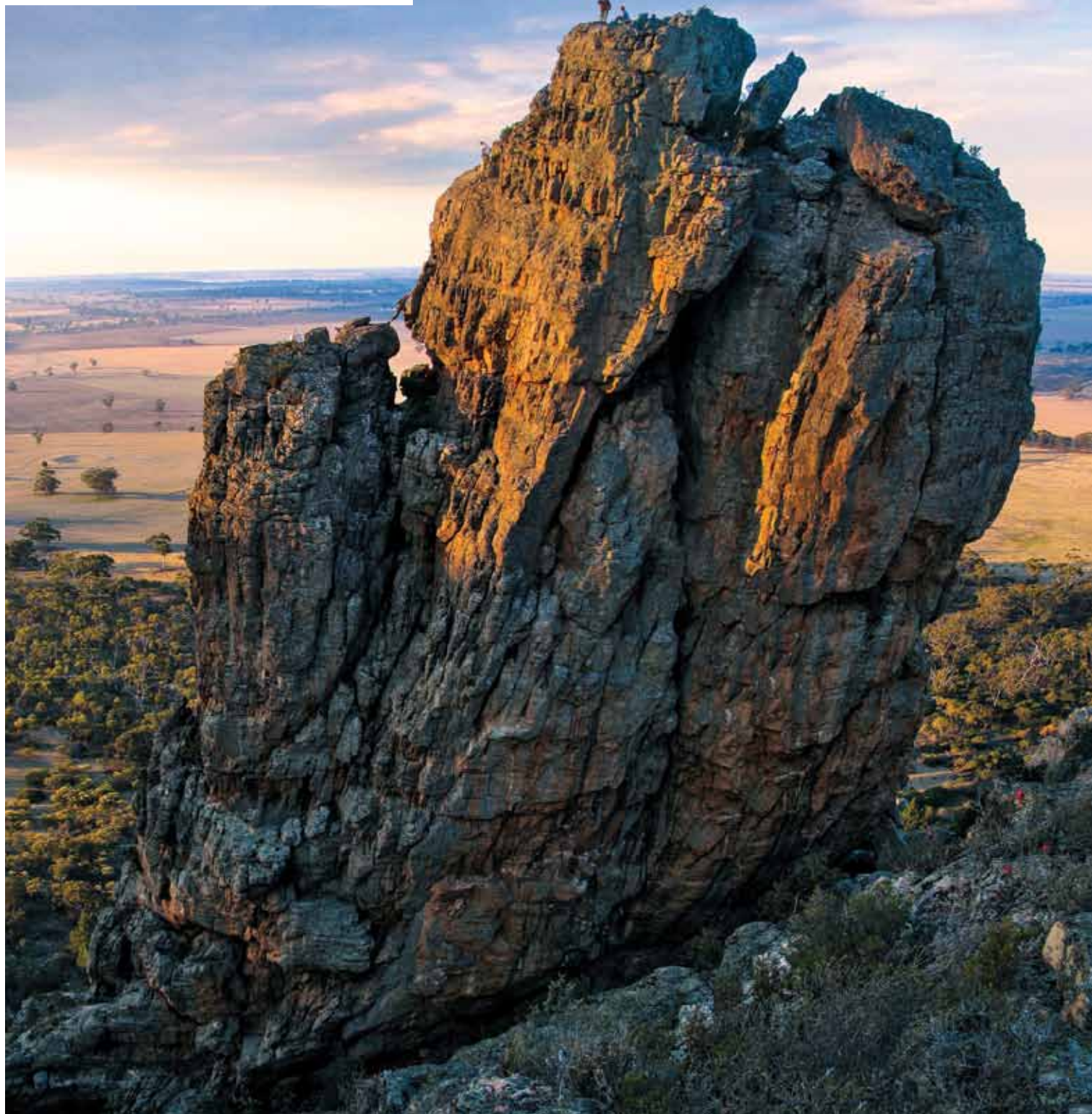


PARK WATCH



TRADITIONAL OWNERS CO-MANAGEMENT
REGIONAL FOREST AGREEMENTS
TRUST FOR NATURE
FIRE ISSUES
MERRI CREEK
MOUNT ARAPILES
TRIBUTES TO BERNIE FOX

JUNE 2016 NO 265



VICTORIAN
NATIONAL PARKS
ASSOCIATION
Be part of nature



Be part of nature

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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

Euan Moore, Matt Ruchel, Philip Ingamells, Chris Smyth.

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- 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.

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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 September 2016 *Park Watch* is 1 August 2016.

DESIGN Mary Ferlin **PRINTING** Adams Print

FRONT COVER

The Pharos at Mt Arapiles, Arapiles-Tooan State Park, is one of the park's many rock climbing attractions. See article on page 26. Photo courtesy Glenn Tempest.

BACK COVER

Eucalypt woodland at Neds Corner Station, looking towards the homestead from near the Murray River. See article on page 30. Photo: Shannon Reddaway, Trust for Nature.

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From the President

We were shocked and greatly saddened to hear that past VNPA president Bernie Fox had passed away suddenly on 12 April. Bernie and his wife Sue Hayman-Fox had been a force for conservation for many years.



Friends, family and VNPA councillors, staff and members attended a celebration of his life in Nhill on 29 April, and there were many fitting tributes.

Bernie's and Sue's more recent work had been based largely in the Wimmera and Mallee, where they were heavily involved in habitat restoration.

Rest in peace, Bernie. You've left a great legacy for conservation, and many people, inspired by you, will continue your work.

The resourcing, legal and bureaucratic processes that govern our protected areas and guide the management of native species are often hard to get excited about. But they are critically important for conservation across the state, and more widely.

With a sound basis for resourcing and managing our natural heritage, we're well on the way to protecting this heritage in perpetuity.

Without adequate resources, parks and reserves become degraded. Invasive species spread and become entrenched. Built infrastructure decays. This degradation results in reduced quality of ecosystem services like water supply, and fewer visitors. In turn, this affects services and employment opportunities in country towns

The VNPA's 'Rescue our Parks' campaign aims to redress this resources shortfall.

There is still much to do. The recent State Budget included \$20 million over four years to revitalise park infrastructure, and we understand there will be additional operational funding from the Parks and Reserves Trust, but Victoria's parks service, severely affected by years of savage staff cuts, now needs at least \$30 million a year in core operational funding just to reverse the damage caused by former state governments.

It's not just public land that has high conservation value. In the most cleared bioregions of Victoria, most of the remaining conservation values are on private land. Trust for Nature plays an important role in the protection of these values, with more than 1,300 covenanted properties. And there are many more areas of remnant native vegetation on private property that should be protected.

Good legal processes are also essential for protecting our natural environment. In recent years governments have

weakened protections under the guise of reducing red tape, and where laws have not been weakened they have been ignored. This is illustrated by the successful cases brought by Environment East Gippsland against VicForests to have old growth and rainforest protected as required by law.

The previous government weakened native vegetation clearing controls to the point of being useless. It is now time to rectify this. The current review of the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act, native vegetation clearing controls and new marine and coastal legislation is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to improve the protection of our natural environment.

The VNPA is actively working to have the current government adequately resource nature conservation and establish robust laws to protect our natural environment long into the future. This work may seem dull compared with some of our other campaigns, but without a firm foundation our conservation estate will be undermined. • PW

Euan Moore, VNPA President



From the Editors

Yes, we know – Michael was supposed to step down as editor after the March issue. But sadly, Chris, who was to produce June *Park Watch*, became ill, and Michael was asked to step up again.

However, Chris had already done quite a bit of work on the June issue,

so it's really been edited jointly. As for the future, we'll just have to wait and see.

So welcome to June *Park Watch*, which has some very interesting and important stories: on Traditional Owner co-management of parks in north-central Victoria, the failure of Regional Forest Agreements, the vital work of Trust for Nature, the future of Merri Creek, and much more.

There are also three articles on walks and one on nature activities for children, and tributes to Bernie Fox, Frank Rouch and Kevin Jones.

As always, thank you to all our contributors, and please keep those stories coming in! • PW

Michael Howes, Chris Smyth

New minister takes responsibility for parks

VNPA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
MATT RUCHEL OUTLINES
THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF
ENVIRONMENT MINISTER LISA
NEVILLE AND WELCOMES NEW
MINISTER LILY D'AMBROSIO.

The VNPA was disappointed to learn about the recent (23 May) Victorian cabinet reshuffle which saw Lisa Neville moved from Environment to take on the Police portfolio (while retaining the Water portfolio).

Although this is probably a promotion, it's with reluctance that the VNPA offers congratulations to Minister Neville, who has achieved some important milestones as Environment Minister and shadow environment minister.

Minister Neville has driven a number of reforms important to the VNPA in the environment portfolio over the last 18 months:

- In May 2015, legislation was passed which banned cattle grazing in the Alpine National Park (or at least closed the loopholes).
- Legislation removing the capacity for 99-year leases in national parks was passed in September 2015.
- The flawed commercial lease for the Point Nepean Quarantine station was dropped in July 2015, and work on a new master plan commenced. This will hopefully be completed by the end of 2016.
- In line with election commitments, work towards a new Marine and Coastal Act has begun, with an expert panel and community reference group established and a discussion paper to be released in June 2016.

- The controversial 5% prescribed burning target for public land has been dropped and replaced by a more sophisticated risk-based approach.
- A State of the Bays report is under way for Westernport and Port Phillip Bays. It will probably be released later this year or early next year.
- A review of native vegetation regulations has commenced and a discussion paper released, with 29 areas of proposed improvement.
- A new statewide biodiversity strategy has been released as a draft, and a review of the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act commenced.
- Fees for camping in national parks and other reserves have been reviewed and many have been reduced.
- Dogs have once and for all been banned on Mornington Peninsula National Park beaches to protect threatened Hooded Plovers and their nests.
- The 2016 state budget offered some relief to Parks Victoria, though it fell well short of what our magnificent parks system needs to survive and flourish. The \$20 million funding boost allocated over four years to revitalise parks infrastructure was a step in the right direction, and is expected to be complemented with additional funding from the Parks and Reserves Trust, but Parks Victoria still needs a significant increase in core operational funding.

Lisa Neville can be proud of her achievements in the portfolio, and in many ways has made more progress in 18 months than some ministers have achieved in whole terms of government. Her interest in and passion for natural areas, particularly

marine and coastal environments, has been refreshing.

Lisa also persevered as ALP shadow minister for the environment during the long haul in opposition under the previous Coalition Government, and helped fight the many backward steps introduced in this time.

Still, one person's loss is another's gain, as the saying goes, and we congratulate, and look forward to working with, Lily D'Ambrosio (MLA for Mill Park), who will take on the new portfolio of Energy, Environment and Climate Change, with a focus on renewable energy, energy efficiency and combating the effects of climate change – and, we hope, protecting and conserving nature.

As we have done for the last 63 years, whoever the relevant minister is we will always, on your behalf, speak up for nature in Victoria. In the next 12 months we will continue to be busy as a conservation group representative on the Forest Industry Taskforce, working to improve marine and coastal management and protect habitats through native vegetation rules, the Biodiversity Strategy and the review of the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act.

We will also continue to build on our 'Rescue our Parks' work, and gain the resources our parks and other conservation areas need to be well managed and healthy into the future. • PW

Support the VNPA!

Please consider making a donation to ensure we can 'give nature a voice' in the coming months.

To donate, visit www.vnpa.org.au, phone 03 9341 6500 or fill in the coupon in this *Park Watch*.



PHOTO (MT ARAPILES) COURTESY GLENN TEMPEST

Restoring the landscape

HELP HONOUR AND CONTINUE **BERNIE FOX'S** WORK AND COMMITMENT BY COMING TO ONE OR MORE OF THESE PLANTINGS!

Coming soon – Hindmarsh!

The 2016 **Project Hindmarsh** planting weekend is fast approaching! It is on **24-26 June** and hosted in Rainbow township. The main planting is at a property north of Lake Hindmarsh.

15,000 indigenous plants, as well as direct seeding, are planned for the site, owned by Murray Robinson. He is establishing large vegetation corridors over the property to encourage wildlife movement.

A teacher at Rainbow P-12 school, Murray has also offered the property as the site for a Victorian Leadership School. These secondary schools, which run nine-week Student Leadership programs, are currently operating in SW Victoria, East Gippsland and the Alps.

Why not ask Murray about his school and wildlife plans in between planting?

Rainbow Recreation Reserve will resemble a tent city during the weekend! Or you can stay in the town's motel, one of its hotels or the caravan park.

Registrations close on **Monday 13 June**. Register through Eventbrite via www.hindmarshlandcare.org.au

For more information contact Hindmarsh Landcare Facilitator Jonathan Starks on **0429 006 936**, or email hln@hindmarshlandcare.org.au

Grow West goes south

Grow West is heading south for its 11th annual Community Planting Day on **Sunday 17 July** (9.30am – 4pm).

This year Grow West is partnering with Western Water at the Melton Recycled Water Plant (Surbiton Park), Pinkerton Landcare and Environment Group (PLEG) and Melbourne Water, all involved in restoration work at the site.

The Recycled Water Plant in Exford was constructed in 1977 to service Melton and surrounds.

In 2009, a \$7 million recycled water plant was opened, designed to produce 5 million litres per day.

Class A recycled water is supplied to Eynesbury and Toolern in purple pipes for toilet flushing and laundry use, gardening and car washing, and firefighting. This has led to a reduction of up to 50% in the use of drinking water.

Western Water won the 2009 UN Environmental Award for Excellence in Sustainable Water Management.

In 2010, a \$2 million biogas plant was opened to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by more than 1800 tonnes annually also generates electricity for use on site.

The site is home to two areas of environmental significance: Pinkerton Forest (35ha) and Werribee River Volcanic Gorge (54ha). With the help



At the 2015 Grow West Planting Day, Bernie Fox (above with Judy Douglas) and the Victorian Mobile Landcare Group ferried volunteers around the site. Bernie was a key player in initiating the event more than 10 years ago. Helena Lindorff says he will be remembered by many for his conservation work and networking.

of PLEG and Melbourne Water, environmental work has been done along 2km of the Werribee River.

Further creation of habitat corridors to connect Pinkerton Forest and nearby Bush's Paddock is underway.

Grow West Environmental Projects Coordinator Helena Lindorff said: "The volunteers at the Grow West Planting Day will help continue the development of these important corridors. This is a unique site with wonderful views of the Werribee River and its escarpments."

The event has been funded through the Greening the West – 1 Million Tree program which is supported by the Australian Government's 20 Million Trees Program. The project is a unique opportunity to make substantial, wide-ranging improvements to the liveability and sustainability of the west.

Grow West is proud to have the VNPA as a long-standing partner, and welcomes members and their families to the Planting Day. Lunch and refreshments will be provided.

Places are limited, so please register online now at www.growwest.com.au. Registrations close on **Sunday 10 July**.

Mali Dunes planting

In honour of Bernie Fox, and to continue the vegetation restoration work he and Sue planned together, VNPA members and friends are invited to a tree-planting day at their north-west Victoria property, Mali Dunes, on **Saturday 9 July 2016**.

There are 7,000 plants to go in, plus a review of images from NatureWatch wildlife monitoring cameras. Take your food plus cooking and camping gear; Sue will organise a meal and hopefully a band on the Saturday night. Stay for the weekend or the week!

For more information, or to register, contact Sue Hayman-Fox mali.dunes@bigpond.com. RSVP by Thursday 16 June for catering purposes.

Boulders in Kooyoora State Park, west of Bendigo. The park is now jointly managed by Traditional Owners and Parks Victoria.

Traditional Owners take on park management

DOUG HUMANN WAS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE VNPA FROM 1990 TO 1997 AND IS AN HONORARY LIFE MEMBER. NOW AS DEPUTY CHAIR OF THE DHELKUNYA DJA LAND MANAGEMENT BOARD, HE WRITES ABOUT A NEW WAY OF LOOKING AT NATIONAL PARKS IN VICTORIA.

In my childhood in the 1960s I slept under canvas at Melville Caves in central Victoria. During the day I roamed the open park-like woodlands of its northern side, the air full of the blossoming wattles and my mind full of who might have lived there.

I've visited what is now Kooyoora State Park many times since, but in November 2015 it was as a member of the State Government appointed Dhehkunya Dja ('healing country') Land Management Board.

Dja Dja Wurrung Traditional Owners, including Parks Victoria ranger staff who are jointly badged as Dja Dja Wurrung Traditional Owners, took us to an extraordinary rock arrangement which evidences Dja Dja Wurrung presence in this landscape and highlights the ongoing attachment of Jaara (Dja Dja Wurrung people) to Djandak (country).

In other parts of Australia, joint and co-management arrangements with Traditional Owners have been in place for decades. It is 40 years since the passage of the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act* (NT), but progress has been slower in Victoria.

A number of Victorian Traditional Owner groups are now forging



Above: Trent Nelson, Dja Dja Wurrung Ranger Team Leader, on Country in north-central Victoria.

Right: Dhehkunya Dja Board members (left to right) Doug Humann, Rebecca Phillips, Jan Mahoney, Graham Atkinson (chair) and Marlene Burchill (absent: Trevor Miles).



their own opportunities for joint management arrangements in the national parks estate alongside wider efforts to build economic and social prosperity and invigorate cultural identity, including renewal of language and cultural practice.

In the case of Dja Dja Wurrung, this opportunity is built on the back of the Victorian Parliament's *Traditional Owner Settlement Act 2010* and the Recognition and Settlement Agreement (RSA) signed by Dja Dja Wurrung and approved by the Victorian Cabinet in 2013.

Joint management is established under the terms of the Act, which provides a

framework that recognises native title in Victoria and allows for parks and reserves to be returned to Aboriginal ownership under a form of land title called Aboriginal Title. Land under this title will continue to be managed as national parks or other forms of public parks.

The RSA achieved resolution of Dja Dja Wurrung claims to 266,532 hectares of Crown Land, recognises Dja Dja Wurrung as Traditional Owners of this country and – among other outcomes – established the Dhehkunya Dja Land Management Board to jointly manage six parcels of land.

Dja Dja Wurrung Traditional Owners have now been granted title to six

PHOTO: DAVID TATNALL

PHOTOS: DOUG HUMANN



PHOTO COURTESY DHELKUNYA DJA BOARD

Aboriginal heritage: grinding stones at Vaughan in the Hepburn area.



PHOTO: DOUG HUMANN

'Upside down country' in Greater Bendigo National Park, the legacy of gold mining and motorbike use.

parks and reserves within their native title settlement area: Greater Bendigo National Park, Kara Kara National Park, Hepburn Regional Park, Kooyoorra State Park, Wehla Nature Conservation Reserve and Paddys Ranges State Park. These parks will be jointly managed and overseen by the Dhehkunya Dja Land Management Board.

It needs to be explicitly stated that the extent of dispossession and the degree of hostility inflicted on Dja Dja Wurrung and other Traditional Owners in Victoria following European occupation was nothing short of horrendous.

Despite this, Dja Dja Wurrung presence remains as a powerful influence, standing with dignity and humility and offering, through the Dhehkunya Dja, Dja Dja Wurrung Country Plan 2014-2034, produced by the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation, a blueprint for the aspirations of both the Corporation and the Dhehkunya Dja Land Management Board.

Dja Dja Wurrung people have lived on their traditional lands for many thousands of years, with dreaming stories that explain the creation of the land and associations with the land. It is this connection which is being continued.

The Dhehkunya Dja Land Management Board has a majority of Dja Dja Wurrung members and has been operating for just 18 months. Another

similarly structured board in East Gippsland with responsibilities over 10 'appointed lands' is the Gunaikurnai Traditional Owner Land Management Board.

The key piece of work that both boards are now engaged in is the production of joint management plans for their appointed lands. For the Dhehkunya Dja Board, work is about to commence on these. Among a range of research, this will involve community consultation before the preparation of a draft for public comment and adoption by the Minister for the Environment.

The Board produced its first Annual Report to Parliament in 2015 and enunciated its **Vision** (the knowledge and culture of the Dja Dja Wurrung people is recognised and incorporated into the management of the Appointed Lands), **Mission** (to provide a platform for the development of the Dja Dja Wurrung people and their lands) and **Values** (including to support Dja Dja Wurrung cultural obligations to look after country and act in good faith for the best interests of Jaara).

It is expected that other similar boards will be established shortly. The work of these boards and the opportunities for increased Traditional Owner activity in national parks and other public lands in Victoria opens a new door for engagement for the VNPA, and for the wider Victorian community. This is welcome and long overdue.

In writing this, and turning more widely, I acknowledge Traditional Owners and the relevant custodians and elders of all the land and sea country in and around Australia and the continuing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to Country. The Indigenous 'owned' estate (in the legal sense of the word) held under various land rights and Native Titles currently covers about 23% of Australia's landmass, not to mention very substantial areas of sea country.

For example, the Wunambal Gaambera people of the northern Kimberley have responsibility for 1.6 million hectares of sea country. The National Reserve System includes the more than 10,000 protected areas in Australia and covers 17.88% of the country; there are now 72 dedicated Indigenous Protected Areas that make up 40% of the National Reserve System.

The lens through which we consider the national parks model has changed. While the principal purpose of parks to conserve, protect and manage the natural and cultural environment, and to engage people through education and research, remains, expanding partnerships which reflect community aspirations and which build a sustainable base to enable those aspirations to be met must be found.

This remains the responsibility of government, but will only succeed with cooperation and support from the wider community. Joint management of Victoria's national parks is a big step in that direction. • PW

REGIONAL FOREST AGREEMENTS: nice idea, total failure

RFAS HAVE BEEN AROUND FOR 20 YEARS, BUT A NEW REPORT SAYS THEY'VE FAILED TO ACHIEVE THEIR AIMS.

In mid-May the National Parks Association of NSW (NPA) launched a new report by their Senior Ecologist Dr Oisín Sweeney, titled *Regional Forest Agreements in NSW: have they achieved their aims?*

In short, the answer is no—far from it.

Regional Forest Agreements are deals between the Commonwealth and State governments that allow for logging in public native forests. There are 10 RFAs currently active in four states: WA, Victoria, Tasmania and NSW. They begin to expire from 2017, with East Gippsland and Tasmania coming first.

The NPA did this analysis because neither Commonwealth nor State governments seem particularly interested in questioning whether RFAs have worked or not. But given the volume of evidence that has accumulated since the signing of the RFAs, failing to consider contemporary issues would be a serious dereliction of duty.

For example, despite the Swift Parrot having just been upgraded to 'critically endangered', governments are committed to simply extending the Tasmanian RFA.

The RFAs were, in essence, designed to create certainty for the logging industry, protect the environment and end social conflict over logging.

Credit where it's due: a lot of people put in a huge effort to make sure the environmental gains from the process were as good as possible, and their efforts secured some of our incredible protected areas.



PHOTO: DAVE GALLAN

The RFAs were designed to reduce conflicts over logging, but tensions still flare up regularly. This was a NSW protest.

But many of those same people will now tell you that the RFAs have been a failure.

Environmental costs

First to the environment: the RFAs accredit native forest logging under the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act* (EPBC Act). This means that logging is not

constantly subject to appraisal under Commonwealth law as to its impact on threatened species or ecological communities.

But accreditation has acted as a loophole to allow impacts that would otherwise be unacceptable to occur legally—and it has been shown to have reduced protection for threatened species.



PHOTO: FRANCES PIKE



PHOTO: LORRAINE BOWER

Logging is now responsible for the greatest loss of canopy on an annual basis in NSW.

Inset: Greater gliders are the latest forest species to be listed as threatened under Commonwealth legislation. Logging is one of the key threats to the species.



PHOTO: DAVE GALLAN

The concept of Ecologically Sustainable Forest Management (ESFM) was key to protecting ecological values while producing timber. ESFM was supposed to ensure that logging did not disrupt ecological processes such as the carbon and water cycles and soil formation, and did not negatively impact on biological diversity.

Unfortunately, the principle of ESFM has been demonstrably, and repeatedly, violated.

For example, in NSW logging is identified as a driver of two Key Threatening Processes: the loss of hollow-bearing trees, and forest eucalypt dieback associated with over-abundant psyllids and bell miners (or bell-miner associated dieback).

Clearfell logging and the loss of hollow-bearing trees are key reasons why the formerly-common Greater Glider has just been listed under the EPBC Act. Research in the Mountain Ash forests of the Victorian Central Highlands has modelled a 92% chance of ecosystem collapse 50 years from now under the status quo.

The NSW *State of Environment Report 2015* shows that logging is now far and

away the largest driver of canopy loss in the state, and logging was a key factor in the identification of eastern Australia as a 'global deforestation front'.

And the most recent Australian State of the Forests report shows an increase in the number of forest threatened species, and an increase in carbon transfer away from native forests. It's a very worrying scenario that our forests are acting as carbon *sources* when we have never been in greater need of carbon *sinks*.

Economic costs

In essence, the wicked problem facing the logging industry is this: the steps necessary to protect the extraordinary biodiversity values of native forests (two RFA regions lie within global Biodiversity Hotspots) make it impossible to produce wood as cheaply as in plantations. Something has to give, and the RFAs have meant that this something is the environment.

But the RFAs haven't delivered for the logging industry either. Statistics from the 2011 census show that forestry and services directly employ 2131 people in NSW—and that's both native and plantation forestry.

A recent report by The Australia Institute estimated that just 600 people are employed in native forestry in NSW. That same report showed that demand for native forest products is steadily declining, and subsidies to the

industry have been \$78 million over the last seven years in NSW alone. That's one way to ensure certainty.

Environment and jobs

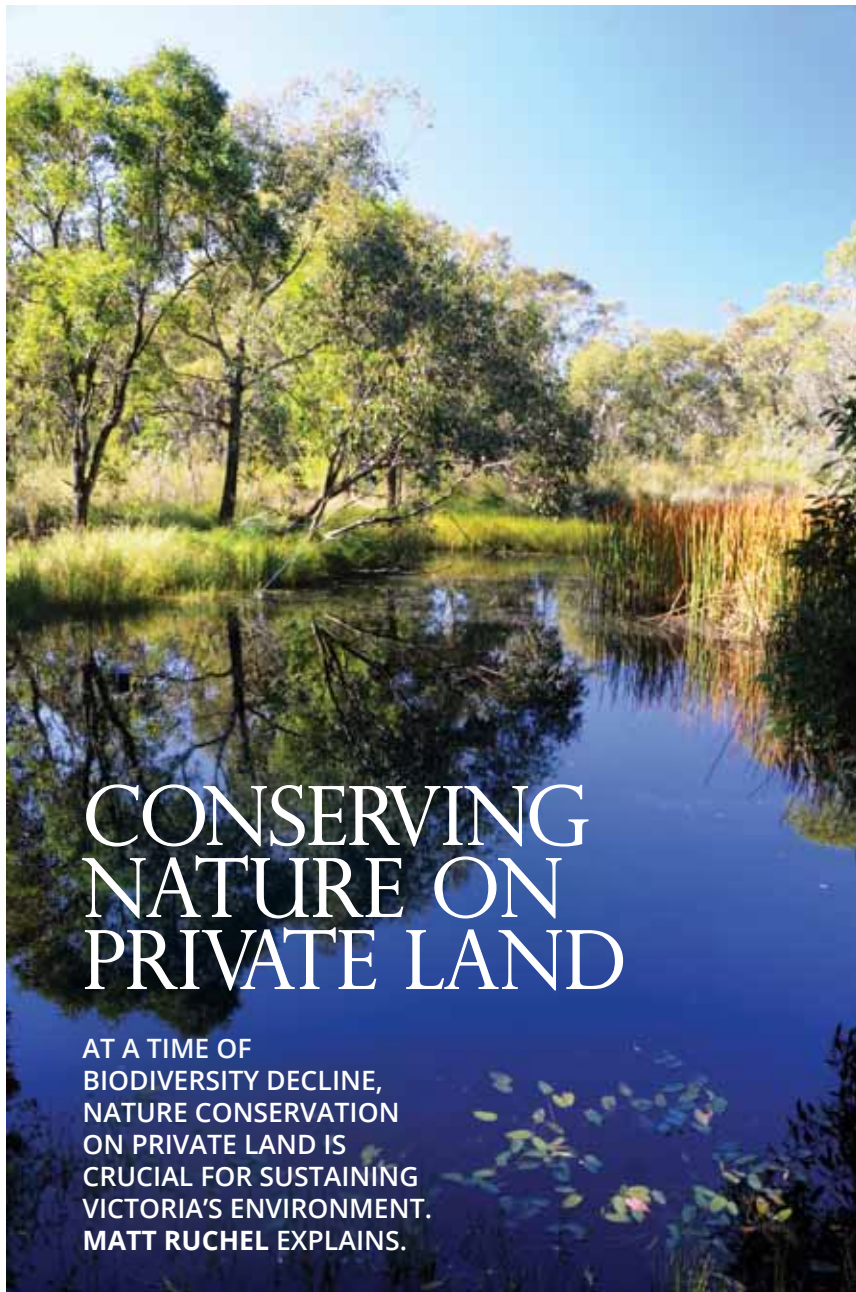
The NPA thinks it's time to grasp the nettle now, commit to a transition out of native forest logging following the expiry of the RFAs, and use forests to develop a new future for regional economies.

How? Well for a start, the potential monetary value of carbon in native forests is vast. Managing forests to maximise carbon sequestration could more than offset any jobs lost by ending logging. And of course this would also help to safeguard water supplies by protecting forested catchments.

But we should also invest in our national parks network. We know that protected areas confer a financial benefit to local government authorities. But nature is also the number one driver of Australia's \$100 billion per year tourist industry. In light of these economic benefits, public investment in protected areas is small and increased investment to grow employment opportunities is justified.

So there are options available that both protect the environment and secure jobs in the plantation industry and in native forest restoration. The numbers speak for themselves.

Our governments purport to be concerned with both fiscal and environmental responsibility. We hope that evidence can trump ideology. • PW



CONSERVING NATURE ON PRIVATE LAND

AT A TIME OF BIODIVERSITY DECLINE, NATURE CONSERVATION ON PRIVATE LAND IS CRUCIAL FOR SUSTAINING VICTORIA'S ENVIRONMENT. MATT RUCHEL EXPLAINS.

PHOTO: D. DONALD, TRUST FOR NATURE

Conservation Covenant-protected property in the Goulburn Broken catchment area.

The five regions with the lowest proportion of native vegetation have more than two-thirds of their area in private land tenure; in four of these more than a third of their EVCs are endangered. Of the half of Victoria's regions that are more than 50% privately owned, all but one have lost more than 50% of their native vegetation and have less than 50% of their remnant vegetation protected.

This analysis shows the importance of private land conservation.

The detailed review undertaken by the VNPA in 2014, *Natural Victoria: Conservation Priorities for Victoria's Natural Heritage* (available on the VNPA website) highlights this problem.

Time to ramp up support

On-title covenants or private protected areas increase the likelihood that remnant or restored habitat will be retained and maintained in the long term. They are critically important in regions where remaining habitat is largely privately owned. In Victoria these covenants are usually administered by the Trust for Nature (formerly the Victorian Conservation Trust), a statutory agency of the Victorian Government.

The Trust is one of Australia's oldest and leading private land conservation agencies. Managed under the *Victorian Conservation Trust Act 1972*, it has 1300 voluntary conservation covenants, protecting more than 59,000 hectares across Victoria, and has purchased and preserved more than

59 properties through its revolving fund. It manages 44 properties that total over 36,000 hectares.

If we are to protect examples of native habitat across the state, we need to dramatically ramp up support for private land conservation and the work of the Trust, particularly in highly cleared private landscapes.

An overall increase in funds for land stewardship is needed, but there are three immediate priorities:

- increase core funding for Trust for Nature to at least \$2 million per annum
- invest in a \$40 million Habitat Revolving Fund for the Future
- provide tax incentives for private land protection.

Although the Trust is essentially a government agency, it has in the past received very little direct state government support (less than \$500,000 per annum) for its role as a custodian of important natural heritage. Importantly the recent State Budget included \$3.1 million over the four years as per the budget, plus supplementary funding of \$1.35 million which, when combined with existing funding, provides for annual core funding of \$1.5 million a year for the next four years.

This is a welcome and important step for the Trust.

Victoria's conservation parks and reserves cover close to four million hectares of public land and form the cornerstone for preserving our unique flora and fauna.

But private land contains some of the most intact vegetated areas of Victoria and more than two-thirds of habitat for threatened species.

Unfortunately only a tiny proportion of agricultural land is managed for conservation: just 0.5% is under a conservation agreement. Activities such as native vegetation protection and revegetation, and livestock exclusion, are occurring on a bare 1-2% of agricultural land.

The least formally protected ecological regions in Victoria have the highest proportions of vegetation loss, endangered ecological vegetation classes (EVCs) and EVCs unrepresented in the reserve system. They also have a high proportion of land in private ownership.

For example, 11 have less than a quarter of their remnant vegetation protected in the park and reserve system. Eight of these have had more than half of their native vegetation cleared, while nine have more than a quarter of their ecological vegetation classes endangered.



PHOTO: D. DONALD, TRUST FOR NATURE

Left: Site visit to Conservation Covenant-protected property in the Goulburn Broken catchment area.

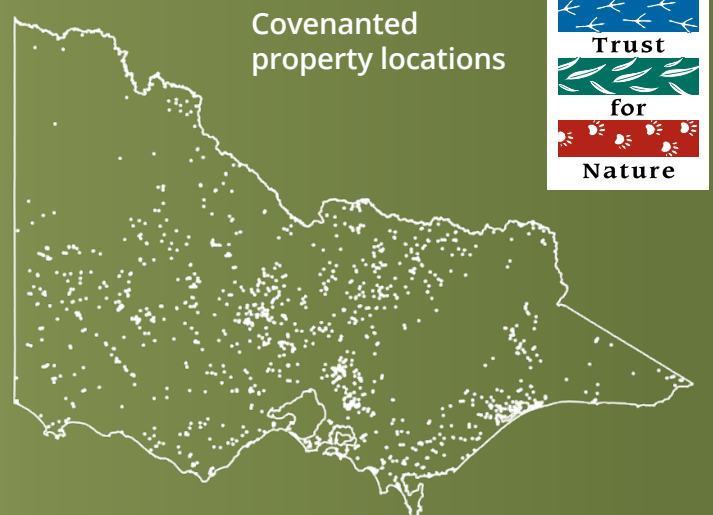
Right: EPBC-listed Red Swainson-pea *Swainsona plagiotropis* at Trust for Nature property Glassons Grassland.



PHOTO: TRUST FOR NATURE

Private land protected for biodiversity <i>As at 30 December 2015</i>	2014 –2015
	27 new conservation covenants
1,352 conservation covenants	1,881 more hectares protected
59,928 hectares protected	91 management plans created for covenanted properties
	90 stewardship visits to landholders
	536 additional landholder visits and contact

Private land conservation achievements of the Trust for Nature.



MAP: TRUST FOR NATURE

Beef up the Trust's revolving fund

The Trust currently operates a revolving fund that achieves conservation in a simple and straightforward way by:

- acquiring land for sale on the real estate market
- designing conservation covenants to protect habitat in perpetuity
- selling land to buyers seeking conservation property
- returning sales proceeds to the fund for further acquisitions.

However, the revolving fund needs a dramatic ramp-up, particularly in the face of climate change and other pressures. The Victorian Government should reallocate from existing funds (e.g. the Sustainability Fund) a capital amount of \$40 million to a returnable non-diminishing Revolving Fund.

Boosting the capital of the revolving fund would set new standards for the capability and reach of such funds in Australia. It would become a primary conservation tool for the protection of thousands of hectares of threatened habitat, a lasting legacy for the Victorian environment.

The revolving fund's expanded capital base would increase opportunities in the real estate market (including important coastal and urban fringe land) and lead to more rapid and high-quality conservation outcomes. It would also increase the area of permanently protected high-priority flora and fauna habitat on private land by about 2,500ha per year, subject to market conditions.

Since its inception, the Trust for Nature Revolving Fund has purchased more than 60 properties, protecting nearly 7,000 ha. With just \$1 million in government funding, through a grant from the Australian Government, it has created a large portfolio of secured conservation property valued at over \$13 million in 2015 prices. Trust for Nature retains capital in firm, redeemable assets of property and cash, visible on the financial record of the State.

Reform of tax deductions and rate relief

Primary producers receive special tax concessions that require commercial use of their property; managing farms for conservation or eco-services does not qualify. There are some capital gains tax concessions for landowners entering into a perpetual conservation covenant, but to receive them the property's market value must decline as a result.

Tax incentives or land tax exemptions for conservation farming, as a form of primary production (supporting ecosystem services), would stimulate conservation investments. Rate relief for conserved land is available in some municipalities and could stimulate covenanting if all municipalities applied it. Most other Australian jurisdictions (apart from Queensland) provide land tax relief for covenanted properties.

A 2013 cost benefit analysis by ACIL Allen Consulting found that the biodiversity value obtained by placing 'new' land under a conservation covenant would, on average, outweigh the value of the land tax revenue foregone if tax changes were adopted for land under permanent covenant.

Victorians should be proud of their government's foresight in creating Trust for Nature over 40 years ago. Its work is more important today than ever. It does an amazing job of leveraging funding from many donors and philanthropy, but the government needs to supply the resources so it can do more, and do it better. • PW

You can help protect Victoria's endangered fauna emblems by making a donation to enable Trust for Nature to purchase property in Yellingbo. See www.trustfornature.org.au/donate.

See page 30 for article on Trust for Nature property Neds Corner Station in north-west Victoria.

The Covenantors

JENNY ROLLAND AND EUAN MOORE WRITE
ABOUT THEIR COVENANTED PROPERTY AT
JILPANGER, WEST WIMMERA.

Our attraction to the woodlands and lake systems of Western Victoria developed from our involvement with Project Hindmarsh. In 2005 we bought our 80ha property near Douglas, 60km SW of Horsham, from the TfN revolving fund. The covenant was established at the time of purchase.

Originally lightly grazed as a 'soldier settlement' property, its sandy soils and intermittent droughts and flooding proved too challenging. The natural vegetation has now recovered to its beautiful mix of open yellow gum woodlands, stringybark heathlands and red gum wetlands.

To date we have recorded 145 species of birds and over 280 of plants across three EVCs; 17 are listed threatened species, including Red-tailed Black Cockatoos, Swift Parrots and Small Milkwort. A full list of mammals, frogs and reptiles awaits dedicated surveys. We adjoin Jilpanger Conservation Reserve and another covenanted property so contribute to linked protected habitat in our area.

It's very satisfying to manage a property for conservation, chiefly from getting to know the wildlife and vegetation,



PHOTO: EUAN MOORE

their interactions, and changes through seasons. There's always something new to discover.

Managing the few feral animals and plants on our property gives us insight into the greater challenges facing the state, and we've established many rewarding networks.

Protecting high conservation value land on private property is essential for the survival of many native species. While current owners may do well, without a covenant this cannot be guaranteed with new owners.

Further protection of land by conservation covenants could be encouraged by the State government providing for uniform rate relief on covenants across all shires. More resources for TfN to provide technical support services and field days for covenanters would also be welcome.

ANN AND BRUCE MCGREGOR'S COVENANTED
PROPERTY IS NEAR BEAUFORT IN THE
VICTORIAN MIDLANDS.

Our property is on the north-facing slopes of the Great Divide, its rocky ridges descending to gentle slopes and creek valleys. There is Herb-rich Foothill Forest of Messmates and Peppermints, with Lowland Forest including attractive Yellow Box and Candlebarks.

Gold mining, timber harvesting and clearing for pasture have been past disturbances but the native grasses and wildflowers remain, and there has been good recruitment of eucalypts in cleared areas since we removed the sheep 12 years ago. The covenant on our property was established in 2008.

We both love the bush and want to help stop further degradation and restore habitat. The biodiversity is amazing, with many colourful fungi and a huge range of invertebrates as well as orchids and beautiful large old trees. Each year we find new species.

We've recorded more than 200 plant species and over 100 birds, including declining woodland species and others that migrate to the area in spring to breed. This bush is special as the home and refuge for many species. It's essential for their future survival.

We're learning more about ecological restoration, and enjoy observing seasonal changes. It's inspiring listening to the Boobook Owls and Owlet Nightjars, and waking up to the dawn chorus.

Australia's biodiversity is unique, and if we don't look after it no one else can or will. A covenant gives reassurance that future



PHOTOS: BRUCE MCGREGOR

Ann birdwatching among the Wallaby Grass and old box trees.



Inset: Retaining old dead trees is essential to ensure nesting sites for woodland birds like these Dusky Woodswallows.

owners will be required to continue protecting and enhancing natural values. It is very difficult to restore nature from scratch; it's much better and easier to protect valuable remnants.

With a conservation covenant, our property is part of Australia's network of protected lands. However, the landholder carries all of the costs. The existing range of government taxes and rates should be simplified and turned into positive incentives to encourage the establishment of more covenants, and support the active management of land to conserve its natural values, including carbon storage. • PW

Fuel reduction burns fail to protect nature

NATURAL SYSTEMS ARE IN TROUBLE ACROSS VICTORIA, AND A SUCCESSION OF FIRE REPORTS BY THE DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT, LAND, WATER AND PLANNING (DELWP) CONFIRMS THAT, SAYS THE VNPA'S PHIL INGAMELLS.

It's true that some Victorian plant species depend on occasional fire, and probably most of our native plant species have evolved mechanisms to survive fire. But frequent and/or unseasonal fire remains a great threat to Victoria's native plants and animals.

For the third year in a row, DELWP's annual *Fuel Management Report* has stated that the department failed to meet its statutory objective to protect Victoria's biodiversity. In the most recent of these reports, two measures were used to assess the impacts of its burn program on our natural areas.

The first, an assessment of 'time since fire' for each ecosystem type, shows that most of Victoria's native bushland lies below each ecosystem's 'tolerable fire interval'. That means, in most of the state, ecosystems will struggle to recover from any additional fire in the near future.

DELWP's burn program is only partly to blame; vast areas of the state have been subject to bushfires in the last 15 years or so. It's a real problem.

The second, more sophisticated, assessment looks at whether an appropriate range of 'fire age classes' currently exists for each ecosystem. It looks at whether we have a suitable range of long-unburnt bush, and medium age classes, through to more recently burnt bits of bush, for each habitat type.

Protecting appropriate growth-stage structures is a well-advised strategy – a precautionary measure in the absence of more detailed studies of how the thousands of different species of plants and animals, etc, cope with and respond to fire.



Before and after a control burn at Gippsland's Providence Ponds Flora and Fauna Reserve.

One idea driving fire management programs has been a belief that, since the 1980s, our increased ability to fight naturally occurring bushfires has resulted in unnaturally high levels of understorey fuel. So if we have lots of planned burns we'll be more able to manage bushfires, and that will be good for public safety and the environment.

But that ignores a number of other factors, such as decades of forestry and, most importantly, climate change.

Researchers have now looked at fire occurrence in south-eastern Australia over the last few decades, and found that weather had a far greater influence on bushfires than fuel levels.

We are going to experience catastrophic fire weather more and more often in the decades ahead. That's a new situation, which won't be solved by old solutions.

Research has also shown (as many have pointed out for a long time now) that fuel reduction is most useful in the immediate vicinity of the assets in need of protection.

We urgently need a radical re-appraisal of fire management. We should move fuel reduction activity close to homes and other infrastructure, and in many instances that will involve private land.

And we should hit fires where they start, by improving our rapid attack capability. We should also reduce ignition possibilities by mandating local energy generation in remote areas, and increasing a strong police presence where firebugs are known to operate.

Changes like that should increase public safety, and also give our native ecosystems a chance through the years ahead. • PW

See next page for some fire impacts.

New fire inquiry!

The Victorian Parliament is holding an "Inquiry into Fire Season Preparedness". The terms of reference include impacts of planned burns on threatened species and ecological vegetation classes. Submissions are due by 17 June 2016.

A glance at fire impacts across Victoria

Mallee

Community surveys found a planned burn in the Murray-Sunset National Park would compromise the largest known population of the threatened Mallee Emu-wren.

The Strathbogies

Post-burn surveys by the local community highlighted tree hollow loss and other damage. DELWP have now adjusted the extent and method of fuel reduction burns there.

Box-Ironbark country

DELWP funded research showed no evidence of ecological benefit from fuel reduction burns, and an urgent need to protect long-unburnt woodland areas.

Little Desert National Park

Burns in the Wimmera and Mallee have been greatly reduced, but the Malleefowl, and other species that rely on long unburnt areas, are still in trouble.

South-west Victoria

Canopy tree scorch from fuel reduction burns has undermined work by hundreds of volunteers to save the endangered South-eastern Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo.

Otway parks and forests

The Strategic Bushfire Risk Assessment & Strategy Selection Project, an educational program and survey of local community attitudes, showed people favoured ecological priorities for burning in the broad landscape.

Mornington Peninsula

Weedy Polygala and tea-tree surrounding houses make fuel reduction difficult. Rapid attack capability in areas like this is essential.

The target to burn 5% of Victoria's public land each year has gone, but burn planners are only slowly acting on evidence of ecological damage across the state.

Foothill forests

DELWP funded research shows little impact of burns on the foothill forests, but the research failed to look at fragmented areas, or assess impacts on threatened species.

Gippsland

Local community action has deferred some burns in valuable old forests in Mitchell River National Park. Other burns throughout Gippsland, such as at Providence Ponds, are being challenged.

East Gippsland

A recent DELWP study showed that "planned burns unambiguously and substantially increased the collapse probability of hollow-bearing trees." The felling of a great many 'dangerous' trees along roadsides throughout Victoria is further reducing the range of hollows for wildlife.

Central Highlands

Local communities have been asking for a review of 'Fire Related Threatening Processes within Kurth Kiln Regional Park', and are questioning burns elsewhere.

Dandenong Ranges

Private bushfire bunkers, and a local rapid attack capability, may be the best ways to save lives in places with dense forest and narrow winding roads.

The Prom

Most vegetation communities at Wilsons Promontory National Park, as for most of Victoria's public land, are far below tolerable fire intervals.

Prom island cruises

SHOWCASING THE PROM, OR JUST ANNOYING SEALS AND PEOPLE? PHIL INGAMELLS QUESTIONS PLANS FOR CRUISES AT WILSONS PROMONTORY.

It's a familiar story. A new tourism venture is planned for a park, with great promises to support nature conservation, but the impacts are real.

A month or so ago, a Tasmanian tourism company won a government tourism development grant, enabling it to build three amphibious boats, each holding 32 people, for 'wilderness cruises' at Wilsons Promontory National Park.

Pennicott Wilderness Tours plans to run two-hour boat tours from Tidal River around the islands of the south-western tip of the Prom, featuring Kanowna Island's seal colony and the dramatic Cleft Island, more commonly known as Skull Rock.

The amphibious boats (which don't need a jetty), will potentially leave the north (Tidal River estuary) end of Norman Bay beach about every 45 minutes at peak operation.

Pennicott has been operating for some years in Tasmania, where they use fast vessels, roaring spectacularly close to shore in their Bruny and Tasman Island cruises, slowing down from time to time while aspects of the coast and wildlife are explained to participants. Trips cost in the region of \$135 for an adult.

They promise a lot: carbon neutral operation, a percentage of profits to help conservation programs, no new infrastructure and 30 new local jobs over five years. It will be, they say, a rare chance for visitors to experience the Prom's marine parks.

But there are problems.

Pennicott's Tasmanian tours rely a lot for their excitement on travelling close to the coast, and later edging almost within reach of a seal colony.



MAP COURTESY PENNICOTT WILDERNESS JOURNEYS



PHOTO: JOE SHEMES

A Pennicott Tours boat speeds along very close to the Tasmanian coast.

But Victoria's boating regulations mean boats must keep below 5 knots (about 10 km/hr) within 200 metres of the coastline.

And the Management Plan for Wilsons Promontory Marine National Park only allows boats to come 50 metres from Kanowna Island, extending to 200 metres during the seal breeding season (November to January).

There are issues on land too.

The three 12.5 metre long, 32-seat amphibious boats will be housed in Tidal River's park maintenance area, trundling through the campground every morning and back again in the evening. They will sit on the beach till they launch from the area at the mouth

of Tidal River, the most popular part of the beach for families.

And the target audience is not just the Prom's campers, but day visitors. Car parking areas are already overfilled in peak visitor season, and the increasing number of day visitors since entry fees were abolished is putting great pressure on the park.

While Pennicott's record is good (they have won a stack of awards for ecotourism), they clearly have expansion plans for anything they do at the Prom.

The island cruise outlined above is an 'initial offering,' and their injection of funds into the regional economy will be 'growing annually.'

Is the Prom the right place for this? If the purpose is to showcase the Marine National Park, maybe hiring snorkels and flippers out, with guided visits to good safe dive spots, would give people a better experience of the Prom's underwater treasures, with less impact.

And places like Phillip Island and its seal colony, or the Twelve Apostles, which are geared to handle high numbers of tourists, might be better venues for the cruises.

Pennicott's are yet to win a permit to operate this venture. That will come from Parks Victoria, which backed them for the grant. • PW



What feather is that?

SECRETARY OF WOMBAT FORESTCARE **GAYLE OSBORNE** SAYS THAT BIRD FEATHERS OFFER IMPORTANT CLUES ABOUT THE WILDLIFE OF THE WOMBAT FOREST.

We are all drawn to the beauty of bird feathers. They can be exquisitely patterned and coloured, and in a multitude of shapes and sizes. Feathers have been used in all cultures for decoration and ceremony.

The mystery of flight also captures our imagination. The flight of birds can seem miraculous, especially watching birds of prey soaring in wind currents. Historically, people tried to imitate wing structures in order to fly, but it's the design of the feather that enables highly sophisticated flight.

Discarded feathers show that a bird has passed through the landscape. Clumps of feathers can mean that a bird has fallen victim to an animal or bird of prey.

Some feathers are easy to identify. Those of Crimson Rosellas, usually the blue wing feathers, are frequently seen in the forest. A Wedge-tailed Eagle feather seen near Spargo Creek was obvious because of its size. Kookaburra feathers, with their distinctive orangey bands, are also familiar.

So where do you turn for assistance if you see unusual feathers?

North Americans have a wonderful publication, *Bird Feathers, A Guide to North American Species*, with photos of feathers for all their birds: primary, secondary and trailing secondary wing feathers, tail feathers, breast feathers, a total of 19 categories.

I hadn't realised how complex and fascinating feather identification could be. We'd welcome a guide for Australian birds!

A pair of Peregrine Falcons nests in the Wombat Forest in the top of a dead tree that is now only a very tall stump. After the young had fledged, we examined the surrounding area. There was a mound of Galah feathers, some feathers from Crimson Rosellas, and also some we couldn't identify (see image).

We sought help from a number of experienced bird watchers who puzzled for quite some time and separately came up with the Cockatiel. This placed the bird outside its known natural range and it's thought to have been an escaped pet. Captive-bred Cockatiels have a greater range of feather colours than 'natural' ones; it was this difference that made the identification difficult.

Powerful Owls inhabit the Wombat Forest, and we have been collecting found feathers to send to a research project

for DNA testing. Their feathers have barring patterns that are common to most owls and hawks. The wing feathers also have a velvety nap that allows for silent flight.

Juvenile Powerful Owls emerge from their nest hollows with snowy white chest feathers. It takes about six months for them to achieve the dark chevrons of adult plumage.

Many birds moult during later summer and early autumn. This process is the periodic replacement of feathers. Old feathers are gradually shed and new ones (pin feathers) grow to replace them.



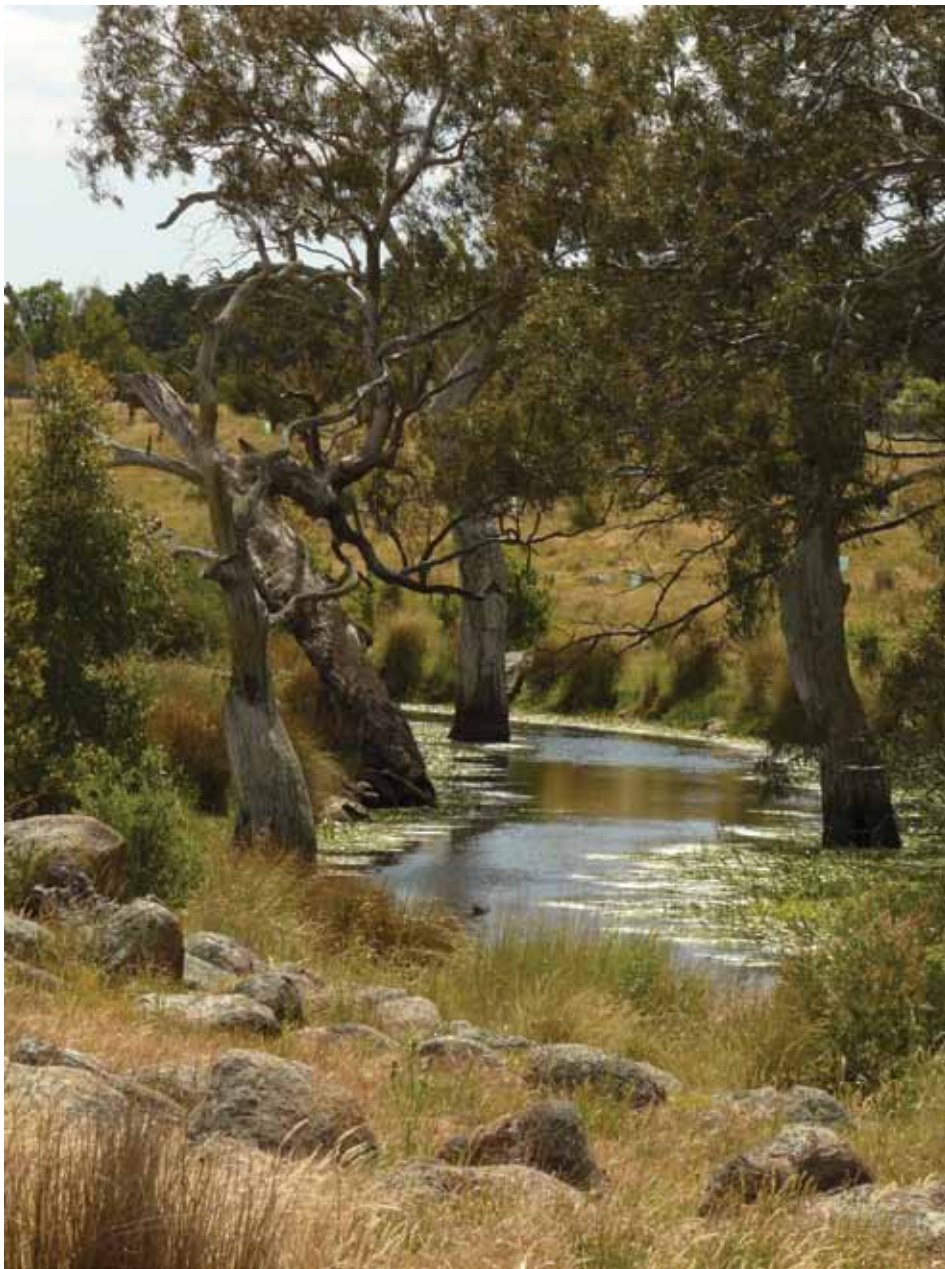
Juvenile Powerful Owls in Wombat Forest.

PHOTO: GAYLE OSBORNE

Like scats and tracks, feathers are clues to the species that inhabit the Wombat.

Wombat State Forest forms a significant part of the only largely intact native vegetation in the central Victorian region and has many important flora and fauna species. State Forests are managed primarily for their resources, which can include timber harvesting and mining, whereas parks are managed for nature conservation.

The community group Wombat Forestcare is asking the State Government to set up a Victorian Environment Assessment Council (VEAC) investigation into the status of the public land in the area. • PW



Merri Creek on private property, Merriang district.

Marran Baba Parklands encompass another 25% of the creek's length, from the Ring Road to Craigieburn Road. But 10 years after Parks Victoria released a draft concept plan, much of the implementation is still languishing. Public land is discontinuous; it's not legally possible to walk the distance, and cycling is out of the question as there's only a fragment of a path.

This leaves 50% of the length of Merri Creek –from Craigieburn to Wallan – still waiting for a coherent park plan. Wallan, once a rural township, now sits within Melbourne's 'Northern Growth Corridor', which covers most of the upper Merri catchment. Eventually it will house 300,000 new residents.

A new park

In the absence of a state government vision, community-based environmental groups have developed a concept for the **Greater Wallan – Merri State Park**. The aim is to conserve nature and create a green spine linking Wallan to inner Melbourne.

It's a once in a life-time opportunity to create a major park that will benefit all Melbourne residents, attract visitors and protect natural and cultural heritage.

The natural values of the upper Merri include the EPBC-listed communities of Natural Temperate Grassland, Grassy Eucalypt Woodland and Seasonal Herbaceous Wetlands. EPBC-listed species include the Growling Grass Frog, Golden Sun Moth, Curly Sedge, Matted Flax-lily and more.

A wildlife habitat and movement corridor will sustain migratory and resident native species.

Landscape features such as four volcanic cones and the stony rises of the basalt plain are of significant geological value. And the entire landscape is of immense cultural value to the Wurundjeri Traditional Owners, containing a multitude of artefact sites that tell us how important and how well-used the Merri Valley was in traditional times.

Vision for a green spine

LUISA MACMILLAN, MANAGER OF THE MERRI CREEK MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE, DESCRIBES AN EXCITING PLAN FOR A NEW GREATER WALLAN – MERRI STATE PARK.

Not so long ago Rebecca Mayo, artist and passionate Friends of Merri Creek member, began planning her seven-day, 100km walk along Merri Creek, from its headwaters near Heathcote Junction to the Yarra confluence in Abbotsford.

At the time she had no idea how hard it would be to actually get access to the creek.

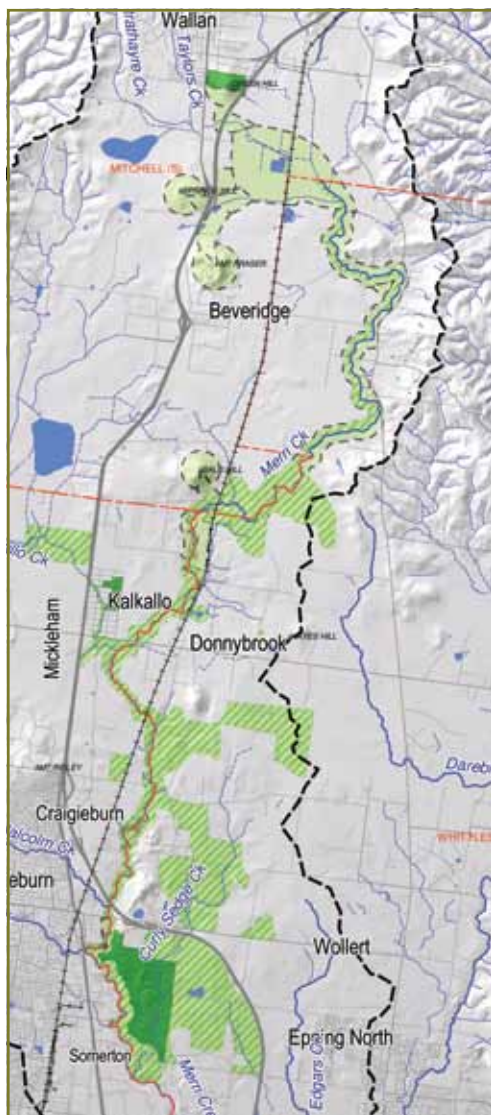
Many Merri Creek freehold titles go all the way to the creek bank. Rebecca says there are more than 25 private landholders along the upper reaches of Merri Creek. She approached many for permission to walk their stretch of creek

but not all agreed. It meant some major detours and other barriers. On one day alone she had to climb 25 fences.

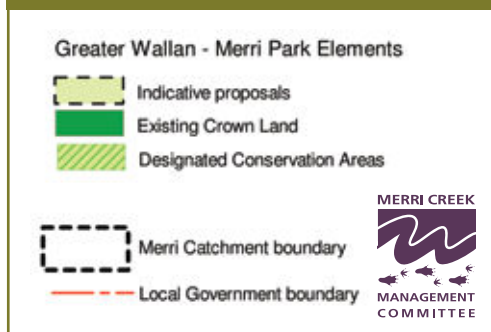
If you're familiar with inner urban Merri Creek you'll know the much loved Merri Creek Parklands and the Shared Trail, the hard-won result of community activism to transform former wasteland to parklands. These Parklands follow a quarter of the creek's length, from its confluence with the Yarra to the Metropolitan Ring Road.

Further upstream, access gets progressively more difficult. The

PHOTO © BRIAN BAINBRIDGE



Draft Greater Wallan-Merri State Park concept (February 2016)



Components of the park

Wallan: At the park's northern end, a major destination node on part of the former Hernes Swamp would be created. Re-established wetlands of national significance would support thousands of ducks, geese, swans and other wildlife. It would also be a magnet for outdoor recreation such as picnicking and bike-riding, as well as environmental education and eco-tourism.

River Red Gums at Amaroo in the Merri corridor.

The important roles of the swamp in buffering floods and improving water quality would be enhanced to meet the growing challenges of urbanisation and climate change.

On the southern edge of Wallan, the park would embrace the designated inter-urban break between Wallan and Beveridge, flood-prone land unsuitable for development, part of the soon-to-be-redundant Wallan Sewage Treatment Plant, and endangered Seasonal Herbaceous Wetland to the southeast.

A Regional Trail Hub: The Wallan end of the park would connect with multiple trails: to the south leading to Melbourne, north and west along the five creek tributaries of the Merri, and upstream to the Dividing Range and regional Victoria via the planned Heathcote-Wallan rail trail.

Four volcanic cones: Green Hill, Spring Hill, Mt Fraser and Bald Hill are striking landscape features of the upper Merri catchment and the source of the basalt rock that underlies the area. The volcanic cones would be protected in the park and linked with open space corridors and trails.

Merri Creek Habitat Corridor: Heading south from Wallan, Merri Creek forms a major north-south biodiversity corridor, providing important habitat and connectivity. The State Government has designated a special corridor along the creek to protect the endangered Growling Grass Frog, though not necessarily as public land. This needs to become public land and part of the park.

Additional land needs to be added to the overly narrow frog corridor in places such as Merriang, next to a proposed inter-modal freight terminal, and the Cloverton town centre. This would enhance the functionality of the frog habitat, increase the landscape value and enhance the potential for nature recreation.

Other designated Conservation Areas already form a logical part of the State Park concept and link to the Merri Creek corridor spine as part of a habitat corridor network. These include native grassland, ancient River Red Gum woodlands and endangered fauna species. We need a commitment from the state government to acquire all these areas and resist pressures to reduce the size of the Conservation Areas.

To the south: The Greater Wallan - Merri State Park would connect to the proposed Marran Baba Parklands south of Craigieburn East Road and to the existing Merri Creek bushland and trail corridor through the northern suburbs.

Rebecca Mayo is already dreaming of the 20th anniversary of her 2013 walk. Let's work together to ensure a walk along Merri Creek in 2033 is free of fences and passes through a protected, highly-valued and well-managed landscape. • PW

The concept for a Greater Wallan - Merri State Park was developed by the Wallan Environment Group (President rob.eldridge.au@gmail.com 0414 399 954), Friends of Merri Creek (merricreek@bigpond.com) and Merri Creek Management Committee (admin@mcmc.org.au). Contact any of these groups if you'd like to assist with the campaign.

MAP COURTESY MCMC



PHOTO ©MCMC

Two of the panels from the Merri Creek exhibition currently touring public libraries in the Merri catchment.

Exhibition celebrates Merri Creek

The passionate members of the Friends of Merri Creek, with support from the Merri Creek Management Committee (MCMC), are celebrating 40 years of protecting, rehabilitating and restoring the creek corridor with an exhibition that is touring the catchment's public libraries.

The exhibition features large-scale graphic panels that illustrate the astounding transformation of the much-loved creek, which flows from Wallan southwards through Melbourne's northern suburbs to join the Yarra in Fairfield.

MCMC President Ann McGregor says the milestone is a great opportunity to reflect on how far the Merri Creek had come.

MCMC, a partnership between community groups and local councils, was the first management committee of its kind, and the collaboration between key stakeholders has led to far greater achievements for the creek's rehabilitation.

The public exhibition will travel to all six municipalities along the Merri Creek over 2016. You can see reduced versions of the panels online at www.mcmc.org.au.

A volunteer working group organised the exhibition. Funding support was provided by Melbourne Water, Clifroy Community Bank branch of Bendigo Bank, and the Merri Creek Environment Fund. • PW

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WORKING TOGETHER

Community action to reclaim Merri Creek



By the 1970s, the Merri Creek in the northern suburbs was in a bad state. But the local community recognised its potential to provide valuable green space, and began taking collective action to effect change.

CAMPAINING TO PROTECT THE CREEK

Plans to construct a freeway and to line the Merri valley with concrete from Clifton Hill to Clifton Hill spurred the community into action. Strong opposition led to the freeway reservation being removed south of Ball Street first, and then south of Melbourne Road in the late 1980s. It took a major campaign from 1977 to 2002, spearheaded by Friends of Merri Creek, to re-route the Hume Freeway-Creswick Road bypass away from Merri Creek.

A line of pylons for a high voltage powerline from Brunswick to Richmond was proposed to run partly along the Merri Creek valley. The local history led to a State Government Inquiry in 1988-1989, and resulted in the powerline being directed underground, along another route.

MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN

The Merri Creek Coordinating Committee was formed in December 1979, when local councils and community groups came together with the shared goal of rejuvenating the Creek. In 1980, it published one of the first guides to local indigenous plants in Victoria. Indigenous plants are used exclusively in revegetation projects along Merri Creek.

The Coordinating Committee also commissioned a design study for the Merri Path, a paved trail for pedestrians and cyclists from Clifton Hill to Melbourne Road. This opened up public access and provided a focus for controlling improvement of Merri Creek and its parklands. In 1986, the Australian Bicentennial Program gave the Melbourne & Metropolitan Board of Works (now Melbourne Water) \$1 million for Merri Creek. The grant was used to build paths and pedestrian bridges, and for revegetation works by a specialist team.

The Coordinating Committee was succeeded by Merri Creek Management Committee in 1989. Collaboration and cooperation with many partners continue to restore and protect the natural heritage of the Creek today.



Gandhi said, "be the change you want to see in the world". Revegetation work on Edgars Creek and our community: that's the world I want to see and the world I want my kids to see.

— David Pascoe, President, Friends of Edgars Creek, a tributary of the Merri.



"My involvement with restoring Merri Creek goes hand-in-hand with my own personal restoration. It is such a joy to have made a small contribution to improving the environment. My favourite place on the Merri is Galada Tamboore, a spectacular site where I can feel the spirit of the place."

— Ray Radford, Secretary of Friends of Merri Creek since 1996.

Planting trees (here at Hindmarsh last year) is great, but far from the only important work environment groups carry out.

Inquiry report a door-stop

VNPA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR MATT RUCHEL LOOKS AT THE RECENT FEDERAL INQUIRY INTO THE REGISTER OF ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANISATIONS.

In one of the last sessions before Federal Parliament went into election mode, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on the Environment tabled its final report on the Inquiry into the Register of Environmental Organisations.

This was the outcome of a referral from Environment Minister Greg Hunt, on the back of what can best be called a media frenzy around alleged 'lawfare' and 'environmental vigilantism' by environment groups.

If implemented, the report's recommendations would at best add a whole lot of additional red tape to already stretched environmental charities. At worst, they could be seen as a clear attack on civil society as a whole.

The report was not unanimously supported. Dissenting reports came from the committee's ALP members and from Liberal Jason Wood, MHR for La Trobe (Victoria).

While the bulk of the recommendations are administrative and likely to lead to more red tape, two (numbers 5 and 6) are a clear over-reach. Both were rejected by the ALP members and Mr Wood.

No. 5 recommends "...that legislative and administrative changes be pursued by the Australian Taxation Office to require that the value of each environmental deductible gift recipient's annual expenditure on environmental remediation work be no less than 25 per cent of the organisation's annual expenditure from its public fund."

Essentially advocacy, legal representation, research, community education and environmental monitoring are not counted as 'remediation'. The committee's report offers the following definition: "... activities that should qualify as remediation work include revegetation,

wildlife rehabilitation, plant and animal pest control, land management, and covenanting".

The dissenting ALP report from Andrew Giles, the Hon. Mark Butler, Sharon Claydon, the Hon. Mark Dreyfus and Tony Zappia is scathing on this point:

"Despite the efforts of government members, no disinterested evidence was adduced in support of the proposition that a distinction should be drawn between so-called 'on-ground' environmental activities on the one hand, and advocacy, on the other.

"In these circumstances, the Labor members of the committee find it extraordinary that government members have recommended to, in effect, constrain the capacity of environmental organisations to engage in advocacy work. We completely reject this undemocratic proposition. Citizens should be supported to question government decision-making and corporate power, not manoeuvred into silence by legislative and administrative action.

"The weight of evidence rejects the premise, advanced by government members, that there exists a dichotomy between advocacy and 'on-ground' work. The evidence instead shows that it will increase red tape and treat environmental organisations differently to other not-for-profit organisations."

Recommendation 6 calls for "... administrative sanctions [to] be introduced for environmental deductible gift recipients [DGRs] that encourage, support, promote, or endorse illegal or unlawful activity undertaken by employees, members, or volunteers of the organisation or by others without formal connections to the organisation"

Jason Wood notes in his dissenting report: "...drafting laws or regulations would be very complex and could only practically work if a DGR at the board or committee level made a decision to use violence or damage to property. In this case I would support sanctions against the DGR, however I also believe this scenario would be very unlikely and serious offences would more likely be made by individuals on a random basis."

He also states: "... It should be noted that it was due to environmental activists, through their efforts and through the use of a blockade, that major environmental disasters have been prevented. An example would be the Franklin River in Tasmania..."

The ALP members note: "Given the nature of many environmental organisations is based on volunteer networks and promotes inclusive environments with large groups of people, the extent to which this recommendation could be implemented is questionable."

While the VNPA has a clear organisational policy against undertaking 'illegal activity' as part of its operations, it is impossible for the Association to account for what members or volunteers do in their own time.

This report seems to be a relic from the Abbot Government's divisive style, which we have seen does not go down well in Australia. Recent one-term governments in Queensland and Victoria attest to this.

Let's hope the coming federal election sets the stage for some different political styles. Either way, implementing the recommendations from this report should be ruled out by all major parties.

The document might find its best use as a Canberra door-stop or draught blocker. • PW



PHOTO: STEVE HEMPHILL

Research roundup

CHRIS SMYTH PRESENTS
THE LATEST NEWS ON
NATURE RESEARCH!



PHOTO: DAVID PAUL, MUSEUM VICTORIA

Smoky Mouse (Pseudomys fumeus).

Smoky mice hanging in there

Research by Museum Victoria and Parks Victoria has shown that the Smoky Mouse, one of Victoria's most endangered native mammals, persists in an isolated population in the western section of Grampians NP (Gariwerd).

The mice have been hanging on there for more than 40 years in a small area of the Victoria Range despite substantial impacts from drought, feral predators and bushfires.

In 2012, 28 Smoky Mice were found in one drainage basin of the Victoria Range. During the previous 40 years, fewer than 40 had been recorded from across the entire range.

But in 2013 a fire devastated every site where Smoky Mice had been recorded. Numbers dropped to nine that year and three in 2014. However, surveys in 2015 found an increase to seven, and other sites showed similarly high survival – 24 were detected across four sites.

The mouse's survival is testament to the value of Parks Victoria's predator control program, Grampians Ark, for reducing the impact of feral predators in the area.

Even so, ongoing surveys are needed to better estimate the number of Smoky Mice and to track populations while they are still present. In the absence of regular surveys, Smoky Mice may have completely disappeared in other areas where they were previously recorded, including the Otways, the ACT and far East Gippsland.

The results of the study were published in the CSIRO journal *Wildlife Research*.

Happy and healthy people in wildlife-friendly cities

Research by the Australian Research Council's Centre of Excellence for Environmental Decisions has shown that Australia's urban landscapes offer opportunities to marry wellbeing and environmental objectives.

The researchers have identified four key considerations that will promote biodiversity and the physical and psychological benefits attached to it in urban areas. These are discussed in their report *Key lessons for achieving biodiversity sensitive cities and towns*.

1. Consider the wildlife impact of urban sprawl into adjacent habitats: The effects of urbanisation on wildlife vary, but are likely to extend beyond 250 metres.

2. Enhancing urban greenspace creates biodiversity gains: Landscaping green space with shrubs, rocks, logs and trees can create miniature biodiversity hotspots where animals can thrive.
3. Manage large old trees for long-term sustainability: A single large tree in a suburb or park results in the same accumulation of bird species as the addition of many small and medium trees.
4. Use education and engagement to connect local residents with nature and raise awareness: Promoting urban green space and reserves offers an opportunity to connect residents with nature and promote stewardship of the local environment.

Women have lower mortality rates in cities with vegetation cover

A study from Harvard's T.H. Chan School of Public Health and Brigham & Women's Hospital has found that women who lived in the greenest surroundings had a 12% lower overall mortality rate than those living in homes in the least green areas.

Improved mental health, measured through lower levels of depression, was estimated to explain nearly 30% of the benefit from living around greater vegetation. Increased opportunities for social engagement, higher physical activity, and lower exposure to air pollution may also play an important role.

Associations between higher amounts of greenness and lower mortality were strongest for respiratory-disease and cancer mortality. Women living in areas with the most vegetation had a 34% lower rate of respiratory disease-related mortality and a 13% lower rate of cancer mortality compared with those with the least vegetation around their homes.

These more specific findings were consistent with some of the proposed benefits of greener areas, including that they may buffer air pollution and noise exposures and provide opportunities for physical activity.

The research was published in the journal *Environmental Health Perspectives* and is available at www.ehponline.org/15-10363.

Tracking Melbourne's Powerful Owls

Deakin University scientists are using GPS technology to monitor how Melbourne's Powerful Owls make use of urban landscapes. They hope this will help reveal how to conserve Australia's largest owl (*Ninox strenua*), which comes out when the lights go out in restricted areas of Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane.

Project supervisor Associate Professor Raylene Cooke said apex predators like Powerful Owls are critical components of our ecosystem, and working out how to conserve and maintain them was important to ensure the future health of the entire system.

"They are generally associated with parks and reserves, making a living eating the many possums that also call the city their home. They have also occasionally been shown to successfully breed in some urban reserves, but only if there is an enormous tree hollow – a very rare urban resource," said A/Prof. Cooke.

"How much time do they spend using suburban backyards and other urban areas? Answering this question is critical to developing better urban planning guidelines for the conservation and enhancement of their populations."

Melbourne residents who know of some Powerful Owls can report them via BirdLife Australia's website: www.birdlife.org.au/projects/powerful-owl-project

Value of Australia's natural capital on rapid rise

The Australian Bureau of Statistics has estimated the total value of Australia's natural capital - land, mineral, energy and timber resources – at \$5,836 billion, almost double what it was in 2006.

Land now makes up 81% of the value of Australia's environmental assets and was valued at \$4,722 billion at 30 June 2015.

The ABS identified some positive trends in how Australians have responded to environmental pressures while maintaining economic growth, but the news was mixed.

While the economy grew by 71%, water consumption dropped by 16% between 1996-97 and 2013-14. However, waste generated in Australia grew at a much faster rate than the economy, increasing by 163% in the same period.

You can find all the details in Australian Environmental Economic Accounts, 2016 (cat no. 4655.0), available from the ABS website www.abs.gov.au • **PW**

Planned landscaping can minimise the risks associated with large old trees, which are vital as habitat.



PHOTO: KAREN IKIN



CITIZEN SCIENCE

A two-way street

BIODIVERSITY COORDINATOR **MICHAEL CINCOTTA** OUTLINES
CITIZEN SCIENCE PROJECTS IN THE LA TROBE WILDLIFE SANCTUARY.

*Brindley Backwater in the
La Trobe Wildlife Sanctuary.*

**The moon is bright and the sky
clear as cool air descends and twilight
merges with the night.**

A budding citizen scientist absorbs the sounds infiltrating the urban bush setting. The hum of a co-generation power plant and nearby traffic seems dulled by the cacophony of frogs and the momentary call of a boobook owl.

Micro-bats stream out of a nesting box one by one, 49 in total, nearly colliding with their observer. She maintains eye contact in the fading light, avoiding the use of a torch so as to not interfere with their nocturnal vision. She then startles a kangaroo that bounds off into the darkness.

Where is she? La Trobe Wildlife Sanctuary, La Trobe University's 'Outdoor Laboratory' in Bundoora.

The sanctuary was established back in 1967 as a flora and fauna restoration project covering around seven hectares. Since then, it has grown to around 30 ha and now combines remnant Red Gum Grassy Woodland and reconstructed habitats that include woodlands, grasslands and wetland ecosystems.

This is valuable habitat in an otherwise suburban desert, and the sanctuary is linked to other large tracts of remnant grassy woodland, such as Gresswell Forest and Gresswell Hill Nature

Conservation Reserves, by the revegetated Gresswell Habitat Link.

The primary aim of the sanctuary is to offer opportunities for learning about indigenous flora and fauna through engagement with the community. It's a very flexible learning place, with primary, secondary and tertiary student visits, Friends group working bees and volunteer programs.

In 2002 the sanctuary was gazetted under a conservation covenant through Trust for Nature. With this covenant and recent infrastructure improvements – a new office, predator-proof fencing, stormwater improvements and a lake observation deck – the sanctuary is more accessible and better protected than ever before.

Historical records suggest that it has been used by up to 237 species of birds, 26 of native mammals, 26 reptiles, 13 frogs and at least 14 species of native fish, many of which are threatened. There are also records of around 580 vascular plants species.

Many of the historical records about the native animals that once roamed these woodlands, and how their populations have since fared, are incomplete and dubious at best. What we need to know is what lives here now, how we should manage it and what is required for the

potential reintroduction of threatened species such as the Growling Grass Frog, Eltham Copper Butterfly and Eastern Barred bandicoot.

Enter citizen science!

Citizen science involves the collection of real scientific data by everyday people for use in documentation, scientific studies, policy writing and on-ground management.

It is often part of large-scale collaborative projects with scientists, managers, students and the general public, and is a fantastic way to involve the community in hands-on projects that affect them locally. This gives people a sense of belonging, achievement and participation.

Although some people may join citizen science projects just to get up close and personal with fluffy animals, the projects being undertaken are real science and have genuine management implications. Integrity and accuracy are important.

Expectations, data recording, the correct use of equipment and modern technology and, most importantly, how the data will be used, are critical to ensure a thorough understanding of the project by all involved.

Citizen science is a very important component of the overall biodiversity monitoring program at the sanctuary and



PHOTO: MICHAEL CINCOTTA



Budding young citizen scientists on a school excursion.



Citizen scientists sampling aquatic macroinvertebrates.

PHOTOS: LA TROBE WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

many of our programs are designed around it. Here are the citizen science projects currently available for your involvement.

Frog census: Frog species are surveyed at 16 sites around the sanctuary four times a year. Conducted after dark, surveys consist of a short presentation followed by timed recordings and data tallying. Data is shared with the Melbourne Water Frog Census and the Atlas of Living Australia, and used to inform staff on sanctuary wetland management.

Stag watches: Hollows and nesting boxes are observed four times a year across a range of sanctuary habitat types. The one-hour survey evenings consist of a half-hour presentation, observations and data tallying. The data shared with the Atlas of Living Australia informs management on topics such as nest box installation and

the revegetation of food and shelter plants for wildlife.

Little creatures bio-blitz: Conducted from January to April, when invertebrate activity is at its peak, the bio-blitz compiles a photographic record of the amazing diversity of the sanctuary's invertebrates. This ongoing project can be undertaken at any time during opening hours (9.00am to 3.00pm Sunday to Friday).

Fungi forays: Running from April to June, when fungi are most obvious, this project is creating a photographic record of the sanctuary's fungi. Photos of habitat, cross-sections and size comparisons help in the identification of fungal diversity. Information is shared with Fungimap, a national citizen-science group, and helps the understanding of how biodiversity changes over time.

Waterbird surveys: Conducted throughout the year, these surveys identify bird species at a number of designated observation points, and the data is shared with the Australian Living Atlas. The surveys will help show the benefits of removing introduced predators from this ecosystem; the data will be collected before and after fox removal.

To get involved and register for La Trobe Wildlife Sanctuary's citizen science projects, or for more information on our indigenous nursery, nesting boxes, twilight tours or education experiences, just follow this link: www.latrobe.edu.au/wildlife.

Who knows? You could be the first person in 30 years to spot an Agile Antechinus racing around the sanctuary in the gnarly old River Red Gums, or to hear the baritone rumble of the once common and widespread Growling Grass Frog. • PW



The formidable bulk of Mt Arapiles looms above the surrounding plain.

Inset: Sandy track in the park's Tooan Block.

Climbing drawcard and mallee remnant

Mt Arapiles–Tooan State Park

GEOFF DURHAM VISITS ONE OF VICTORIA'S ROCK-CLIMBING MECCAS BUT KEEPS HIS FEET FIRMLY ON THE GROUND.

As its name suggests, this park is in two units or blocks, separated by 5 km of farmland. The blocks are topographically very different. Mt Arapiles is a prominent rock outcrop, Tooan a flat sandy remnant of mallee-type bushland.

There is no one management plan for the park. A 1991 plan for the 1,510 ha Mt Arapiles Unit was intended to guide management for five years, when a review would be considered. There has been no review.

The 1998 Tooan Block Management Plan is coupled with the Dergholm State Park plan. Dergholm is about 100 km to the south, in quite different country.

Tooan park was a 1982 recommendation of the Land Conservation Council. It was created in 1987; Mitre Rock, an outlier of Mt Arapiles, was added in 1989.

Mt Arapiles

To the Djurite Balug Aboriginal people, Mt Arapiles is 'Djurite' and a site of significance. It was climbed and named by Major Mitchell on 23 July 1836, the anniversary of the battle at Salamanca near the Spanish village of Arapiles (1812) where his brother died.

From a distance Arapiles is 'less a mountain and more a scab', rising as it does out of the flat cleared Wimmera farmland. But on approach from Natimuk, its formidable bulk looms 230 m above the plain.

Backed by tableland, the rock escarpment faces generally north, and the sun moving across its indented face creates ever-changing lightscapes.

Mt Arapiles and Mitre Rock are outliers of the Grampians quartzose sandstone

and conglomerate sedimentary rocks deposited in fresh water about 420 million years ago. About 20 million years later, heat from below Arapiles metamorphosed the rock into hard quartzite. When the sea encroached about 20 million years ago Arapiles became an island.

The Mt Arapiles block has 14% of the State's flora with over 500 species. The plateau has Yellow Gum, Long-leaf Box and some White Cypress-pine with a dense shrubby understory. The outwash slopes have stands of mallee including Peppermint Box, and woodlands of Grey Box, Yellow Gum and River Red Gum. Peregrine Falcons nest on the cliff faces.

Woody weed infestation is low but there are plenty of alien grasses. Smilax has been controlled. There are rabbits, foxes, cats, common starlings and feral bees, but no deer or goats.



PHOTOS: GEOFF DURHAM

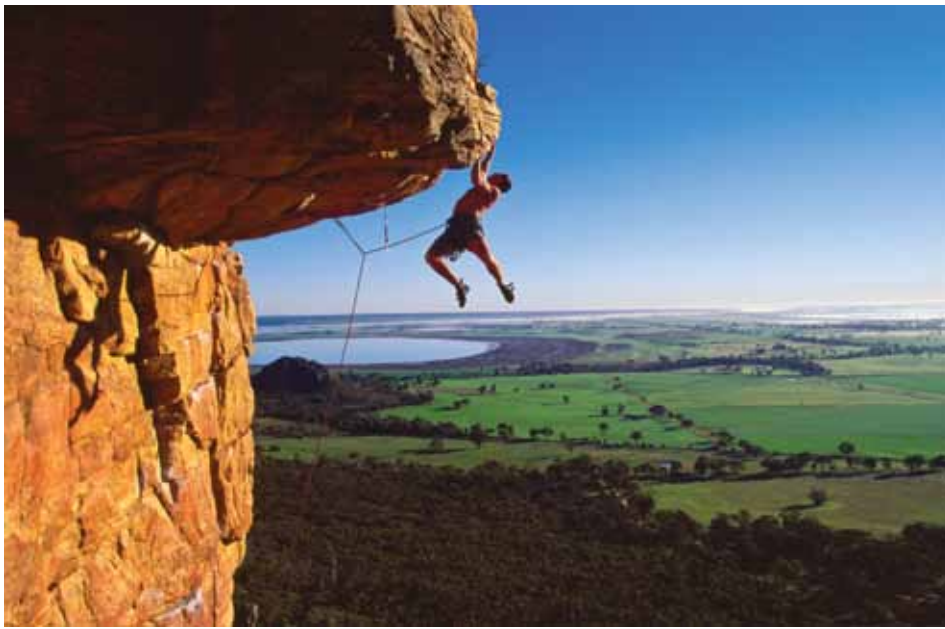


PHOTO COURTESY GLENN TEMPEST

Paul Deacon swinging across the roof of Kachoong, Northern Group, Mt Arapiles.

Climbing, camping and walking

The internet tells us that Mt Arapiles is 'one of the best crags in the world for traditional climbing'. It has about 3,000 recognised climbs. There are so many places to climb that the bush below is riddled with informal paths, and below the cliffs there is trampling of the vegetation. Volunteers have done some commendable work to limit this damage.

The latest climbing guide is the 2016 edition of *Arapiles Selected Climbs* by Simon Mentz and Glenn Tempest. This 400 page book describing 1,300 climbs is lavishly illustrated with hundreds of striking colour photographs.

The guide says that "few other places can compete against Arapiles for sheer quality, quantity and diversity of climbing at all grades ... and its unique setting, ease of access and ideal weather". Arapiles attracts many interstate and overseas climbers, and with the weekend influx from Melbourne and Adelaide, a veteran told us, "tents come up over Friday nights like mushrooms".

Campers are supposed to pre-book and pre-pay \$5.10 per person per night through the internet or the Parks Victoria hotline – 13 1963. But sites are not marked and it's something of a free-for-all. Over 17,000 camper nights were booked last financial year.

The campground has a public telephone box, rubbish bins, toilets and some fire places, but you need to bring your own wood, and no fires are allowed between 1 November and 30 April. Domestic animals are not permitted. There's a solid log shelter in the picnic area.

Pinus radiata planted in 1936 as part of the centenary celebrations of Mitchell's expedition are removed as they die or become unsafe. The Management Plan says they will not be replaced, but because of their historic significance and shade many people would like to see them retained.

Two walking tracks lead from the base of the cliffs to the plateau, one (more a rock scramble) up the main gully near the campground, and the other, up Pharos Gully, steep with steps. Combine them into a 4 km circuit walk taking in the summit.

Vehicle access is restricted. You can drive or cycle around the base of the mountain, but part of the track is seasonally closed. There's a bitumen road to the fire lookout and communication towers on the summit, and off that the wheelchair-friendly Bluff Lookout, a short track to Melville Cave and a 30 minute Nature Walk.

Tooan

Tooan, an Aboriginal word for 'small squirrel' now used (spelt 'Tuan') for the Brush-tailed Phascogale, is the forgotten park. Known locally as the 'Tooan Scrub', it is little visited.

Parks Victoria's Park Note for the State Park has no information on Tooan, and no map. The only map I can find is in the out-of-date 1998 Management Plan.

The Tooan Block was then 3,550 ha. With the addition of adjacent public land in 2004 it now covers 5,960 ha, including a 420 ha Reference Area.

Tooan is a botanist's delight with its variety of vegetation communities,

including areas of Buloke regeneration. There are endangered Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos and Malleefowl.

Local naturalist Dr Rod Sutherland says of Tooan: "It's a wonderful area – beautiful in spring with wildflowers, particularly orchids, but it has been hit badly by the drought". He warns that it's easy to get bogged on the sandy 4WD tracks.

Tooan is a bonus for those who appreciate the bush without people.

Management challenge

The park is managed by Parks Victoria in accordance with a co-operative management agreement with the Barengi Gadgin Land Council. Protecting natural values while managing intensive specialised use is a management challenge, particularly with Parks Victoria's limited resources.

The park is rated A1 for Level of Protection and B for Level of Service. It is fortunate in having had the same ranger, Peter Hawker, for 26 years. There is an Advisory Committee and a Friends Group: contact Louise Shepherd on 5387 1558.

Natimuk

Many small towns in the Wimmera and Mallee are declining, but since the 1960s Natimuk (25 km west of Horsham and about 8 km from Mt Arapiles) has been revived by the growth of rock climbing. Climbers and artists have purchased houses and started small businesses.

It has an interesting, well-looked-after Main Street, about five shops (there were 70 in the 1880s), climbing instructors, a café, post office, police station, school and hospital, but no fuel outlet – the nearest is at Horsham.

The hotel has good meals, old-style accommodation and five modern cabins. There are also two cabins at the caravan park at Natimuk Lake (now dry).

Stay at Natimuk or the 'convivial no-frills' Arapiles cosmopolitan campsite for a few days. Take a folding chair, camera and binoculars, choose a suitable spot and combine bird-watching with climber-watching; observe the athleticism, skill and patience of the climbers. • PW

Exploring western Canada's parks (part 2)

IN *PARK WATCH* FOR DECEMBER 2015 VNPA COUNCILLOR MICHAEL FELLER DESCRIBED SOME OF CANADA'S SPECTACULAR PARKS AND THE THREATS AND ISSUES FACING THEM. HERE HE CONCLUDES HIS SURVEY.

In Jasper National Park we went on two walks, one along the spectacular Maligne Canyon, a deep narrow slot through limestone, and another up on to a ridge above Maligne Lake, with superb views of the lake and surrounding mountains.

The BWAG group was impressed with 30-year-old trees that were only two metres tall. Unlike Australian eucalypts and wattles, most Canadian conifer trees are easy to age visually, and they are slower growing, particularly at higher elevations.

At the highest elevations at which trees can grow, they take on a shrub growth form. Any stems projecting above the winter snowpack are killed by desiccating winds and very low temperatures. Above these elevations, in the 'true alpine', we saw only lichens and ground-hugging plants.

Climate change will allow taller plants to move uphill, obliterating Victoria's subalpine communities and some of their inhabitants, such as the Mountain Pygmy-possum.

In the Canadian mountains the subalpine and alpine communities have higher areas to colonise – although some higher-elevation animals, such as pikas, will be adversely affected.

Climate change and fire

Climate change in Canada is bringing other serious problems, such as the future loss of polar bears and the very widespread death of trees in British Columbia (BC), as winter temperatures do not drop low enough to kill the larvae of some beetles that attack trees.

On the road to Maligne Lake, we went through an area burned by a fire that was only controlled a few weeks before our arrival. This 1,000ha fire was caused by lightning, the most common cause of fires in BC (61% of all fires). In Victoria the figure is 26%.

But the big difference between Victoria and Canada is in the percentage of deliberately lit fires, a shameful 25% in Victoria compared to less than 5% in Canada.

Already, only a few weeks after the fire, green plant shoots were emerging from the ground, but it will be a long time before trees will be big enough to constitute a forest.

VNPA group on trail above Lake Louise, heading towards Mt Victoria.



PHOTO: FRED TROPP-ASHER

PHOTO: MICHAEL FELLER

Unlike most of our eucalypts, most Canadian trees cannot resprout after a fire. Lodgepole Pine, the commonest tree in the fire area, is like Victoria's Mountain Ash after a fire, with a massive drop of seed leading to dense regeneration of seedlings.

From Jasper we drove south to Lake Louise along the most scenic highway in Canada. Unfortunately the scenery was mostly hidden thanks to a snowstorm. Two days later we returned and saw spectacular turquoise lakes at the base of tall mountains.

We walked up a track to Wilcox Pass, overlooking the huge, heavily-glaciated Mt Athabasca on the other side of the valley. A small group of Bighorn Sheep grazed near our lunch spot.

Dogs and horses

On a previous visit, a sheep I was about to photograph suddenly bolted as a dog raced up. Most tracks we walked in Banff and Jasper parks were open to dogs, although they had to be on leash.

Some people ignore this rule and others take dogs into areas where they are banned. The prevalence of dogs was disconcerting and reduced our enjoyment of the park. Victorian parks clearly lead western Canadian ones in this respect.

The previous day we started earlier to avoid crowds and walked around Lake Louise in Banff NP, up above some glaciers, then up a small mountain where we had lunch and mingled with the crowds.

Horse droppings on the walking tracks, even one where horses were banned, again affected our enjoyment. They were from commercial horse tours; there are no feral horses in these parks, and feral animals are of no concern in western Canadian parks thanks to healthy populations of carnivores.

Lake Louise is the most photographed place in Canada, and the sunny day with much fresh snow encouraged our group to take hundreds of photos. A steep descent to the beautiful Lake Agnes took us deep into the crowds, complete with many dogs.



PHOTO: FRED TROPPASHER



PHOTO: MICHAEL FELLER



PHOTO: MICHAEL FELLER

We were up there! (Lake Louise area).

Walking above Lake Agnes, Banff NP.

Walking trail in Johnson Canyon, Banff NP.

Developments

Across the valley we could see the Lake Louise downhill ski area, to which a large expansion into the adjacent wilderness area of Banff park is proposed. This is being fought by environmental groups, but anti-environment and pro-development forces are strong.

The Canadian government has removed various legislated environmental protection measures, and muzzled its own scientists. Current park managers are unable to speak out against any proposed developments in national parks, though this hasn't stopped retired senior Parks Canada staff from publicly opposing the Banff proposal.

The day after our Wilcox Pass walk we visited Yoho NP. This park, and the adjacent Banff, Jasper and Kootenay national parks, make up a UNESCO World Heritage Site, one which has lost only one wildlife species (bison) since European settlement. Attempts are being made to reintroduce bison.

In Yoho park one group walked the Iceline trail, with magnificent views of the nearby Takakkaw Falls (254m) becoming obscured with dense bushfire smoke. Another group went for a shorter walk around picturesque Emerald Lake.

Loss of melting snowpacks and glaciers will cause many waterfalls to disappear. If current warming climate trends continue, it has been estimated that by 2100 few glaciers will remain in the Rocky and Columbia mountains.

The next day we drove to Canmore, a town in Alberta just outside Banff park. This town is growing rapidly because of restrictions on growth in the towns of Lake Louise and Banff within the park.

Those calling for more commercial development within Victorian parks should follow this example of encouraging commercial developments outside parks. This is advantageous to most people and also to the parks' ecosystems.

On our drive to Canmore, heavy smoke from fires to the south-east had reduced visibility to less than a kilometre. Unfortunately conditions remained this way for the rest of the trip to the Rockies.

It became apparent that fires are common in and around BC and that perhaps Victoria is not unique in having a very flammable environment – some conifers are just as flammable as eucalypts.

Our last two days in the Rockies were spent trying to focus on close, rather than distant, vistas. A walk along the popular Johnston Canyon, cycling on the excellent bike paths around

Canmore and seeing the sights of Banff town and Canmore took up most time.

One party of four walked the Prairie View trail east of Canmore, but saw mainly smoke. This trail was on crown land, not in a park, but was well-signed, including recently placed bear-warning signs.

Interpretation and fees

These had been installed by Alberta Parks staff who manage an adjacent provincial park. There were also some interpretation signs.

In general, we found well-presented and maintained interpretation signs in all parks we visited in the Rockies. This is another contrast with Victoria (and BC provincial parks) where interpretation is patchy, good in some areas but poor in many.

There have been government funding cuts to parks in both BC and Victoria. In BC some NGOs have been able to step in and do some of the interpretation and maintenance work. More initiatives like this in Victoria would help – perhaps Friends groups could also assist with interpretation.

Costs to park visitors in Canada have gone up. Declining income from governments, and increased commercial exploitation of parks, have resulted in higher costs for visitors from both park services and the private sector. Wealthier visitors and their demands may also drive up fees.

It's unclear how much of the fees actually goes back into park management. Nor is it clear how much park management is doing to maintain the natural environments that visitors come to see.

Wildlife overpasses and underpasses on the major highway through Banff park are one positive example, but that highway was converted to four lanes only a few years ago, with the loss of much forest.

Allowing dogs, horses and commercial exploitation in parks, lack of enforcement of rules, closure of walking tracks because of lack of funds to maintain them, an apparent management emphasis on the roadside in contrast to the backcountry and a disregard of the impacts of climate change are all features of park management in western Canada.

Sadly, many of these issues are very familiar in Victoria. • PW

Helped by rabbit control, direct seeding and natural regeneration, vegetation is returning to many parts of Neds Corner Station.



PHOTO: SHANNON REDDAWAY

Neds Corner Station

From degradation to restoration

TRUST FOR NATURE DEVELOPMENT MANAGER VANESSA MEACHEN WRITES ABOUT A PIECE OF THE OUTBACK IN VICTORIA.

Situated 82 km west of Mildura, Neds Corner Station is Victoria's largest private property and its largest privately managed conservation reserve.

The 30,000ha former-sheep and cattle station was purchased for nature conservation by Trust for Nature (Victoria) in 2002 and has been an inspirational example of the impact – and the possibilities – of large-scale restoration ever since.

Neds Corner is in the driest area of Victoria, with an average annual rainfall of only 250 mm, and sits within an extensive network of public and private conservation lands bordering or close to the Murray River in Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia.

The reserve is bordered on three sides by Murray Sunset National Park and has frontages along the Murray River and associated anabranches for more than 30 km.

At Neds Corner the riparian zone, dominated by River Red Gum (*Eucalyptus*



PHOTO: COLLEEN BARNES

Male White-winged Fairy-wren at Neds Corner.



PHOTO: PETER BARNES

Emu and chicks, Neds Corner.

camaldulensis) connects with Chenopod Shrublands, Black Box Woodland, and remnants of once more extensive Mallee Woodland and semi-arid woodlands.

When Trust for Nature first took over management of the property, it had been a sheep and cattle station for more than 100 years and was severely degraded from continuous over-grazing by stock, rabbits and native herbivores, as well as weed infestations, historic clearing of extensive areas of woodland for firewood and forage, and lack of flooding.

Trust for Nature's conservation efforts on the property are targeted at:

- improving the quality of the terrestrial habitats
- restoring woodland connectivity across the property to improve habitat extent and condition for woodland and Mallee plants and animals, including the nationally threatened Regent Parrot
- restoring ecological flows to the wetlands and floodplains.

Pest control

Following the removal of livestock, the Trust has had a major focus on weed and rabbit control, and control of other herbivores. We use an integrated approach

to rabbit control, with methods varying according to the site in question, enabling the protection of cultural and natural values which may be present.

To date, over 20,000 rabbit warrens have been treated, and 600 km of bait laid. As a result, rabbit numbers have declined significantly and the abundance of many plant species and extent of vegetation cover across the reserve have noticeably improved.

Feral predator control is also continuous, and with national park on three sides of the property, is carried out in collaboration with Parks Victoria and other neighbours to make the program as effective as possible.

Restoration

We have undertaken direct seeding and tubestock planting progressively across different parts of the property, supported by funding from donors, the Australian Government and the Mallee Catchment Management Authority. Additionally, there has been extensive natural regeneration of shrubs over more than 500 hectares of former cropping land, following the cessation of all cropping on the property in 2012.

These restored areas are now providing habitat for some of our indicator bird species such as Chestnut-crowned Babblers, Brown Treecreepers and Red-capped Robins, all of which have shown encouraging population growth over the past 15 years.

Also in partnership with the Mallee CMA, we have used environmental water allocations to inundate areas of Neds Corner. This offers a vital lifeline to many of the plants and animals of the riverine billabongs and floodplain forests, helping restore the health of these flood-dependent ecosystems.

Currently, Trust for Nature is halfway through a three-year project, funded by the Yulgilbar Foundation, to restore floodplain habitat and improve the population size of some threatened species on the station. The project aims to restore 2,000ha of Chenopod Shrubland and Chenopod Woodland habitat, which are habitat for many significant species of flora and fauna, including the Fat-tailed Dunnart and Narrow-leaf Emu-bush. This involves intensive feral predator control as well as an intensive weed control program, and seeding and tubestock planting.

Education

Neds Corner Station has proved to be a rich educational resource for universities, researchers and environmental professionals, who are continually helping to guide its conservation management practices. With the property's extensive Indigenous cultural heritage, it has also become a hub for students of Indigenous culture and archaeology.

In the 14 years since domestic stock removal and ongoing rabbit and weed control, there has been a dramatic increase in the cover of native vegetation, not just from supplementary planting and direct seeding but also from natural regeneration. In 2011, widespread natural germination of Murray Pines occurred, and Sandhill Wattle (*Acacia ligulata*) seedlings were observed on one rise where no parent plant was known to occur, indicating the possible presence of a viable seed bank.

A biodiversity survey in 2011 found 884 native species at Neds Corner Station, including six threatened birds and animals, 77 threatened plants, and 21 species new to science. These include a new species of truffle now formally named after our Neds Corner managers.

We continue to find new records for Neds Corner Station, and we're currently investigating the viability of reintroducing regionally extinct mammal and bird species to the property, in collaboration with other conservation partners.

Management for conservation on this scale is ambitious, but the signs are promising that Neds Corner Station is progressing well on the long road to becoming once more the natural living ecosystem it was many years ago. • PW

Neds Corner: the book

Neds Corner Station in Victoria's far north-west corner had a long history before its 2002 purchase by Trust for Nature. Aboriginal people lived there for thousands of years before European arrival, after which it became an iconic sheep and cattle station, owned and managed by a variety of individuals, groups and companies.

This rich history is detailed by author and long-term volunteer Catherine King in *Ned's Corner on the Murray: a History*. The book's publication was made possible through the hard work and dedication of Catherine and a group of devoted friends of Neds Corner who published it as a gift to the Trust.

You can purchase copies of *Ned's Corner on the Murray: a History* from the Trust for \$30 each or two for \$50, plus \$15 postage and handling. See www.trustfornature.org.au to order. We plan to review the book in a future *Park Watch*.

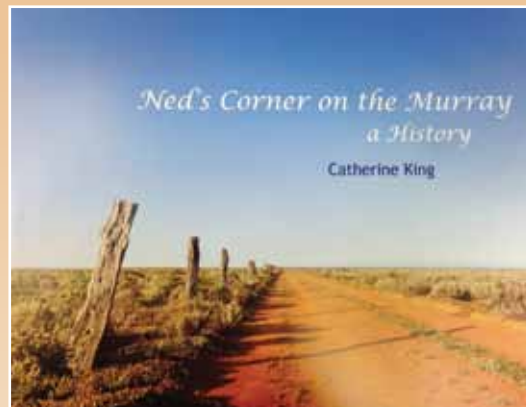


PHOTO: BRIAN BAINBRIDGE

NatureWatch – it's all happening!

*Matted
Flax-lily*

NatureWatch is one of the VNPA's two citizen science programs. A number of projects are happening over winter, including our Caught on Camera project, monitoring the threatened *Dianella amoena* (Matted Flax-lily) in urban grassland, and our newest project, Communities Listening for Nature.

Do you have a good ear for bird calls? We'd love to hear from you! In Communities Listening for Nature we're using acoustic technology to monitor birds and we'll need lots of help to annotate bird calls in our recordings.

If you'd like to get involved in any of these projects, contact Christine at naturewatch@vnpa.org.au or on 9341 6510, or check out the Citizen Science section of our website www.vnpa.org.au to find out more. • PW

Walking in a winter wonderland



BWAG LEADER
TAARIQ HASSAN
RECOUNTS
PREVIOUS ALPINE
ADVENTURES AND
INVITES YOU TO
MORE OF THE SAME
THIS WINTER!



During the winter of 2015 in the months of July and August two VNPA snow-shoe trips were successfully led by this writer and mad keen hiker.

The first trip was a base camp weekend in late July at Sheeppark flat.

Although the Howqua river valley is quiet and secluded in winter, one must expect cold and wet weather as part of the package. This did not deter the intrepid winter VNPA campers.

The main excursion was a full day of hiking at Mt Stirling on the Saturday. Although the snow line had receded up the mountain by about 1 km from Telephone Box Junction (TBJ), the full circuit of the mountain provided some excellent winter landscapes for the snow-shoe trekkers to enjoy.

The ascent via the Bluff Spur trail to the Bluff Spur Hut was a good way to build an appetite for lunch at the hut. After lunch the party traversed the treeless summit area in near whiteout conditions.

Alas, the spectacular view of the Cross Cut Saw was under a blanket of white and invisible from the summit area that day. The next stop, after following the pole line across the icy summit, was at the King Spur Hut. The hut was warm and dry and the snow cover was complete. The more sheltered slopes on that side of the mountain made for less intensely cold and bracing walking. Indeed it began to snow quite a bit after lunch.

The party all safely returned to the car park at TBJ and headed back to the campsite for some food and the warmth of a camp fire. Apart from losing a snow

Left: In the snow at Mt Stirling.

Inset: VNPA group at King Spur Hut, Mt Stirling.

Illustrations: www.freemages.com/
Barry Meyer.

shoe extension from my snow shoe, no other loss or damage was mentionable.

The next day the hike up the Bluff was called off because the road up there was not suitable for 2WD, so some of us hiked to Fry's Hut. The weather was so cold and overcast that Sunday that light wet snow began to fall as we passed the Timbertop saddle and drove towards Merrijig.

I must say that I am a fan of Mt Stirling in the winter and any attempt or plans to develop it in any way raises my ire!



August 2015 saw the VNPA BWAG heading for the snow at Mt Feathertop in the Alpine NP in snow shoes.

This pack carry hike up the Bungalow spur from Harrierville involved snow camping at Federation Hut. Luckily, the weather was relatively benign for novices and experienced snow hikers and campers alike. The snowline was situated at about 1300m and was where people used their snow shoes on the ascent and removed them on the descent the following day.

Federation Hut on Saturday evening was at capacity, with many parties cooking and enjoying the fire. Meanwhile, I was keeping the music alive with my backpacker guitar.

Some made it to the top of Mt Feathertop on Saturday and also on Sunday, while others just marvelled at the astounding view of the totally white snow-clad jagged and steep peak as seen from near the Razorback Track junction at Molly Hill.

The summit was shrouded in clouds and other walkers reported only fleeting moments of visibility.

The summit ridge surface was icy, with a pronounced ice cornice, and crampons would have been better than snow shoes for that section. But the conditions in winter up there change so rapidly one might have to bring a shop load of winter trekking gear to cover every eventuality.

Winter in the Victorian Alps is inspiring and we are lucky to have such beautiful places as the Alpine NP to visit in order to recalibrate our equilibria in such an unbalanced world.

Both of these trips were truly memorable, enjoyed by all, and will be organised again for winter 2016. • PW

MAIN PHOTO: MARIAN SHEPPARD
INSET PHOTO: TAARIQ HASSAN

A walk to Feathertop (nearly)

VNPA MEMBER THERESE RYAN DESCRIBES A RECENT WALK THAT DIDN'T GO QUITE AS PLANNED, BUT WAS STILL GREAT.

View along the way to MUMC Hut.

A weekend walk with VNPA's walking group to Mt Feathertop (1922m) in autumn! This sounded like a wonderful opportunity to experience the beauty of Victoria's Alpine National Park in north-east Victoria.

Indeed it was a wonderful walk, but not the sunny one I had anticipated.

In fact, while driving in heavy rain to Friday night's campsite at Smoko near Harrietville, I was doubting the wisdom of such a trip. The weather forecast was bleak, and the possibility of glorious views across to Mt Hotham (1,861m) and Mt Bogong (1,986m) was rapidly diminishing.

The leader's plan was to climb the gentler Bungalow Spur, visit Federation Hut, walk to the summit of Feathertop, descend via the steep North West (NW) Spur to spend the night in the MUMC (Melbourne University Mountaineering Club) Hut and continue down this spur to the Harrietville area.

This was not to be! The dismal weather forecast, combined with advice from the local Parks Victoria ranger, led to a change. Heavy rain could cause Stony Creek on NW Spur to be a problem on the return trip, so the leader suggested that the spurs be reversed; i.e. climb NW and descend via Bungalow.

That meant a far steeper climb, but the group was keen to try the less-travelled NW spur, and, rather than walking Bungalow Spur twice, the new plan was accepted. We were all well prepared for adverse weather.

With humid conditions but (surprisingly) no rain, it was a steady upward climb through the changing vegetation. The domed MUMC Hut at 1,600m was a most welcome sight. This unusual hut with its mezzanine sleeping platform and small nocturnal visitors was a much appreciated overnight shelter.

Thick fog soon set in, and later that night a massive storm raged for three hours. A spectacular sound and light show!

The next morning was foggy and much colder. A side trip to the summit was not feasible. Just to stay upright in the ferocious winds was quite a challenge and it was a relief to reach Federation Hut.

Bungalow Spur Track, constructed in the 1920s as a bridle track, offered a well-graded descent. There were occasional glimpses of the Ovens Valley through the clouds, and even a rainbow to the south as we drew closer to Tobias Gap, Picture Point and Harrietville.

Despite the depressing weather forecast, the walk was most enjoyable. The 360° views across the Victorian Alps were not for us. But the friendly group of seven intrepid walkers, eerie foggy conditions, huge overnight storm and walking almost rain-free all contributed to making this a memorable weekend walk.

Why did I ever doubt that it would be? • PW



MUMC Hut.



Dinner by the light of a hanging candelabra – thanks John!



PHOTO: MARY FERLIN

A photograph of three children in a forest, crawling on a large, mossy fallen log. The child in the foreground is wearing a blue and green patterned hat and a grey and brown striped sweater. The child in the middle is wearing a dark jacket, and the child in the background is wearing a blue jacket. The forest has many thin, light-colored tree trunks.

Sharing nature with the family

PHOTO COURTESY SAM FORD

Exploring fallen logs.

VNPA COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MANAGER CAITLIN GRIFFITH WANTS TO ENCOURAGE AND SUPPORT FAMILIES TO ENJOY NATURE TOGETHER AND WITH US.

We've written articles and run activities for families in the past, but we're really keen to think about how we can improve them.

Nature-based activities and learning are a great way to have an adventure with the family. Here are some fun activities for grandparents, parents or others to try with the kids!

Great place to visit

Dandenong Ranges National Park is a wonderful place to enjoy family-based nature activities!

It offers family walks, picnic grounds, waterfalls, ferny gullies, the tallest flowering plants in the world (Mountain Ash) and spectacular forests to experience. For Melburnians, this national park is right on your doorstep! Visit www.parkweb.vic.gov.au and look for Dandenong Ranges National Park to find the right adventure for you.

Head for an adventure

- Discover hidden sculptures in the bush at William Ricketts Sanctuary.
- Go back to the time of the dinosaurs on the Hardy Gully Nature Walk (Kallista).
- Enjoy the sight, sound and feel of splashing water at Sherbrooke Falls.
- Picnic and play games with the family at a range of picnic sites across the park.

Wild creature: Superb Lyrebird

Lyrebirds live in the Dandenong Ranges and are well known for the males' wonderfully long tail feathers.

Did you know?

- Superb Lyrebirds can mimic the sounds of other birds and even machinery such as cameras. Check them out with David Attenborough at bit.ly/bbclybird and on youtube.
- They eat insects and worms in leaf litter or rotting fallen logs.
- Lyrebirds' feathers were once fashionable for ladies' hats.
- Males have 16 tail feathers.
- Lyrebirds build a soft domed nest on the ground that they often camouflage with ferns or moss.
- Take a look at the back of a 10c coin. What do you see?

A great family activity!

Here's a fun way to explore mini habitats, how things break down and the cyclic nature of life. You don't need specialist knowledge, just a keenness to observe and discuss. It's more important to explore answers than trying to find the 'correct' answer.

1. Find a fallen log.
2. Look closely – what's living on the log? Plants, animals, fungi, lichens?
3. Try some of these discussion starters:
 - What colours can you see?
 - What does it feel like?
 - How did this log end up here?
 - Is it alive or dead?
 - Why do you think these things live on the log? If nothing lives on it can you think why not?
 - What might eat things that live on this log?
4. Use photos, drawings or writing to record your observations.
5. Feel free to send your observations to us at vnpa@vnpa.org.au.

Staying safe

An adult needs to be responsible for ensuring this activity is done safely. Here are some safety tips:

- Check for dangers such as snakes and spiders before starting.
- Keep hands and fingers where you can see them – don't put them in holes!
- Don't touch any animals or fungi.
- Leave the log in its place.
- Work as a family with adults and kids. • **PW**

Getting away from it all at Edwards Point

PAUL BRYAN WRITES ABOUT
A COASTAL WALK THAT'S
IDEAL FOR ALL AGES.

A relatively short drive from Geelong, the Edwards Point walk at St Leonards offered us the chance for some much-needed respite from the crowded buzz of the Australia Day weekend on the Bellarine Peninsula.

It delivered in spades.

Starting at the large grassy car park on Beach Road, there wasn't another soul in sight as my wife and I guided our two young boys through a gap in the coastal scrub to the start of the trail.

We followed the light sandy path, edging our way into the beautiful coastal woodland as the sand crunched under our every footstep. The path soon straightened out and, surrounded by Coast Tea-tree, Wirilda and Coastal Moonah, it was remarkable how quickly we found ourselves a world away from civilisation.

We were completely at one with nature and we'd only walked a few hundred metres.

Every now and then the vegetation would open up and give us glimpses of the wider area and coastline.

Stopping intermittently to let inquisitive young eyes and minds have their fill of the new sights and sounds, and gently feel a few of the grasses and plants near the path, all we could hear was the odd chirp of a bird and the sound of the wind gently rustling the leaves in the canopy.

Knobby Club-rush was quite abundant and proved a real fascination for the boys, along with a beetle and a few ants that were going about their business.



The boys on the boardwalk.

After a while, perhaps a kilometre or so, we found ourselves leaving the woodland to come upon pleasant views of salt marshes and Swan Bay. A lone pelican flew by overhead.

Winding our way left, we walked through more woodland and then came to a picturesque boardwalk through a seasonal lagoon surrounded by glasswort shrubland. The lagoon was dry, revealing a dead branch shaped just like a whale tail. This greatly excited our sons.

At the end of the boardwalk the long, deserted beach revealed itself before us. Sunlight shimmered on the ocean surface and a gentle breeze carried the smell of seaweed. A few seagulls were on the wing overhead.

With the soothing sound of breaking waves filling our ears, we sat down on a bench at the back of the beach and took a few minutes' rest, completely at peace.

Soon we were up again as the boys started rushing around on the sand.

Covered with shells, small stones and large amounts of seaweed, it was a shoreline to explore and look for treasures.

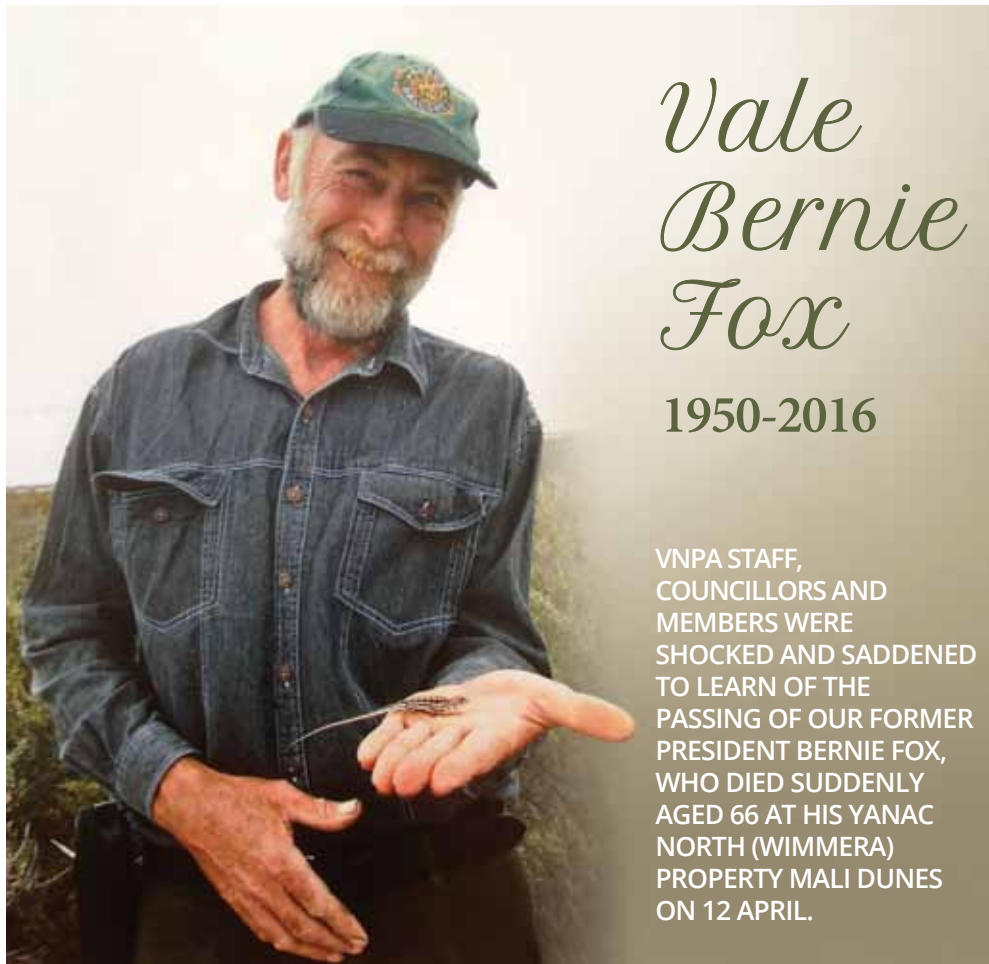
With beaming faces they cheered with delight as they played with shells, picked up seaweed, ran to and from the water's edge to make splashes with small stones and marvelled at a sea sponge.

The tide was part way out so we didn't have to leave the beach at all on our way back. We wound our way around a few trees, savouring the fresh sea air and pretty landscapes.

We were so glad we'd come.

Perhaps the best testament to the experience was that our four-year-old completed the full two hours we spent on foot entirely under his own steam and without asking to be carried.

Like the walk itself, that was really quite something! • PW



Vale Bernie Fox

1950-2016

VNPA STAFF,
COUNCILLORS AND
MEMBERS WERE
SHOCKED AND SADDENED
TO LEARN OF THE
PASSING OF OUR FORMER
PRESIDENT BERNIE FOX,
WHO DIED SUDDENLY
AGED 66 AT HIS YANAC
NORTH (WIMMERA)
PROPERTY MALI DUNES
ON 12 APRIL.

PHOTO: SUE HAYMAN-FOX

Bernie with
lizard friend.

Bernie lived at Mali Dunes with his wife Sue Hayman-Fox in a partly underground Terradome house, and with Sue was actively restoring the property's natural vegetation and monitoring its wildlife.

He said: "Although we're sometimes known as 'those city greenies who have bought a farm', our farming neighbours are great.

"Since buying Mali Dunes, Sue discovered her grandfather's name on the Nhill war memorial and I have learnt that my great-grandfather's original selection was on the Wimmera River at Dooen. We sometimes feel we were always meant to end up here."

A member of the VNPA since 2001, Bernie was on the Council from 2002 to 2007 and President 2004-07. He was a committed and passionate environmentalist and land carer who played a major role in many conservation campaigns, including the protection of Mallee flora and fauna and of Point Nepean National Park.

Bernie was on the advisory group for NatureWatch and instrumental in getting the program up and running, as well as establishing two NatureWatch projects at a local level and developing leadership protocols and training.

He was a key player in the VNPA's involvement with the Project Hindmarsh and Grow West tree planting programs, and was involved with several Friends

groups, including Friends of Brisbane Ranges, Werribee Gorge & Long Forest, Wyperfeld, Little Desert, and Terrick Terrick, as well as the Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group.

A member of the Victorian Environmental Friends Network, in recent years he distributed the network's quarterly newsletter to over 11,000 Friends members and groups, Landcare groups and others.

Bernie will be remembered for his warmth, humour and insights, and his willingness to help and support people and causes. He was always deeply generous in sharing his wisdom and knowledge with our staff and volunteers, and inspired many people with his infectious passion for nature.

Our thoughts and sympathy go to Bernie's wife Sue Hayman-Fox, former VNPA Treasurer and also Finance and Operations Manager of the VNPA, and to Bernie's family and friends.

A celebration of Bernie's life was held on Friday 29 April at the Uniting Church Hall in Nhill. Some 300 people attended, including VNPA councillors, staff and members.

A number of people spoke about Bernie at the Nhill celebration. Here are some extracts.

Tributes at Nhill

Bernie's brother **Paul Fox** recalled they grew up with stories about a family farm in the Mallee. He said Bernie was kind and astute, loved children and could be relied on to do good things 'under the radar'.

Sister **Helen Widdowson** agreed, and said Bernie was a communicator, a connector who never assumed that those who weren't talking had nothing to say. He was also cool with his yellow panel van!

David Clohesy outlined Bernie's career with Social Security and Centrelink, and remembered him as generous, a strategic thinker and a multi-tasker.

Niece **Carina Johns** said 'Unca Bernie' was a wonderful uncle who supported his nieces and nephews in their sport and other activities, as well as giving guidance. He 'opened their eyes to the environment'.

Neighbour and fellow Landcarer **Brett Wheaton** said Bernie was a 'cheeky bugger' who listened and always asked questions. He recalled Bernie's almost 20-year involvement with Project Hindmarsh and said he had 'sown the seed for us to follow'.

Matt Ruchel outlined Bernie's many achievements as VNPA President.

Peter Stokie of the Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group said Bernie was passionate about Malleefowl and a great advocate for them. He also believed that national parks are for everybody and helped develop an accessible path in Brisbane Ranges NP which local disability groups use. Peter believed Bernie achieved his dreams with the vegetation restoration at Mali Dunes and the return of Malleefowl and their mounds there.

Friend **Wendy Poussard** read an evocative poem she had written, *The small lives of birds*.

Neighbour **Greta Morphet** from Yanac and friend **Mirinda Thorpe** said Bernie's legacy was the people he inspired. His passion lives on through the attitudes he helped shape. This is not an ending but a continuation.

Sue Hayman-Fox said heart disease had taken Bernie but he would be brought home to Mali Dunes, where his work would live on.

In lieu of flowers, donations to the Nhill Aviation Heritage Centre Revegetation Project were requested.



Clockwise from top left: Burchell Track realignment group, Brisbane Ranges NP; Sue and Bernie at Mali Dunes; Mallee eucalypt photographed by Bernie; past and current Presidents of Friends of Brisbane Ranges at 25th anniversary celebration, 2007: (from left) Richard Sullivan, Nola Haines, Bernie Fox, Colin Cook, Chris Lindorff and baby; Burchell Track maintenance with kids, Brisbane Ranges NP.

Tribute from Paul Dodd, BirdLife Australia

Bernie contributed much to various conservation organisations and causes around Victoria. He and Sue also devoted much of their time to rehabilitating their property Mali Dunes. With time and care, they re-established the cleared vegetation and the wildlife came back too.

Bernie and Sue hosted many different groups at Mali Dunes conducting bird, mammal and reptile surveys, and others helping them rehabilitate the property. He will always be remembered as someone who gave his all to projects that he was passionate about.

I will be forever grateful to Bernie and to Sue for that special day in 2012 when, through his contacts, we saw 12 Bustards on a neighbouring property. We had never seen these birds in Victoria before.

Tribute from Colin Cook, Friends of Brisbane Ranges

We met Bernie when we moved to Meredith, near Brisbane Ranges NP. Wendy and I had a keen interest

in the bush and, with one-year-old son Owen, chased up the Friends of Brisbane Ranges.

Bernie was President at the time and made us warmly welcome. When Owen became more mobile, he actively guided the budding member, and later also our daughter Kristen. Bernie always took the time to answer questions, even from the very young.

His depth of environmental knowledge amazed me and spurred me to increase my own. With a bit of gentle nudging from him, I became Friends President in 2005.

Mind you, even Bernie couldn't have predicted the fire that burnt out 40% of the park in January 2006.

In the aftermath, Bernie and others invigorated the Friends to push ahead with some worthwhile projects, and led the charge on transferring 1165ha of Barwon Water land to the national park.

While assessing the fire's impact, we discovered that fauna records for the Brisbane Ranges were woefully

inadequate. So we developed a monitoring project that continues today.

With no previous experience, I found myself studying the habitats and behaviour of our local wildlife, and also found out something else about Bernie: hang around with him long enough and you'd find yourself doing something you didn't think you could do.

Bernie had two remarkable talents. He knew people: he was able to see inside and recognise the hidden potential and skills. And he could make you aware of these and act on them.

Bernie was a great Friend of the Brisbane Ranges, and a great friend. Thanks Bernie.

From BWAG leader Julia Pickwick

Bernie Fox, the world has lost a great man with your passing. Your passion, enthusiasm and vision for the natural environment was an inspiration for so many. Thanks for your friendship over the years. You will be sorely missed but your wonderful legacy will remain. RIP cobber. • PW

Tributes compiled by
Christine Connelly and Michael Howes

Australian Wildlife After Dark

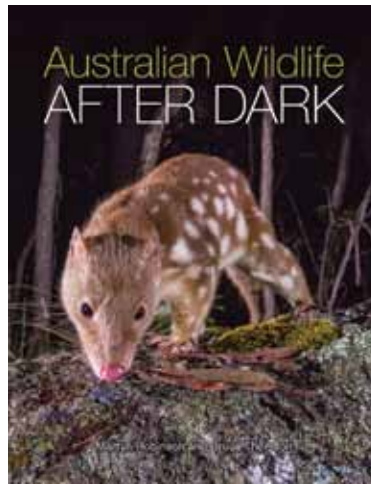
By Martyn Robinson and
Bruce Thompson. 160 pages hard cover.
CSIRO Publishing, April 2016. RRP \$35.00.

They're mostly awake while we are asleep. And if you want a glimpse of them, you'll usually have to stumble around in the dark, silent and patient, hopefully aiming a powerful torch at forked branches or likely feeding spots.

Much of Australia's fauna is active after dark. So, unless you're a night owl, you won't have much of a chance to watch and learn about the behaviour of our unique and varied nocturnal wildlife.

We glean what we can from reference books and field guides, but the information is usually presented in a dry and uninspired way and the more fascinating descriptions of behavioural curiosities are buried in facts and figures.

In *Australian Wildlife After Dark*, we get a rare insight into the lives of our cryptic fauna and their peculiar adaptations to nocturnal life. The authors present a selection of Australian nocturnal wildlife species, focusing on the diversity of species and their interesting features rather than compiling a comprehensive list.



The species covered range from katydids and spiders to kangaroos, and the book includes an impressive selection of photos. Lesser-known species like the Southern Marsupial Mole are shown in full colour images. Boxes highlight interesting features, such as geckoes cleaning their lidless-eyes with 'windscreen wiper' tongues.

Martyn Robinson has been a naturalist at the Australian Museum for more than 30 years and brings a friendly and enthusiastic style that inspires fascination. Bruce Thompson is a well-known and experienced wildlife photographer and his images offer delightful and insightful portraits.

Martyn and Bruce did not aim to produce a field guide, but hope their book encourages greater understanding of our nocturnal wonders. Unusually, the species are grouped by their adaptations to nocturnal life. If you approach the book as a field guide you may find this a bit confusing.

Australian Wildlife After Dark is an insightful introduction to the quirky nature of nocturnal Australian wildlife. Full of beautiful colour photos and interesting facts, it will suit a varied audience from families with inquisitive children to wildlife enthusiasts and experienced naturalists. • PW

Review by Christine Connelly.

Tributes

Frank Rouch

1923-2016

VNPA member and generous donor
Frank Rouch died on 12 April, aged 93. He had been involved in VNPA bushwalks and excursions for many years.

The excellent obituary in *The Age* of 6 May describes his life as a World War 2 Spitfire pilot and afterwards as a psychologist focusing on the education of students with disabilities and the training of junior psychologists.

Alan Farmer, obituary writer and colleague of Frank's, mentions that he loved nature, native plants and animals, and that 'bushwalking was one of his lifelong pleasures'. He also 'had a passion for traditional jazz and a love of good Australian red wine', to which he attributed his resilience and enduring good health.

Guided by his unswerving faith in humanity, says Farmer, Frank had a lasting impact on the lives of others. VNPA Excursions Convenor Larysa Kucan remembers him as always cheerful and friendly. The VNPA extends sincere sympathy to Frank's family and friends. • PW



PHOTO COURTESY ANN JACOBS

Kevin Jones

1935-2016

We would like to honour
Kevin Jones of Friends of Organ Pipes NP, who died aged 80 on 27 March.

Kevin has been a volunteer with FOOPs for 32 years and the group's treasurer for 15 years. He received a Best Friend award in 2011.

Kevin was a very faithful participant in weeding and planting working bees that helped restore the park from a weed-infested wasteland to an attractive area of indigenous vegetation and a haven for wildlife.

He designed and built nest boxes for bats and sugar gliders, building the first 10 bat boxes for the park's remarkable bat monitoring scheme that has been running for 17 years.

Kevin was an unassuming quiet achiever who will be greatly missed by the Friends group and the park to which he gave so much. • PW



PHOTO COURTESY ROBERT IRVINE



VNPA staff news

The VNPA wishes to thank and farewell Maxine Hawkins (above at left), who has been our Direct Marketing Officer for six years. Maxine's dedication and hard work have been invaluable; she was instrumental in launching the Association's new brand in 2012 and improving our communications with members and supporters.

Maxine and her husband are relocating from Melbourne to Woodend where they are building a new home. We wish them well for the future.

Our Fundraising Manager, Emily Clough (above right), is back from parental leave where she spent a year in London with her husband and two children. Emily is very much enjoying her return to Melbourne and engaging with VNPA's supporters.



The VNPA is also delighted to welcome Amelia Easdale, our new Supporter Development Officer.

Amelia brings a wealth of fundraising experience from Trust for Nature, where she has worked for more than six years. She is looking forward to meeting and speaking with you – our members and supporters – in the coming months. • PW

Winter Reads



CSIROPUBLISHING
www.publish.csiro.au

NEW 4-day Bay of Fires walk with **Park Trek**



Launch offer! 20% off 2016-17 season bookings. Save **\$370** per person

Regular departures October to April, small group tours, includes all meals and snacks, accommodation and transport. Travel with experienced and mature guides.

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offer available for a limited time only



