rehabilitation, and support Landcare facilitators in protecting our environment.
10. **Provide** \$5 million to establish and upgrade new facilities in parks and reserves across the state, and \$19 million to build the Grampians Peaks Trail.

Some of these commitments, like a new Marine and Coastal Act, are major initiatives that will take time to develop; others, such as stopping the previous government's flawed cattle grazing 'trial', are already being carried out or are planned.

The VNPA's job, as always, will be to ensure that the government delivers on these commitments and does more than simply repair the damage, but actually improves protection and management of our natural areas.

Many things need to be done. Our recently released Nature Conservation Review lists over 200 recommendations and identifies many gaps in how we manage our natural areas. We know that not everything can be done at once, but we do have a plan – the NCR!

Unfinished business: actions required from the Andrews Government

Funding for parks: Labor's commitment of \$5 million in additional funding for parks is not nearly enough. Parks Victoria's budget, including its funding for pest plant and animal control, has been severely cut in recent years. The agency now has fewer staff than when it was created in 1996, even though the area of parks has significantly increased. Parks Victoria urgently needs extra funding, and enough staff and appropriate expertise to properly manage our park system.

Deliver a Great Forest National Park: Conservationists have been pushing for a government commitment to a new national park in Victoria's central highlands. This was the 'big ticket' conservation item of the campaign, with widespread support across the community. Labor failed to support the new park in its policy, instead proposing to 'facilitate and support' the establishment of an industry taskforce to find common ground on forestry issues.

Complete the red gum parks system: Prior to the 2010 state election the Brumby Government was on the verge of formalising the widely supported

Murray River Park as part of the historic red gum parks package. New national parks such as Barmah and Gunbower had been declared previously, and a new Murray River Park was to incorporate the smaller connecting reserves along the river from Wodonga to the SA border.

The ALP lost that election and the Coalition won office. Parks Victoria had commenced phasing out grazing licences but this was halted. Over 200 licences were returned and the cows went back in. The linking Murray River Park is unfinished business, and it could be upgraded to have better protection as a regional park or similar.

The previous government dropped its questionable 'ecological thinning' trial on the eve of the election, and the ALP has agreed not to revive this.

Work for better protection of the Wellsford, Wombat and Strathbogie forests: Strong local campaigns were undertaken for better protection of these forests, but Labor has failed to commit to any reviews of public land use and baulked at launching VEAC inquiries into the forests. In a last-minute move before the election, the Coalition handed control of native forests in western Victoria to its commercial forestry arm VicForests. The details are still unclear

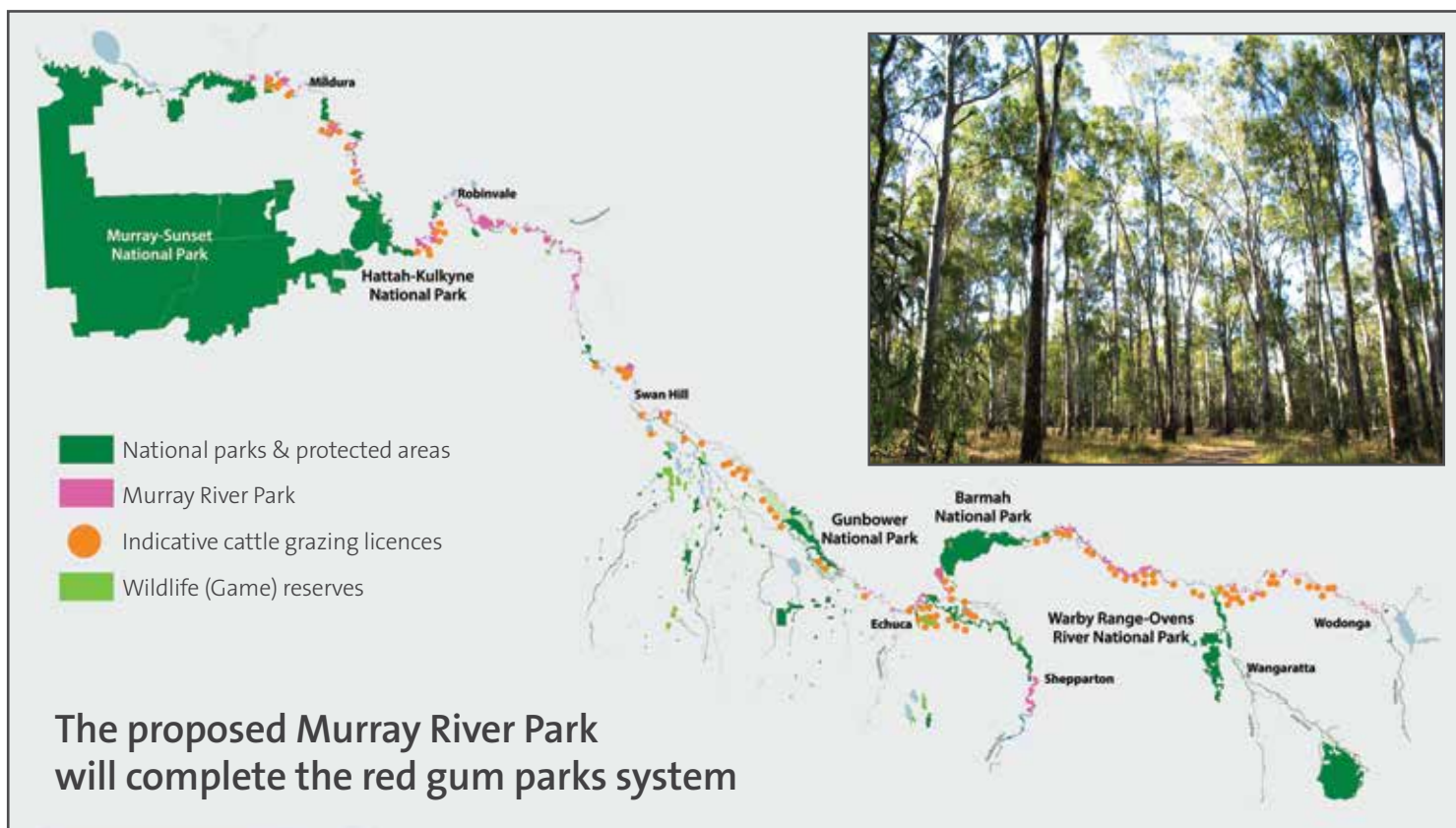
but this destructive action must be reversed urgently.


Mount Stirling: In July last year the VNPA launched a VCAT challenge against a planned road across Mount Stirling. It was first proposed by the Mount Buller and Mount Stirling Alpine Resort Management Board in 2008, put on hold in 2010 and then re-launched in 2013.

This road, which essentially goes nowhere, would destroy high conservation value alpine forest and threatened species habitat, and appears to be of limited value in an emergency.

A week before the planning application was to be heard at VCAT, former planning minister Matthew Guy 'called it in', effectively shutting down public scrutiny. We understand the application has not yet been approved and is with new Planning Minister Richard Wynne.

The VNPA has asked repeatedly for some justification for the road's value in the case of an emergency, but we have heard nothing substantial from its proponents. We are asking that this application be rejected once and for all, and that the government consider adding Mount Stirling to the national park estate. • PW





Paddling the Lower Glenelg

VNPA MEMBER **LYNN GUNNING** IS AN ACCREDITED EXERCISE PHYSIOLOGIST AND FREELANCE WRITER WHO LOVES BIKE RIDING, BUSHWALKING AND CANOEING, AND ENJOYING AND ADVOCATING FOR AUSTRALIA'S GREAT OUTDOORS AND ITS FLORA AND FAUNA.

PHOTO: LYNN GUNNING

Canoeing the Glenelg.

A wildlife and relaxation paradise, Lower Glenelg National Park, about 380 km west of Melbourne, is a hidden treasure offering great hiking, boating, camping and paddling opportunities.

The perfect way to take in the surroundings is by paddling at a leisurely rate along all or part of the 46 km stretch of the Glenelg River within the national park. With elusive platypuses, koalas, shingle-back lizards and birds, plus dedicated canoe camping sites, it's the place for a break that's both incredibly tranquil and very invigorating.

You don't have to own all the paddling gear needed as it's easily hired from local operators. Ross and Marg Atkins run Paestan Canoe Hire and kitted us out with boats, paddles, personal flotation devices and barrels to put all our gear in (see www.canoehire.com.au).

They also dropped us off and picked us up from our entry and exit points. The only hassle was navigating our way through the new Parks Victoria booking system, which has individuals and school groups alike scratching their heads and sometimes giving up in utter frustration.

Booking blues

Parks Victoria introduced a new campsite booking system with increased fees in 2014 and it hasn't been smooth going for the park since then. The first time I used the system I found it unwieldy and hard to navigate when you need to change campsites each night. The key issues are:

1. The system is designed for stays of several nights and does not easily cater for one-night stays and daily changes to site bookings.
2. One site can accommodate up to four people. So camping areas with six sites can take up to 24 campers. However, many confused users book one site for each person. Thus in campsites with four sites you may find only four people instead of 16.
3. Groups of more than 16 people are excluded (even though some sites can take up to 24 people).

Ross has noticed his business has dropped 10-15% in the last two years. Meanwhile campsites along the river that were once only available by ballot over the very popular summer period are now often vacant.

"The lack of campers with permits has created a vacuum, and unfortunately, the thing that is filling that vacuum is illegal camping," says Ross.

"Where there were once six or eight other campers keeping an eye on unruly groups, asking them to quieten down or pick up their rubbish, now there's nobody to moderate bad behaviour."

Then there's the significant increase in prices for hiking and canoeing, to \$10 per night per person and \$50 per night for vehicle sites. By comparison, a family can stay at a nearby private caravan park with all amenities for around \$35 per night.

School groups have been particularly hamstrung. First they have to use the cumbersome booking system, with bookings required for each individual student. Not much fun when you're taking 40 kids. Teachers are able to email details through, but this is not seamless or foolproof.

Schools are also being charged twice as much as they used to be, despite some of them doing volunteer maintenance while they are in the park. Imagine the increased overall costs if this volunteer labor were dissuaded from continuing to visit!



Clockwise from top left: Calling on a koala; Superb Fairy-wrens are abundant along the river; Shingleback lizard; 'Wedding cake' formation, Princess Margaret Rose Caves; tent with a view (and kangaroo); echidna at work.



PHOTOS: LYNN GUNNING

We chose to paddle upstream from Dry Creek to Pritchards over four days. With limited canoe camps, the length of each leg is largely determined by the capability of the paddlers and the availability of the next camping site.

All campsites have drop toilets and picnic tables. With a large group of eight people of differing abilities, we opted for two short days of around 6 km each to start with. This gave us plenty of time to visit the Princess Margaret Rose Caves on the afternoon of the first day.

This 90 minute side-trip offers a welcome break and an intriguing look at some great limestone formations. The caves are leased from Parks Victoria by a commercial operator and car camping is available on site.

With an international guest in our group, the highlight of our first night at Lasletts campsite was a local wombat feeding away happily only five metres from our tent.

The second leg to Pattersons canoe camp took less than 90 minutes and allowed

for a sleep-in for those still unwinding from the rat race. As shelter is available at this campsite, we were able to keep dry amid passing showers and prepare a gourmet meal – all the while watching kangaroos hop down to feed by the river, or the resident possum sneak out after dinner to try his luck at securing some easy pickings.

The shorter paddle leg also gave us the opportunity to hike a section of the Great South West Walk, where we spotted an echidna foraging for ants.

Day three is a longer 12 km paddle to one of my favorite sites: Georges Rest. We stopped along the way for lunch and explored another car camping site (where we discovered a tiger snake). We had the campsite to ourselves and spent some of the afternoon cooling off in the river, later to fall asleep listening to the somewhat intimidating grunting calls of the koalas.

Our final day was an 8 km paddle to our pickup point at Pritchards. We saw two koalas in the trees along the riverbanks, and one Azure Kingfisher.

Our international guest was surprised and thrilled to be able to see so many native animals in their natural habitats along the river – something he had never experienced before.

As we disembarked from the canoes we couldn't take the contented grins from our faces. Completely free from mobile phone coverage for the duration of the paddle, we'd been able to truly connect with each other and with the inspiring environment around us. • PW

The Great South West Walk

A section of the 250 km Great South West Walk (which starts and finishes at Portland) hugs the river for three days of walking and is very popular with hiking groups. From Moleside camp, hikers have dedicated campsites at Battersbys, Murrells, Pattersons and Simpsons, and can walk the 50 km through to Nelson in three or four days. More information is available at www.greatsouthwestwalk.com

Park camping fees hike

VNPA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
MATT RUCHEL LOOKS AT RECENT
INCREASES IN CAMPING AND
ACCOMMODATION FEES IN
PARKS, WHICH ARE UPSETTING
CAMPER, HIKERS, GREY
NOMADS AND MANY OTHERS.

In July 2014, the Napthine Government introduced a new fee structure and a new on-line/ phone booking system for camping in Victoria's parks.

The new fee regime increases the amount paid for campsites, expands the number of parks in which fees are applied, and requires campers to book sites in advance on line or by phone.

For overnight hikes, large groups, a few campsites such as Glenelg NP canoe sites, and successful bookings involving a ballot or advanced booking, there is also a booking fee.

The booking system seems very confusing and the schedule of fees is difficult to follow. And when you ring, you often have to wait quite a while to talk to anyone.

Fees vary according to the facilities provided at sites. Those for 'basic/very basic' camp grounds are \$13 a night for up to six people, and those with 'very high' standard facilities are \$59.20 a night for up to eight people at peak periods (\$65.90 for a powered site at the Prom).

Many people are happy to make a contribution to the costs of managing parks, but some have complained to the VNPA that they dislike the booking system, particularly in remote areas.

If you want to stay in a park but don't have access to the internet, or there's no mobile coverage, or you want to book by phone and it's after hours, you won't be able to book a site.



PHOTO: PROM CAMPERS ASSOCIATION



PHOTO: GEOFF DURHAM

Not a good welcome to a park.

Heavy-handed

Some have also complained about what appears to be non-welcoming and heavy-handed wording on park signs, which may deter some people from visiting or staying in the parks. The signs are also visually intrusive and detract from the natural bush setting.

'Warrnambool Bushwalker's' comment in *Bushwalking Victoria News* highlights the fee issue.

Rises in camping fees at Victorian national parks could be counter-productive, the Warrnambool Bushwalkers group says. Group spokesman Lothar Satzke said some of the big increases, such as the \$34 a night charge to camp at the Borough Hut campground near Halls Gap, could discourage people from camping [in parks] and reduce government revenue. "At \$34 a night, it's cheaper to stay at a Youth Hostel, where I can have a hot shower," Mr Satzke said.

So what has driven the increase in camping and accommodation fees in parks? Is it 'competitive neutrality', i.e. ensuring the government isn't competing 'unfairly' with private providers like caravan parks? Is the increase justified and fair, or counterproductive?

Key questions include the current pricing system for 'special services' (such as roofed accommodation, guided walks and powered sites), the fairness or otherwise of the fees, and whether they disadvantage visitors or discourage the use of parks.

Drivers

There seem to be four key drivers for introducing the new fee structure:

- recovering costs
- creating a source of revenue independent of government funding
- claims it makes for a fairer system for camping in public reserves as it 'provides affordable, convenient and certain site bookings'
- Parks Victoria is broke and can't see any other way of raising the money.

According to the Regulatory Impact Statement accompanying the new fee regime, in 2011-12 the cost to Parks Victoria of the camping and accommodation facilities in parks and reserves under its management was estimated at \$12.3 million, whereas the revenue earned was \$4.2 million, an apparent \$8.1 million shortfall.

The Statement used these figures to estimate dramatically increased costs of \$17.8 million a year on average over



PHOTO: PROM CAMPERS ASSOCIATION

A family now has to pay \$414.40 to camp for a week in summer at Tidal River. Previously it was \$259.70.

the period 2013-14 to 2022-23, leaving a shortfall of \$11.3 million per annum. According to Parks Victoria, this is neither fair nor sustainable.

Based on these estimates, the total cost of maintaining camping and accommodation facilities is around 7% of the annual Parks Victoria budget. And this does not take into account that about 40% of Parks Victoria's funding already comes from a direct levy of Melbourne residents through the annual Parks Charge on rates bills (though technically this money can only be spent on parks in the metropolitan area).

Department of Treasury and Finance guidelines seem to indicate that there are possible exceptions to the cost recovery rules, such as where costly charging could undermine other objectives. For example, preventive health care helps individuals as well as the state by reducing costs of hospital treatment.

The same argument could be applied to camping in or use of parks. The health and wellbeing benefits of getting out into nature have been extensively documented, but do not seem to have been taken into account in assessing the costs and benefits of park camping and accommodation.

In addition, cost recovery principles are not applied consistently, particularly in relation to the environment. The on-going public subsidy of native forestry is a classic example, as is the fraught debate about a price on carbon.

VNPA policy

The VNPA has a long-held policy that parks should be funded from general revenue, and that there should not be fees for entry into public reserves, although fees may be acceptable where 'special services' are provided.

The VNPA policy also contains the following provisos:

- revenue raised in parks through fees should be paid into a fund set up for that purpose, and expenditure from that fund should be based on priorities for the statewide park system
- fees should be scaled so as not to attain levels which would encourage avoidance of payment, nor discourage visits to the parks on which they are levied
- fees should not be set at a level which excludes disadvantaged people from parks
- camping areas should be maintained to a high standard so the public can 'see their money at work'.

Personally, I think some of the well-serviced accommodation options and powered sites are probably 'special services'. Only time will tell if they are correctly priced.

The bigger issue for me is the other 521 'very basic' camp sites, used by the largest number of people. The vast majority of users of camping areas (over 550,000 visitor nights annually, or 75% of all overnight stays in parks) stay in 'basic' and 'very basic' camping areas.

To my mind the parks system, and the use of it, should be considered an essential service, like education. It is something provided by the government for all citizens, and everybody should be encouraged to use it.

The increased fees and the new booking system seem to be more about business planning for Parks Victoria and picking the easiest ways of developing new revenue sources, rather than about assessing the broader societal case and dealing with the chronic under-funding of the park system. • PW

For more information, see www.parkweb.vic.gov.au/visit/book-your-stay/changes-to-camping-and-accommodation-fees

Camping fees compared – a weekend in the Otways

Parks Victoria camping areas:

pit or composting toilets, shared fireplace, no showers.
Cost per night: \$47.80 (including \$10 booking fee) for two people.
Total for two-night weekend: \$95.60

Bimbi Park (commercial camping):

flush toilets, showers, full use of other facilities.
Cost per night: \$35 (peak periods), \$20 (off-peak) for two people.
\$10/\$8 for each extra adult. Total for two-night weekend: \$70 (peak), \$40 (off-peak).

Prinetown Recreation Reserve:

flush toilets, showers, coin laundry, undercover barbecue. No bookings.
Cost per night: \$20 for two people, \$5 for each extra adult in same car.
Total for two-night weekend: \$40.

See Glen Tempest's Open Spaces Publishing website www.osp.com.au for more analysis of the camping fee increases in the blog 'Healthy Parks Wealthy People'.

Higher camping fees may lock families out

CONCERNED ABOUT PARKS VICTORIA'S NEW CAMPING FEES AND BOOKING SYSTEM, THE PROM CAMPERS ASSOCIATION (PCA) WAS KEEN TO SEE HOW CAMPING IN WILSONS PROMONTORY NP WOULD BE AFFECTED. ASSOCIATION SECRETARY CARLOTA QUINLAN REPORTS.

Tidal River campground is always crowded from Christmas Day until the Australia Day weekend. It's when families enjoy the Prom in traditional ways.

But this year, changes were obvious. Many regular small groups and families were absent. Some campsites were overcrowded, with two caravans or multiple tents on a site.

Campers' cars were parked in the Norman Bay carpark or on road verges. Some campervans stayed overnight in day carparks.

All this put extra pressure on the park. Vegetation around campsites was damaged by campers using off-site areas for seating, tents and trailers.

There was also more than usual use of free camping at the Yanakie Hall (outside the park).

These changes can be attributed, at least in part, to the increased camping fees and changed fee structure.

In January 2014 the minimum fee for an unpowered campsite at Tidal River (maximum of three people and one car) was \$32.80 per night.

In January 2015 the same campsites cost a flat rate of \$59.20 per night.



Tidal River campsite possibly damaged by excessive numbers of people using the site.

Traditionally, the Prom has been a place for budget family holidays. Formerly a family of four (two adults and two children) would have paid \$37.10 per night (\$259.70 per week).

With the new price structure, the same family had to pay \$59.20 per night. That is an extra \$22.10 per night, or \$154.70 a week. A week's camping now costs them \$414.40. This is likely to have locked out many families.

It also discriminates against smaller families or groups. The flat fee covers from one to eight people. A sole parent with two children, onechild families, couples and single travellers now all have to pay the same flat fee. This is totally inequitable.

Campsite application forms ask whether you need a small, medium or large site but you don't know what size site you're getting until the full fee has been paid.

Applicants are informed that they have a site and that the full payment has been withdrawn from their credit card account. The allocated site number is given but the flat fee has already been paid.

As site sizes vary, the allocated site may not suit a family's or group's needs. But cancellation is expensive. It looks as if people made do, and overcrowding occurred.

This summer it was obvious that people were trying to minimise the cost of their holiday by squeezing more people on to a site.

Extra people per site results in more pressure on showers, toilet facilities, the store, campsites and car parking. It also generates greater noise levels, alcohol consumption, rubbish and recycling, and demand for fresh water.

This January the potential pressure was fortunately alleviated by the extremely windy and cool weather, unusual even for the Prom, which drove people inside or to arrive late or vacate sites early.

Campers discussed these issues at the PCA's annual public meeting at Tidal River.

It was widely agreed that a national park camping holiday, or one in basic roofed accommodation, should remain affordable for all. The price structure should cater for the less well-off as well as those who can afford to pay more.

Suggestions included:

- Restructure the payment so the minimum charge is for a small group – say two or three people. The nearby campground at Walkerville charges \$33 for two people plus \$5 for each child and \$10 for each person over 14.
- Revisit the fee increase and revise it to reflect only a modest increase, in line with the CPI. • PW

The skills we need

PHIL INGAMELLS TELLS A STORY OF ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE.

I was in a tin shed at the back of one of those towering city buildings, talking to a man called Jack Douglas. It was 1988, and Jack and the shed were both showing their age.

I'd gone there because Jack, generally regarded then as the pre-eminent Victorian geologist, had agreed to take me through the 600 million years or so of the geological formation of the Grampians.

As we talked among the dusty cabinets with their multitude of marvellous rocks, a Japanese gentleman with a suitcase arrived at the door. He was pointed towards the makings of a cup of tea in the corner, while Jack kept on with his story of the layering of sands, massive uplifts and aeons of erosion.

I had to ask what the Japanese man was doing there, and it turned out he had just arrived for the 3rd International Organization of Palaeobotany conference, which Jack was running in Melbourne that week.

I felt a bit awkward that Jack had left his distinguished guest in the corner while he continued with me, but he wasn't fazed at all.

I had come for advice because I was gathering information for an audio-visual at the new Grampians National Park visitor centre. Jack was adamant that there were few things more important than community education; the conference and his colleague could wait a while.

But there was another question bothering me: Why had the department parked him in this old shed out the back?



PHOTO: PHIL INGAMELLS

Sensitive visitor access at Cape Conran, where Aboriginal middens are common. Most aspects of park management require expertise and experience.

"Ah!" he said, "now that's an interesting story."

He proceeded to tell me that when the Geological Survey of Victoria started, it consisted of a number of young geologists, of whom he was one. They combed the wilds of Victoria, and accumulated the knowledge necessary to advise any number of industries and land management agendas.

But the administrative side of things was burdening them, so they employed a secretary to look after the phone and the paperwork. She soon hired an assistant, and in time the administration section grew to occupy a ten-storey building.

Eventually, poor Jack and the few remaining geologists were relegated to the shed.

Things may not be quite so dire in Victoria's land management departments, but there are clear parallels.

It's hard to get figures on these things, and expertise is hard to quantify, but I seem to remember that when I was first employed by the National Parks Service in 1985, most of the professional staff were biologists or other scientists (either by training or

experience), and everyone seemed to know pretty much what to do – or if not, who to ask.

And now? Well ... take the making of the management plan for Victoria's Alpine National Park.

In the early 1990s, when the first plan was written, a team of four park staff was given the job. They drew on their extensive knowledge and experience, consulted widely and produced a very good plan.

In 2008 the plan was up for revision, but it seems the expertise necessary to put a management plan together was by then scarce in Parks Victoria. Considerable management knowledge was there, but it was thin on the ground.

Seven years later, all that has emerged is a largely dysfunctional draft. More worrying, the vacuum left by the agency's lack of skills, and a seeming absence of any clear sense of purpose, invited ill-informed and damaging political interference – the very thing a park plan should be designed to avoid.

Proper funding for park management is urgently needed, but it has to be married to a concerted effort to rebuild the expertise we need to look after Victoria's finest natural areas. • PW

From grasslands to rainforests

Protecting terrestrial ecosystems

EVELYN FELLER SUMMARISES THE THIRD CHAPTER OF THE VNPA'S NATURE CONSERVATION REVIEW, COVERING VICTORIA'S TERRESTRIAL (LAND) ECOSYSTEMS.

For more detail, see www.vnpa.org.au/page/publications/nature-conservation-review/nature-conservation-review-2014

Victoria's 23 million hectares of diverse landscapes are inhabited by a multitude of different life forms.

Australia is recognised as one of the world's megadiverse countries. On the 3% of its land area that Victoria occupies are some 80,000 to 100,000 species – half of the nation's bird species, more than a quarter of its mammals and lichens, about a fifth of its vascular plants.

More than 500 species are unique to Victoria, many yet to be identified. Many are significant for ecosystem services such as carbon storage and pollination.

About 17% of Victoria is protected in the national park and conservation system. Outside parks, small areas of private land (totalling about 100,000 hectares) are securely protected and are very important in areas where there are few or no parks.

Threats and priorities

Victoria's terrestrial ecosystems have suffered severe losses. More than 80 species are extinct and over 1000 threatened. Mammals have suffered the greatest losses: 19 species are extinct and another 19 threatened. These losses affect many ecosystem functions, with consequences for forest health, vegetation structure and soil recovery.

With less than half the land retaining original vegetation, major challenges lie ahead to avert further degradation and loss of biodiversity, and restore health to Victoria's landscapes.

Climate change is already increasing the extremes of drought and fire. We need to do

as much as possible now to mitigate threats, foster resilience and facilitate adaptation.

National park and conservation system

Expanding the national park and conservation system is more important than ever. About three-quarters of Victoria's subregions remain poorly protected. The VNPA has identified five priority clusters for expanding protection: the South West, central Victoria, Melbourne Metro and Catchments, Gippsland Plains and Strzeleckis, and East Gippsland.

Because many priority ecosystems are on private land, strategies like conservation covenants must be used to protect ecosystems outside parks. Unfortunately the capacity of national park managers to protect parks adequately has been compromised in recent years by government pressures and actions.

Recommendations

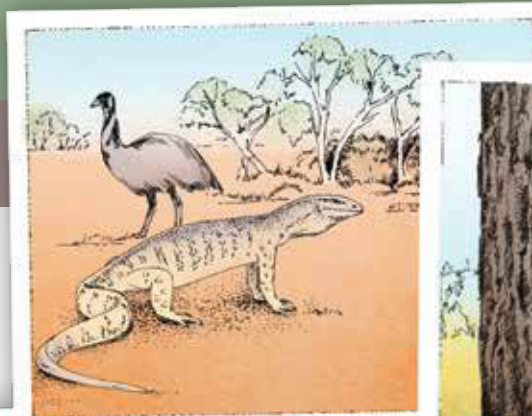
- Commission the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) to investigate how most effectively to achieve a comprehensive, adequate and representative national park and conservation system in Victoria.

- Upgrade protection for conservation reserves by transferring them to the National Parks Act.
- Establish a fund for purchasing high priority lands for addition to the park estate.
- Strengthen measures and incentives to support conservation on private land.
- Increase the scientific research, policy development and management planning skills of park agency staff.

Vegetation protection

With more than half the state cleared of native vegetation, and much of the rest degraded, the priority must be to protect what remains, reverse degrading processes and restore high-priority areas.

The previous government severely undermined protection of native vegetation but the Andrews Government has undertaken to reform vegetation clearing regulations. It is critical to protect remnant vegetation; there are many problems with offsetting, and it does not halt vegetation loss.



Recommendations

- Establish new native vegetation laws with an independent regulator to oversee management of native vegetation, and to enforce and administer offset schemes.
- Revert to the statewide objective of 'net gain' and reinstate the steps of 'avoid, minimise, and (only then) offset'.
- Improve the offsets framework to deliver genuine conservation gains.
- Develop a state biolinks plan to enhance landscape connectivity.

Stewardship and restoration

Victorians face an immense restoration task. Thousands of landholders will need motivation and support to manage their land better for conservation. Victoria has been a leader in ecomarket schemes in which landholders can be paid for protecting biodiversity.

Protection of restored habitats will only occur with mechanisms like conservation covenants. Though many Victorians are engaged in Landcare and other restoration projects, it is important to evaluate the success of these programs.

Government support for biolink projects which connect areas of high-quality intact vegetation, and for supporting landholders to manage land better for conservation, is essential.

Recommendations

- Expand and strengthen the use of ecomarkets such as BushTender to deliver real conservation gains.
- Review the Land for Wildlife program to see how it can be expanded and improved.

Forests

Because native forests are severely depleted, it is time for industry to move to plantation forestry. There are already extensive plantations to meet demand.

Despite being heavily subsidised, forestry on public lands incurs substantial economic losses. Current subsidies for public land logging should be removed to make existing plantation timber use more economically attractive.

Forestry laws are poorly enforced and environmental assessments not required in new logging areas. Removal of fallen wood impacts on biodiversity; demand for firewood should also be met from plantations. Victoria could be a world leader in protecting forest-based carbon stores to mitigate climate change.

Recommendations

- Transition Victoria's wood products industry from native forests to plantations for woodchip, pulp and paper products in the next five years, and for sawlogs within the next ten, with industry assistance and regional development packages.
- Immediately ban logging in western Victoria, and stop logging in areas of high conservation value such as Leadbeater's Possum habitat in the central highlands.
- Apply the federal Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act to all relevant forestry activities.

Fire management

The arbitrary state burning target of 5% of public land annually is not based on sound science and such burning may not be the best option for reducing risks to life and property. Other options for protection should be considered and evaluated. Research is needed to identify ecologically appropriate fire regimes for the full range of biodiversity.

Extent to which Victoria's ecological vegetation classes are protected (as percentage of the NCR's reserve targets)

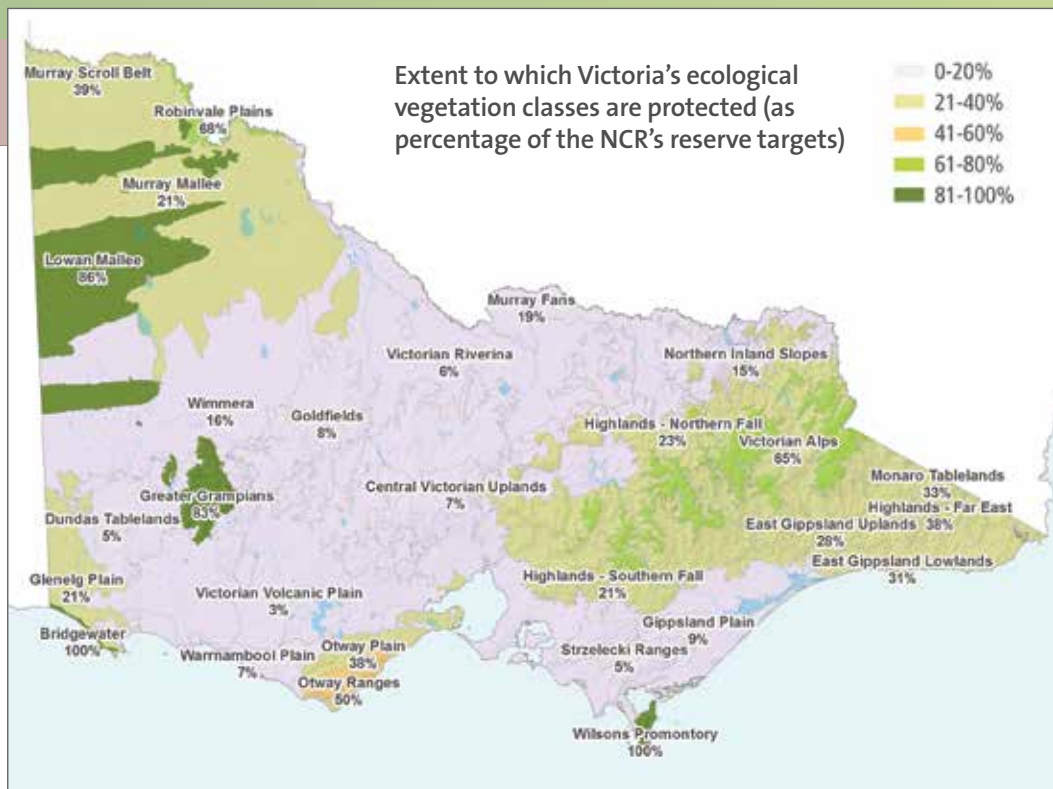
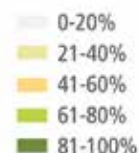


IMAGE: NCR

Recommendations

- Assess the need for prescribed burning programs at a local level in the context of other more useful safety measures.
- Prioritise fuel reduction to areas critical for public safety and beneficial to wildlife.
- Replace any annual statewide target for prescribed burning by a risk-based approach.
- Apply strong planning rules and building codes in bushfire-prone areas to avoid placing homes and people at risk and reduce the need to remove native vegetation.

Invasive species

Victoria's already dire invasive species problems will worsen unless there is substantial reform of laws, policies and programs to prevent the introduction of new harmful species.

Recommendations

- Strengthen biosecurity legislation about harmful invasive species.
- Establish regional weed committees comprising local government, community representatives and land managers.
- Develop training and certification for all workers involved in weed control.
- Reclassify deer as a pest species and implement control programs for both deer and feral horses. • PW

Right: The current leaking tailings dam at the headwaters of the Tambo river. It is proposed to extend the dam wall to an additional 25 metres in height. The dam is expected to do the impossible: it must protect the toxic tailings for at least a thousand years.

Lake Wishful Thinking

SHOULD WE PRETEND THAT A LEAKING TAILINGS DAM WON'T HARM THE TAMBO RIVER AND THE GIPPSLAND LAKES? PHIL INGAMILLS LOOKS AT GIPPSLAND'S SOMEWHAT PERILOUS LAKE ST BARBARA.

In February 2006, having spent around \$7 million of taxpayers' money trying to fix up an unstable tailings dam abandoned by a failed copper and zinc mining enterprise, the Department of Primary Industries was moved to ask the Register of Geographic Names to call the dam 'Lake St Barbara'.

Among the reasons listed for the naming were that the dam would sit at the headwaters of the Tambo River for a very long time, and that, as it no longer played a part in mining activity, it should not be referred to as a tailings dam.

What the department failed to mention to the honourable place names authority was that the dam would hold 700,000 tonnes of toxic tailings for at least a thousand years, that it was still leaking highly acidic waste, and that there was no way to guarantee its long-term stability.

The department was, at that stage, right in its expectation that the dam would not be re-used. When a new company, Independence Group, recently applied to re-open and expand the old copper and zinc mine, the Lake St Barbara tailings dam remained exempt from the mining licence area.

It wasn't exempt from Independence Group's expectations, however – it was central to their plans for handling the new mine's waste. Indeed, they plan to raise the dam wall to a height of 45 metres and store up to 7 million tonnes of toxic waste, around ten times the volume held by the original dam.

The waste must remain covered by two metres of water for at least a thousand years. That, frankly, is impossible.

For a start, an independent GHD report has pointed out that the membrane (the industrial film used to keep the earth and rock wall impermeable) used in the original dam will only last for around 30 years. And the somewhat improved membrane planned for the dam wall extension has a lifetime of only 100-200 years. Neither of them can be replaced or repaired.

And in the lifetime of the dam there will inevitably be many ten-year droughts which will evaporate the crucial protective water cover.

There's more. The GHD report listed 67 cases where important information from Independence Group on how the tailings dam will be managed long-term was either missing or inadequate. So, what happens if the mining company does its business and goes west like the last company, leaving a serious toxic legacy threatening the Tambo River and the Gippsland Lakes for generations to come?

The mining operation has now received federal approval and, shortly before last year's election, Victoria's then Planning



PHOTO: LOUISE CRISP



PHOTO: CBC KAMLOOPS

The tailings dam for Canada's Mount Pollie mine failed catastrophically last year. The planned rickety tailings dam for Independence Group's Stockman Mine could bring a situation like this to the Tambo River and the Gippsland Lakes.

Minister Matthew Guy gave his approval. In his assessment he claimed that no objections had been raised over the location of the tailings dam, but that is fundamentally false.

The Gippsland Environment Group (which has been leading this fight), the VNPA and others made strong written submissions and presentations to the investigative panel about the inadequacies of the dam and many other issues.

Mr Guy also claimed that a post-closure trust fund of only \$5.5 million would account for catastrophic failure of the dam. But the report he referenced for that estimate actually recommended a \$264 million bond. Then, in his media announcement, he even got muddled about what the mine was mining!

The saving grace is that the tailings dam (or Lake St Barbara if you're so inclined) remains technically outside the mining approvals so far. And that, we are quite sure, is where it should stay.

We implore the Victorian Environment Minister, the Planning Minister, and the Minister for Energy and Resources to look very carefully at the long-term safety of Gippsland's waterways, and deny final approval for the Stockman Mine. • PW

A 'fuel reduction burn' in the Fryers Ranges, Central Victoria, where there was little fuel in the first place. Some burns in this forest type actually increase the fuel load.

Burn target gets a welcome review

PHIL INGAMIELLS BACKGROUNDS THE VEXED 'BURN 5% OF PUBLIC LAND EACH YEAR' ISSUE.

Since Black Saturday, for very good reason, the way we manage fire has been one of the most earnest issues occupying the minds of Victoria's land managers.

At its heart is an apparently unsolvable issue. On days of severe fire weather, conflagrations can cause terrible damage and loss of life across the state.

Yet the stuff that fuels those fires is our natural heritage, the tens of thousands of species that 500 million years of terrestrial evolution has left us with.

There are no easy answers, and simplistic solutions just don't cut the mustard.

The Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, set up to investigate fire management in Victoria after Black Saturday, was by far the most exhaustive inquiry into fire management we have seen.

But one of its recommendations has remained contentious: the recommendation to burn 5% (390,000ha) of public land each year for fuel reduction.

The Commission believed that the important issue of fuel management required an easily measured target that would make the department clearly accountable to the people of Victoria.

But in doing so, it skewed fire management programs in ways that have led to a less effective burn program, and unnecessary impacts on Victoria's already struggling natural systems.

Since the 1930s, when control burns were first recorded, a fuel reduction burn of 390,000ha has been achieved only once, in 1981, and that was almost certainly due to the foresters' habit of

burning the ridge-tops of eastern Victoria's forests, and then counting the whole area as being fuel-reduced.

So it's not surprising that our land managers have been putting burns into remote areas like the Mallee and far east Gippsland, where large areas are more easily burnt.

There has been less incentive to perform the crucial smaller, more resource-intensive burns around townships and settlements, as they contribute little to the target.

And in some cases, such as some of the Box and Ironbark forests of central Victoria, woodlands with little undergrowth have been burnt, only to create an almost impenetrable growth of highly flammable coffee-bush (the indigenous 'Chinese scrub'). That made no sense at all.

With an increase in bushfires, almost certainly due to climate change, and the over-enthusiastic burn program, there has now most probably been more fire in the Victorian landscape than at any time in the past 50,000 years.

DEPI's last report on the burn program points out that half of Victoria's native vegetation is below its 'minimum tolerable fire interval', meaning that any significant fire in most of Victoria's public land could seriously compromise the health of our ecosystems.

We have few long-unburnt areas left, and many species depend on them.

So we welcome the announcement by new Environment Minister, Lisa Neville, that the Inspector-General for Emergency Management will conduct an inquiry into whether the target for bushfire fuel management should be hectare-based, or based on the capacity for bushfire risk reduction.

Importantly, the Commission's own Independent Monitor has already pointed out that the target was unachievable and expensive, and compromised good planning.

DEPI (now DELWP) has also already done considerable work in assessing and planning risk-based fuel management. Hopefully, the hectare target will now be shelved.

The next step will be to greatly improve planning for fuel reduction programs, and assess them along with the many other programs that improve public safety. We need a program to encourage people living in vulnerable areas to install their own approved bushfire shelter.

And we need to improve our capacity for rapid attack. We are already quite good at this, but more aircraft and training can mean we stop more fires at their source.

That's good for asthma sufferers, good for the wine industry, good for tourism, a relief for hard-pressed CFA volunteers and, crucially, good for public safety.

And, yes, it's also good for our long-suffering natural areas. • PW



PHOTO: PHIL INGAMIELLS

Ecological debt and deficit

MATT RUCHEL LOOKS AT THE URGENT NEED FOR BETTER FUNDING FOR NATURE AND PARKS.

The current catchcry about 'debt and deficit disasters', usually followed by a statement that future generations will be condemned to paying off our debt, is often heard from politicians.

But it's probably better applied to the natural environment. The damage we do now, and past damage, does indeed create a burden for future generations, not just in the quality of the environment they inherit but also in the costs of managing and (heaven forbid) repairing it.

The natural environment directly and indirectly sustains the Victorian economy and society – as the basis for industries such as tourism, fishing and primary production, and by providing a multitude of ecosystem services.

Costs and values

Failures to maintain Victoria's 'natural capital' have exacted an enormous financial cost, seen in the billions of dollars spent trying to rescue the Murray-Darling system, mitigate salinity, restore vegetation and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Yet there is far from sufficient investment of public funds to arrest environmental decline, condemning future Victorians to spiralling costs for restoration and threat mitigation.

So how much do we spend on the natural environment – and how much should we? And what do we gain from it?

A 2002-03 valuation found that the gross value to the Victoria economy from the use of public lands was about \$3.5 billion, and the net value about \$2.5 billion. The economic benefits came primarily from the more than 110 million visits each year to Victoria's national parks, beaches and piers

(worth \$1.5 billion), and from resource harvesting and extraction (\$1.8 billion), mainly from the use of water for irrigation and urban purposes.

Parks Victoria estimates that the park system annually generates \$1.02 billion through park tourism (overnight visitors attributed to parks), \$330 million worth of water services and \$180 million of avoided health costs.

A recent study by the Victorian Coastal Council found that the annual value of Victoria's non-commercial coastal ecosystem services (\$8.4 billion) was similar to that of commercial coastal activities (\$9.8 billion).

Numerous auditor-general reports and similar assessments have found that because of insufficient funding, government agencies are unable to meet many fundamental environmental obligations.

According to a 2010 audit, invasive species threats in national parks will

escalate if resource constraints are not addressed, and relying on short-term funding to address a long-term problem is detrimental to effective management.

Threats

Another audit in 2011 found that the environment department had not allocated sufficient resources to plan for or respond to marine biosecurity incidents, and that dedicated funding for managing marine parks had been used for other activities.

Only a small proportion of the Victorian budget goes to support nature conservation, at a level that is far from proportionate to the value of ecosystem services and the resources needed to restore biodiversity.

For example, funding in 2012-13 for Parks Victoria – including from the state government budget, the Parks and Reserves Trust and other sources – was about \$260 million, equivalent to 0.6% of the state budget, or just \$45 per Victorian per year.



Above: Broom is a serious weed in the Alpine National Park and other parks.



Left: There are thousands of Sambar Deer in Victoria's parks and they cause significant environmental damage.

PHOTO: PARKS VICTORIA

PHOTO: YUSUF IJSELDIJK, FLICKR CREATIVE COMMONS



PHOTO: VNPA

Above: Damaged signs and other facilities in parks are the result of inadequate funding and staff levels.

Below: Bandicoot taken by a fox. Ongoing pest control programs are vital to protect native species.



PHOTO: VNPA (JULIE KIRKWOOD)

Environmental standards should not be compromised for the sake of an agency saving money. OMBUDSMAN VICTORIA



PHOTO: WWW.FREEIMAGES.COM

The Twelve Apostles, Port Campbell NP. Putting a charge on visiting Victoria's national parks is sometimes suggested as a way of raising revenue.

This is for managing some 18% of the state's land area and 5% of its marine waters – about 4 million hectares of land and 50,000 hectares of marine waters, plus 35 million annual visits to national and state parks and 96 million to all places managed by Parks Victoria.

The funding available to manage the national park estate for conservation outcomes is substantially less than \$260 million. About a third (\$88 million, from the Parks Charge levy that Melbourne residents pay) is spent on managing just 5000 hectares of metropolitan parks. Large sums are also spent on managing visitors and facilities in parks across the state.

Parks Victoria employs fewer than 1000 full-time equivalent staff, which equates to more than 4000 hectares of land managed per employee (many of whom are not field staff). The government cut at least 120 jobs from Parks Victoria in 2013.

According to the Community and Public Sector Union, staffing levels in Park Victoria are now as low as when it was established in 1996, yet it manages an additional two million hectares of national parks and conservation areas across the state.

Many rangers are telling the VNPA that they have virtually no funding for management activities such as pest plant and animal control. This situation is especially problematic. As the 2010 auditor-general report noted, spasmodic

and 'initiative' funding for pest control undermines its effectiveness. If no management is undertaken for one or two years, pest species run riot, wasting or undermining much of the previous investment.

Resources needed

Parks Victoria and our environment departments need more management resources for facilities too. In many of our parks, especially less-visited ones, signs have been damaged or destroyed and walking tracks washed away or overgrown. Decrepit picnic tables and other facilities are more of a hazard than a convenience.

Parks and the environment need more resources, but state governments seem unwilling to pay for what should be part of their routine core business. Yet support for national parks is almost universal, as the VNPA's recent poll found.

The previous Coalition government spent a lot of time attacking the parks system. Even while complaining that parks are over-run with pest plants and animals, it cut budgets and initiated strange and unpopular strategies.

While this was spin politics at its worst, the fundamental funding problem continues. The ALP election campaign commitment of \$5 million in additional funding for parks is not nearly enough.

Leader of the Vote 1 Local Jobs party and new Upper House MP James Purcell, from western Victoria, proposes a \$10 entrance fee to the Twelve Apostles, which he says would create a \$20 million tourism fund to employ 50 new rangers and implement a range of tourism initiatives.

This sort of idea could be looked at, but we must avoid creating too many barriers to people visiting parks. There's also an equity issue, with Melbourne householders already paying \$70+ per year as a parks levy while other Victorians pay nothing.

The tourism industry is a significant beneficiary of the parks system, so perhaps a 'bed tax' or similar levy on tourists for high-volume areas is another strategy worth investigating. Any long-term solution will probably require a series of measures, perhaps broadening the base or amount of the parks levy.

If this is too difficult, maybe it's better just to allocate the park system the funding it needs.

While we do need to look at alternative funding methods, parks need their fair share of the government funding pie to ensure they remain healthy.

This is not just an environmental question. In the long run it's a more efficient use of taxpayers' dollars, and should ensure that our magnificent national parks are in good shape for future Victorians, and that we continue to have a truly world-class parks system. • PW

Brighter future for Victoria's seas and shores

MARINE AND COASTAL EXPERT **CHRIS SMYTH** OUTLINES WHAT HE HOPES WILL BE THE OUTCOME OF THE NEW STATE GOVERNMENT'S POLICY TO CREATE A MARINE AND COASTAL ACT. CHRIS IS NOW WORKING WITH THE VNPA AS MARINE AND COASTAL COORDINATOR.

Three days out from the 29 November state election last year the then Labor Opposition released its environment policy, which included a commitment to establish a Marine and Coastal Act. It said:

An Andrews Labor Government will undertake a five-yearly State of the Bay report to monitor the health of coasts, bays and waterways. We will establish a new Marine and Coastal Act, bringing together all management and protections under the one system.

For more than 40 years there has been talk about the need for an integrated approach to marine and coastal planning and management, but most 'solutions' put in place have revolved around collaboration, interdepartmental committees, hope and a lot of faith in 'the system'.

With this new government commitment, Victoria can now act to address the issue. However, there are few details on what the new legislation might actually do.

Here are some personal thoughts that I developed in the preparation of the report *The Coast is Unclear*, which can be downloaded from the VNPA website. The report contains a much fuller discussion about what is described here and also about the protection of coastal nature.

Marine and Coastal Act

A Marine and Coastal Act should establish the framework for integrated marine and coastal planning and management, and drive:

- ecologically sustainable use of Victoria's marine and coastal resources
- integrated marine and coastal planning across sectors and agencies
- security of access and certainty of process for marine and coastal industries
- increased knowledge and understanding of Victoria's marine and coastal environment
- community and industry stewardship of Victoria's marine and coastal environment, and effective community engagement in planning, management and conservation.

Marine and Coastal Authority

The Act should establish a Marine and Coastal Authority, a statutory independent body that would replace the Victorian Coastal Council and could have an administrative structure based on six regions: South-west, Otway, Central (Port Phillip Bay and Western Port), West Gippsland, Gippsland Lakes and East Gippsland.

The Authority would be responsible for the integrated planning and management of what would be the Victorian Coastal Crown Land and Waters Reserve. This new reserve would include all coastal waters to three nautical miles offshore (the state limit), estuaries, and all coastal Crown land, excluding the coastal conservation estate (such as national parks).

The Authority would administer the planning process and delegate certain management responsibilities to state agencies such as Park Victoria for conservation reserves and Fisheries Victoria for fisheries management.

However, in both of these cases and others, the delegated agency would have to manage the resource in a way that is consistent with the new legislation and the objectives, targets and timelines in the regional marine and coastal strategies and plans prepared by the Authority.

Planning zones

The regional marine and coastal plans would, among other things, contain a set of planning zones with rules, objectives and targets, and what is and isn't allowed in each zone.

This transparent and accountable planning process would be carried out in close consultation with stakeholders, regional marine and coastal advisory committees, coastal municipalities, coast committees, other agencies and the community, and allocate marine and coastal natural resources for ecologically sustainable uses.

Responsibility for the management of these zones would rest with the Marine and Coastal Authority, but the management functions would be delegated to other state government agencies and coast committees.

Regional offices of the Marine and Coastal Authority would work closely with the regional catchment management authorities to ensure that the quality and quantity of water entering coastal estuaries and coastal waters was adequate to maintain and then improve the health of those estuaries.

In each region the Marine and Coastal Authority would establish a Marine and Coastal Advisory Committee comprising representatives of the local council, parks agency, Coast Committee, catchment management authority and key stakeholders including, commercial and recreational fishers, tourism, conservation and Indigenous communities. • PW



PHOTO: MARK NORMAN, MUSEUM OF VICTORIA



Some of the Bellarine Peninsula's wetlands, looking towards Point Lonsdale, Queenscliff and Swan Bay.

PHOTO: GEELONG ENVIRONMENT COUNCIL

Minister Lisa Neville to have the Victorian Environment Assessment Council (VEAC) report on the environmental values of the wetlands and make recommendations for their protection, management and maintenance into the future.

Population growth, development, new infrastructure, climate change and pollution from runoff into the wetlands could cause irreversible damage to their habitat values – unless integrated management is established to protect their diversity and ecological values.

Bellarine Wetlands Nature Conservation Reserve

This proposed Reserve is an example of how the protection of coastal nature could be better integrated and more effective, and is consistent with the above thinking on the Marine and Coastal Act. Such integrated management of the Bellarine wetlands was earlier proposed in *The Coast is Unclear*.

The wetlands, dispersed across the peninsula, are vital habitats for tens of thousands of migratory wading birds in summer and for many resident waterbirds all year round.

Geelong Environment Council and the Queenscliffe Environment Forum have asked new Victorian Environment

Migrating waders fly from Siberia to this area each year around August and stay through the southern summer, then fatten up for the long journey back to Siberia and the Arctic for breeding during the short summer months there.

A number of both the migratory and the resident species are considered 'threatened', and the Orange-bellied Parrot is at risk of extinction.

Point Nepean National Park

Under the proposed Marine and Coastal Act, Parks Victoria would continue to manage the conservation reserves along the Victorian coast to ensure the coherent, consistent and integrated protection of coastal nature.

However, under the leasing arrangements for Point Nepean National Park rushed through just hours before the caretaker period of government began in the lead-up to the November state election, a private property developer has been given management rights over 64 ha of the park.

This undermines the community's long-held objective of a single integrated national park under the management of Parks Victoria.

In its election policy, the Labor Opposition stated:

We are particularly concerned about the granting of a lease to developers at Point Nepean. It is contrary to the master plan and the community's wishes. Victorians should not be denied access to this national park and Labor will rigorously



PHOTO: GEOFF DURHAM

The VNPA strongly supports the historic Quarantine Station being managed as part of Point Nepean National Park and accessible to all.

test what appears to be its privatisation. We will immediately review the lease to determine its legal status, given it does not become operational until 2016, and look to use any powers of the Parliament to disallow it where possible. We will return Parks Victoria as the overall manager of an integrated Point Nepean Park.

The VNPA is now working with local groups and the Andrews Government to ensure that the commitments are kept, the inappropriate development proposals are abandoned, and a protected future for Point Nepean National Park and its unique natural and cultural heritage is achieved.

With a little help from its Friends

VNPA MEMBER JENNY NORVICK EXPLAINS
HOW A HAVEN OF INDIGENOUS VEGETATION
HAS BEEN CREATED IN A CITY PARK.



PHOTO: JENNY NORVICK

The occasional pink colour of this salt lake comes in summer from a harmless alga and a bacterium in response to high salt levels and temperatures.

Victorian Government decided to turn the site into a park with lakes and ponds, and low hills created using the builders' rubble and concrete remnants left on site, which were covered with clean fill and topsoil.

Lawns were sown, paths constructed, a few picnic tables scattered around and garden beds planted with native shrubs and small trees, mainly from Western Australia. And then the park was largely neglected until a Friends group was formed in 1999.

Friends of Westgate Park

The group was started by Fine Arts/ Photography student Naomie Sunner, who had visited the park as part of a university assignment documenting a seven-day walk up the Yarra as far as Warrandyte. Drawn back by the river and the park, and interested in being part of a Friends group, she formed the Friends of Westgate Park.

A couple of years later, current Friends' President George Fotheringham, a landscape designer, joined the group, and they set about creating a park using local vegetation.

They decided to revegetate it as if the created landforms had always been there. They used nearby remnants of native vegetation such as the Botanic Gardens, Studley Park and the Jawbone Reserve at Williamstown as references for what to plant to recreate a truly indigenous vegetation pattern.

Since then they have worked away at replacing the original plantings and some of the lawn with ten different plant communities from the local area, using over 300 different plant varieties to provide all the main structural elements: trees, understorey shrubs, creepers, ground covers, grasses, herbs and rushes.

As well as gradually replanting the original park, the Friends have extended plantings out to the river and upstream as far as Pier 35. They hope to extend the park further down the river, and ideally, if the State Government and the Port of Melbourne agree, right to its mouth.

Factories surround Westgate Park on three sides. To the south is Webb Dock, which is undergoing a three-fold expansion and has cut a corner off the park for road access. Westgate Bridge straddles the southern boundary, generating a dull mumble of background noise.

Yet once I'm walking beside one of its lakes or along a woodland walk, or sitting by a billabong looking out for birds, I no longer hear the roar of traffic or the Sunday whine of go-karts from across the road.

Rather, I lose myself in the peace, beauty and wonder of the place, and am thankful that such an oasis can still be created in the middle of a big city.

I first got to know Westgate Park when my husband and I took up cycling around 1990. One of our favourite rides was down the Yarra to the end of Lorimer Street in Port Melbourne, where we'd either turn right and catch the punt across the river to Williamstown, or turn left under Westgate Bridge and head for the St Kilda seafront via Westgate Park.

We'd follow the bike path into the park, stop on the first small hill under the benign presence one of Lyn Moore's Earth Series sculptures and then pedal on.

Gradually the park became a destination in itself, as we explored its walkways and eagerly checked out which waterbirds were in residence on the freshwater lake. And we noticed over time that the dense, woody and rather dull vegetation was being replaced with a more diverse and attractive range of indigenous plants.

We only recently found out that this transformation was almost entirely the work of a local community organisation, the Friends of Westgate Park, who have planned, planted, fund-raised and managed the whole development.

History

Originally an area of sand spits and saltmarshes at the mouth of the Maribyrnong and Yarra Rivers, the park site has been a sand quarry, airfield, unofficial car race track and rubbish tip.

In 1984, as part of the celebrations for Victoria's 150th anniversary, the



PHOTO: LYNN ALLISON



PHOTO: JENNY NORVICK

Clockwise from top left:

Telstra staff spreading mulch in preparation for planting, 2013. Telstra is one of the park's corporate partners.

Coot on nest.

Grade 3 and 4 students from Albert Park Primary School planting on a sustainability excursion to the park in August 2014.

Freshwater lake in the park.



PHOTO: LYNN ALLISON



PHOTO: JENNY NORVICK

They are starting to plant an area on the south side of Westgate Bridge with a view to turning it into a proper wetland with boardwalks and bird hides. A long-term wish is to stabilise the shores of the salt lake and establish it as a salt marsh so as to attract Orange-bellied Parrots to the park and add them to the remarkable current list of some 153 bird residents and visitors.

In 2006, with a grant from Landcare, they installed a work space and plant propagation area where they now raise about a third of their own seedlings (sourcing the rest at St Kilda Indigenous Nursery Co-op), and also landscaped the strip in front of it on the northern boundary with red gum woodland, heath and a series of quiet, shady billabongs.

There is much to be done: landscaping, path creation, mulching, putting in 20,000 plants annually, weeding, pruning and rubbish collection. Even a large and active Friends group clearly

couldn't provide all the labour and funds needed, and they have done it largely by forming partnerships, as well as raising funds through grants. They believe that other Friends groups could adopt a similar approach.

Partnerships

A number of different groups volunteer at the park. Work for the Dole teams and the Friends work at the site two days a week, and this year the Green Army is there four days a week.

Through a partnership with Landcare, the Friends established a regular corporate volunteering program whose participants average one day a week and bring their own funding with them. As well, an arborist supplies free mulch.

In 2013-14 an average of 1,309 volunteer hours were worked each month in the park, and that number will increase this year.

To me the park is an impressive achievement, full of interesting birds and plants, a few snakes and Blue-tongue Lizards and some seriously strange fungi, and it will only get better as it matures and develops.

It is a park which brings back some of what has been lost to urbanisation, a park which, like the Australian Garden at Cranbourne, shows the beauty of native plants in landscaping. It's obviously a labour of love but also a tale of perseverance, hard work, enterprising minds and good relationships.

So go and visit! Have a picnic, go for a walk, ride your bike there, look out for the changes in the plants, flowers and birds through the seasons. Go in summer and see the salt lake turned lipstick pink. Or find a quiet nook and soak up the atmosphere. • PW

Find out more or get in touch with the Friends through their website www.westgatepark.org.

From left: Yorta Yorta elder Neville Atkinson, former NSW Premier Bob Carr and Nick Roberts by the Murray during the red gum parks campaign.

Nick Roberts reflects

AT THE END OF 2014, VNPA CAMPAIGNER NICK MADE ONE OF THE TOUGHEST DECISIONS OF HIS CAREER – TO LEAVE THE VNPA AFTER NEARLY 13 YEARS.



PHOTO: NICK ROBERTS

When I joined the VNPA staff in 2002, the Association was holed up in a tiny terrace in East Melbourne. But it had a vision and a passion for protecting Victoria's natural environment that excited me.

I was employed as the Barmah-Millewa campaigner, working on what I thought would be the relatively simple task of ensuring the world's largest River Red Gum forest and wetlands were placed in a national park, with a special first for Victoria: joint management by the region's Traditional Owners, the Yorta Yorta.

Little did I know that this was to become one of the VNPA's, and indeed Victoria's, most successful conservation campaigns.

It started well with a campaign launch by then ACF President Peter Garrett on a paddle steamer. ACF staff in Melbourne were somewhat bemused that little old VNPA had kidnapped their main man to launch a VNPA campaign.

Following the expansion of a proposed investigation by the Bracks Government, the campaign quadrupled in size with the entire red gum area of northern Victoria included in a VEAC investigation. A similar campaign was underway in NSW too.

The Murray and its major Victorian tributaries were finally getting some much-needed political attention.

The rest is pretty much history. A needlessly prolonged VEAC investigation and interference from the Brumby Government saw opposition to new parks grow, following concerted campaigning by logging, hunting and water interests. The ALP seemed determined to make the job harder.

Ironically, many park opponents made themselves largely irrelevant by clumsy stunts and general stuff-ups. The National Party-aligned cattlemen's association couldn't actually find their cows when DSE instructed them to remove cattle at the height of the drought. And DSE allowed a large area of Superb Parrot habitat in Barmah State Forest to be bulldozed by contractors.

The DSE regional manager, desperately trying to explain, calmly announced to the media that it was all because the employee who had the necessary map was off sick.

You couldn't make this stuff up!

This was a turning point in the campaign, with DSE's credibility and claims of 'good management' by logging and grazing interests in tatters.

Finally, in 2010, new parks were legislated. This historic outcome was well received, though without any promise of adequate environmental water, and with concessions to hunters.

The Murray River Park, narrow strips of land along the Murray, has still not

been formally established. This helped the recent Coalition government to reintroduce 200+ cattle grazing licences in 2013.

The past four years have been spent dealing with arguably the worst state government for environmental issues in Victoria's history.

My years with the VNPA can be summed up as a combination of rewarding, frustrating, humorous and deeply satisfying. Working with the Yorta Yorta Nation was a highlight. Governments, park managers and all Victorians have much to learn from Indigenous people's deep spiritual connection to land and water.

I know I leave the VNPA in good hands. Executive Director Matt Ruchel is as sharp as a tack and leads a fantastic team. The staff, volunteers, members and supporters are what makes the VNPA and will continue to ensure that Victoria's nature is at the forefront of all governments and policy makers for another 60 years.

This was the best job I have ever had. • PW

This is an edited extract from a future publication 'The politics of wood and water' by Nick Roberts.

Nick is the new Campaigns Director at Environment Victoria, and the irony is that he now sees more of his ex-colleagues than when working for the VNPA in Shepparton! The VNPA thanks Nick for his work and wishes him well in his new role.

Where are the Growlers?

FROM DECEMBER TO FEBRUARY, VNPA NATUREWATCH VOLUNTEERS TOOK PART IN THREE GROWLING GRASS FROG SURVEYS AT THE CITY OF WHITTLESEA'S RECLAIMED QUARRY IN EPPING, WHICH IS MANAGED TO PROTECT THESE FROGS. NEW NATUREWATCH OFFICE VOLUNTEER **EMMA BARNETT** JOINED THE SURVEY AND DESCRIBES HER EXPERIENCE.

On a Thursday evening in February, we make our way to the Northern Landfill and Recycling Centre in Epping. It's my first NatureWatch survey and I'm not sure what to expect.

The thought of sifting through knee-deep rubbish in the dark crosses my mind. But when we arrive, we find the rubbish has been hidden under soil and revegetated with native grasses and trees.

The wetland is generously covered with emergent vegetation, mostly bulrush, which has crept over a third of the lake.

The survey is being led by seasoned zoologist Daniel Gilmore from Biosis Research.

As we circle the upper ridge, Daniel explains the history of the site, its vegetation and the management of the GGF. We make our way back to the bottom of the quarry and are briefed on snakes, safety and how to identify a Growler.

Soon the sun sets – our cue to switch head-torches on and begin. We spend the next two hours peering under rocks, scanning the lake surface and looking along the muddy edge in search of frog life.

The light illuminates hundreds of reflective spider eyes and Daniel finds a few Spotted Marsh Frogs. We head around the quarry to our next location.



Above: Zoologist Daniel Gilmore describes the old quarry.
Left: Growling Grass Frog.



PHOTO: BEAU MENEY

It's 10:30pm and we're yet to see the elusive GGF. Despite finding an Eastern Banjo Frog, the group's energy and attention begins to wane. Still no Growler!

A steep, rocky path takes us down the north side of the quarry lake. Leading us carefully down the slope, Daniel stops abruptly. All I see is a brown flash as something moves in the distance, but Dan is certain it's a Growler.

Excited to finally find one, we spend a short time searching here, then decide to call it a night.

clumps. It's a female – her rounded white throat is perfectly visible. Even under the glare of eight torches, she stays still and we take it in turns to get a better look through binoculars.

Although I arrive home sweaty, muddy and tired, I feel wonder at the recovery of life in the old landfill site, and gratitude for seeing two Growling Grass Frogs persisting in the quarry.

This has been an exciting introduction to NatureWatch. I'm looking forward to the next survey. • PW

Getting involved in NatureWatch

In 2011 the Epping quarry had a healthy population of Growling Grass Frogs, volunteers sighting over 100. This year, NatureWatch volunteers saw just one adult Growler at the first two surveys and two at the second. Growlers are a threatened grassland species, classified as Endangered in Victoria.

Disease and drought have contributed to their decline, but habitat loss, fragmentation and degradation are at present more significant issues. However, we hope that Growlers can once again flourish at the Epping Quarry.

Thanks to Daniel Gilmore, Peter Homan and David De Angelis for leading the NatureWatch team on their surveys, and to the City of Whittlesea for continuing to support the community surveys at this important site.

To find out more about NatureWatch or to get involved, join our mailing list at vnpa.org.au/page/volunteer/naturewatch. On 29 March we are holding a 'Caught on Camera' Community Training Day at Trentham. For more information, contact me at naturewatch@vnpa.org.au or on **9341 6510** (Thurs/Fri only).

Christine Connelly,
NatureWatch Coordinator.



Cape Schanck

A MAGNIFICENT COASTLINE



PHOTO: LEON COSTERMANS

*Pulpit Rock, Cape Schanck.
Note columnar basalt.*

GEOFF DURHAM REVISITS A SPECTACULAR PART OF MORNINGTON PENINSULA NP WHERE RANGERS AND VOLUNTEERS HAVE DONE EXCELLENT MANAGEMENT WORK.

'Magnificent' is how geomorphologist Dr Eric Bird in *The Coast of Victoria* describes the cliffed coast in Older Volcanics running north-east from Cape Schanck to Flinders. He says it 'includes some of the finest cliff scenery in Australia'.

The cliffs reveal a series of volcanic lava flows with alternating layers of lava and ash 40–50 million years old, overlain by dune limestone deposited within the last 100,000 years.

This is Bunurong country, and middens attest to the long occupation of Indigenous people.

Cape Schanck was named in December 1800 by Lieut. James Grant to honour Capt. John Schank, R.N. [the spelling varies], who designed Grant's ship, *Lady Nelson*, the first European vessel to sail west to east through Bass Strait. In 1802, under the command of John Murray, the *Lady Nelson* was the first vessel to enter Port Phillip Bay.

The 21 metre tall limestone lighthouse was built on the cape in 1859. Before 1975, land at the cape that was not privately owned comprised the fenced Commonwealth Lighthouse Reserve (a prohibited area) and the degraded and neglected State Crown Land Coastal Reserve, the responsibility of a Committee of Management.

Dust bowl

Cars parked in a dust bowl at the end of Cape Schanck Road, and the point itself was seriously eroded due to unrestricted access.

Cape Schanck first gained the protection of the National Parks Act in 1975 with the creation of Cape Schanck Coastal Park, and the area began receiving proactive management (erosion control and improved visitor access) from the National Parks Service. Subsequently, it was included in Nepean State Park in 1978, and Point Nepean National Park in 1988.

In 1994 the Land Conservation Council recommended the creation of a Nepean National Park including Cape Schanck, and said that the Lighthouse Reserve, being surplus to Commonwealth requirements, should be included in the park following transfer to the State. Point Nepean National Park became Mornington Peninsula National Park in 1995, but the Lighthouse Reserve, then State Crown Land, was not included.

I visited Cape Schanck with the Friends of Nepean Parks in the late 1970s. We helped with rehabilitation work on the eroded clifftop and with cutting tracks through the tea-tree.

Fingal walks

Cape Schanck is less than two hours' drive from Melbourne. Take Boneo Road off the Mornington Peninsula Freeway and turn south onto the Cape Schanck Road – Melway map 259. About 2 km along on the right is the entrance to the extensive Fingal picnic area, formerly The Pines picnic area, in a shady pine plantation.

The 1998 Mornington Peninsula National Park Management Plan refers to the progressive removal of mature pines and their replacement with indigenous vegetation. There are toilets, tables, a shelter with electric barbecues and an open games playing area.

Walking tracks from here lead through Coast Tea-tree, Moonah and coastal scrub (and an invasion of the weeds *Polygala*, *Smilax* and *Asparagus Fern*) to the Fingal Lookout and down to sandy Fingal Beach, with rounded basalt and limestone boulders at its south end. I counted 424 steps!

The track continues 5 km from Fingal to Gunnamatta Beach. In the other direction, south to the cape, the track passes Selwyn Lookout on the Selwyn Fault – the eastern edge of the Port Phillip Sunkland. The basalt west of the fault line is beneath the sandy surface.

It's about 2.5 km to the free (bitumen) car park at the end of Cape Schanck Road where there are toilets, picnic tables and a



PHOTO: GEOFF DURHAM



PHOTO: GEOFF DURHAM



PHOTO: LEON COSTERMANS

Clockwise from top left:

Cape Schanck lighthouse complex. Accommodation is available here.

Bushrangers Bay from track above Main Creek.

Bushrangers Bay beach looking towards Cape Schanck.

Steps and boardwalk down to the Cape. Before these were built in the 1980s the area was badly eroded.



PHOTO: GEOFF DURHAM

very basic kiosk. A circuit walk leads to lookouts, and a boardwalk with many steps (which I haven't counted) takes you down to attractive rocky coves on either side of the point, with Pulpit Rock offshore.

Bushrangers Bay

Because of cliffs and gulches, it is not possible even at low tide to walk east along the shore platforms from here to Bushrangers Bay, but at the top of the cliffs there is a 2.6 km walking track from the car park on a narrow strip of land acquired from the *Barragunda* property, which had title to the high water mark.

This is one of the finest shorter walks in the state. The track crosses Burrabong Creek and drops down onto sandy Bushrangers Bay at the mouth of Main Creek.

The bushrangers referred to were convicts Henry Bradley and Patrick O'Connor, who landed here from

Tasmania in 1883 and commenced a forty-day rampage at *Barragunda* and *The Briars* homesteads, ending up on the gallows of the Old Melbourne Goal.

Swimming at the unpatrolled Bushrangers Bay beach is hazardous due to strong rips and large waves.

A 2.5 km walking track on the western side of Main Creek leads through banksia woodland to a car park on Boneo Road. There is no access east of Bushrangers Bay, as this remains private property to the high water mark.

Further east there is a narrow section of the national park along the coast from Ti-tree Creek to Flinders, with access from Boneo Road in two places: to the mouth of Ti-tree Creek, and further along to 'The Blowhole'.

The 1998 Management Plan includes the action 'Investigate long-term opportunities for a track from Ti-tree Creek to Bushrangers Bay'.

It was hoped to achieve a *Barragunda*-type arrangement, but unfortunately nothing has come of this. With this link we would have a continuous coastal walking track between Flinders and Point Nepean.

Lighthouse

There is a fee (adult \$13.50, child 5-16 \$9.50) for access to the privately managed Lighthouse Reserve and museum, and for a guided Lighthouse tour (adult \$16.50, child \$10.50).

Accommodation is available in two assistant keepers' cottages which can each sleep up to nine people, and an inspector's cottage suitable for a couple. Bookings are essential: phone 5988 6184 or 13009 885 259, or email lamp@austpacinns.com.au

Cape Schanck is highly recommended for picnics, sightseeing and walking. Dogs are not permitted. The shore platforms are a rock-pooler's delight, but be wary of freak waves. • PW



PHOTO: COURTESY THE WOODLAND TRUST (UK)

Reframing the planet

PEOPLE WHO THINK THEY ARE PROTECTING NATURE BY COSTING IT ARE STEPPING STRAIGHT INTO THE DESTROYERS' TRAP, SAYS **GEORGE MONBIOT**.

On the outskirts of Sheffield (UK) there is a wood which, some 800 years ago, was used by the monks of Kirkstead Abbey to produce charcoal for smelting iron. For local people, Smithy Wood is freighted with stories. Among the trees you can imagine your way into another world.

The application to plant a motorway service station in the middle of it, wiping out half the wood and fragmenting the rest, might have been unthinkable a few months ago. No longer.

When UK environment secretary Owen Paterson first began talking about biodiversity offsetting – replacing habitats you trash with new ones created elsewhere – his officials made it clear that it would not apply to ancient woodland. But in January Paterson said he was prepared to drop this restriction, as long as many more trees were planted than destroyed.

His officials quickly explained that such a trade-off would be 'highly unlikely' and was 'very hypothetical'. But the company that wants to build the service station wasn't slow to see the possibilities. It is offering to replace Smithy Wood with "60,000 trees ... planted on 16 hectares of local land close to the site".

Who cares whether a tree is a hunched and fissured coppiced oak, worked by people for centuries, or a sapling planted beside a slip road with a rabbit guard around it? As Ronald

Reagan remarked, when contemplating the destruction of California's giant redwoods, 'a tree is a tree'.

Who, for that matter, would care if the Old Masters in the National Gallery were replaced by the prints being sold in its shop?

In swapping our ancient places for generic clusters of chainstores and generic lines of saplings, the offsetters would also destroy our stories.

But this is the way it's going now: everything will be fungible, nothing will be valued for its own sake, place and past and love and enchantment will have no meaning. The natural world will be reduced to a column of figures.

In his interview with the *Guardian* a few weeks ago, George Lakoff, the cognitive linguist who has done so much to explain why progressive parties keep losing elections they should win, explained that attempts to monetise nature are a classic example of people trying to do the right thing without understanding frames: the mental structures that shape the way we perceive the world.

As Lakoff points out, you cannot win an argument unless you expound your own values and reframe the issue around them. If you adopt the language and values of your opponents "you lose because you are reinforcing their frame."

Costing nature tells us that it possesses no inherent value; that it is worthy

Ancient woodland today covers only 2% of Britain. It's vital to protect what is left.

of protection only when it performs services for us; that it is replaceable. You demoralise and alienate those who love the natural world while reinforcing the values of those who don't.

Do you believe that people prepared to cheat to this extent would stop a scheme because one of the government's committees has attached a voodoo value to a piece of woodland? It's more likely that the accounting exercise would be used as a weapon by the developers. The woods are worth £x, but by pure chance the road turns out to be worth £x +1.

Beauty, tranquility, history, place, particularity? Sorry, they've already been costed and incorporated into x – end of discussion. The strongest arguments opponents can deploy – arguments based on values – cannot be heard.

This is why the government promotes biodiversity offsets, even for ancient woodland. It is reframing the issue. Those who believe they can protect nature by adopting this frame are stepping into a trap their opponents have set. • PW

This is a condensed version of an article by celebrated environment writer George Monbiot, published in the (UK) *Guardian* on 22 April 2014. For more information see www.monbiot.com.

The Woodland Trust is currently campaigning to protect Smithy Wood. See www.woodlandtrust.org.uk.



Native vegetation protection and offsets

PHOTO: GROW WEST

Of course planting trees is good, but it doesn't replace protecting existing native vegetation. We need to do both.

VNPA PRESIDENT **RUSSELL COSTELLO** REFLECTS ON THE RELEVANCE OF GEORGE MONBIOT'S ARTICLE TO VICTORIA, AND ON THE NEED TO REVIEW AND REFORM OUR CURRENT NATIVE VEGETATION CLEARING CONTROLS.

Isn't it amazing that the UK is facing similar problems with environmental bean counters as Victoria?

In 2003, Victoria replaced poorly specified native clearing controls with new and far more prescriptive ones, based primarily on protecting remaining native vegetation.

Although founded on many fine principles, including setting methods for assessing native vegetation and priorities for protecting it, the system was deemed too complex, time-consuming and costly to implement, apparently relying too heavily on site inspections by experts.

In 2013, many of the principles were thrown out for the vast majority of clearing applications. It became a numbers game. Computer-generated regional-scale maps, with as much relation to on-ground reality as an Enid Blyton fairy story, now say 'yes' to most clearing applications. A centralised number-cruncher program determines the required offsets.

Just as in the UK, where seedlings in the ground are no real offset for the loss of ancient and historic woodlands, Victoria's offset system is often onerous but ineffective in providing real, on-ground gains in any way equivalent to the remnant vegetation, lost forever.

It's not just trees which are lost – it's the complex and established web of native species which inhabit and depend on a vegetation patch which has gone. This

cannot be replaced by revegetation. It would take decades or centuries for the whole system to re-establish.

Often the offset involves protecting another piece of bush to ensure it can't be cleared later, and undertaking management to improve its condition – and hence it's a 'gain'. While this is better than simply planting trees, it still reduces the extent of the bush, and the calculations are more akin to alchemy than science.

The gains calculated are all based on pseudo-science – best guesses enshrined in models, and never validated.

For example, you get four times the 'gain' for transferring private bush to a state conservation reserve than for protecting it with a covenant. The assumption is that a public reserve is four times less likely to be degraded or cleared than covenanted land. Really?

There has been no testing of this unlikely hypothesis. After the last four years of severely restricted public reserve funding, it seems unlikely. After all, covenanters are passionate and dedicated people, often with more resources per hectare available than public land managers could dream about. This could be the basis for a truly worthwhile public-private partnership.

In addition, magnificent 400+ year old paddock trees, like the giant red gums of the Western, Gippsland and

Northern plains, have lost their special protection. They can usually be cleared with quite simple offsets.

The computer that number-crunches the offset value of such trees totally ignores their visual majesty, their role in saline groundwater control, and their importance as vital biodiversity hubs in otherwise nature-dead paddocks. It's a travesty.

The VNPA has written numerous submissions and published a series of position papers about native vegetation protection.

In our 2014 Nature Conservation Review, we outline a proposal to revise the institutional arrangements for native vegetation protection. We hope that the proposed review of native vegetation laws promised by the Andrews Government will deliver some improvements in a timely manner.

As it is now, just as in the UK, Victoria's 'let's clear it' regulations and over-reliance on a dubious offset system are leading this state further into net loss of vegetation.

We need to focus more on protecting what we have left, recognising as 'remnant protection' the enhancement of valuable remnants with buffer, linkage and infill revegetation, and accepting that the central computer and its minions don't know it all.

And there will always be a place for on-ground assessment. • PW

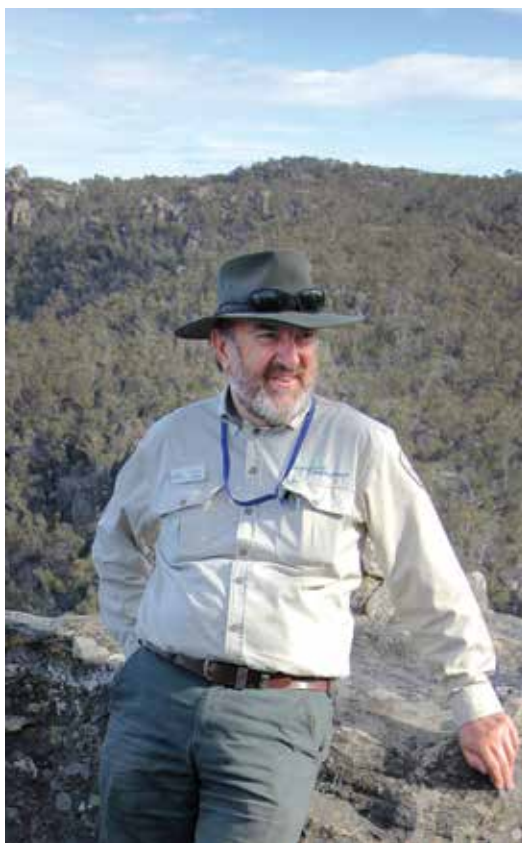
Outstanding Grampians park manager retires

PARKS VICTORIA DISTRICT MANAGER **GRAHAM PARKES**, WELL KNOWN TO MANY VNPA MEMBERS, IS RETIRING AFTER 42 YEARS IN PARK MANAGEMENT. ALWAYS WILLING TO LISTEN TO COMMUNITY CONCERNS, AND ONE OF VICTORIA'S MOST RESPECTED PARK MANAGERS, HIS KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE WILL BE HARD TO REPLACE.

Graham became Ranger in Charge of Grampians National Park in 1993, following many years as a ranger in parks including Port Campbell, Chiltern and Croajingolong national parks and Buchan Caves Reserve. He helped to make the Grampians one of the most popular Victorian destinations for local and international visitors.

Through his compassionate and visionary leadership, he has been a positive force for many people and many places.

He has made a huge contribution to the environment and the community, his friendly approach and ability to connect with and inspire people resulting in strong networks and friendships with people throughout Victoria.



*Graham Parkes
in his preferred
habitat.*

connections between the community, the land, national parks and other protected areas. He instigated innovative conservation, cultural and recreation works in many parks across the state.

As District Manager, he worked with his team on many complex management challenges in the Grampians, Little Desert, Mount Eccles and Lower Glenelg national parks.

Dr Bill Jackson, Parks Victoria Chief Executive, said that Graham was a highly respected leader in fire management in partnership with the environment department, the CFA and other emergency services.

"He led fire management teams at many large and complex incidents including the Gippsland fires, Deep Lead and the recent Grampians fires. He is trusted and well recognised by his community as a fire leader, and was awarded the Australia Day Fire Services Medal in 2009," Dr Jackson said.

Graham was a significant leader also in working with Traditional Owners in park management to establish stronger

"Graham has empowered and inspired staff and our partners. He leaves a powerful legacy for all us who were fortunate enough to work with him," said Dr Jackson.

Graham says he has loved his career and feels privileged to have worked with so many wonderful people within the National Parks Service, Parks Victoria and the community.

"After 42 years of looking after parks, I'm looking forward to lots of camping and walking in Australia's national parks, more time with family and friends and brushing up on my carpentry skills," he said. • PW

CONGRATULATIONS!

The VNPA congratulates the following recipients of the Order of Australia Medal in this year's Australia Day honours:

Elizabeth Barraclough, Mount Martha, for service to conservation and as a volunteer educator.

Campbell (Cam) Beardsell, Hurstbridge (ranger, NE Melbourne District), for service to conservation in Victoria.

Dr Brian Cuming, Bittern, for service to conservation in the Westernport region.

Nanette Cuming, Bittern, for service to the Australian native plant industry and the community.

Alison Teese, Carisbrook, for service to conservation in Victoria.

Allan Thomson, Port Fairy (formerly of Pascoe Vale), for service to conservation through many organisations.

Richard Weatherly, Mortlake, for service to the visual arts and conservation.

We also congratulate **Andy Gillham**, Parks Victoria Ranger in Charge, Central Gippsland, who received the Australia Fire Service Medal.

And last but not least, we congratulate the two Best Friends for 2014: **Dawn Kneen** of Friends of Bogong, and **Bernie Fox** of Friends of Brisbane Ranges (and past VNPA President), who have both made great contributions to nature conservation in Victoria. • PW

Thelma Grace Argall

A TRIBUTE

29 APRIL 1927 –
22 DECEMBER 2014

FORMER VNPA PUBLICATIONS
OFFICER **BARBARA VAUGHAN**
REMEMBERS ONE OF THE
ASSOCIATION'S QUIET BUT VERY
IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTORS.

Many *Park Watch* readers no doubt know the name 'Ian McCann', and are familiar with some of Ian's wonderful flower photographs, featured in the *In Flower* field guides published by the VNPA from the late 1980s: the Alps, the Mallee, the Coast and the Grampians.

Less familiar might be the identity behind the simple dedication in three of these titles – 'For Thelma'. 'Thelma' is Thelma Argall, known to those who loved her — and there were many — as Thel.

Thel died on 22 December last year. She was one of those quiet contributors who give groups such as the VNPA their strength and their legitimacy — people who know their local environment well and dedicate themselves to its care.

It was in the bush surrounding the small family farm in Redbank that Thel's love of plants and animals was nurtured. She never moved too far away – Redbank, Maryborough, Ballarat and Stawell comprised her home patch lifelong. Her local knowledge was thus deep and detailed. When Thel lamented the lack of spider webs or the disappearance of Painted Honeyeaters from her local area, you trusted these observations.

She had an exceptionally keen eye and ear, and could identify a bird high in flight from a passing glimpse or half a



Left: Thelma with her husband Ian McCann, who died on 30 July 2003.

Below: Thelma with kookaburra friend.

PHOTOS: COURTESY MCCANN FAMILY



bar of a distant call. Indeed, as part of a cognitive test at Ballarat Base Hospital late last year, she was asked to write a sentence. She wrote, 'I can hear barking owls.' She said they thought she was 'barking mad' but there were, in fact, owls she could hear hunting mice in the surrounding urban area.

Thel was a member of Birdlife and the Stawell Field Naturalists Club (until it folded several years ago). She and her friend Win were involved with Frog Watch, and would head off late at night to collect water samples and record frog calls. She was forever bringing home rubbish from her beloved ironbark forest and worked tirelessly on the eradication of noxious weeds such as boneseed. And nothing seemed to give her more grief in her later years than the relentless spread of gazanias from home gardens into the surrounding bush.

In 2006, the Banksia Environmental Foundation recognised Thel's contribution to saving Victoria's threatened orchids with an award in the 'Land and Biodiversity' category.

Aside from these many efforts, we can thank Thel, in part, for Ian's impressive photographic legacy.

Ian and Thel got together later in life. (Their love story is a fabulous one, but not for the telling here, I am sorry.) Ian was about to embark on the fairly ambitious project of photographing as many Victorian flowering plants as he could and publishing them in field guides.

Thel was Ian's mate in all of this endeavour (although he called her 'The Boss'). She would help lug his cumbersome photographic kit through the bush, search for specimens, record their GPS coordinates and provide shade and wind protection for the shots.

I first met Ian and Thel in 1989, when I drove to Stawell with the colour proofs of *The Mallee in Flower*. It must have been autumn because Thel served up her stupendously good baked quinces — a revelation to me. (The secret to the creamy, gelatinous sago sauce, she told me, is to add a few of the quince stones to the baking tray.)

I have visited Stawell every year since, and eaten many more serves of baked quince.

It was only the day of Thel's funeral that I learned her middle name was 'Grace'. Of course it was. I am thankful to have known the grace of Thel's friendship, and seen, at close hand, the ripple effects of a life lived with love and humility. The conservation community can be thankful for Thel's connection to the natural world and her efforts on its behalf, which were deeply felt, lifelong, locally grounded and unflagging. • PW



A place that keeps giving

GABRIELLE BRIDGE, A MELBOURNE-BASED STUDENT OF BOTANY, WRITES ABOUT AN EDUCATION CENTRE THAT CHANGES LIVES. SHE WORKED AT THE CENTRE IN 2012 AND IS NOW A MEMBER OF ITS COUNCIL.

Wollangarra is an outdoor education centre in Gippsland, tucked in beside the Macalister River about halfway between Heyfield and Licola.

A few cheeky young people comment as they are being driven there that they are probably being taken somewhere to be murdered, Wolf Creek style. You can't really blame them as many of those who come are city kids.

It's only when they see the quaint homestead (having survived walking through the front paddock and the hair-raising flying fox entry) with its homely wooden walls and bright red roofs, a few lambs skittering around and fruit trees speckled all over, that they start to calm down.

Many comment right away on the beauty of the place – that they have never seen anywhere like it, that it isn't at all what they imagined. Nerves now mainly come from being separated from phones and electricity.

Almost everything at Wollangarra is second (or tenth) hand, and most of it is pioneer-style and hence old-fashioned. Everything works, though, because it was well-made and is well looked after.

One of Wollangarra's lessons is that taking time to do things properly is always beneficial. In a fast-paced world, this is a relaxing and valuable reminder.

In sending kids out into the bush with simple food, a heavy 30-year-old canvas tent, a donated jacket and some lumpy hand-made knitwear, the message is

Above:
Wollangarra
homestead
welcomes you.

Right: Group
with Parks
Victoria
Alpine NP
ranger Wayne
McCallum
(now retired).



PHOTOS: GABRIELLE BRIDGE

subtly imparted that things don't have to be new and shiny to be good enough.

The word 'Wollangarra' comes from two Indigenous words meaning 'young people in high places'.

The centre offers programs to young people, mostly between 15 and 22, in which they are encouraged to spend time in the mountains, not just for its own sake but to develop a strong, positive relationship of mutual benefit.

Most programs we deliver are Stage One courses, dubbed 'meeting the mountains', and involve time spent at Wollangarra, working in the garden and baking bread, as well as three days of hiking. This course is usually for a young person's first visit to both Wollangarra and the surrounding mountains.

Many of the kids are incredibly nervous about heading into the bush. But though challenging for first-timers, the hiking is rarely very tough. Participants are given time to adjust to their new surroundings, games are played during breaks, and slowly they start to feel

at home among the surrounding trees. Their communal pride is obvious when a summit or 'awesome' view is reached.

The young people are confronted with lots of simple problems like uncomfortable packs, blisters or coordinating lunch. This forces them to ask for help and to admit that they don't know everything!

It's fascinating watching the changes in how they behave. They are separated at all sorts of levels. Some are the best hikers, some the most helpful, some the best at telling jokes or riddles. All these new experiences allow them to wriggle out of their usual niches and try new ways of interacting and behaving.

Wollangarra can't claim too much credit for the effects of the courses on the kids. The programs simply act as a bridge to link young people to the mountains and let them discover just how beneficial that can be.

One girl wrote in the visitors' book at the end of a course, "It is incredible to think that there is this 'other place' where everything is so calm and at ease and you don't need much



Clockwise from top left: Learning how to fix things the pioneer way at Miller's Hut; a Stage One group proud to have made it to the top; Gabrielle checks a walk route; netting Wollangarra's fruit trees to keep the bowerbirds and cockatoos at bay.

to be happy." The experience of facing so many challenges and overcoming them visibly boosts self-esteem and confidence.

Many of the courses we run take place in the areas of the spectacular Alpine National Park around Macalister Springs, Moroka Gorge, Bryce's Gorge, Lake Tali Karng and The Crinoline. It is a privilege to be able to take young people into these areas, and they are often blown away by the magnificence they never knew existed.

Wollangarra also runs Stage Two and Stage Three courses, which focus on conservation or 'helping the mountains' and often involve track work, hut repair or other jobs. These courses are for young people who have completed a Stage One program and want to stay involved with the Wollangarra community.

Wollangarra courses are filled with stories about the places visited, giving them a history and enhancing their meaning. When visiting Tali Karng, to be told the outlines of the Aboriginal story of the lake's creation is really special and evocative. For participants, the significance of the place becomes tangible.

Another place we often visit, not far from Wollangarra, is Burgoyne's Hut. Here the young folk love hearing the stories of the hard life led by the couple who built the hut over 100 years ago, and the details of their tragic but romantic life together.

Giving a place a context and meaning past its physical presence is an important element in helping young people understand the magic of the mountains and the richness of their history.



PHOTOS: GABRIELLE BRIDGE

Over the years, participants in Wollangarra courses have worked with Heyfield park rangers, notably Wayne McCallum (fondly nicknamed 'Power Ranger Wayne') who is a treasured part of the courses and the broader Wollangarra community.

The rangers identify jobs that need to be done in the national park surrounding Wollangarra. They are also invaluable in passing on cultural and ecological information about the land, and in helping direct the eager hands that Wollangarra contributes to useful and necessary projects.

This can then inspire interested young people to start thinking about environmental management as a career path.

Thankfully, the ranger working with Wollangarra since Wayne's retirement is equally enthusiastic and wonderful to work with, and incredibly is also called Wayne, so the nickname still stands!

Having real purpose is something that Ian Stapleton, the creator of Wollangarra,

identified as largely missing in a lot of young people's lives. Wollangarra offers the simple purpose of having a specific goal such as repairing a hut or putting in a set of steps, or even just plodding up a hill.

These goals require effort, determination and teamwork to complete. There is no quick or easier way. It's a challenge. Thus, when it's completed, the young people feel a real sense of accomplishment because they have done something useful, tangible and good.

Young folk from around Victoria eagerly give up scarce holiday time to return for courses time and again, developing a group of Wollangarra veterans who become close friends with a common love for the bush – this bush that they have experienced together – and bound by a common interest in protecting it.

To finish, another quote from a Stage Three visitor: *"I learnt that if you give to a place, it will just keep giving and giving forever."* • PW



Overlooking Squeaky Beach (study).

The Prom – an artist's inspiration

FOR 25 YEARS, WILSONS PROMONTORY NATIONAL PARK HAS BEEN THE MAIN FOCUS OF **NEIL MOORHOUSE**'S PAINTING. HE IS CONTINUALLY INSPIRED BY ITS UNIQUE SCENERY AND THE AMAZING NATURE EXPERIENCES IT OFFERS.

My connection to the Prom began in 1990, when I was invited to stay with relatives camping at Tidal River over the bustling Christmas period. I remember being stunned by the dramatic sight of Mt Oberon at sunset, alight with glowing orange rockfaces plunging down to the turquoise waters of Norman Bay.

As thousands of regular visitors have discovered, Tidal River is the most wonderful place to take a young family for a holiday full of fun adventures, and fortunately for me it also served as a rich source of inspiration and reference for my art. I have been back there camping with my own family every year since.

I am drawn to painting places and scenes that I have a strong emotional

connection with, and so it is only natural that the majority of my paintings are of the bays and headlands of the Prom's eastern coast.

There are such varied landscapes within a short walk of the campsite – lichen-covered rocks and deep tannin-stained pools at the bottom of Tidal River, the sweeping beaches bounded by weathered boulder stacks at Whisky and Picnic Bays, and the clear, turquoise inshore water merging with the deeper blue of Bass Strait.

My favourite view is from the Tidal Overlook track, looking across Leonard Bay and Squeaky Beach towards Tongue Point and Cape Liptrap. It reminds me of my favourite painter, Arthur Streeton, and his panoramic panels.

In 25 years of camping at Tidal River, I have experienced some momentous events – the 1996 'Hands Off the Prom' protest, bushfire evacuation, many wild storms – and alongside those, a wealth of incredible nature experiences.

To mention just a few: watching an octopus hunting and eating crabs in the rockpools off Darby Beach at extreme low tide, encountering an Eagle Ray while snorkelling at Fairy Cove, a Blue-ringed Octopus stranded at low tide at Millers Landing, a whale washed up and rotting on Squeaky Beach, and innumerable Tiger Snake encounters.

All these plus sightings of the endangered Hooded Plover, meeting the Roving Ranger, seals, penguins, shark eggs, surfing lessons, shooting stars and even a fiery comet – all part of my family's Prom experience.



Evening, Whisky Bay.



NEIL MOORHOUSE

Exhibition: *Wilsons Promontory and recent travels*

Official opening: 6-8 pm, Wednesday 18 March, 2015.

Victorian Artists Society Galleries, 430 Albert Street, East Melbourne.
Exhibition open daily from Thursday 19 March until Tuesday 24 March.
Open weekdays 10am-4pm, weekends 1pm-4pm.

enquiry@neilmoorhouse.com.au • www.neilmoorhouse.com.au • Facebook: Moorhouse Fine Art • 0415 799 558

Above: SandCliffs, Tidal River.

For me, the Prom's irreplaceable value is not just in the spectacular scenery or the scale of the stunning coastal landscape that always manages to re-inspire on each visit, but in the fact that it remains largely undeveloped.

Threats of large-scale commercial development have been overcome in the past, but serve to highlight how fragile the continued existence of this wilderness is. It can survive fires, floods and storms, but not development.

Overseas visitors who accompanied us on a recent trip to the Prom were astounded by this natural wilderness. I hope it can remain that way.

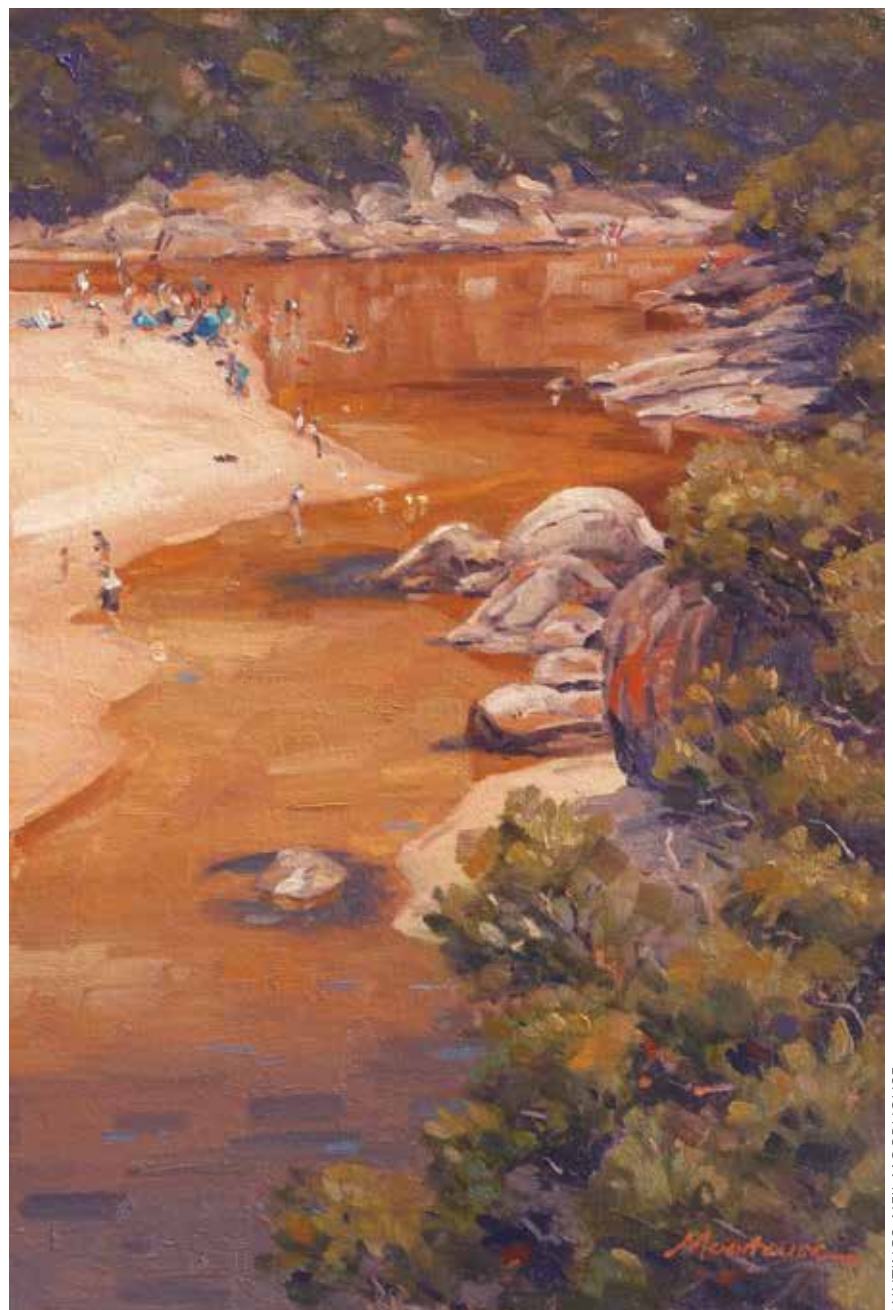
I began drawing in primary school and first exhibited pen and ink drawings of maritime scenes and native botanical studies in 1990, while pursuing graphic art as a career.

Memories of painting trips and visits to the art studio of my aunt, alive with the aromas of linseed oil and turpentine, drew me to change to using oil paints, and I joined the Victorian Artists Society, exhibiting my first oil paintings there in 1992.

I have since held solo exhibitions of paintings of Wilsons Promontory, and a joint exhibition of Seascapes with watercolourist Julian Bruere.

My upcoming exhibition features oil paintings and pencil drawings of my favourite places at the Prom, along with many other paintings of recent travels to the Bellarine Peninsula, Sydney, New Zealand, Italy and England.

I would like to invite VNPA members to join me in a glass of champagne on opening night, or over the weekend. I look forward to meeting you soon! • PW



Rockpools, Tidal River.

PAINTINGS: NEIL MOORHOUSE



VNPA walk at
Lysterfield Park.

PHOTO: VNPA

For your mental health, get back in touch with nature

THIS ARTICLE BY FAIRFAX ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COLUMNIST ROSS GITTINS APPEARED IN THE AGE ON 24 DECEMBER LAST YEAR. WE THOUGHT IT SO RELEVANT TO THE VNPA AND ITS ACTIVITIES THAT WE OBTAINED HIS PERMISSION TO REPRINT IT.

I've just got to get through extended Christmas festivities – and subsequent mopping up – and I'll be off on my hols. What am I doing this year? Same as most years: heading for the bush. This time we're going to the mountains.

As a denizen of the inner city I've long had a great desire to get out into the country whenever possible. Get into the grass and trees, where the air is clean and the sleeping seems better.

There's a place we rent not far up the coast that backs onto a national park. I call it Lyrebird Lodge. And even when we go overseas I often find the country towns beat the big cities.

In recent times I've been singing the praises of big cities: how efficient they are and how they promote creativity and productivity, particularly in the era of the information economy.

But cities have their dark side and insufficient grass and trees is it. That's more than just a personal preference. Environmental psychologists and others have been gathering impressive evidence of the health-given properties of greenery.

It's evidence to support the American biologist E. O. Wilson's 'biophilia' hypothesis: because humans evolved in natural environments and have lived separate from nature only relatively recently in their evolutionary history, people possess an innate need to affiliate with other living things.

Research published last year found that people who live in urban areas with more green space tend to report greater wellbeing – less mental distress and higher life satisfaction – than city dwellers who don't have parks, gardens or other green space nearby.

Mathew White and colleagues at the University of Exeter Medical School used a national longitudinal survey of households in Britain to track the experience of more than 10,000 people for 17 years to 2008.

They found that, on average, the positive effect on wellbeing was equivalent to about one-third of the difference between being married rather than unmarried and a tenth of the effect of being employed rather than unemployed.

A different study followed the experience of more than 1000 people over five years, in which time some moved to greener urban areas and some to less green areas. The results showed that, on average, people who moved to greener areas felt an immediate improvement in their mental health. This boost could still be measured three years later.

"These findings are important for urban planners thinking about introducing new green spaces to towns and cities, suggesting they could provide long term and sustained benefits for local communities," the lead author of the study said.

A study from Canada began by summarising all the various benefits from contact with nature that other research had found: it can restore people's ability to pay attention, improve concentration in children with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, and speed recovery from illness. It may even reduce the risk of dying.

Yet another study notes that the first hospitals in Europe were infirmaries in monastic communities where a garden was considered an essential part of the environment in that it supported the healing process.

This study of studies, from Norway, says that "in most cultures, both present and past, one can observe behaviour reflecting a fondness for nature. For example, tomb painting from ancient Egypt, as well as remains found in the ruins of Pompeii, substantiate that people brought plants into their houses and gardens more than 2000 years ago".

Many studies find health benefits from contact with nature. The Norwegian paper says a key element in this may be nature's stress-reducing effect. Stress plays a role in the causes and development of cardiovascular diseases, anxiety disorders and depression.

Contact with nature may help "simply by being consciously or unconsciously 'pleasing to the eye'". Office employees seem to compensate for lack of a window view by introducing indoor plants or even just pictures of nature. One study found that having a view to plants from the work station decreased the amount of self-reported sick leave.

One of my favourite blog sites, PsyBlog, conducted by the British psychologist Dr Jeremy Dean, notes research estimating that people now spend 25% less time in nature than they did 20 years ago. Instead, recreational time is often spent surfing the internet, playing video games and watching movies.

But this is more up my line: Dean reports a study finding that taking group walks in nature is associated



PHOTO: BWAG



PHOTO: MARY FERLIN

BWAG walk at the Prom.

with better mental wellbeing and lower stress and depression. The study evaluated a British program called Walking for Health, and involved nearly 2000 participants, divided into two matched groups of those who took part in the walks and those who didn't.

The walks, which extended over three months, combined three elements, each of which you'd expect to make people feel better: walking, being in nature and being with other people.

Those who seemed to benefit most were those who'd been through a recent

stressful life event, such as divorce, bereavement or a serious illness.

"Our findings suggest that something as simple as joining an outdoor walking group may not only improve someone's daily positive emotions but may also contribute a non-pharmacological approach to serious conditions like depression," one of the study's authors said.

You beaut. When I get to the mountains I'm hoping to do a lot of bush walking. • PW

Top: Monday walking group
with bollards at Geelong.
Bottom: Crossing footbridge on
Diamond Creek – Eltham walk.

Rambles on a Monday

PAMELA ASHCROFT HAS LIVED AND WORKED AS AN ARTIST IN VARIOUS PARTS OF VICTORIA AND RETURNED TO MELBOURNE IN 2011. SHE'S ALWAYS HAD ITCHY FEET AND LOVES EXPLORING MELBOURNE AND THE BUSH.

The early 13th century Persian poet Rumi said, 'Beauty surrounds us, but usually we need to be walking in a garden to know it.'

Given their enthusiasm for a walk in the park with time to smell the roses, those who join the twice- monthly VNPA Monday walks would probably concur with this observation.

'Second Monday of the Month' afternoon walks were started in 2007 by VNPA stalwart and life member Ruth Stirling. A year later, she persuaded one of her Monday walkers and another long-standing VNPA member, Sue Parkhill, to lead a walk on the fourth Monday of each month.

The walks led by Ruth and Sue range from ambles through bushland, along creek trails and beaches to strolls through formal parks and gardens and urban streetscapes. All walks can be reached by public transport. Most are in Melbourne, with the occasional full-day walk or excursion further afield.

On a hot Monday in January 2014, the group met for the first walk of the year at the floral clock in Queen Victoria Gardens. We walked through the Domain, admiring the grottoes along the embankment of Alexandra Avenue before heading into the Botanic Gardens where we paused at the brutally vandalised Separation Tree for a sombre, moving moment.

Then it was up the hill to admire Guilfoyle's Volcano, a restored historic



PHOTOS: PAMELA ASHCROFT

reservoir whose slopes are planted with masses of succulents to produce a truly spectacular landscape.

We rounded off our tour with a wander in the cool shade of the eucalypts and oaks on the southern lawns and then retired for a well-earned drink.

In early February we explored Wattle Park in Burwood, so named in 1917 when it was opened with the planting of a Golden Wattle, later added to with another 12,000 wattles. We strolled along some of the park's numerous paths and found respite from the hot sun under a sprawling eucalypt in an area of remnant indigenous vegetation.

In mid-summer, the bleached native grasses contrasted strikingly with the manicured lawns and exotic trees surrounding the chalet and other

historic park buildings. Refreshments at a nearby café gave time for social chitchat before we boarded the No. 70 tram to return to the city.

Skipping a few months, in late October a handful of hardy souls caught the train to Geelong and braved unseasonably cold and wet weather to walk the Waterfront Geelong Bollards Trail from Rippleside Park to Lime Burners Point. The bollards are carved from old timber pylons and the brightly painted human figures portray characters and themes from Geelong's history.

We admired a group of musicians, a former mayor, sea captains, bathing beauties and footballers, reaching the final bollard on Lime Burners Point in a squall of rain. Then we made our way into town through Eastern Park and took refuge in the Sheraton for



Time for a rest.



VNPA Excursions
Convenor Larysa Kucan
(left) and friend Libby
are sun smart.

PHOTOS: PAMELA ASHCROFT

a warming cup of coffee and piece of cake while taking in the view of the You Yangs. Mission accomplished!

A day walk from Diamond Creek to Eltham along the Diamond Creek Trail on the second Monday in December rounded out the year. In bright sunshine we meandered through sublime open parkland following the path along the creek valley and near the railway line, and ate our lunch sitting on the grass

under mature eucalypts and enjoying the abundant birdlife. Finally we squeezed through a narrow breezeway between a cluster of units to find our way to Eltham village and the train home. A wonderful outing on a balmy day and a perfect way to end 2014.

There is tremendous camaraderie in the group, whose members enjoy the walking and the sociability of like-minded souls, all contributing to a

powerful sense of wellbeing. As the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates said, 'Walking is the best medicine.' • PW

If you'd like to join these walks, details are in the BWAG Program for the 2nd and 4th Mondays of each month. The next walk will be on Monday 23 March (see program p. 27) when Sue Parkhill will lead a walk in and around Woodend. Places are limited as the walks are very popular.

BOOK REVIEW

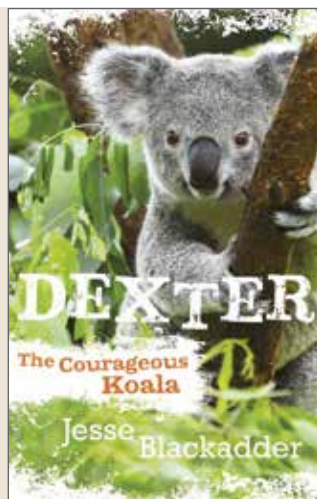
Dexter, the Courageous Koala

By Jesse Blackadder. ABC Books, 2015. Paperback, \$14.99.

There are three things children can't resist in a story: characters they can relate to, cute animals, and dramatic adventures. This gripping, emotional story has all three.

I couldn't put it down. I read it in one go, and I can easily imagine upper and middle primary school children doing the same.

Like many children her age, main character Ashley longs for a puppy, but can't have one. To make up for this, her eccentric aunt Micky, a koala carer



living near Byron Bay, invites Ashley to stay with her.

Ashley lands in the aftermath of a tropical cyclone, collecting leaves in the rain for the rescued koalas and finding an injured mother and joey, blown from their tree in the storm.

A nail-biting rescue tale ensues, involving a hair-raising flying fox ride to get the koalas to safety, a risky journey along a flooded road to the vet,

and a passion sparked in Ashley for wildlife care.

The events ring true because of the author's personal experience with koalas, and her meticulous research. She includes a useful afterword thanking the koala carers and vets she consulted, and giving practical advice about helping injured wildlife.

Half the book is written from the joey's point of view, making readers feel strong empathy with the injured koalas.

This moving story would be perfect for a teacher to motivate a class to help rescued wildlife, perhaps by knitting joey pouches, donating mother-substitute teddy bears, or raising money. Classrooms need more inspirational books like this. • PW

Review by Elizabeth Howes



Bushwalking: Bring a Friend for Free!

Bring a Friend for Free walk group at Sugarloaf Reservoir.

PHOTO: COURTESY FRED TROPP

We offer one of these walks in each program to enable potential new members to come with a VNPA friend to meet, chat and walk with other bushwalkers, and experience what we do.

The member must book the guest when booking the walk and know that the guest has the appropriate level of fitness. The member will pay the usual walk fee of \$5 or hold a walks pass. There is no charge for the guest.

See the testimonial at right for a recent walk from guest Susan Pepper. • PW

Sugarloaf for starters

Saturday 31 January was perfect for a good walk - coolish for summer, with the prospect of just enough rain to refresh energetic walkers. A 16 km walk around Sugarloaf Reservoir was before us.

As we gathered, our leader Sue welcomed all comers, both experienced bushwalkers and those less so, and gave us an overview of the day. Once briefed, we set off, the leader in front and the 'whip' at the rear, making sure slow-coaches like me weren't left behind.

We started by crossing the reservoir wall, with the golden grassy hills, curious roos,

views across the water and the undulating countryside, steep but thankfully short hills, panoramic views over the reservoir and a glimpse of racing yachts still before us. The day promised to be a great one.

The pace was steady and the breaks well-timed and just the right length until, sadly, the walk was over. We headed off to a nearby cafe for a well-earned coffee or tea and a slice of cake to review the day, and consider new challenges.

As an introduction to walking with the VNPA it was a great experience, where newcomers felt welcomed and supported.

Boneseed blitz

Back in the 1980s, Stephanie Rennick from Bayside Bushwalkers recognised the devastating effects of African Boneseed at Arthurs Seat, and decided to do something about it.

Working with land managers, bushwalking clubs and local groups, the heavily infested Cook Street spur of Arthurs Seat State Park was divided into plots allocated to the various groups. One of them was later passed on to the VNPA.

Originally Colin Smith coordinated the VNPA's annual weeding, but for the past 24 years long-time member Marg Hattersley has done the job. "It was pretty bad to start with," said Marg. "The bloody boneseed was over six feet high!"

Years of dedicated volunteering have made a huge difference. "Nothing stops



Left: Marg Hattersley is happy with the result of weeding at Arthurs Seat.

Above: Boneseed seedlings keep coming up.

PHOTOS: JULIA PICKWICK

us," said Marg. "We do this every year, come rain, hail or shine". These days you have to look hard to find boneseed seedlings.

Last year, Marg decided it was time to hang up the weeding gloves and pass on the coordinator role. BWAG Convenor Terese Dalman was

delighted to take it on. "Marg has left an amazing legacy," she says.

The Annual Boneseeding day will be held at Arthurs Seat State Park on **Saturday 2 May**. For more information refer to the BWAG program or contact Terese on 0413 234 130. • PW

From Julia Pickwick

NEIL MOORHOUSE



Moorhouse Fine Art



Wilsons Promontory

AND RECENT TRAVELS

An exhibition of oil paintings of my favourite places at Wilsons Promontory, along with the highlights of recent trips to the Bellarine Peninsula, Sydney, New Zealand, England and Italy.

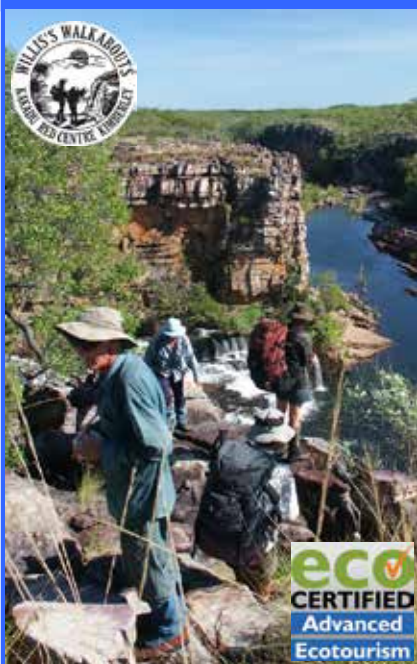
Official opening 6-8pm Wednesday March 18th.

Open daily Thursday 19th - Tuesday 24th March, 2015. 10am - 4pm weekdays, 1-4pm weekends. Victorian Artists Society Galleries, 430 Albert Street, East Melbourne, Victoria.

www.neilmoorhouse.com.au enquiry@neilmoorhouse.com.au 0415 799 558

Willis's Walkabouts

Kakadu – No One Knows It Better



Join us and see why so many of our clients come back again and again.

THIRTY years leading tours plus another ten exploring the park with the Darwin Bushwalking Club. Russell Willis always has the latest information.

Our trips offer you the best that Kakadu has to offer in each of its six seasons. That's right, **SIX** seasons. Forget the Wet and Dry of the tourist brochures. The local Aboriginal people recognised six seasons. So do we. The only way to understand how different they really are is to experience them for yourself.

We know which creeks are flowing when, which 4WD tracks are likely to be open, when the vegetation makes walking easy and when it makes it hard. We offer a huge variety of trips so that we can give you the best possible bushwalking experience at any time of year.



www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au rrwillis@internode.on.net Ph: 08 8985 2134



Ecotours and walking in the High Country, East Gippsland and beyond

Are you curious about the natural world? If so, how about immersing yourself in nature and letting us share our love and knowledge of the environment with you.

Let us arrange the accommodation, the driving, the walks and talks. Even your meals appear like magic. Enjoy the companionship of like-minded nature lovers and return home refreshed, informed and invigorated.

For full details of the current program visit the website or contact Jenny

Gippsland High Country Tours
Phone (03) 5157 5556

Email: jennyghct@netspace.net.au
www.gippslandhighcountrytours.com.au

Advanced Ecotourism Certification. Est. 1987

FORESTS FOREVER



EASTER ECOLOGY CAMP



WHEN
3-6 April 2015.

WHERE
Goongerah, 70km north of Orbost.

COST
\$60 for the weekend, \$25 for
one day (concessions available),
under 13s free.

CAMP among Peppermint and Manna
Gums on the Brodribb River.

SPOTLIGHT for wildlife.

EXPLORE ancient and beautiful forests
with expert biologists.

BE INSPIRED to help save East
Gippsland's spectacular forests.

BOOK YOUR SPOT

→ TO BOOK ONLINE or get more info visit:
eastgippsland.net.au/forestsforever,
email forestsforever@eastgippsland.net.au
(preferred) or phone 03 5154 0145.



VICTORIAN
NATIONAL PARKS
ASSOCIATION
Be part of nature

www.vnpa.org.au



www.eastgippsland.net.au