

# PARK WATCH



## **MARINE NATIONAL PARKS PODCAST**

ENVIRONMENT LAWS REVIEWED

**REGIONAL FOREST AGREEMENTS RENEWED**

RIVER RED GUM PARKS TENTH ANNIVERSARY

**A RARE DISCOVERY IN THE CENTRAL WEST**

FEDERAL COURT BACKS ALPINE PROTECTION

**WILD FAMILIES NATURE AT HOME**

JUNE 2020 NO 281



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

A Ruby Bonnet (*Cruentamycena viscidocruenta*) which grows on leaf litter in more moist parts of the Wombat Forest and other native forests. You can read more about the wonders of Victoria's western forests in this edition of *Park Watch*. Photo: Alison Pouliot.

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# From the President

## From the President

Following the catastrophic bushfires over the past summer, Victoria has been in lockdown to control the coronavirus pandemic. I hope all our supporters are staying safe and coping well in these challenging times.

VNPA had to quickly impose 'work from home' rules and many activities were cancelled, postponed or transferred online. I thank the staff, especially our Executive Director Matt Ruchel and Finance and Operations Manager Heath Rickard, for their prompt action, dedication to our work and forbearance. Various meetings have been held via video conferencing instead of face to face. One long-term benefit of this is that VNPA will be better able to include remote people in our work.

People prevented from participating in organised sport or gyms have flocked to natural areas for their exercise and recreation. All the trails along Melbourne's waterways have been very busy. This shows that not only are these areas important infrastructure, but that people value and need nature wherever it can be found. Our planning system is not taking into account the needs of nature, nor people.

The government restrictions did show, however, that human health and biosecurity are more important than the economy. Economists, politicians, unionists and business people are getting a belated lesson in biology and biosecurity. About time really, as this is the type of message that VNPA has been communicating for years. Feral deer, feral horses, weeds and many other invasives – all issues that VNPA works on – are serious threats which do damage to both the environment and the economy.

Last year the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) presented the state government with

recommendations for protecting public land in Victoria's Central West. This includes the Wellsford, Wombat, Mount Cole and Pyrenees Ranges forests. The state government was due to respond in February. After four years of expert consideration by VEAC, 160 days of community consultation, 450 pages of expert documentation and 3000 submissions, the community is still waiting for an Andrews Government response to approve these recommendations, as required by law.

VNPA has long been active in advocating for more nature protection in this often forgotten region of our state. All supporters of VNPA are urged to write, ring or visit their local Member of Parliament about the need for new parks and nature reserves in the Central West.

The COVID-19 lockdown regulations helped me focus on cleaning up the desk (unlikely, I hear my daughter say). The focus this time has been the build-up of bird sighting lists, which are of no value just collecting dust. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, my wife and I were volunteers, along with thousands of others, in the then largest citizen science project ever, the first Bird Atlas for Australia. Since then, work, family and life have taken priority while many records continued to accumulate. So for more than three weeks I have entered records into various online databases.

While this provided a sense of satisfaction, it was also a challenge in two ways. First, there were the many changes in names and classifications for various species. The science keeps advancing, which is of course a good thing. Second, it became clear that some species which were reasonably common in the 1980s are now rare. I was repeatedly asked to justify my observations of now-rare species. The intervening two to three decades have

seen the climate change, wetlands degraded, rangelands cleared and forests logged. It highlights once again why the conservation actions of VNPA are so needed.

VNPA advocates strongly for biodiversity conservation in Victoria. Our Conservation and Campaigns Committee was recently briefed by staff from the Victorian Environment Department who are modernising the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act*. Much of the data used by DELWP in formulating threatened species action plans has been collected by citizen scientists. VNPA plays an important role in citizen science, with programs such as ReefWatch and NatureWatch led by our staff. Many VNPA Members engage in citizen science projects with us or fellow environmental organisations.

The recent catastrophic fires and the strong desire for people to get out into nature during the COVID-19 lockdown highlight the critical need to properly fund nature conservation and appropriate recreation in nature. Various economic stimulus packages are being developed by governments right now. VNPA staff are advocating for more 'green infrastructure', improved planning and more funding for Parks Victoria for more boots on the ground, which in turn means more regional jobs. Your support in communicating these needs to decision-makers is vital.

At this critical time, the funding provided by our Members, financial supporters, and philanthropic partners is enabling us to continue advocating strongly for nature – and I thank you all. If you have the capacity to make a tax-deductible donation at this time, I encourage you to do so. • PW

Bruce McGregor, VNPA President

## VNPA COVID-19 Update



PHOTO: SNOWMANPADO/ANDY, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Along with the rest of the community, we are concerned by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and we are thinking of you and your families and friends.

VNPA has put in place measures to minimise the exposure of our community to the virus, while continuing our work protecting nature across the state.

To remain up to date with the VNPA's COVID-19 response, visit [www.vnpa.org.au/COVID-19](http://www.vnpa.org.au/COVID-19) • PW

### Bushwalking and activities

At this stage, we are unfortunately unable to run bushwalking and other community activities. Our usual Bushwalking and Activities Program is, therefore, again not included with this edition of *Park Watch*.

Please make sure you're on our bushwalking email list to hear when activities are up and running again. You can subscribe at [www.vnpa.org.au/bwag-sign-up](http://www.vnpa.org.au/bwag-sign-up)

### Nature at Home

To help us stay connected with nature from our homes, VNPA has developed a new 'Nature at Home' section on our website. You'll find activities such as a Virtual Fish Count with underwater footage, our latest podcast on the history of marine national parks in Victoria, and the latest Wild Families activity sheet on ways to enjoy, learn about and care for nature at home. Visit [www.vnpa.org.au/nature-at-home](http://www.vnpa.org.au/nature-at-home)

### Continuing to care for nature

Thanks to your wonderful support, our work protecting nature continues apace.

While parks and natural areas have had a small break from visitors during COVID-19 restrictions, parks staff continue to work hard to manage our most important natural areas. On the flip side, the loggers and developers are still at work also.

Read more about VNPA's nature protection advocacy work that your support makes possible in this latest edition of *Park Watch*.

For regular news and updates you can follow us on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn (just search 'Victorian National Parks Association') or sign up for our emails at [www.vnpa.org.au/sign-up](http://www.vnpa.org.au/sign-up)

### Your support

The reality is that our natural environment needs us now, more than ever. As people who love nature, we must stand up for Victoria's special places and give voice to the species that call them home. Sadly, many within our community are experiencing financial hardship right now. But if you are in the fortunate position of having capacity to give, we ask that you continue to support VNPA's work through your Membership or by making a donation – nature still needs you.

Call the team on (03) 9341 6500 or visit [www.vnpa.org.au/donate](http://www.vnpa.org.au/donate) • PW

## Annual General Meeting – ADVANCED NOTICE

VNPA's 69th Annual General Meeting will be held on **Tuesday 13 October 2020 at 6.30pm**. Location and format to be confirmed depending on COVID-19 restrictions at the time. • PW

## Nominations for VNPA Council are now open

Nominations for the VNPA Council are now open to members who would like to participate in the governance of the organisation. The Council play an important role in the life of VNPA – establishing policy guidelines, approving annual budgets and undertaking strategic planning for the association.

Elected councillors are unpaid volunteers and are asked to participate in six Council meetings and relevant committees (usually around two hours each) over the course of the calendar year.

The Annual General Meeting elects the volunteer Council and includes a president, vice-president, honorary secretary, honorary treasurer and up to nine councillors.

To nominate for Council, you must be a current financial member and indicate your intentions by writing to the Executive Director Matt Ruchel, via [matruchel@vnpa.org.au](mailto:matruchel@vnpa.org.au) by 5pm on Tuesday 15 September 2020.

More information on our Council, please visit [www.vnpa.org.au/about](http://www.vnpa.org.au/about) • PW



# LISTEN IN

## Our new podcast on marine national parks!



PHOTO: KADE MILLS

A Sea Sweep and diver in Port Phillip Heads Marine National Park.

In 2002 a world-first system of marine national parks and sanctuaries was established in Victoria after over 10 years of community campaigning. This campaign was a significant part of our state's environmental and marine history.

The Victorian National Parks Association has created a podcast series to celebrate this successful campaign and the marine areas that are protected as a result. Listen in and learn all about how it all came about and why it matters.

In our Marine National Park podcast series we capture the social history that led to the creation of marine national parks and sanctuaries in Victoria.

Over six episodes you will hear:

- from people who were directly involved in the campaign and in the creation of these protected areas.
- from Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation about Sea Country.

- a range of perspectives on marine national parks and sanctuaries and Port Phillip Bay, including from local community groups, marine managers, scientists, marine advocates and educators.

And you will get to:

- take a guided tour of Port Phillip Bay and discover its geology and background.
- develop an understanding of the deeper political history that led to an investigation into the protection of marine areas in Victoria.
- learn about the values of marine national parks and sanctuaries.

Today, marine national parks and sanctuaries are a well-loved part of our marine environment where important underwater habitats and unique wildlife are protected.

**It is worth reflecting on the hard work of the people who fought for the conservation of these areas – it is truly an inspiration for current and future nature protection campaigns!**

**Listen or download the six-episode podcast on our website: [www.vnpa.org.au/marine-national-parks-podcast](http://www.vnpa.org.au/marine-national-parks-podcast)**

There are also links to your favourite podcast apps Spotify or iTunes. • **PW**

The podcast was produced by the Victorian National Parks Association and Jan Hendrik Brueggemeier, RMIT University, with support from the Victorian State Government.

### Looking ahead for marine protection

Establishing the marine national parks network in Victoria in 2002 was a remarkable achievement – but now, almost 20 years on, the network still has significant gaps, with important marine wildlife and habitats still left unprotected. We still have a lot more work to do.

Sign up as a 'marine champion' to get email updates on marine issues, or learn more about the work VNPA is doing for our marine national parks and sanctuaries here: [www.vnpa.org.au/marine-national-parks-and-sanctuaries](http://www.vnpa.org.au/marine-national-parks-and-sanctuaries)

# Opportunity to strengthen national environmental laws

VNPA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
**MATT RUCHEL** GUIDES US THROUGH  
THE REVIEW OF THE EPBC ACT.



PHOTO: COURTESY NATIONAL PARKS AUSTRALIA COUNCIL

The Alpine Tree Frog is listed as threatened under the EPBC Act.

The main piece of national environmental law, the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) is not providing anywhere near the adequate protection for Australia's environment.

In particular, the EPBC Act is not able to cope with the increased challenges we face with species extinction and climate change.

Thankfully it is currently being reviewed.

The Act requires that an independent review be undertaken at least once every ten years. The review must examine the operation of the Act and the extent to which its objects have been achieved. The last review was completed in 2009.

The review is somewhat of a "fork in the road" – in that it could lead to the much-needed strengthening of the Commonwealth's role in protecting nature, or conversely open doors for those who wish to weaken national environmental laws by streamlining or cutting of so-called 'green tape'.

VNPA agrees with the position of many national and state environment groups that the EPBC Act should be replaced with new federal-level environmental laws that better protect and restore our natural environment, strengthen our democracy, and support community involvement.

For the Commonwealth to hold an effective leadership role in managing Australia's environment, it requires a suite of regulatory tools that are fit for purpose. These include both mechanisms to avoid, control and mitigate impacts on the environment, and proactive provisions that enable protection of key environmental values.

Currently, whether by design or ineptitude, in Australia it is unclear who is ultimately responsible for ensuring our environment is managed well. The existing system distributes responsibility across the federation, but no one jurisdiction is charged with coordinating efforts.

A truly national approach to environmental protection would build on Australia's international responsibilities and the federal government's capacity to bring authority and resources to environmental governance.

In VNPA's submission to the review we considered ten issues:

1. The need for a stronger EPBC Act.
2. Scope, role and function of Commonwealth environmental powers.
3. Additional 'Matters of National Environmental Significance'.
4. The use and effectiveness of strategic assessments.
5. Strengthening of bioregional planning.
6. Strengthening critical habitat determinations.
7. Improving restoration opportunities.
8. Community rights to review decisions and enforce the Act.
9. The role of offsetting.
10. Better recognition of cumulative impacts of individual actions to be covered by the EPBC Act.

VNPA along with other National Parks Associations through our national body the National Parks Australia Council (NPAC) are particularly supportive of adding a new 'trigger' for national parks and reserves under the designated 'Matters of National Environmental Significance'. This would

allow the Australian Government to intervene to protect national parks and other protected areas reserved primarily for the conservation of nature, if there is a risk to their integrity or proposed development impacts.

The logic of this is relatively straightforward. The major objective behind Australia's protected area estate is for the conservation of the natural environment and the protection of biodiversity. In line with this, most Australians assume and expect that once an area is declared a national park, or other highly protected area such as a wilderness area, it becomes a haven for wildlife – forever. But protected areas are increasingly subject to significant pressures that threaten to compromise Australia's natural heritage.

The term 'national' might seem to suggest that the Commonwealth already has a role. However, this is, surprisingly to many in the community, not the case. With the exception of Territories or Commonwealth waters, the national reserve system is almost exclusively the domain of the states.

As a party to the World Heritage Convention and the Convention on Biological Diversity, Australia (noting that being a signatory to international conventions give the government a constitutional role) has committed to designating world heritage sites and establishing a terrestrial and marine protected area network that is "comprehensive, adequate and representative", and fulfils what are called the Aichi Targets.

Consequently, if a state government wish to approve plans to introduce potentially destructive activities such as logging, grazing, building inappropriate infrastructure, or other high-impact developments in national parks and other protected areas, there is little the federal government can do to stop them.

Australia's protected area network has not been afforded the level of national protection required to prevent actions that may destroy, damage or degrade the very natural heritage values that prompted the inclusion of these areas within the national reserve system in the first place – and which in part help fulfil international treaty commitments, made on behalf of all Australians.

For example, when the former Victorian government proposed to allow grazing within the Alpine National Park, then federal environment minister, Tony Burke, had to resort to using the impact of grazing on a specific nationally threatened species, the Alpine Tree Frog, to intervene. It was recognised that there was a gap within the EPBC Act: national parks aren't designated as 'Matters of Environmental Significance' and therefore not a 'trigger' under the Act. Subsequently, federal involvement could only focus on one of the values of the national park, the Alpine Tree Frog, not the whole ecosystem for which the park was created to protect.

In this case it became clear that one way to provide greater protection for Australia's national parks was by including them as 'Matters of National Environmental Significance' under the EPBC Act.

Let's hope this review results in some thoughtful reforms to improve protection of nature both here in Victoria and across Australia. • PW

For more information see *Briefing Paper, National Parks – a Matter of National Environmental Significance* produced by the National Parks Australia Council, of which VNPA is a member. The paper can be downloaded here: [npac.org.au/news-publications](http://npac.org.au/news-publications)

VNPA's submission to the EPBC Act review can be found on our website: [www.vnpa.org.au/submission-epbc-act-review](http://www.vnpa.org.au/submission-epbc-act-review)

## Give nature a future voice

### LEAVE A GIFT IN YOUR WILL

Leaving a gift in your Will to the Victorian National Parks Association will ensure you continue to protect Victoria's natural heritage for future generations.

Your gift, large or small, will make a significant difference to our work, funding projects and campaigns which may not otherwise be possible.

A gift in your Will also ensures the Victorian National Parks Association will continue to be here to stand up for Victoria's amazing national parks, special natural places and unique wildlife.

If you are considering making a bequest, or you have already included the VNPA your Will, please get in touch so we can assist you and discuss your wishes.

PLEASE CONTACT:

**Emily Clough**

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# Another decade...

AMID THE COVID-19 SHUTDOWNS IN EARLY APRIL, THE VICTORIAN AND COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENTS RE-SIGNED THEIR AGREEMENT FOR LOGGING NATIVE FORESTS FOR A FURTHER TEN YEARS. BY **MATT RUCHEL**.

While there was little fanfare, all five RFAs (Central Highlands, East Gippsland, Gippsland, North East and West) were renewed to 2030 as part of so-called “modernisation” process.

While expected, it is nevertheless disappointing to see these outdated and ecologically damaging agreements continue.

The RFAs are essentially agreements between the two levels of government to log Victoria’s native forests.

Of ongoing concern is that the “modernised” RFAs still allow the logging of native forests to remain exempt from national environmental laws.

A few extra clauses have been added relating to climate change and also what is called a ‘Major Event Review’.

The Major Event Review allows state and federal governments to undertake a joint review to assess the impacts of major events, like bushfire, flood and disease, in relation to the objectives and operation of the RFAs.

Almost before the ink is dry on the document, a Major Event Review is

already being initiated to respond to this summer’s devastating bushfires. The scope of this is still unclear, but there is a clear need for a reassessment of native forests across the whole state, as unburnt areas are now critical for the survival of a range of forest-dependent species.

The fires in Gippsland, East Gippsland and the North East have burnt between 30–90 per cent of scheduled logging coupes, and 40–50 per cent of all areas open for logging in these regions. Ninety per cent of the proposed ‘Immediate Protected Areas’ for Greater Gliders in East Gippsland, which were only announced in November 2019, has now been burnt.

The Andrews Government appears to remain committed to phasing out native forest logging by 2030, starting in 2024. However, the same government continues to argue that RFAs remain the most effective mechanism available to support the transition from native timber harvesting to plantations by 2030. But the agreements do nothing to facilitate change – in fact they largely lock in existing arrangements. For

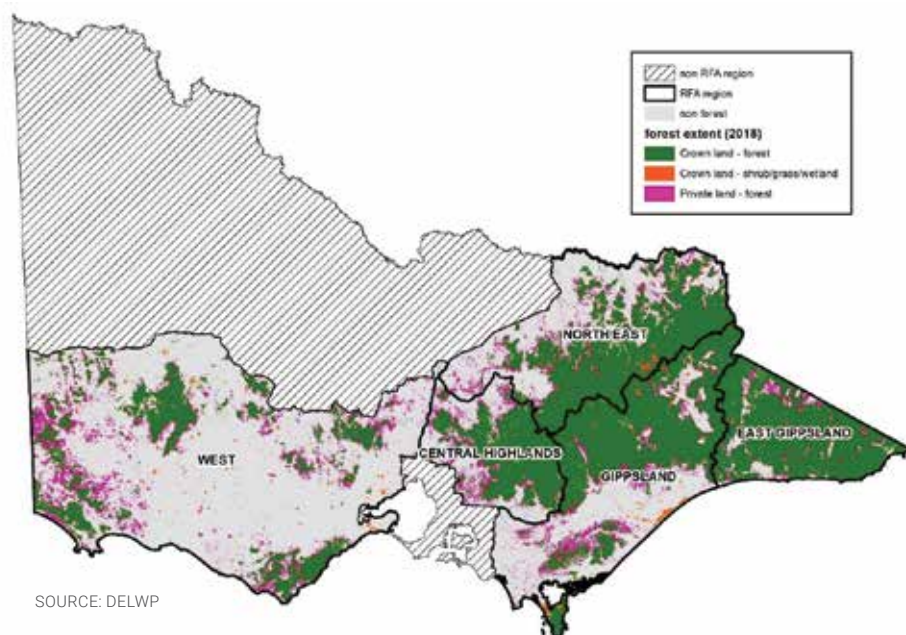
example, the word “transition” is literally only mentioned once in the “modernised” RFAs, in the statement “Victoria acknowledges that the expansion of Plantation estate will assist in supporting the Timber and Forestry Products Industries to transition out of harvesting State Forest by 30 June 2030...” This makes it rather difficult to reconcile with the claim that the RFAs are a framework for change. There are no clear timelines, steps, or detailed transition plans linked to the renewed agreements.

Over 50 per cent of respondents to surveys undertaken as part of the “modernisation” process wanted native forest protected from timber harvesting. Only 27 per cent of respondents wanted more support for industry and employment. Many reports were generated as part of \$17.5 million “modernisation” program, but they did not address any of the core failings of the RFAs, and seemed more of a ‘tick and flick’ paperwork exercise.

The Andrews Government’s commitment to phase out native forest logging by 2030 and manage the transition is outlined in a two-page Victorian Forestry Plan. The plan is allocated \$120 million over 30 years (an average of \$4 million per year). It includes some payments for “Mills and Harvest and Haulage” and some regional development initiatives starting from 2019, but direct financial support for logging industry workers are only available from 2024 – another election cycle away.

Forestry phase-outs over long periods are tenuous, and have great capacity to fade away unnoticed. Indeed, the Bracks Labor government largely phased out native forest logging in Victoria’s west, assisted by generous transition packages, and also committed to removing the West RFA. Now, not only was the West RFA just renewed for another ten years, but logging is actually increasing in the western region of the state (see next article page 9). • **PW**

## Forest extent across Victorian RFA regions (2018)





# The wicked Regional Forest Agreement of the west

NATIVE FOREST LOGGING IN THE WEST RFA WAS LARGELY SQUASHED – BUT IT HAS NOW RETURNED, **MATT RUCHEL** EXPLAINS.

In 2005, legislation to establish the Great Otway National Park and the Otways Forest Park by the Bracks Labor government heralded the end of native forest logging on public land in the Otway Forest Management Area.

Further areas in the west were protected in the Portland Forest Management Area in 2008 with the creation of the Cobboboonee National Park by the Brumby Labor government.

Many forestry-related businesses received financial transition packages in this period.

However, over the last decade, the logging industry in this region has again grown by stealth.

As described in the previous article (page 8) the Victorian Government has invested \$17.6 million over four

years in forest management reform, which includes the “modernisation” of Victoria’s Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs). With a fraction of that money, they could transition the west away from native forest logging once and for all. Instead, a new West RFA has been put in place for another ten years.

Logging of native forests in the west has almost doubled over the past ten years. While the volumes and areas of harvesting in the west are small compared to the main commercial logging focus in the east of the state, and are largely for low-value uses like firewood, logging continues to do significant damage to the special natural places left in the west.

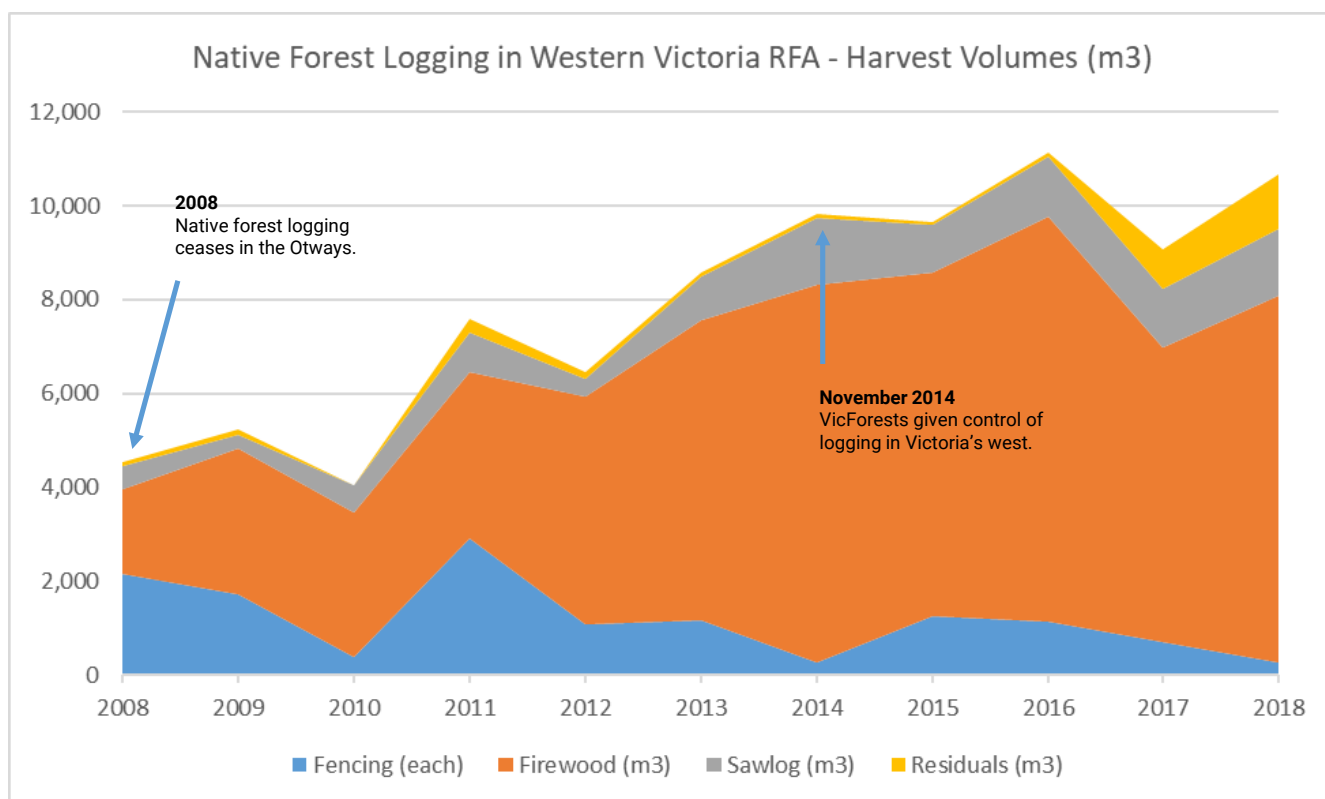
Logging in the last patches of bush in a highly-cleared landscape, which has high numbers of threatened species and many rare or endangered vegetation types, is compounded by

the futility of the operation, which is almost completely state-subsidised and supports very few jobs in the region.

The best estimates of the number of total jobs dependent on the native forest logging industry from across Victoria was around 1580–1680 jobs, and declining, in 2016. Fewer than 40 of these jobs – just two per cent – are estimated to be in the West RFA. (There is, however, significant employment in the plantation sector in the region; around 1974 jobs in 2016.)

In 2014 the Victorian Government’s logging agency VicForests was given management of forestry in the west, and received a \$3.3 million grant in advance to run its so-called “Western Community Forestry”. In their 2018–19 Annual Report, VicForests reported total revenue from western native forests was around \$700,000. State government funding to VicForests’

*Continued overleaf*



SOURCE: DELWP

*Continued from previous page*

"Western Community Forestry" in that same period was \$678,000. That's a surplus of only \$22,000 – the price of a small car – for Victorian taxpayers for the logging of our publicly-owned native forests. The \$3.3 million grant is due to expire this year, and should most certainly not be renewed to prop up the logging industry in the region.

Despite this, across the West RFA region, total commercial harvest volumes have more than doubled from 4538 cubic metres in 2008 to 10656 cubic metres in 2018. Since 2008, sawlog harvest has increased 300 per cent, firewood 400 per cent, and residual 1200 per cent. Firewood is still the largest volume of wood harvested.

Meanwhile, we have not seen any new protected areas in the western region.

Since 2008, when native forest logging ended in the Otways with the creation of new protected areas, there have been 6725 hectares harvested in the West RFA. This is roughly equivalent to the total annual state-wide revegetation effort by our Catchment Management Authorities (5000 hectares per year).

The bulk of the harvesting in this region is thinning and selection harvesting, but clearfelling methods have re-emerged since VicForests took over management. 27 hectares (13-14 MCG fields) of forest in the west have been clearfelled since 2014.

By comparison, in the period (2008-2017) in the Central Highlands there was 14,601 hectares harvested, including 8176 hectares clearfelled. In East Gippsland, 17,315 hectares were harvested.

The amount of commercial native forest logging in the west is comparatively small, but it is significantly damaging.

If a transition out of native forest logging is the Andrews Government's aim, the west should be the first and the easiest region to do so in. The west already has the largest plantation extent in the state, with 257,000 hectares of plantation in the ground. Surely this is the definition of transition ready.



Logging in Mount Cole.

Over the years there have been millions of dollars in taxpayer money wasted in propping up the native forest logging industry in the west. This money should be reallocated. If jobs are the driver, just a small proportion of the \$17.5 million used to so-called "modernise" the RFAs could have been instead invested in conservation management on public land (fire management, pest control, fencing, tracks and trail maintenance). For around \$6 million per annum, would deliver 40 relatively high paid conservation management jobs. This investment would also, of course, also be beneficial to the environment as well adjoining landowners, which logging is not.

Government policies and investment to support smaller-scale private or even community 'woodlots' on cleared farmland for commercial firewood and other minor forest products, such as fence posts, should also be considered. In 2010, it was estimated that Victorians use about

600,000 cubic metres of firewood each year, with around 13 per cent coming from public land, though the figures are not very accurate. Firewood can sell for between \$100-\$300 a tonne, depending on where you are in the state.

The renewal of the outdated and obsolete West RFA brings into question how serious the Andrews Government is about phasing out native forest logging, when they missed a prime opportunity for transition of the easiest RFA region. • PW

## TAKE ACTION

Ask the Minister responsible for forestry and regional development, Jaclyn Symes, to rid the west of the West RFA, and create new national parks in the region:  
[www.vnpa.org.au/central-west](http://www.vnpa.org.au/central-west)



## Hidden gems

We know Victorians love forests, but often they think of wet rainforests of East Gippsland or the towering Mountain Ash of the Central Highlands. Many might be surprised by the forests of the west of Victoria and all their beauty and wonder:

**The West Regional Forest Agreement** is the biggest RFA region in the entire state, covering 5,770,000 hectares, or about 44 per cent of all RFA areas.

**High numbers of nationally listed species:** The West RFA region has the highest number of nationally listed (EPBC Act) species of any RFA region in Victoria, with 115 listed species (more than double those in East Gippsland and Central Highlands). This includes 16 critically endangered species, the highest number of any RFA region.

**High numbers of threatened ecological communities:** The West RFA area has nine nationally listed ecological communities, the highest in the state along with Gippsland.

**Forest dependent threatened species:** In the west, there are 28 forest-dependent species listed under state law (FFG Act).

**Depleted vegetation types:** The West RFA region has the highest number of vulnerable, rare or endangered vegetation types of any RFA regions – 119 in total (more than double the Central Highlands and East Gippsland).

**Levels of protection below par:** The West RFA region has the lowest proportion of forest areas protected in a “comprehensive, adequate and representative” (CAR) reserve system of any RFA region. Only 32 per cent of its pre-1750 extent protected as at December 2019. The rest of the RFA regions are above 40 per cent.

**There is old growth** – Surprisingly, in 2018 the West RFA area had an estimated 107,290 hectares of modelled old growth forest, the second highest in the state behind the North East RFA region (127,786 hectares). While a lot is protected in the Greater Otway National Park (62 per cent) 14,033 hectares remain unprotected in either formal or informal reserve system.

**Important wetlands:** There is almost 74,000 hectares of wetlands in the West RFA region, with the vast majority (97 per cent) recognised as Ramsar Wetlands, the international convention for the protection of international migratory species. Only 41 per cent of these wetlands are in dedicated reserves; the rest remain unprotected. There are 38 wetlands in the West RFA listed in the *Directory of important wetlands in Australia*, more than any other RFA area.

**Degraded rivers and streams:** Due to the higher proportion of non-forested land along rivers and streams in the West RFA, there are large areas with rivers assessed with a low to mid condition. Much of the vegetated land in key water catchment is on public land. Water from forested public land is estimated to be worth \$96 million per annum.

**Nature-based tourism economy:** The largest economic contribution of park tourism is in western Victoria – over \$200 million. The makes up almost half of the total economic contribution of park tourism in RFA regions across the whole state (roughly around \$450 million).

**Carbon rich:** According to government models of above-ground carbon storage, the forests of the west contain a total of 550 million tonnes (CO<sub>2</sub>e) of carbon, estimated to be valued at between \$6.6 and \$32.5 billion.

**Forest cover is mostly public land** – The west is one of the most cleared parts of the state, and by far the most cleared of the RFA regions (only 24 per cent forest cover including plantations). However, there is still over one million hectares of native forest and woodland in the West RFA region, about 14 per cent of total native forest cover in the state, and of which 78 per cent is on public land.

**Significant areas still open for logging:** There is almost 160,000 hectares of unprotected land in state forests in the west which is open for logging. This is only a little less than the Central Highlands (approximately 180,000 hectares).

**Source:** Australian Government/ Victorian Government, *Assessment of matters pertaining to the modernisation of Victoria's Regional Forest Agreements 2019*.



Waterfall in Mount Cole.

PHOTO: DAVID TATNALL



# Parks legacy – River Red Gum Parks tenth anniversary

THIS JULY MARKS TEN YEARS SINCE THE FORMAL DECLARATION OF THE LAST MAJOR ADDITION TO THE NATIONAL PARKS ESTATE IN VICTORIA. MATT RUCHEL REFLECTS ON THE LEGACY.

After almost two decades of work by VNPA, and a four-year investigation by the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC), the Brumby ALP government created this extensive system of parks along the Murray, Goulburn and Ovens Rivers.

It saw the establishment of more than 100 parks and reserves covering more than 215,000 hectares of our state.

The creation of the River Red Gum Parks was an impressive legacy for the Brumby ALP government. VNPA would like to acknowledge the key role that Gavin Jennings played, as Minister for the Environment, in delivering these magnificent new parks. In a Statement From The Premier, Daniel Andrews paid tribute to Gavin Jennings on his retirement from the Victorian Parliament in March this year: "Perhaps one of his proudest achievements in public life was as Environment Minister in the Brumby Government – intervening to protect 140,000 hectares of River Red Gums along the Murray, Goulburn and Ovens rivers. Today, those ancient and majestic trees stand tall as testament to Gavin's tenacity".

After the government decision, followed by legislation and lastly formal declaration, there came a package to create the River Red Gum Parks, including \$38 million for an extra 30 Parks Victoria staff and ten contractors to build fencing.



PHOTO: PARKS VICTORIA/A

After extensive community consultation, the *River Red Gum Parks Management Plan* was completed in July 2018, covering five national parks and more than 100 other parks and reserves. Earlier this year a final Joint Management Plan was produced for Barmah National Park, by the Yorta Yorta Traditional Owner Management Board. The River Red Gum Parks were one of the first examples of Indigenous co-management in Victoria.

Unfortunately, not all the VEAC recommendations adopted by the Brumby government were implemented. There appear to be no plans to formally create the Murray River Park (a type of nature conservation reserve) even though it was promised by the Brumby government and Parks Victoria were given control of the process, and the

costs of implementation would be as little as \$2 million.

The River Red Gum Parks anniversary reminds us that protecting nature for the long-term requires vision and persistence – and of course the support from our Members and donors. It is often a few steps forward, then back, and then forward again. This is particularly pertinent now as we battle to get the Andrews Government to agree to the next big addition to the national park estate of over 60,000 hectares in Victoria's Central West.

Decision-makers from Ministers and Premiers need to consider the great legacy of creating new parks. In our fast-moving and challenging world, it is these decisions that stand the test of time, even if they require a helping hand along the way. • PW



# Forgotten forests

VNPA NATURE CONSERVATION CAMPAIGNER **JORDAN CROOK**  
ON THE CONTINUED LOGGING IN THE CENTRAL WEST.

The forests and woodlands of Victoria's west are sometimes referred to as the "forgotten forests" – and when it comes to compliance and oversight of logging operations, this, unfortunately, rings very true.

In February this year, VNPA representatives met with the state government's logging company VicForests about the logging of native forest in the Pyrenees Ranges and Mount Cole.

VicForests' 2019–2023 Timber Utilisation Plan has a steep increase in the number of logging coupes located within the known distribution of the threatened Mount Cole Grevillea and other vulnerable species. Its plan is for an increase in the intensity of planned

logging types from "single tree" to "even-aged stand management" – in other words, clearfell logging.

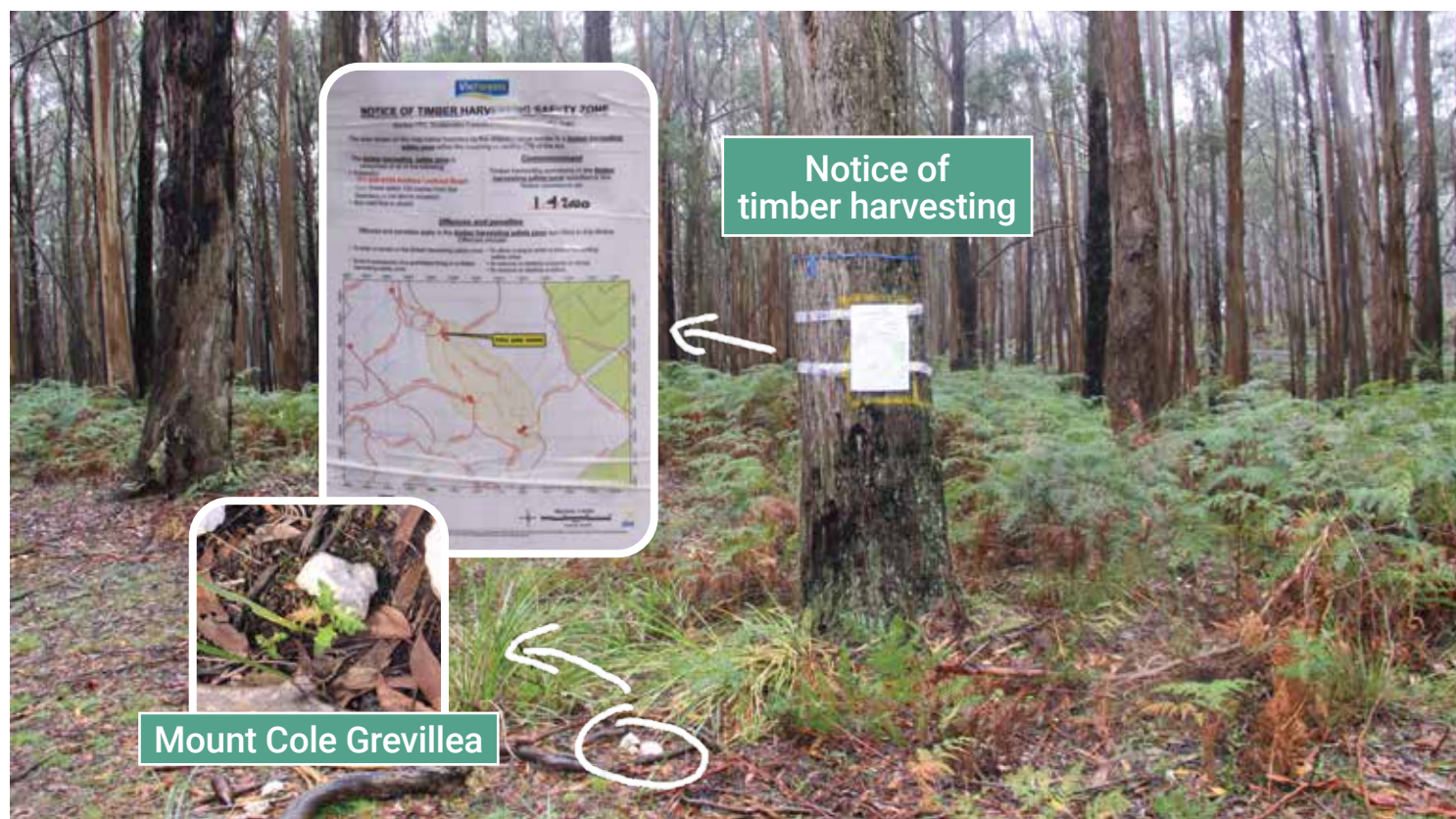
After some questioning, it was revealed that pre-logging survey work to identify biodiversity and conservation values before logging commenced was not being conducted under the Victorian Government's Forest Protection Survey Program in the west of the state, unlike in the east. Instead of surveys by independent ecologists, the task was being left exclusively in the hands of potentially un-qualified VicForests foresters.

According to a report by the Australian and Victorian governments, there were no forestry audits carried out in

the West Regional Forest Agreement between 2015 and 2018, since the audit program was established. We have had assurances from the Office of the Conservation Regulator that these will commence this year, though none have been done to date, even though logging is actively happening or set to happen – including areas proposed to be new parks in the Central West.

VNPA will continue to monitor logging operations in the west. The Central Victorian Uplands bioregion has only 2.7 per cent of its native vegetation largely intact. Across the west are high numbers of threatened plant and animal species. Logging has no place in these high-conservation value areas. • PW

We found Victoria's newest listed threatened species, the Mount Cole Grevillea, growing right next to a VicForest's Notice of Timber Harvesting in Mount Cole. (Read more on following pages.)



PHOTOS: VNPA





PHOTO: VNPA

A VNPA volunteer surveying a Mount Cole Grevillea in late March. This rare shrub, with holy-like leaves and beautiful red flowers, is found nowhere else on the planet.

## A rare discovery

THE FIRST THREATENED SPECIES DETECTION REPORT HAS BEEN SUBMITTED FOR THE WEST, SHARES **JORDAN CROOKS**.

In late March (pre-COVID-19 restrictions) VNPA volunteers and local conservationists conducted citizen science survey work in the Mount Cole Forest. Their focus was the Mount Cole Grevillea, recently listed as threatened under the state's main threatened species law the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* (FFG Act) after nomination by VNPA. They set out to understand its distribution, and if its populations were further threatened by the increase in logging activity and intensity at Mount Cole.

VNPA volunteers mapped a population of Mount Cole Grevillea

beside and within an area set to be logged on Mount Cole Road beside Coupe 185-537-0104 (Archie's Lookout Road). They also found an individual Grampians Bitter-pea (listed as threatened under the FFG Act and vulnerable under the national *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*) beside the coupe.

We have now submitted a 'threatened species detection report' to the Forest Reports team at the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) with these important findings.





We have recommended a Special Protection Zone of 200 metres around the plant populations. Special Protection Zones are given to other rare grevillea species such as the Colquhoun Grevillea and Gippsland Rock Grevillea within areas to be logged. These zones range from 200-250 metres.

There is no way of logging this area without severely impacting both Mount Cole Grevillea and Grampians Bitter-pea recovery.

We hope this threatened species detection report will lead to greater scrutiny of logging operations in the seemingly forgotten forests of the west. • PW

Special thank you to all the citizen science volunteers who helped with the Mount Cole survey work. We are looking forward to getting back to Mount Cole again when we can.

The Grampians Bitter-pea is a tall upright shrub with orange-yellow pea-like flowers. Thought to be extinct until a rediscovery in 2004, there are only about 200 plants in the wild.



PHOTO: BRENDAN NUGENT

## Meet our new campaigner

### JORDAN CROOKS

JOINS OUR TEAM OF NATURE CONSERVATION CAMPAIGNERS, FOCUSING ON PROTECTING VICTORIA'S THREATENED HABITATS AND SPECIES.

I have been involved in nature conservation work for around ten years, including field-based citizen science work; advocacy campaigning and lobbying politicians of all political persuasions; conducting guided tours; and hands-on conservation work in pest plant and animal management. I lecture in Conservation and Land Management at Swinburne University and volunteered extensively with WOTCH (Wildlife of the Central Highlands Inc.).

I grew up in the foothills of the Dandenong Ranges in Boronia, and went to high school in Sassafra in the heart of the Dandenong Ranges National Park. Our school had a fantastic science program, as well as scattered remnant Mountain Ash trees with visiting Lyrebirds and other forest birds on the grounds. Growing up in that type of environment really makes it easy for 'nature conservation' to work its way into your heart and be something you want to do.

My most important work has been to inspire others to help reverse the extinction crisis we have unfolding around us, by empowering people to make changes in their lives that will help our wildlife and wild places. The greatest champions of conservation are everyday people who step up.

At VNPA I am working towards expanding our national parks and protected areas estate. Victoria is the most cleared state in Australia, most



PHOTO: KARENA GOLDFINCH

of the larger patches of bush left are on public land, which belong to all of us and we have a collective responsibility to look after it for all Victorians. Many of our habitats and iconic species now sit on the precipice of extinction and the decisions we make, battles we fight and minds we can change, will be the difference.

At VNPA I will be addressing the need to better protect biodiversity in key regions of Victoria where threatened habitats and many species of threatened flora and fauna currently have no or very little protection. I am focusing on campaigns to protect Melbourne's critically endangered grasslands and the forests of the west and east of Victoria. I'll be working closely with a range of regional conservation groups for better protection of forests across the state.

The VNPA is an amazing organisation. I doubt many conservation groups in Victoria or even Australia have a track record like them. It's not until I asked more questions that I found out how important the VNPA has been in ensuring our most iconic natural places are protected and helping improve the management of our national parks and reserves. It's quite extraordinary how many pies VNPA has fingers in, all with an eye for protecting nature in the long-term, which is very inspiring. • PW

Jordan's role is supported by an advocacy grant from The Ross Trust.

# Federal Court backs national park protection

A FEDERAL COURT JUDGE HAS RULED THAT PARKS VICTORIA IS FREE TO CONTINUE A CULL OF FERAL HORSES IN THE ALPINE NATIONAL PARK. IT'S A DECISION WITH LESSONS FOR US ALL, SAYS **PHIL INGAMELLS**.



Mount Nelse, Alpine National Park.

Paintings borrowed from national or state collections normally adorn the walls of government offices.

But last July, when a bevy of lawyers, court officials and a dozen or more spectators gathered in Melbourne's Federal Court for the case *Australian Brumby Alliance v Parks Victoria*, the walls were bare. Courts can't display prejudice, so evocative landscapes that might influence the mood are ruled out.

In that disciplined, objective environment, the Australian Brumby Alliance (ABA) put their case that Parks Victoria's plan, to remove or cull all feral horses from the Bogong High Plains and a large number from the eastern areas of the Alpine National Park, should have been referred to the Federal Environment Minister. The ABA claimed that the 'brumbies' were part of the cultural heritage values outlined in the national heritage listing for the Australian Alps National Parks, and were therefore protected. The National Heritage List sits within the Commonwealth's *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act 1999*.

It was to be a good ten months before Justice Michael O'Bryan handed down his meticulous 93-page decision: the ABA's claim was dismissed, with costs against them.

A remarkable collection of arguments were put to the court by the ABA, and pretty much all of them were refuted or considered irrelevant by the judge. But the crystal clear basis for his ruling came from just a couple of clauses in the EPBC Act.

While the alpine parks national heritage listing under that Act does include cultural as well as extensive natural heritage values, the EPBC Act gets its authority (other than for protecting Indigenous heritage) solely from the international Convention on Biological Diversity, and that's entirely about protecting the world's natural heritage.

Even if the national heritage listing had actually mentioned horses (it didn't), it has always been the high country's remarkable biodiversity that Commonwealth law protects.

## Lessons for us all

It seems that the ABA, in their unbridled enthusiasm to keep feral horses thumping across the high country, was blind to the legal obstacles in front of them. And that's a trap people on any side of any debate can fall into; they think they must be right, that a minor legal clause, or an out-of-context sentence in a scientific paper, or anything else that appears to support their cause will win the day.



The ABA, over years of stakeholder meetings, has advanced an astonishing assortment of half-truths or total imaginings (for example claiming that more research could show that horses are good for the high country). But as the judge pointed out, speculation, misrepresented science, or personal opinion isn't evidence.

It's a lesson for all of us, but a very expensive one, this time, for the brumby groups.

### Laws are important

Another lesson is that, even though some of our environmental legislation isn't as strong as we might want, it's a lot stronger than many of us, even many of our land managers, realise. *Victoria's National Parks Act 1975*, for example, is unequivocal in its objective for protection of our native flora and fauna, and for action on pest plants and animals.

Our land managers could be more upfront about this, and educate the general public (including members of parliament and public servants) that the honourable task of reversing ecosystem decline in our parks is solidly backed by law.

Currently, anyone who finds themselves in stakeholder consultation groups might have to point out that the consultation should not be about *whether* we should focus on protection of a park's native plants and animals, but how we should go about doing that.

### Early intervention works

While Judge O'Bryan made it evident that the Convention on Biological Diversity cleared the way for Parks Victoria to deal with feral horses, he also pointed out that the Convention comes with guiding principles, and one that relates to the management of alien species is important.

It should not be necessary for land managers to wait for exhaustive evidence before they deal with alien species. The precautionary principle holds that they should act before alien species get out of control. That's surely better for the environment, and better for Parks Victoria's budget.

### We need science

Scientific studies, nevertheless, are a critical support for park management. The judge was impressed with the depth and quality of the science that had been

performed in the Australian alps over the last 150 years or so, as outlined by Parks Victoria's expert witness ecologist, Dick Williams. His witness statement was not questioned in court, nor could it have been. On the other hand, the ABA's 'expert' evidence was "not supported by scientific studies and was not persuasive".

How refreshing to have scientific evidence presented in the cool, objective atmosphere of a court case. All too often these days, science is devalued, misinterpreted or simply ignored. We still have such a lot to learn about Victoria's complex natural areas and the remarkable native plants and animals that share this planet with us, and we largely rely on our research bodies to advance that understanding.

### We need courage

Finally, it's important to hold to the objectives of national park management, and stand by the evidence we have, against whatever odds.

Congratulations are due to Parks Victoria, and our Environment Minister Lily D'Ambrosio, for holding strong on this issue, weathering the difficult process of a Federal Court challenge to their feral horse management plan. That plan grew out of a couple of years of consultation with scientists, welfare experts and the community, including seemingly endless sessions with brumby support groups.

Parks Victoria's horse management will slightly change now: feral horses unable to be rehomed will not be trapped before they are euthanised, as originally in the strategy. Captivity unnecessarily stressed the horses, so they will now be dealt with in the wild by professional marksmen, a revision that has support from welfare experts.

No-one wants to shoot horses. When the numbers of this damaging pest species have been reduced to the extent that our beautiful and fragile alpine habitats are recovering, it may be that rehoming eventually becomes the main option.

Hopefully, this court case will give our land managers, and our political representatives, more courage to stand up for nature in the future. • PW

With contributions from Deirdre Slattery.



The rare Broad-toothed Mouse's habitat is being impacted from browsing and trampling of feral horses.

PHOTO: CATCHING THE EYE, FLICKR CC

#### LATE BREAKING NEWS:

A second judgement, this time in Victoria's Supreme Court, has also affirmed Parks Victoria's obligation to manage horses.





# Too sensitive and precious to risk

OUR NATURE CONSERVATION CAMPAIGNER **SHANNON HURLEY**  
RALLIES THE COMMUNITY TO SPEAK OUT AGAINST THE  
INDUSTRIALISATION OF WESTERNPORT BAY.

PHOTO: HANNAH LEWIS

Westernport's Ramsar wetland, just around the point from the proposed gas facility.

For the past couple of years, AGL's moves to industrialise Westernport Bay have been underway, and their plans for a Gas Import Terminal Facility are getting closer to crunch time

In AGL's proposed project, an industrial-sized 300-metre-long gas storage ship would be moored permanently at Crib Point south of Hastings. It would be fed by imported gas from interstate or overseas, by up to 40 additional large Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) carrier ships per year. The gas would then be connected to a new gas pipeline 60 kilometres long to join the gas network in Pakenham – to be developed and constructed by an energy infrastructure business APA Group.

VNPA, along with other statewide and local conservation groups, have opposed the project from the start, due to serious concerns of the potential impacts on marine life. Chlorine release into the bay, increase in shipping, and fuel spills could have flow on effects on migratory birds, marine mammals, and important fish habitat such as seagrass and mangroves. Not to mention the climate pollution that would be released at a time when we should be transitioning away from fossil fuels.

In our view, Westernport Bay is too sensitive and precious to risk. We have urged for, at the very least, for the project to undergo the most thorough environmental assessment. Thankfully this was granted by both the state and federal governments back in October 2018.

So where is the project at, and what lays ahead of us?

## Where is the proposed project at?

For over 12 months, AGL has been 'preparing' their environmental assessment documents to submit for assessment by state and federal governments. At the state level this happens through an Environmental Effects Statement (EES) process, whereby AGL undertake and report their technical studies of the impacts of the proposed project on environmental and social values.

AGL has submitted their EES documentation to the Department of Environment Land Water and Planning (DELWP), who will review it and provide advice to the Planning Minister Richard Wynne. He then decides if the EES is suitable for public exhibition, which is expected in early June.

That's where we come in.

Once made public, this is our opportunity as the community to have our say on AGL's assessment, and provide feedback through written submissions. Public consultation is usually only open for a short window of 30 days.

Given the current Covid-19 restrictions (at the time of writing), it is being investigated to move the entire process online. We argue that removing opportunities for in-person consultation would seriously limit meaningful participation by the community, be unfair, and in favour of the proponents, AGL and APA. VNPA, and other state and local conservation groups have written to the Planning Minister to ask him to delay the EES process until either a thorough online process is developed, or the social distancing restrictions for COVID-19 have lapsed. Hopefully, the Minister decides in favour of the Victorian community.

When this next phase of the EES process does occur, several other planning-related state permits and approvals for the proposed project will be rolled into this one consultation process – meaning this will be our last opportunity to provide comment on those matters.

Further approvals are needed later on in relation to cultural heritage and marine and coastal consent under the *Victorian Marine and Coastal Act 2018* and under the federal *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.

Right from the get-go from the scope of impacts AGL has been required to look at has not been comprehensive enough.

VNPA and Environment Victoria previously engaged marine ecologists at Australian Marine Ecology to look at the AGL's previous studies when referring the project initially for the EES process. This work showed significant gaps in AGL's initial studies, including a lack of acknowledgement of:

- the impacts the project could have on the bay as a whole, by only considering impacts in the immediate vicinity of the project;
- the impact chlorine can have once released into the bay;
- the risk of catastrophic impacts associated with additional shipping in the bay.

For anyone with knowledge about the movements of water and marine species throughout Westernport Bay, it would be clear this project has the capacity to impact the bay on a much larger scale – a severe oversight so far by the state government and AGL.

## What lays ahead of us?

After the public exhibition ends, it is likely an independent panel will assess and run a series of 'hearings', an opportunity for experts to comment and ask questions on AGL's studies, and AGL and APA to respond with their views.

Then the state Planning Minister and federal Environment Minister will need to decide if the project will have acceptable levels of environmental effects, and approve it – or not.

The process will likely take place over a series of months, with final decisions from state and federal government expected by the end of this year/early next year.

This entire period will be an important time for us as a community to continue to stand up for our precious Westernport Bay, but the upcoming public exhibition will be the one and only time for formal comment. • PW

You can help by having your say when the community consultation opens – keep informed by signing up to our email updates at [www.vnpa.org.au/sign-up](http://www.vnpa.org.au/sign-up).

## Vale Chris Chandler (1959–2020)

We remember and acknowledge Chris Chandler's service to the environment.

Throughout his life Chris spent much time at French Island and was one of the founding members of the Friends of French Island National Park, of which he recently held the position of Treasurer. He was also a VNPA member and led VNPA walks on French Island. Chris was involved with the French Island Landcare Group, and was an active committee member of the Westernport and Peninsula Protection Council.

Farewell to Chris, an expert naturalist always willing to share his knowledge and stand up for his local patch. • PW



# Victoria's new threatened species laws coming into force

A SMALL STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION, BUT NOT FAR ENOUGH TO ADDRESS THE EXTENT OF SPECIES DECLINE IN VICTORIA, WRITES **MATT RUCHEL**.

The *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* (FFG Act) is the key piece of Victorian legislation for the conservation of threatened species and communities, and for the management of potentially threatening processes.

Just before their election in 2014, the then Andrews opposition announced its policy to "...review the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act" and their party platform to "modernise threatened species protection to adopt world's best practice".

The review of the FFG Act was undertaken by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) in a parallel process to developing the Victorian *Biodiversity 2037* strategy. In 2015–2017 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. See previous coverage [vnpa.org.au/act-nature-enters-parliament](http://vnpa.org.au/act-nature-enters-parliament)

The revised or "modernised" legislation entered Parliament in mid-2018 but did not make it through the congested Upper House until last year. The Coalition supported the Bill.

The *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Amendment Act 2019* will come into effect on 1 June 2020.

Probably the change people will most notice will be to the process for listing of species. The current FFG Act largely only lists species as 'threatened', whereas the new FFG Act will align with federal legislation and many other jurisdictions, with what is called the 'common assessment method'. It will use the subcategories – 'extinct'; 'extinct in the wild'; 'critically endangered'; 'endangered'; 'vulnerable'; and in the case of a taxon of fish, 'conservation dependent'.

The Environment Department is currently going through the process of re-assessing species on the current FFG Act list, in addition to their 'DELWP Advisory List' which presently does not have any legal status. This will likely significantly increase the

number of species formally listed under the new FFG Act in Victoria from around 700 to more than 2000. The new list will be open for consultation, expected in early June, before being finalised. At this stage, it does not include the transfer of Ecological Communities from the DELWP Advisory List, but existing listed Ecological Communities will be retained.

While most of the existing elements of the Act remain, the new legislation also has some refreshed tools; such as the capacity to make critical habitat determinations, interim conservation orders (a declaration by the Minister which can require conservation protection or management of critical habitat of flora, fauna and or land or water), and a broader definition of public authorities and their duties.

Some of the supporting guidance documents are unlikely to be ready by June, though some parts such as the Regulations will be complete.

Conservation groups were frustrated with the review process and argued the reforms needed to go much further than what was proposed as part of 'modernisation' if we were to reverse the decline in Victorian ecosystems. The new legislation will need to be tested to see if it allows greater action on threatened species, or if more reform is likely needed. • PW

## Victorian Inquiry into ecosystem decline

Initiated by the Victorian Greens and backed by the Victorian Government, the Legislative Council's environment and planning committee will hold an inquiry into the decline of Victoria's ecosystems, and measures to restore habitats and populations of threatened and endangered species.

The broad-ranging inquiry will look at extent and trends; the impact of climate change; the adequacy of current legislative framework, policies and funding; opportunities to restore Victoria's environment while upholding First Peoples' connection to country; and increasing and diversifying employment opportunities in Victoria.

The inquiry will be completed in 12 months. Submission are open until 31 July 2020. [www.parliament.vic.gov.au/epc-lc/article/4500](http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/epc-lc/article/4500)

VNPA will be making a submission, and we will provide resources on our website to support people in making their submissions. Please see [www.vnpa.org.au](http://www.vnpa.org.au)

# TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF BUSHFIRE MANAGEMENT

Following the devastating bushfires in Australia this summer there was plenty of talk and confusion around the complex issue of fire management – a serious and truly complicated topic.

- 1** Which body is responsible for controlling fire management on public land (including national parks) in Victoria?
  - a. Parks Victoria
  - b. Country Fire Authority
  - c. Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning
  - d. Local councils
- 2** All bushland types in Australia are adapted to dealing with fire. True or False
- 3** Increasing temperatures and increasing drought events are clearly producing an increase in the frequency of severe fire. True or False
- 4** A 2015 review of the '5% of public land fuel reduction target' resulted in the target being:
  - a. Abandoned
  - b. Replaced by a risk based target
  - c. Kept
  - d. Increased to a 10% fuel reduction target
- 5** What is an appropriate fire interval for a grassland ecosystem?
- 6** What is an appropriate fire interval for a tall Mountain Ash ecosystem?
- 7** What is an 'ecological burn'?
  - a. A burn to reduce the amount of fuel in a forest
  - b. A burn used to control a bushfire
  - c. A burn carried out to maintain the health of a particular species or ecosystem
- 8** Does alpine cattle grazing reduce fire?
- 9** Do fuel reduction burns reduce fire?
- 10** The Pink Flannel Flower (pictured) is:
  - a. A weed that fire can control
  - b. A native plant that is destroyed by fire
  - c. A native plant that appears after fire

**Answers on page 29**



# Planning Grampians/Gariwerd's future

A NEW 'GREATER GARIWERD (GRAMPIANS) LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT PLAN' SHOULD REVOLUTIONISE THE MANAGEMENT OF GRAMPIANS NATIONAL PARK, SAYS **PHIL INGAMELLS**.



PHOTO: SAM HALDANE, FLICKR CC

Sometimes national park management has to bide its time. Managers might do very well with their available funds, but a lack of resources inevitably leaves some jobs undone. What might originally be minor problems turn out to be larger 'sleepers' problems; feral deer and horses, or mountain bike trails, or any number of other issues keep growing until they're far beyond control.

There are a number of problems like that in Grampians National Park, but a new planning process is getting serious about addressing them.

In line with Parks Victoria's policy of creating landscape scale plans, this new management plan will cover some 15 parks and reserves in the Grampians area: Grampians National Park, Black Range State Park to the west, Black Range Scenic Reserve (or Bunjil's Cave) to the east, and a

number of surrounding small but important bushland reserves mostly established in 1983, shortly before the creation of the national park in 1984. This new plan will update the last management plan undertaken in 2003.

One issue has been hitting the headlines, especially in *The Australian*: apparent damage caused by the growth of rock climbing in the park has led to some climbing 'territory' being provisionally taken from the rock climbing and bouldering fraternity. Cries of misinformation and victimisation have been loud, but careful surveys are showing that rock climbing is definitely having an impact.

Graffiti, litter, bolts, exfoliation of rock, tracks and vegetation clearance are all evident. It's now estimated that, for the 200 most visited climb sites in the

park, about 18 hectares of vegetation has been impacted, and some 108 kilometres of informally developed tracks have appeared.

An especially big issue is damage to Aboriginal cultural sites, with extensive climbing chalk marks found at rock art sites and other significant places. Many of the art sites are faded or otherwise hard to identify, making self-regulation of rock climbing impossible. Their protection is clearly important to the Jardwadjali, Gunditjmara and Djab Wurrung traditional owners, but also to the broader community.

Of course there are other things the plan addresses. 'Natureprint' mapping by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) shows almost all of the Grampians National Park and Black Range State Park are rated as of the highest



A 'Natureprint' map of the relative value of habitat in the planning area. Grampians National Park and Black Range State Park (in dark and light red here) both rate as having the highest habitat value.

quality habitat, partly because the parks contain a remarkably complex assembly of habitat types.

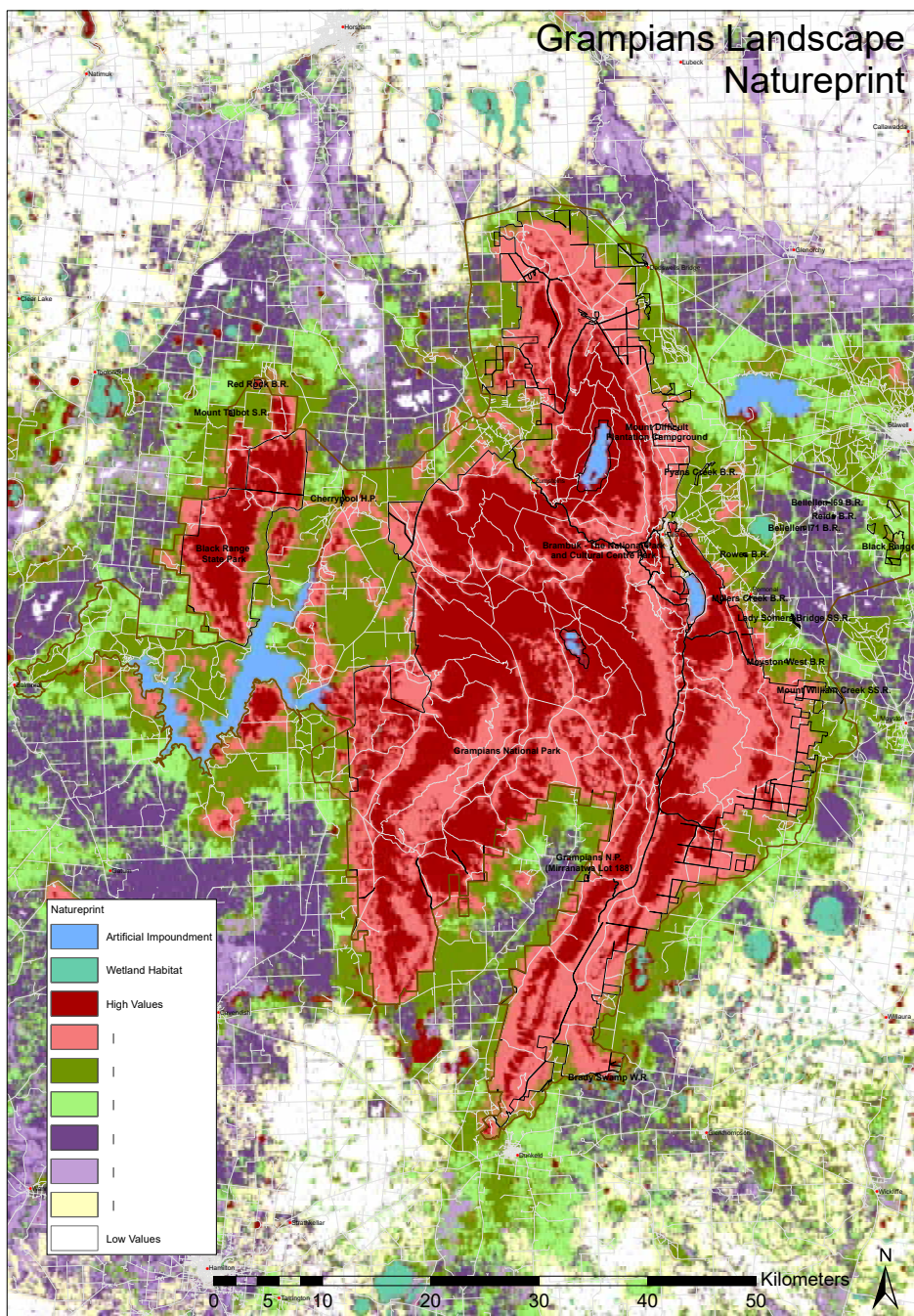
Hundreds of known records of threatened plants and animals extend throughout the Grampians and the adjacent wooded plains.

This calls for vigilant management of pest plants and animals, and also of the increasing visitor pressure the park is experiencing. The plan will dictate management for the next 15 years at least, and visitor numbers are growing exponentially.

Frequent fire is also an issue; almost all of the planning area has been burnt at least once, often twice, in the last 20 years. Fire will become more frequent, and have more impact on this precious refuge for western Victoria's wealth of native plants and animals.

The test of course will be the implementation of the new plan, with some of the current issues due to inconsistent implementation of the current plan and a lack of park management resources.

The draft *Greater Gariwerd (Grampians) Landscape Management Plan* should be released for public comment in June, or shortly after. • PW



MAP: PARKS VICTORIA AND THE DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT, LAND, WATER AND PLANNING

## Falls to Hotham Alpine Landscape resurfaces

Originally proposed in a 2008 (and long obsolete) Nature Based Tourism Strategy, a Falls to Hotham 'icon' tourist walk has been re-invigorated yet again.

The 'Falls to Hotham Crossing' has now re-appeared in a new parks Victoria planning process, despite receiving 'significant opposition' in earlier processes.

Somehow tourism industry bodies seem to be able to get funding for projects in parks without first going through a proper park planning process. That's not the way park visitor planning should operate.

In its various iterations, the proposal has included building huts and lodges along the route. Most recently, in Parks Victoria's 2016 Falls to Hotham draft plan, the walking trail was rerouted up the extremely steep Diamantina Spur, with a series of serviced huts near the top of the spur, adjacent to Mt Feathertop.

This is a very big intrusion on a fairly remote and magnificent part of our great Alpine National Park.

There are far better ways to spend scarce resources on the park, and far better ways to encourage people to experience the park. However, Parks Victoria seems to have been given little option but to move this scarcely feasible, and potentially damaging, project along. • PW

Available from Envirobook:  
[www.envirobook.com.au](http://www.envirobook.com.au)



## KOSCIUSZKO A GREAT NATIONAL PARK

DEIRDRE SLATTERY AND  
GRAEMEL WORBOYS







# Seashore snapshot

PHOTO: JAMES CORDWELL

SHANNON HURLEY PROVIDES A BRIEF VIEW THROUGH OUR COASTAL WINDOW.

Bridgewater Bay  
Foreshore Reserve.

Our coastlines are integral to many Victorian's ways of life, whether it's spending our summer holidays down at our favourite beach, day trips to enjoy a surf, a fish or a beach walk, or for those who live or work with it. Whatever our connection to these special places, for us to continue to enjoy them, it is important they are planned for and managed well.

To do this, we need to understand a large piece of our coastline puzzle – coastal reserves. Coastal reserves make up almost 30 per cent of our coastline – 61,770 hectares of land. We need a firm grasp of what and where they are, their conservation, cultural, social and economic values, and current and future threats.

The Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC), under the instruction of the Victorian Environment Minister, has compiled an inventory and information package of coastal reserves as part of its *Assessment of Victoria's Coastal Reserves* report released in March this year.

## What is a coastal reserve?

Victoria has roughly 2,790 kilometres of coastline. Over 90 per cent of this is in public ownership. Of this, 70 per cent is protected under the *National Parks Act 1975* as national, marine or coastal parks. The VEAC assessment had a focus on the remaining almost 30 per cent of the public land (61,770 hectares) outside of these protected areas, which are known as 'coastal reserves'.

Coastal reserves are usually narrow strips of Crown land along the shore, often intensively used by the community for recreation and leisure activities. 73 per cent of these are reserved for 'public purposes', and 20 per cent for 'protection of the coastline'. There is still more than 1250 hectares of coastal reserve as unreserved Crown land, which means it has not been set aside for a particular public purpose.

## Who manages them and what are the issues?

Coastal reserves are variously managed by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP), Parks Victoria, local government, or public committees of management. One of the issues the VEAC report highlights is that many members of the public, stakeholders and even land managers could not identify the responsible land manager for many areas of coastal Crown land.

This means that managing coastal reserves can be inconsistent and fragmented, leading to significant on-ground issues for land managers and the community. These issues will only escalate in the future with the pressures and demands of a changing climate including rising sea levels and storm surges.

## Current trends and emerging threats across the coastal reserves landscape

- Victoria's population growth is the fastest of all states and territories at 2.1 per cent, higher than the national growth of 1.5 per cent, in the year ended June 2019.
- Coastal reserves are at or over-capacity for most of the summer period, with areas within two hours of Melbourne experiencing the most pressure.
- Participation in citizen science is growing, with a 224 per cent increase in the number of scientific publications using data collected by citizen scientists between 2010 and 2015.
- An estimated that 20–30 per cent of coastal assets such as sea walls are in poor condition, and 30–50 per cent can be expected to have less than ten years useful life remaining.
- Marine and coastal pest plants and animals is predicted to increase as changes in climate alter distribution patterns.
- As urban populations grow, the flow of litter to the marine and coastal environment is also considered likely to increase. (However, there is some good news: in 2018/19 the National Litter Index showed a 32 per cent decline in the number of litter items on Victorian beaches and recreational swimming locations compared to the previous year!)
- Almost all the coastal reserves with high biodiversity values (94 per cent) and those with high recreation and tourism values (96 per cent) are predicted to be impacted by coastal erosion, inundation, or disturbance of coastal acid sulphate soils.

A valuable resource for coastal land managers to better plan and manage the coasts, the technical report undertook a review into the number and types of coastal reserves; identifying their environmental, cultural, social and economic values; and current and emerging threats. It makes recommendations to state government on clarity and consistency in use and management of coastal reserves; improving coastal Crown land administration and governance; and better access to information and support for land managers.

## Many coastal reserves are wildlife havens

- 132 species of conservation listed fauna were identified in 133 coastal reserves, with 36 of these species only recorded in a single coastal reserve.
- 75 species of conservation-listed flora were identified in 49 of the coastal reserves.

## What does the future look like?

- Due to the fragmented land tenure and regulations, we are unprepared for the future demands such as climate change impacts.
- More than 75 per cent of coastal reserves will be impacted by the predicted 2040 sea-level rise scenarios of 20 centimetres.
- Climate change, population growth and ageing coastal infrastructure are the most significant pressures on marine and coastal environments at a statewide level.

## Recommendations

The report made nine recommendations to the Victorian Government to improve future planning and management of our coasts:

- New or amended legislation to clarify what a 'coastal reserve' means, in line with the description and objectives outlined in VEAC's *Statewide Assessment of Public Land (2017)* – so everyone is on the same page.
- Establish a process to:
  - Formalise previous VEAC recommendations (or from the former Environment Conservation Council and Land Conservation Council) for coastal reserves, by appropriate reservation.
  - Assess areas for reservation as coastal reserves that are currently used as such but have no formal state government decision supporting that use, such as the beds of the Gippsland Lakes, or areas of unreserved Crown land.
- Extending coastal reserve boundaries to 200 metres offshore so that regulations and management can apply consistently across coastal reserves and the nearshore areas; simplifying regulation enforcement by eliminating boundary effects at the shoreline; and facilitating better administration of uses such as at piers and jetties.
- Improve public access to Crown land reservation details, including purposes and objectives for coastal reserves; and greater support for land managers with difficult decision-making.

Unfortunately, there was a missed opportunity in that the VEAC assessment was limited to coastal reserves. It did not include a broader scope looking at other areas of coastal public land, such as marine and coastal parks. Some marine and coastal parks are still not afforded complete protection by the National Parks Act and Regulations. An example is the islands in Nooramunga Marine and Coastal Park, where if a dog was brought to these islands renowned for important areas for migratory shorebirds and nesting areas for resident shorebirds, there is essentially no penalty (a hangover

from regulations created in 1966!) This makes it very difficult for land managers to do their job, and leaves parts of the coast open to destructive activities.

We hope the state government will action VEAC's recommendations from this report and prioritise establishing a process, with an administrative and funding backing, to provide clarity and tidy up the areas of the coast that are left unprotected – after years of inaction.

Visit VEAC's website here to find out more, including an online inventory of the 237 coastal reserves and their values: [www.veac.vic.gov.au/investigation/assessment-coastal-reserves](http://www.veac.vic.gov.au/investigation/assessment-coastal-reserves)





# AUSTRALIA'S FIRST OFFSHORE WIND FARM PROPOSED FOR VICTORIA

**SHANNON HURLEY** EXAMINES A COMPLEX  
PROPOSED PROJECT OFF THE GIPPSLAND COASTLINE.



It is certainly an exciting opportunity to boost renewable energy in Victoria and beyond.

It would be the only offshore wind project in the southern hemisphere, and could supply up to 18 per cent of our state's electricity needs.

However this proposed offshore wind farm does not come without risks to our precious marine life.

The Star of the South Offshore Wind Farm Project is proposed for the south coast of Gippsland. It would involve up to 250 wind turbines out at sea generating electricity, which would be transmitted to the Latrobe Valley and into the electricity grid via substations and underground cables.

The project location would be 8–13 kilometres offshore from Port Albert, traversing the Ninety Mile Beach.

This coastline is known for its vast stretches of sand dunes, supporting rich marine and bird life, and underwater sandy plains harbouring some of the abundant marine diversity on the planet.

While so important for reducing climate pollution, any infrastructure project of this scale does come with significant potential environmental risks.

Impacts on marine life and habitats from the construction and operation path could include underwater noise and vibrations; vessel strikes; fuel and oil spills; and the presence of underwater infrastructure from the turbines and transmission stations and the laying of cables.

Impacts could be felt across offshore and intertidal environments as well as the seafloor (benthic habitat) – and of course the marine mammals, invertebrates, fish, seabirds and shorebirds that live, feed, breed or pass through the area.

Threatened species listed under state (*Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988*) and federal (*Environment Protection and Biodiversity*

*Conservation Act 1999*) law with nursery or feeding grounds directly overlapping with the project area include the Blue and Southern Right whales, Shy Albatross and the Great White Shark

The offshore wind farm project will largely operate offshore in Commonwealth waters, but particular elements of the project will be directly within state waters (from the beach to three nautical miles offshore), including undersea cables and where they connect to land. Of course, marine species know no boundaries and will move readily between federal and state-managed waters.

## The process

There is a chain of approvals required under state and federal legislation for the project to get the go-ahead. One of the first, an 'exploration license' from the federal government, was given the green light in March 2019. This allowed exploration to occur in Commonwealth waters for undertaking activities to assess wind resources and sea bed conditions, to understand whether an offshore farm is technically feasible for the area.

Most recently, in early April this year, the project was referred to the Victorian Minister for Planning and the Federal Environment Minister for planning and environmental approvals.

*Continued overleaf*

Map showing areas the Star of the South project would operate in. It includes the offshore license areas where scientific surveys for wildlife and other information collection are taking place to inform the location of the infrastructure. The three corridors on the land are different potential options for where the marine infrastructure will meet the land infrastructure and route to the energy network at Latrobe Valley.





Continued from previous page

VNPA has met with the project team at Star of the South on multiple occasions to gain a thorough understanding of the risks to the marine and coastal environment. We have since written to the Victorian Planning Minister Richard Wynne asking him to order a full and thorough environmental assessment process (an Environmental Effects Statement at state level, along with a parallel EPBC Act process at the federal level) – a decision which is due in the coming weeks.

In the meantime, the project has been undertaking ecological surveys, which will be valuable for improving our understanding of how marine wildlife use the areas, and also the potential impacts this project could have. Some of this critical work that has either commenced or will shortly include:

- aerial bird and marine mammal surveys
- bird tagging to understand bird flight-paths for species such as Short-tailed Shearwater
- seabed studies
- fur seal tagging
- fish ecology studies
- underwater microphones for sonar of marine mammals

An essential part of the project is connecting the offshore wind farm to the Latrobe Valley, so it can 'plug into' the electricity grid. The project will investigate, design and choose the transmission route to do this.

VNPA has some concerns around the routes potentially requiring vegetation removal in state forests. We want to ensure that the chosen route has minimal impacts on environmental and Aboriginal cultural heritage.

Due to the sheer scale of the project; the potential impacts on significant state and federally-listed wildlife, habitats and communities; and the lack of knowledge of the marine environment in the project area; thorough environmental assessments should be essential.

Before any construction can start, the project will need a commercial license from the federal government. We will keep you up to date as the project progresses, including any opportunities for public comment. • PW



Southern Right Whale

PHOTO: PETER STEWARD, FLICKR CC

### What is special about this part of Victoria's coastal and marine environment?

There are so many reasons why Gippsland's Ninety Mile coastline is special. Its wonders include:

- primary residency region for juvenile Great White Shark.
- foraging areas for the Shy Albatross.
- resting and migration areas for the Southern Right Whale and Blue Whale.
- important habitat and breeding areas for state and federally-listed threatened birds such as the Hooded Plover and the Wandering Albatross.
- sandy underwater plains among the most biologically diverse sediment beds in the world, with 860 marine species discovered within ten square metres!
- A rare crab is found in the region.

In recognition of these rich natural values, this coastline features a number of protected areas:

- Ninety Mile Beach Marine National Park
- Nooramunga Marine and Coastal Park
- Corner Inlet Coastal Park, Marine National Park, and Ramsar Wetland
- Wilsons Promontory Marine National Park
- Gippsland Lakes Coastal Park and Ramsar Wetland

All of these natural wonders are either directly in or close to the vicinity of the proposed offshore wind farm project area.

Over 800 different species – mostly tiny bivalves, worms, crabs and snails – have been found in ten square metres of Ninety Mile Beach Marine National Park, making it one of the most diverse marine habitats in the world.



PHOTO: MUSEUMS VICTORIA

# QUIZ ANSWERS

(From page 21)

- 1 **Answer is c.** Fire management on public land, including in both national parks and timber harvesting areas, is controlled by Forest Fire Victoria, an arm of the state government's **Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP)**. For information on other bodies involved in bushfire management visit [www.vnpsa.org.au/fire-management-in-victoria](http://www.vnpsa.org.au/fire-management-in-victoria)
- 2 **False.** While many different ecosystem types have adaptations that allow them to recover after fire, there are some ecosystems such as our pockets of rainforest that don't recover from fire at all well. Across Victoria's 100 or more ecosystem types and the roughly 100,000 native species that depend on them, there is a great range of responses to fire frequency and severity.
- 3 **True.** Climate scientists and ecologists have been predicting more frequent and more severe fires in Victoria for decades, and those predictions have been increasingly borne out, or even exceeded, in recent years. While one fire event can't always be attributed to human-induced climate change, the extent of fire across eastern Australia in 2019–20 is unprecedented in living memory. Increasing temperatures and increasing drought events are clearly a major factor in the increasing frequency of severe fire.
- 4 **Answer is b.** A 2015 review of the 5% target recommended it be **replaced by a risk-based target**, encouraging planned burns to take place where they are most likely to be effective in protecting life and property, and the environment, based on evidence.
- 5 How often fire should take place in particular ecosystems **depends on season, severity of fire, how patchy it is, and other things**, and there is always more to learn about how our many plants and animals respond to fire. Native grasslands in Victoria's volcanic plains seem to handle frequent fire better than other ecosystems, responding well to a fire somewhere between every two and seven years.
- 6 Our tall Mountain Ash forests don't like fire much at all. Unlike most eucalypts, they are killed by even moderately severe fire. If another fire takes place within 20 years, the regrowing trees have not had time to produce seed, so the Ash forest can be lost. It can take **100 years or more** for a growing forest to develop hollows needed for the many animals that live there, so **fire in these forests really shouldn't occur in less than that time period**, and then not through the whole forest.
- 7 **Answer is c.** Ecological burns are performed under the advice of ecologists, aimed at **maintaining the health of a particular species or ecosystem**. (Sometimes ecological burns also act as fuel reduction burns, and vice versa, but not necessarily.)
- 8 **No.** Scientific studies have clearly shown that alpine grazing does not reduce fire. This is largely because cattle don't eat shrubs, which are the main vehicle for the spread of fire in the high country.
- 9 **Yes and No.** It might seem that 'Yes' is the obvious answer, but in many ecosystems, fuel is only reduced for a few years after fire. But that fire can promote a lot of shrub growth, resulting in a considerably increased fuel load for decades. After many years, those shrubs can die off, leaving a less-flammable ecosystem in the long-term.
- 10 **Answer is c.** Pink Flannel Flower is a native plant that's quite hard to see in Victoria, but it can be stimulated by fire to sprout from seed and bloom.

For more in-depth information on bushfire management in Victoria visit [www.vnpsa.org.au/fire-management-in-victoria](http://www.vnpsa.org.au/fire-management-in-victoria)

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# A once in a generation opportunity

A VISION FROM THE PAST BECOMES A NEW PLAN, WRITES MERYL BROWN TOBIN.

## Then

In 1996, 1,139 Bass Coast Shire locals and visitors signed a petition for a new national park fronting Westernport Bay.

They wanted to ensure lasting protection for the biggest remnant stand of native trees left on the eastern side of the bay. Proponents believed it would become a major new tourist attraction.

The vision for the park was to be developed progressively from a core of several existing reserves – the Hurdy Gurdy, The Gurdies, Colbert Creek and Grantville reserves – and other Crown land in the Grantville district. The first stage would see all native vegetation preserved south of Lang Lang to south-east of Grantville to the Corinella turnoff, and also the coastal strip from Bass Landing at the mouth of the Bass River back to the mouth of the Lang Lang River.

The Gurdies and Grantville Nature Conservation Reserves are home to grass trees, tree ferns and 54 different species of orchids. Wildlife includes the Powerful Owl, Lace Monitor and marsupials such as the Common Wombat, Black Swamp Wallaby, Eastern Grey Kangaroo and the Bobuck (thought to be locally extinct but rediscovered in 2005).



Grass trees grow tall on the Westernport Bay's coastline.

The petition, organised by the Bass Valley & District Branch of the South Gippsland Conservation Society (SGCS) and Coronet Bay Ratepayers and Residents Association, was presented to Gippsland West MP Alan Brown, with a request for him to present it to Parliament. Brown was a strong advocate of eco-tourism in the region and had supported previous efforts by the SGCS, including the George Bass Walking Trail and the

rail trail between Anderson and Wonthaggi, but he had two concerns: the park's relatively small size and the extent of private ownership.

It was pointed out at the time that there were precedents for small national parks, all of which are viable and loved by millions of Victorians and tourists. However, unfortunately the vision for the new national park did not progress.

PHOTO: HARTLEY TOBIN

Rare wildlife and plants found at the proving ground site include:

- Southern Brown Bandicoot
- Long Nosed Bandicoot
- Powerful Owl (sighted just out of the area)
- Southern Toadlet
- Swift Parrot
- White-footed Dunnart
- Latham's Snipe
- Lace Monitor
- Southern Pigmy Perch
- Orange-tip Caladenia
- Eastern Pygmy-possum
- Strzelecki Gum

## Now

Moving forward to 2020, there is now another chance to reintroduce the plan for a new national park for Westernport.

Out of loss, a great opportunity has emerged within the Bass Coast Shire – in the Holden proving ground site.

Holden opened the proving ground in Lang Lang in 1957 and used it to test every one of their vehicles since. Much of the bushland has remained in good condition due to sustained work by Holden and Landcare to control environmental weeds species. With the General Motors company deciding to end its Holden car brand in Australia, the chance to acquire the proving ground in Lang Lang has arisen.

It would add 877 hectares (2152 acres) of predominately native bushland to the conservation estate and secure the future of threatened species found on the site such as the Strzelecki Gum and the Long Nosed and Southern Brown bandicoots, as well as threatened vegetation types unique to the Bass Coast.

All this while also allowing recreational pursuits, compatible with the protection of flora and fauna, in the Bass Coast Shire.



The Holden proving ground site is located in the middle of a fragmented nature corridor from Wuchatsch Reserve to Grantville Nature Conservation Reserve.

Using this land could alleviate past concerns about the small size of a proposed new park.

There has been a great local groundswell of support to protect the proving ground's woodlands, and a working group has formed.

On May 20 the Bass Coast Shire Council voted unanimously to write to the state government to request the purchase of the proving ground site

at Lang Lang for the preservation and recognition of the site's environmental, cultural and coastal habitat values.

With a community and political effort, many hope the local's vision can finally become reality! • PW

Anyone interested is invited to email [editor@basscoastpost.com](mailto:editor@basscoastpost.com) to be part of the working group or to be kept up to date.



# March of the Spider Crabs

**AJ MORTON**, SCUBA DIVING BUSINESS OWNER OF DIVE2U,  
REVEALS HOW ONE OF VICTORIA'S GREATEST UNDERWATER  
SPECTACLES COULD BE UNDER THREAT.



PHOTO: MATT TESTONI

Every year, through March to July, our southern coastal waters are invaded by bizarre, alien-like crabs, aggregating in their thousands.

Covered in seaweed and sponges, a mass of legs crawling this way and that, they pile over the top of

one another in a hectic battle for position. Scuba divers, nature lovers, educators, and coastal residents eagerly anticipate this annual natural phenomenon. People travel to Melbourne from all over the planet to experience this fascinating event.

The annual Spider Crab Aggregation holds many mysteries to us all, but one question many people ask that we do know the answer to, is: "why do the Spider Crabs risk travelling from the depths of the Bass Strait to the shoreline shallows?"



Visitors come from around the world to see the spectacle.

The answer is to moult.

Moulting is an extremely vulnerable phase of the Spider Crab's life. The process of shedding a shell and waiting for a new shell to harden takes time, leaving the crab exposed, and easy pickings for predators such as the large Smooth Stingrays which cruise these waters. Moulting alongside thousands of other crabs increases their chance of survival.

Made globally famous by David Attenborough's BBC documentary *Blue Planet II*, the Spider Crab aggregation has become a tourism drawcard. The crabs can often be seen from piers when the visibility is clear, and those keen to brave the 10-12-degree waters often jump in for an up-close scuba or snorkel.

In what would usually be an off-peak season for the Mornington Peninsula, crowds flock to see this amazing sight, unlike any other in the world. Unfortunately, with the fame has come some unexpected attention.

During the 2019 aggregation event, there was an influx of fishing of the crabs. An event which drew passive observers, such as photographers, videographers, educators and visitors alike, was now subject to fishing pressure that has not been observed at this scale before.

Much about the Spider Crab's life remains unknown, i.e. their population size, how far they travel to moult, where they go after moulting, and whether they return to the same location each year, or are even if we are seeing the same individuals year on year.

What we do know, however, is that in just two weekends, large numbers of crabs were removed from piers on the Mornington Peninsula.

For the tourists and locals who had come down to admire the migrating

crabs, the sight of them being hauled up in nets and carted down the pier was shocking and stressful for many. With so many basic questions around the life cycles of the crabs unknown, it is difficult to estimate the impact fishing may have on their population.

Until 2019 people that came to witness the aggregation only took photos, and left bubbles. These same people are concerned that if this fishing pressure continues to escalate in these easy to access locations, this unique event may no longer be witnessed in the future.

Representatives from the dive industry, conservation and education sector sought a meeting with the Victorian Fisheries Authority (VFA) to express their concerns and see what could be done to address the issue.

Presented at the meeting on behalf of the 'Spider Crab Alliance' (an alliance with the above sectors, with the addition of concerned community members) were views from nearly 20,000 petition signees; 50+ statements of position from tourism operators, education providers and businesses; over 1000+ personal statements from marine scientists, educators, photographers and community members; and a handwritten letter from Sir David Attenborough himself. They all called for a halt on fishing Spider Crabs during their peak aggregation months of March to July – at least until we know more about their population numbers and the impact fishing has on this valuable tourist attraction.

The VFA's concerns do not appear to be echoed at the same level, with their efforts going towards education, instead of any regulatory change or ban on

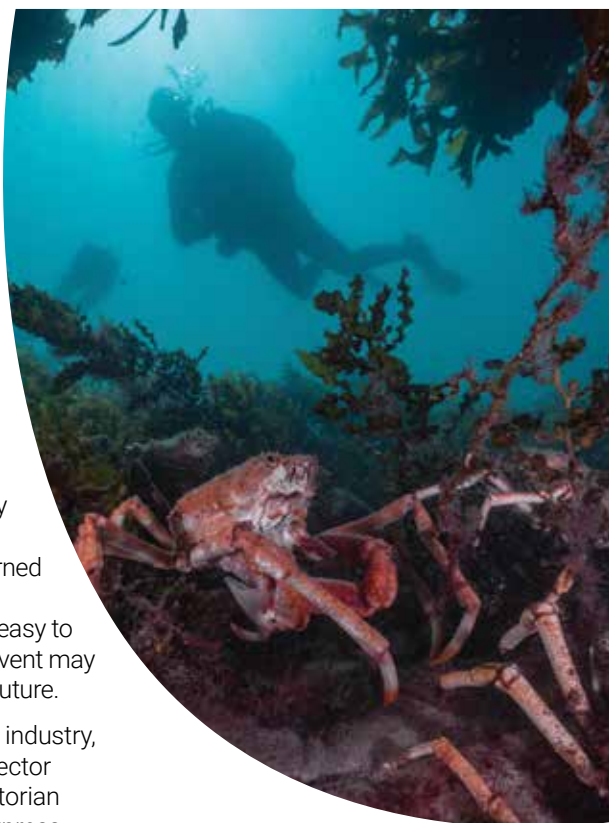


PHOTO: MATT TESTONI

fishing Spider Crabs in their peak moulting season. It would be prudent to take a precautionary approach to protect the aggregation and the benefits brought by the visitation to the local economy. The VFA's automatic assumption of abundance and the statement that "lots of crabs get to moult", as quoted in a recent article in *The Age*, is disappointing to many.

Fears for the future of the Spider Crab Aggregation partly stems from events encountered by our South Australian neighbours. Over there, during the Giant Cuttlefish mating migration on the Spencer Gulf, populations were believed to have dropped by more than 90 per cent, which overlapped with a history of intensified fishing pressure. In response to community concern and action, fishing closures were implemented, reversing this decline. The Giant Cuttlefish population is now enjoying a strong recovery.

Due to the huge benefits the Spider Crab spectacle brings to tourism, local economies, and simple public enjoyment, balanced with the imminent and real threat it appears that fishing has on this prized crab – more consideration should be given to its management efforts.

Introducing an interim halt on fishing Spider Crabs during their critical aggregation period of March – July is a good start, at least until more research is undertaken to gain an understanding of the species population numbers.

We hope the VFA will see the huge value these Spider Crabs bring, and what is at risk. • PW

Spider Crab in net.



The letter from Sir David Attenborough calling for a halt on fishing Spider Crabs.



# Coopracambra National Park

PHOTO: LAURIE MORRISON, FLICKR CC

**GEOFF DURHAM** HELPS US 'VISIT' A NATIONAL PARK FROM HOME.

Coopracambra – the very name is enticing.

Les Blake in *Place Names of Victoria* says 'Coopracambra' is an Aboriginal name for kookaburra.

Situated in East Gippsland on the border with New South Wales, this is the most remote and least visited national park in the state. I had driven along the spectacular Monaro Highway, which borders it on the west, and been driven into it on one occasion on an inspection with the National Parks Advisory Council, but for me it was – and remains – largely unknown territory.

Why then am I writing an 'In Parks' article about it? Particularly when it is closed to visitors as a result of the 2019/2020 bushfires which almost completely burnt the park?

Years ago I asked a dedicated VNPA Member, the late Valda Trenberth, who was confined to a wheelchair, why she was so interested in parks

when she couldn't visit them. She said "I want to know they are there for the birds and animals, and that someone is looking after them". You don't have to visit parks to appreciate them; hence this article.

I tracked down Stephen Johnston, a past President of the VNPA now living in Perth, who I knew had led extended overnight VNPA walks in the park. He had this to say:

"I led three four-day walks for the VNPA in Coopracambra down the Genoa River between 1987 and 1991 and organised a base camp just outside the north-eastern boundary of the park in 1989. To walk down the Genoa is to really experience isolation. Apart from one old fire access track running down to the river from the WB Line Road, there were no other tracks into the core wilderness area, which is one of the most intact in Victoria. But access along the river is generally not difficult

with sandy beaches separating extensive rocky sections, occasional waterfalls and high cliffs. Despite the Genoa catchment draining farmland and pine forests, the water quality was remarkably good and weed infestation was limited.

"Thick fire regrowth scrub was the only significant challenge on our side-walks up the surrounding mountains, the best of which was Mount Coopracambra, the highest point in the park at 1103 metres. At the summit we encountered a beautiful grove of flowering Gippsland Waratahs and a large rock slab on the western side from which there were extensive views south to the second highest mountain in the park, Mount Kaye."

There is a dearth of information about the park on the Parks Victoria website. I have a hard copy of the 1998 Management Plan, but it is not possible to access this, nor is there an old-style Visitor Guide – only a basic map. Much



of the following information is taken from the management plan.

Coopracambra was a Land Conservation Council (LCC) recommended park. Coopracambra State Park (14,500 hectares) was created in 1979 following the LCC East Gippsland Recommendations, and became Coopracambra National Park (now 38,800 hectares) in 1988 following the LCC East Gippsland Area Review. It contains a 19,400-hectare Wilderness Zone and four Reference Areas. The Genoa River which winds through the park is a Heritage River. Primeval fossil footprints in its sandstone gorge are of international significance.

The north-eastern border of the park is the Black-Allan Line, the straight border between Victoria and New South Wales from Cape Howe to the headwaters of the Murray River. Between 1870 and 1872, Alexander Black and Alexander Allan surveyed the boundary, marking the

border with cairns. Adjacent is the 115,177-hectare South East Forests National Park on the NSW side.

The park can be reached from Wangarabell in the south east, or from the Monaro Highway at Chandlers Creek, from where there is a one hour walk to Beehive Falls. The gravel 2WD WB Line Track (sometimes 4WD) passes through the park between Chandlers Creek and Wangarabell.

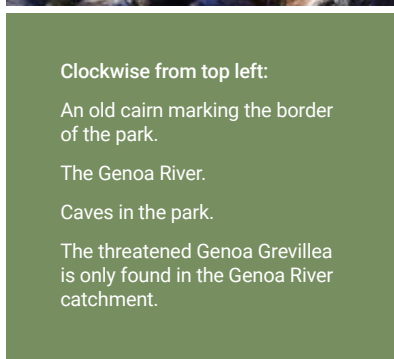
The park has 13 Ecological Vegetation Classes ranging from rainforest to heathland. As always, the vegetation is related to the geology and landform – Ordovician and Devonian sediments in the east, and Devonian granite in the west. The Genoa River and various remote creeks have waterfalls, rapids and cascades.

The park is fire-prone and has been subject to major wildfires. The recent fire will have severely impacted the vegetation and fauna, with who knows what consequences to its rare, endangered and vulnerable species.

The management plan says that pest plants are not widespread, but the Genoa River has been badly affected by willows and blackberry, Morning Glory, Sweet Briar and poplars thought to originate from settlements and farmland upstream in New South Wales. Pest animals are listed as including the rabbit, fox, wild dog, goat, pig, house mouse, black rat and cat. Sambar and Fallow deer are also present. Parks Victoria has pest control programs.

Jane Calder, in *Parks - Victoria's State and National Parks*, published by the VNPA, says the special features of the park are its remoteness and spectacular scenery, especially Genoa Gorge. For experienced and well-equipped bushwalkers the park is challenging and rewarding.

We may not have visited, or indeed ever visit, Coopracambra, but – like Valda Trenberth – we are comforted in knowing that it is there. • PW



Clockwise from top left:

An old cairn marking the border of the park.

The Genoa River.

Caves in the park.

The threatened Genoa Grevillea is only found in the Genoa River catchment.



# AUSTRALIAN MAGPIE

Some may be familiar with the Australian Magpie (*Gymnorhina tibicen*) as the bird that swoops cyclists, others may appreciate their delightful early morning warbling – these iconic black and white birds are certainly commonly encountered in our day to day lives.

Magpies are found almost anywhere and everywhere in Australia; we often share our backyards or local parks with them.

There are nine subspecies of magpies in Australia, each with a unique feather pattern. In southern Victoria, adults will be seen with mostly white backs, whereas in the north their bodies are almost entirely black.

Magpies walk along the ground searching for insects, larvae and other invertebrates.

They construct nests in trees about 15 metres above ground, built out of small branches, twigs and sticks and then lined with hair and grass.

Magpies breed in late August to October, and during this time fathers keep watch over the nests for four to six weeks on high alert for any intruders or perceived threats to the nest. Swooping is not a random attack, rather, it is a defensive action from a protective father when an unknown intruder is near the nest and assumed to intend harm.

The Australian Magpie has one of the most complex bird songs, musical and flute-like. They are also clever mimics.

Australian Magpies are considered to be one of the smartest bird species in the world. Many can be found in tight social groups of up to 25 birds of varying ages. It has been found that magpies existing in these large groups are more intelligent than those who live separately. They have been witnessed engaging in social play with each other, humans, toys and even with pets. If you watch them closely in your backyard or local park you may be able to observe their entertaining behaviour.

We can get to know magpies so well because once they find a suitable place to live, they will occupy this territory for life, which can be up to 25 years. Magpies remember individual human faces, meaning it is possible for us to form complex and lasting relationships with them. It requires recurring kindness to build trust, but once a bond has been made, you have earned a friend for life.

Keep an eye out for this Australian icon in your backyard or local park. You can also submit your sightings to iNaturalist [www.inaturalist.org](http://www.inaturalist.org) • PW





# Just add water

REEFWATCH'S **NICOLE MERTENS** VISITED BENDIGO, A DECIDEDLY LAND-LOCKED CITY, FOR A MARINE EXPERIENCE WITH A TWIST.

Our Great Victorian Fish Count, held every year in November–December, is the biggest marine citizen science event in the state. Groups survey their local patch all along the Victorian coastline, from rocky reefs and seagrass beds to the sponge gardens found underneath piers and marinas. In doing so, they get a chance to explore these habitats and discover the unique marine animals that live in our southern coastal waters.

But if you can't dive or snorkel, or live far from the beach, it's hard to imagine the truly spectacular world that exists just below the surface. How can we experience marine systems without getting wet? In great news for those that don't visit the coast too often, technology is now allowing us to "dive in" from the comfort of our homes and classrooms.

Last year the Great Victorian Fish Count focused on promoting our Great Southern Reef, an

interconnected system of rocky reefs covered in sponges and algae, and home to many of the fish species that we target in our surveys. While the Great Southern Reef can be visited from almost anywhere along the Victorian coast, we have a special patch of reef located in the middle of Port Phillip Bay beloved by snorkelers and divers – Pope's Eye, in the Port Phillip Heads Marine Park.

Pope's Eye was constructed in the 1880s as the foundation for an island fort intended to protect the entrance to the bay from enemy ships. But before it was finished, advances in naval gunnery meant that Port Phillip could be protected from existing forts nearby, and the foundation was abandoned to the wild. This horseshoe-shaped bluestone structure is now a fully functioning reef, complete with kelp forest and home to a myriad of fish and invertebrates. It is also Victoria's oldest marine reserve, protected since 1979.

The Nature Conservancy installed cameras at Pope's Eye a few years ago, and anyone can view the livestream of what's happening both above and below the surface from the ReefCam. From gannets and cormorants roosting on the rocks and jetty platform, to the fish and rays that foraging in the algae forests – if you're very lucky, you might even see a seal diving for food, or a diver giving the camera a wave.

We realised there was an untapped resource here; nothing was stopping us using the live footage to conduct a 'virtual' survey during the Great Victorian Fish Count.

Bendigo, in central Victoria, is approximately 200 kilometres from Pope's Eye. It is also my home town, and I always lamented how far we were from the beach. I would have been ecstatic to have a window into the bay like ReefCam. So it seemed fitting to visit classes at Bendigo's



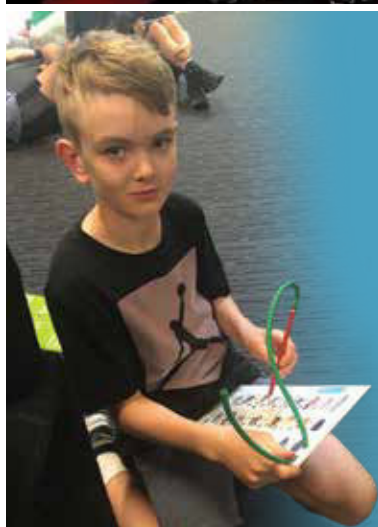
PHOTO: KADE MILLS

An virtual glimpse of the underwater world.



PHOTOS: SHAREE DALTON

Junior 'Fish Counters' at St Kilian's Primary School.



*"I wish I could count fish every day at school! I enjoyed seeing so many different species and it was great to hear about more than just the Great Barrier Reef. I learnt something new, that there is also a Southern Reef. It has different water temperature, fish species and plants. It sounds like an amazing ecosystem. I love fish!"*

Will Runnalls, student at St Kilian's Primary School  
(and proud caretaker of 36 fish at home!)

Quarry Hill and St Kilian's primary schools to pilot a Virtual Fish Count program.

They had done their homework, and had impressive fish identification skills – students in years one and two were able to tell their Magpie Perch from their Old Wives, and their Scalyfins from Sea Sweep. A sense of wonder began to emerge, as students gasped and laughed at all the different species that swam by the rotating camera. Some had a very keen eye, spotting a juvenile Senator Wrasse that darted out from shelter and disappeared again moments later.

The results of our Virtual Fish Counts were entered into the Atlas of Living Australia ([www.vnpa.org.au/reefwatch-biocollect](http://www.vnpa.org.au/reefwatch-biocollect)) along with all the other results from 2019. Students can visit the Atlas to compare results of counts at various sites, or see what other classes found at Pope's Eye on different dates or times.

Extra special for the classrooms was that the camera could be piloted manually during the Virtual Fish Count, allowing us to follow fish as they drifted past and swivelling in all directions to try and find any hiding in the kelp. The idea that we were controlling a camera, attached to an underwater habitat hundreds of kilometres away, was as exciting for some students as being a marine scientist for the day was for others, and really showed how citizen science can be a great way for schools to introduce a range of STEM topics to their classrooms.

We talked about the uniqueness of our southern reef systems and the threats they face: climate change, invasive species, overfishing, and pollution were all issues that the students identified and discussed. By showing what's out there, and what's at stake, we can create connections between people and

the environments we hope to better protect. Hopefully, opportunities like ReefCam and the Great Victorian Fish Count inspire a new generation of marine scientists and custodians. • PW

### Nature At Home

Would you also like to "dive in" to Pope's Eye? For a link to some of the footage from our Virtual Fish Counts and more info on the ReefCam project visit [www.vnpa.org.au/fish-count](http://www.vnpa.org.au/fish-count). If your school, business or community group would be interested in taking part in a Virtual Fish Count, please contact [nicole@vnpa.org.au](mailto:nicole@vnpa.org.au) to discuss options, including how to conduct this activity as a remote learning exercise.



# Nature at home

## FAMILY ACTIVITIES FOR CONNECTING WITH NATURE INSIDE OR OUT IN THE YARD

### Adventures

1. **Home camping** – Set up your tent in the backyard or build a fort inside and camp out for the night. Make a list of five things you would usually do on a camping trip and try to come up with an alternative way to do them home camping.
2. **Adventure book** – Go through photos from walks or camping trips you've been on in the past and use them to create a book together about the things that happened. You could do this online or with printed photos.
3. **The places we'll go** – Research a Victorian national park you've never been to. Create a list of what you could do and what you might see when you go there.



### Projects

4. **Animal home** – Choose a native animal and build a home inside out outside your house that you think it would like to live in. Think about what they would need for the home to be safe. If it's big enough you could use it as a cubby.
5. **Mini forest** – Use things you find in your yard or anything else like blocks to create a mini forest. Think about what you would like in your forest, like tall trees and small trees, native animal homes, flowers, fungi.
6. **Stick and leaf critters** – Collect some sticks and leaves and use them to create pictures or sculptures of your favourite native animals.
7. **Leaf art** – Pick leaves to create leaf rubbings with crayon, or draw a detailed picture of an interesting leaf. Take time to notice the details.
8. **Growing nature** – Count how many plants there are in your garden. Plant some seeds in a pot and watch them grow.

### Looking for nature

9. **Watch birds** – Watch them closely. How many different types of birds can you spot? What are they doing? What sounds are they making? When are they visiting (time of day or season)?
10. **Sky gazing** – Lay back and watch the clouds or stars. Look for shapes you recognise.
11. **Nature through the window** – Keep a note pad by the window to record signs of nature passing by, like traveling insects or colours changing as the sun sets.
12. **What's under here?** – Carefully turn over rocks or logs in your garden. Who is hiding under there? Remember to always keep your hands where you can see them.
13. **Special tree** – Find a tree in your yard or street. Give it a nice big hug! You can also tell it a secret or about your day.



### Playing

14. **Dig in the mud** – Create a spot for digging and playing in the mud in the yard.
15. **Wildlife documentary** – Make your own 'wildlife documentary' with members of your family being the narrators, scientists and animals. You could research facts to include, or focus entirely on pretending.