



A comprehensive vision to protect nature - Victorian State Election 2018

Too often, the natural environment is placed a long way down the list of priorities of political parties, belying its central role in ensuring Victorians can have a prosperous future.

While the Andrews government has used this term of office to advance a positive agenda on clean energy and climate change, the record on nature conservation – protection and management of our unique native plants, animal and landscapes — has been patchy.

The Coalition also has a very poor record in the previous term of government with unprecedented cuts to key conservation agencies and a number of backward policy steps.

Analysis by the Nous Group, commissioned by the Future Economy Group in 2014, has found that policies to drive environmental protection would, over the next 20 years, bring far more economic benefit to Victoria than continued environmental degradation.¹

The 2018 Victorian election is an opportunity to forge a strong agenda for nature – creating new parks, protecting threatened species and making sure that we pass on a healthy, sustainable environment to future generations.

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¹<http://www.futureeconomy.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Future-Economy-Group-Final-Report-Nous-June-2014.pdf>



1. Creating new parks for every Victorian

Victoria is blessed with incredible national parks but there are so many special places that don't have sufficient protection. Government urgently needs to expand the areas under protection to support regional economies, protect the forests that Melbourne relies on for clean air and drinking water, and to create sustainable jobs.

All political parties need to support a transition out of native forestry and create the opportunities for new national parks and conservation reserves to be planned, funded and delivered.

Parties should commit to a package of new national parks and conservation reserves that will protect Victoria's environment for decades to come, ensuring that generations of Victorians have access to clean air and water, wild nature, recreational opportunities, sustainable jobs that are decent, safe and secure.

Priority parks to be created:

- The Great Forest National Park
- The Emerald Link recreation and conservation reserve system, linking the Australian Alps to the East Gippsland coast
- Strathbogie Ranges
- Wellsford, Wombat, Mount Cole and Pyrenees Range forests
- Completing the Murray River Park
- Inclusion of Mount Stirling in the Alpine National Park.

Consideration should also be given to better protection of the habitat of the nationally endangered South-eastern Red-tail Black Cockatoo in far South west Victoria.

These parks should be established through Victorian Environment Assessment Council (VEAC) investigations, taking into account Traditional Owner aspirations in relation to management, and to ensure that communities, recreation groups, scientists and the general public can all participate in decision making.

2. Expand our marine & coastal parks

Victoria is home to a wide range of unique marine animals, but successive governments have failed to establish any new marine parks since 2002. We were once a leader in protecting the marine environment, but now we are laggard. The next Victorian Government must ensure we're adequately protecting our marine and coastal species. This should include a review of the comprehensiveness, adequacy and representativeness of Victoria's marine protected areas, with a view to expanding them and making Victoria a leader in this space once again.



Coastal reserves, our beaches, dunes and rocky reefs are also important places, both for people and nature. We need to avoid damaging these areas and fund comprehensive programs to ensure these places survive and thrive, particularly in the face of climate change and coastal population pressure.

3. Stopping logging in our native forests

Victoria's native forests are still being logged for low-value products. Forest dependent wildlife are threatened and endangered, and some are facing extinction. Old-growth forests and rainforests are still being destroyed. Logging continues at a great social, economic and environmental cost.

A formal moratorium should immediately be placed on logging in select high conservation value forests to preserve the full range of social, economic and environmental benefits.

Improve forest management

There should be no further renewals or extensions of Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs). Instead, they should be scrapped, with the next Victorian government referring logging plans to be assessed under federal environment law. The full suite of forest values and ecosystem services must be considered under any new forest management regime that may replace the RFAs. The value of carbon, water and tourism must be accounted for and evaluated against the cost of continuing logging in native forests.

Off-reserve management prescriptions for species and plant communities threatened by logging must be strengthened and rigorously enforced. Where there are none, effective prescriptions must be developed, with the involvement of the Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC), and where prescriptions are out of date, they must be updated.

The Department of Environment Land Water and Planning (DELWP) is failing in its role as the regulator of logging in Victoria. Widespread and systematic logging breaches have taken place under a weak and self-regulated system that has not resulted in prosecutions and appropriate enforcement. The independent review of timber harvesting regulation that was due to be completed by October 24th 2018 must be publicly released in full with its recommendations.

There is a clear need for regulatory reform of the native forest logging industry, including the establishment of independent regulatory oversight. Environmental protections must be improved by strengthened regulations and more effective enforcement of the code of practice for timber production, as well as protecting environmental values such as rainforest and threatened species in state forests.



Fixing the problems with the regulation of native forest logging in Victoria is important, however it alone will not address the substantial and ongoing economic and wood supply realities the industry is experiencing. Current native forest logging is unsustainable. Logging in native forests needs to end, with formal forest protection and industry transition as priorities- reform of native forest logging prescriptions, rules, regulations and law is not enough.

Complete the transition

As with the transition from coal to renewable energy, the wood and fibre industry is well overdue to transition from native forests to plantations.

The next Victorian government should urgently undertake industry reform within the native forest logging sector and rapidly complete a transition out of native forests and into sustainably managed plantations and non-timber sources of fibre. The paper and woodchip industries should also be immediately moved into plantations and non-timber sources of fibre, and state government forest managers should reform any native forest logging to achieve Full Forest Management Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification.

This transition must be accompanied by a full review of VicForests' capacity and efficacy as managers of Victoria's publicly-owned forest estate for logging. The Government should also consider whether VicForests is still fit for purpose, and whether the agency needs to be replaced with a more balanced body that places the long-term needs of our environment at the forefront of forest management, rather than the provision of wood to the lowest value (woodchips for paper) being the main priority, as is currently the case for VicForests.

4. Reform threatened species protections under the Flora and Fauna Guarantee (FFG) Act

Over the last three years there has been a departmental review of the FFG Act. The findings fell well short of the standard of protection needed by Victoria's threatened species. This reform opportunity should be revived and extended through an independent Commission of Inquiry to identify the shortcomings of our current structures for protecting threatened species, frame new legislation, and set up programs and institutions needed to reverse the decline.

In addition to the Commission of Inquiry, an incoming Minister should use the powers under the existing Act to protect habitats for threatened species through critical habitat determinations and interim conservation orders. To make sure the Act is effective the government needs to put in place real enforcement powers, tougher penalties for non-compliance and clear targets to help threatened species recover, combined with a political willingness to actually take steps to protect Victoria's biodiversity.



5. Improve the implementation of native vegetation clearing controls

Native vegetation on private land is critical to biodiversity conservation in Victoria, while also delivering a range of other benefits. However, Victoria's native vegetation clearing controls are not properly monitored or enforced.

DELWP and local governments need to be funded to support landholders to comply with their regulatory obligations, and the government needs to commit to develop and implement a strategic compliance and enforcement policy to monitor compliance with regulations and permit conditions and, where necessary, take enforcement action.

6. Continue funding for successful riverbank restoration

Riverbanks are incredibly valuable places. When they are in good condition they stop pollutants entering the water, provide shade to keep rivers cool and preventing flood damage and erosion. As the climate changes, they will become increasingly important, creating refugees and migration opportunities for wildlife. Riverbanks need to be at the forefront of biodiversity conservation.

The number one threat to riverbank health is livestock grazing. To address this, the Andrews government implemented the Regional Riparian Action Plan. This program has protected and enhanced nearly 2,300 kilometres of riparian land – that's almost the distance from Melbourne to Cairns - and 33,000 hectares of riparian land, which is more than three times the size of Phillip Island.

Evaluations show this program is working to improve environmental health. However, the program only has funding to run for two more years. Given the success of the program, all parties should commit to scaling-up the program by providing \$60m of new funding to be delivered between 2020 and 2024, which would provide \$15 million per year for restoration.

7. Invest in protection and restoration of biodiversity on private land

The Trust for Nature plays a vital role in protecting biodiversity by supporting private landholders to convert their properties to permanent protected habitats. To significantly ramp up this work, Victoria should invest between \$30 - \$40m in a Revolving Fund that purchases properties rich in biodiversity, applies permanent protections and then re-sells the properties. This would protect 60,000 - 70,000 ha of vital conservation land over four years, without affecting the budget bottom line, because the funds are retained as property asset, and once sold, can be re-invested.

Partnerships between government, government agencies, community groups, landholders and Traditional Owners are critical to restoring and protecting Victoria's biodiversity. Support needs to be continued and increased for landscape scale biodiversity conservation



and restoration programs, as well as efforts targeted at significant areas, species and communities.

8. Fund our parks properly

To protect our national parks, government needs to significantly increase the amount of operational funding provided to Parks Victoria. An initial core funding increase of \$50 million per year, with subsequent annual increases of at least \$15 million in core government funding (non-tied) over the forward estimates, would bring Parks Victoria back up to an appropriate level of resources. This would provide funding for hundreds of skill-based positions such as rangers, as well as improving long-term land management programs.

As part of this, the government should commit to a comprehensive approach to, at a minimum, joint management of national parks and conservation estates with Traditional Owners, working collaboratively to build on the successful programs already in place across Victoria. We should also seek to avoid inappropriate large scale developments in our national parks.

There also needs to be much greater recognition of the role that community volunteers play in improving the health and the accessibility of Victoria's public park lands for everyone. Friends groups, Landcare and conservation groups all offer commitment, passion, local knowledge and established networks, but they need increased support for volunteer programs and increased investment in public land management.

9. Act on invasive species

The next Victorian Government needs to commit to a statewide control and containment strategy in parks and across the landscape to end the impacts of feral game species, especially deer – which are spreading like giant hairy hoofed cane toads - and other problem pest animals. To do this government needs to implement integrated control of pest species including eradication in key areas by professional shooters; list deer as a pest species; improve research funding for targeted baits; and other control methods.

10. Reform the Water Act to give our rivers a fair share of water

The Water Act formally enshrined the concept of 'environmental water reserves' in 2005 but, unfortunately, successive Victorian governments have consistently failed to provide sufficient water to actually maintain healthy rivers. To address this, the Water Act needs to be reformed to guarantee good quality, available water for environmental purposes.



11. Implement the Murray Darling Basin Plan

The Murray Darling Basin Plan is the best chance we have to sustain the vital Murray River system. To date, the Andrews government has failed to give the river the water it needs, instead promoting irrigator interests and showing little commitment to delivering the remaining 450 GL of environmental water required for the river and to maintain good water quality.

The next Victorian government should commit to supporting both the economic and environmental future of the river by delivering the 450 GL of environmental water, managing the constraints that affect the delivery of environmental water, and embracing all opportunities to make water use sustainable in the long-term. This should be combined with a focus on ensuring the integrity of the Murray Darling Basin Plan is maintained, given the many issues of compliance, collusion and alleged water theft that have been exposed over the past 18 months.

12. Create a truly Natural Melbourne

To make sure our city remains green and livable, we need to fast-track the protection of green spaces in our city. We can do this by properly funding the acquisition of critically endangered grassland and woodlands on Melbourne's western and northern fringe. In addition, creating a network of smaller conservation and recreation corridors would add smaller high-conservation areas to the metropolitan and regional parks network. Commitments to new regional/metropolitan parks are also welcome.

13. Protecting and enhancing Melbourne's waterways

Melbourne's waterways have suffered for too long from neglect, and lack of a coordinated approach to planning and protection. Good progress has been made with the passage of legislation to protect the Yarra River corridor, and there is now also strong support for better protection of rivers and waterways in Melbourne's west.

The next Victorian government needs to continue to support the *Yarra River Protection (Wilip-gin Birrarung murron) Act 2017* and ensure that the first Yarra Strategic Plan provides a strong foundation for protection and restoration of Melbourne's iconic Yarra River.

Current processes aimed at securing similar protection for the Werribee, Maribyrnong and other waterways in Melbourne's west also need to be supported. The next Victorian government should support the current Ministerial Advisory Committee review of these waterways and commit to implementation of the reviews recommendations.