

PARK WATCH



HOW CAN WE ALLOW PLATYPUS TO DROWN?
LEARNING TOGETHER TO CARE FOR NATURE
NEW PLAN FOR POINT NEPEAN
SAVAGE BLOW FOR COASTAL RESERVE
TIME FOR NEW APPROACH ON FORESTS
LESSONS FROM THE LITTLE DESERT
NATURE'S MILLION SECRETS

MARCH 2018 NO 272



VICTORIAN
NATIONAL PARKS
ASSOCIATION
Be part of nature



Be part of nature



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VNPA'S VISION

The Victorian National Parks Association vision is to ensure Victoria is a place with a diverse and healthy natural environment that is protected, respected and enjoyed by all.

EDITOR

Meg Sobey

GETTING INVOLVED IN VNPA

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

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

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You're always welcome to contact the editor to discuss ideas for articles. Phone the VNPA or email meg@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.

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FRONT COVER

They are one of our most beloved native animals, but platypus are dying unnecessarily in Victoria. See pages 8-9. Photo: Doug Gimesy.

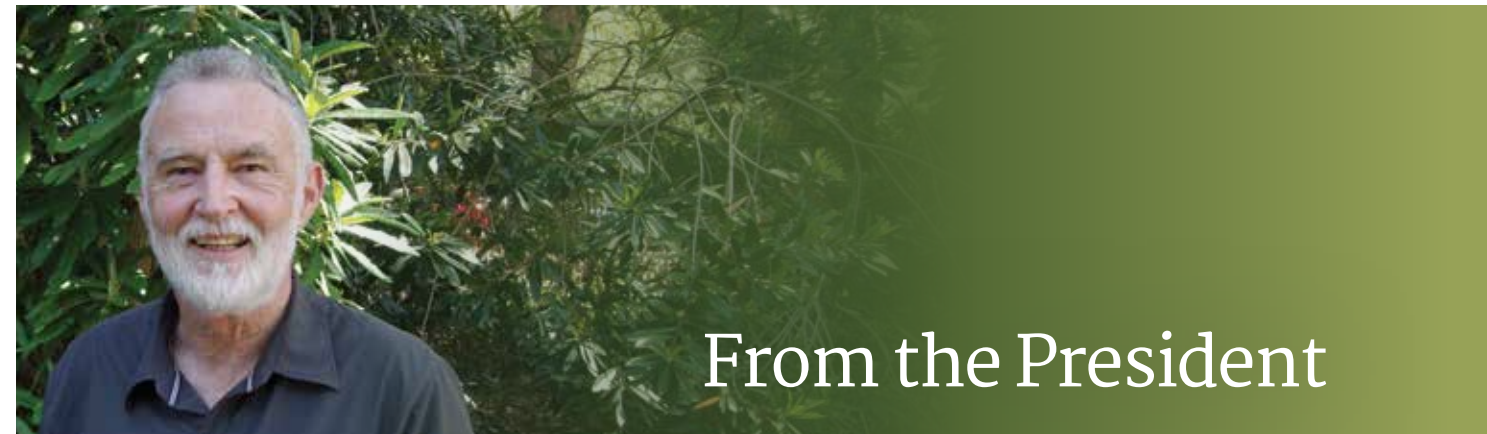
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I spend a lot of time thinking about the declining state of the natural environment and how we can turn it around. While rapid in ecological terms, for individuals it is often a slow change that goes unnoticed, particularly for the majority of people who give little attention to the natural environment in their area.

This decline has been going on for centuries as each of us modifies our personal habitat, yet for each generation what is 'normal' and what represents a 'good environment' is less than that for the previous generation. Think about what your children and grandchildren accept as a natural environment compared with what you grew up with or, going the other way, what you see now compared with what your parents or grandparents knew. This is not a case of looking back through rose-tinted glasses. Think how wonderful it would be to still have regent honeyeaters or eastern barred bandicoots as an integral part of our wildlife in Victoria.

Today most of us live in highly urbanised communities. Air-conditioned homes and work places leave little opportunity for interaction with nature. For most people, contact with nature involves watching an Attenborough documentary or a visit to the zoo. Important though they are, these are still very sanitised and remote contacts with the natural world.

Talk to people outside your circle of friends and you may be surprised how few venture beyond areas covered by street lighting. A common perception is that the bush is dangerous, that there are snakes and other things that bite waiting to attack at the first opportunity. There is a fear of the unknown which prevents

many people enjoying the natural environment. TV documentaries in particular raise expectations and fears to a level that is rarely realised in life.

However if we are to protect our natural environment, our native plants and animals, we need people across the community to support and advocate for that protection. We need many more people who are familiar with and comfortable visiting the bush, who appreciate its wonders in all its diversity, and value all life forms, not just the cute and cuddlies.

VNPA's Wild Families program (see page 35) is one area where we are working to engage the next generation of environmentalists. This program aims to excite a younger audience about the wonders of the bush while they still have unbridled curiosity about all that surrounds them.

For older groups we have our program NatureWatch and related projects. Projects like Caught on Camera and Communities Listening for Nature tend to cater more for those already familiar with the bush, but take this engagement to a higher level. Ideally these people will become ambassadors for the bush and recruit more people keen to protect it.

Our ReefWatch program has been going from strength to strength with new records set each year for the number of participants in the Great Victorian Fish Count. Last year had more than 700 people in the water counting fish (see page 34). This program does a great job of raising awareness about an environment that is usually out of sight.

Probably our main area for engaging those unfamiliar with the bush is our Bushwalking and Activities Group

and our VNPA Excursions group. Both groups provide an easy introduction to the bush for people who may not have spent a lot of time outside the city. Our experienced leaders help make these experiences safe and enjoyable. The Walk, Talk and Gawk activities are particularly good for teaching people about the bush while on easy walks, usually within an hour or two's drive from the city.

In coming months we will be changing our activities registration process so that we can provide our participants with more information about VNPA and our activities. It is important that we do this. We urgently need more people who understand and love the bush and who are at a minimum willing to support those who are fighting for its protection. Without that, the quality of the natural environment will continue to decline for each generation. • PW

Euan Moore, VNPA President

“ Think about what your children and grandchildren accept as a natural environment compared with what you grew up with... ”



PHOTO: IT'S A WILDLIFE

Learning together to care for nature

VNPA'S COMMUNITY LEARNING AND ENGAGEMENT MANAGER **CAITLIN GRIFFITH** INTRODUCES THE THEME OF NATURE-BASED LEARNING FOR THIS EDITION OF *Park Watch*.

The Victorian National Parks Association's vision is big: "Victoria has a diverse and healthy natural environment, protected, respected and enjoyed by all". This vision is about both nature and people. We recognise that learning, education and knowledge sharing are essential to achieving this vision, and we are delighted to share a diverse range of nature-based learning projects, events and activities from our and other organisations in this edition of *Park Watch*.

How is the VNPA involved in learning and education?

VNPA has been committed to learning and education throughout our full 66 year history.

One fine example early on was in 1974 when a group of eager members researched and wrote *The Alps at the Crossroads*, published by VNPA. That book triggered the campaign for the Alpine National Park. It is long out of print, but remains an impeccable source of information on the park's natural and cultural history.

Today, VNPA continues to offer many learning opportunities for our members (such as yourself), supporters, volunteers, staff, council and committee members, project partners, environmental groups, schools and the general community.

This includes through our:

- activities and events;
- citizen-science and community engagement programs NatureWatch, ReefWatch and Wild Families;
- campaign work, educating politicians and the public;
- creating school resources and presentations; and
- producing high-quality and interesting communications materials about Victoria's nature and related issues, both online (our website, social media and emails) and print (books, booklets and *Park Watch* magazine).

Developing a learning culture

"In earlier times it was considered that information leading to knowledge about the environment would in itself be adequate motivation for citizens to act to protect natural places. It was assumed that they

would adjust their own behaviour in the light of their knowledge about problems and impacts. It is now accepted that this is not the case. We often have knowledge that there is a problem, but knowledge alone does not necessarily (or even often) lead to appropriate action."

VNPA Community Education and Engagement Strategy, 2012

Learning about and connecting with nature are still essential to fostering and encouraging a sense of care for nature. Addressing the gap between knowledge and pro-environmental behaviour is not straightforward and not yet strongly understood. However, it is important for us to continue to learn new ways to address this gap. One valuable way is in creating opportunities for people to participate and take action.

VNPA developed an 'Community Education and Engagement Strategy' in 2012 in recognition of the need to strengthen our education-based work. A key outcome was the philosophy and tagline: "learning together to care for nature".

To meet the challenges of collectively protecting nature in Victoria, we acknowledge the need for everyone involved with our organisation, from staff to supporters, to continue to learn and share skills, knowledge and values, and ways to take action. We create opportunities for our VNPA community to do just this.

Some recent key actions that have arisen are:

- Leading the VicNature2050 process bringing academics, land managers and the community together to share knowledge about climate impacts on nature, and ways to manage them. That process has been influential in building climate actions into Victoria's new *Biodiversity 2037* strategy and has triggered ongoing discussions throughout the conservation community. (See: www.vicnature2050.org)
- Developing the Wild Families program which has engaged more families with our organisation.
- Continuing to create opportunities for knowledge sharing and development for scientists, local communities and volunteers through the NatureWatch and ReefWatch citizen science programs.
- Engaging new audiences in these programs, e.g. children and young adults through Wild Families, Scouts, schools, and university clubs.
- Developing 'Skill up for Nature', a training program for staff and volunteer leaders.
- Partnered with Environment East Gippsland to run the annual Forests Forever camp with adventure and advocacy-based content. Hundreds of people have learned more about the values of East Gippsland forests and conservation challenges
- Worked in partnership with local community groups around Bendigo to develop 'Living Next to Nature, Being a good neighbour to Nature, Being a good neighbour to Bendigo's bushland' booklet, website and stories.

An ongoing journey

Learning and education with VNPA is an ongoing journey, not a destination. We are continuing to learn new ways to approach the challenge.

Our Education and Engagement Strategy raised numerous questions we will continue to address into the future, including:

- Victoria is the most ecologically stressed state, why does only a small part of the population seem to care about this situation?
- What are the most effective ways of working with our members and supporters to enhance our capacity and theirs?
- What are some of the most engaging and effective ways of diversifying the VNPA audience?

We couldn't do this without our members and supporters, and we look forward to continuing this learning and knowledge sharing journey with you. • PW

A champion of the seas

VNPA BID **CHRIS SMYTH** A FOND FAREWELL.

Late last year Chris resigned from the position of Marine and Coastal Coordinator. His depth of knowledge will be greatly missed by all at the VNPA. We sincerely thank him for his dedicated work.

Chris was our Marine and Coastal Coordinator from 2015- 2017. During this time he took on responsibility for other roles within the organisation, including Acting Executive Director, Program Manager and editor of *Park Watch*. Chris also had a previous stint at VNPA as Marine Campaigner between 2000-2003.

Prior to returning to the VNPA fold, Chris was the Healthy Oceans Campaigner with the Australian Conservation Foundation, where his work focused on the establishment of marine protected areas, ecosystem-based regional marine planning,

national marine legislative reform and sustainable seafood.

One of Chris' key achievements has been resolving the conflict over Point Nepean, particularly the Quarantine Station, over many years. The recent release of the final Management Plan for an integrated Point Nepean National Park is a milestone in which Chris played a leading role (see page 6). Chris has also been working hard to protect the hooded plover from racehorse training at Belfast Coastal Reserve (see page 7).

The work of VNPA in protecting our seas and shores will continue. Chris has generously agreed to provide research and strategic advice on an ad-hoc basis, and we are currently recruiting a new full-time campaigner to work on marine, coastal and other critical conservation issues. • PW



PHOTO COURTESY CHRIS SMYTH

POINT NEPEAN SAGA

Drawing to a close?



PHOTO: COURTESY
MATTHEW MACKAY, INNER
LIGHT PHOTOGRAPHY



Hundreds of protesters gathered in 2014 to save Point Nepean.

Part of the Quarantine Station, and beyond it the Ticonderoga Bay Sanctuary Zone, home to the endangered burrunan dolphins.

PHOTO: COURTESY VNPA

THE RELEASE OF THE ANDREWS GOVERNMENT'S FINAL MASTER PLAN FOR POINT NEPEAN NATIONAL PARK IS WELCOME, SAYS **CHRIS SMYTH**.

Are we there yet? That has been a frequently asked question during the more than 20 years that the Point Nepean saga has been running.

It was asked when the federal government established a reference group that produced a draft master plan in 2002.

It was asked when the federal Coalition government's planned sell-off of public land was stopped in its tracks in 2003.

It was asked when the federal Labor government returned the Quarantine Station to Victoria in 2009, and the state Labor government produced a draft master plan in 2010.

It was even asked when the Napthine government rejected that draft plan in 2014 in favour of a long-term lease with a developer for a spa retreat and hotel complex that would have been devastating for the park's environment.

And in 2018 we are now asking it again. Three years after Victorian Labor's 2014 election commitment to review the Point Nepean lease and return Parks Victoria to managing the entire park, the state government has delivered. In 2015, the developer's lease was allowed to expire, Parks Victoria is back and, after two years of research and consultation, the Environment Minister Lily D'Ambrosio launched the park's final master plan in January 2018.

So, are we close? Let's hope so.

When releasing the final master plan at a small gathering in front of the Quarantine Station's disinfecting and shower complex, Minister D'Ambrosio praised the patient work of the community and, especially, the one constant in years of campaigning, Kate Baillieu.

The minister also committed \$3.7 million to the master plan's implementation and new visitor facilities, including the upgrade of the disinfecting complex to become the beating heart of the park's interpretation. In other commitments:

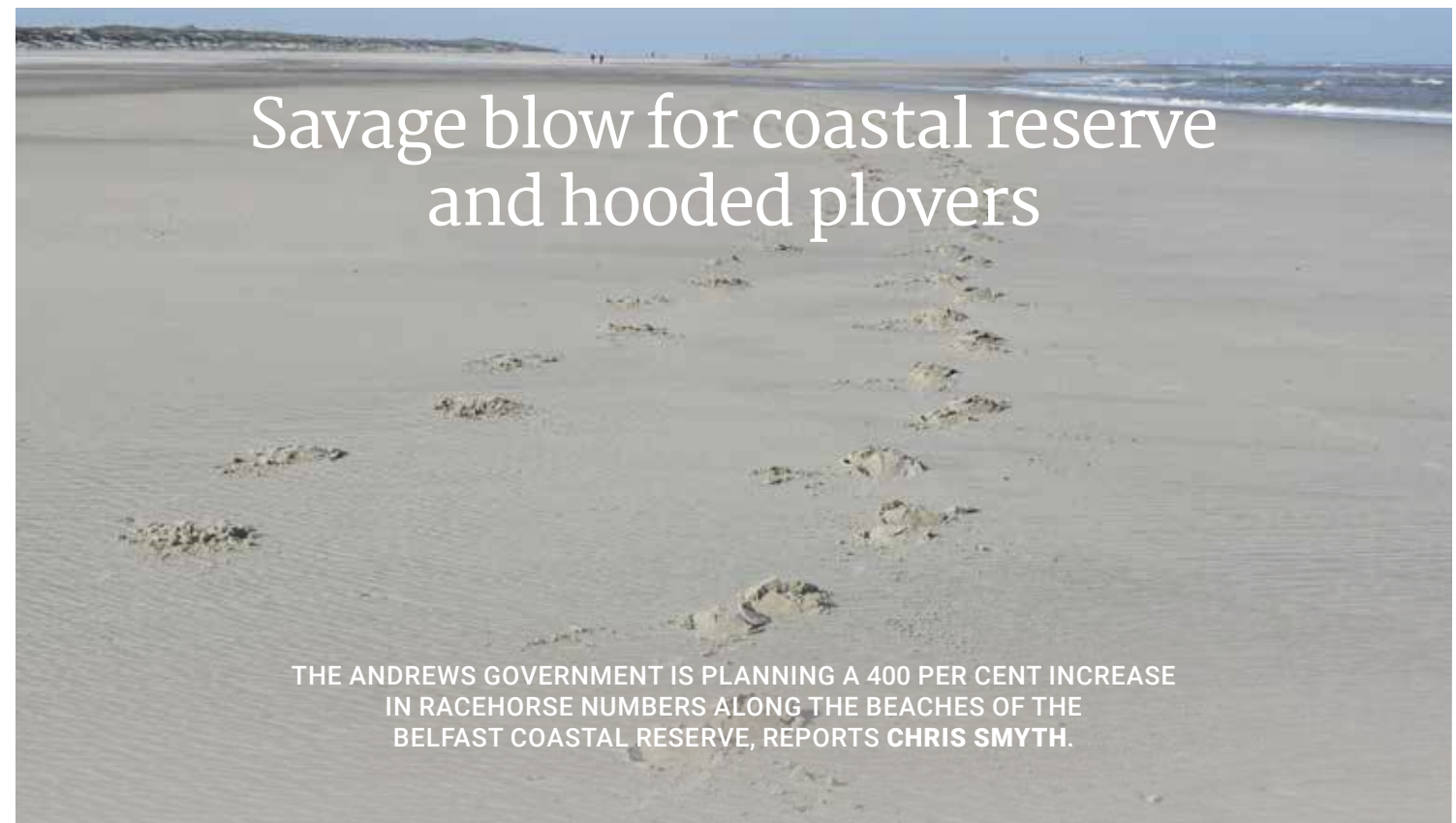
- a new Point Nepean Advisory Group will be established and report to the Parks Victoria Board,
- a new staff member will be appointed to implement the plan and be based in the park,
- new camping experiences will be installed at the Quarantine Station,
- the Defence Road out to Fort Nepean will be repaired.

Although these commitments are relatively small – the master plan estimates that its full implementation may require \$140 million of public and private investment in the coming years – they serve to reaffirm the state government's support for an integrated national park that protects the area's natural and cultural heritage, the very thing the community has been urging for more than 20 years.

The government could immediately save at least \$2-3 million capital expenditure, and millions on long-term recurrent spending, by scuttling a proposed new jetty in the Ticonderoga Bay Sanctuary Zone, previously established to protect the endangered burrunan dolphin. It will significantly increase boat traffic in the area and distort park management priorities, taking resources away from protecting the park.

Thank you to all of you who supported this community campaign over the years. VNPA will continue to monitor the implementation of the plan, including options for accommodation and new buildings. For more information and to view the final master plan go to: www.parks.vic.gov.au/pointnepeanplan • PW

Savage blow for coastal reserve and hooded plovers



THE ANDREWS GOVERNMENT IS PLANNING A 400 PER CENT INCREASE IN RACEHORSE NUMBERS ALONG THE BEACHES OF THE BELFAST COASTAL RESERVE, REPORTS **CHRIS SMYTH**.

Are hooded plovers the new sacrificial lambs of Victoria's coastal mismanagement? It would seem so after reading the draft coastal management plan for the Belfast Coastal Reserve, released by Parks Victoria in January 2018.

Hooded plovers are not alone in their sacrifice. The plan would also put to the sword the south-west region's biggest conservation, tourism and recreational asset – its beaches.

But let's go back a few months to 15 June 2017. On that day, the Andrews Government issued a licence for racehorse training on the reserve's beaches between Warrnambool and Port Fairy.

The 12-month licence was granted to the Warrnambool Racing Club to coordinate racehorse training on the reserve's beaches, effectively privatising the management of coastal public land. And the licence fee? Less than \$3 a day for each horse being trained.

For the government, the licence apparently signalled the start of a bright future for the reserve and its resident hooded plovers. Racehorse numbers would be:

"reduced to a maximum of 65 across the reserve. Before the introduction of the licence, the numbers of horses being trained in the area had increased from about 180 to 250 in two years, with a significant increase in the number of those horses using the beaches."

But after almost two years of consultation, during which racing interests were given elevated status, the draft coastal management plan brings horse numbers back to...256 per day!

Under the plan, commercial racehorse training would rapidly expand to multiple beaches and in sand dunes, with devastating effects for the nationally threatened hooded plovers, other coastal wildlife and the safety and enjoyment of other beachgoers.

The length of beaches available to racehorse training would be increased by 250 per cent (from two kilometres to five kilometres) and the number of horses by 400 per cent (from 65 to 256 each day). That represents 25 per cent of the reserve's beaches, with nothing in the plan to stop future increases. This is in stark contrast to the government's spin when issuing the licence – only one per cent of the reserve would be available to racehorses.

Racehorses would also be allowed back into 750 metres of fragile dunes behind Levy's Beach, where in the past they have caused severe dune erosion. The plan even recommends racehorse training within a conservation zone at Rutledge's Cutting. Why? Because the use is 'historical'. That is simply laughable.

The plan cites examples of damage caused by racehorses but fails to explain how increasing the area available to them by 250 per cent will mitigate those impacts. Worse still, the plan's risk assessment reveals that management won't make any difference. Before management, the risk to coastal dune vegetation, cultural values, resident and migratory shorebirds from racehorse training is rated 'Extreme'. And after management is introduced, the rating remains 'Extreme'.

Ever since the uninvited invasion by racehorses in 2015, their training has been mismanaged, with numerous breaches of licensing conditions, public safety put at risk and taxpayers footing the bill for costly Parks Victoria surveillance and infrastructure upgrades. Expanding the number of training beaches will simply make that worse.

This is not a plan for the future, it is a relic of past coastal mismanagement and inappropriate use.

It is time to get the horses out of the Belfast Coastal Reserve so that mum, dad and the kids, anglers, surfers – and hooded plovers – can have their beaches back.

You can read the draft plan at www.engage.vic.gov.au/belfast • PW

PHOTO: PIXABAY CC

How can we allow platypuses to drown in Victoria?

DOUG GIMESY (CONSERVATION AND WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER) AND JOSH GRIFFITHS (WILDLIFE ECOLOGIST) SHED LIGHT ON THE TRAGIC BUT LARGELY AVOIDABLE DEATHS OF AN ICONIC SPECIES.

The thought of any animal trapped underwater, slowly drowning while it frantically searches for an escape, is horrific. Knowing that we allow this to happen to one of our most iconic and unique species, the platypus, for the sake of a few yabbies, is simply disgraceful.

And yet this is what happens every year with people using enclosed yabby traps (such as opera house nets and drum net) and other type of enclosed nets in our waterways.

These nets trap indiscriminately and frequently drown platypuses (as well as other air breathing animals such as rakali and turtles) and the current regulations clearly don't prevent this. This was graphically and horribly illustrated last May by the death of five platypuses in just two opera house nets in West Gippsland.

In Victoria enclosed yabby traps are illegal to use in public waterways, but allowed on private property (presumably to allow landowners to fish their off-stream dams). But what constitutes public waterways? If a creek runs through my property is it a private stream? Do platypuses inhabit farm dams?

Confusion around the current regulations as well as a lack of awareness or appreciation of the risks posed by these nets appears to be a major problem, so let's clarify a few common misunderstandings:



A shocking sight; this platypus struggled to escape this opera house net before drowning. This is just one of many such cruel deaths.

PHOTO: DELWP

1. "There aren't any platypus in this stream, I've been coming here for years and haven't seen any."

As platypuses can be quite elusive and mainly active at night, not observing one in your local waterway certainly does not mean they are not present. Platypuses inhabit many large and small waterways throughout Victoria, and long-term residents are sometimes quite surprised when they are told they have some platypus neighbours. For someone unfamiliar with the waterway, it is virtually impossible to tell if platypuses are present.

2. "Platypus don't live in farm dams."

Platypuses are regularly found in farm dams. In fact, some on-stream dams can provide excellent foraging habitat for them. They can also travel across land to reach off-stream dams or travel along drainage channels after rainfall. So regulations allowing

the use of these indiscriminate death traps in private dams do not prevent platypuses being drowned.

3. "I use these nets safely as I check them regularly."

Platypuses are mammals like us. They only have a few minutes of air when diving, and if they are frantically searching for a way out of a trap, they will use this up even quicker. Checking nets regularly will not prevent their drowning.

4. "But they are sold in my local camping store so surely I can use them?"

Yes, and that's part of the problem. While most responsible stores will inform customers of the regulations and risks, many don't. These nets are also available in large fishing and outdoor stores and online, where no staff are available to share this information. The problem is compounded by the fact that many nets sold have little or no labelling.



PHOTO: DOUG GIMESY

5. "I wasn't aware their use in public waterways in Victoria was illegal."

The great news is, now you do, and you can share this information so others know.

6. "I'm unsure of the difference between an enclosed yabby trap, such as an opera house net, and a hoop or drop net".

Victorian Fisheries Authority has good information available on their website. Go to www.vfa.vic.gov.au

So how do we prevent this?

We're sure that most people would be absolutely devastated to be responsible for the death of a single platypus. How terrible would it be to pull out a net with your kids and find a drowned platypus in it? Or two? So what to do?

1. We want owners/users to immediately stop using enclosed yabby traps and switch to the safer alternatives such as hoop or drop nets.
2. We'd like to see retailers acknowledge the problem, show some corporate responsibility, and simply stop selling enclosed yabby traps immediately. Wouldn't it be great if they considered a product recall or implemented an in-store discount/swap out scheme for safer nets?

3. We'd like legislation and regulations in Victoria to be changed so the sale, ownership and use of enclosed yabby nets in any waterway is prohibited. There are platypus-friendly alternatives that are virtually just as effective, such as hoop or drop nets.

So what can you do?

• Spread the word

Many people are simply unaware of the regulations or about the risks that these nets pose, so please pass this information on.

If you find any trap being used illegally, immediately report this to the relevant authorities. In Victoria you can call 13FISH any time of the day, or DELWP on 136186 during business hours.

• Talk to those who sell them

If you go into a fishing/outdoor store, ask if they sell enclosed yabby traps, and if the answer is yes, explain the issue to them, and then ask them if there is a good reason they won't stop?

• Engage with those who make policy

Contact your local or state politicians, and politely ask them to support a change in regulations which ban the sale, ownership and use of enclosed yabby traps, and explain why. A key minister responsible for both fisheries and animal welfare related regulations is Minister Jaala Pulford, email:

jaala.pulford@parliament.vic.gov.au. The Environment Minister Lily D'Ambrosio can be emailed at: lily.dambrosio@parliament.vic.gov.au. Or simply sign our petition at www.change.org. Search for 'Enclosed yabby traps drown platypuses - ban their sale, use and possession in Victoria'.

• Report a sighting

If you are ever lucky enough to see a platypus in the wild, please register the sighting using the platypusSPOT app available at www.platypusspot.org. The more we know about their distribution the better.

What are we (and others) doing?

In Victoria, a concerned group have been established (the Victorian Alliance for Platypus-Safe Yabby Traps), and we are working hard with relevant government authorities and like-minded organisations to try and get the use of enclosed yabby traps in all waters banned, as well as raise awareness around the issue. You can find us on Facebook and will update with developments.

At the end of the day, we have to ask ourselves, "Are a few yabbies worth causing the traumatic drowning death of our most iconic wildlife?"

We think the answer has to be a resounding 'NO', and call on all people who use them to stop, all retailers who sell them to stop, and all the relevant authorities with the power to do something, to change the regulations. • PW

Who's in charge?

THE TOURISM INDUSTRY IS ASSUMING CONTROL OF OUR NATIONAL PARKS. **PHIL INGAMELLS** LOOKS AT TWO CASES WHERE THINGS ARE GOING AWRY.

The Mount Buffalo land grab

For over a year now, a proposal for a series of massive tourism developments in Mount Buffalo National Park has been pushed as a serious option.

But neither Parks Victoria, the environment department (DELWP), or the Environment Minister appear to have any say in this process, even though they alone have clear responsibility for the park under Victorian law.

The proposal, put forward by a consortium called the Mount Buffalo Destination Advisory Group, wants six hectares of the national park handed over to private investors, bypassing national park leasing restrictions.

That would allow a new 47 room 'Spa Retreat Hotel' and associated day spa to be constructed behind the old chalet, adjacent old sheds revamped as a bar and café, a second bar and function centre, a wedding chapel, a reception room, an ice/roller skating rink and some 'boutique shops' added for good measure.

Then there is an outdoor café with diners precariously perched over the Buffalo Gorge on a glass-bottomed walkway, a reconstruction of the always problematic Cresta Lodge in the plateau's south and a number of other outrageous schemes.

The proposal would essentially establish an alpine resort complex on Mount Buffalo, smaller than but similar to the Falls Creek and Hotham villages tucked into the vast Alpine National Park.

But Mount Buffalo is a very small national park and, as one of Victoria's oldest and most loved (it was proclaimed in 1898), undoubtedly worthy of vigilant protection.

How did this come about?

Faced with seemingly endless millions of dollars to restore the dysfunctional Mount Buffalo Chalet, Parks Victoria put a realistically costed proposal to Heritage Victoria. It involved restoring the oldest part of the Chalet – the picturesque front – and demolishing the unsightly and no-longer necessary jumble of extensions at the back of the chalet. Heritage Victoria approved the proposal in 2014.

The remarkably balanced Sentinel, Mount Buffalo National Park. Every walk on the plateau is full of interest; there is no need to add 'attractions' to the park.



A short walk in Little Desert National Park. Parks Victoria should be promoting short walks across the state, not spending millions on unnecessary infrastructure in highly sensitive areas, to service a very small 'market'.



The remarkable Buffalo Gorge has long been a favourite for visitors. Adding an intrusive glass-bottomed viewing platform would take away far more than it contributes.

Unfortunately, the plan met with some local objections and triggered a social media campaign aimed at saving 'Australia's largest timber building', even though that was an erroneous claim.

Had Parks Victoria and the Minister weathered that misinformed opposition and gone ahead with their pragmatic restoration, we would now have a restored and fully functioning chalet.

We could have been busy promoting Mount Buffalo, Victoria's 'Island in the Sky', as one of the finest places for short walks in the land. And we could be concentrating on caring for the park's remarkable sub-alpine ecosystems, which face a tricky future under a warming climate.

So what's the state of play?

The Mount Buffalo Destination Advisory Group's 40-page manifesto for handing the park over to private developers is still under consideration, and Victoria's Tourism Minister has now handed \$200,000 to the Alpine Shire Council to "evaluate the proposal". But neither the Tourism Minister, nor the Alpine Shire, actually have any legal responsibility for, or planning authority over, Mount Buffalo National Park.

It's time for Parks Victoria and the Environment Minister (who jointly hold that responsibility) to exert their authority and halt this developer's dream in its tracks. After all, the Victorian Government's policy on developments in national parks makes it very clear that tourism developments should be "sited on private or other public land outside parks, in locations that are more likely to provide economic benefits directly to regional towns".

Mount Buffalo National Park is one of Victoria's most beautiful and intriguing natural areas, and remains very popular just as it is: around 180,000 people visit the plateau each year. It doesn't need a series of 'added attractions'. And it's very hard to wind back unwise infrastructure.

The Falls to Hotham fantasy

Some time ago, Tourism Victoria got the notion that Victoria needed four 'icon walks' to challenge the great adventure walks of our neighbours: Tasmania and New Zealand.

Ignoring several long-distance walks Victoria already had (such as the Great South West Walk and the Alpine Walking Track), they came up with four new ones, all featuring serviced accommodation along the way.

Parks Victoria swallowed the scheme whole, and set about planning:

1. The Great Ocean Walk
2. The Grampians Peaks Trail
3. The Falls to Hotham Alpine Crossing
4. A Croajingolong coastal walk.

The Great Ocean Walk, from Apollo Bay to the Twelve Apostles, is up and running, but it soon proved far better for everyone if existing B&B operators on nearby private land picked up people who wanted a bit of luxury. Unnecessary development impacts to Great Otway National Park were avoided.

The second walk, the Grampians Peaks Trail, is partly constructed, but plans for private serviced cabins along the way have been abandoned – no private investors showed wintest.

The third 'icon' walk is the Falls to Hotham Crossing, in development for several years now. This time the powers that be seem determined to fulfill their dream of serviced in-park luxury accommodation at each stop, to look after the 'comfort seeker'. At the insistence of Tourism Victoria, one set of luxury huts will be positioned on a steep and hard to access spur off Mount Feathertop, where servicing of fresh bedding and gourmet food will necessitate intrusive daily helicopter trips. And fire regulations now mandate clearing native vegetation for some distance around all new accommodation.

But this enthusiasm for serviced multi-day walks to boost tourism in Victoria is founded on a fantasy.

While there is a level of interest in Victoria's long walks, the proportion of people that actually do them is very small. The great majority of people visiting our parks do short walks, even if they stay in the park for a number of days.

Victoria should dump the 'icon walk' idea as an expensive and damaging waste of resources. We should be playing to our advantage, and promote the state as somewhere where you can travel through regional Victoria, staying at wonderful wineries, B&Bs and charming hotels, and experience any of the many hundreds of great short walks our natural areas offer.

That would be better for tourism, better for the health of Victorians, and better for our remarkable but very vulnerable national parks. • PW



The long history of scientific study in Victoria's Alpine National Park has been recognised in the park's National Heritage listing.



The threatened Alpine Marsh Marigold community flowers under melting snow. It is highly vulnerable to the trampling of hard hooves.

PHOTO: HISTORIC PLACES BRANCH, DELWP

PHOTO: COLIN TOTTERDELL

Park's chance to heal

MISCONCEPTION MUST NOT STALL ACTION ON HORSES IN THE ALPINE NATIONAL PARK, EXPLAINS OUR PARK PROTECTION CAMPAIGNER **PHIL INGAMELLS**.

Parks Victoria is about to take action on the thousands of feral horses trampling wetlands and eating out other areas of Victoria's magnificent Alpine National Park.

It's been a long journey to get to this stage, involving two exhaustive series of stakeholder consultations and numerous expert reports over the last six years.

The length of that process is remarkable, given that a seemingly endless list of obligations under international treaty, and national and state law, actually compel the government to act on feral animals.

However it seemed the common perception of the 'pure-bred brumby', galloping through alpine wildflowers, might be able to override decades of evidence and unambiguous law.

The truth is a little different, however: the horses up there are a bit of a hotch-potch of breeds, and they don't always have a good time.

They suffer and die in droves in bushfires, drought and heavy winter snows. Many are in a condition that, if found on a farm, would lead to action against their owner.

In 1946, long before the Bogong High Plains were included in a national park, action was taken to remove horses and sheep from the area and limit cattle grazing. It was found back then that hard-hooved grazers were causing soil erosion and affecting the quality and release of water at the headwaters of so many of Victoria's rivers.

Science informed that action then, and the "outstanding" nature of the many high country scientific studies have now been recognised in the National Heritage listing for the Australian Alps National Parks.

Victoria's Alpine National Park protects some 575 rare and threatened plants and animals, many of which have been slowly recovering from decades of grazing.

The cattle are gone, but horses, deer, pigs and goats now increasingly reign over what should be one of the land's most important protected conservation reserves.

The high country shouldn't be a paddock, it's a national park.

Parks Victoria has recently increased action on pigs in the eastern alps, and Victoria's environment department is developing a strategy to deal with the so-far intractable problem of feral deer.

By removing all horses from the Bogong High Plains, and taking 400 a year from the eastern Alpine National Park, Parks Victoria is starting a process to restore this remarkable park to health.

This action must be done as humanely as possible, but doing nothing won't help the park or the horses. • **PW**

Opinion piece first published in *The Weekly Times*, 7 February 2018.

Minister for Resources revokes mining exemption over toxic tailings dam

THE TAMBO RIVER AND GIPPSLAND LAKES ARE UNDER RENEWED THREAT FROM THE LATEST MINING PROPOSAL TO MASSIVELY EXPAND A TOXIC TAILINGS DAM ON THE HEADWATERS OF THE RIVER NEAR BENAMBRA, WRITES **LOUISE CRISP**.

The original Benambra copper and zinc mine operated from 1992-96 until the company went into receivership and abandoned the site. The company left behind a leaking tailings dam containing highly-acidic toxic tailings sitting across the headwaters of the Tambo River. The Department of Primary Industries (DPI) was forced to rehabilitate the mine site and tailings dam, containing 700,000 tonnes of tailings, at a cost to the taxpayer of nearly \$7 million. The tailings have to remain covered with two metres of water for at least a thousand years.

In 2006 the tailings dam (which is still leaking) was renamed Lake St Barbara; the land was excluded from the surrounding mining lease and the facility exempt from any further mining activity.

However, in October 2014, then Planning Minister Mathew Guy approved the Western Australian mining company Independence Group's Stockman Base Metals Project EES to reopen and develop



The Stockman tailings dam across the Straight Creek tributary of Tambo River.

PHOTO: LOUISE CRISP

the Benambra mine. The project also involved reopening and expanding the tailings dam in order to store up to another seven million tonnes of mine waste, even though at that stage the tailings dam area was exempt from the company's mining licence. The wall of the tailings dam would be raised in a series of staged lifts from 20 metres above the valley floor up to a total of 45 metres, and increase the surface area from 8 hectares to approximately 32 hectares, drowning a significant area of headwaters catchment.

Gippsland Environment Group, VNPA and others strongly criticised such a foolhardy proposal that would jeopardise the health of the Tambo River and Gippsland Lakes forever.

In 2015 the price of copper fell and Independence Group put the Stockman Project on hold, then sold it to CopperChem Limited.

In December 2017 the Minister for Resources Tim Pallas announced

the state government had signed an agreement with CopperChem to maintain and monitor the tailings dam in perpetuity after mining is completed. Shockingly, The Stockman Project Post-Closure Deed requires the company to lodge a bank guarantee of only \$5.7 million to ensure the safety of the tailings dam for a thousand years. This amount is peanuts compared to the cost of \$264 million calculated by the GHD consulting firm in an independent report during the Environment Effects Statement process.

At the same time the Minister revoked the mining licence exemption over the tailings dam. CopperChem has now applied for a mining infrastructure licence over the tailings dam.

Anyone who has concerns about the severe environmental risk this project poses for the Tambo River and Gippsland Lakes, should write to Victoria's Minister for Resources Tim Pallas. Visit www.vnnpa.org.au/tambo-river-toxic-threat • **PW**

ENOUGH ALREADY

Ten reasons why we need a new approach to forest management



PHOTO: JUSTIN CALLY / FLICKR PUBLIC DOMAIN

NATIVE FORESTS DESERVE BETTER THAN A REGULATORY RELIC, SAYS **MATT RUCHEL**.

The looming expiry of the Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs) offers a once-in-two-decades opportunity to put in place modern, improved and transparent arrangements for the management of Victoria's publicly owned state forests – arrangements based on current science, and on community views about how our state forests should be valued, used and managed.

RFAs are twenty-year agreements between the Victorian and Commonwealth Governments, which allow for the logging of public native forests. Logging that occurs under these agreements does not require approval under federal environmental laws, unlike most other industries or activities.

There are five RFAs in Victoria, which start expiring from March 2018:

- East Gippsland (signed 3 February 1997)
- Central Highlands (signed 27 March 1998)
- North East (signed 9 August 1999)
- West Victorian (signed 31 March 2000)
- Gippsland (signed 31 March 2000)

Left: The devastation of logging in the Central Highlands.

The so-called 'mandatory' five-yearly reviews of the RFAs, currently being consulted on by government, do not even cover contemporary issues and are largely a matter of 'tick the boxes'. They are retrospective exercises that cover the period of implementation of the RFAs between 1 July 2009 and 30 June 2014, now well in the past. Even when it is acknowledged that there have been breaches, or that work has not been completed, there are no recommendations, no alternatives offered, and no consequences or accountability measures outlined.

On studying the review documents, along with the outcomes of previous reviews, it is difficult to take seriously the claim that either government is committed to "effective" conservation and forest management.

In VNPA's submission to the consultation, we outlined ten reasons why the RFAs have failed, are now obsolete and should not be renewed. These are:

1. **RFAs have failed to meet their objectives** – Repeated reviews and reports highlight that the numbers of forest-dependent species listed as threatened continue to rise and forest health is declining. Even the native forestry industry itself is in decline as their main resource runs out.
2. **RFAs ecological targets are out of date** – Many of the RFAs' standards for the protection of ecosystems fall below international and national benchmarks.
3. **RFAs do not effectively manage threatened species and ecosystems** – RFAs purport to protect threatened species but contain no targets or outcomes for their protection, making the objective largely meaningless and ineffective.
4. **RFAs ignore climate change implications** – The RFAs do not even mention climate change and its potential impacts.
5. **RFAs ignore fire impacts** – Successive or cumulative impact of bushfire is huge, and even though there have been extensive fires in the last 10 years, the RFAs ignore both their impact and extent.

6. **RFAs ignore other forest values** – RFAs do not recognise, include or account for non-wood forest values (such as water, ecosystem services, recreation and tourism) that are contributing many millions to the state's economy, and could contribute further.
7. **RFA reviews ignore their own previous recommendations** – Recommendations relating to improved threatened species outcomes from the previous five-yearly review have still not been complied with.
8. **RFAs give unjustified and unfair special treatment to native forest logging** – RFAs are exempt from the national environmental laws (the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*), leading to lower standards of environmental assessment and unfair advantages over other industries.
9. **RFAs stifle industry innovation** – The method of harvesting native forest, clear fell logging, has not changed significantly in 30 years, yet has a dramatic impact on native habitats and drinking water production. The 'special' treatment given by RFAs has made the industry unable and unwilling to change, keeping it locked in the past while destroying public ecological assets in the process.
10. **RFAs are a regulatory relic** – RFAs are not a best-practice approach to regulation and are outdated. For example, many people thought the West Victorian RFA had been phased out after the creation of the Otway National Park. Yet the agreement still exists and is still part of the current review. The last review in 2010 recommended that the West Victorian RFA be cancelled, but as recently as mid-2017, plans were released for logging of fragmented and depleted woodlands right across the west.

The five Victorian RFAs must be allowed to expire, and not be extended or rolled over. This overdue review should recommend that the RFAs be abandoned, and at a minimum bring

to an end the special treatment this industry enjoys under the RFAs by:

- ending the regulatory relic which is the West Victorian RFA, and comprehensively reviewing proposed logging plans;
- discontinuing the industry's exemption from national environment laws in all RFAs;
- accounting for other forest-dependent industries – such as conservation, recreation, tourism, agriculture, water, and carbon storage – in any arrangement or agreements going forward;
- strengthening management prescriptions for threatened species, climate change impacts, and fire;
- making substantial additions to the formal reserve system.

Thank you to all our members and supporters who responded to the call to make submissions. You can read the detail in our submission at www.vnpa.org.au/publications/submission-regional-forest-agreements

• PW

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New investigation for south-west woodland wonders

MATT RUCHEL REVIEWS RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NATURE IN OUR STATE.

A few days before Christmas the Andrews Government responded to the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council's (VEAC) Statewide Assessment of Public Land Investigation.

The recommendations included proposals for new investigations by VEAC, including areas currently underrepresented in the protected area estate in south-west Victoria, the Strzelecki Ranges and Gippsland Plains, and central Victoria (which is already underway as part of the Central West VEAC Investigation).

An investigation into the south-west woodlands is long overdue. This region stretches west from the Grampians to the South Australian border, north to the Little Desert and south to the Glenelg River. These areas, mostly in the Wimmera and Dundas Tablelands, are some of the most cleared areas in the state. However they have some real hidden gems: scattered woodland and dryer forests rich in habitat for threatened species such as the south-eastern red-tailed black-cockatoo.

According to analysis in a supplement to the VEAC Public Land Discussion Paper, if current international standards are applied there are is a potential 'shortfall' of underrepresented vegetation types in the formal reserve system (national parks and other conservation areas) of approximately 200,000 hectares on public land in the south-west regions.

While the Andrews Government support for a new VEAC inquiry in the area is welcome, the caveat appears to be that as long as it does not impact on logging. It states: "The information made

available through the investigations will be incorporated into broader processes such as the Regional Forest Agreements... The Regional Forest Agreements currently outline that any changes to the area of State Forest will not lead to a net deterioration in the timber production capacity of those areas available for harvesting."

While this is technically right, the government's response fails to mention that the Western Regional Forests Agreement (RFA) also says that logging must "...not lead to a net deterioration in the protection of identified Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative Reserve System (CAR) Values". This clause is ignored.

The West Victorian RFA itself notes that the agreement signed in 2000 failed to reach its own levels of protection, stating that while the agreement "...has increased their levels of protection, but not to the level specified in the national reserve criteria. Further protection of these ecological vegetation types would have significant resource implications and potential adverse social and economic consequences". This demonstrates RFAs are a flawed and obsolete concept (see article on pages 14-15). We know well-managed parks are good for the local economy, and good for society.

It also makes little economic sense for the industry. According to the most recent 2016–2017 VicForests annual report, total revenue for the so-called western 'community forestry' operation was approximately

\$773,000, while at the same time VicForests received a grant from the Victorian Environment Department of \$678,000 (per annum) paid in advance. Assuming the difference of \$95,000 per annum is made from timber sales, the total costs to the Victorian Government, and to you and I as taxpayers, is more than \$500,000 (half a million dollars), in return for the destruction to large areas of scarce and vulnerable, publicly-owned native forest and woodland. By way of comparison, the Victoria Government invested \$6.4 million, and the Federal Government \$1.8 million, in the Wimmera Catchment Management Authority for various conservation and land management projects in just one of the catchment management areas affected. (Read our full western forests report at www.vnpa.org.au/publications/western-forests-at-risk)

Marine national park double speak

The VEAC investigation also includes a proposal for assessment or review of coastal reserves, which is welcome, and a long-awaited new investigation into the comprehensiveness, adequacy, and representativeness of marine protected areas (such as marine national parks) in Victoria.

While the recommendations were accepted by the state government, the marine protected area investigation comes with strings (fishing line?), which undermine the intent of the recommendation. The government response states: "The review will not include recommendations to expand

Victoria's marine protected area system. It is current government policy that no new marine national parks will be created".

Victoria has around four per cent of our marine waters in marine national parks and sanctuaries; well below international benchmarks. It seems hard to reconcile an investigation into 'gaps' in the reserve system if they can't be filled due to restrictive government policy. We will advocate for Andrews Labor, the Coalition and all other political parties to have a well-advised marine protected area policy after the next election.

Reform of public land legislation

As part of a major focus of the investigation VEAC was asked to look at all current land categories in Victoria and look at ways to consolidate and simplify them without altering current levels of protection (see *Park Watch* article September 2017). Fairly dry stuff, but in many ways very important, as it forms the foundation of the way we manage public land and habitats. VEAC made 30 recommendations, often around complex regulatory and legislative arrangements, and sets out a significant reform agenda for crown land legislation. It also importantly identifies gaps in our conservation estate and the need for further investigations.

The Victorian Government accepted all of the recommendation in full, in principle, or in part. There are significant areas of work required to reform these quite complex pieces of legislation, so this part of the investigation is likely to take many years and will involve public consultation. We will keep you informed of developments. • PW

Policy ideas to protect nature: Funding for Trust For Nature's Revolving Fund

IF YOU THOUGHT BUYING A HOUSE IN VICTORIA WAS TOUGH, TRY BEING A THREATENED SPECIES!

The state election is not far off, and the political parties are starting to think about policy. VNPA has a broad policy agenda, with over 40 individual initiatives, which we plan to publicly release later in the year. Throughout 2018 we will feature some of these ideas in detail in *Park Watch*.

In this edition we will examine the need for a boost to the Trust for Nature Revolving Fund. The aim of this initiative is to essentially give Trust for Nature (TFN) enough funds to purchase, protect, then resell high-value habitat. This is critically important for large farms, peri-urban and coastal properties, which are now worth many millions.

The Revolving Fund is essentially a capital investment from the state government of around \$40 million over four years, into a fund managed by the TFN, but retained on the Victorian Government balance sheet without depreciating. The fund buys, improves, protects (via a Conservation Covenant on title) and then sells property. The sale proceeds are returned to the fund at little or no reduction of capital. Through its ability to replenish its investment, the Revolving Fund will continue to operate over a long-term, continually accruing significant biodiversity outcomes.

This is an innovative conservation mechanism that creates an ongoing, non-diminishing cycle of biodiversity protection on private land, to balance ongoing losses and shore up the health of habitat crucial for Victoria's threatened species.

At the last state election the Andrews Government committed to "...work with Trust for Nature so communities can have private land protected and rehabilitated". The Andrews Government has provided some additional core support for TFN, but we really need it to ramp up.

The state biodiversity strategy released in 2017, *Protecting Victoria's Environment – Biodiversity 2037*, identifies significant gaps in our reserve system, particularly on private land. The strategy acknowledges that: "...this can only be achieved by land purchase or additional formal protection of habitat on private land", and its Priority 18 commits to: "Work with partners to increase the extent of private land under voluntary permanent protection, and managed under conservation stewardship arrangements to complement the reserve system."

This innovative initiative is really worthwhile, with similar schemes overseas having a proven track record. Let's hope it gets support from all political parties and funding in the next budget. • PW

PHOTO: ED DUNENS; FLICKR CC

Authority-mad government blinks on marine

THE MARINE AND COASTAL BILL IS A MISSED OPPORTUNITY TO REFORM MARINE AND COASTAL PLANNING IN VICTORIA, WRITES **CHRIS SMYTH**.

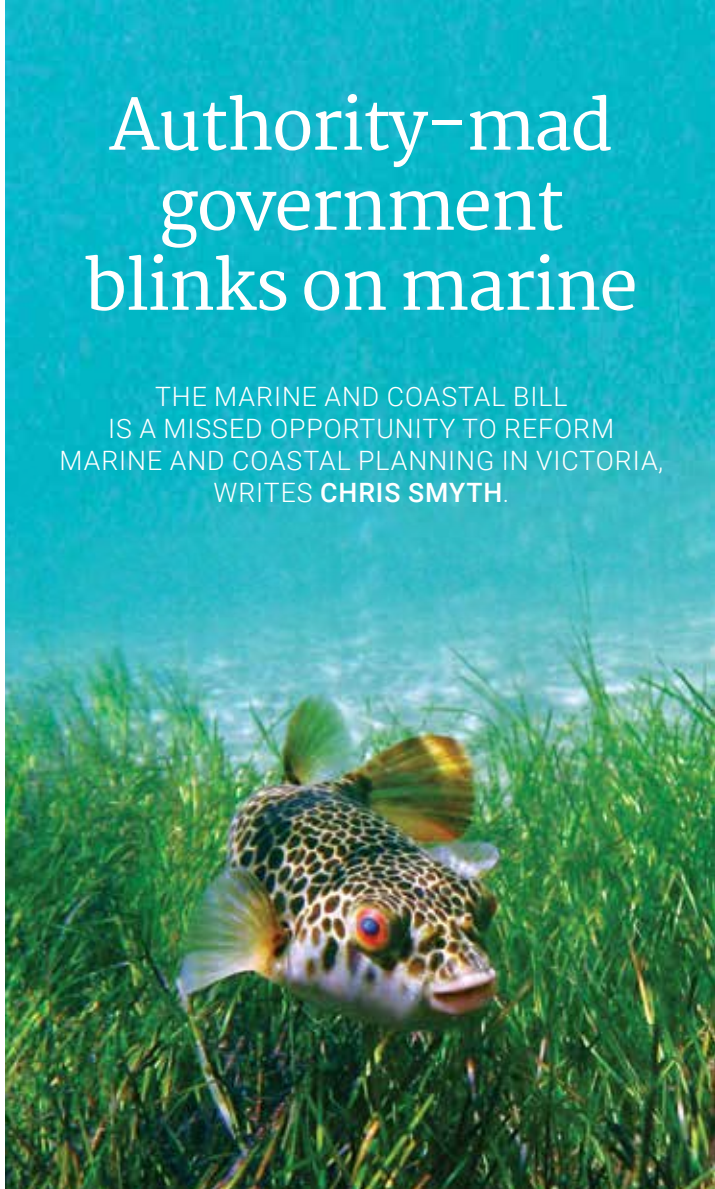


PHOTO: JOHN GASKELL

Victoria is awash with statutory authorities. We've got them for ports, channels, transport ticketing, planning, curriculum, teaching, environment protection, fisheries, game management, emergency services, catchment management, business licensing, north east link, western distributor, fires and tenancy bonds – and these are just the ones that have the word 'authority' in their name.

With so many, you would think it wouldn't be too hard to establish one for marine and coastal planning. But the Victorian Government's marine and coastal bill 2017 ignores it, even though such reform is needed to establish an integrated marine and coastal planning framework that sets a new course appropriate for the 21st century.

When enacted, the marine and coastal bill will replace the *Coastal Management Act 1995*, which was a significant reform championed by former environment minister Mark Birrell. The new legislation retains some of his vision, including the Victorian Coastal Council, the Victorian Coastal Strategy and coastal management plans (all with marine added to their titles), and consent processes for coastal use and development. Environmental management plans, currently prepared under State Environment Protection Policy (Waters of Victoria) will now be under the new legislation.

A smooth toadfish in Port Phillip Bay.

New positive features in the legislation are the preparation of an overarching statewide marine and coastal policy, five-yearly state of the marine environment reports (an extension of the state of the bays reporting), and reference to the development of a marine spatial planning framework. Another new feature is regional and strategic partnerships, i.e. interdepartmental agencies brought together on a 'needs' basis to help resolve regional marine and coastal issues.

But there are significant negative features:

- Gutting the Victorian Coastal Council by turning it into an advisory body only. It will no longer prepare the marine and coastal strategy, which will now be done by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP). Over the past 20 years, the strategies have been forward looking and innovative documents that have greatly influenced coastal planning and management in the state. That is unlikely under the department's heavy hand.
- Abolishing the regional coastal boards, transferring their role to existing catchment management authorities with coastal boundaries. Even though the boards were starved of resources, they played an important role in developing local community engagement in coastal planning and management. The catchment management authorities have shown little interest in marine and coastal environments, maintaining an agricultural focus, and with boards that have little or no expertise in marine and coastal matters.
- Port Phillip Bay is the initial focus of the environment management plans and largely about water quality, while the marine and coastal management plans are very localised and the work of the regional and strategic partnership likely ad-hoc responses to 'problems' emerging. There appears to be no pathway to develop the proactive, long-term and integrated regional marine and coastal planning that should be the cornerstone of a marine spatial planning framework and implement the new marine and coastal policies and strategies.
- There is no clear public process for public comment on changes to the use of coastal and marine areas, whereas development projects are covered by the *Planning and Environment Act*. Racehorse training on public beaches, brought to us by DELWP, is one such use that has avoided scrutiny under consent processes.
- And from the outset of consultation on the new legislation, ports and fisheries were excluded from consideration, and there is nothing in the bill that should worry those sectors even though their impacts are significant (the new environment management plan for Port Phillip Bay also excluded them).

The marine and coastal bill is a missed opportunity to reform marine and coastal planning in Victoria. It fails to rise to the ambition of the Andrews Government's 2014 pre-election commitment and will substantially reduce meaningful community engagement.

VNPA will work to strengthen the provisions of the bill over the coming months. • PW

Lessons from the Little Desert

MICHAEL HOWES SHARES THE STORY OF VICTORIA'S LITTLE DESERT AND HOW IT BECAME A NATIONAL PARK.



PHOTO: IAN MORGAN, FROM BIRDS AND PLANTS OF THE LITTLE DESERT

A rainbow bee-eater exiting a nesting burrow in Little Desert.

The desert that isn't

Situated 375 kilometres west of Melbourne, the Little Desert is far from being the Sahara-like area of bare sand dunes that its name suggests. Named because its mostly sandy soils are unsuitable for farming (and because it is 'little' compared with the Big Desert to the north), it is largely covered with a wide variety of native vegetation and has no fewer than 670 native plant species. It also is inhabited by 220 bird

species and 60 species of mammals and reptiles, as well as a wide range of insects and other invertebrates.

The Little Desert may not be 'scenic' in the sense that the Grampians, Wilsons Promontory or Tarra-Bulga national parks, with their tall forests, dramatic mountains and fern gullies, are scenic. Many people might see it as flat and monotonous, or even frightening. We need to look more closely to find its beauty and variety.

Studying the 'battle for the Little Desert'

For young people today, the 1960s controversy over the Little Desert in western Victoria is a little known part of our state's environmental history. However, over the next few years, VCE Outdoor and Environment Education students will be learning about 'the battle for the Little Desert' as it is now included in the curriculum. They will be preparing a case study of differing

Continued overleaf



PHOTO: GRAHAM AND MAREE GOODS, FROM BIRDS AND PLANTS OF THE LITTLE DESERT

The delights of spring in the Little Desert.

Continued from previous page

values between people who wanted to preserve areas in a natural state and those who wanted to clear more land for farming. It was a true struggle between conservation and development. Students will be looking at how the controversy developed, who was involved and how it was resolved.

The Little Desert National Park controversy is often considered to mark the beginning of widespread environmental awareness and activism in Victoria, and it contributed to the creation of an independent body to study Victorian public land, which has become today's Victorian Environment Assessment Council (VEAC).

VNPA also is currently working in partnership with Parks Victoria to develop a five-episode podcast on the battle for Little Desert, which will be valuable to students and teachers studying Outdoor and Environmental Studies, and anyone else with an interest in this national park. It is to include the following episodes:

- 1&2. Social history of the campaign leading up to the creation of the Little Desert National Park.
- 3. Current values of the Little Desert National Park.
- 4. Personal connections to the Little Desert National Park.
- 5. A deeper history of the Little Desert prior to the campaign.

When completed, the podcast will be available on the VNPA and Parks Victoria websites.

To help these students, we have also developed a timeline of the key events in the controversy. This was compiled using material from the main reference on the issue, *Defending the Little Desert* (1998) by Libby Robin.

Additional references

An excellent reference is *Birds and Plants of the Little Desert* (2014) by Ian Morgan, Graham Goods and Maree Goods. This book, which has magnificent photos of virtually all the park's birds and many of its plants featured in this article, is available from VNPA, as is *Defending the Little Desert* by Libby Robin. • PW

Getting to know the Little Desert National Park

Little Desert National Park covers 132,647 hectares, and extends about 95 kilometres east to west between the Wimmera River near Dimboola, and the South Australian border. Its north-south extent varies between ten and 24 kilometres. Some 50,000 people visit the park each year for walking, camping, discovering the plants and wildlife, and enjoying the peace and quiet.

The park has three camping areas accessible by 2WD vehicles and two that cater for people undertaking the challenging 80-kilometre Desert Discovery Walk. Facilities are basic but adequate. There are also three short self-guided nature walks that introduce you to the park's flora and fauna. For more information, see www.parks.vic.gov.au

LITTLE DESERT TIMELINE

For tens of thousands of years, Aboriginal people hunted and gathered food in the Little Desert. The local Wotjabaluk people maintain a connection with the area even after their forebears were moved into the Antwerp mission near Dimboola in the 19th century.

July 1836: Assistant Surveyor Granville Stapylton, second in command of Major Mitchell's expedition through what is now western Victoria, crossed part of the Little Desert, reporting that the country was "dreadfully deep" (in sand and mud).

1840-1880s: The Little Desert became known as 'scrub country'. Settlers avoided it because of its infertile sandy soils and low rainfall, although there was some sheep and cattle grazing.

1870s to 1950s: Much of the natural vegetation of the Wimmera and Mallee districts was cleared for farming by selectors and soldier settlers (especially after World War I). The Little Desert, however, remained 'an island of biodiversity in a sea of agriculture'.

1946: Small conservation reserves were established near Dimboola.

1955: Kiata Lowan Sanctuary (218 hectares) was established to protect malleefowl (also called lowans), which were in decline. The Sanctuary was incorporated into a 945 hectare Little Desert National Park in 1968.

1963: The AMP Society, a large insurance company, proposed to subdivide and clear the Little Desert for agricultural and pastoral development. However, declining wool and wheat prices, and government indecision, led to the scheme being abandoned in March 1967.

June 1967: Sir William McDonald, a local pastoralist and long-standing Victorian Member of Parliament, was appointed Minister of Lands by premier Henry Bolte.

Early 1968: McDonald announced the Little Desert Settlement Scheme, under which 48 wheat farms would be established. Agricultural experts, economists and conservationists opposed the scheme. Conservationists set up the Save our Bushlands Action Committee, representing eight conservation groups, including VNPA, and held two major public meetings in Melbourne in 1969, each attended by over 1000 people. Local Wimmera people also ran a campaign against the clearing scheme.

Mid 1969: McDonald scaled back the Little Desert Settlement Scheme to 12 sheep farms and also announced a larger national park to cover 35,300 hectares. But conservationists were not satisfied with this, believing that national parks must have 'ecological integrity'.

October 1969: Labor MP J.W. Galbally MLC set up a Select Committee to inquire into the Little Desert Settlement Scheme. Leading ecologists such as Malcolm Calder gave evidence about the natural values of the Little Desert. *The Age* newspaper ran articles suggesting that the scheme was proposed partly because a new road it included would benefit McDonald's brother-in-law.

December 1969: The Victorian Liberal government lost the Dandenong by-election, partly because of community opposition to the Little Desert scheme. The Legislative Council voted to block the scheme. Little Desert National Park was enlarged to 35,300 hectares and the clearing scheme was abandoned.

May 1970: In the Victorian election, the Liberals win with a slightly reduced vote, but McDonald loses his seat of Dundas after 15 years as member. During the election campaign Premier Bolte promised to create and extend national parks so that they covered five per cent of Victoria's area. He also promised to set up a new independent body, the Land Resources Council (later named the Land Conservation Council) which would encourage public involvement. The Council would study Victoria's public land and recommend how it should be used. It continues today as the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC).

William Borthwick became Minister for Lands (later Minister for Conservation) in the new government.

1988: The western part of Little Desert added to Little Desert National Park, roughly tripling it in size and making it the state's second largest national park at the time.

1991: An addition of seven hectares was donated to the park by a local family.

1997: 640 hectares was added to the park.

2005: Barengi Gadjin Land Council Aboriginal Corporation and the Victorian and Australian governments entered into the first Indigenous Land Use Agreement in Victoria. A cooperative agreement that includes Little Desert National Park ensures that the traditional owners will continue to be able to care for country by being involved in the management of the areas where their native title rights have been recognised.

NATURE'S MILLION SECRETS

A PERSONAL HISTORY OF THE UPS AND DOWNS OF ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN VICTORIA
BY PHIL INGAMELLS.

As a child in the 1950s I was enchanted by nature talks, broadcast by radio into our primary school classroom. I must have focussed long on the loudspeaker placed centrally above the blackboard, because I still remember its octagonal plywood frame.

Once each week, a compelling voice invited us into the natural world. We heard how snakes and lizards aren't truly 'cold-blooded', but take on the temperature of their environment, sometimes having a higher temperature than warm-blooded animals like possums and people. We learnt that 'fairy rings' of mushrooms are just the visible fruits of an underground fungus, that some have been found up to 30 feet wide, and that a mushroom ring that size might have started its life before Captain Cook sighted these shores. His voice was kind and generous to the young listener: "...you probably know that we never get frogs in salt water".

I had no idea I was listening to Philip Crosbie Morrison, renowned President of the Royal Society of Victoria and Chairman of the National Museum of Victoria. He was

then one of the world's greatest natural history communicators, broadcasting to Australia, New Zealand and even South Africa. 78 per cent of all Victorian radios tuned in to his program at 6pm every Sunday evening.

Crosbie Morrison (as he was known) would also be instrumental in setting up the Victorian National Parks Association, becoming its first president in 1952. He lobbied successfully for Victoria's national parks to be managed by the Victorian Government (parks were then managed by a series of inexperienced and unfunded committees), and he was appointed as the new National Parks Authority's first director in 1957. To his dismay the new park agency was poorly resourced, and he struggled to win the levels of management he knew our natural areas needed. He was to die suddenly a year later, but his extraordinary energy, his commitment to the protection of our natural heritage, and his belief in the power of nature's stories have echoed through the years.

Times would change.

Left: Nature has many stories yet to be told.

Thirty years later, in 1985, I fluked a job in the community education arm of his Parks Authority's successor agency, the National Parks Service of Victoria. That park agency was in the process of being absorbed into a new mega-department, Conservation, Forests and Lands, incorporating all of Victoria's land management bodies. I was to become part of a 40-person-strong conservation education group, extending information to the public about fisheries, farming, forestry and, by no means least, the remarkable heritage of Victoria's fast-growing park system.

I was no Crosbie Morrison (my knowledge was thin) but I had the freedom to talk to staff biologists, academics and amateur naturalists, and bring their stories to the public. Through publications, posters, information centre displays, audio-visu-als and any other means, we told stories about the evolution of rainforests, the rarest of frogs, the pollination of orchids and those precious wetlands waiting for the arrival of migrating birds. We relentlessly encouraged the community to visit their parks and experience nature at its best.

Others in the group talked to farmers about Victoria's rising salinity problems, or organised holiday programs for young summer visitors.

Throughout the 80s and early 90s there were fairly comprehensive, routinely staffed visitor information centres at Wilsons Promontory, Grampians, Mount Buffalo, Lower Glenelg, Organ Pipes, Point Nepean, Tarra-Bulga, and Hattah-Kulkyne national parks, as well as a new multi-million-dollar Rainforest Information Centre at Orbost. People could generally meet a park ranger at these centres, or come across one as they walked through any of our parks. As well as increasing visitor enjoyment of the natural world, community education engendered cooperation with and support for good conservation management.

In the mid 90s I came under the Morrison spell once more. I had been working on an audio-visual outlining the evolution of Victoria's remarkable parks system, to be installed in most of those visitor centres. We invited Crosbie Morrison's gracious wife Lucy to a launch of that production, partly to show her the tribute it paid her late husband.

But times were to change again.

A few months later, the Kennett government declared that conservation education was not the role of government, and the department's 40-strong group of environmental educators was scrapped.

Since then, most of Victoria's park visitor centres have closed or become greatly diminished. Even the remarkable Orbost Rainforest Centre lost its funding and abandoned its role in education and regional park tourism; it was handballed to the town as a local community centre.

Rangers are now rarely, if ever, seen in our parks, and walking tracks and signage are often in poor repair in all but the most high-profile places. Inevitably, public respect for our parks and the natural areas they protect has declined within large sections of the community.



Crosbie Morrison in his element.

PHOTO COURTESY VNPA

There are signs things might be improving. The Victorian Government's new biodiversity strategy has promised a "campaign to raise awareness about Victoria's biodiversity". So far, the government has invested in new park rangers, but under current work regimes they are more likely to be stuck behind a computer, arranging contracts, than out in the parks. And very modest improvements to visitor information are in progress in the tiny space now available at the Prom's park office.

It's time for a real surge in investment in park management and, most importantly, in community education. There are something like 100,000 native species in Victoria, and there is a host of extraordinary stories to tell about them, about their evolution, about the roles they play in ecosystems, and indeed, about the people who study them and work to protect them.

There are also important stories about Indigenous knowledge of native species and their care for country.

All Victorians, and Victoria's visitors, surely have a right to know about our remarkable natural heritage, and a right to understand what skills and resources we need to fulfil our role as nature's custodians.

Crosbie Morrison knew that the protection of nature was a core role for government and its land managers. He also said it was a role for "anyone who has ever sat under a tree".

And he knew that education was the key. • PW

Advancing the nature of science

The Victorian Government released a strategy for protecting Victoria's biodiversity in April 2017. This article in the fourth in a series in *Park Watch* (see June, September and December 2017 editions) that addresses the strategy, why it matters and what we would like to see from the strategy.

Protecting Victoria's Environment – Biodiversity 2037 is the first formal statewide, long-term biodiversity plan in two decades and it contains a range of priorities and initiatives around two main goals:

- Goal 1:** Victorians value nature
- Goal 2:** Victoria's natural environment is healthy

CITIZEN SCIENCE IS ONE WAY OF APPROACHING BOTH GOALS IN THE BIODIVERSITY STRATEGY, AS IT ENGAGES PEOPLE IN NATURE AND COLLECTS VALUABLE SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION THAT CONTRIBUTES TO OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE HEALTH OF VICTORIA'S NATURAL ENVIRONMENT, EXPLAINS CAITLIN GRIFFITH.

The potential to build how communities can contribute to nature conservation is acknowledged in the strategy, with a target for 2022 being: "More people are undertaking effective action for the environment, including through 'citizen science'."

What does citizen science look like?

Citizen science is the meaningful involvement of members of the public in authentic scientific work.



Citizen scientists learn how to install a motion-sensing camera for our NatureWatch program's Caught on Camera project. Since 2012 this long-term project has monitored wildlife in locations across Victoria, leading to several important discoveries.

Sometimes it looks like community members sighting birds with binoculars, and sometimes it looks like people watching on their desktop an underwater camera to count fish, and in both scenarios reporting what they record. The work of these citizen scientists is generally a part of bigger projects that they contribute to.

Sometimes citizen science also looks like community members sitting down with scientists to develop projects that address issues of local concern, for example coming up with a way to monitor a waterway that has had a pollution spill.

VNPA has developed and delivered citizen science projects over the last 15 years, particularly through our ReefWatch and NatureWatch programs. Thousands of people have been involved in collecting highly valuable information on the health of Victoria's natural environment. Motion sensing cameras have been used to record thousands of mammals and birds, and divers have logged data for thousands of fish during the Great Victorian Fish Count.

Citizen science projects gather valuable scientific information about Victoria's biodiversity, answer scientific questions, and provide strong opportunities for participants and scientists alike to learn

more about nature and contribute to nature conservation.

One of my favourite things about citizen science is that it is an opportunity for everyone and anyone to participate in well-founded science. While so many of us see science as being just for the academics, or something we gave up in high school, it is a great way of making science an accessible community and cultural practice.

Victorians value nature and citizen science

With the new Victorian chapter of the Australian Citizen Science Association and the Victorian *Biodiversity 2037* strategy, VNPA is excited to see traction and support building for citizen science initiatives in our state.

Where to now?

As a result of the *Biodiversity 2037* strategy, we hope to see real action, increased funding, and programs that support nature-focussed citizen science projects.

It provides a great new framework for supporting community initiatives, including citizen science.

The following are some things VNPA would like to see the Victorian Government put in action in support of citizen science:

- **Build on what's being done** – Take the lead from existing citizen science work in Victoria by asking questions and finding out what this community needs, acknowledging this existing wisdom, and working accordingly. We are pleased work has already happened in this area, and hope to see it continued.
- **Promote citizen science data** – Strengthen resourcing and support for land, waterway and marine management staff to partner on citizen science projects to collect useful data which complements professional science.
- **New data hub** – Consider new ways to incorporate and align quality citizen science data into policy and management, potentially with a third party (government, community, academic) data management agency.
- **Long-term focus** – Science can take time. Support citizen science through regular and long-term community funding for state and regionally based projects. Include funding for paid coordinators. Support existing citizen science projects as well as new ones.

- **Value knowledge** – Build a bureaucratic and community culture that recognises development of evidence and knowledge as a credible outcome.

We also hope to see an approach to supporting citizen science projects that hold the values and interests of the community at heart (not just a way for the Victorian Government to achieve its goals) – there needs to be plenty of space for projects to continue to be community led. • PW

Case study: VNPA's Great Victorian Fish Count and four *Biodiversity 2037* priorities relevant to citizen science.

Priority 2: Increase the collection of targeted data for evidence-based decision making and make all data more accessible.

In 2017, nearly 700 people participated in the Great Victorian Fish Count. This significantly increased the number of records of fish species and where they are found along Victoria's coastline. Even a small group of scientists couldn't collect this data alone.

Priority 3: Raise awareness of all Victorians about the importance of the state's natural environment.

The fish count raises awareness of the fish species present at sites across the state for hundreds of divers and snorkelers, by providing them with resources to identify and record fish species. This increases knowledge and understanding of the value and threats present for these species.

Priority 4: Increase the opportunities for all Victorians to have daily connections with nature.

The fish count provides a novel and engaging way to connect with nature by giving a different purpose to a snorkel or dive.

Priority 5: Increase opportunities for all Victorians to act to protect biodiversity.

Through providing records of fish species and increasing collective knowledge of where they occur along the Victorian coastline, Victorians have an opportunity to act in protecting nature.

See page 34 to read more about the Great Victorian Fish Count.

Citizen scientist using a dive slate to identify and record marine species during the Great Victorian Fish Count.



SPECIAL SPECIES: NUDIBRANCHS

My name is Ian Scholey and I have a confession to make. I am one of the considerable number of sea slug addicts among the diving community. From my earliest encounter as a novice diver with a nudibranch I have been hooked.

Nudibranch (pronounced nooda-brank) comes from the Latin word *nudus* (naked) and Greek *branchia* (gills).

These shell-less mollusks are slow-moving, short-lived and solitary. They are hermaphrodites that can mate with any other mature member of their species.

They are carnivorous, identifying their prey with tentacles on their heads, and deriving their colouring from the food they eat as camouflage.

Nudibranchs can be found just about anywhere underwater, from the coldest arctic waters to the tropics, inhabiting reefs, walls, sea grass meadows and any man-made structure, including shipwrecks.

There are currently 2300 species identified worldwide, with new ones being classified regularly.

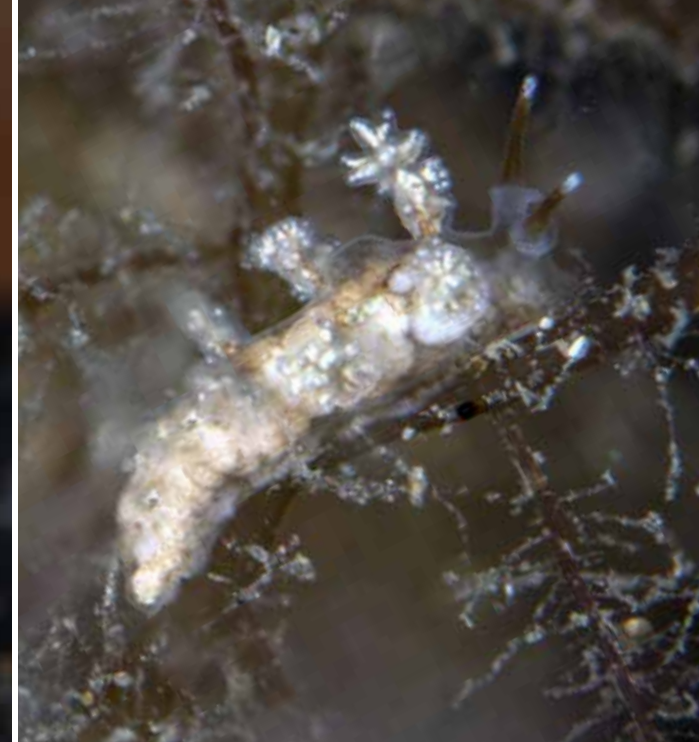
We are lucky to have here in Victoria a nudibranch hotspot. The pier and surrounds at Blairgowrie are home to numerous species. In the past year we have recorded 85 species and are finding new ones on almost every visit.

The key to spotting them is to slow right down and take the time to really look carefully.

Many of the species we find are just 3-4 millimetres in length (though they can be up to 30 centimetres long and weigh up to a kilogram) and are never seen by most divers.

Once you start to hunt for nudibranch it's difficult to stop. A great way to start discovering them is to take part in our upcoming Port Phillip Bay Sea Slug Census on 21-22 April. More information: www.vnpa.org.au/programs/sea-slug-census
• PW

The brightly coloured and patterned sea slugs, with their numerous striking forms, look like something from a crazed inventors imagination.



Cape Otway

PHOTO: GEOFF DURHAM

GEOFF DURHAM HIGHLIGHTS A SOMEWHAT OVERLOOKED SECTION OF THE COAST ALONG THE GREAT OCEAN ROAD.

In their rush to get to the Twelve Apostles, many travelers experiencing the Great Ocean Road ignore the area between the road and Cape Otway, the southern-most point of Western Victoria. They miss much of interest.

In 1880 Cape Otway was named after Captain William Otway by his friend Lt James Grant of the Lady Nelson, the first ship to sail west to east through Bass Strait. Sailing in this direction cut 1200 kilometres from the voyage to Sydney, but it was hazardous. Many shipwrecks led to the construction of lighthouses at Cape Otway, completed in 1848, and Cape Wickham on King Island, completed in 1861.

From Apollo Bay it is only about seven kilometres along the Great Ocean Road to the Elliot River Road turn off. This bitumen and gravel road takes you through Great Otway National Park southern blue gum forest to Shelly Beach picnic area, where there are several picnic tables, an information shelter and a pit toilet, but no barbecues. From here there are

walking tracks down to Shelly Beach or to the mouth of the Elliot River, and with low tide and calm seas you can complete a circuit by walking and rock-scrambling the half kilometre along the beach and shore platforms.

The next stop is Maits Rest, 18 kilometres from Apollo Bay, where there is off-road car parking but no toilet or picnic tables. The easy self-guided one kilometre rainforest circuit on a boardwalk and gravel path meanders through a beautiful fern gully with towering mountain ash and a 300 year old National Trust registered myrtle beech tree. Look for the glossy black shell of the endemic Otways carnivorous snail and the small beech orange fungus. At night there are glow worms, and you may hear the scream of a yellow-bellied glider or a bellowing, grunting koala.

The turn-off to Cape Otway is 22 kilometres from Apollo Bay. The 12 kilometre bitumen road from the Great Ocean Road turnoff to the lighthouse passes through the national

park and then private land – both cleared and timbered. The vegetation changes are explained by the geology. The underlying rock is early Cretaceous sandstones and mudstones, in the south overlain with Paleocene, Pliocene and Pleistocene sediments.

Manna gum and messmate with twisting branches grow on undulating dunes of the Pleistocene. I assumed a stand of white, skeleton trees was due to fire, but am informed the dead trees are the result of desperate overgrazing by starving koalas. I had seen the impact of koalas at French Island, Tower Hill and Budj Bim National Park (Mt Eccles), but never anything as stark as this.

Since 2015, DELWP has been delivering management programs to improve the health of the koala population and their habitat at Cape Otway. These government programs include health assessments, translocations, euthanasing any unhealthy koalas to prevent their suffering and fertility controlling healthy females.



Clockwise from top left:

Maits Rest.

Koala forest devastation.

Cape Otway Lighthouse.



PHOTOS: GEOFF DURHAM

Three kilometres before the lightstation is the Blanket Bay turn-off to the east, and from this a turn-off to the south along a sandy track to the Parker Hill car park and campground with 20 tent sites overlooking Parker Inlet. The Great Ocean Walk track goes down into the inlet at the head of which is a four-metre waterfall.

After returning to the Blanket Bay track, you cross the Parker River which marks the boundary between the Pliocene and the Pleistocene to the east. The vegetation changes to low stringybarks and dense damp heathlands with the Victorian endemic bog gum.

Secluded Blanket Bay has toilets, a picnic area, 22 camp sites and the 1.5 kilometre, 45 minute Katabanut circuit walk. When the Otway National Park was declared in 1981 it had a collection of private shacks, on government leased land, which were progressively removed against vigorous opposition. (The Otway National Park was expanded in 2005 to make the Great Otway National Park.)

Most of the coast is inaccessible. At Shelly Beach, Elliot River, Blanket Bay

and Parker River are extraordinary natural sculptures, concretions and pot holes in the rock platforms.

The old fenced lightstation reserve is part of the national park but is privately managed and has an admission fee. The grounds are well kept, although I was disappointed to see weeds such as polygala. There is much to see, not only the 19 metre high lighthouse, but also the Telegraph Station, a small dinosaur exhibition, the World War 2 radar bunker and a collection of Aboriginal artefacts. Take advantage of interpretive talks and displays and an atmospheric café.

Outside the reserve, the historic Cape Otway cemetery is a 15 minute walk from the lightstation entrance car park. One of the early projects of the Friends of Otway National Park in 1983 was restoration work at the cemetery. There was little vegetation but now it is enclosed by dense bush.

Apollo Bay, with its variety of accommodation, is a civilized base from which to explore this part of Victoria. Bookings for the

campgrounds at Parker Hill and Blanket Bay and the Great Ocean Walk can be made through the Parks Victoria hot line 131 963.

The Lighthouse, Head Keeper's House and Manager's House has accommodation (phone 5237 9240). Bimbi Park has camping and caravan sites and a range of roofed accommodation (phone 5237 9246). The Conservation Ecology Centre offers high-class accommodation in its ecolodge with the opportunity to be involved in its koala habitat restoration and native animal research programs (phone 5237 9297).

Apollo Bay is the start of the 100-kilometre Great Ocean Walk – a one-direction walk to the Twelve Apostles with seven special hike-in campgrounds. In the Cape Otway section these are at Elliot Ridge, Blanket Bay, Cape Otway and Aire River. With vehicle access to Shelly Beach picnic area, Blanket Bay, Parker Hill, Cape Otway and Aire River, car shuttles provide opportunities for wonderful day walks.

For day visits, an extended stay or bushwalking, Cape Otway has it all. • PW

New benefits for Members

As a Member of the Victorian National Parks Association, you're critical to protecting our national parks, special places and Victoria's vanishing plant and animal species.

To thank you for all you do to protect our natural environment, we've reached out to some like-minded businesses to see how they can recognise your commitment to nature too. So don't forget to mention that you're a VNPA Member and show your membership card for some generous discounts!

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PHOTO: IT'S A WILDLIFE



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PHOTO: NICK BRADSWORTH

CHRISTINE CONNELLY RECENTLY SUBMITTED HER PHD ON THE EFFECTS OF URBANISATION ON EASTERN YELLOW ROBINS. THIS IS A SUMMARY OF HER FINDINGS WRITTEN FOR EVERYONE, ESPECIALLY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE, TO UNDERSTAND.

What does it mean to be a tiny bird in the big city?

Well, if you're an eastern yellow robin, it means there's lots of bad guys to avoid, food and shelter are scarce, your living space is getting smaller, and sometimes you become so imprisoned in your patch you can't leave home to find a member of the opposite sex (that is not your sibling!) to mate with.

Truly, it's a tough life for a tiny bird in the city.

I've been investigating the effects of urbanisation on yellow robins; those spunky little creatures that you might expect to see flitting around and pouncing on insects in the undergrowth of the Dandenong Ranges, especially if you happen to have kicked up a bit of leaf litter.

Urbanisation is likely to be one of the biggest contemporary challenges for biodiversity conservation. As we transform entire landscapes

into environments ideal for a single species (humans), we threaten the existence of many others.

I've focused on how urbanisation fragments and degrades yellow robins' habitat, who are usually forest dwellers. I have also examined the genetic consequences of urban fragmentation.

Genetic data compliment field data, by enabling us to make inferences about whether fragmented populations are likely to go extinct (because of the harmful effects of in-breeding).

I used a mix of field surveys and lab techniques to delve in to an in-depth study on the effects of urbanisation on a single species.

I spent almost three years surveying robins in the various bits of fragmented forest on public land across the urban sprawl of eastern Melbourne, from Braeside Park in the south-west, to Kinglake National Park in the north-east.

I had a few sites in the Dandenong Ranges National Park, including just near the 1000 Steps. There's plenty of yellow robins that inhabit the forest right next to the tracks there. Perhaps you've noticed one there?

In total I caught and banded 120 yellow robins at 18 sites in the area, adorning most of them with pretty leg jewellery in a unique combination so I could identify them later. Sounds easy? Not quite. Sometimes I sat among the shrubs for days on end with mist-nets and traps at the ready, without so much as glimpsing a robin, even though I knew from previous surveys that they were there.

On many occasions, I spent hour upon hour patiently watching busy pairs of yellow robins collecting cobwebs and bits of bark to build their perfect little sculpted nest, carefully following them through the thick undergrowth, sometimes crawling under blackberry thickets or wading through *Tradescantia* (a thick ground-cover weed) so high I couldn't sense the terrain underneath.



PHOTO: CHRISTINE CONNELLY



PHOTO: ALVIN KUAN



PHOTO: NICK BRADSWORTH



PHOTO: THOMAS HEALY

Clockwise from top left:

Eastern yellow robins make tiny open-cup nests, which they build with leaves and bark bound by spider webs and decorate with lichen and moss. Juvenile robins wear a camouflage of brown feathers with light coloured streaks and huddle together to stay warm.

Christine listens intently to track a calling robin living in habitat along the Yarra River with a thick ground-cover infestation of *Tradescantia* weed.

Measuring the head-and-bill length to explore whether there are size differences between robins living in urban reserves and those in intact forest.

Christine in the field.

Sometimes I eventually found their nest, so I could monitor its fate, but often my efforts weren't fruitful at all.

On one occasion I had been watching a pair of yellow robins, sitting completely still in the undergrowth for what seemed like an age. Eventually I decided to break for lunch, but not far away, just in case. No sooner had I opened my sandwich wrapper than the pair started with the most crazed racket.

I crept over to investigate and watched them aggressively diving at something on the ground. The next moment, the largest tiger snake I have ever seen came slithering at full speed out of the grass and straight towards me!

Even in my panic, I couldn't help but marvel at the gall of these tiny 20-gram birds. They were willing to take on a large predator for the sake of their feathered family.

They're tough, alright, but my research has showed that there's a limit to their toughness, and that maybe they're not quite robust enough for inner city life.

I combined the field data I collected with that which I accrued from many long days of lab work, plus extensive spatial modelling (for which I had to construct my very own super computer!)

And the results?

Sadly, urbanisation is causing extreme fragmentation of suitable yellow robin habitat. And detrimental in-breeding is highly likely in patches that are entirely isolated, such as Braeside Park in Braeside or The Grange Reserve in Clayton South.

However, it's not all bad news: all we need is trees! The connectivity models and genetic data show that landscape tree cover facilitates gene flow, that is, individuals dispersing and passing on their genetic material successfully. Thus, retaining trees in the east of Melbourne, to connect our parks and reserves, is absolutely critical.

And it's apparent that vegetation along protected river corridors (particularly the Yarra River and Dandenong Creek) are providing important landscape links.

At a finer scale, yellow robins are able to exploit some elements of the modified microhabitat in urban environments. For example, it seems that ground covering weeds such as *Tradescantia* may be performing an similar function to the deep, moist leaf litter that is ideal habitat for insects and spiders that yellow robins feed on in less modified habitat.

This species is known to be a kind of indicator for other small woodland bird species. What threatens yellow robins is likely to also threaten a variety of other species, especially the small insectivores.

So, for the sake of these species, let's make sure we protect the trees in our urban landscape, and look after the forest and woodland reserves across Melbourne, with special care for the river corridors.

Finally, a note of caution for conservation managers. Sometimes weeds can be important for our native fauna, so before you remove them, make sure you've considered their ecosystem function and how you will replace that function once the weeds are gone. • PWW

Greater diversity in the Great Victorian Fish Count

TABATHA LOUGHNAN JOINED VNPA'S REEFWATCH PROGRAM TO ASSIST WITH THE INTRODUCTION OF SHARKS AND RAYS TO LAST YEAR'S FISH COUNT. SHE REPORTS BACK ON SOME FINDINGS HERE.

The 2017 Great Victorian Fish Count was our most successful and fun year yet! Over 700 divers and snorkelers took part in the event – if you were one of them, thank you enormously. It was fantastic to see so many new and familiar faces jumping in the water across the state to gather data on the amazing and unique marine life found here in Victoria. All this couldn't happen without the ongoing support of our partners, dive clubs and operators, environmental groups, community groups, schools and universities.

A greater diversity of participants

This year we were able to diversify the fish count in more ways than one; not only did we add sharks and rays, but we also saw the addition of many new groups such as Scuba Scouts, schools and dive companies. VNPA also ran two Wild Families events to give mums, dads, grandparents and kids the opportunity to put their snorkels on and experience the wondrous underwater world together.



PHOTO: CATLIN GRIFFITH

A greater diversity of fish

This year's theme was 'praise our rays', to celebrate the addition of our ten new target species, the friendly sharks and rays of Victoria. These included:

- smooth stingray, black stingray, spotted stingaree, southern fiddler ray, southern eagle ray
- Port Jackson, spotted wobbegong, elephantfish, varied carpetshark, draughtboard shark

Rays were regularly seen during the fish count, and many participants were delighted to watch them fly through the water with grace and beauty. Wild Families were some of the lucky participants to see smooth stingrays, black stingrays and southern fiddler rays at St Leonards Pier.

Despite the sharks proving a little more elusive, a spotted wobbegong was spotted at Lee Breakwater.

Participants have uploaded their findings online to the Atlas of Living Australia to improve our knowledge of Victoria's marine species. The ReefWatch team is currently collating the data and preparing a report to be released in coming months.

To find out more about ReefWatch or to be the first to know about the 2018 fish count, subscribe here: www.vnpa.org.au/programs/reefwatch • PW

“ We frequently see wobbegongs along our coast ... but to see one during the fish count made it extra special! ”

SHARENE COLLETT
FISH COUNT PARTICIPANT



PHOTO: NICK SHAW

Learning side by side

A family nature adventure is a wonderful chance to embrace a 'learning side by side' approach to discovery.

Have you ever taken the kids out on an adventure, only to find yourself learning more about nature than they do? Even adults with years of experience in exploring and understanding nature can learn more, and many adults may find themselves in a position of being taught all sorts of things by their wildlife loving kids.

For some fun on your next family adventure try playing a game of 'I've never seen that before!'.

The rules are super easy. Find as many things as you possibly can that you've never seen before and record

Experiencing nature together.



PHOTO: CATLIN GRIFFITH

them. Depending on your family or your mood you could compete (see who can find the most), collaborate (see how long you can make a combined list of things you've never seen before) or play adults versus kids.

You can record your findings by writing them down, photographing them or drawing them. What matters most is that you get to explore, discuss and remember together.

Example list:

1. A tree that large fallen across the track
2. A blue beetle
3. A yellow looking wormy thing
4. A pelican landing in the water
5. A purple crab

Always remember to look after your safety on all outdoor adventures! Find more Wild Families and sign up for emails on our website: www.vnpa.org.au/programs/wild-families • PW

Space for kids to record their 'I've never seen that before' findings	1
	2
	3
	4
	5

Space for adults to record their 'I've never seen that before' findings	1
	2
	3
	4
	5



Donate today to give nature a louder voice at this critical time

By supporting the Victorian National Parks Association, you're rescuing our National Parks, reserves and special places. You're saving Victoria's vanishing species, and protecting our waterways, beaches and the marine environment.

With a state election in November, it is critical that we give nature a louder voice.

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☐ **Cheque/money order** payable to 'Victorian National Parks Association' is enclosed.

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Please post with payment to Victorian National Parks Association, Level 3, 60 Leicester St, Carlton VIC 3053,
call us on **03 9341 6500** or visit **vnpa.org.au/support/give-nature-a-louder-voice**

* Donations will be automatically deducted from your credit card or direct debit arrangement on the 28th day of each month. You will receive a tax receipt at the end of each financial year, and you can alter your donations at any time. Minimum gift is \$15/month. All donations over \$2 are tax-deductible. ABN 34 217 717 593

Authorised by Matt Ruchel, Executive Director, Victorian National Parks Association.

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