

PARK WATCH

NEW NATIONAL PARKS FOR VICTORIA!



**SPECIAL FEATURE EDITION
ON NEW PROTECTIONS FOR
THE FORESTS OF THE CENTRAL WEST**

THE ANNOUNCEMENT — GOOD AND BAD
NEXT STEPS FOR OUR CAMPAIGN

SEPTEMBER 2021 NO 286



**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 or call us on (03) 9341 6500.

EDITOR Meg Sobey

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The forests of the central west are truly special. Turn to page 4-13 for our feature on the recent developments for their protection. Photo: Sandy Scheltema.

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Authorised by Matt Ruchel, Executive Director, Victorian National Parks Association.
Level 3, 60 Leicester St, Carlton, VIC 3053.

The Victorian National Parks Association acknowledges the many First Peoples of the area now known as Victoria, honours their continuing connection to, and caring for, Country, and supports Traditional Owner joint-management of parks and public land for conservation of natural and cultural heritage.

Our office is located on traditional land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. We offer our respect to Elders past, present and future.

Park Watch is printed on FSC certified paper.

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From the President



There has been much excitement following the state government's announcement of the creation of new national parks and conservation reserves in the central west of Victoria. After years of campaigning, dating back to the 1990s, the VNPA and many community partners welcome these announcements.

The 18-month delay in the government response to the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council's (VEAC) recommendations, however, has not resulted in a satisfactory result. While most of the proposed parks in the Wombat Forest area will be established, there have been significant changes made to the proposed protection of the Wellsford, Mount Cole and Pyrenees forests.

Astonishingly, areas acknowledged to have conservation values worthy of national park status will be sacrificed to the rapacious greed of the forestry industry, and be subject to clearfell logging before incorporation into parks at some time in the future. The ancient, precious and rare trees of Wellsford Forest will continue to be at risk from inappropriate uses. As a consequence, VNPA will need to continue our vigilance against inappropriate intrusions and advocate for protection of these special places. Please go to pages 4-13 for a full explanation from our staff.

VNPA has been engaged in the updating of the Victorian Code of Timber Production. Thousands of small changes have been proposed to this code, which provides the guide to how forestry should be conducted. It is one thing to try to obtain a modern and environmentally sensitive code, but another for this code to be faithfully followed. More details are provided on pages 16-18.

Inappropriate developments in our national parks continue to put pressure on natural values. Interests from the tourism industry, aided and abetted by government tourism departments, seem to assume that national parks are unused, wasted land, for which they are entitled to appropriate for their own financial gain. They overlook the fact that specific legislation has committed the land in perpetuity for conservation purposes. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature regards National Park status as the highest level for the protection of land for conservation. The land is not uncommitted or "vacant". Turn to pages 24-25 for more.

Volunteers have been working to protect nature in Victoria since at least the 1880s and their efforts are reflected in the establishment of our many protected areas, national parks and Friends groups. As a community organisation, VNPA still provides much volunteer support for parks, which is a benefit to the entire community and to the tourism industry. VNPA facilitated the establishment of many Friends groups and this network evolved into the Victorian Environmental Friends Network (VEFN).

In Victoria, environmental volunteers provide for free over 20 different types of support, often based on members' professional and technical knowledge, including planting, weeding, citizen science, public events, management advice, grant writing, planning input and interpretation.

This year Parks Victoria has developed a new Volunteers Manual. Unfortunately, it introduces a 'one size fits all' system for all volunteers in the parks estate that goes beyond standard legal requirements and will create barriers for volunteer recruitment and involvement.

The VEFN and the VNPA are not happy with what should be a symbiotic relationship with Parks Victoria. What we do not need is a volunteer management system that discourages committed citizens from helping our parks. Overly legalist and bureaucratic approaches will be counterproductive. What we want is good planning and management of our conservation estate with good facilitation of volunteers in a collaborative manner to help citizens make worthwhile contributions.

Victoria recently experienced unprecedented wild gales and storms which wreaked widespread damage on forests in parts of Gippsland, the Dandenongs and around Macedon Ranges (see pages 22-23). As well as the loss of giant old trees, local infrastructure such as walking tracks and bridges have been destroyed. For example, in the Dandenong Ranges National Park Sherbrooke Forest, it will take years to replace essential bridges, which will prevent many locals and visitors from enjoying popular nature walks in the forest. Lack of resources provided by the government to Parks Victoria is again impacting their ability to properly maintain existing park infrastructure. VNPA has called on the government to provide one per cent of revenue to properly fund parks statewide. To support VNPAs campaign, please contact your local member to advocate for improved funding for Parks Victoria.

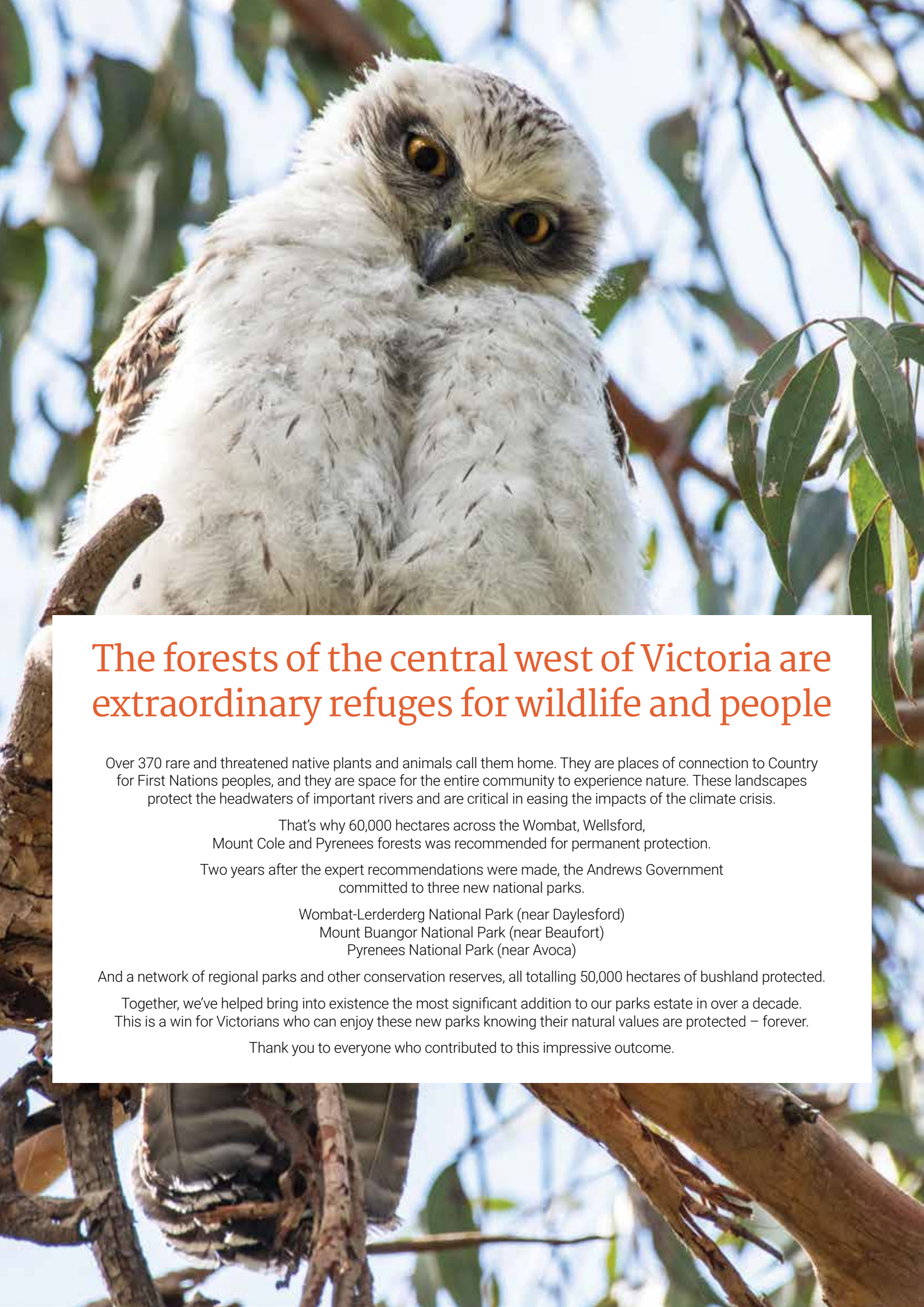
The VNPA Council and staff are very grateful for the generosity of our loyal supporters and donors who make our nature conservation work possible. Our end of financial year fundraising targets have been met despite the impact of the pandemic. None of our work is possible without your continuing support, so on behalf of Council and staff, I sincerely thank you for standing with us • PW

Bruce McGregor, VNPA President



NEW NATIONAL PARKS FOR VICTORIA!

Permanent protection for 50,000 hectares of forests in the state's central west is the most significant addition to our parks estate in over a decade.



A young Powerful Owl, one of over 370 threatened species in the forests of the central west.

The forests of the central west of Victoria are extraordinary refuges for wildlife and people

Over 370 rare and threatened native plants and animals call them home. They are places of connection to Country for First Nations peoples, and they are space for the entire community to experience nature. These landscapes protect the headwaters of important rivers and are critical in easing the impacts of the climate crisis.

That's why 60,000 hectares across the Wombat, Wellsford, Mount Cole and Pyrenees forests was recommended for permanent protection.

Two years after the expert recommendations were made, the Andrews Government committed to three new national parks.

Wombat-Lerderderg National Park (near Daylesford)
Mount Buangor National Park (near Beaufort)
Pyrenees National Park (near Avoca)

And a network of regional parks and other conservation reserves, all totalling 50,000 hectares of bushland protected.

Together, we've helped bring into existence the most significant addition to our parks estate in over a decade. This is a win for Victorians who can enjoy these new parks knowing their natural values are protected – forever.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to this impressive outcome.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR **MATT RUCHEL** AND DIGITAL CAMPAIGNER **JESSIE BORRELLE** EXPLAIN HOW THE RECENT ANNOUNCEMENT IS ... COMPLICATED.

It was an overcast Thursday morning, shaping up to be a very ordinary (COVID-normal) work day – until we received an unexpected call. Our state Environment Minister was about to finally table a response in parliament to the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council's (VEAC) Central West Investigation.

The contents of their pending response, like the reasons for the 18-month delay in its delivery, were a mystery to us. All the pressure our supporters, staff and community had applied over those long months had so far resulted in nothing but scripted non-answers from the environment department. We didn't know if they would accept all, some, or none of the expert independent recommendations to create new national parks across 60,000 hectares of native forests and woodlands in the state's central west.

The quiet months after the Victorian Government officially tabled the VEAC recommendations now seem a different time, a different world. A world before the Black Summer bushfires ravaged our landscapes, consuming habitat, wildlife, property and lives. A world before a ruthless virus took the everyday hostage, with no sign of setting its captives free anytime soon.

To nature-lovers, community, scientists and conservationists, the gravity of these events only reinforced the urgency of protecting swathes of unburnt forests across the west. Having avoided the catastrophic bushfires, they became vital refuges for wildlife, like the Greater Glider and Powerful Owl, that lost substantial populations in the east (see vnpa.org.au/after-the-fires-report). As Victorians turned to green spaces for respite from the sombre notifications of the health crisis, a renewed appreciation of nature unfurled. (See vnpa.org.au/covid_parks_polling).

If, as they say, a week is a long time in politics, the almost two years we waited for a formal decision on such a critical issue seemed like an aeon. To say it was worth the wait would be too much of a simplification of the substance of the government's response. The best way to describe our reaction might be: hesitantly relieved and pleased – but also disappointed at the contradictory logic embedded in the response.

The big picture:

All in all, the Andrews Government announced it accepts in principle, or accepts in part, 76 of 77 recommendations made in VEAC'S Central West Investigation Final Report.

They are committing to creating the new Wombat-Lerderderg National Park, Mount Buangor National Park and Pyrenees National Park, along with other parks and reserves, including a new regional park at Wellsford near Bendigo. The response was formally tabled in Victorian Parliament on 24 June 2021.

As Victoria confronts alarming rates of ecosystem decline, bushfire recovery and the real-time impacts of climate change, the intention to create new national parks could not come at a better time. Permanent protection is a critical step in managing natural areas for the future.

These new parks will safeguard core habitats in one of our most fragmented landscapes. They'll be good for both the natural environment and for local economies – as evidenced in our economic report on the myriad values of prospective new parks (see vnpa.org.au/new-central-west-parks-economic-assessment).

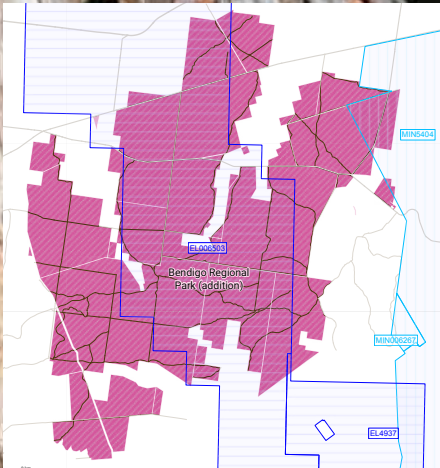
The state government's stated intention to create three of the four recommended national parks for Victoria will eventually add 50,000 hectares into Victoria's parks estate. While less than VEAC recommended, these additions will grant permanent protection to over 370 rare and threatened plants and animals that depend on (and are integral to) these forests. We're also pleased to see the inclusion of a new small Wimmera River Heritage Area included at Mount Cole.

The government reassured recreational users that four-wheel driving, trail-bike riding, mountain biking, bushwalking, picnicking and nature observation opportunities will not be impacted, regardless of the fact they were never going to be. They also emphatically pointed to the retention of seasonal, recreational deer hunting in the Wombat-Lerderderg and Pyrenees National Parks, in areas currently permitted, with some restrictions.

Continued overleaf

Greater Gliders and their tree-hollow homes will now be protected in a national park.
Photo: Josh Bowell

Wellsford Forest



Continued from previous page

While the Andrews Government has committed to their creation, it will still take a long time with multiple steps, and potential setbacks, for these areas to receive the full protections of formal, finalised national parks status.

If we do see these extraordinary forests added to Victoria's wonderful parks estate, it will be the most significant inclusion in over a decade – a milestone for nature if the obstacle course of political hurdles is overcome.

Can you have your parks and log them too?

The decision has come with strings attached. Tugging a little harder at those strings reveals a convoluted, regressive and mixed set of outcomes, not in line with many of VEAC's expert recommendations.

An especially disturbing departure from the final recommendations is the gross twisting of VEAC's implementation timeline. We are alarmed to see that the proposed parks will be logged before being established at some mercurial yet-to-be-specified date. This was not contemplated by VEAC, nor ever discussed during any of the consultation phases.

Continued extensive logging of the forests at Mount Cole (the proposed Mount Buangor National Park) and Pyrenees (the proposed Pyrenees National Park) is deeply worrying. There will be some targeted logging in the Wombat Forest, but this is to be fairly restricted.

The plan to log many of these critical wildlife refuges before turning them into national parks (as late as 2030) doesn't make any sense. Especially when there is decades of wood supply existing outside of the proposed park areas. More importantly, aren't we supposed to be phasing out native forest logging according to the Andrews Government's Victorian Forestry Plan?

It's disappointing, and frankly egregious, to see the Victorian Labor Government doggedly pursuing native forest logging, a small-minded position directly at odds with community values, a changing climate and the already profound loss of biodiversity across our state.

The creation of three new national parks, hopefully jointly managed by Traditional Owners, and a parcel of new regional parks and conservation areas, is a cause for celebration. But to acknowledge the forests are worthy of protection on one hand while revving up logging machinery on the other is contrary, to say the least.

The details:

For many local conservation groups, this muted triumph has been over 15 years in the making. For others, and the places they have fought so long and hard to protect, it's an underwhelming outcome.

In what is a glaringly politically-motivated measure, the implementation of our new national parks will be staggered. Some parts of proposed parks, such as Mount Cole and Pyrenees, may not be created until 2030, well after they are unnecessarily logged.

Most regional parks, along with significant areas of proposed national parks, will be available for "commercial thinning" (managing the forest to create thicker logs) and "selective logging" (mostly for commercial firewood and, in one instance, wood chop logs) until native forest logging is phased out in 2030.

Proposed changes to the current Special Protection Zones in the Pyrenees that protect forests from logging are some of the most cynical aspects of the Victorian Government's response.

Wombat Forest

Overall, the announcement was positive for Wombat Forest – especially so for members of Wombat Forestcare, whose endless dedication to protection for their local forest contributed greatly to the outcome.

They will see the creation the Wombat-Lerderderg National Park protecting 45,000 hectares, which combines the existing Lerderderg State Park with an additional 24,000 hectares.

The size of the national park was reduced by 4855 hectares from the original VEAC recommendations, which will now become Barkstead Regional Park. Additions to Hepburn Regional Park and the creation of Spargo Creek Regional Park, Blackwood Regional Park and Fingerpost Regional Park have been accepted – but will allow continued commercial firewood production and domestic firewood collection.

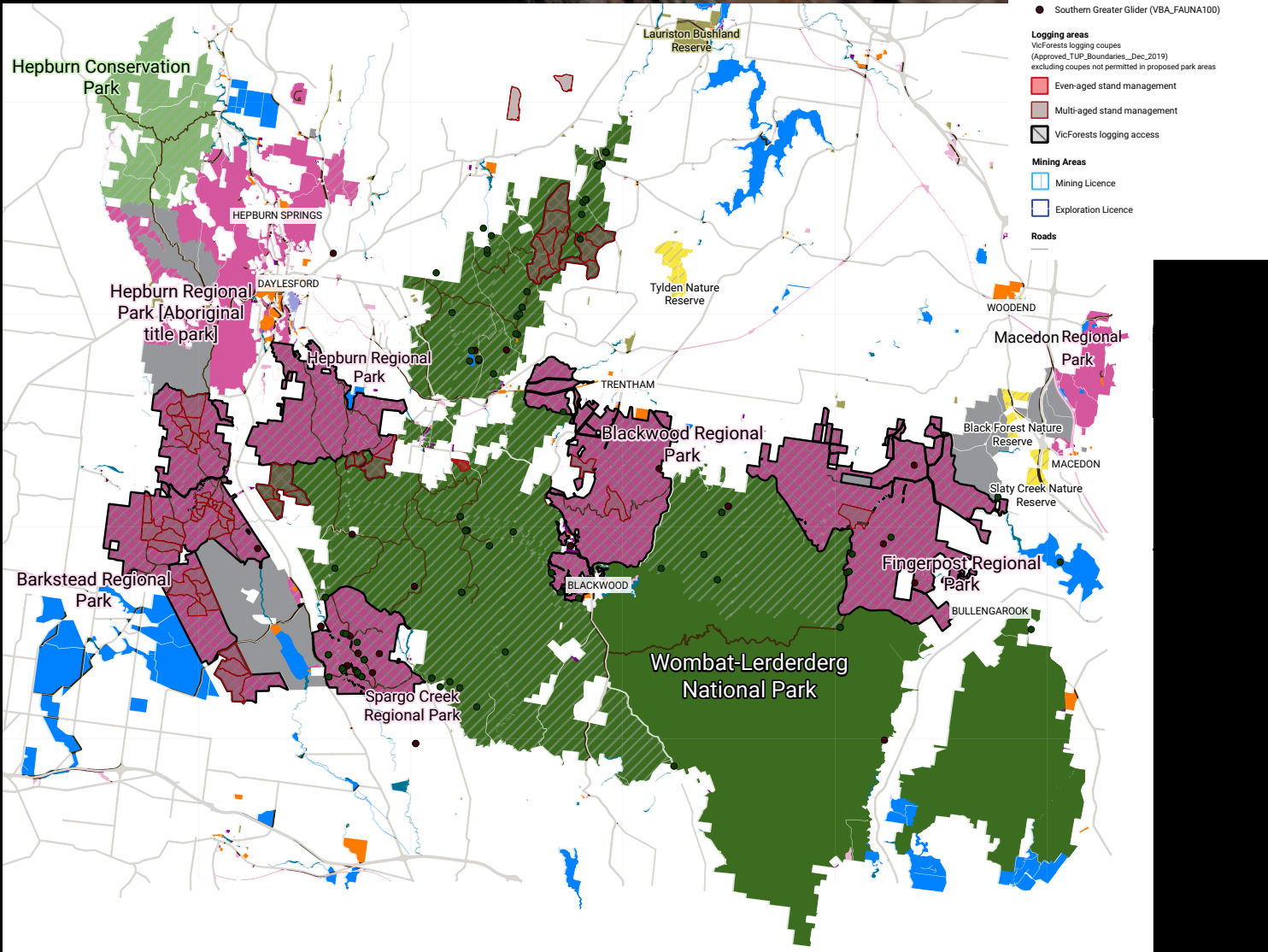
Worryingly, in the proposed national park, 18 logging coupes have been retained, covering a huge 1206 hectares.

Wellsford Forest

The government does not accept the recommendation to expand the existing Greater Bendigo National Park, and instead this area will be added to the existing Bendigo Regional Park. This outcome for Wellsford Forest is of great concern, especially for locals and conservationists who wanted to see the forest safeguarded in the recommended national park.

Continued overleaf

Wombat Forest



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Failure to give parts of the Wellsford Forest national park status may leave it more vulnerable to mining development, domestic firewood collection, and inappropriate recreational use.

Regional parks are primarily geared to "provide opportunities for informal recreation for large numbers of people associated with the enjoyment of natural or semi-natural surroundings or semi-natural open space". Environmental protection is a secondary purpose in this context, and instead of ecological objectives given precedence, they need to be "consistent with" recreational activities.

There is some relief to be found in the protections afforded by the new status – primarily an immediate moratorium on commercial logging in the Wellsford Forest – but as regional parks are not formally part of the protected area network, this is somewhat of a lost opportunity.

Wellsford Forest will need to be closely monitored with a proper management plan for the impacts of growing recreational use in the area. Existing regional parks around Bendigo are not subject to joint management, and do not require park management plans like national parks, though Parks Victoria has the power to produce plans for them.

The existing Greater Bendigo National Park is one of six Aboriginal Title parks in central west Victoria, jointly managed by the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation and Parks Victoria. The national park is governed under a Joint Management Plan for the Dja Dja Wurrung Parks by the Dhekunya Dja Land Management Board.

The government supports the VEAC recommendation for joint management of central west parks "...in principle, subject to further consultation with Traditional Owner groups, including the three Traditional Owner group entities to whom the State has already made, or committed to make, grants of Aboriginal title under Part 3 of the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act 2010 (Vic)*" – essentially pushing the joint management arrangements into a separate process.

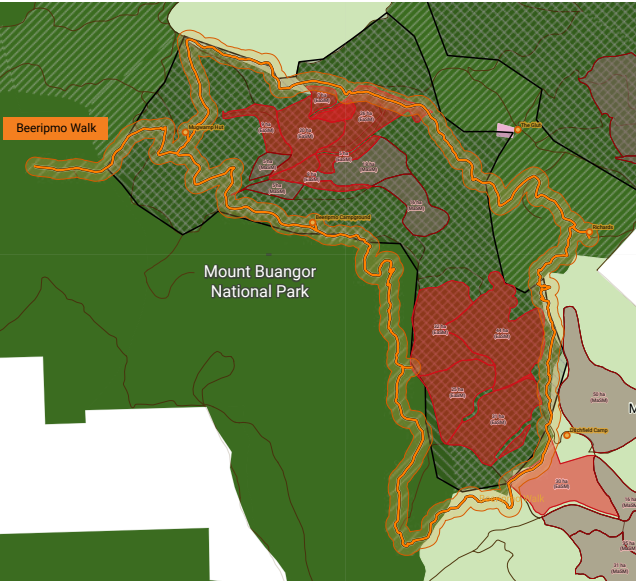
Mount Cole and Pyrenees Forests

The future of the Mount Cole and Pyrenees forests are the most uncertain and troubling. The creation of the Mount Buangor National Park and Pyrenees National Park will be staged to allow logging in large areas prior to incorporating those areas in the parks, which could take as long as 2030.

Unlike in Wombat, there isn't a specific list of coupes that remain; instead, we see entire areas open for logging. Logging coupes were increased at Mount Cole in 2017 and again under the new Timber Release Plan issued late 2019 – after the final VEAC report was tabled and the Andrews Government's Victorian Forestry Plan to phase out native forest logging was released.

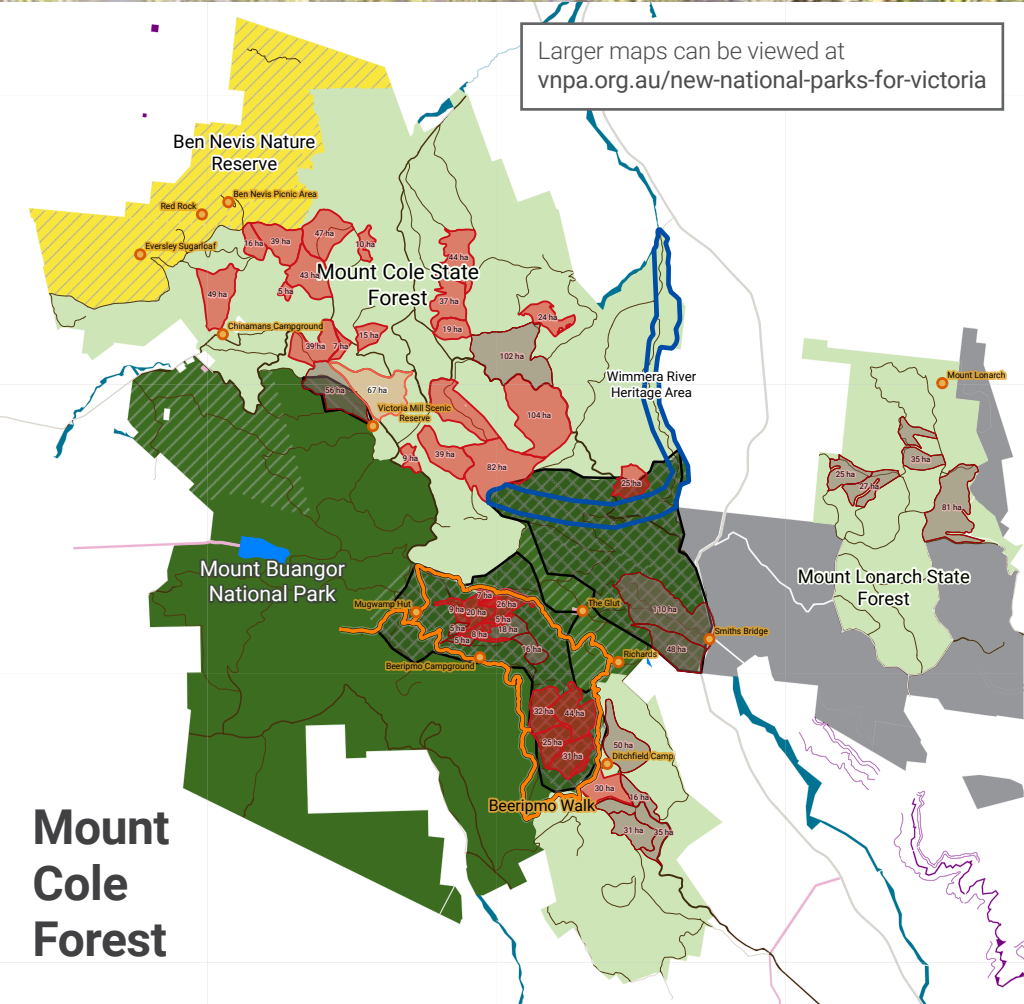
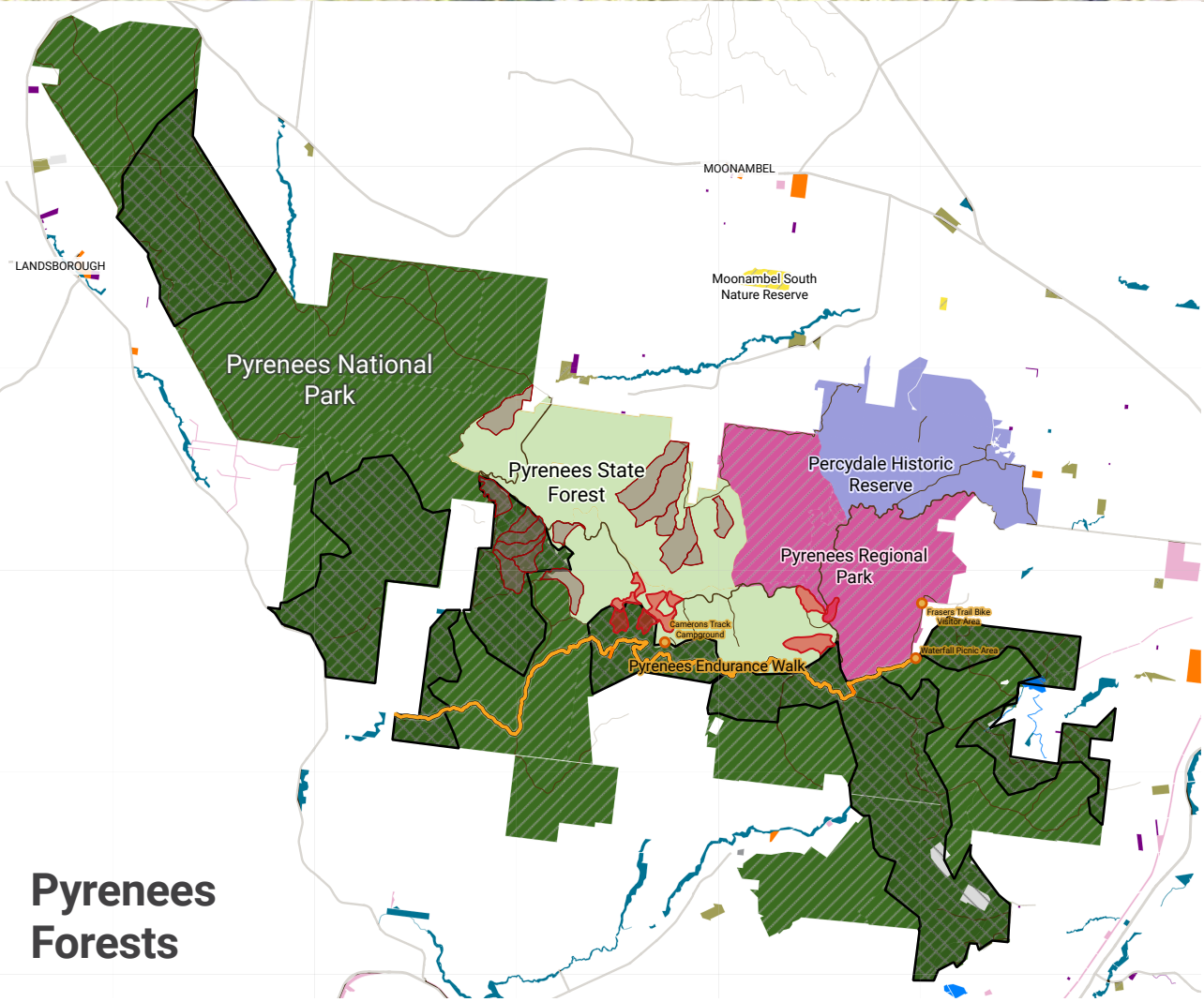
This Timber Release Plan increased both the number of logging coupes and the intensity of logging in the proposed national park, notably alongside the Beeripmo Walk – a popular and challenging 20-kilometre track that weaves through the tall forests and cool fern gullies of Mount Cole. Once slated for "selective logging" by VicForests, coupes alongside the walk are now listed for "even stand management" – that is, clearfell logging.

The Beeripmo Walk – and logging coupes



The government's decision to continue VicForests access to Mount Cole and the Pyrenees for logging operations (including clearfell) is both nonsensical and short-sighted. It's certain to damage integral habitat in these forests, further threaten plants and animals, and disrupt the enjoyability of the Beeripmo Walk, as well as other camping and walking areas, like the aptly named Endurance Walk in the Pyrenees.

Surely a generous level of cognitive dissonance, or a high degree of political arrogance, is required to recognise the national park values of the area while simultaneously locking in long-term clearfell logging. We're hugely disappointed by this colossal lack of foresight.



Continued from previous page

Logging in the west is not as closely scrutinised as it is in the eastern parts of the state. For example, standard pre-logging forest surveys for threatened species carried out in the east don't occur in the west, leaving citizen scientists – like those in our NatureWatch program – to pick up the slack and do the work government should be doing.

The response from our elected leaders on the Central West Investigation has illuminated the Andrews Government's position on nature conservation in Victoria, and cast their priorities in the harshest light. Logging first, nature later.

VEAC investigations are supposed to be the formal process for changing land tenure and protecting natural areas. Yet the Andrews Government has placed more weight on its (only four-page) Victorian Forestry Plan, entrenching decade-long logging in areas independently and expertly assessed to be worthy of national park status. Instead of hastening the transition out of native forest logging while progressing nature protection, the government again appears to have been gamed again by logging interests.

Eyes on the prize

What has become clear is that our work here is far from done. We need to be vigilant and do everything possible to protect the value of these important places. The Victorian Government's commitment is only the first step in the formal creation of these new parks; legislation now needs to be developed, pass both houses of parliament, and the parks formally gazetted.

The stunning Mount Cole Grevillea – critically endangered and found only in the forests of Mount Cole.



PHOTO: DAVID TATNALL

The implementation timeline is not clear enough, too slow, and could easily never happen in some places. It is unnervingly tethered to the state's phase-out of native forest logging, a drip-fed approach to squeeze as much timber from these forests and woodlands as possible before new national parks are realised.

The logging of areas proposed for national parks rich in threatened wildlife doesn't make sense, but it has been done before. In the 1980s, legislation to create the Alpine National Park had clauses that allowed "... once only logging to be carried out ..." after which areas are to be managed as part of the park". But the parks creation was legislated up front. While less than ideal, that was a better model than drip-feeding legislation to create parks after logging finishes as is the case for the central west.

The Andrews Government is facing an election next year, another in 2026, and again in 2030. It's difficult to take such commitments seriously when they may not be governing in 2030. We need to see a clear set of timeframes for the creation of these new parks before this term of government ends in November 2022.

If the Andrews Government is serious about its legacy and the proper protection of these incredible natural places, for current and future generations, it will commit to:

- Legislating all the proposed parks, upfront, in this term of government
- No, or significantly reduced, logging in proposed areas for new national parks
- Greater protection and management for the mighty Ironbark forests of Wellsford
- Election commitments reaffirming the delivery of these parks
- Introduction of pre-logging threatened species surveys in the Western RFA
- Completion of Action Statements for key threatened species
- Funding allocated specifically for park management
- A clear plan to manage domestic firewood supply sustainably across the state
- A speed-up of the transition to end native forest logging

While the government's position on the proposed new parks isn't the most ambitious or aspirational, we can not and will not let our elected representatives stall on their legislative and moral duty.

The Victorian National Parks Association community was instrumental in bringing home this long-fought for accomplishment. You helped forge a commitment to create the most significant addition to our parks estate in over a decade. This is no small feat – thank you. We hope you join us on the journey to make these parks a reality, for wildlife, habitat and people. • PW

Thank you!

Well done to everyone who has worked so passionately over many years to secure this protection for nature, and thank you to the Victorian National Parks Association community for supporting our work on this long campaign.

Tens of thousands of you:

- made a submission to VEAC in support of the recommendations through our online action tools
- came to our central west webinar about the importance of the national parks
- sent a set of three central west art posters to 85 Victorian MPs
- joined our social media pressure campaign on the two-year anniversary
- joined an online calling party asking the Environment Minister and local MPs to support the creation of new parks
- sent personalised Phascogale postcards to local Bendigo MP Jacinta Allan
- asked the Victorian Premier and Environment Minister to create new national parks immediately
- asked for central west national parks to protect Powerful Owls in Mount Cole
- asked for central west national parks to protect Wombat Forest's Greater Gliders
- called on VicForests not to clearfell the Beeripmo walk
- emailed the Environment Minister and the member for Macedon to support new parks, not native forest logging
- emailed their local MPs asking them to publicly support a Wombat-Lerderderg National Park
- emailed the Ministers of Cabinet to protect the wonders of the west, like the Mount Cole Grevillea
- signed an open letter in the media calling on the Premier to create the parks
- generously donated to power this campaign – thank you!

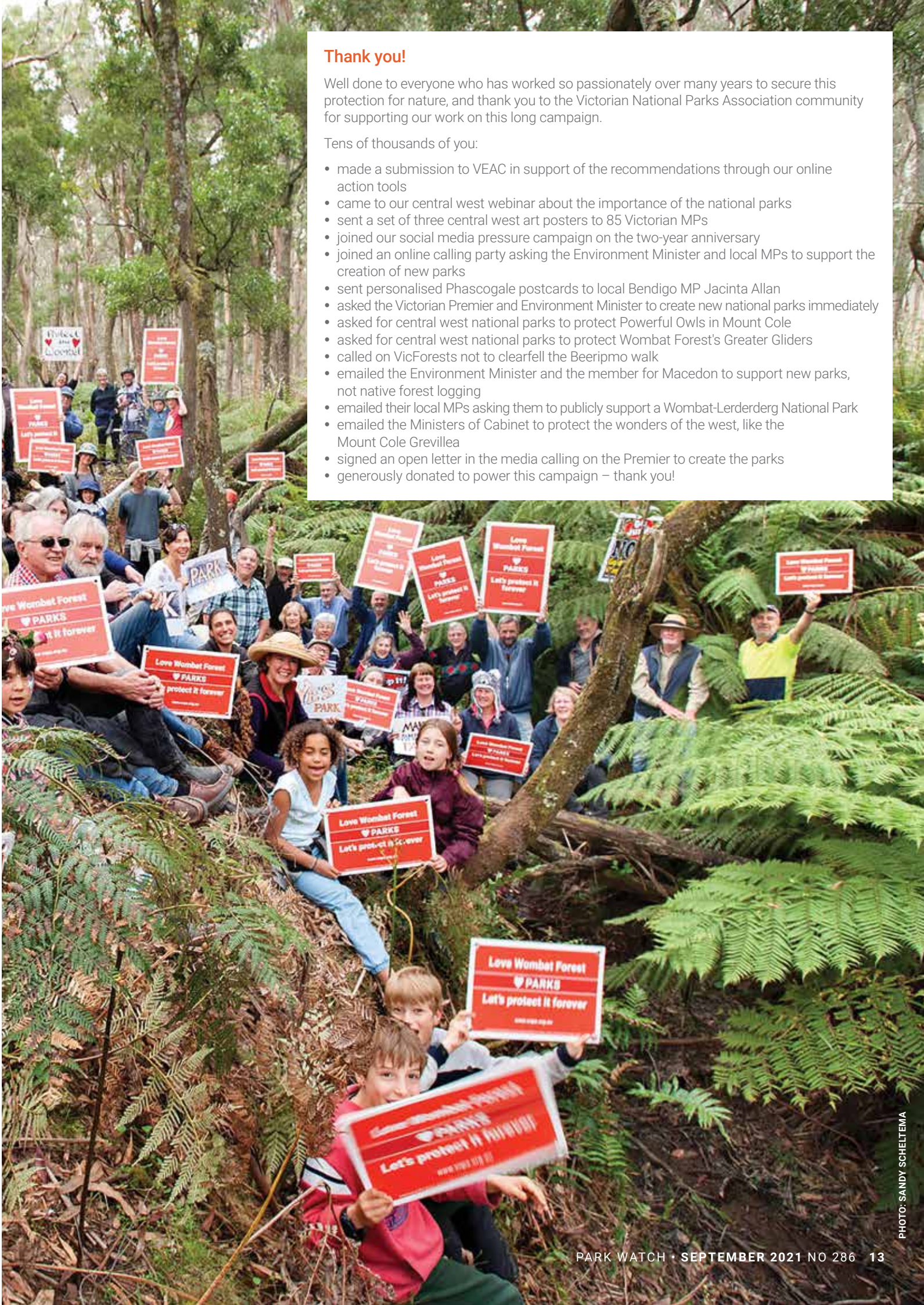


PHOTO: SANDY SCHEITEMA

COVID-19 Update

Our staff continue to work from home during the current lockdowns, and VNPA meetings, events and activities are being run online. For more details visit vnpa.org.au/covid-19 We can be contacted at vnpa@vnpa.org.au or on 03 9341 6500. • PW

Annual General Meeting ADVANCED NOTICE

VNPA's 69th Annual General Meeting will be held on **Tuesday 12 October 2021 at 6.30pm** via online zoom meeting. For more information and to RSVP see the enclosed flyer or vnpa.org.au/agm • PW

Spring 2021 Bushwalking and Activities Program

For the Spring 2021 program there is no printed version but you can easily find all of the upcoming activities available at vnpa.org.au/adventures

If you would like to receive updates, you can join the dedicated email list at vnpa.org.au/bwag-sign-up • PW

Staff update

We are grateful to John Kotsiaris for his fantastic contribution during an 18-month project position on staff. John provided valuable research and support to the campaigns team, including submissions for the 2019/20 bushfires and threatened species legislation in the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act* and the *Wildlife Act* review. John will continue to support the VNPA as a volunteer via the Conservation and Campaigns Committee.

At the end of August, we also farewelled our long-term Administration Officer Charlotte Kandelaars. See page 41 for a full profile on her time with the organisation.

Our Finance and Operations Manager Heath Richard will be taking on Long Service Leave from October, returning in April 2022. We have appointed Simon O'Connor to take on Heath's role while he is away. Simon has fantastic experience in a similar role at another nature conservation organisation.

We are currently in the recruitment process a new Office Coordinator.

We welcome new members of the team, NatureWatch Project Officer Rachel Nalliah and Elizabeth Morison as part of the Australia Institute's Anne Kantor Fellowship for Young Women Environmentalists. Please turn to page 32 and to the next page respectively for their full profiles.

We are very grateful to the donors and philanthropic organisations who have helped ensure we have extra staff at a time when nature in Victoria especially needs our efforts. • PW

PHOTO: SANDY SCHEITEMA

Welcome to the team

ELIZABETH MORISON HAS RECENTLY JOINED THE VICTORIAN NATIONAL PARKS ASSOCIATION AS PART OF THE AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE'S ANNE KANTOR FELLOWSHIP FOR YOUNG WOMEN ENVIRONMENTALISTS.

The Australia Institute is an independent think tank that conducts research to drive public debate and secure policy outcomes to make Australia better. The Fellowship aims to develop new voices to contribute to Australia's future environmental, climate change and nature conservation debates by providing young women environmentalists with opportunities to develop skills in policy, research, and advocacy.

We are so pleased to have Liz on the team and to be part of the fellowship program.

From Liz:

I am an environmental campaigner, working to secure the protection of nature through policy and legislation. My background is in the conservation and climate movements, with experience in community organising, fundraising, storytelling, and research and advocacy.

I have always been interested in climate and conservation, especially where they interlink. My Honours research specialisation was on how understorey plants respond to extreme climate events, particularly heat and drought stress. In a laboratory experiment, I found that when my study species was exposed to compounded heat and drought stress in spring, the mortality rate was high, but for those plants that survived a spring exposure, their ability to withstand a subsequent exposure to heat and drought stress in summer was much improved. As climate extremes occur at higher intensities and frequencies, species won't have evolutionary time to adapt, and instead will have to rely on individual resilience to multiple stressful events within their lifetimes. This shift from evolutionary adaptation to individual resilience is an area that I am especially interested in, and I am thrilled to join the Victorian National Parks Association with its strong focus on ecosystem resilience.

During my studies I was grateful to spend time in Canada and Costa Rica studying alpine, arctic, tropical and marine ecosystems in the field. Alongside the science I was learning, I found myself both grounded and motivated by the communities and movements that were working to protect these environments. I've worked in non-government advocacy organisations ever since.



Through these experiences, I understand that storytelling is the foundation of all good campaigns. I am passionate about science communication, and have worked as a content researcher for traditional media as well as a non-fiction book. I really enjoy uncovering the ideas and links that help others understand complex challenges, and finding the human stories that give narrative force to those concepts.

As I progress in my career, I am committed to creating meaningful, just, and lasting change in the fields of conservation and climate. Foundational to this commitment is a deep respect for Aboriginal Elders past, present and emerging, and the Gadigal country where I was raised, the Wodi Wodi country where I studied, and the Wurundjeri country where I now live. Sovereignty was never ceded and I am committed to strong allyship in every domain of my work.

I am really excited to join the Victorian National Parks Association for the Anne Kantor Fellowship, in a cohort of young people all working hard to make lasting change in their communities. I feel grateful to have the opportunity to contribute to the campaigns to protect nature, and bolster those campaigns with relevant research arising from working with The Australia Institute. During my very first week, we got word of the central west national parks win. Joining the team at this junction has been extremely motivating, and I am eager to contribute to the next stage of this campaign: stopping the logging of these important forests before they become legislated as national parks! • PW

VNPA is grateful for the support of the Australia Institute's Anne Kantor Fellowship for Young Women Environmentalists.

Clearfelling the Code

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR **MATT RUCHEL** AND NATURE CONSERVATION CAMPAIGNER **JORDAN CROOK** EXPLAIN HOW CHANGES TO LOGGING LAWS ARE BAD NEWS FOR FORESTS AND VERY BAD NEWS FOR COMMUNITIES WHO FIGHT FOR THE PROTECTION OF NATURE.

Anyone that knows the Code of Timber Production knows it protects the logging industry far better than our native forests.

This is why many community groups across Victoria have challenged poor interpretations and compliance of the Code in the courts over the years. At least when the logging industry broke these rules and put nature at risk, community groups could pursue justice through the law.

But now, the Victorian Government is trying to dilute the already weak and poorly enforced legal protections for forest wildlife, and silence community rights to hold illegal logging to account.

The Code of Timber Production (2014) and its associated Management Standards and Procedures are the key set of rules managing how native forest logging happens in Victoria.

The current clunky and opaque Code is a relic of the coalition state government who rushed through substantial changes to the earlier 2007 version only days before the caretaker period of the 2014 election.

The current Andrews Government withdrew proposed reforms to the Code in 2019 after environment groups, including VNPA, highlighted the wholesale removal of large sections of the Code by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning in response to ongoing legal challenges. At that time, the Minister for the Environment Lily D'Ambrosio responded that she "...acknowledged there are legitimate concerns around the draft reforms

to the code of practice for timber production and how they fit together" then intervened to "withdraw the current consultation" committing to further consultation on the total package of proposed changes.

Despite this previous backlash to their flawed plans, now the Andrews Government is again proposing reform to the Code. This has been formulated behind closed doors in consultation with the timber industry, and released in July to the public with only 28 days (half of that time in COVID lockdown) to understand and interpret 3000 highly technical changes among 350 pages of documents.

The Code in its existing form needs updating, but the current proposed changes would lead to an overall further eroding of protection of threatened species and forest ecosystems.

In a media release on 20 July 2020, the Victorian Government stated it had initiated a review of the Code to:

- "minimise the risk to short-term supply obligations arising from third-party litigation
- ensure it remains fit for purpose and facilitates the implementation of the Victorian Forestry Plan
- strengthen the regulatory powers available to the Conservation Regulator
- identify regulatory reforms informed by the 2019-20 bushfires."

This update of the Code should map out a clear transition out of native forest logging in Victoria as committed by the Andrews Government in its Victorian Forestry Plan. It should be a

genuine plan for removing logging from sensitive areas such as threatened species habitat, water catchments, important cultural heritage and recreational sites and within proximity to tourism assets. But instead, it facilitates further and increased destructive logging of these areas.

This process could have been a chance to start the phasing out logging in high conservation areas as the industry is wound down to its 2030 cessation, but seems to have been used as a last chance smash and grab of more native forests to feed the rapacious paper pulpers and saw millers.

The review is certainly aimed at diminishing legal protection and at reducing community legal cases. We summarised this in our submission as follows:

"Despite statements from the department to the effect that the review of the Code is limited to clarifying its operation and is not intended to change current standards or forest protection, examination of the material published for consultation demonstrates that this is not the case – this review proposed significant changes to current regulations covering logging in Victoria's forests."

If these plans go ahead, hundreds of dedicated zones designed to protect the habitat of threatened wildlife won't be governed by rules, but aspirational targets.

We hold concerns around many elements of the changes proposed by the state government, including a worrying increase of activities like constructing roads allowed in Special Protection Zones (SPZs) that will make it easier for logging operations to be conducted in areas such as where Leadbeater's Possums have been detected by citizen science groups.

Meanwhile, a Forest Management Zoning Accountability Framework 2021 is being sold by the environment department as a tool to manage and increase accountability of fixed zoning protections in state forests, but detaches it from the Code and leaves its enforcement and legal standing in a sense of doubt.

Much can be written about the proposed reform changes to the Code and their impact on forest ecosystems and wildlife. I would encourage you to read our submission on our website: vnpa.org.au/submission-code-of-practice-for-timber-production



PHOTO: VNPA

Logging in Mount Cole.

Big trees – little protection

THE PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE CODE OF TIMBER PRODUCTION INCLUDE ADDING NEW PROTECTIONS FOR LARGE TREES IN VICTORIA, WRITES JORDAN CROOK.

The Environment Minister first raised in 2018 that: “all native trees across the state greater than 2.5 metres in diameter would also be protected, whether they stood in forests or along roadsides” (ABC 2018). But this is not reflected in the inadequate and vague “protection” put forward in the proposed additions to the Code, and has no basis in basic tree protection or care. It mostly provides for only a three-metre buffer, nowhere near enough to protect a large tree, and is inconsistent with how large trees are dealt with in other settings.

The Australian Standard for Protection of Trees on Development Sites (AS4970 2009) is regularly used on development and work sites and in events and festival planning. The standard is widely used across state government sites and embedded in many local government planning schemes.

The standard involves the calculation of Tree Protection Zone (TPZ). TPZ is calculated using the diameter at breast height (DBH) or 1.4 meters above ground. Using this diameter multiplied by 12 (DBHx12=TPZ), a sufficient protection zone can be established to maintain the tree's viability and vigour.

AS4970 2009 restricts activities within the TPZ, including logging, using machinery, burning or radiant heat from post-logging burns, and allowing woody debris (“slash”) to build up around the trunk.



From little things, big things grow...

PHOTO: DAVE GALLAN

Using one well-known large tree as an example, the Whitelaw Tree in state forest near Mount Baw Baw, using its DBH of five meters multiplied 12 is a TPZ of 60 metres around the tree.

This is obviously far superior to the three-metre buffer proposed by the environment department.

Applying AS4970 2009 to protect large trees in logging coupes in our forests should be a bare minimum. It would not only result in the protection of large trees, but also make implementation and enforcement of

regulations easier for the Conservation Regulator.

This doesn't even consider that the use of diameter criteria for large tree categorisation neglects different vegetation types. For example, tree species in the woodlands of the western Forest Management Areas are not likely to reach 2.5 metres in diameter, but are still vital for wildlife habitat and are large trees for their vegetation types. There is a clear need to define what a 'large tree' is, incorporating the area and conditions the tree is found in, not just its diameter. • PW



A kangaroo and her joey after the fires in Mallacoota, Australia.

PHOTO: JO-ANNE MCARTHUR

THE VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT IS NOW CONDUCTING A MAJOR EVENT REVIEW ON THE IMPACT THE 2019-20 BUSHFIRES HAD ON NATIVE FORESTS AND THE LOGGING INDUSTRY.

It's hard to forget the intensity and unprecedented scale of the Black Summer fires. The impact on lives, homes, landscapes and wildlife is still difficult to comprehend. Many of the ecological consequences of the fires aren't yet understood.

Across Victoria, 1.25 million hectares burnt, including 18 per cent of our public native forests. 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.

In 2020, VNPA and East Gippsland community forest groups undertook an analysis of the impact of the fires, and the added burden of native forest logging on key unburnt areas. The findings were published in our report *After The Fires: Protecting Our Forest Refuges* (see vnpa.org.au/after-the-fires-report). We discovered 553 coupes covering over 20,000 hectares of forest are planned for logging in the coming months to years by VicForests in East Gippsland.

This is the first Major Event Review to be conducted jointly by the Victorian and the Commonwealth governments

after the process was introduced with the renewed Regional Forests Agreements in 2020. A review is triggered by a destructive event such as bushfires, floods, diseases or other large significant changes to the forests estate. A key objective of a Major Event Review is to figure out how the impact of events affects the Regional Forest Agreements, the long-term plans for managing native forest logging in our state.

It involves a public consultation and an independent panel consisting of Victorian Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability, Dr Gillian Sparkes; Ms Katherine Mullett, a proud Gunaikurnai, Ngarigo Monero woman who has a decade of experience in Cultural Heritage Management and Land Management; and forester Dr Tony Bartlett.

It aims to identify environmental, economic, social and cultural values impacted by the fires and if remedial actions need to be undertaken. However, the recommendations will be non-binding, and importantly, the outcomes will not result in the Regional Forests Agreements being renegotiated or changed.

The loss of native vegetation and wildlife, followed by predation from invasive cats and foxes, browsing by pest herbivores like deer, and an influx of weeds in disturbed areas pose an immediate threat to native plants and animals in the aftermath of fire.

We believe the Major Event Review must not underestimate the importance of protecting – that is, not logging – unburnt forest and wildlife refuge areas for their recovery and resilience to future major events.

In our submission to the review we identified, as a starting point, ten key issues that should be focused on:

- Assessing implications of climate change and fires on forests
- Impact on threatened species and communities
- Impact on the reserve system
- Impact on old growth
- Impact on ash forests
- Impact of salvage and post-disturbance logging
- Impact on logging yield
- Improved forest management post-fire
- Protection of unburnt forest refuges
- Protection of large old trees

Read our detailed submission at vnpa.org.au/submission-major-event-review

Not so fast

IMMEDIATE PROTECTION AREAS ANNOUNCED ALMOST TWO YEARS AGO ARE FINALLY MOVING FORWARD, WRITES **MATT RUCHEL**.

In November 2019, the Andrews Government announced as part of its Victorian Forestry Plan what they called “the largest environmental protection policy in the state’s history, with immediate protections for the iconic Greater Glider species, native fauna and Victoria’s remaining old-growth forest”.

While the claim of being the ‘biggest ever’ is debatable compared to the creation of the Otways National Park or Alpine National Park, the policy put in place Immediate Protection Areas for 96,000 hectares of forest that was available for logging in East Gippsland and the Central Highlands, as well as the Strathbogies Forest near Benalla, and small areas of forests around Mirboo North.

The Immediate Protection Areas (IPAs) have hardly been immediate, though. Almost two years after the original announcements, a process for their establishment was finally begun in late August.

The process has two parts:

- The Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) will undertake a scientific assessment of environmental, biodiversity and other values in areas identified as IPAs.
- Community consultation will be undertaken by the newly established Eminent Panel for Community Engagement, which will work alongside VEAC.

According to the Andrews Government, the panel will consult with the community to seek their views on VEAC’s assessment of the IPAs in Mirboo North and the Strathbogies Ranges. Later this year, while consultation on VEAC’s assessment of the IPAs in the Central Highlands and East Gippsland will take place over a longer period, starting in 2022. The panel will present its report and recommendations to the state government on the former in early to mid-2022, with the report on the latter IPAs to be received towards the end of 2022.

While the commencement of a process was welcomed by some of the key local groups in the Strathbogies and Mirboo North, campaigners in the Central Highlands and East Gippsland still hold concerns.

In the Central Highlands, campaigners remain concerned with the original design of the IPAs, over which there was little consultation. Over 20 per cent of the area had been logged previously. Local groups also question the relevance for Greater Gliders, as some of their best habitats are outside the proposed IPAs.

Ideally, this new process would revisit the boundaries to maximise the protection of Greater Gliders as well as Leadbeater’s Possum and other forest-dependent threatened species the IPAs were designed to protect.

In East Gippsland, IPAs proposed in 2019 were impacted by high severity fire during the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires, with 70 per cent of the area burnt. Greater Gliders lost 32 per cent of their habitat to the flames. Again, local groups there also question the original design of the IPAs, with some of the most significant populations of Greater Glider around Bendoc and Cottonwood range still under direct threat from logging, even though the forest where they are located was not burnt.

It is clear the establishment process for Immediate Protection Areas needs to take into account the extreme damage to these forests and the devastation to so many threatened wildlife still severely affected by the fires.

More importantly, the Andrews Government needs to move quickly to make up for lost time. It must act promptly to have the IPAs formally established, legislated and funded before this term of government ends late next year if they have any hope of getting anywhere near the claim of “the largest environmental protection policy in the state’s history”. • PW



PHOTO: DAVE GALLAN

Immediate Protection Areas are designed to protect Greater Gliders and other forest-dependent threatened species – but will they?

Wishing, waiting

PERMANENT PROTECTION IS WELL OVERDUE, SAYS SAVE OUR STRATHBOGIE FOREST SPOKESPERSON **BERTRAM LOBERT**.

There’s nothing like the risk of losing something of value to get you motivated. VicForests’ plan to significantly expand logging in the Strathbogies Forest in 2013 very quickly galvanized the local community to meet this threat head-on.

Our methods were varied, but the key was information, and the means was citizen science. From 2014 to 2020, hundreds of volunteers helped survey the diverse habitats of the 24,000-hectare Strathbogies Forest. Their efforts resulted in an impressive conservation data set that includes hundreds of species of plants, animals and fungi.

Spending so much time in the forest allowed it to slowly reveal its story to us – a story we have now been able to share with others. And the more we learnt, the more we have come to respect and love this special place.

Whilst the crowd-pleasers of the forest are the ancient, giant trees – Mountain Gums, Messmates, Narrow-leaf Peppermints and Victorian Blue Gums – the pivotal information collected by our citizen scientists related to the more difficult to see threatened species.

Nocturnal surveys along 56 kilometres of forest transect detected 240 of the threatened Greater Gliders in high densities; 28 per cent of transects (median length 500 metres) had glider densities greater than ten animals per kilometre, with some as high as 18 per kilometre. This was both exciting and unexpected, as Greater Glider populations across Victoria and interstate have been in sharp decline over the last 20–30 years. Amazingly, our surveys detected four times as many Greater Gliders

as Common Ringtail Possums, the second most numerous species. (See: www.strathbogiesustainableforests.wordpress.com).

In 2017, our citizen science findings attracted the attention of government scientists, who then undertook a series of detailed arboreal mammal surveys. They confirmed that the Strathbogies Forest is a hot-spot for Greater Gliders and one of the few areas left in Victoria where numbers have not declined.

In November 2019, the Victorian Government released its Greater Glider Action Statement and announced Immediate Protection Areas (IPAs) to remove logging in a number of forests across the state important for Greater Glider conservation, including the entire Strathbogies Forest.

Tragically, within months of this announcement, the devastating Black Summer bushfires burnt much of eastern Victoria, including extensive Greater Glider habitat. Straight away, it was clear that protecting unburnt

habitat across the state was now critical, and the importance of the Strathbogies Forest as a refuge for Greater Gliders has consequently increased significantly.

In the almost two years since the announcement that our local forest would be protected, there has been no clear indication of the next steps, despite many letters, phone calls and meetings with government staff and advisors. We were repeatedly told that the fires and then the pandemic were to blame for the delay. So we are delighted by the latest announcement of the establishment process for the IPAs.

In the case of the Strathbogies Forest, the transition is largely a technical exercise: the IPA boundary is broadly defined, the forest is demonstrably a key element in protecting the Greater Glider, logging has been stopped, and all coupes have been removed from the Timber Release Plan.

Our one remaining concern is that the process be completed well before the next election so that the forests get actual permanent protection and not just another promise. • PW

WILD WINDS AND FLATTENED FORESTS

JORDAN CROOK WAS IN THE EYE OF THE STORM – AND EXPLAINS WHAT IS NECESSARY IN THE AFTERMATH.

On the night of the 9th of June, wild winds tore across the state, leaving in their wake downed trees, damaged houses and infrastructure, and vast swathes of forests flattened.

In the Yarra Valley where I live, power was lost for many weeks, and clean-up works are still ongoing.

Heart-breaking scenes the following morning of large old trees that had withstood thousands of storm events smashed across roads and paddocks showed the ferocity of these winds.

The Dandenong Ranges and its grand stands of Mountain Ash and Mountain Grey Gums and its valleys of cool temperate rainforest had been hammered. Towering trees that had taken so long to grow could not withstand the unusual easterly gale-force wind, heavily sodden soil from massive downpours, and in many cases the being weakened from past development and poor tree management.

Similar damage was seen across the state. Friends of Tarra Bulga National Park reported so many large old trees downed that some tracks are still closed. Large patches of the Wombat Forest can be seen from aerial footage to look from above like spilt matchsticks. The impact on species like the Greater Glider that live in these forests is still unknown.

Arborist Dr Greg Moore from Melbourne University has suggested the storm and gale-force winds that hit the state are yet another warning of the future in the changing climate and likely to be more and more common.

As the clean-up continues, there is a need to understand the impact on threatened species and ecosystems. Clean up in a precautionous and sensitive manner especially within the parks estate is critical. Just like after fire or flood, ecosystems are recovering from the toppling of so many trees and wildlife left homeless. The mass disturbance across the landscape will also promote further infestation of pest plant and animal species into natural areas.

Arborists use tree risk assessments regularly to calculate the risk of tree failures causing harm using their knowledge of tree health and physiology, the possibility of harm caused by tree failure, and defects within the tree or past damage that could cause failure.

It is obviously very important to clear roads and infrastructure after these events, but dead trees should be retained in the landscape once they have fallen. In particular, logs with hollows play an important role in the local ecology and provide habitat for small ground-based mammals such as Antechinus and Bush Rats, and decaying wood is important for fungi growth as well as being home to a myriad of insects and small reptiles.

We also echo the concerns and wishes of locals that the timber not be taken for commercial purposes but used within the community and conservation estate if it must be removed.

And, of course, the utmost care must be taken when cleaning up around surviving trees.

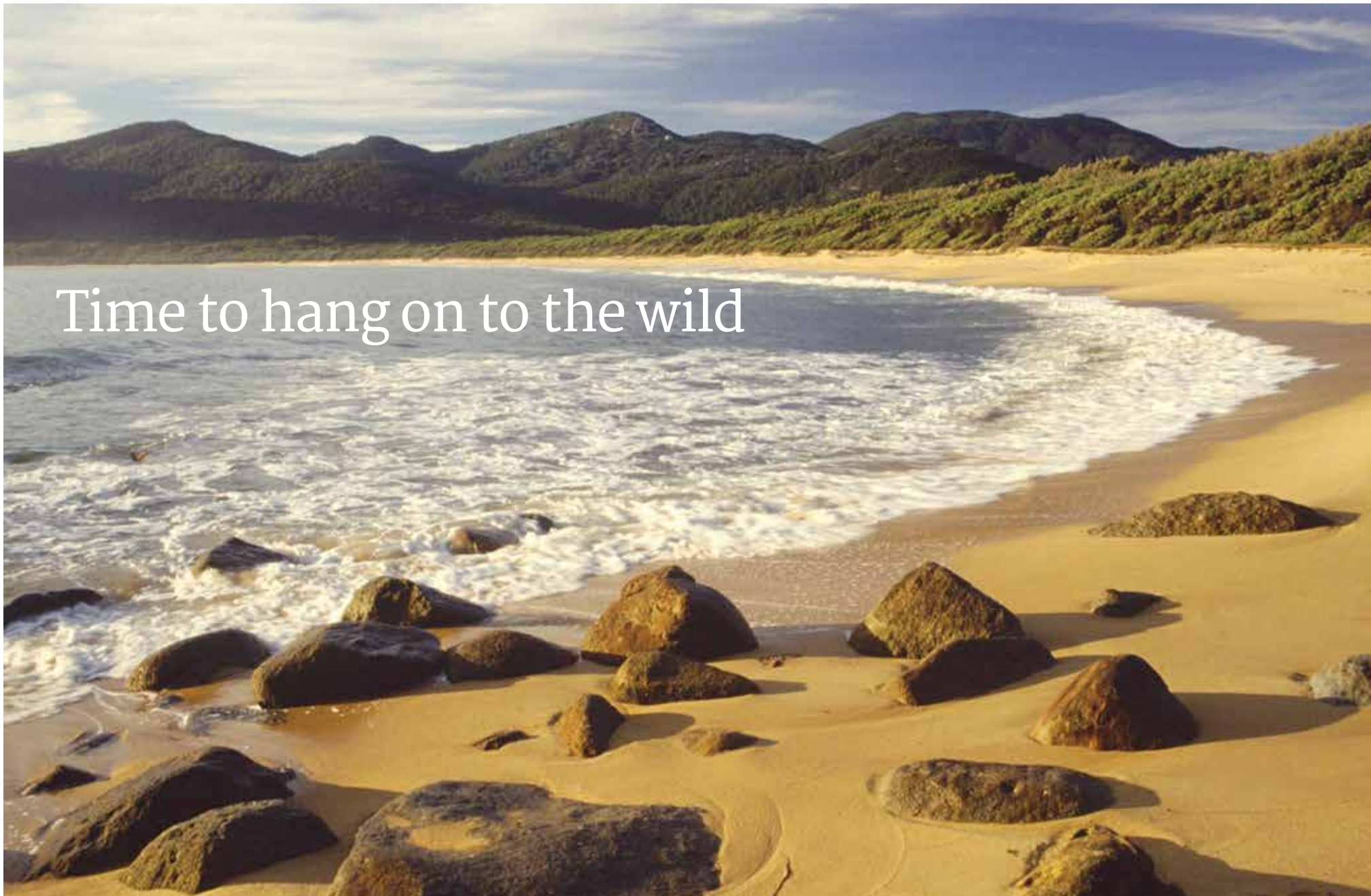
There is also a great imperative to get in and start managing emerging weed infestations to allow the ecosystem to recover effectively and nip in the bud future weed and pest issues caused by this massive disturbance event. Similar successful programs for controlling deer were put in place after last year's fire, and similar should be considered in this circumstance.

As Southern Dandenong's Landcare President Robert Pergl stated in the media, "Recent storm damage on Melbourne's doorstep at the Dandenong Ranges highlights the need for more funding to manage these unique bushland areas. The recent disturbance from the storms, will lead to a flourish of invasive weed growth, amplifying a pre-existing issue that needs serious government commitment for future conservation management."

Gayle Osborne of Wombat Forestcare added, "The scale of the damage in the national parks and reserves of the Dandenong and Macedon Ranges is immense ... and highlights the need to understand the impact of [the] storm on our parks and wildlife. It is important not to rush in with heavy machinery, except to clear infrastructure, as the best way forward to protect the fragile environment, the areas need to be assessed".

We couldn't say it better. We are currently working with local community groups to monitor works within storm impacted areas and advocating for an ecologically sensitive clean up where it is needed. We have also joined with local groups calling for a wildlife and ecosystem recovery package to help manage ongoing threats such as weed and pest control and an ecological assessment of the storm damage to parks and reserves.

As these severe weather events increase due to climate breakdown, we must build resilience into our natural areas, and respond to the aftermath in an ecologically precautionous manner. • PW



Time to hang on to the wild

Waterloo Bay in Wilsons Promontory National Park, and its hinterland, are protected as a Remote and Natural Area under Victorian law.

PHOTO: PAUL SINCLAIR

THERE HAVE BEEN SOME GREAT WINS FOR CONSERVATION OVER THE LAST 50 YEARS OR SO. BUT WE CAN'T MAINTAIN PROTECTION OF OUR NATIONAL PARKS UNLESS WE VIGILANTLY PROTECT THE LAWS THAT GOVERN THEIR MANAGEMENT. THE THREATS ARE MOUNTING, WARNS CAMPAIGNER **PHIL INGAMELLS**.

In recent years there have been many challenges, official and unofficial, to the long-established protections offered by park and other legislation, not just in Victoria but around Australia. Many of those challenges are coming from the tourism industry, which can view parks as prime real estate.

We could have seen that coming decades ago, when people campaigning for protection of our remaining natural areas pointed out how parks would benefit regional economies. And we were spot on: Parks Victoria's own figures show that (pre-COVID) tourists were

spending \$2.1 billion dollars each year associated with their visits to Victoria's parks, and generated 20,000 jobs. The places that benefited most from this tourism include the Grampians, Great Ocean Road, Alpine, Yarra Valley, Dandenong Ranges and Gippsland regions.

Parks have been generating far, far more for the economy than they cost to manage.

Parks also contribute through the production of clean water, carbon storage, coastal protection, even honey production, and perhaps most importantly, they contribute greatly to human health and wellbeing.

But the tourism industry, whether at a local, state or national level, hasn't expressed much gratitude. On the contrary, they want to build on their success with greater access to parks, especially to bring in the big spenders – the "comfort in nature" market.

In Victoria, challenges to park legislation and planning processes have meant, in recent years:

- Establishing a new tourism-focussed Great Ocean Road Authority, which is effectively subcontracting Parks Victoria to manage national park areas along the Otway coast.

- Three privately operated bus-sized boats conducting expensive boat tours are now parked daily on the family-friendliest part of Tidal River beach at Wilsons Promontory National Park. The tours may be conducted well, but the building of the boats received significant funding from the federal government, completely bypassing the Prom's excellent management plan.
- Most alarming was a proposal by local tourism enthusiasts to excise land from Mount Buffalo National Park to build spa hotel accommodation, a rolling skating rink, shops, a wedding chapel and more, with initial development funding from the Victoria's tourism minister. Fortunately they failed to establish a viable business plan.

This last case, the Buffalo mega-development, is telling. It would have been easier to set up luxury eco-tourism developments outside but adjacent to Mount Buffalo, where things like water supply, sewerage, car parking and staff access can be accommodated without the necessarily onerous planning hurdles buildings in parks must comply with.

Beyond Victoria the situation is more worrying.

Since 2014 the Tasmanian Government has been inviting Expressions of Interest for "Tourism Investment Opportunities" and associated infrastructure on reserved land across the state, with no clear requirement to comply with management plans.

There is now a powerful push for luxury tourism infrastructure in the middle of the magnificent Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA) – the only wilderness area on the planet to achieve World Heritage recognition. The TWWHA is composed of several national parks and other reserved lands over some 1.6 million hectares.

Now a revised Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service plan for managing the TWWHA has dropped the earlier plan's objective to "maintain or enhance wilderness quality", and changed zoning of the remote Lake Malbena Area, allowing large scale tourism developments there.

And then there's Kosciuszko National Park in NSW, where the massive Snowy 2 hydro development was followed by legislation to protect "heritage" (read feral) horses.

Now NSW is flagging legislation for a range of large and unnecessary tourism developments in the park. That's three different laws going through the NSW parliament within a few years to sit above the state's national park legislation and the carefully developed Kosciuszko National Park Management Plan.

Wilderness is a word that's been criticised lately, as it can imply that Aboriginal people didn't occupy, let alone alter, the landscape – a notion that can't stand scrutiny.

But Victoria's legislation for the protection of wilderness doesn't discount Aboriginal influence at all.

Rather, the *National Parks Act 1975* provision for wilderness parks and zones aims "to maximise the extent to which those parks are undisturbed by the influences of the European settlement of Australia" and to protect "the plant and animal community ... in a state that has not been substantially modified by the influences of European settlement or is capable of being restored to such a state".

Importantly, the legislation also asks that these areas be large enough to be able to achieve that condition, and large enough to provide "opportunities for solitude and appropriate self-reliant recreation".

Surely we can leave sections of the planet free from the intrusions of modern 'civilisation'. Surely there should remain places where people can really experience a more-or-less natural world.

We must maintain vigilance to ensure Victoria's wilderness legislation, and our similarly valuable remote and natural area legislation, can't be overridden. Indeed we have good cause to expand those areas.

Nature lost is hard to regain. • PW

Grevillea alpina in Grampians (Gariwerd) National Park. We need large protected areas to protect small things.



Fire management needs some open scrutiny

FIRE AFFECTS US ALL, AND IT AFFECTS ALL OF VICTORIA'S ENVIRONMENT. SO SURELY ITS MANAGEMENT WARRANTS ONGOING, RIGOROUS, INDEPENDENT EVALUATION, SAYS **PHIL INGAMELLS**.

If there is a conundrum in modern land management, it's that our natural heritage, the native plants evolution has delivered to Victoria, is also the fuel that sets out, it seems, to roast us.

And climate change is rapidly – more rapidly than was predicted – exacerbating that situation.

We've had many of inquiries into fire management: several royal commissions, parliamentary inquiries, auditor evaluations and other processes costing vast amounts of money and expert hours.

Yet we have established no permanent, independent overseer of fire management. Currently Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV) assesses risk, delivers risk management, and then reports on its own effectiveness. That should change.

FFMV is largely a section within the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, with links to the CFA and Melbourne Water. It is required to abide by Victoria's 'Code of Fire Practice' as revised after the 2009 Black Saturday fires. The Code summarises its objectives as:

- To minimise the impact of major bushfires on human life, communities, essential and community infrastructure, industries, the economy and the environment. Human life will be afforded priority over all other considerations.

- To maintain or improve the resilience of natural ecosystems and their ability to deliver services such as biodiversity, water, carbon storage and forest products.

It's interesting to see how FFMV performs with at least two separate objectives taken from that list:

1. Minimising impacts on human life (the overriding fire management priority)

While this is the critical and understandably well-supported first priority of the Code, it might be one of the least successfully managed objectives.

Bizarrely and quite unnecessarily, FFMV decided (on its own account!) to use buildings as a proxy for human lives – if we save the buildings we save lives, they said.

But that decision effectively resets 'community infrastructure' as the primary objective, contrary to the Code's clear prioritisation of 'human life', and that brings consequences.

It leads to the prioritisation of fuel reduction burns over other life-saving measures such as planning and rehearsing evacuation strategies for rural communities, and subsidising the installation of private bushfire shelters. These are well-understood strategies for saving lives, but remain pretty much unfunded in Victoria.

And scientific studies – many studies – tell us that most people come to

grief in very severe fires, and that these are the very fires that fuel reduction has the least impact on. Fuel reduction in the right place at the right time has its uses, but it really can't claim to be the life-saving panacea we need.

2. Maintaining or improving the resilience of natural ecosystems

Despite the clear imperative here to "maintain or improve" natural ecosystems, including their biodiversity, FFMV has recently taken upon itself to downgrade the objective to "minimise the impact on" nature. I'm not sure FFMV's staff, employed to administer the Code, should be the people to change an objective designed to adhere to Victorian and national environmental laws, and the International Convention on Biodiversity.

FFMV reports on the range of fire 'age classes', including the serious loss of old age classes, the long-unburnt forests and woodlands. However, FFMV fails to clarify in what ways that impacts on biodiversity, including the loss of tree hollows and hollow logs identified as critical habitat structures by a cohort of scientific studies from south-eastern Australia.

FFMV also fails to report at all on the impacts of its burns on threatened species, or rare and

Fuel levels, and flammability, can increase considerably soon after an intended 'fuel reduction' burn.

At the top: a 2010 planned burn in Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park.

Middle: understorey growth barely two years after the burn.

Below: a thick growth of Cassinia (so flammable it is locally known as 'kerosene bush') just four years after the fire. It can take decades for fire-induced understorey shrubs to senesce and thin out again.



threatened habitat types (listed threatened Ecological Vegetation Classes).

There has been a promise for some time to report on Geometric Mean Abundance (GMA), a highly sophisticated measure of biodiversity condition, but Victoria's Auditor General has noted that that reporting is yet to appear. And given that FFMV's monitoring protocols across the state are not consistent, and that its data management is poor, we have little confidence that reporting on GMA can happen with sufficient scientific rigour.

Importantly, FFMV seems to take it upon itself to monitor and report on the impacts of fire on biodiversity, yet has only tenuous links with DELWP's dedicated biodiversity section, including the Arthur Rylah Institute for Environmental Research, DELWP's own research arm.

And as noted in the last edition of *Park Watch* (June 2021), despite evidence that many intended fuel 'reduction' burns are effectively fuel 'production' burns, FFMV does not systematically (if ever?) monitor the return of fuel levels, or flammability levels, after performing its planned burns.

Effective bushfire risk management will not be achieved in Victoria until a skilled, integrated fire management planning and monitoring body has independent oversight of FFMV's risk abatement programs. • **PW**

Regulating our forests

VICTORIA'S CONSERVATION REGULATOR IS WELL INTO ITS SECOND YEAR OF OPERATION AND IS RESPONSIBLE FOR REGULATING WILDLIFE, FORESTS AND PUBLIC LAND IN VICTORIA.

The Conservation Regulator was established by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning's (DELWP) in 2019 and at the helm is Kate Gavens, the Chief Conservation Regulator.

Meet the Chief Conservation Regulator, Kate Gavens:

I'm no stranger to regulation and the environment. I started my career as a seasonal park ranger before cutting my teeth as an Authorised Officer at the Environment Protection Authority. I then worked on the development of the Victorian Climate Change Act and the new Environment Protection Act.

I'm most at home in the bush. When I'm not working, I usually escape to Victoria's great outdoors – walking, riding or camping.

I now lead more than 170 staff across the state – a mixture of on-ground authorised officers educating and ensuring compliance with environmental laws as well as staff who are responsible for wildlife permits, intelligence and other functions.

The Conservation Regulator exists to educate, monitor and ensure compliance with laws relating to timber harvesting, public land use, biodiversity and fire prevention. We are working hard to do just that.



PHOTO: OFFICE OF THE CONSERVATION REGULATOR

Q. What have been the main challenges for the Conservation Regulator?

Bushfires and COVID-19 meant navigating the first 12 months was different than expected, but it highlighted how important it is to protect our state's natural environment to preserve biodiversity and to ensure Victorians can enjoy it.

The devastating impacts of the 2019-20 bushfires led to a significant focus of understanding biodiversity impacts of flora and fauna to help focus our work.

Regulation of native timber harvesting continues to be a topic that captures public interest, and we are committed to being effective and transparent in the way we regulate this industry. Significant changes have been made to how we regulate the industry and how we report to the public over the last two years.

Q. How has the Conservation Regulator changed the regulation of native timber harvesting?

Since our establishment, we have made key improvements to the way in which timber harvesting is regulated.

Inspections

In late 2019 we initiated a proactive coupe inspection program focusing on preventing environmental harm during timber harvesting. This coupe inspection program focuses on issues that can cause the highest environmental harm in the highest priority timber harvesting coupes. We have committed to inspecting at least 30 coupes each year and in 2020-21, we exceeded this target by inspecting 58 individual coupes.

In addition to proactive inspections, we assess all allegations of unlawful timber harvesting and assess all reports of threatened species in coupes. These reports come from concerned community members and groups who want to make sure our unique native flora and fauna are protected. These reports are valuable contributions, and every allegation is assessed by an Authorised Officer to ensure a comprehensive review of the detection or allegation.

Forest Protection Survey Program

An important part of our role is the Forest Protection Survey Program. This is an \$18.3 million Victorian Program to undertake field surveys for



Coupe inspections look at roading, waterways, habitat protection and rehabilitation.



Backpack electrofishing for threatened fish and crayfish in a stream in East Gippsland for the Forest Protection Survey Program.



The 2019/20 bushfires affected significant areas of native plant and animal habitats.

important flora and fauna species, and other values such as large trees and vegetation communities, in native timber harvesting coupes. The surveys are conducted in the State forests east of the Hume Highway.

Since 2018 we have surveyed 86 per cent of coupes planned for harvest. Across the program we have recorded nearly 60,000 observations of flora and fauna in the field, of which over 11,000 have been protected from the impacts of timber harvesting.

This includes 310 Special Protection Zones for Leadbeater's Possum, which equals over 3,500 hectares of fully protected areas. More than 230 coupes equivalent to 8,200 hectares have been removed from the timber harvesting planning schedule since 2018 without being harvested, in many cases due at least partially to Forest Protection Survey Program detections.

The program has detected species such as Smoky Mouse and Giant Burrowing Frog that are now the subject

of more than 80 Special Protection Zone applications to fully protect where they live. Many other species and values when detected require modified, reduced harvesting or no harvesting at all. This includes aquatic species, large old trees and Greater Gliders.

Forest Protection Survey Program activities and results can be found on the online Forest Information Portal via www.vic.gov.au/forest-protection-survey-program

Q. How did the Black Summer impact your regulation?

A key focus of our work since the 2019-20 bushfires has been to ensure the uncertain impacts of the fires on biodiversity are considered in timber harvesting as required by law. This has led to significant changes in the way timber harvesting has been conducted since the 2019-20 fires, and continued biodiversity assessment and advice will continue to be a key part of our role as a regulator into the future. • PW

You can find more information about the Conservation Regulator, including how to submit reports about threatened species and alleged timber harvesting breaches, on its website conservationregulator.vic.gov.au

VNPA are on the Conservation Regulator Stakeholder Reference Group and also meet regularly with the Office of the Conservation Regulator. It is an important independent agency, but only as effective as the rules they have to enforce. We have consistently called for the office and the rules to be strengthened.

Submit a report

Report wildlife crime to Crime Stoppers Victoria on 1800 333 000

Submit a threatened species report to forest.reports@delwp.vic.gov.au

Report alleged breaches of timber harvesting to forest.reports@delwp.vic.gov.au

Report all other alleged non-compliance to 136 186

NatureWatch news

NATUREWATCH COORDINATOR **SERA BLAIR** REPORTS BACK ON CITIZEN SCIENCE FIELD TRIPS BETWEEN WILD WEATHER AND LOCKDOWNS.

NatureWatch Project Officer Rachel (middle) and volunteers Mick and Tessa setting up a wildlife monitoring camera in Cabbage Tree Creek Flora Reserve.

The past few months have been a rollercoaster for the NatureWatch team. We managed to get into the field for some of our wildlife monitoring projects at the start of the year, but the last few months have been more difficult due to wild weather and lockdowns. We are learning the art of flexible planning and seizing opportunities when they arise. Fortunately, we have been joined by Rachel Nalliah, our new NatureWatch Project Officer. Rachel has jumped right into our Caught on Camera and Life After Fire projects providing her fantastic skills in fieldwork and project planning.

Life After Fire project – part 1

Our new post-fire wildlife monitoring project in East Gippsland is underway. After long delays last year, we managed to do the fieldwork for the first part of the project over February and March.

Our focus was on wildlife recovery on private land. We were lucky enough to

find landowners on five properties in two very different areas of Gippsland to help us investigate which native and introduced species were on their properties a year after the 2019-20 bushfires, and how these differed from before the fires.

Three properties were in Clifton Creek northwest of Bairnsdale and two in Goongerah north of Orbost. All properties were burnt in the fires, some patchy and others completely. We installed cameras and song meter audio recorders on the properties over a six-week period. Landowners moved the equipment to new locations halfway through.

7160 photos and 65,106 minutes of audio data were recorded across all properties. From this, eight species of native mammals were recorded and 36 species of native birds (see list on next page). Plus, one native reptile, a Lace Monitor, and one amphibian, a Common Eastern Froglet. Five introduced species were also recorded: European Rabbit, European Hare, Red Fox, Black Rat and House Mouse.

Notable wildlife present before the fires but not afterwards include small mammals and native rodents in the Clifton Creek area such as Antechinus and Bush Rats. They were present at Goongerah properties, which also had introduced rodents. These properties were along a small river which provided some fire refuge. Southern Boobook Owls were recorded at all sites, but no properties had Powerful Owls at this time. Much of the tree canopy on these properties was burnt and the habitat reduced for possums and gliders, prey species for Powerful Owls. While some are present, it may be that the possum and glider populations need to increase to a level to support these large forest owls.

This research was supported by a WIRES – Landcare Wildlife Relief & Recovery Grant and the generosity of the amazing landowners: John H, Robyn, Di, Will, John I, Rena, and Jill.

We plan to return to these properties, and new ones, to monitor at different times of the year and add spotlighting surveys and nest boxes, thanks to a new Landcare Led Bushfire Recovery Grant.



Clockwise from top left: Common Brushtail Possum mother and offspring; White-winged Choughs; female Satin Bowerbird; Lace Monitor.

Native mammals and birds recorded on camera or audio recordings

Native mammals	
Agile Antechinus	
Common Brushtail Possum	
Common Wombat	
Eastern Grey Kangaroo	
Mountain Brushtail Possum	
Swamp/Black Wallaby	
White-striped Freetail Bat	
Yellow-bellied Glider	
Native birds	
Australian King Parrot	
Australian Magpie	
Australian Raven	
Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike	
Brown Thornbill	
Common Bronzewing	
Crimson/Eastern Rosella	
Eastern Koel	
Eastern Spinebill	
Eastern Yellow Robin	
Fan-tailed Cuckoo	
Flame Robin	
Golden Whistler	
Grey Butcherbird	
Grey Fantail	
Grey Shrike-thrush	
Horsfield's Bronze-cuckoo	
Laughing Kookaburra	
Magpie-lark	
Pied Currawong	
Red Wattlebird	
Rufous Whistler	
Satin Bowerbird	
Silvereye	
Southern Boobook	
Spotted Pardalote	
Sulphur-crested Cockatoo	
Superb Fairy-wren	
Superb Lyrebird	
Tawny Frogmouth	
White-eared Honeyeater	
White-throated Treecreeper	
White-winged Chough	
Willie Wagtail	
Yellow-faced Honeyeater	
Yellow-tailed Black-cockatoo	



Volunteers Jason and Gregor installing a camera at Cape Conran.



Volunteer Caroline conducting a scat and track survey at Cape Conran.

Life After Fire – part 2

After the success of this project on private land, and with the generous support of the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust, we are expanding this project to public land, targeting priority areas of high conservation value. Areas are chosen based on assessments done by the Victorian Government after the fires, and as identified by VNPA in partnership with other environmental groups in East Gippsland in the recent report *After the Fires: protecting our forest refuges*. Currently, we are planning research in: Errinundra National Park, Nunniong Plain Natural Features and Scenic Reserve, Cabbage Tree Creek Flora Reserve, Cape Conran Coastal Park, Mitchell River National Park, Colquhoun Regional Park. On top of the motion-detection cameras and audio recorders we regularly use, we have added spotlighting surveys, photo points and scat and track surveys along our kilometre-long transects. This provides more opportunities to accurately depict wildlife present and a deeper understanding of the wildlife activity in the area.

We ran our first expedition to Cabbage Tree Creek Flora Reserve at the end of May. These are planned as three-day expeditions with bush camping on the property of a generous VNPA supporter. On the second day of the expedition – lockdown was called for midnight. Thanks to our fantastic volunteers, we powered through and got all the monitoring equipment in place with enough time to all get home before lockdown started. Our return trip was delayed, taking us six weeks to return, collect the equipment, and move it to new sites in Cape Conran Coastal Park. Once again, lockdown was called again on the second day and we had to press through and get the equipment out quickly so we could return home. Hopefully this pattern will not continue, and we will be able to return soon to pick up the equipment and move it to our next sites in Colquhoun Regional Park.

Caught on Camera

Wombat State Forest

After an exciting start back to fieldwork last March, our fortunes turned wild weather and lockdowns ending our field season early. With the help of our field volunteers and team leaders, we managed to get monitoring equipment out on ten sites before the storms hit. While disappointed to not get all 20 sites monitored during our tenth season in Wombat State Forest, we were very excited to hear the recent announcement of the new Wombat-Lerderderg National Park.

Bunyip State Park

Thanks to a new Community & Volunteer Action Grant from the Victorian Government, we can complete a tenth year of wildlife monitoring in Bunyip State Park. Now we just need COVID and the weather to cooperate! We were scheduled to start mid-August but have been delayed due to lockdown. We hope to get back to the park soon to continue monitoring wildlife and habitat recovery after the 2019-20 bushfires at 20 key sites. Thank you to the enthusiastic volunteers who have signed up to help us in the field – fingers crossed we get there soon. • PW

To get updates on our projects or to sign up as a citizen scientist, join our NatureWatch email list (vnpa.org.au/naturewatch/sign-up) or follow us on Facebook.



Rachel holding a Western Meadowlark while working in Grasslands National Park in Canada.

Introducing our new NatureWatch Project Officer

WELCOME **RACHEL NALLIAH** TO THE NATUREWATCH TEAM. HER MAIN FOCUS IS IMPLEMENTING THE LIFE AFTER FIRE PROJECT – OUR NEW POST-FIRE WILDLIFE MONITORING PROJECT IN EAST GIPPSLAND. SHE IS ALSO WORKING ON A RANGE OF OTHER CITIZEN SCIENCE PROJECTS, INCLUDING CAUGHT ON CAMERA IN BUNYIP STATE PARK.

I have always been intrigued by animals and their behaviour from a young age. As a kid, I filled up multiple disposable cameras at an alarming rate with images of the neighbourhood cat and my pet rabbits. This curiosity to understand animals at a deeper level stayed with me, and motivated me to pursue a career in wildlife conservation.

When I found out I could study wildlife conservation at Deakin University, I knew I was on the right path. I participated in various field research volunteer opportunities during my undergraduate degree, and it was during these experiences that I saw first-hand the importance of on-ground wildlife management and the role different species play.

I then spent six months in Grasslands National Park, Canada as a field research intern for the Black-tailed Prairie Dog project, which shaped my interest in small mammal threatened species management.

I also enjoy interacting with people, and this led me to work at Museums Victoria in visitor engagement. I thoroughly enjoyed enhancing visitor experiences at the museum and bringing community awareness toward important Australian fauna.

At the end of 2019, I completed my Masters research project at the University of Melbourne investigating how fire, resource availability and introduced predators influenced the endangered Heath Mouse (turn to pages 34-35 for this edition's Special Species!). This project developed my experience and fascination with fire ecology. After the 2019-20 bushfire season, all I wanted to do was assist in the recovery of threatened species and fire-affected areas.

When I saw VNPA's Life After Fire project officer position, I could not apply faster. I am now dedicating my time at VNPA by conducting wildlife monitoring field trips, engaging with citizen scientists and helping with science communication. I look forward to meeting more of you on future field trips! • PW

Mystery in the shallows

CAMPAIGNER **SHANNON HURLEY** SHARES HOW THIS SEASON THE SPIDER CRABS HAVE KEPT EVERYONE WAITING WITH BATED BREATH.

Unlike this Smooth Ray, most Spider Crab enthusiasts missed out on seeing them this year.

Every year in winter, the famous cast of Giant Spider Crabs usually aggregate in their thousands as they shed their shells in their safety of numbers along the shores of the Mornington Peninsula and in other areas in Port Phillip Bay, one of the most reliable and popular locations to experience this natural phenomenon.

You can imagine for those who come to witness this extraordinary event year in, year out, what a disappointment it was when the Spider Crabs did not arrive in their usual locations at the piers on the Mornington Peninsula this year. Many checked daily for signs of moving dark patches with crawly legs that can often be seen from above, only to be saddened day after day. Why had they not come? Where had they gone?

The mystery created some concern, particularly when anecdotal evidence suggests that the number of years when they have come into the shallows of the Mornington Peninsula far outweigh the years when they have not.

But there were a lucky few who did get to experience them. Reports from some scuba divers who ventured further offshore to see smaller aggregations of crabs suggest that the Spider Crabs stayed in deeper waters in 2021. The reasons for this, we do not know.

Some speculate the latest Spider Crab trends are due to the intense and unprecedented harvesting during the past two years. Although correlations can be drawn, and it can be easy to point a finger, without evidence, we cannot say that is to blame.

VNPA, along with the community, has been advocating for a no-take period during the Spider Crab's moulting season from April to July. These efforts have yet to cut through the Fisheries Department and in state government, with statements made by Minister for Fishing and Boating Melissa Horne in correspondence to the Mornington Peninsula Shire Council on 21 July 2021, that the "Victorian Government does not support a 'no-take' season for giant spider crabs at Rye and Blairgowrie during aggregations between April and July".

2021 was to be a test for how well the Victorian Government's (highly compromised and misaligned in our view) alternative 'solution' of a reduced bag limit would see any tangible results.

Equally concerning as the disregard for the Spider Crabs is that the state government is ignoring community sentiment. The repeated lines we keep hearing from fisheries is that "it's not a sustainability issue" and "there are plenty of crabs". But there has not yet been the research to back these statements, nor do we even have a clear picture of Spider Crabs whole lifecycle, population dynamics or even conservation status.

We do not believe it is right to encourage Spider Crab harvesting during a vital part of their lifecycle in a location where there is such a long-standing tradition for many enjoying the natural event.

There is greater value for thousands of tourists experiencing a real-life nature documentary moment on Melbourne's doorstep than there is in dead Spider Crabs in a bucket on the pier.

Many Mornington Peninsula locals as well as statewide, interstate and international visitors feel we can do better than this – including Sir David Attenborough, The Mornington Peninsula Shire Council, tourism and business owners, educators, fishers, divers, water-users – many of which have joined the call for greater protection in an online petition of over 36,000 people strong.

It is very apparent how mysterious our crabby friends can be, highlighting how little we know about them. Good decisions on their management require good science, and in the absence of this, we should always err on the side of caution – with a break on harvesting during their important and vulnerable time in their lifecycle. We need an independent species assessment overseen by a relevant scientific body to be able to make informed calls.

VNPA will continue to advocate for solutions and support the SOS Save Our Spider Crabs team and other interested parties to represent the views of many community members. We'll be calling for a no-take period until we have more answers than questions about Spider Crabs.

This is also a reminder of how unpredictable nature can be, even after years of consistency. Still, one constant is our need to try to understand and assist our oceans and communities to adapt and thrive. • PW

HEATH MOUSE

NEW NATUREWATCH PROJECT OFFICER **RACHEL NALLIAH** COMPLETED HER MASTERS RESEARCH PROJECT INVESTIGATING HOW FIRE, HABITAT AND INTRODUCED PREDATORS INFLUENCE THE ENDANGERED HEATH MOUSE – HERE SHE TELLS US A LITTLE ABOUT THEM.

Say hello to the Heath Mouse (*Pseudomys shortridgei*) – a rather cute and mysterious Australian rodent.

Also known as the Dayang, this mouse hides in the dense understorey layers of heathy woodlands, nesting on the ground or in shallow burrows. Their home range varies with food availability and other circumstances, but has been recorded between 0.75 and five hectares in different studies. It eats grass shoots and small flowering plants all year round but seeks out flowers as a dietary change in the harsh winter months.

Once widespread, the Heath Mouse is now listed as endangered nationally. The species was previously considered extinct around the 1930s before being rediscovered in 1961 (eastern Australia) and 1987 (western Australia). Reasons for its significant decline are uncertain, but habitat fragmentation, competition with other rodents, predation and inappropriate fire regimes and climate change are likely explanations.

The Heath Mouse now occurs in two patchy, isolated regions of Australia – south-western Victoria (eastern population) and Western Australia (western population). It has often been confused with its furry native counterparts – the Bush Rat and Eastern Chestnut Mouse. The Heath Mouse is slightly more well-known these days, but data related to its habitat preferences are minimal, inconsistent, and varies between the eastern and western populations.

There is great interest in how fire regimes play a role in the protection and survival of the Heath Mouse. Latest research has found that the indirect effect of fire on dense shrub cover is of most importance for the species. As heath mice respond to changes in resource availability rather than the time a habitat patch was last burnt, planned fire regimes that promote dense shrub regeneration may be an effective strategy to conserve this endangered animal. • PW



Wyperfeld National Park

PHOTO: DONALD HOBERN, FLICKR CC

FOR OVER 40 YEARS, **GEOFF DURHAM** HAS VISITED THE MALLEE, WOODLANDS AND HEATHLANDS OF THE THIRD-LARGEST NATIONAL PARK IN VICTORIA, LOCATED IN THE FLAT, SEMI-ARID NORTH-WESTERN CORNER OF THE STATE.

I write this on Monday 14 June 2021, the Queen's Birthday holiday. I had planned to join the Friends of Wyperfeld National Park at their annual camp in the park, but as in 2020, the camp has been cancelled because of COVID. In 2019 I was ready to go; instead, as the result of a fall, I spent the weekend in a Melbourne hospital. I have visited the park with the Friends every Queens Birthday weekend since 1976, bar the above and one other, which prompts the question – how has the park changed in 45 years?

For starters, in 1976, Outlet Creek was flowing into the park. Black Flat was full, and Lake Brambruk was filling. When the lakes dried out in 1978, the waterbirds moved away. Outlet Creek has not flowed since then. Lake Hindmarsh to the south of the park filled in 1996 and 2011, but with no overflow, the lakes in Wyperfeld have been empty. The Wimmera Mallee Pipeline Project, completed in 2010, replaced 17,500 kilometres of inefficient earthen channel with 9,159 kilometres of pipeline, providing a

continuous supply of good water that has revolutionised Mallee farming, saving much water lost through evaporation and seepage. It was hoped this would result in increased flow in the Wimmera River, fill Lake Hindmarsh and Lake Albacutya and overflow through Outlet Creek into the park. But without successive years of exceptionally high rainfall, this has not happened. The long-term future of the flood plain vegetation without flooding is uncertain.

Management Arrangements

Management arrangements have significantly changed. There are no longer any resident rangers and staff houses have been removed, including the public payphone.

There have been enhancements in provision for visitors. Pit toilets have been replaced with composting toilets. Fireplaces remain but there are no longer rubbish bins.

The public tracks are gravelled. The 4-wheel drive North/South Track is open, and in the north there is 2-wheel

access to Snow Drift. The Ring Road has been re-named the James Barrett Nature Drive.

The park is exceptionally well interpreted. In addition to the old Tykil Nature Walk and the Mallee Walk there are the seven-kilometre Desert Walk and the four-kilometre Discovery Walk. Malleefowl have this year worked the public mound on the Mallee Walk. The Information Centre, opened in 1981, remains open 24 hours a day with well-maintained displays. It has solar lights, as have the toilets and picnic shelter.

Between COVID lockdowns, I was able to visit the park for one day in April this year. Everything at the Wonga campground was immaculate. As I drove the nine kilometres from the southern park entrance the two most obvious things were the proliferation (and good health) of the Slender Cypress Pines, and the paucity of kangaroos. In early years there was a plethora of kangaroos and rabbits which ate pine seedlings, and old pines had a kangaroo browse-line. Calicivirus had a big impact on rabbits and control programs for rabbits



PHOTO: ARTHUR CHAPMAN, FLICKR CC



PHOTO: PATRICK KAVANAGH, FLICKR CC



PHOTO: PATRICK KAVANAGH, FLICKR CC



PHOTO: DONALD HOBERN, FLICKR CC



PHOTO: DONALD HOBERN, FLICKR CC

Clockwise from top left:
Much of the park is vegetated sand dunes
Malleefowl make their homes here
Visitors can see Regent Parrots flying above Desert Banksia
Altercation between male kangaroos
Shingleback enjoying the warm weather
Wyperfeld is full of small details



PHOTO: FRANCESCO VERONESI, FLICKR CC



PHOTO: REXNESS, FLICKR CC

and kangaroos are now keeping them in check. Whilst pines are now regenerating naturally, that is not happening with Buloke.

The natural environment

Wyperfeld is a national park, meaning that its primary purpose is the preservation and protection of the natural environment and indigenous flora and fauna; provision for the use of the park by the public for enjoyment, recreation or education is subsidiary to that purpose. So how has the natural environment fared in the last 45 years?

In 1976 the park was 53,558 hectares. It is now 359,445 hectares, much of it wilderness zones of the vegetated sand dunes of the Big Desert. In the north there were large additions to the park in 1979 and 1991. The privately-owned 'Pine Plains Lodge' enclave remains, and grazing ceased in 1996. The Hopetoun-Patchewollock rail line through the park closed in 1986. Outlet Creek in the park has been proclaimed part of the Wimmera Heritage River.

Fire is a natural and essential component of the mallee environment, where many fires are started by lightning.

A big fire in 2014 burnt to the Wonga campground. Extensive 'fuel-reduction' burns have been a contentious issue.

Climate change is now generally recognised, but long-time local farmer 'Jum' Fuller says it is hard to say whether this is a factor because of the variability of the mallee climate.

Dr. Joe Benshemish has been studying Malleefowl for many years. He agrees that it is hard to discern the effects of climate change when rainfall is characteristically variable in this semi-arid zone. Winter rain is very important and it does seem to be in steady decline. Malleefowl are doing well in small isolated patches. Overall, in Wyperfeld they seem to be holding their own with no discernible trend, but there is a national decline in Malleefowl breeding of about two per cent.

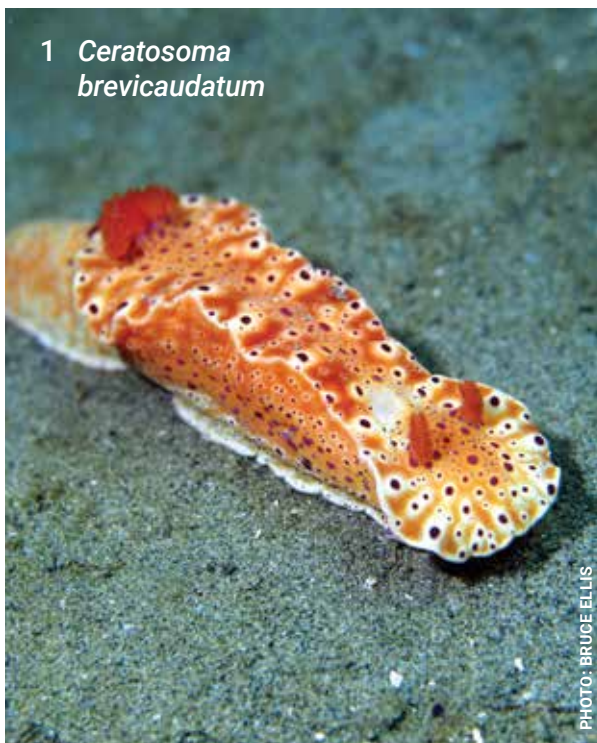
Local entomologist Fabian Douglas says resident and immigrant species of the most common butterflies are declining, but there are weird seasonal anomalies. He has noticed that some

birds such as the Rufus Song Lark, the Diamond Fire Tail and the Grey Butcher Bird are moving south.

Pest plants and animals are given selective ongoing attention. The most obvious plants are Horehound and Paterson's Curse. Feral animals are rabbits, fox, dogs, cats, goats, European Honey bees and wasps. Deer have been sighted in the north.

Now is the time to visit – COVID restrictions permitting

I have never seen the southern section of the park in such good condition. There is no better time to visit than September to November. The spacious Wonga campground does not have defined campsites but there is plenty of room and it is suitable for caravans. An alternative to camping is the Rainbow Motel (phone number **5395 1060**). Camping is also available in the north of the park via Patchewollock at Casuarina campground and at the Snow Drift. Campsite booking is through the Parks Victoria website www.parks.vic.gov.au or calling **131 963**. • PW



Sea slugs by the seashore

OUR POPULAR MARINE CITIZEN SCIENCE PROJECT IS EXPANDING, WRITES **NICOLE MERTENS**.

Since 2018, hundreds of slug sleuths have recorded nearly 200 species of sea slugs by the seashore around Melbourne for our Sea Slug Census.

Now the search is set to expand across the state thanks to a Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning Community Volunteer Action Grant.

Collaborating with Professor Steve Smith from Southern Cross University's National Marine Science Centre, for the past few years our ReefWatch program has engaged with hundreds of divers, snorkelers and rockpool rambles to find and photograph these fascinating marine creatures.

The most commonly sighted slug in our Census records is the lovely *Ceratosoma brevicaudatum*, followed by *Verconia haliclona*, *Phyllodesmium serratum*, *Doriopsilla carneola* and *Tambja verconis*. These are all true nudibranchs, the 'naked-gilled' sea slugs, often brightly coloured and highly sought after by underwater photographers. However, divers and snorkelers have also found unusual, tiny, and

cryptic species of nudibranchs and other sea slugs during their search, some of which the experts have very rarely (or never) seen before.

While we recorded *Ceratosoma brevicaudatum* an impressive 142 times between April 2018 and March 2021. Meanwhile 51 other species have only been seen once in that time. Sea slugs are often considered to be "rare in space and time", but this is not true for all species. "Rarity" of a species at a certain place may also be influenced by its life cycle, availability of food, and whether or not its young are carried by the currents to new locations. Survey methods and frequency of surveys may also impact how often a species is recorded (just because something isn't found during a single survey doesn't mean it is never there), which is why we hold a Census here in Victoria every three to four months, even in winter.

Sea slugs are considered bioindicators of environmental disturbance due to their lifespans (usually less than 12 months) and specialised diets, allowing researchers

to observe how climate change is impacting sea slug populations over a short timeframe. Data from other Sea Slug Censuses in NSW have documented southward range extensions in dozens of sea slug species along the east coast. Baseline data on sea slug distribution and occurrence is important for tracking changes to slug populations, such as range shifts due to warming waters. So, every single slug photographed during a Census is a valuable data point.

The Melbourne Sea Slug Census was focused on Port Phillip and Westernport bays, but with the encouraging uptake from our ReefWatch program and the broader community it started to expand and we began including sightings of sea slugs from anywhere along the Victorian coast. Some areas in the east and west of Victoria are known hotspots for nudibranchs.

However, sightings coming in from the east and west of the state have been patchy. The Victorian Government's Community Volunteer Action Grant provides us with an

Keep your eye out for the fantastic five above

The most commonly sighted slugs in our Census records are from left to right: *Ceratosoma brevicaudatum*, *Verconia haliclona*, *Phyllodesmium serratum*, *Doriopsilla carneola* and *Tambja verconis*.

FYI: Sea slugs often don't have common names, and the ones that do aren't much easier to remember than their scientific names (for example, *Tambja verconis* becomes Verc's Tambja). They're kind of like dinosaurs in that regard – and yet everyone remembers *Tyrannosaurus Rex*!

opportunity to work closely with community groups, dive clubs and other interested slug hunters to better resource and support the regions. We will workshop with local legends to identify more sea slug hotspots and better cater our Census events to sea slug sleuths in eastern and western Victoria.

Knowing that it's hard to plan in advance right now, we are still hoping to hold another Victoria-wide Census in October this year- our tenth to date! So, if you're in the east, west or central coast of the state be sure to keep your eyes peeled for these marvellous molluscs. • PW

If you're interested in contributing to this citizen science project for the first time and want to learn more, please email nicole@vnpa.org.au. Otherwise, make sure you're subscribed to our ReefWatch email list via vnpa.org.au/reefwatch/sign-up for the latest updates on the Sea Slug Census, including upcoming Census dates. You can also check out vnpa.org.au/sea-slugs for tips on how to photograph sea slugs for identification and to download all of our Census reports.

Tribute

Ian Harris (1948–2021)

THE VICTORIAN NATIONAL PARKS ASSOCIATION COMMUNITY IS SADDENED BY THE PASSING OF **IAN HARRIS**. IAN SERVED AS OUR PRESIDENT FROM 2001 TO 2004, CONTINUING AS VICE PRESIDENT UNTIL 2006. HE WAS A MEMBER OF OUR ORGANISATION SINCE THE VERY EARLY DAYS IN 1975.



Ian was slightly built and neat, always courteous, thoughtful, and quietly spoken. Unlikely character traits for an environmental warrior, perhaps, but warrior he was. His passion for the environment was driven by the power of his intellectual rigour, and he also understood that campaigning for the environment can be a long, hard game.

During Ian's time at the helm of VNPA, he was involved in some of those long, hard, but ultimately successful campaigns.

He had always believed that the organisation's work was critical for achieving a truly world-class national park system in Victoria.

Ian was there as the VNPA campaigned successfully for the establishment of the world's first network of marine national parks, the creation of national parks in the Box Ironbark forests, the creation of an integrated Point Nepean National Park, and an end to alpine cattle grazing.

Many who were active in those campaigns have spoken about Ian's wise counsel and heartfelt encouragement, which meant so much when the task seemed impossibly tough.

He was a very patient, persuasive man and understood how to bring people into meaningful consultation and decision making. Importantly, he understood the issues because he understood the science.

Ian had pursued his love for science through university, graduating with a Bachelor of Science (University of

Melbourne) and Master of Environmental Science (Monash University).

He was able to draw on this strong grounding in the sciences when he became a manager at the then Victorian Department of Conservation and Environment in the early 1980s. There he was appointed Director of Flora and Fauna, then Director of National Parks, and a member of the Land Conservation Council.

He moved to the Environment Protection Authority in the 90s, where he was Director of Environmental Science and concurrently the Victorian representative during the development of Australia's first National State of Environment Report.

The underlying theme of Ian's professional life was his commitment to conserving and protecting the environment.

During his time with the Lands Department he was responsible for identifying and cataloguing small 'islands' of remnant bushland which were scattered all over Victoria, and were critical hotspots for biodiversity. These small patches of bush were threatened by the active cultivation and agriculture that surrounded them.

It is thanks to remarkable work by Ian and his colleagues that those endangered areas are now permanently protected as 'Bushland, nature conservation, and flora and fauna reserves'.

Years later, he was to become involved in the protection and good management of all public land in the state as a member of the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council from 2011 to 2015.

The environment was central to Ian's work at the City of Melbourne too, as Head of Policy and Planning, Parks and Recreation. He was a vital advocate for urban parks and gardens and was particularly involved in two major projects: the development of a master plan for the World Heritage-listed Carlton Gardens, and planning for a \$5 million habitat, water treatment and recycling wetlands in Royal Park; known as the 'Trin Warren Tam-boore Bellbird Waterhole'.

Ian's passion for the natural world and the environment was lived out in his love of bushwalking, ski touring, camping out and exploring national parks. He was a keen gardener and an enthusiastic traveller to remote, less travelled places.

Ian died in August this year after a battle with cancer.

He is survived by his beloved wife Jillian, much-loved children James and Fiona, and grandchildren Ava, Erin, Aisling and Sam.

His lifelong contribution to the protection of Victoria's finest natural areas will be a lasting memorial to a fine man. He has left the world a better place, but he will be sadly missed by us all. • PW

By Chris Smyth and Kate Baillieu

Vale Don Marsh

Don Marsh, a pioneer of revegetation methods in Victoria, a founder of the Friends of Organ Pipes National Park and a member of the VNPA since 1969, has sadly passed away. We hope to have a tribute to Don in the December edition of *Park Watch*.

Thanks and farewell to Charlotte

AFTER 17 IMPRESSIVE YEARS AS VNPA'S ADMINISTRATION OFFICER, **CHARLOTTE KANDELAARS** IS MOVING ON.

Many of you will have spoken to Charlotte on the phone, and in pre-COVID days she was always there to welcome supporters, volunteers and visitors to the office or events.

Charlotte was an extremely diligent and hard worker, strongly committed to protecting nature. Always very caring, considerate, friendly, reliable and up for a chat.

Some of Charlotte's fondest memories from her time with the organisation are working closely with volunteers who gave up their valuable time. While it was a lot of work,

processing so many wonderful donations and memberships always reminded her of the dedication and generosity of the VNPA community. And Charlotte will never forget the atmosphere of camaraderie when she pitched in to shepherd members at the 'Shine a light' event at Wilsons Prom in 2013 – where participants formed a human sign 'Hands off Parks' on the beach in protest against development in national parks.

Many thanks to Charlotte for her outstanding service to VNPA. We

wish her the very best for the future, with more happy hours to spend on her paintings. She will also be continuing as a loyal Member of the VNPA community. • PW

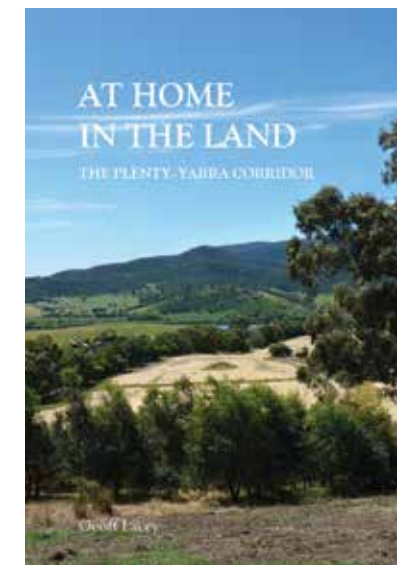


At Home in the Land

The Plenty-Yarra Corridor

BY GEOFF LACEY.
PAPERBACK, 112 PAGES. RRP \$24.
AVAILABLE AT READINGS BOOKSHOP IN CARLTON,
AND FROM THE AUTHOR AT
glacey@unimelb.edu.au

Long-time VNPA Member and campaigner Geoff Lacey packs a lot of information, ideas and inspiration into his new book's 112 pages, including 32 useful and attractive colour photos and two maps. In *At Home in the Land: the Plenty-Yarra Corridor* looks at the ecological network or web of corridors north and east of Melbourne that retain features of the pre-European landscape and continue to protect biodiversity.



An example is the Coliban Main Channel from Malmesbury Reservoir to Bendigo. Geoff describes its landscape features, flora and fauna, and role in sustaining farmland.

He then turns to the Plenty River corridor and its connections to the Yarra, Merri and Darebin corridors. Travelling south from Mount

Disappointment, he discusses the area's fire history as well as its value for water supply and timber. He continues through Yan Yean to Plenty Gorge Park and the Yarra, listing the bird species that reflect the change from forest to basalt plains grassland, and describes the great work of Friends groups in restoring original plants and landscapes.

Geoff stresses the importance of Indigenous learning and spirituality in addition to western-style scientific knowledge, in particular the concept of 'dadirri', an "inner deep listening and quiet, still awareness of Country".

The book concludes with thought-provoking sections on regenerating the city, bushfires and coronavirus: "We need to find our place once again after a long period of alienation". • PW

Review by Michael Howes

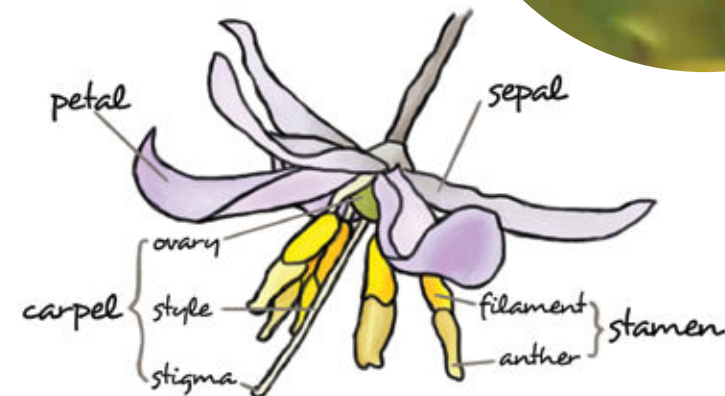
Explorer's corner

TIPS AND TRICKS FOR GETTING IN TO NATURE

It's nice to meet you, wildflower!

Learning to identify wildflowers takes time and practice. The best thing we can do when we are starting is to be a close observer. Once we know the features of flowers, we can also begin to learn to identify them.

Use the activities on this poster as a guide to fun ways to get to know wildflowers you come across on your next adventure.



Find a wildflower and get close to observe it

Does it have petals? How many?	What size is the flower?
What does your flower feel like? What do the leaves feel like? Are there any hairs growing on the leaves?	What size is the plant it is growing on?
Sketch the top side of your flower.	Draw a picture of the underside of your flower.

What colour are the petals (if it has petals)?	What other colours are there on the flower, e.g. stigma, style, anthers and filaments?
How many flowers are on the same plant?	Watch your flower for a few minutes. Is anything coming to visit it?
Give your flower a name. It could be a name that describes its features, a name that poetically describes it, or a name just for fun. Some wildflowers have names such as Running Postman and Flying Duck Orchid!	Be a citizen scientist. Photograph your flower and upload it to the iNaturalist app*. There may be people out there who can identify it for you.

You can repeat the activity as many times as you like.

There are many wildflower books, and some councils produce guides to local plants of the areas, which can be found online if you search. While they are usually not a complete guide to all of these species, if you have one of these for your location it is a great starting point. If you have paid close attention to the features of your flower, this will make identifying it much easier.

*You'll need to create a profile on iNaturalist, but you may find yourself in an exciting world of discovering, learning about and contributing to our understanding of nature through your images. • PW



PHOTOS BY NICOLE MERTENS



