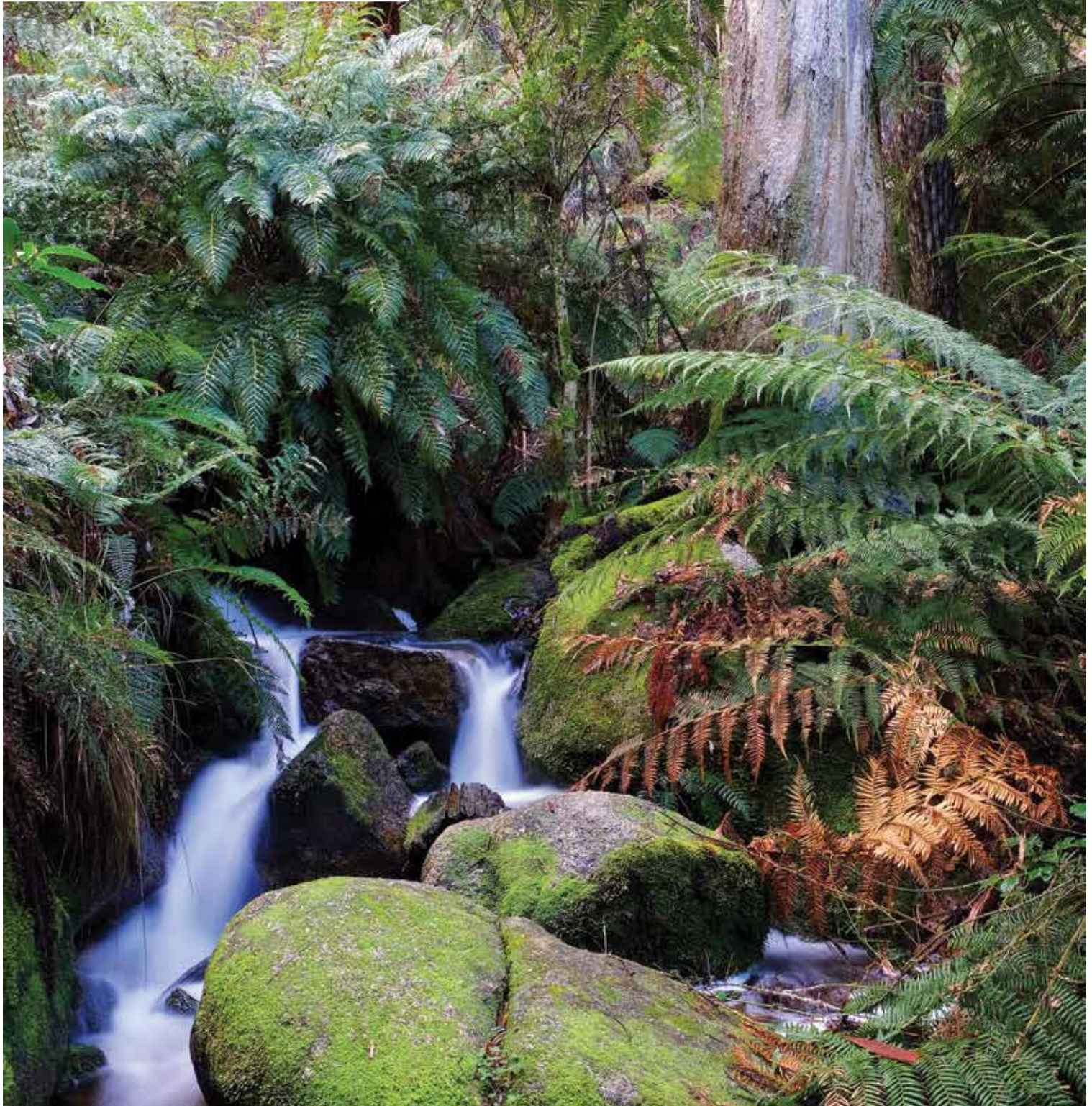


# PARK WATCH



NEW CENTRAL WEST NATIONAL PARKS  
GREAT OCEAN ROAD TAKE-OVER BID  
WORLD HERITAGE FOR BUDJ BIM  
FERAL HORSES COURT CASE  
BLUE PRINT FOR OUR BLUE COMMONS  
DRAGON QUEST  
PLUS VNPA ANNUAL REPORT 2018-19

SEPTEMBER 2019 NO 278



VICTORIAN  
NATIONAL PARKS  
ASSOCIATION  
*Be part of nature*





Be part of nature

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#### OUR 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.*

Everyone can help in the conservation of Victoria's wild and beautiful places. To find out how you can help, visit [www.vnpa.org.au/support](http://www.vnpa.org.au/support) or call us on (03) 9341 6500.

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#### FRONT COVER

Ferntree Falls in Mount Buangor State Park. We are campaigning the state government to commit to creating new proposed parks to protect Victoria's central west forests, including extending Mount Buangor State Park to better protect adjacent parts of Mount Cole forest. See feature on pages 4–9. Photo by David Tatnall.

#### BACK COVER

The endangered swift parrot is one of the many wildlife species found in the forests in the central west of Victoria. Photo: Gunjan Pandey, Wikimedia Commons.

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## From the President

VNPA welcomes the Victorian Environment Assessment Council (VEAC) final recommendations for the Central West Investigations for public lands and forests (see full coverage on pages 4–9). The central west areas covered include the Wellsford Forest, Wombat Forest, Mount Cole Forest and the Pyrenees Ranges. The recommendations call for significant improvements in the protection of public land and proposed new national parks, state parks and other reserves. If the Victorian Government accepts these proposals, they will greatly assist in establishing a landscape-scale network of protected areas in the central west of Victoria. Such a step will strongly support existing widespread community on-ground actions to protect nature in central Victoria and provide better-managed areas for recreation.

VNPA is actively encouraging the state government to adopt the VEAC final recommendations. I encourage VNPA supporters to speak with their state MPs to let them know you support the proposals and to counter a noisy minority who do not value proper management of our natural resources. It is also essential that the government provide appropriate resources for proper park planning, adequate operating budgets and staffing to ensure the ongoing sustainable management of these protected areas. There is still much more work to do to restore proper landscape-scale biolinks throughout central Victoria from the Grampians-Gariwerd to the Alps. The VEAC recommendations are an excellent step for this process.

It has been a long time since a Victorian government has created a large new national park. Given the increasing pressures on Victoria's

environment from climate change, invasive plants and animals and growing population, it is time to prioritise nature conservation. Too many of our plants, animals and other life forms are facing serious threats and even extinction. The best way to tackle this crisis is to protect large areas of existing native vegetation, which has the majority of the natural biodiversity already present.

The recent tax cuts passed by federal parliament made plainly evident the question of political priorities. Given the critical state of much of Australia's biodiversity and the meagre natural resource management budget, it appears that the Federal Government has lost sight of its responsibility for our natural heritage. At a time when many species are threatened with extinction, it is surprising how limited the support is from the federal government. Indeed, it appears that red tape, economic tape and political tape is more important than protecting the very nature of Australia and the main reason overseas visitors come here – to experience our exceptional natural areas and unique wildlife.

VNPA staff have been engaging with the Victorian Government over their proposal to introduce a new Great Ocean Road Authority. The government's proposal lacks clear objectives, and no cost-effective funding model has been developed. If the government wants improved management of public land along the coast, then all they need to do is provide more funds to Parks Victoria, which is already responsible for most of the land in the area of concern. It is a simple matter to improve coordination among various existing authorities – we don't need another bureaucracy to improve communication. Or is this

proposal just a way to introduce Gold Coast-style skyscraper development along the Victorian coastline? (See pages 10–11).

Our program of community engagement includes cutting edge collaborative action research with the communities affected by the Bunyip bushfires. Our NatureWatch program staff and volunteers have been monitoring biodiversity in the Bunyip State Park for several years. The unfortunate fire events earlier this year have made the citizen science data extremely valuable in understanding the recovery of the forest after the fires. The idea of monitoring our forests before and after bushfires and "controlled burns" was identified in the Bushfire Royal Commission, but resources have been skewed to other activities. Again, it has been left to community groups and volunteers to do the work of government.

A highlight of my recent visits to nature conservation areas was the sensational delights of the Deep Lead Nature Conservation Reserve, near Stawell, in June. My family enjoyed the highly scented yellow gum blossoms and rising eucalypt vapours, the loud calling of 11 species of honeyeater and numerous swift parrots, the constant movement of birds and the healthy appearance of the bush. • PW

Bruce McGregor, VNPA President

It is with great sadness that we acknowledge the loss of eminent forest scientist and much-loved community member Dr David Blair in a skiing accident on Mount Bogong on 30 August. VNPA extends all its deepest sympathies to his family and friends at this time. We hope to publish a full tribute in the next edition of *Park Watch*.





# A DOZEN GOOD REASONS FOR NEW NATIONAL PARKS IN THE CENTRAL WEST OF VICTORIA

RIGHT NOW THE ANDREWS GOVERNMENT HAS A FANTASTIC OPPORTUNITY TO DO OUR STATE PROUD BY CREATING MUCH-NEEDED NEW NATIONAL PARKS FOR THE PROTECTION OF OUR FORESTS AND THE ENJOYMENT OF ALL VICTORIANS.

The state government needs to agree to the final recommendations (see box on page 8) of the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) to protect almost 60,000 hectares of forest in Victoria's central west.

These forests worthy of protection include the Wombat Forest (near Daylesford), Wellsford Forest (near Bendigo), Pyrenees Ranges Forest (near Avoca), and Mount Cole Forest (near Beaufort) as well as many smaller forest areas (see maps on next pages).

After decades of community campaigns and a thorough independent investigation, the Andrews Government now needs to move to pass the necessary legislation and associated funding.

A dozen good reasons the Andrews Government should commit to creating these new parks in the central west are:

1. Victoria's forests of the central west have incredible natural values. Their forests harbour 380 threatened species, such as powerful owl, brush-tailed phascogale (similar to a small quoll), greater gliders and many more.
2. National parks are great for both people and nature. According to the Parks Victoria Annual Report, the Victorian parks estate contributes \$2.1 billion annually to the Victorian economy through park tourism, supporting 20,000 jobs.
3. There is growing demand for nature experiences in national parks. In 2017–18, 14 million people took part in at least one nature-based activity, which is up eight per cent year on year. Nature-based visitor numbers have grown by 36 per cent since December 2014.
4. National parks protect natural areas and manage potentially damaging activities while encouraging visitation. Most recreational activities are actively encouraged in national parks including camping, horse riding and mountain biking, and generally the rules regarding activities, such as 4x4 driving, are the same as in state forests. The reserve system has been carefully designed to include almost 20,000 hectares of regional parks close to townships which allow almost all forms of recreation, including dog walking, fossicking and prospecting.
5. New national parks in our state's central west would be an impressive Andrews Government legacy for future generations of Victorians, and show real leadership on nature conservation.
6. It has been almost a decade since the last major additions to our national parks system in Victoria. The last decade has seen the lowest level of national parks creation in the last 60 years.
7. The Victorian Environmental Assessment Council's final recommendations were developed through a thorough consultation process over a two-year period. It received 2698 written submissions with a further 450 people attending drop-in sessions and public meetings. These forests had not been formally assessed for over 30 years.
8. Victoria is the most cleared state in Australia and much of our key habitat remains on public land. While public land only covers 40 per cent of the state, it contains 70 per cent of the highest biodiversity values.
9. New parks in the central west will protect some important habitat types currently under-represented in the reserve system, and help deliver key elements of the Victoria's *Biodiversity 2037* strategy. This would once again make Victoria a national leader in nature conservation.
10. New parks will protect eleven significant headwaters of important rivers including the Moorabool, Werribee, Lerderderg, Maribyrnong, and Wimmera rivers.
11. Better protection and management as national park or other conservation reserves will be critical to improve resilience of Victoria's special places and species in the face of climate change, for example snow gums on Mount Cole.
12. New national parks would be a drawcard for recreation and tourism to the central west of the state. They would be assets to the growing Melbourne population, particularly the western suburbs, giving that community the opportunity to enjoy getting out into nature only a short drive from the city.

Wombat Forests is one of the special places in Victoria's central west that should be protected in proposed new parks.



# Forests worthy of protection

PHOTO: DAVID TATNALL

## Pyrenees Ranges Forest

The Pyrenees Ranges features 240 species of native plants including the endemic Pyrenees gum. A range of threatened wildlife have been recorded including brush-tailed phascogale and the endangered swift parrot (pictured back cover).

## Mount Cole Forest

Mount Cole features one of Victoria's most popular walking tracks, the Beeripmo Walk. Its forest harbours more than 130 native bird species including the powerful owl (pictured page 8). The Mount Cole grevillea is only found here (page 9).

## Wellsford Forest

Wellsford Forest is dominated by eucalypts, wattles and wildflowers, and a place to enjoy Victoria's box-iron bark forests as they recover from a long history of logging.

## Wombat Forest

Only 60–90 minutes drive for Melbourne growing western suburbs. An important habitat for threatened greater gliders which require very extensive areas of forest to provide an adequate food source. Important headwaters of major rivers – the Loddon, Campaspe, Coliban, Maribyrnong, Moorabool and Werribee-Lerderderg rivers – which provide water supply for large areas of western Victoria to the north and south.

## Final Recommendations

### MOUNT COLE – PYRENEES

#### Pyrenees Regional Park

New 2016 hectare regional park incorporating areas of most intensive recreation.

#### Pyrenees State Forest

Retention of 3099 hectares of existing state forest for timber harvesting, domestic firewood and additional recreational uses.

#### Pyrenees National Park

Large new national park of 15,126 hectares including 4443 hectares of existing nature reserve.

#### Ben Nevis Nature Reserve

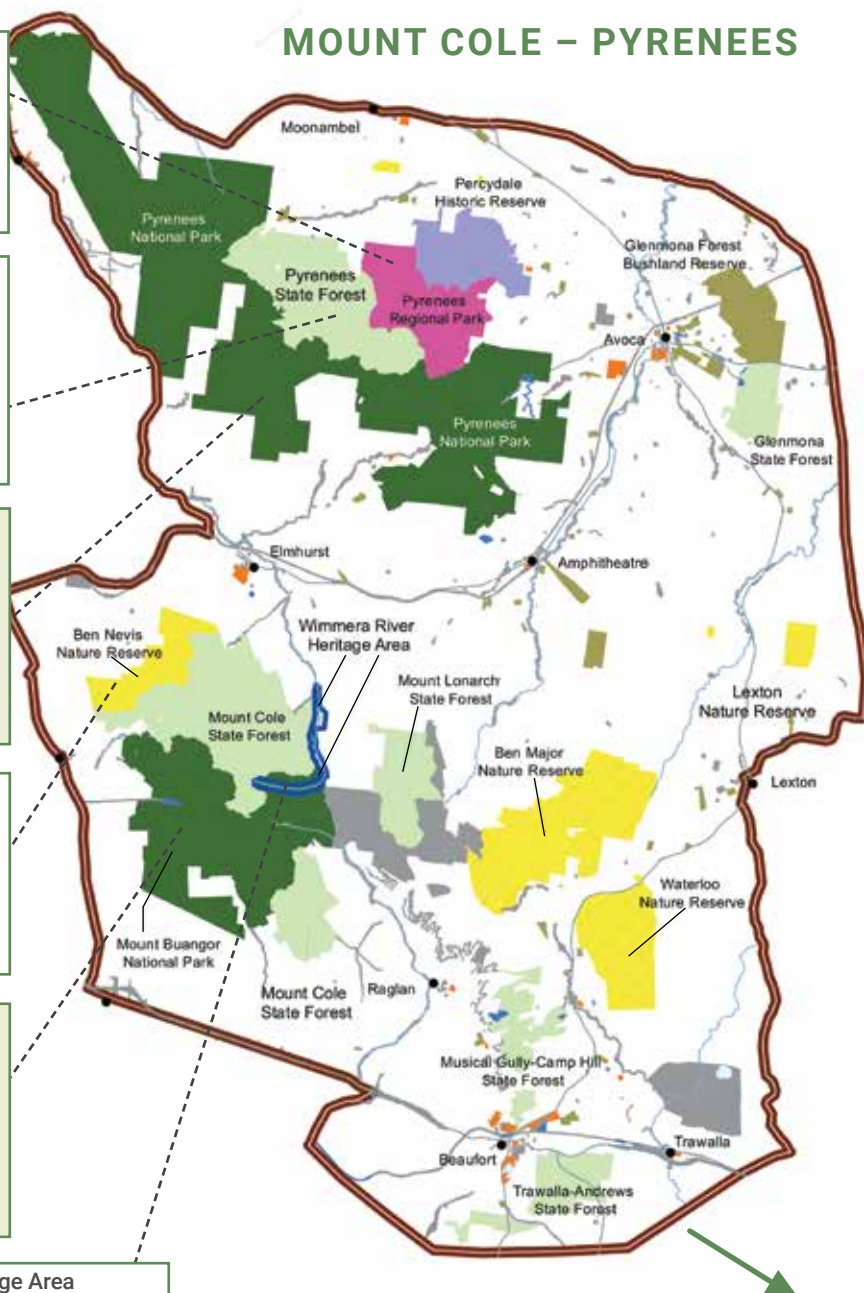
New nature reserve of 1088 hectares on the rocky flanks and peaks of the Mount Cole range.

#### Mount Buangor National Park

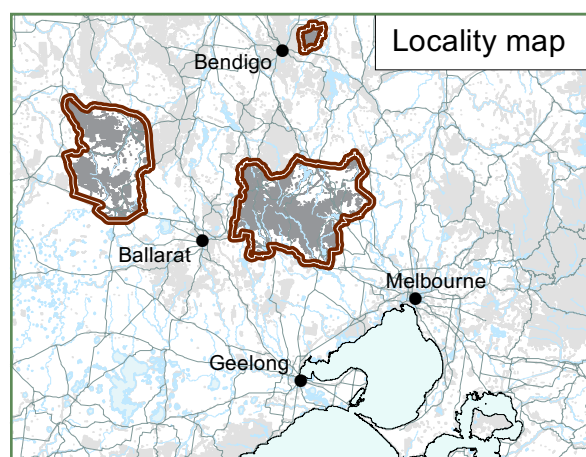
Additions to existing 2498 hectare Mount Buangor State Park to create new national park of 5282 hectares.

#### Wimmera River Heritage Area

Addition of 276 hectares to the existing Wimmera River Heritage Area (outside the investigation area) to protect cultural and ecological values of the Wimmera River's headwaters.



45km  
Ballarat



For more detailed map, visit  
[www.veac.vic.gov.au/investigation/central-west-investigation/reports](http://www.veac.vic.gov.au/investigation/central-west-investigation/reports)

### Greater Bendigo National Park (addition)

Protection of 3152 hectares of important habitat for many threatened species such as brush-tailed phascogale and swift parrot, and the few remaining large trees in this block. Addition of one of the largest and best condition box-ironbark forests in Victoria, outside of existing parks.

### Bendigo Regional Park (addition)

3949 hectares incorporates the areas of the Wellsford forest most intensively used for recreation. Some domestic firewood collection would be allowed over a ten year phase-out period.

## WELLSFORD

15km  
Bendigo

0 3.75 7.5 15 22.5 30 km

### Public land use category

- National park, State park
- Conservation park
- Regional park
- Nature reserve
- Bushland reserve
- Historic reserve
- State forest
- Water production reserve
- Community use reserve
- Other public land

### Public land use overlay

- Heritage River
- Investigation area boundary
- Recommended change in public land use

### Hepburn Conservation Park

New park of 2714 hectares containing high natural values and important habitat for rare and threatened species.

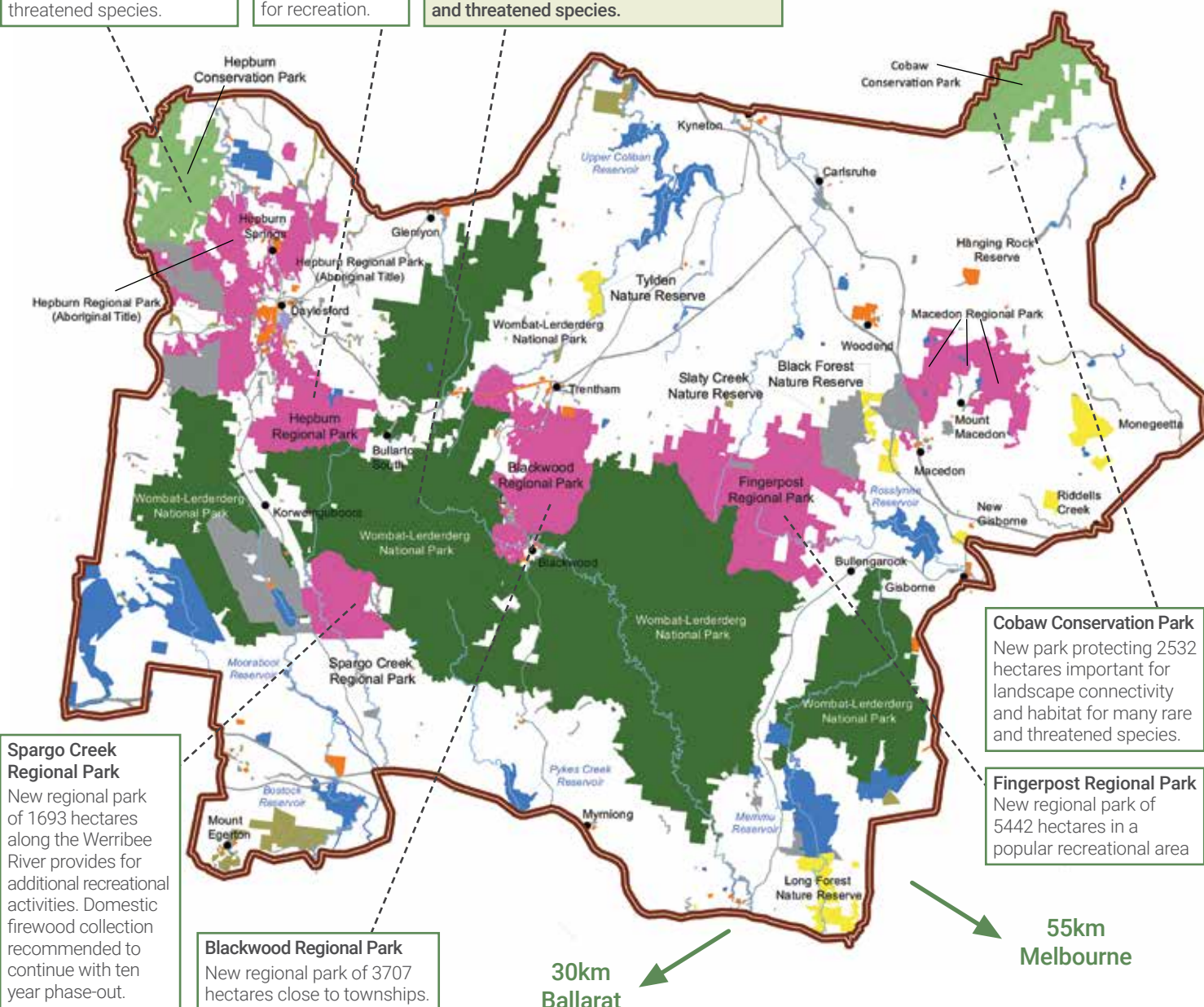
### Hepburn Regional Park

Additions of 2947 hectares mostly in a popular area for recreation.

### Wombat-Lerderderg National Park

Large new national park of 49,553 hectares (including the existing Lerderderg State Park) to protect water catchments and headwaters, and high value habitat for rare and threatened species.

## WOMBAT – MACEDON





## Recommendations at a glance

VEAC'S final recommendations propose an increase of almost 60,000 hectares in protected areas in the central west of Victoria (national park, conservation park, nature reserve, bushland reserve or heritage river).

Just over 50,000 hectares of area will be protected under the *National Parks Act 1975*, which includes new or additions to existing national or state parks, including:

- **Wombat–Lerderderg National Park** – establishment of a large new national park from existing state park and state forest, capturing a significant amount of the largely-intact landscape and high strategic biodiversity values of the Wombat forest (addition of 29,079 hectares).
- **Pyrenees National Park** – establishment of a new national park from existing nature reserves and state forest over the southern flanks of the Pyrenees Ranges (addition of 15,126 hectares).
- **Mount Buangor National Park** – establishment of a new national park from existing state park and some adjoining state forest (addition of 2784 hectares).
- **Greater Bendigo National Park** – addition of the Wellsford forest to the existing national park (addition of 3152 hectares), and addition to the Bendigo Regional Park (3950 hectares)
- **Hepburn (2714 hectares) and Cobaw (2532 hectares) Conservation Parks** – establishment of two new conservation parks from state forest north-west of Daylesford and at Cobaw.
- **Thirty new smaller conservation reserves** (5246 hectares), nature reserves (1348 hectares) bushland reserves (1761 hectares).
- **New heritage river designation** upper reaches of the Wimmera River in Mount Cole.

An additional 19,728 hectares of regional parks managed primarily for recreation, in areas of highest recreational activity near towns, is also proposed.

## Next steps

VEAC's Central West Investigation final recommendations were released in June 2019, and have been tabled in the Victorian Parliament.

The Andrews Government has roughly six months to provide a response in parliament (likely in February 2020), though it can make a decision earlier.

Once the government agrees to commit to creating the new national parks, legislation needs to be drafted and passed by both houses of parliament. This is usually associated with an implementation-funding package to build appropriate infrastructure (such as signage, campground and picnic areas), conduct urgent feral animal or pest control, employ rangers and develop a park management plan. This can take some years to complete, and the sooner the resources are available, the better.

## Now is the time for action

We are calling on the Andrews Government to:

- Publicly support all of the final VEAC recommendations
- Decide earlier rather than later, to allow for legislation and park implementation to be undertaken well within this term of government
- Provide appropriate resources for park establishment and management

### Please take action by:

Contacting Premier Daniel Andrews, Environment Minister Lily D'Ambrosio and your local Labor members of parliament.

Find details to write, email or call them here:

[www.vnpa.org.au/political-contacts](http://www.vnpa.org.au/political-contacts)

OR

Sending a message to the Victorian Government using the quick and easy form on our website:

[www.vnpa.org.au/support-creation-of-new-national-parks-in-victorias-central-west](http://www.vnpa.org.au/support-creation-of-new-national-parks-in-victorias-central-west)

Powerful owls make their home in the forests of the central west.



PHOTO: DAVID LOCHLIN, FLICKR CC



## Mount Cole grevillea – eligible as a threatened species

The eucalypt forests and woodland of the Mount Cole Range and Mount Buangor State Park harbours a very special flowering shrub, the Mount Cole grevillea, found only here and nowhere else on the planet (endemic).

This was one of the reasons why VNPA nominated it for listing as a threatened species under the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988*.

The Mount Cole grevillea has undergone a serious decline and geographic contraction in the order of 75 per cent in recent decades. Disturbances such as logging are strongly implicated in its decline.

These plants are thought to survive for over 70 years. But without protection, they could face extinction in the coming decades.

VNPA's nomination has been looked at by the Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC), and it has been preliminary recommended for listing as a threatened species. This however is subject to public comment, after which the SAC making a final recommendation for listing, and then a final decision is made by key government ministers.

If the state government also accepts VEAC's final recommendations for new parks in the central west of the state, the new Mount Buangor National Park would protect much of the only known distribution for the Mount Cole grevillea. • PW



PHOTO: BILL BLACKBURN

## Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act re-emerges

Amendments to Victoria's key piece of threatened species legislation, The *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* (FFG Act) has again been introduced into state parliament.

The Andrews Government's 2014 election policy was to "... review the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act", and the ALP party platform 2014 was to "modernise threatened species protection to adopt world's best practice".

The review was undertaken by the Environment Department in a parallel process to developing the Victorian *Biodiversity 2037 strategy*. The process included one round of public submissions and a series of meetings with stakeholders. According to the summary of submissions: "The submissions received in response to the Consultation Paper indicated a strong appetite among contributors for even broader-scale reforms to biodiversity regulation in Victoria." Unfortunately, this appetite was largely ignored.

The amendments were introduced in the previous parliament, but failed to be put to the upper house before the 2018 state election. (See our previous coverage: [www.vnpa.org.au/act-nature-enters-parliament](http://www.vnpa.org.au/act-nature-enters-parliament))

The new bill is likely to pass with Coalition support, though the Greens have proposed amendments. The new bill does not go far enough to address the scale of the problem facing species in Victoria, but does make some useful amendments, including:

- Adopting the common assessment method for listing threatened species, which will bring Victoria in line with national laws.
- Improving management agreements which can entered into by the environment department.
- Rejigs conservation orders and critical habitat declarations (neither of which have really been used in Victoria).
- Strengthens a duty of care for government departments who may impact on biodiversity. • PW

# GREAT OCEAN ROAD PARKS FACE A WOBBLY TAKE-OVER BID

Traffic from bikes, buses and private cars is reaching unmanageable levels along the Great Ocean Road in peak periods.

PHOTO: PHIL INGAMIELLS

THERE ARE REAL VISITOR MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS ALONG THE GREAT OCEAN ROAD, BUT IS THE PROPOSED SELF-FUNDED 'COAST AND PARKS AUTHORITY' JUST A BIZARRE BRAINSTORM FIX? VNPA'S PARKS PROTECTION CAMPAIGNER **PHIL INGAMIELLS** IS WORRIED.

Over two years there have been, so far, two rounds of public consultation on a new governance model for the Great Ocean Road (GOR) precinct. But despite obvious public concerns about the management of the area, there has never been a clear articulation from the Victorian Government of exactly what a new 'Great Ocean Road Coast and Parks Authority' would look like, and how it would be funded.

This is a dangerous situation, as the proposed new body will have authority over the management of national parks and marine parks along the Otway coastline, including, it seems, a driving interest in future lease and licence revenue from those parks. The consultation process has been extensive, yet the community is still largely left in the dark.

## Phase one

Initially, the state government's *Engage Victoria* website posed a series of questions for the public to answer, ranging from "What do you love most about the Great Ocean Road and its landscapes?" to "What criteria should the Taskforce use to evaluate the management model options?"

A look through the written submissions in the first round of consultation, up to the end of April 2018, showed that:

- The Parks Victoria Board opposed a new over-arching GOR authority, saying "we do not believe a case has been made to add further bureaucracy and costs".
- Most submissions, including those from local councils, were confused about the nature of the proposed authority.

- Most submissions called for more clarity and further engagement about both the structure and funding of the new authority.

The process was overseen by a Great Ocean Road Taskforce, charged with recommending GOR governance reforms that would "boost tourism expenditure and investment" along the road, help local communities benefit more from visitors, and maintain "appropriate environmental and landscape protections". The Taskforce was to report to three Victorian Government ministers:

- Minister for Planning
- Minister for Regional Development
- Minister for Tourism and Major Events.

The Environment Minister, oddly, was left out of this first round of consultation and decision-making.

The Taskforce's report proposed a very comprehensive list of functions for the new authority. It would encompass "advisory, regulatory, management and service delivery, scientific research, park management, inter-jurisdiction activities, program design and implementation, coordination and client representative for delivery of major state construction projects".

That's a sizeable new government department with extraordinary powers – far above anything clearly flagged in the phase one process.



Strong reference was made to the need to rationalise the large and confusing number of councils and committees that manage land along the GOR, such as tennis courts, carparks and toilet blocks. But around 80 per cent of the land along the road is national parks and other reserves managed by Parks Victoria. The new authority will actually take charge of:

- Port Campbell National Park
- Otway National Park (unspecified areas only)
- Point Addis Marine National Park
- Twelve Apostles Marine National Park
- The Arches Marine Sanctuary
- Bay of Islands Coastal Park

There were no problems with park management identified in the submissions or in the Taskforce report, other than visitor pressure at the Twelve Apostles site. Nevertheless, the new authority will reduce Parks Victoria to, effectively, a sub-contractor for all parks along the road. It's a terrible precedent for parks elsewhere in the state.

### Funding the beast

The Taskforce report talks about a "secure funding model" for the new authority, but there is no mention of government funding, and no remotely realistic funding appeared in the state budget.

While there are potential sources of revenue for the proposed authority if it hoovers up all profits from camping areas and car parks on council land, and if it puts a levee on the 40,000 odd tour buses and vans that use the road annually, that revenue, in our estimation, would struggle to support the authority itself, let alone the on-ground infrastructure and maintenance it is expected to deliver. Oddly, while a self-funded authority seems to be the model proposed, the Taskforce report made it clear that an all-important "detailed cost-benefit analysis ... was outside the scope of the terms of reference".

- Is it possible that this achievement-driven but cash-strapped new government authority would be tempted to raise revenue through new commercial leases on the land it manages, including our national parks and reserves?
- Is it at all reasonable to expect this new body to survive without a large slice of government funding?
- Is duplication of existing government services, such as park management, a fundamentally foolish move?

These are the sort of questions that should be addressed in the consultation process, but they are not.

### Phase two

In the second (recent) round of consultation, the questions on the *Engage Victoria* website were largely trivial. No discussion or feedback was entertained on the governance model nor on the funding model, despite the statement in the Taskforce report that "stakeholders held a consistent view that they would like to be consulted on future governance arrangements".

And bizarrely, with a decision on that governance model apparently already made, and in the absence of any business model for this self-funded government department, the implementation of the new GOR Coast and Parks Authority has now been handballed to the Environment Minister.



It's unclear who has been driving this process, but it appears to be an ideologically driven exercise rather than a practical one.

There is no need to duplicate park management expertise and responsibility, or other expertise along the road.

Is there another way?

The very real problems along the road could more realistically be solved by:

- Declaring the Great Ocean Road as a 'distinctive area and landscape' under Victoria's *Planning and Environment Act 1987*. This would ensure long-term protection for the area.
- Finishing implementation of the Shipwreck Coast Master Plan, which was designed to handle visitor pressure.
- Setting up a smaller, and more practical, Great Ocean Road Authority to guide management of the GOR landscape, especially the many small reserves and facilities currently run by committees of management.
- Leaving marine and terrestrial park management in the competent hands of a properly-funded Parks Victoria.
- And yes, it's probably sensible to put a toll on tourist busses, to help fund essential infrastructure like those problematic toilet blocks.

The question "What is the problem in our national parks that is so severe that it needs a new park authority to solve it?" is central here. It's a question we have addressed to the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) at all levels, and to the Environment Minister, without being given even a hint of an answer.

We welcome the recent suggestion from DELWP that there will now be a third public consultation phase, looking at last at "governance arrangements". We hope that will allow the return of park management to Parks Victoria. • PW





# World Heritage for Budj Bim

AN ABORIGINAL CULTURAL SITE IN VICTORIA, OLDER THAN STONEHENGE, HAS BEEN ADDED TO UNESCO'S WORLD HERITAGE LIST.

The Budj Bim Cultural Landscape, located in the traditional land of the Gunditjmara in western Victoria, is the only Australian World Heritage site to have been listed entirely for its Aboriginal cultural associations.

The site was created around 6,600 years ago, when the Gunditjmara people developed a permanent settlement on volcanic lava flows and associated wetlands. The area, covering about 10,000 hectares, contains the remains of around 300 round stone huts and one of the world's most extensive and oldest aquaculture systems.

The settlement has long been cited as evidence that the common understanding that pre-European Aboriginal communities were nomadic is not always the case. The Budj Bim Cultural Landscape contains extensive evidence of stone house villages situated on numerous wetlands. These wetlands, such as Lake Condah, Condah Swamp, Gorrie Swamp and Homerton Swamp were formed when the Budj Bim lava flow blocked the natural drainage patterns of the water in the region.

The UNESCO listing points out that

“the Budj Bim lava flows, which connect these three components, have enabled the Gunditjmara to develop one of the largest and oldest aquaculture networks in the world. Composed of channels, dams and weirs, they are used to contain floodwaters and create basins to trap, store and harvest the kooyang eel (*Anguilla australis*), which has provided the population with an economic and social base for six millennia.

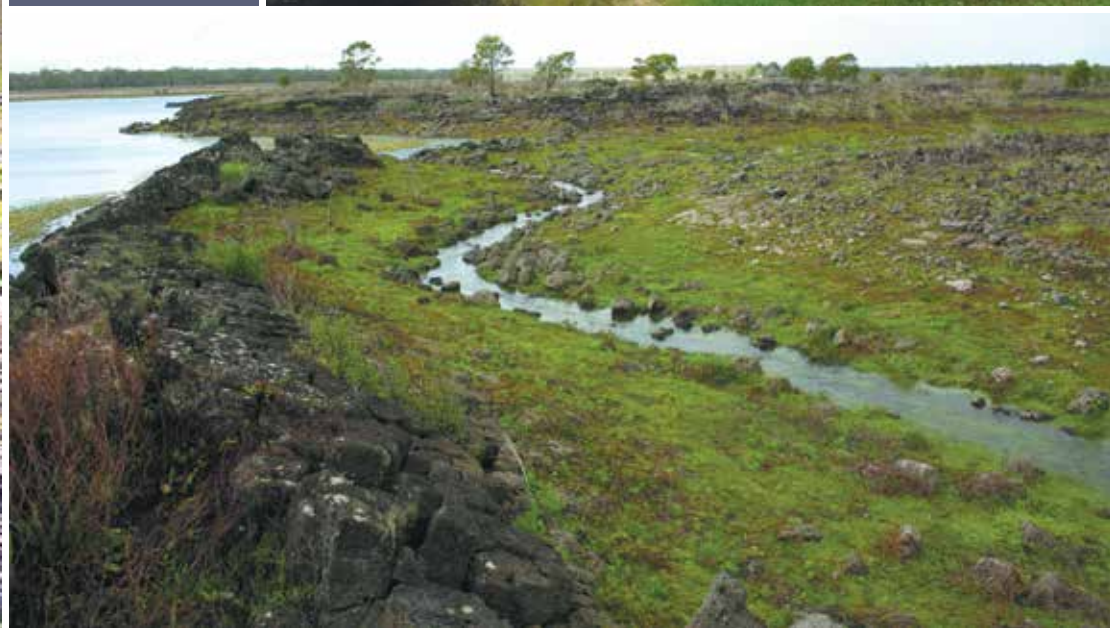
“The Budj Bim Cultural Landscape is the result of a creational process narrated by the Gunditjmara as a deep time story, referring to the idea that they have always lived there. From an archaeological perspective, deep time represents a period of at least 32,000 years. The ongoing dynamic relationship of Gunditjmara and their land is nowadays carried by knowledge systems retained through oral transmission and continuity of cultural practice.”

World heritage status is not awarded lightly. In this case, the listing was preceded by extensive works to restore traditional water flows to the landscape. In the mid 20th century, a drain had been constructed to take water from what was then known as the Condah Swamp.





Channels, dams and weirs have been constructed throughout the Budj Bim Cultural Landscape.



PHOTOS © GUNDITJ MIRRIING TRADITIONAL OWNERS ABORIGINAL CORPORATION. AUTHOR TYSON LOVETT-MURRAY.

The restoration of water to Tae Rak (Lake Condah) has been the subject of proposals that commenced in the 1970s and concentrated then on the field and game aspects of the area. With the return of the Condah Mission site and neighbouring land to traditional owners in the mid-1980s, the first restoration proposal based on Gunditjmara heritage values was made.

In March 2008, the Lake Condah area was returned to Gunditjmara people by the state of Victoria. The Lake Condah Restoration Conservation Management Plan was also completed to ensure that the extensive Gunditjmara cultural heritage values were maintained and enhanced during and after the installation of a new weir.

In 2010, the Lake Condah Restoration Project was awarded the Civil Contractors Federation Earth Award which acknowledged the following attributes of the project:

- its design, which was in keeping with the cultural and environmental sensitivity of the site;
- the engagement of the local Indigenous community in all aspects of the construction; with training and on-site supervision, Indigenous workers were recruited to undertake all the construction tasks, as well as some of the administration roles;

- an exhaustive community consultation program involving all stakeholders; this enabled the realisation of a united vision for the project and a highly cooperative team for implementation.

Budj Bim Tours currently offer opportunities for access to the Budj Bim Cultural Landscape. Government funding for the Budj Bim Master Plan will produce an increased range of visitor infrastructure, including information facilities and more raised pedestrian walkways to limit visitor impact.

Visitors are welcome as ever to the crater and lake area (previously Mt Eccles) of Budj Bim National Park.

Budj Bim means 'High Head', as the cone of the volcano relates to a Gunditjmara Dreamtime story where a giant revealed itself in the landscape.

Victorian National Parks Association congratulates the Gunditjmara community on their restoration work, and on the considerable achievement of World Heritage recognition for this remarkable and truly precious site. • PW

Thanks to UNESCO and the Gunditjmara community for the information in this article.



# POINTLESS PAIRING

VNPA DIRECTOR **MATT RUCHEL**  
ASKS WHAT IS THE POINT OF THE  
REGIONAL FOREST AGREEMENTS?



The Victorian and Australian governments are understood to have commenced formal negotiations on renewing the Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs). The Commonwealth is also understood not to have committed the funding or future resources for implementation – which begs the question, why is Victoria even bothering to renew them?

It was made clear in face to face discussions during the consultation period in June this year that the most important question of them all was beyond the scope – why we need the RFAs in the first place.

On reading through the 20-year-old RFAs, it becomes apparent they try to set up a weird and ‘pointless pairing’ – you ‘greenies’ get parks and reserves, and us foresters get to log. All fair and balanced, right?

This messaging is repeated in the Independent Consultation Paper, *Modernisation of the Victorian Regional Forest Agreements*, that the RFAs have been in some way responsible for the bulk of the formal reserve and park system. This is simply a fallacy.

84 per cent of the formal reserve system (national parks and conservation areas) was in place before the RFAs even commenced. The parks that have been created since were done so outside of the RFA areas, e.g. the Box Ironbark national parks and Red River Gum national parks, or were created due to extensive community campaigns in spite of the RFAs, e.g. Great Otway National Park and Cobboboonee National Park.

The Independent Consultation Paper claims that: “By 2003, 900,000 hectares of forest had been added to the existing reserve system in Victoria through the RFA process”. The important distinction that needs to be made here is that around 92 per cent of so-called ‘reserves’ created under all the Victorian RFAs are ‘informal’ (an example are special protection zones). Only 8 per cent of reserves related to RFAs are protected in formal reserves such as national parks. This is in stark contrast to other jurisdictions such as NSW which protected 23 per cent of the area in formal or dedicated reserves, and less than 4 per cent in informal reserves. While NSW’s RFAs still did not cover all their high conservation areas, they are much better than Victoria’s efforts.

Victoria is also ignoring the 1997 Nationally Agreed Criteria for the Establishment of a Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative Reserve System for Forests in Australia

(also called the JANIS criteria), even though it is quoted extensively through many RFA documents (though parts of it are selectively used).

For example, JANIS criteria requires that “all reasonable efforts should be made to provide for biodiversity ... in the dedicated reserve system on public land” and an informal reserve system should only be used if it “is demonstrated that it is not possible or practicable to meet the criteria in the Dedicated Reserve system”. This is certainly not the approach that has been taken in Victoria, where all that has been created is a largely-insecure forest zoning system, which has even from time to time been adjusted. The Victorian Government has never given a clear justification for this.

The RFA renewal and ‘modernisation’ process has followed a fairly strange consultation process so far, which included various workshops as well as the ubiquitous *Engage Victoria* website, where 2,824 people filled in the long online survey. The results make for interesting reading, with native logging barely getting a mention. The report states the “overarching theme of these comments was protecting native forests from timber harvesting”. We suspect this will have little impact on the overall outcome as the governments seem hell-bent on protecting what remains of the native logging industry.

The RFAs are largely about the Commonwealth’s inability to administer its own national environmental protection laws and export controls. With a largely hollow federal environment department, and a federal government with little interest in having the capacity to regulate forest under federal laws, the RFAs make it easier for them by switching off these powers and handing them to the state.

If the federal government is refusing to provide resources to support either the ‘modernisation’ process or RFA implementation, in the end Victoria will have to use its own inadequate laws and resources to regulate the industry on behalf of the Commonwealth.

Either way, virtually no Commonwealth funding goes to the management of state’s parks and reserves, and previous funding has only ever propped up the forest industry – further highlighting what a mirage of the ‘pointless pairing’ embedded in the RFAs, which really only act to support the continued logging of our native forests. • PW

# Feral horses end up in court

**PHIL INGAMELLS** REPORTS FROM THE FEDERAL COURT, WHERE THE AUSTRALIAN BRUMBY ALLIANCE WAS CHALLENGING PARKS VICTORIA'S ALPINE NATIONAL PARK HORSE PLAN.

Having failed to convince Parks Victoria that 'brumbies' belong in Victoria's Alpine National Park, an alliance of wild horse supporters ventured into the tricky realm of environmental law recently, in a last-ditch attempt to enshrine their version of alpine heritage protection.

The alpine feral horse issue has been debated for a decade or more in a series of exhaustive round tables within which the horse groups were well represented. Parks Victoria's thorough process also included the VNPA, Indigenous consultation, a scientific reference panel, and animal welfare experts. But the damage done by feral horses to alpine systems was clear.

A draft horse management strategy was released (and received overwhelming public support) before Parks Victoria published its final Feral Horse Strategic Action Plan 2018–2021 for the Alpine National Park in June last year. It set targets to remove 1200 horses over three years from the eastern section of the park, and completely remove the smaller Bogong High Plains/Cobungra population.

The strategy was designed to be consistent with (and to answer the demands of) several federal and state environmental laws, and to put the park's 2016 management plan to work.



The remarkable alpine marsh marigold flower is an early bloomer, actually flowering under melting snow. Its alpine plant community is listed as threatened.

PHOTO: COLIN TOTTERDELL

The Australian Brumby Alliance disagreed, however, claiming the strategy violated some clauses in the listing of the Australian Alps National Parks as a National Heritage Place. That listing takes in all of the Australian mainland alpine region parks, including Victoria's Alpine National Park.

The clauses they were depending on included 'protection of the mountain vistas' (the wild horses were part of that, they said), the 'pioneering history' (they were part of that too), and the 'stories, legends and myths of the mountains' such as the *Man from Snowy River* poem and the *Silver Brumby* books.

But as the case proceeded, it became clear it was going to be an uphill battle to protect feral horses in the park.

The National Heritage list sits within Australia's *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act 1999*. That Act also lists alpine ecosystems threatened by hard-hooved grazers: the peat beds and moss beds so crucial to the functioning of alpine catchments, and the watery fens that accompany them. It also lists a number of threatened alpine plants and animals affected by horses, such as the unfortunately named broad-toothed rat – it's actually a charming fluffy mammal largely restricted to isolated high country populations.



There was another catch.

It was deftly argued by Parks Victoria's counsel that, under the EPBC Act, it is only the place that is given heritage protection. The cultural values are listed because the place evokes those cultural associations. It's not necessary to have a mountain horseman forever re-enacting his riding skills down some crazy slope, for example.

It's why the listing includes the cattlemen's heritage, but not the cattle. And, crucially in this case, it's why the feral horses/brumbies aren't specifically mentioned.

Laws are, for the most part, written very thoughtfully. And the Australian Heritage Council goes to considerable care when it lists places for protection.

The plants and animals in the Australian Alpine region are the product of 500 million years of terrestrial evolution. They have been knocked around a lot in the last 200 years by activities that some, in a limited acceptance of the vast passage of time, value over-highly as heritage.

It's the native plants and animals that need our attention, not a continuation of their hard-hooved punishment by cattle, horses, pigs, goats and deer that have been driving species to the brink.

In summing up on the final day of the case, Parks Victoria's counsel referred to the witness statements of alpine ecologist Dick Williams as "comprehensive and compelling", adding that "courts rarely received evidence of such quality".

Professor Williams' knowledge of Victoria's high country was not just based on his own extensive experience, but on the many decades of alpine science, reaching back

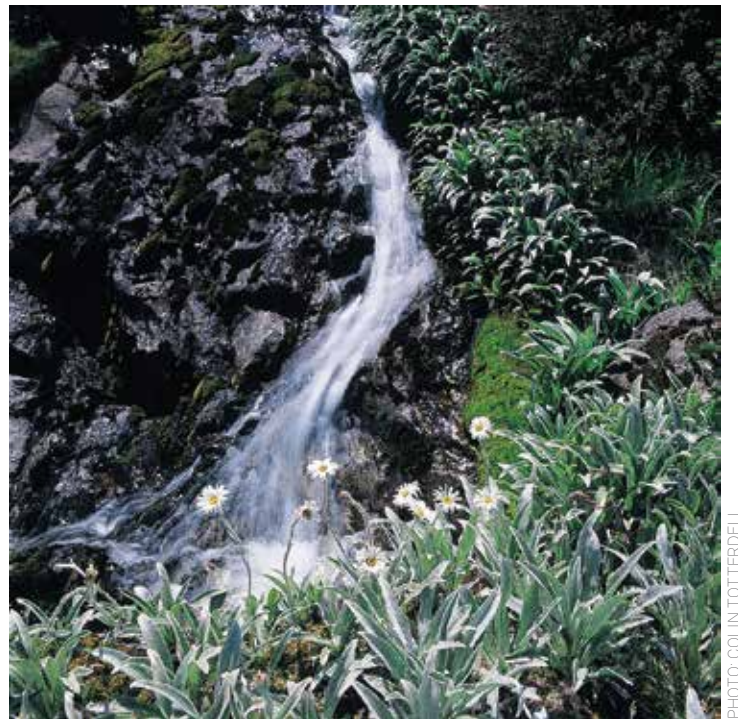


PHOTO: COLIN TOTTERDELL

The silky snow daisy is generally found in sheltered stream banks on Victoria's Bogong High Plains in the Alpine National Park.

to the journeys of Baron von Mueller in the mid-1800s. Not surprisingly, that great extent of alpine science is also cited in the alpine parks heritage listing.

For a number of legal reasons, some aspects were not considered relevant to the case. One of those aspects was an examination of the historical accuracy of the 'brumby' legends. In the following intriguing pages (18–20), the popularly accepted interpretation of that history is seriously challenged.

Whatever the judge finally decides, it might be a ruling referred to for many years to come. • PW

The judgement in the case brought by the Australia Brumby Alliance against Parks Victoria in the Federal Court is pending.

Victoria's Bogong High Plains are only a very small part of the state, and highly vulnerable to the impact of hard-hooved grazers. The red line below indicates the approx. 20 km north-south extent of the Bogong High Plains.

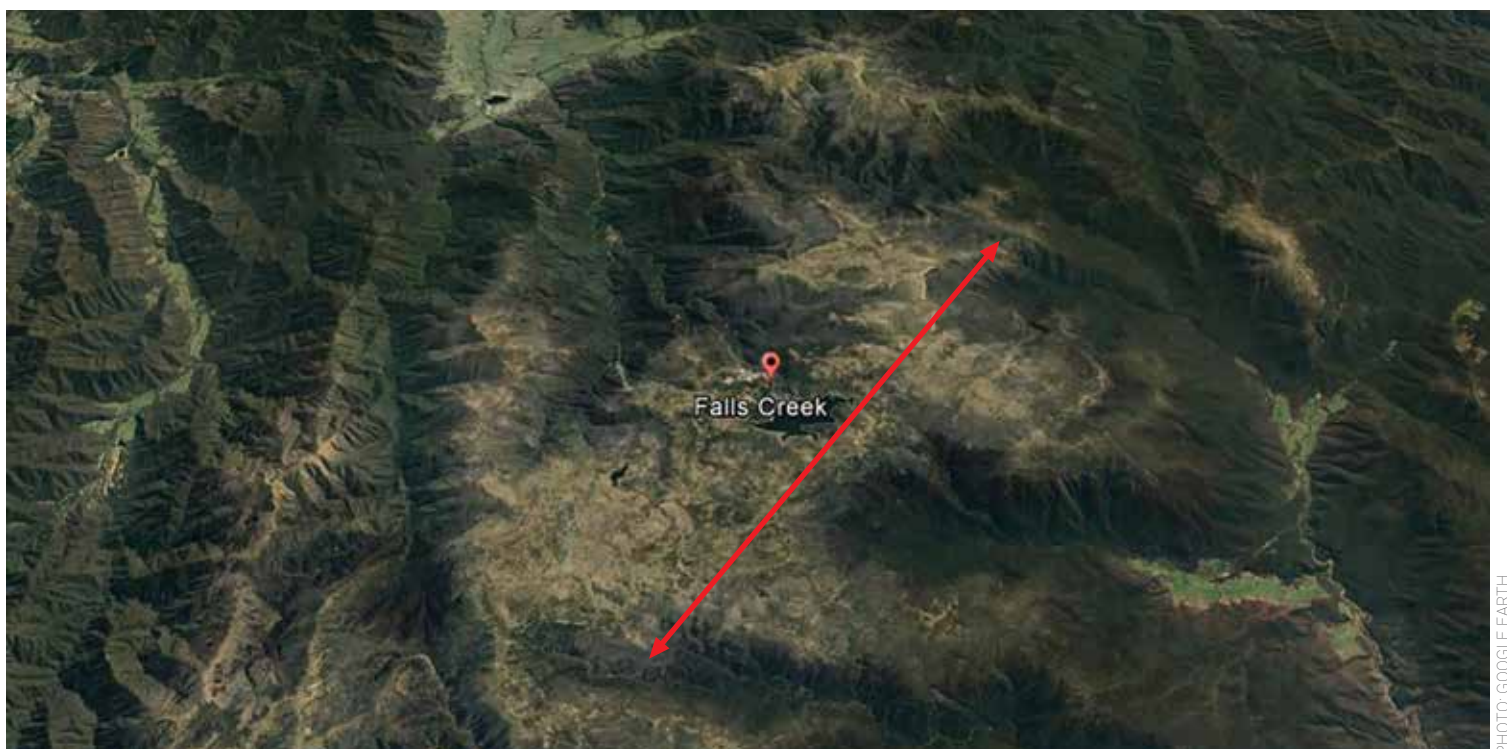


PHOTO: GOOGLE EARTH

# *Blinded to the Real?*

**DEIRDRE SLATTERY** WRITES OF HOW FAMOUS DEPICTIONS OF BRUMBIES IN AUSTRALIA'S LITERATURE DO NOT REFLECT THE REALITY IN EITHER THE PAST OR THE PRESENT.





79% of Victorians interviewed in a random survey of community attitudes and understanding of feral horses did not think that they were 'pest animals'. This rather shocking fact is just one element of Parks Victoria's current control problem. It has its origins in illusion and delusion about our culture and its values in relation to land use and management.

Arguments from brumby organisations are also mistaken. They include claims by a spokesperson for the Snowy Mountains Horse Riders Association of a caring tradition: "our families had protected and managed [the horses] for over a hundred and sixty years". A spokesperson for the Hunter Valley Brumby Association romantically asserts that wild horses live "a life free of pain and fear, stress or any suffering". In reality, the historical treatment of the horses was neither caring or romantic: they were far from being a national treasure.

Media articles throughout the 19th century commonly show that brumbies were a pest to be eliminated, chased to exhaustion, yarded, shot or throats slit, either stripped for their hides or taken live to abattoirs. 'Traditional management' methods were brutish and cruel, but the economics of a colonial society underpinned such attitudes. Then, the brumbies were a threat to grazing land, crops and water supplies, and to the quality of domesticated stock horses. Now, the horses are a threat to vital water catchments, to threatened native animals, and to taxpayers funding their maintenance on, or removal from, public land.

As Col Gibson notes in his very useful commentary on media evidence from the 19th century:

"Today, the value placed on their presence has altered. Now, the brumbies do not wreck good grazing land; they just wreck national parks, which is not the neighbouring landowners' problem, nor that of the brumby advocates. Traditionally, the brumby has been a problem when it impacts economically, not environmentally." (www.spiffa.org.au)

## The Man from Snowy River

Oddly, many people do not notice the quite minor role played by the wild horses in Paterson's poem, and believe that it is significantly about "the wild bush horses" that lured the "Colt from Old Regret" away from the station. Closer examination, and an explanation of the practice of brumby hunting by Paterson himself, show a rather different story.

The source of the poem is Paterson's journalistic piece *How Wild Horses are Yarded*, where he does not romanticise the struggle between property owners, their employees and the horses.

Paterson says the wild horses,

"... are a great nuisance to stock owners because valuable animals constantly stray away and join them, and nothing but desperate riding and good fortune will get them back.

The usual result is that after a desperately run 10 miles or so across rough country, the pursuer's horse knocks up, and he has to walk home and carry his saddle ... By this time the stock horses are in a pitiable condition, bloody with spurring and hardly able to raise a canter; some will have been crippled by the rough country and others will have knocked up altogether."

Three or four good horses are often broken down in such a pursuit.

Paterson's concern for the stock horses is not matched by respect for the brumbies. This is reflected in the poem, where the material value of the colt is the object of the pursuit and the brumbies are merely the background for its recovery and the prowess of the rider.

"The wild horses are never much use. They buck like demons, they are straight-shouldered and badly ribbed up and they never have any courage in captivity."



Banjo Paterson, circa 1890, when he wrote his famous poem.

They are just the excuse for a 'fine day's sport' for the Sydney-based lawyer Paterson and others. The cruelty and suffering for all the horses involved is hardly suitable material for a valued heritage. They would certainly attract attention from the RSPCA today.

The 1890s the *Bulletin* magazine, where the poem was first published, itself was an exercise in identity-shaping that involved highly contentious issues: racism against Chinese and Jews, pastoralism versus labour, the city or the bush were hotly debated, and Paterson was clearly on the romantic, populist side in such issues.

Paterson's literary adversary Henry Lawson argued that Paterson was "blinded to the real". Lawson wrote of isolated settlers struggling with drought, fire and flood, with poor soils and inappropriate farming methods and skills. While Lawson is now arguably considered the better writer of the two, Paterson's romantic vision has won the popularity stakes. Many Australians today seem to continue the romantic tradition, seemingly preferring to be seduced by the poem still, and neither knowing nor seeing the damage done by feral animals.

## The Silver Brumby

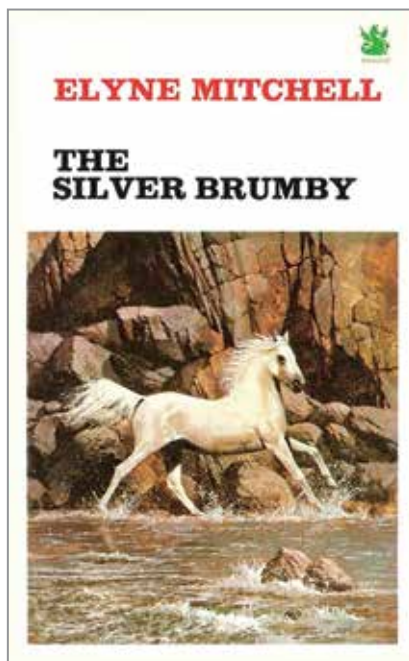
Mitchell's thirteen Silver Brumby novels are in a very different genre from Paterson's poetry. She wrote them for her four children, isolated on their remote property at Towong Hill, just across the Murray Valley from the 2000-metre wall of the Main Range in NSW. Mitchell skied, walked, explored and camped there for 60 years: her detailed knowledge of the place, the horses, the native plants and animals were new in children's literature in the 1950s. My generation of Australian readers had more access to 'Biggles', Enid Blyton and British Boarding School stories than we did to books about our own country.

Mitchell also published an account of her skiing adventures *Australia's Alps* (1942), two semi-autobiographical accounts of land management, *Speak to the Earth* (1945) and *Soil and Civilisation* (1946), and a history, *Discoverers of the Snowy Mountains* (1985). She was at the forefront of conservation thinking about the land and its condition. In the late 1930s, large, frequent dust storms over south-eastern Australia alarmed conservationists, public servants and politicians. Mitchell was part of the widespread moves by leading farmer organisations and soil conservationists to modify farming practices and stop unwise settlement of new areas. In a manner oddly contradictory to the Silver Brumby series, she argues cogently for respect for Australian ecological conditions, especially for the value of catchments.

"We already know only too well the effects of some imported animals and plants, but that knowledge needs to go further. It is obvious that what is indigenous to a country is part of its ecological balance.

The only creative way of fighting erosion is by natural means—by discovering what vegetation best protects each type of soil and feeds it as well as feeding the stock, what crops can be grown, when and where; by seeking with honesty the correct carrying capacity of our land and, as a nation, resolutely refusing to sanction any economic considerations, or rapacity, that may lead to overstocking."

Mitchell sees recognition of wise and careful land use as leading to a new nationalism, "... that understands the equilibrium between necessary industries and the life of the people and of the soil." She argues: "high mountains, where the rivers head, are amongst the most important features of a country..." Because there the snow feeds bogs which feed the snowgrass and the forest, ensuring a steady flow throughout the dry months to feed the rivers on which the civilisation of a land depends. She goes on to say: "sheep should never be permitted to graze on these mountains. The mountain country should remain in a state as close to the original balance as it is possible for us to achieve."



And yet in Mitchell's Silver Brumby fantasy world she glorifies the presence of horses in the mountains. They are part of the scenery, and there are no serious consequences from them for the land, the catchment, or the habitat of native species. They live in a state of amiable cooperation with emus, kangaroos, wombats, birds and other wildlife and do not cause damage. The horses are given pseudo-Aboriginal names, which has the effect of naturalising or indigenising them as rightfully Australian. The native animals recognise this status: they revere the horses, advising and helping them. Although Mitchell acknowledges that the native animals have even

more finely-tuned relationships to the land than the horses because they have been here longer, there can be little doubt that her brumbies are the top animal in the mountains.

She also shares some of Paterson's blithe indifference to the wellbeing of the horses. She describes an adventure that becomes the basis for *Silver Brumby's Daughter* story-line, where she and two friends lasso and drag down a feral horse in the Cascades area just for fun, to celebrate their prowess in use of the rope and to cut off its tail hair as a souvenir.

These oddly contradictory views from both Paterson and Mitchell suggest to me that cultural heritage in Australia is a highly conflicted phenomenon.

In a summary of the cultural heritage values of Kosciuszko National Park, Jane Lennon and Sharon Sullivan comment on the ready esteem attached to the skills and exploits of horsemen involved in pastoralism, or associated with the 'Snowy Mountains' mythologies, compared to the lack of recognition of other significant cultures, such as that of scientific exploration:

"... the anti-intellectualism in the Australian psyche has failed to adequately acknowledge the extraordinary feats of endurance and imagination in the scientific explorations of the early researchers such as Howitt and von Mueller. These people are not as nationally recognised as is the ethos encapsulated in The Man from Snowy River ..."

Community education towards a cultural shift is much-needed. Such issues should not have to be resolved, at great expense to all concerned, in court cases such as the current Australian Brumby Association vs Parks Victoria. The public's knowledge of the environmental impact of horses crucially depends on shifting their perception of feral horses from a species that belongs in the Australian environment, to one which most certainly does not. • PW





# A BLUE PRINT *for our* BLUE COMMONS

IN THE FOLLOWING PAGES  
WE SHARE THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN  
MARINE AND COASTAL PROTECTION  
IN VICTORIA.

# A blue print for our blue commons

VNPA'S NATURE  
CONSERVATION CAMPAIGNER  
**SHANNON HURLEY** GIVES  
AN OVERVIEW OF VICTORIA'S  
ONGOING MARINE AND  
COASTAL REFORMS.

Our seas and shores support all life, and they have certainly played an important role in shaping mine. As a kid I grew up enjoying weekends with my family at the beach, feeling invigorated from dipping into our cool temperate waters and having the sand in between my toes.

As I grew older, the ocean waves continued to shape my life. I learnt to scuba dive and further experienced the beauty of our unique underwater world. This became the core of my inspiration to work to protect it.

Every time I immersed myself, I would see something new. Right here on our door step we have the only sea dragons found on the entire planet, the world greatest diversity of red and brown seaweeds, crabs and shrimp – all playing their part in our complex, interlinked web of life.

Victoria's unique coastline is unlike any other in the world, having been shaped by geological isolation, currents and climate. As a result, we are incredibly lucky to have an incredibly high species richness and diversity, with many species found here and nowhere else (known as endemic).

Our marine and coastal environments are essential for life. They provide enormous environmental, social and cultural benefits to our communities, from the air we breathe, to the food we eat, and the places we enjoy for recreation.

In the face of existing and emerging threats such as climate change,

pollution, and the increasing pressures of commercial and recreational activities, it is essential we plan for and manage them well.

It is not simply the 12,000 Victorian marine species (and counting) and habitats we are protecting, but our own lives and livelihoods. Thinking about climate change terrifies the 'bejeebers' out of me, where already are we seeing the impacts of storm and surge damage on our cliffs and infrastructure, warming of our waters, and imbalances of and movements of species, which is putting the balance out of whack.

How we use, and what we take, from our marine and coastal environments will affect the ability of them to either build or degrade their resilience, and therefore the response to climate change. The decisions we make now will impact us directly, as it is south-eastern Australia where higher oceanic temperatures are projected.

## Blue print

The release of the Victorian Government's draft Marine and Coastal Policy needs to be treated as the blue print for the protection of our unique and highly-valued marine and coastal environments.

The release of the draft is the latest development in the ongoing reforms into Victoria's marine and coastal planning and management, led by the Victoria's Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning.

The new *Marine and Coastal Act 2018* requires this new Marine and Coastal Policy, to outline the policy position on matters relating to the marine and coastal environment at a state level, and guide decision-makers in implementing these policies.

The policy will include the development of a marine spatial planning framework, and a marine and coastal strategy will later outline the actions to achieve the policy.

The policy will be co-endorsed by Ministers of Acts relevant to the marine and coastal environment such as fisheries, ports and tourism, which can be a fraught process.

When finalised by the end of the year, the policy will guide decision-makers including local councils and land managers in the planning, management and sustainable use of our marine and coastal environment for the next 10–15 years. The draft builds on the legacy established through the old Victorian Coastal Strategy and we see it as a good start. But while it has significant strengths, it also has significant gaps that must be addressed before it is finalised.

## Blue commons

When it comes to completing and managing Victoria's marine and coastal conservation estate, the bar needs to be raised much higher.







PHOTO: KARL NORLING, FLICKR CC

Marine protected areas (MPAs) such as marine national parks and sanctuaries are among the most essential tools for biodiversity protection and resilience (see following article). International benchmarks have set the bare minimum for high-level marine protection at 10 per cent, with a long-term aspiration of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is for at least 30 per cent in no-take zones.

Currently, Victoria has only 5.3 per cent of our waters in marine national parks and sanctuaries. This is the lowest of any Australian state – we really need to be striving to put us back in the leaders position. With 100 per cent – all 10,000 square kilometres – of our marine waters bring publicly owned they are truly a 'blue commons' that deserves better protection.

VNPA's 2014 *Nature Conservation Review* found at least 20 additional marine areas that are worthy of protection and which could fill these significant gaps in our current marine protected area network.

No matter what our interest is in Victoria's largest common space, it is crucial we address these impacts to sustain a healthy, productive and biodiverse marine environment. This needs to involve proper, coordinated planning and management where all interested parties actually change the way we currently do business, as if our lives depend on it – because, in many ways, they do. • PW

## Draft policy strengths

### Banning damaging new residential canal estates.

Canal estates can have the potential to cause many detrimental environmental impacts resulting in the destruction of natural features, particularly wetlands and estuarine areas.



### Policies on what should be allowed to be built on our beaches and foreshores.

Requiring buildings, structures and facilities on or in marine and coastal Crown land to have a functional need to be located near or in the water, and ensure they provide public benefit.



## Needs strengthening

### Monitor and manage the health of our marine conservation estate.

Victoria has only 5.3 per cent of its marine waters highly protected in marine national parks and sanctuaries, the lowest of any Australian state. This is only half way to meeting the lowest international benchmark, of 10 per cent of high-level protection. Our marine conservation estate needs to be completed, not just monitored and managed.



### Ensuring marine and coastal Crown land remains in public ownership.

This is a strong policy that should be retained, although it should also include acquiring the 4 per cent of coastal land that is currently not in public ownership.



## Gaps

### Does not address fisheries, ports, and shipping, which have major impacts on the marine environment.

There is no policy that ensures fisheries, aquaculture, ports and shipping must minimise and avoid negative impacts on environmental, social, cultural and economic values. The previous *Victorian Coastal Strategy 2014* had some solid outcomes and policies which have appeared to have been taken out.

This is a serious flaw that must be addressed.



### Light on detail of the protection of internationally-significant Ramsar wetlands, critical as safe havens for migratory and shorebirds.

There is no policy that effectively deals with protecting the marine areas of Ramsar sites (for example Westernport Bay). The one policy that does mention Ramsar sites seems to defer to the *Waterways Strategy*, which does not deal with marine areas of Ramsar sites in any great depth.

This must be improved.



### A Marine Spatial Planning Framework

This framework should be establishing a process for achieving integrated and coordinated planning and management of the marine environment between different sectors (fisheries, ports, oil and gas, tourism, conservation etc.). However in reality it is unlikely to do this due to:

- too many barriers to initiating a marine planning process.
- it does not allow for changes to existing planning and management tools, resulting in a 'business as usual' approach.

This must be resolved.



# Our marine values

AN INDEPENDENT REPORT ON THE VALUES OF VICTORIA'S MARINE ENVIRONMENT SHOULD INFORM AND SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF ALL PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT.

The Victorian Environment Assessment Council (VEAC) released its Assessment of the Values of Victoria's Marine Environment report in June 2019.

It is an important piece of work to improve our knowledge of the values, threats and gaps in our state's marine environment.

See a brief snapshot of the report's findings opposite.

The report will help to inform the Victorian Government's current marine and coastal reforms. This should include the statewide marine and coastal policy (see previous article pages 22–23), and a marine spatial planning framework – both requirements of the *Marine and Coastal Act 2018*.

Unfortunately, the report does not address the need to assess and complete the current gaps in our network of marine national parks and sanctuaries. This is a by-product of the Andrews Government ignoring a recommendation by VEAC to do exactly that.

VEAC's 2017 State-wide Assessment of Public Land recommended that:

"Victoria's marine environment be reviewed for the comprehensiveness, adequacy and representativeness of its marine protected areas..."

and

"... the existing system of no-take marine protected areas has some gaps in representation, and individual marine protected areas may not meet the adequacy criterion ..."

The Andrews Government response to that assessment disappointingly explicitly ruled out consideration of new marine protected areas as: "It is current government policy that no new marine national parks will be created".

Marine protected areas are the backbone of marine biodiversity conservation and resilience (see previous article). They are critical for addressing the many threats addressed in VEAC's *Assessment of the Values of Victoria's Marine Environment* report. • PW

## Assessment of the Values of Victoria's Marine Environment report

### Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)

- Victoria's 24 marine national parks and sanctuaries are highly protected areas with no extractive uses (known as 'no take') that are managed primarily for ecosystem protection, conservation and recreation. They cover 5.3 per cent of Victorian coastal waters.
- Threats include marine pests identified in some MPAs with potential to spread further, along with ship anchors impacting on sensitive environments, and shipping accidents.
- The VEAC report does not recognise the need to finish completing our marine conservation estate to safeguard critical marine biodiversity worthy of extra protection.

A brief snapshot of the information, threats, and knowledge gaps VEAC's report highlights:

#### Climate and oceanography:

- The most extensive area vulnerable to erosion by 2040 is the Gippsland coast, with other coasts at risk including west of Portland, beaches in Port Phillip Bay between Mordialloc and Frankston, and between Cape Paterson and Cape Liptrap in South Gippsland.
- Changes in currents around Australia will impact dispersal of fish species that rely on open sea transport of adults and larvae, such as short-finned eel, western blue groper and King George whiting.

#### Biodiversity:

- 172 species and four communities that occur in Victorian marine waters have been given conservation listing under state or federal legislation or international agreements. However, this underestimates the true number of threatened marine species and communities, due to lower investment than compared to in the terrestrial space.
- Seagrass beds, estuarine mudflats and mangroves critical for life cycle stages of many marine species are amongst the most vulnerable habitat types in Victoria, due to the increased risk from nutrients and pollutants transported by stormwater. Significantly, burial rates of organic carbon in blue carbon ecosystems can be 30–50 times higher than rates in the soils of terrestrial forests.

IMAGES: EASTERN BLUE GROPER PHOTO – PARKS VICTORIA; FISHING PHOTO – MERVIN, FLICKR CC; SEASTAR PHOTO – JULIAN FINN, FLICKR CC; TOURISM PHOTO – MARTHA DE JONG-LANTINK, FLICKR CC; SEAGRASS MEADOW PHOTO – SHANNON HURLEY; SHIPPING PHOTO – ED DUNENS, FLICKR CC.



### Aboriginal cultural values:

- The long-term goals and objectives of Victorian Traditional Owners are to develop and apply Indigenous knowledge and practice for Sea Country in a contemporary Victorian context.
- A strategic framework that articulates the measures that Traditional Owners advise as needed to fill knowledge gaps and avoid threats to natural and cultural values is featured in the report.

### Non-Aboriginal heritage:

- Many heritage values are not well known or documented; fewer than half of the 780 shipwrecks along the Victorian coast have been located.
- A shared Heritage Project in Victoria is identifying places with both Aboriginal and other heritage values.

### Coastal development:

- Coastal protection structures can alter natural systems compared to more natural methods of beach renourishment and rehabilitation projects such as shellfish reefs and mangroves for coastal protection, which are emerging activities in Victoria.
- Crowding at boat ramps, conflict between users, noise and water pollution are all emerging concerns, and the demand for coastal access will increase with population growth.

### Tourism and recreation:

- Victoria's most popular marine and coastal visitor destinations are the Twelve Apostles on the Great Ocean Road and the Penguin Parade on Phillip Island.
- Boat-based tourism is a growing industry with more than 400,000 licensed boat operators. Threats from boating include pollution, localised biodiversity impacts of access structures, and disturbance to biodiversity.

### Fisheries:

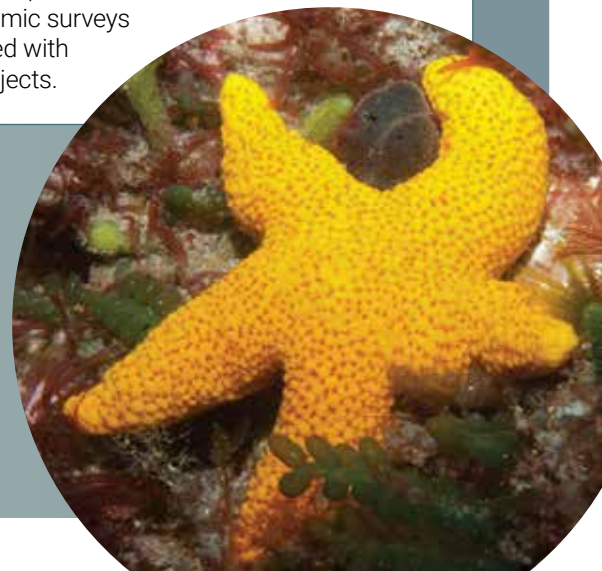
- About 10 per cent of Victorians are estimated to fish recreationally in marine and estuarine waters. In 2016-17, a total of 271,395 licences were sold. (A stark decline from a previous estimate of 830,000. The state government has made efforts to get one million anglers out on the water by 2020).
- Monitoring of recreational fishers is logistically challenging and expensive, so there are large knowledge gaps for this sector.
- Knowledge gaps exist in the stock structure and composition of many valuable fisheries species.

### Ports and shipping:

- Victoria's four commercial ports and fourteen local ports see more than 4000 ships visit annually, with about 3200 the Port of Melbourne alone.
- The ports of Melbourne, Geelong, Hastings and Port Phillip Heads are at highest risk of shipping accidents and spillages. Concerns exist about the impact of ship anchors on sensitive benthic environments, particularly within marine protected areas.

### Energy and earth resources:

- Three oil and gas basins straddle Victorian and Commonwealth waters: the Otway, Bass and Gippsland basins, with production in Victorian waters occurring only within the Otway Basin.
- Negative impacts can occur from seismic surveys associated with these projects.



# Can our parks survive visitor impacts?



PHOTO: PHIL INGAMELLS

NATIONAL PARKS HAVE FED THE REGIONAL TOURISM ECONOMY WELL, BUT IT'S BECOMING AN EVER-HUNGRIER WOLF ON THE PROWL, SAYS **PHIL INGAMELLS**.

Conservationists have long argued that reserving national parks is good for tourism, and that prediction has been justified a thousand times over. According to Parks Victoria's most recent figures, our parks contribute around \$2.1 billion annually to the economy through tourism.

The most popular activity in our parks is short walks; visitors chalked up roughly 37 million strolls in the 2017–2018 year. And visitor satisfaction for our parks sits at around 85 per cent (a very high figure, given the inadequate funding and maintenance the park system receives).

Yet the tourism industry, led by state government agency Visit Victoria and a number of private tourism consultancies that report to regional councils, remains unsatisfied. Indeed they seem obsessed by the lack of infrastructure within national parks, especially of the high end or 'comfort in nature' variety.

But why do these proposals keep popping up, when it's actually state government policy to discourage tourism developments within our parks.

According to a 2015 government (it's still current) *Tourism Leases in National Parks: Guidance Note*: "rather than encouraging developments inside national parks, tourism development will be encouraged to be sited on private or other public land outside parks, in locations that are more likely to provide economic benefits directly to regional towns."

The guidance note adds, for good reason, "This is consistent with the worldwide trend for resorts and large-scale tourism developments to be located outside national parks."

It's also consistent with the objectives of Victoria's *National Parks Act 1975*, which clearly prioritises the protection of our imperilled natural heritage.

But there is a clear disconnect between what our conservation and land management policy requires and the 'darts-at-maps' type approach of the tourism industry.

The Victorian Government is now undertaking a Regional Tourism Review for the state. The problem, according to the discussion paper, is that day trip and overnight visitors from within Victoria spend six times more than interstate overnight visitors, and 14 times more than international overnight visitors.

The Grampians rice-flower is listed as vulnerable under both state and federal law. It's threatened by inappropriate track construction. It is one of a number of plants that are only found in the Grampians, and in a limited number of sites.

The review talks about "making the most of our natural and cultural sites [and] developing boutique nature-based accommodation". But it doesn't address the likely impacts of developments on parks.

Victoria has an opportunity to market itself as a great destination with B&Bs, wineries and historic towns across the state – packaged with a fine range of forest, woodland, alpine, desert and coastal short walks.

Hopefully the review will recognise the importance of supporting tourism infrastructure on land adjacent to our national parks and reserves.

But tourism infrastructure in parks may be the least of our visitor problems.

Day visitor access to Wilsons Promontory is now, chaotically, at double or triple car parking capacity in peak periods, yet there is still no strategy to deal with that.

Unplanned and, increasingly, planned mountain bike and trail bike tracks are growing across the park estate. And rock climbing in the Grampians is well out of control with thousands of climb sites, and maybe 800–1200 kilometres of informally created tracks webbed across the park.

It's great that people visit our parks, but there's an urgent need to manage the fast-growing impacts. • PW





Every track in a national park brings in weeds. These are two of possibly a thousand or more informal rock climbing tracks throughout the park. Go to [www.thecrag.com](http://www.thecrag.com) to see the extent of climbing in the park.



PHOTOS: PHIL INGAMWELLS

# Annual community planting events continued success

Thank you to all the VNPA Members and supporters who joined two recent community planting events, Project Hindmarsh and Grow West.

VNPA has been supporting and involved in these two annual events from their inception.

Now in its 22nd year, Project Hindmarsh was held over the weekend 5–7 July near Nhill in western Victoria. Hundreds of volunteers came from near and far for the long-term restoration project to create a biolink between the Big Desert and Little Desert. 13,000 trees of 37 different species were planted at three sites, with a focus on four local threatened species – bulte, umbrella wattle, hairy-pipe wattle and gerang gerung wattle, which is only found in Gerang Gerung in the Wimmera.

On Saturday 21 July Grow West continued its vision of rejuvenating 10,000 hectares of degraded land by creating nature corridors between the Brisbane Ranges National Park, Lerderderg Gorge State Park and Werribee Gorge State Park. On the day, 300 volunteers planted 4,000 indigenous plants on properties near Ingleston for the community planting's 15th year. • PW

Thanks to all the volunteers of both events!

One of thousands of plants that will now grow thanks to Grow West and Project Hindmarsh volunteers.



PHOTO: COURTESY GROW WEST

Some plans and strategies currently in progress:

At [www.engage.vic.gov.au](http://www.engage.vic.gov.au)

- Parks Victoria's important Land Management Strategy sets directions for park management across the state for the next ten years
- Grampians Landscape Management Plan will hopefully address serious visitor impacts and other threats, like deer.

At [www.yytolmb.com.au](http://www.yytolmb.com.au)

- The draft Joint Management Plan for Barmah National Park addresses many environmental threats and cultural protections.

# 'Glamping' threatens family camping

SOME FAMILIES HAVE CAMPED IN SELECTED CAMPSITES FOR GENERATIONS. BUT THAT OPPORTUNITY MAY COME TO AN END, DUE TO AN APPARENT FASCINATION WITH OBTAINING SOME SORT ADDITIONAL ECONOMIC YIELD FROM PARKS, THROUGH FAD OF 'GLAMPING', WRITES VNPA VICE PRESIDENT **GERARD MCPHEE**.

The Victorian Government is supporting the introduction of high-end 'glamping' in some of our state's traditional park campsites. This could force ordinary families out of the holidays they love. But there are mixed messages.

On the one hand, in a welcome move in 2015, the Andrews Government abolished camping fees at 500 basic sites over 70 campgrounds in 19 parks across regional Victoria. At last year's state election, Labor announced it would go further – halving all remaining fees in state and national parks.

The Victorian Government media release noted that "... the surge in numbers is a boon for regional businesses, with hundreds of families and friends heading into towns across country Victoria to stock up before their trip into the state's beautiful wilderness".

The media release also notes that there has been a 63 per cent increase in bookings at Parks Victoria campsites, for the same period following the price drop. (You can read it here: [www.premier.vic.gov.au/half-price-fees-see-camping-surge-over-the-school-holidays](http://www.premier.vic.gov.au/half-price-fees-see-camping-surge-over-the-school-holidays))

On the other hand, various forms of glamping are being rolled out in popular parks as a fusion of glamour and camping. Will this displace the less glamorous of us?

Promoting glamping also appears at odds with the government's own objective of improving access to nature amongst our newer communities. It would appear that the government is trying to restrict access to parks just for the wealthy.

## What is 'glamping'?

The Victorian Government describes 'glamping' as "a fusion of glamour and camping in temporary, tent-style accommodation with a touch of luxury." It can involve "uniquely designed tents with solar panels, offer family glamping, include luxurious bedding, provide furniture or games, include kayaks and bikes for use or tasty platters of local delicacies."

Glamping differs from traditional camping in that in traditional camping the incoming user of the site arrives at a bare site and erects their tents. Glamping involves the use of permanent or semi-permanent tenting or basic roofed accommodation.

The effective difference between camping and glamping is that camping leaves a site vacant and ready for the next occupant, while glamping reserves the structures for multiple sequential users at a much greater tariff than operates for other campers. Glamping sites are left vacant if visitors do not wish to pay for higher charges. Replacement of any existing public camping opportunities by glamping reduces access to parks for medium and lower-income families or, for that matter, for well-off people who simply like self-sufficient camping.

Here is an example. Current daily costs at one site (Lake Catani at Mount Buffalo) are approximately \$72 for eight people. While costs of a glamping site have not yet been confirmed, a government-led committee has flagged charges



between \$228 and \$460 a night. (The Prom's established glamping sites, the Tidal River Wilderness Retreats, come in at around the middle of that range.)

The comparison is significant. A family group of eight at current rates would pay \$72 per night for the same site. On the above-suggested figures, the same family group would need to rent four two-person glamping tents, which together would cost between \$900 and \$1840 per night.

Some might argue that the glamping option might be adapted for families, but this does not look like the government intention, as illustrated in these pictures.

A recent trial of glamping conducted by Parks Victoria at Lake Catani had prices starting at \$170 per night for tents clearly designed for two. That takes the cost for four people to \$340.

## Why is the Victorian Government developing glamping?

Parks Victoria argues that "the vast majority of visitors to our parks have indicated they'd like more diverse and accessible park services" and "the fusion of glamour and camping has been a hit worldwide, so trialling the experience in Victoria's national parks to connect more people with nature and the outdoors was an exciting opportunity for visitors".



These are reasonable sentiments in some abstract world. However, there is no mention in this world view of the possibility that national parks in Victoria are owned by all Victorians, of all income levels. Nor is there consideration of what opportunities will be provided to those regular family campers who will be priced out of the opportunity to stay in places that have been available for decades.

Further, more diverse and accessible park services might actually mean having accessible Rangers who deliver education to the public, more staffed nature centres, or better and safer walking trails, perhaps toilets which are more modern than the 1970s models available.

Some supporters of glamping might argue that current park facilities are generally only constructed for fit people, who don't mind being uncomfortable. Persons who paint this view of current campers have probably not been to popular camping grounds like Borough Huts campground or Lake Catani in the school holidays and navigated their way through the kids on bikes, family kitchens and games for all ages.

The hard-core of outdoor adventurers will not be found squeezed between the caravans and eskies. I have been unable to find any research that suggests that current users would prefer more comfort for three or four times the price.

### Can glamping be a viable and appropriate option?

There is probably a market for glamping for a few subsets of target users, mostly young couples and better off older couples. Figures from the Prom show that repeat occupancies are rare.

This market is already well catered for. Ample comfortable accommodation, from glamping to five stars, already exist adjacent to parks at the alpine resorts, in Halls Gap around the Grampians, along the Great Ocean Road (for Otway National Park and Port Campbell National Park) and so on. A casual search could start at [www.glampinghub.com/australia/victoria](http://www.glampinghub.com/australia/victoria)

Will the recent trials managed by Parks Victoria at the Grampians and Mount Buffalo be likely to provide some favoured private insider developers with an opportunity to use public amenities for private profit, at the expense of traditional lower budget campers?



PHOTOS: PARKS VICTORIA

In order to provide for a wider range of outdoor orientated accommodation to a wider range of Victorians, the following principles need to be applied.

1. As far as possible, income should not determine access to Victorian national parks and other reserves. The baseline should be that no action impedes access to reserves on the part of middle- and lower-income families. Replacing affordable access with higher-priced access is a step away from social equity and fairness. In operational terms, existing basic camping sites should be preserved at their current locations. The principles of social justice should guide both glamping and hard-shell accommodation, such as upmarket huts and lodges.
2. If there is a case for high priced glamping such as that recently tested by Parks Victoria at Buffalo and the Grampians, the developments must not be on sites currently used by traditional family and low to medium-income recreationists. The exact locations for glamping sites are a case by case decision, but some example considerations would include the following:
  - In and around the Grampians, there is an abundance of private facilities adjacent to the park. That means there is no case for further development on public reserves. A better option to promote visitation

to the Grampians for this demographic would be to support existing local businesses rather than to introduce government-supported competition to local operators. The recent trial conducted by Parks Victoria displaced established campsites. If the trial sites become permanent glamping sites, the better off will have displaced the less well off.

- Wilsons Promontory National Park suffers from extreme traffic and crowding at peak times. A ballot system already operates. The development of further high-cost accommodation in the park such as additional glamping will exacerbate these issues. There is ample opportunity for such developments adjacent to the park, where local businesses can be encouraged, rather than competing with those businesses inside the park.
- Such developments closer to local businesses would stimulate the local businesses.
- During the Mount Buffalo trial conducted by Parks Victoria with a private company, the sites selected were in prime positions around the famous Lake Catani. The trial glamping areas excluded traditional family campers for the period of the trial. The Lake Catani area is treasured by generations of families as a holiday site, and it would be an affront to price them out of that experience. • PW

# *HOW TO SPOT YOUR* **DRAGON**

OUR REEFWATCH COORDINATOR **KADE MILLS**  
INVITES YOU ON A QUEST.



How well do you know your state emblems? You likely know our state mammal is the Leadbeater's possum, and even that the helmeted honeyeater is our state bird. But did you know that our state marine animal is the weedy seadragon, sometimes known by its less glamorous moniker, the common seadragon?

The weedy seadragon is anything but common, as it is found only in Australia and only along the southern half of the country. It is one of the most iconic fish in these temperate waters, and we are fortunate to have a population in Port Phillip Bay, mostly spotted at Portsea Pier. While they are often seen around artificial structures, their natural habitat is along the edges of seagrass beds and rocky reefs covered in forests of brown kelp. They use their small fins to hover above the seabed, and their long 'snouts' to Hoover up tiny little crustaceans.

Weedy seadragons are closely related to seahorses. Like seahorses, the males are responsible for looking after the eggs until they hatch. But while male seadragons

use their long tails, which have a spongy area to attach up to 300 eggs during mating. After about two months the juveniles pop out, and by then they are around 20 millimetres long, fully formed and ready to go. Because they hatch fully formed, they are less likely to disperse over large distances than the larvae of other fish species. Recent genetic work indicates that there is limited gene flow between seadragon populations. This has implications on the local populations – if they were to disappear, they would be gone forever.

Marine pollution, habitat loss and degradation, climate change, illegal collection for trade, and entanglement in fishing debris all impact seadragon populations throughout their range. It has also been suggested that dredging in Port Phillip Bay in 2009, which led to larger swells and beach erosion at Portsea Pier, has altered the habitat, potentially affecting weedy seadragon numbers. We have no way of determining this, but it has highlighted how little we know about the population of seadragons that call Port Phillip Bay home.





ReefWatch's latest marine citizen science project, Dragon Quest, aims to address this knowledge gap by cataloguing individual seadragons at dive sites throughout Port Phillip Bay.

To do this, we are collecting photos of weedy seadragons (along with the location and date taken). The pattern on the side of each seadragon is unique, like a human fingerprint, so we can use pattern mapping software to identify individual dragons. To date, over 40 divers have submitted hundreds of images for analysis, with 60 individuals identified at Portsea. Of these, 14 individuals were resighted – that is, images of the same individual were submitted for different dates. We have also seen the movement of an individual from Portsea to Sorrento – the first time this has ever been recorded.

With spring in the air and the water warming up, it is a perfect opportunity to swim with weedy seadragons – and if you capture a photo, remember to send it in to be recorded – email [kade@vnpa.org.au](mailto:kade@vnpa.org.au). Divers that submit images of new individuals are being rewarded with their find being named after them. Who wouldn't want to tell people they've given their name to a dragon? • PW

If you have never seen this fascinating fish for yourself, join us during our Great Victorian Fish Count at Portsea on **Saturday 7 December** for a chance to swim with weedy seadragons and learn more about Victoria's largest marine citizen science event. Bookings through Bayplay on (03) 5984 0888.

# Cathedral Range State Park

PHOTO: MICHAEL FELLER

**GEOFF DURHAM** VISITS A LONG-POPULAR  
PARK FOR BUSHWALKERS.

Stunning views from challenging and exhilarating walks are a feature of the park.

The Cathedral Range, only 100 kilometres from Melbourne between Buxton and Taggerty, has such commanding presence it attracted early bushwalkers, and it features in many bushwalking guide books. Sandra Bardwell in *Park Walks near Melbourne*, published by VNPA in 1943, refers to "the rocky escarpment of the Cathedral Range, towering precipitously above timbered foothills, with the impressive bulk of The Cathedral itself at the northern end, and the sharply angled Sugarloaf (920 m) guarding the southern end of the range".

According to the *Rock Climbing Guide to Victoria*, published by the Victorian Climbing Club in 1967, the Sugarloaf is probably "Victoria's oldest climbing area ... (and) fathered Victorian climbing". The Victorian Climbing Club and the Youth Hostels Association had huts at Sugarloaf Saddle.

In its Melbourne Area studies, the Land Conservation Council (LCC) drew attention to the natural values of the Cathedral Range, as well as to its historic and recreational values. It recommended a Cathedral Range State Park, which was created in 1979. With later additions, the park

is now 3619 hectares, including the Little River Gorge.

The LCC stated: "The park is considered to be of State botanical significance based on the diversity and undisturbed nature of the vegetation communities, which range from montane damp (mountain ash) forest to grassy dry forest. They include wet (mountain ash) forest, small areas of cool temperate rainforest, damp (messmate) forest and riparian forest. Also present are rocky outcrop scrub, heath-rich foothill forest and messmate and narrow-leaf peppermint and heathy-dry forest of broad-leaf peppermint."

The Parks Victoria Management Plan dated November 1998 lists common tussock-grass, bristle fern and slender tick-trefoil as significant flora, and the common dunnart, powerful owl, sooty owl and mountain galaxias as threatened fauna. There is myrtle beach in the Little River, Storm Creek and other sheltered gullies, alpine ash and mountain ash near Sugarloaf Saddle, and a small stand of snow gum on the summit of Sugarloaf Peak. It snows infrequently during winter. Pest plants, animals and

diseases referred to in the Management Plan are blackberry, tutson, japanese honeysuckle, monterey pine wildings, foxes, cats, dogs, feral goats, cinnamon fungus and myrtle wilt. Parks Victoria says there have been numerous pest plant and animal management programs. Deer are undoubtedly present – the park adjoins the Rubicon State Forest to the east and south.

The Victorian Government has signed an agreement formally recognising the Taungurung people as Traditional Owners, and the intention is to develop a joint management plan. The Taggerty Run, which included the Cathedral Range area, was settled in 1846. Grazing ceased in the mid-1930s and forestry in 1972.

The range is seven kilometres long and runs approximately north-south. It is an upper Silurian sandstone cuesta formed from river sediments – an escarpment with one slope steeper than the other. The steep slope is on the west down to the Acheron River valley, and the gentler east slope is down to the Little River valley.

To get there take the Maroondah Highway through Buxton, turn east at Cathedral Lane then south along the gravel Little River Road which becomes Cerberus Road and runs south to Mt Margaret Road.





PHOTO: GEOFF DURHAM



PHOTO: GEOFF DURHAM



PHOTO: GEOFF DURHAM



PHOTO: MICHAEL FELLER

**Clockwise from top left:**

The Range rises from the surrounding landscape.

Descending North Jawbone Peak.

Kangaroo at Cooks Mill.

Spacious Cooks Mill campground.

Sugarloaf Saddle picnic area.



PHOTO: GEOFF DURHAM

I revisited the park in July this year. As you enter the park there is a privately-owned pine plantation on the left, then a car park. A pedestrian swing bridge (closed in May this year and due to reopen in 2020 following repair) crosses Little River to the walk-in Neds Gully camping area, also closed. Further on, you drive through a privately-owned enclave straddling the river. Since my last visit, the pines have been harvested and a new crop is being incrementally planted.

The road continues to Cooks Mill Heritage Site. Cooks timber mill operated near the junction of Little River and Storm Creek from 1938 until the early 1970s. Relics from the mill have sign interpretation. It is now the site of a spacious campground with a picnic shelter, toilets and unmarked grassy campsites (mowed by eastern grey kangaroos) with generous circular concrete fire pits. Firewood may not be collected in the park but is available to purchase at Buxton and Taggerty. Some

sites are suitable for caravans. There is a good balance between informality and protection. Sites must be booked in advance through the Parks Victoria website or phone 131 963. The fee for one site with up to six people is from \$13.70 to \$15.30 per night depending on the season. Camping is becoming increasingly popular, and sites are sometimes fully booked. No dogs or horses are permitted in the park.

When I visited, the Little River Walking Track was closed, and The Friends Nature Trail has been closed since March 2018 due to fire damage. Sadly, the Friends Group is defunct.

Cerberus Road leads from Cooks Mill past the Jawbone Carpark from which there is a walking track up to The Farmyard at Jawbone Saddle between North and South Jawbone Peaks. The Farmyard is an overnight hike-in site with no facilities. The name is said to be after Lyrebird 'farm-animal' calls. The

road continues through an area burnt in the 2009 Black Saturday fire to Sugarloaf Saddle, where there is car parking, a toilet and a large shelter with picnic tables. The VCC and YHA huts have long since gone. There are two very steep climbs to Sugarloaf Peak.

Download a Parks Victoria map and visitor guide which lists 17 walks ranging from grade 2 (easy) to grade 5 (difficult) giving distances and times. Some are challenging and exhilarating walks along the razorback spine of the range with spectacular views.

There is no walking track to the remote Little River Falls.

Cathedral Range State Park is a significant park. It would be greatly enhanced by the acquisition of the privately-owned enclave, but Parks Victoria says there are no plans to acquire this property. It is as always regrettable that Parks Victoria is limited in its management of parks by lack of resources. • PW



# Tributes

## Vale Uncle Brien Nelson 1940–2019

Uncle Brien Nelson was a highly respected Jaara Elder, passionate about his Indigenous culture and the natural environment. He lived for much of his life on his country, in central Victoria, and was a long-term mentor, teacher and leader, fostering reconciliation both in Victoria and beyond.

He had a leading role in arranging a meeting of Dja Dja Wurrung people on country in 2000 and the subsequent formation of the Jaara Jaara Loddon Aboriginal Corporation. To preserve and pass on cultural knowledge he established the Bunjil Park Aboriginal Education and Cultural Centre near Bendigo.

Uncle Brien worked for Parks Victoria for 17 years. He had a profound understanding of the links between cultural and natural heritage and made a significant contribution towards building respect for Indigenous culture in Victoria's park system. Among his many roles he had an important part in the advisory panel setting up the Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park. He also played a pioneering role in liaising between government

departments and Aboriginal cultural groups, and with cross-cultural training for employees of both Parks Victoria and the environment department. He helped devise the department's Indigenous Partnership Strategy, and the establishment of cooperative land management arrangements between the department and Aboriginal communities.

Uncle Brien will be remembered as a gentle, quietly spoken, generous, wise and passionate person. At a ceremony to mark his appointment as honorary associate of Latrobe University in 2009, historian Gerry Gill described him as a 'pre-eminent Aboriginal leader, who has made an extraordinary lifelong contribution to the recognition of Indigenous culture and reconciliation.' His achievements saw him inducted into the Victorian Aboriginal Honour Roll in 2017.

Compiled from a number of sources.

## Vale Peter Stokie

Peter Stokie was a passionate conservationist, educator and school principal. Peter and his late wife Ann brought their extensive knowledge and experience in citizen science from their involvement in the Victorian Mallee

Fowl Recovery Group to the early development of the VNPA's NatureWatch program. They sat on the NatureWatch advisory committee and provided input to the NatureWatch program that remain part of the program today. • PW



## *Celebrate the life of someone special*

**Commemorate and celebrate the life of a loved one by making a donation to the Victorian National Parks Association**

Making a donation to the Victorian National Parks Association is a meaningful way of helping ensure Victoria's national parks, natural places and wildlife flourish in memory of someone special to you.

If you wish, a card acknowledging your gift can be posted to the next of kin.

If you would like to request donations to the Victorian National Parks Association instead of flowers at a funeral or memorial service, please contact Amelia Easdale on **03 9341 6505** or via **[amelia@vnpa.org.au](mailto:amelia@vnpa.org.au)**

Snow Myrtle in Grampians-Geriwerd National Park.



The Great Southern Reef is home to spectacular marine life, such as this  
Jornate cowfish swimming over a bed of seagrass at Flinders Pier.

What (and where) is the  
**G R E A T**  
**S O U T H E R N**  
**R E E F ?**

REEFWATCH PROJECT OFFICER **NICOLE MERTENS**  
TAKES US FOR A DIVE WITH A TEMPERATE TWIST.





### Our other reef

There is no denying the cultural, environmental and economic benefits of the Great Barrier Reef – just as there is no denying the threats it is facing. But while most of us can conjure up a clear picture of the expansive, overlapping bright corals reefs teeming with colourfully patterned fish in tropical waters, many Victorians don't realise that we have our very own beautiful and highly valuable reef system right here at our doorstep – in our cooler, or temperate, waters along our coast.

The Great Southern Reef is not a single, unbroken line of reef – rather a collection of thousands of kilometres of rocky substrate covered in habitat-forming organisms, and interconnected through currents and ecological processes. If this sounds less impressive, remember that the same goes for the Great Barrier Reef. In the case of our Great Southern Reef system, these rocky reefs are dominated by kelp forests that shelter a myriad of molluscs, some crustaceans and fish, as well as supporting other seaweeds, sponges and bryozoans.

The Great Southern Reef has an exceptionally high percentage of unique species (endemic). Remarkably, somewhere in the range of 80 per cent of species (depending on their taxonomic group) found here are not found anywhere else in the world.

### An underwater wonderland anyone can visit

Unlike the Great Barrier Reef, the Great Southern Reef is easily accessible along most of the coastline it surrounds (see map opposite) and there are many places to see it even within the shallow waters of Port Phillip Bay. You'll find amazing reef habitats and animals just offshore in the Ricketts Point, Jawbone and Point Cooke marine sanctuaries, and many other areas that can be accessed via swimming or a short boat ride.

Outside of Port Phillip Bay, the Great Southern Reef is on display right along the Victorian coast – in Merri Marine Sanctuary in the west of the state, fringing the Great Ocean Road, down around Phillip Island, Bunurong Marine Park and Wilson's Promontory, and right across to Beware Reef in the state's far east. Wherever you are on our magnificent coast, you're never very far from the Great Southern Reef.

Along with temperate reefs, coastal Victoria is home to other important marine habitats seagrasses, sandy bottoms, mangroves and mudflats. While most would not consider these sites their 'go-to' for coastal exploration, you might be surprised at how many species they support; it can be fascinating to observe the differences in species using these varying habitats along the coast.

### Lack of awareness

Low levels of public knowledge of the very existence of this reef system may be putting it in peril. While the effects of climate change on the Great Barrier Reef are well publicised, the kelp forests of southern Australia are beginning to suffer in relative silence. A marine heatwave in 2011, combined with warmer than average water temperatures in the years that followed, caused massive losses to kelp forests in Western Australia and saw movement of tropical species into areas that once supported the state's abalone and rock lobster habitats and industries. Kelp further to the south are surviving, for now, but researchers fear that this could change as ocean temperatures continue to rise.

With 70 per cent of the Australian population living near the Great Southern Reef, it is also at risk of impacts from urban development and population growth.

The Great Southern Reef is estimated to be worth 10 billion dollars in direct tourism alone – compared to estimates of 5.7 billion dollars for the Great Barrier Reef (of course, the real value of both ecosystems is worth more than can be assigned in dollar terms). Despite this, temperate reef studies receive a meagre fraction of the amount of funding spent researching threats to the Great Barrier Reef, and though there have been recent efforts to raise its profile, public awareness of the Great Southern Reef is still relatively low.



## Our marine life is spectacular

Southern marine species are often just as colourful and interesting as their coral reef-dwelling cousins. I've seen children and adults alike mistake a white-barred boxfish for a clownfish, unable to fathom that something so colourful (and made famous by the character Nemo) could be from anywhere other than the iconic Great Barrier Reef.

Taking part in our Great Victorian Fish Count is an exciting way to join the community of people who love and care for the Great Southern Reef and learn about the wonderful fish that live amongst it.

This will be the 15th year of the state's biggest marine citizen science event that sees divers and snorkelers hit the water to gather a snapshot of the fish, shark and ray species that live in Victoria's coastal environment. Data from field surveys is uploaded to the Atlas of Living Australia to support citizen scientists, ecologists and natural resource managers in monitoring these largely understudied species.

The 2019 Great Victorian Fish Count will be held from 16 November – 15 December. Groups with appropriately qualified snorkel or dive instructors may register with VNPA's ReefWatch program to conduct a survey at their favourite patch. While many spectacular fish species can be found sheltering under jetties and piers that are often popular dive sites, it's worth remembering natural coastal

habitats are likely to be home to a different assemblage of species, such as fiddler rays, Port Jackson sharks, blue devils, and cowfish. The Fish Count data lets us compare the species that are found in natural and artificial habitats, as well as in protected and unprotected areas, so it's important that we get a fair share of surveys from both.

## The fishy faces that call our Great Southern Reef home

The ornate cowfish, *Aracana ornata*, is the face of the 2019 Great Victorian Fish Count. This colourful fish (pictured on page 33) has a box-like shape and three sets of horns running along its head and body. They are covered in a rigid carapace of bony plates. Males are easily recognisable with their bright blue spots and stripes, orange tail, and a large yellow bump on their snout, while females have brown and yellow-white stripes. Another species on the Fish Count list, Shaw's cowfish (*Aracana aurita*), looks quite similar, but the stripes on the heads of Shaw's cowfish are more or less horizontal, while the stripes on the heads of ornate cowfish are more diagonal. The horns of ornate cowfish are also taller and narrower than Shaw's cowfish.

You can find both species on reefs and in seagrass beds in sheltered coasts throughout southern Australia – and searching for a glimpse is an excellent excuse to discover, explore and connect with our Great Southern Reef. • PW

A zebra fish cascade taken at Ricketts Point Marine Sanctuary in the Great Southern Reef, like these near Sorrento.



PHOTO: JACK BREEDON





## WILD FAMILIES

# Families find fun in wildlife monitoring!

Three small humans caught on camera.

*"I liked changing the batteries out of the cameras because it was fun to take out six batteries and put six more in. And it was great to see the agile antechinus jump off the peanut butter bait in the photo. I'm glad the cameras worked with their new batteries!"*

**Daniel Nicholson (age 6)**

Our recent Wild Families adventure in Wombat State Forest saw six intrepid families participate in our NatureWatch program's Caught on Camera citizen science project.

Caught on Camera uses special cameras that sense movement to record mammals in the Wombat State Forest and. It has been running since 2012, and over this time the project has recorded 13 native mammals and 15 native bird species, including extra-special records of the brush-tailed phascogale, which is a threatened species.

*"I loved the way it got children and adults engaged with a sense of ownership in protecting the Wombat State Forest and the animals in there."*

**Elke Nicholson**

The six families joined us and Wombat Forestcare in Trentham, where we learnt about the project and got all of the cameras set up with batteries and memory cards and created bait stations to attract wildlife. We then headed out to our research sites in the field and set up eight cameras and bait stations which were left out for three weeks to see what wildlife use those sites.







PHOTOS: VNPA

#### Clockwise from top left:

Making sure all of the cameras have new batteries and enough power to last three weeks. It is easy to forget how big wombats are.  
Two agile antechinus who climbed right up on to the bait cage.  
This black wallaby is very curious!

#### What the kids loved:

- checking out wildlife images from previous surveys
- mixing the bait of rolled oats, peanut butter and golden syrup and setting up bait stations
- carrying the special science bags with all the gear
- using the GPS to locate our sites
- pretending to be wild animals to test out the cameras
- hammering in the bait stations

#### What the adults loved:

- seeing the kids experience being real scientists for the day
- learning new science skills with the family
- working as a team with the family

We recently collected the cameras which had around 3,000 images of wildlife!

While we have yet to do a full study of all the species (this takes quite a bit of time to go through each image thoroughly) we think we have around eight different species including:

1. agile antechinus
2. bush rat
3. black wallaby
4. common wombat
5. eastern grey kangaroo
6. mountain brushtail possum
7. little humans!
8. red fox

All of these images will become a part of our ten-year study on the mammals of Wombat State Forest.

You can see the five-year report on this project on our website: [www.vnpa.org.au/publications/caught-on-camera-citizen-science-in-the-wombat-state-forest-five-year-report](http://www.vnpa.org.au/publications/caught-on-camera-citizen-science-in-the-wombat-state-forest-five-year-report)

Thanks to all the families who took part in this wonderful day. • PW

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