

PARK WATCH



50TH ANNIVERSARY OF FAUNAL EMBLEMS:
LEADBEATER'S POSSUM &
HELMETED HONEYEATER
VICTORIA'S EXTINCTION CRISIS
FERAL HORSE CONTROL PLAN WELCOME
BIG TREES IN BIG TROUBLE
OUR GREAT SOUTHERN REEF

DECEMBER 2021 NO 287



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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FRONT COVER

The Leadbeater's Possum was proclaimed Victoria's state animal in 1971. Turn to pages 25-30 to read all about this iconic species, as well as our state bird the Helmeted Honeyeater. Photo by Justin Cally.

BACK COVER

A Yellow Thornbill in Wellsford Forest.

Photo by Flissy Johnson Photography.

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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.

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From the President



VNPA's greatest assets are its staff and supporters. So it is with mixed feelings that we farewell Phil Ingamells as he heads into retirement. Phil has been a tireless campaigner for parks over his 20 years with us. We and all Victorians owe him a debt of gratitude for his work. Our parks are better for his efforts, we are all wiser, and the government cannot say that it has not been told. Phil has enhanced the reputation of the VNPA as an organisation of value and credibility, and we cannot thank him enough for his strength, vigour and focus on the things that matter for nature protection in Victoria. As my late father used to say, Phil was often the only one talking any sense and with any insight about the issues that matter. All of us at VNPA wish him a long and happy retirement. Please turn over the page for his words.

The recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) COP26 conference in Glasgow has worked hard to protect nature and the biosphere from catastrophic climate change. Obviously, climate change is a major threat to nature, which is why so many community organisations are campaigning to cut emissions from fossil fuels to limit temperature rise to no more than 1.5° C. Climate change is a major agent in accelerating the extinction crisis in Australia with numerous tipping points rapidly approaching.

VNPA has long been concerned about the impacts of climate change. In fact, we held one of the first workshops on its implications in the early 1990s, and more recently facilitated VicNature2050 alliance with government departments, universities and other community organisations. The focus of our activities, however, is the

management of parks and resilience issues which aim to ensure our natural areas are in the best state possible to deal with a rapidly changing climate – for example, removing the damaging effects of feral horses in our Alpine National Park. Feral horses have devastating impacts on our alpine environments, and the situation is even worse in New South Wales. Turn to pages 6-7 for the latest on feral horse control.

VNPA and the wider community are deeply alarmed about the continued destruction of big old trees (see pages 10-11). These living giants are amazing organisms that have defied the impacts of the ages to survive and grow to astonishing physical sizes and/or great ages. In most cultures, old trees are venerated and respected. As a teenager I was fortunate to study botany and plant physiology, which resulted in my great admiration of tall, large and old trees. But trees are not only beautiful, they provide much-needed homes for countless animals. Unlike other continents, in Australia over 20 per cent of our fauna require tree hollows for their safe refuge and breeding, compared with about 8 per cent elsewhere. Following overseas practices and trends is not informative about what should happen to hollow-bearing trees in our unique ecosystems. Our forestry and park managers and decision-makers need to protect our big old trees. You will have recently received correspondence inviting you to support our campaign for their protection. If you have not already made a gift, I would encourage you to do so. Donations can be made at vnpa.org.au/support-old-trees

Related to forest and park management is the vexed issue of the use of fire breaks. In Gippsland, in response to the burning of

forests earmarked for harvesting, authorities have embarked on a sudden, unexplained frenzy of construction and widening of fire breaks along many roads. This process has led to the provision of logs for the rapacious timber industry, yet it is known to lead to seriously destructive effects on our flora and fauna. The continued fragmentation of our forests has countless negative outcomes; it impedes the movement of wildlife, acts as a conduit for weeds and feral animals, and invites dumping and wood removal. Justifying the fire breaks as a way to prevent large fires or to conduct "back burning" is controversial as the Victorian Auditor-General concluded in 2020 that "with the exception of some isolated case studies, DELWP does not know the effect of its burns on native flora and fauna". See page 24 for more detail on fire breaks.

In the last issue of *Park Watch*, I referred to the ongoing disagreements between Parks Victoria and the Victorian Environmental Friends Network (VEFN) and Friends groups generally, over proposed volunteer requirements. While there has been some movement on the issue from Parks Victoria, the VEFN is not satisfied that their concerns have been adequately dealt with. See page 13 for a full explanation from VEFN.

Enclosed with this edition of *Park Watch* is the 2020-21 Annual Report, which I invite you to read to learn about some of the progress we have made together for nature in Victoria.

On behalf of the VNPA Council and staff, I'd like to thank you, our loyal supporters, for your generosity. We are very grateful that you have chosen to support us to make our nature conservation work possible. May you have a safe, happy and nature-filled festive season! • PW

Bruce McGregor, VNPA President

69th VNPA Annual General Meeting

On 12 October we held the 69th Victorian National Parks Association Annual General Meeting. Our many thanks to all those Members who were present for our second online AGM.

Members re-elected Bruce McGregor (President) for a fourth term, David Nugent (Vice-President), Marilyne Crestias (Treasurer), Jan Brueggemeier (Secretary), Lara Bickford, Ann Birrell, Michael Feller, Dianne Marshall, Gerard McPhee, Rosemary Race, Doug Robinson and Paul Strickland.

We are very pleased that Euan Moore was awarded an Honorary Life Membership, in recognition of his outstanding, long-term service to the Victorian National Parks Association. Read his profile on page 31.

During the meeting, we also shared a tribute to the late Ian Harris, former VNPA President. Ian's lifelong contribution to the protection of Victoria's finest natural areas continues to be greatly appreciated.

Many thanks also to our guest speaker Dr Philip Zylstra, who spoke about his bushfire research.

We also heard from Elizabeth Morison, our new Nature Conservation Officer, who joins us via the Australia Institute's Anne Kantor Fellowship for Young Women Environmentalists.

Sera Blair, Acting Manager – Community Learning and Engagement, shared how our community has been getting to know nature, both in the field and online.

Matt Ruchel, Executive Director gave an update on the progress made over the past year – including the win for Westernport Bay and the commitment to create new national parks in central west Victoria.

You can watch the presentations at www.vnpa.org.au/agm-2021

For more on what we've been able to achieve together we encourage you to read the annual report enclosed with this edition of *Park Watch* or online at www.vnpa.org.au/annual-report

We are only able to work on so many nature conservation issues because of the generosity of our Members, supporters and volunteers – thank you very much.

Staff update

Our new Office Coordinator Lucy Permezel started in October. Lucy is experienced across a diverse range of roles in both the hospitality and not-for-profit sectors. Having held a number of management roles, Lucy is well placed and already actioning opportunities for improved delivery of office coordination functions. From Lucy: "I'm energised to be working with a group of such passionate people who advocate for the protection of Victoria's beautiful nature spaces, as well as helping the members and supporters of the VNPA. I love getting out into nature, particularly hiking and running along the trails in the Dandenong Ranges, and Falls Creek over the summer months."



Simon O'Connor is filling the role of Finance and Operations Manager while Heath Richard is on Long Service Leave until April 2020. Simon is a Fellow of CPA Australia, with senior finance and operations experience in both the environmental and public sector. In his words: "I'm super excited about working with the team to support protection of our parks network."



Our long-term Parks Protection campaigner Phil Ingamells retired in November. Please see next page for his parting words.

Summer 2021/22 Bushwalking and Activities

We are working to get the program back on track after lockdown. There is no printed Summer 2021/22 program but any upcoming activities will be available at www.vnpa.org.au/adventures

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

PHOTO: APRIL PETHYBRIDGE / UNSPLASH

PHIL INGAMELLS IS RETIRING AFTER 20 YEARS OF WORKING ON PARKS PROTECTION AT THE VICTORIAN NATIONAL PARKS ASSOCIATION.

Phil is an accomplished conservation advocate with skills and knowledge honed over the past two decades at the VNPA. A thoughtful and persuasive writer and eloquent speaker, he has played an important role in protecting Victoria's natural places and national parks.

Some of the highlights of his time with our organisation include the hard-fought battles to remove cattle grazing from the Alpine National Park, and more recently to control feral horses there as well. He always pushed back against the seemingly endless development proposals in our

national parks estate; and, importantly, always promoted why these places are so special. Phil also played a key role in numerous park management plans, advocating for action on feral species, including the exploding feral deer population. In recent years Phil tackled the extremely difficult issue of fire management in his usual evidence-based way.

While we will miss Phil and his involvement, his retirement is well deserved. After the many years of hard slog, he should be congratulated for all his work.

Matt Ruchel, Executive Director

Thanks for the chance

From Phil:

It's been a huge privilege to spend time as a spokesperson for the VNPA, and I'll remain forever grateful for that opportunity.

I've been able to engage with so many interesting people, tasked in so many ways with the protection of Victoria's great natural heritage.

I've had remarkable access to the expertise of ecologists and other researchers who have been happy to entrust their knowledge to the VNPA. And similarly, I've had access to the formidable understanding of so many of Victoria's amateur naturalists.

And though it's not always easy to find yourself trying to enlighten people who see the natural world as a resource, an opportunity for exploitation or simply a troublesome in-the-way bit of bush, knowing that I was backed by the strength and passion of our members and supporters has made it all seem possible.

There are many challenges ahead, and reversing declines in the condition of our finest areas, especially our national parks, must surely be the biggest among them. That battle's far from won, but the VNPA has always been the Victorian organisation most able to mix evidence-based assessment of threats with the strong advocacy needed to bring about change.

I leave the organisation in strong shape, with the capacity to become even more effective. I certainly hope so.

Thank you, and I hope to see you somewhere along the track.



PHOTO: DAVID TATNALL

Feral horse plan very welcome

IT'S BEEN A TOUGH JOURNEY, BUT VICTORIA NOW HAS A REAL PLAN FOR ALPINE RECOVERY, SAYS PARKS PROTECTION CAMPAIGNER **PHIL INGAMELLS**.

Nature conservation is largely about contested territory, and the battle for Victoria's high country has been no exception.

Since well before 1974 when the VNPA published Dick Johnson's remarkable book *The Alps at the Crossroads*, we have fought for a substantial Alpine National Park, fought to have licensed cattle grazing removed from the park, and more recently campaigned to have management of the high country – and the rest of Victoria's parks system – properly resourced with both expertise and funds.

One of the most difficult problems in that journey has been that the high country is one of those places where impeccable evidence is routinely confounded by entrenched assumptions, where the truth is undermined by community ignorance or, unfortunately, outright mischief.

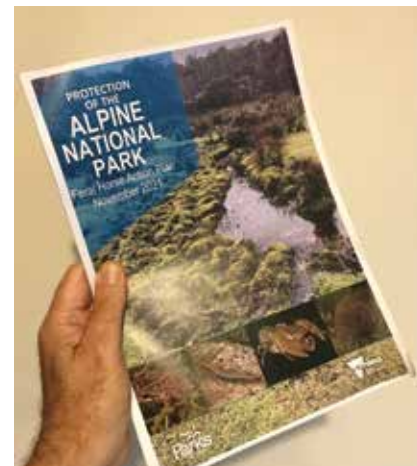
The Alpine National Park's feral horse population (about 5000–6000 in

Victoria with an additional 20,000 in Kosciuszko National Park over the NSW border) has been the subject of the most recent of those battles.

I remember one moment when a brumby advocate, invited by Parks Victoria to be a privileged member of an alpine horse advisory panel, assured the group that a scientific paper said horses improve the diversity of birds in grasslands. It turned out to be an Argentinian paper, and it actually said the opposite: horses trample nesting sites in that country's extensive Pampas plains.

That's a small problem, perhaps, but the relentless feral social media campaign that has personally targeting individuals, including park staff whose only crime is to call for evidence-based management of a national park, is no small matter at all.

Parks Victoria's final *Protection of the Alpine National Park: Feral Horse Action Plan*, released recently, sets up a decade-long management



program that has the capacity to reverse the declines in alpine ecosystems brought about by the expanding feral horse population.

It will aim to remove all horses from the Bogong High Plains, and reduce the main population in the eastern part of the park by up to 500 in the first year. Rehoming will be the first option, with ground shooting and then aerial shooting considered to be the most humane method of controlling the remaining animals.

Brumby running, the control method championed by many horse supporters whereby wild horses are rounded up, roped, then trucked or driven out of the

park before ending up in a knackery, is not supported by animal welfare advocates and won't be allowed in the future.

The plan is the result of many decades of scientific study, and involved years of consultation with the broad community, brumby support groups, cattlemen, animal welfare experts, Aboriginal communities and ecologists. Along the way Parks Victoria has also had to defend its plan in a series of cases in the Supreme and Federal Courts, each of which resulted in unambiguous support for Parks Victoria's intentions to control these feral animals.

We congratulate Parks Victoria in its pursuit of a plan that has real integrity, and we congratulate the Victorian Environment Minister for her unwavering support for that endeavour. We also congratulate our members for their crucial support for the long campaign to restore the ecological integrity, and the great beauty, of the Alpine National Park.

Now all we need is to get the NSW Government to control horses over the border. And, yes, we need to make sure the plans for managing all hard hooved animals are resourced well into the future. • PW

Horseplay in NSW

THE DEEPLY FLAWED DRAFT 'HERITAGE' HORSE PLAN FROM NSW IS A BURDEN FOR FERAL HORSE MANAGEMENT IN VICTORIA, **PHIL INGAMELLS** WRITES.

As long ago as 1986, the environment ministers of Victoria, NSW, the ACT and the federal government put their signatures to a Memorandum of Understanding that would improve conservation management across Australia's alpine region national parks for decades to come.

Still current (though now signed by the heads of the park management agencies), the MOU promises to achieve "excellence in conservation management ... through an active program of cross-border cooperation".

How strange then, that there seems to have been no attempt to co-operate on the control of some 8000 feral horses that roam on both sides of the NSW/Victoria border.

In 2018, the NSW government passed its extraordinary *Kosciuszko National Park Wild Horse Heritage Act*, a law that actually protects feral animals in the most prized conservation reserve in that state. This law was largely driven by then Deputy Premier John Barilaro, who has since resigned but left alpine management chaos in his wake.

The natural values of the alpine region of mainland Australia have been the subject of vigilant study by botanists, zoologists, soil scientists and ecologists for well over 150 years. The breadth of that knowledge has been recognised in the National Heritage listing for the Australian Alps National Parks (AANP).

The listing states that "The AANP has outstanding heritage value for the scientific research that has taken place since the 1830s, demonstrated by the density and continuity of scientific endeavour". That National Heritage listing sits within the federal government's *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, along with recognition of a series of threatened alpine plants and animals, and the critical listing of Alpine Sphagnum Bogs and Associated Fens as a nationally threatened ecological community.

Horses trash peat beds, bogs and fens.

If that needed any further clarification, in a 2019 Federal Court case brought against Parks Victoria by the Australian Brumby Alliance, the Judge unequivocally ruled that controlling feral horses would have no discernible impact on the cultural heritage values of the Australian Alps.

Moreover, the Judge said that the scientific evidence of the damage horses cause was "persuasive" and that retaining horses on the high plains "would not be an appropriate control of the threat they present to ecosystems, habitats and species in those alpine areas".

The Judge dismissed contrary submissions that horses didn't harm the high country, saying it "was not supported by scientific studies and was not persuasive".

He was stating what pretty much anyone who walks in the high country knows, of course, but his judgement after such a comprehensive Federal Court trial should bear decisive weight.

It's time to stop talking about feral horses, and act.

Meanwhile, the Victorian Government has released its final alpine feral horse management plan that aims to take all horses off the Bogong High Plains within three years, and reduce horse numbers in the eastern alps to at least levels that allow the recovery of alpine ecosystems there.

The ACT has been keeping their Namadgi National Park horse free for decades.

Hopefully, under a new environment minister, the NSW Government will re-interpret its horse heritage law, and all park agencies can fully co-operate on alpine management under the long-standing MOU.

It's good to speak about 'excellence', and 'co-operation' in management, but far better to actually enact these things. • PW

PHOTO: NINA KERR

Spot-tailed Quoll are one of almost 2000 species listed as threatened in Victoria.

Balancing on the edge of extinction



PHOTO: S.J. BENNETT, FLICKR CC

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR **MATT RUCHEL** SAYS IT IS TIME TO STOP THE DECLINE AND START RECOVERY.

According to the United Nations, nature-based solutions offer the best way to achieve human well-being, tackle climate change, and protect our living planet. Yet globally, nature is in crisis, as we are losing species at a rate 1000 times greater than at any other time in recorded human history, and one million species face extinction.

Victoria is a microcosm of this global trend. We now have almost 2000 species on our official threatened species list, of which 28 per cent are now listed as critically endangered, the last step toward extinction in the wild. We are in an extinction crisis.

Victoria also prides itself on being a progressive and prosperous state. But our state is responsible for over half of all wildlife extinctions in Australia. While we have been leaders in nature

conservation in the past, bold action is needed if we are to regain this status.

Australia has joined the High Ambition Coalition (HAC) for Nature and People, an intergovernmental group of 70 countries with the central goal of protecting at least 30 per cent of the world's land and ocean by 2030. While these goals don't always translate to subnational governments, like the state of Victoria, as we have seen with the efforts to reduce carbon emissions, state and territory governments can be key drivers of change.

The last comprehensive election policy for nature in Victoria was in 2014. Labor's election announcement 'Our Environment Our Future' claimed that it would "work in partnership ... to put the care and protection of our environment back on the agenda".

The Andrews Government committed to a series of significant reforms including a new Marine and Coastal Act, a new Yarra River Act, important programs for riparian land, review of native vegetation regulations, a review of the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act, and importantly, an update of statewide biodiversity strategy.

The Andrews Government released the *Protecting Victoria's Environment – Biodiversity 2037* strategy in 2017. While far from perfect, its goal of "Victoria's natural environment is healthy" and targeting "a net improvement in the outlook across all species by 2037" was pragmatic – and at least it was a strategy.

In October this year, the Victorian Auditor-General's Office released a highly critical report *Protecting Victoria's Biodiversity*, the first such review of the strategy. Its findings were scathing.

It is clear from the report that current management efforts and funding allocations are not meeting the objectives of the *Biodiversity 2037* strategy nor the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* (FFG Act) to address the extinction crisis and to stop the decline of threatened species.

Some of the findings of the report are alarming, but sadly not surprising, including that the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP):

- cannot demonstrate if, or how well, it is halting further decline in Victoria's threatened species populations.
- cannot guarantee the protection of all threatened species, given current funding levels.
- continues to make limited use of available legislative tools to protect threatened species.
- has no transparent, risk-based process to prioritise these species for management.
- data used in the various models is old and likely outdated, and has some critical gaps.
- lacks performance indicators and reporting to demonstrate the impact of its management interventions on halting the decline of threatened species.

Critically, funding available to DELWP to protect biodiversity falls significantly short of what is needed. According to the Auditor-General's report, in 2017, DELWP received \$86.3 million (project option 1, see graph at right) in government funding over four years to implement *Biodiversity 2037* – less than half what it requested. The government also projected DELWP would receive \$20 million per annum after 2021 for *Biodiversity 2037*'s ongoing implementation – approximately a third of what was requested.

DELWP'S unsuccessful funding bid for \$269 million over four years (about \$67 million per annum) was relatively small and very achievable in the scheme of things – only the cost of two level-crossing removals, for example.

The Auditor-General's report also notes that since 2017, DELWP has not provided further advice to the government about the impacts of the funding received compared to other funding project options provided in the *Biodiversity 2037* business case (see graph below). It has also not provided updated impacts of funding levels and costings given the increased number of species now listed as threatened under the FFG Act.

While the 2014 election commitments and 2017 strategy provided some hope, there was little follow-through at the 2018 election, with very few conservation-related initiatives. Policy was confined to the 'Victoria's Great Outdoors' program, a nature-based extension of the 'Victoria's Big Build' philosophy. While it came with a \$100 million plus price tag, it was largely infrastructure-focused with commitments to cheaper camping fees, new campgrounds, 4WD tracks and walking trails.

This isn't just the result of a lack of up-to-date knowledge, policies and programs. It's also a refusal to actually use the existing legislative tools, commit the required funding, and follow through with action. Frankly speaking, the avoidable decline of our unique plants, animals and landscapes isn't an accident; it's neglect.

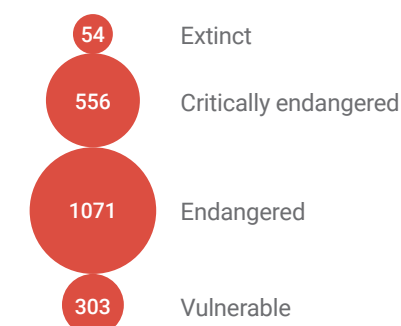
The Auditor-General's report is sobering, but it is also a wake-up call for the

opportunities Victoria has to invest in threatened species' recovery to set our unique biodiversity up for success.

The *Biodiversity 2037* strategy and the FFG Act do provide decent frameworks and objectives – we just desperately need more resourcing and focus for their implementation.

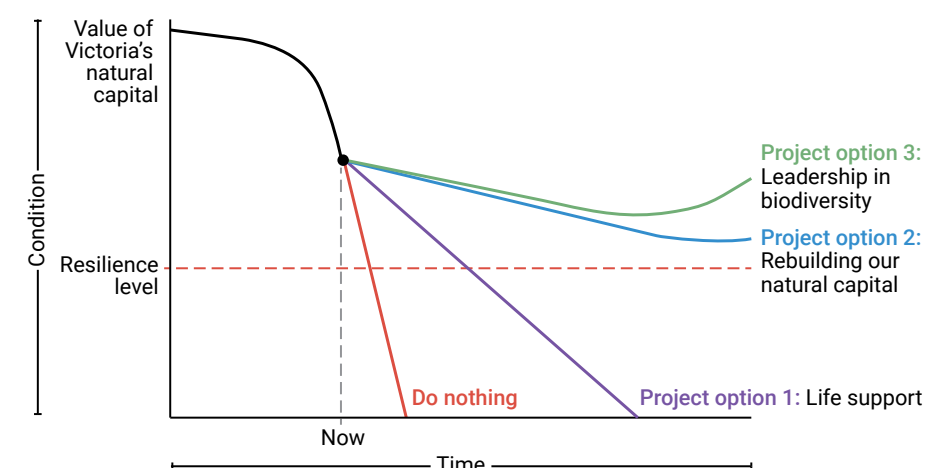
Without it, we will not reverse this distressing decline in our unique native plants and animals. Protecting habitat could be a key avenue to help threatened species, including on both private and public land and creating new national parks, as well as the important job of properly managing these areas once protected.

Victoria's Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act's 1998 Threatened List, June 2021



Increased investment in threatened species recovery will bring real and lasting benefits for Victoria's irreplaceable natural heritage, and will also be good for tourism and regional economy and jobs.

DELWP's predicted impacts of funding options in its Biodiversity 2037 business case



Source: VAGO, based on DELWP's 2017 Biodiversity 2037 business case.

A good starting point would be for commitments to be made as we move into another election year to halt the decline and instead move towards the restoration of our biodiversity. This would involve:

1. A dedicated long-term threatened species program for Victoria, of at least \$500 million which will:
 - Activate all available mechanisms under state threatened species laws to protect species in decline (including using laws to protect critical habitats)
 - Improve prioritisation of threatened species for protection
 - Enable enhanced and targeted landscape programs to control key threats statewide including feral animals and pests to facilitate recovery
2. Dramatic increase in public funding for land and sea conservation and threatened species laws and programs including:
 - Increase in funding core ecological management funding for Parks Victoria to at least one per cent of state expenditure annually
 - An enhanced threatened species recovery and action program across all publicly-owned land and sea
 - Increase targeted funding for Community Action, Landcare and private land protection
 - Expanded Traditional Owner joint management on Country
 - Dramatically speed up the transition out of native forest logging
3. New \$30–\$50 million for a Land Conservation Revolving fund which "purchase, protect, resells" high conservation private land to be run by the Trust for Nature.
4. Strengthen the Wildlife Act to properly protect all native species. • PW

Call on the Victorian Government to keep our already threatened species off the extinction list: www.vnpa.org.au/take-action-extinction-disgrace

The Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline by the Environment and Planning Committee of the Victorian Parliament, tabled in the Victorian Parliament on 3 December, has further highlighted the need to act for nature. The report heard from over 900 submission and 90 plus witnesses, highlighting that Victorians care deeply about our unique natural heritage. The Inquiry made dozens of finding and recommendations, which should be taken seriously. We will cover this in more depth in the next edition of *Park Watch*.

Big trees in big trouble

CAMPAIGNER **JORDAN CROOK** GIVES US A SNEAK PEEK INTO OUR UPCOMING REPORT ON THE FATE OF VICTORIA'S LIVING GIANTS.

Large old trees are not just for marvelling at when you come across them in the bush. They play a vital ecological role, flowering more than younger trees and providing hollows for wildlife dependent on them for habitat.

But many of these grand trees across the public land estate are under threat from poor management, including poor planning of new firebreaks and fuel reduction, and native forest logging operations that maim and kill forest giants.

Following VicForests' proposed logging within 30 metres of the giant Whitelaw Tree on the east side of Mount Baw Baw on Gunaikurnai Country (see previous *Park Watch* article www.vnpa.org.au/living-giants), we hold deep concerns that many other significant trees may also be under threat from native forest logging operations across the state.

Thanks to you, our community of supporters, we conducted a detailed analysis of three significant trees databases and VicForests' logging schedules. Across Victoria, we found a shocking 162 significant trees in logging coupes or within 100 metres of proposed logging. Trees potentially threatened by logging activity include an ancient Black Olive Berry, a small shrub-like tree on the Errinundra plateau, and iconic River Red Gums on the Murray River.

Ninety-five of the trees we identified are nominally protected within Immediate Protection Areas (IPAs) announced in 2019 – but as the IPAs are yet to be legislated by the state government, their protection cannot be guaranteed.

That leaves 67 of these significant trees in or closely surrounding scheduled logging coupes without protection, open to being damaged or destroyed by the native forest logging industry.

We know there is a real threat of increased logging in state forests as native forest logging is phased out in Victoria by 2030 and the industry is transitioned to plantation-based.

We must ensure the protection of these living giants across our state. Not only are they so important for providing critical habitat values – they also offer opportunities for increased tourism as people come from near and far to stand in wonder below them.

VNPA has been working on a log of claims for the protection of large old trees on public land and building a set of recommended actions for their proper management and protection. The recommended actions will be based on science and arboriculture, to help public land managers to ensure these significant trees can survive in a healthy and safe manner across public land here in Victoria. You can help make this work happen by donating at www.vnpa.org.au/support-old-trees

Have you ever thought of becoming friends with a tree?

In the time since colonisation, most of our grand old trees – some among the tallest in the world – have been destroyed. There's only a handful of them left in Victoria.

Across Victoria, we've identified many large and significant trees that are located in logging coupes and may be logged any day!

The current 'protections' for such trees include a tiny buffer zone of just three metres. This means that machinery and logging can occur within three metres of these living giants.

Will you help, will you become a friend of Victoria's remaining large old trees with a special gift today? Make a tax-deductible gift at www.vnpa.org.au/support-old-trees

Our significant large old trees, like the Ada Tree, should be protected not exposed to damage from logging.

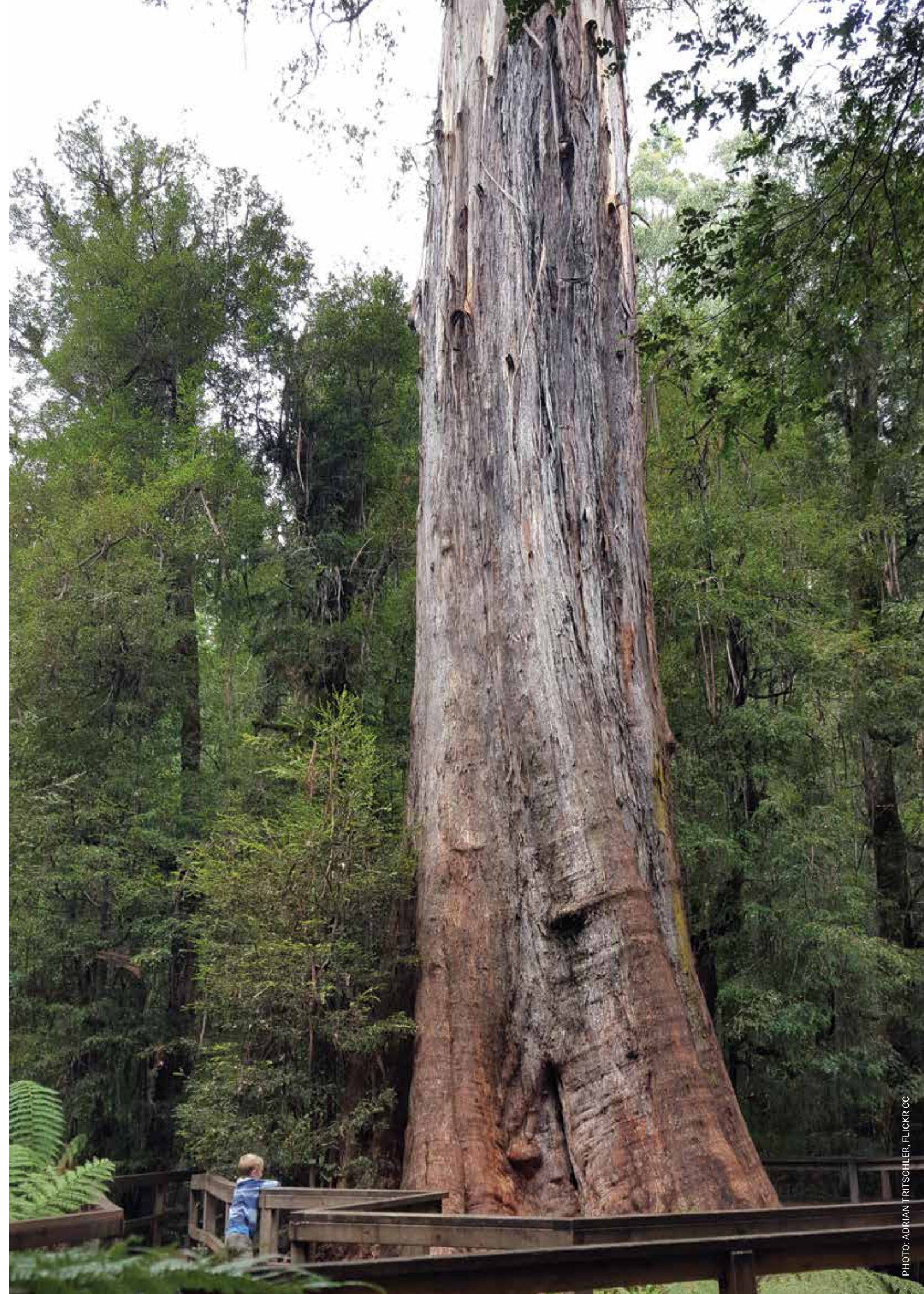




PHOTO: DAVID PAUL/MUSEUMS VICTORIA

A new find

CENTRAL WEST PARKS CREATION LEGISLATION DRAGS AS A NEW SPECIES IS FOUND IN WOMBAT FOREST, WRITES **MATT RUCHEL**.

The Mountain Skink has recently been discovered in the Wombat Forest.

The Andrews Government seems in no hurry to legislate the 50,000 hectares of new central west national parks it committed to creating in late June, even with a year left on the legislative clock. To date, the government has cited difficulties in getting boundaries mapped and undertaking detailed surveying – saying the parks will be legislated “as soon as practicable”. It could be as long as two years, well into the next term of government.

We remain alarmed by their plan to log significant areas of the proposed parks up until 2030, particularly in Mount Cole, Mount Buangor, Pyrenees and Wombat forests. Logging in an area slated for protection in a national park seriously undermines the intent of protection and defies final expert VEAC recommendations.

While far from ideal, it’s not unprecedented. In the 1980s the creation of parts of the Alpine National Park had clauses when it was legislated that that “once only logging to be carried out ... after which areas are to be managed as part of the park”. Either way, if the commitment has any chance of delivering parks in the next decade they need to be legislated in one hit, as quickly as possible, ideally before the end of this term of government.

The delays entrench the Andrews Government as a laggard on national parks creation – the worst of any Victorian government in the last half-century, while other states, especially NSW and WA continue to expand their national parks estates.

If the Andrews Government can’t or won’t legislate this term, and is going to have any chance of making up make up lost time and ground, the fallback is a rock-solid election commitment to legislate in the first six months of a new term, with significant funding commitments for implementation and other much need additions to our reserves systems.

Meanwhile, logging continues at Mount Cole, and test drilling for gold has commenced in part of the Wellsford Forest. VNPA will maintain a close eye on what is happening in these areas, as again the community is left to carry the the burden of standing against the destruction of their local forests.

The current pre-logging forest survey program for threatened species does not apply to the Western Regional Forest Agreement area, seriously limiting capacity of relevant regulators to make sure important values are protected in areas proposed for native forest logging.

The need for detailed pre-harvest forest surveys has never been more important. In December 2020, Monash University reptile researcher Jules Farquhar, with his companions Wyn Russell and Nicholas Gale, discovered several individuals of Mountain Skink (*Liopholis montana*) in the Wombat State Forest. This is the first time this species has been found in the west of the state, once again highlighting the unique value of the Wombat Forest.

To date, Mountain Skinks have only been found at elevations between 900 metres and 1800 metres, with the site on the Lerderderg River having an elevation of approximately 620 metres. There are now two verified locations for this species in the Wombat Forest, with a second population found by Wombat Forestcare. The skink is currently being assessed to be recommended as endangered under the national *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.

The Mountain Skink was only described in 2002 and has a scattered distribution, largely found in rocky habitats in subalpine woodlands or open dry forests in southeast Australia. It is a smooth-scaled skink of medium size with a snout to vent length up to 111 millimetres. The primary colour is grey-brown, and most have a reddish-brown upper surface. They construct deep burrow networks beneath rocks and live in colonies, which is uncommon in the reptile world and appear to form stable pair bonds. The females give birth to four young. Their diet is omnivorous and includes seasonal fruits.

The newest find, along with the critically endangered Mount Cole Grevillea, the Powerful Owl, Greater Gliders and 370 other threatened species, continue to highlight the importance of these areas for Victoria’s natural heritage. The need for permanent protection and well-resourced management is more than established, and after decades of campaigning and a four year expert process, they should, in plain terms, just get on with it. • PW

Friends groups not being treated like friends

LAURA MUMAW AND PAUL STRICKLAND FROM VICTORIAN ENVIRONMENT FRIENDS NETWORK WRITE OF THEIR DISAPPOINTMENT IN PARKS VICTORIA’S TREATMENT OF FRIENDS GROUPS.

Over many tedious months since 2019, groups that organise environmental volunteers have been wrestling with a manual that seeks to provide an administrative framework for volunteers working on Parks Victoria managed land.

The Victorian Environment Friends Network (VEFN) represents environmental volunteer groups, often called Friends groups, many working in the parks estate.

To the surprise of the VEFN, the 76-page Volunteering Manual was launched in April 2021, without resolution on a number of issues previously raised about the relationship Parks Victoria has with volunteers, especially those organised by outside groups, including VNPA.

The manual and its increased administrative burden on group leaders are likely to impact most the many smaller, locally organised and often unincorporated groups.

There appears to be a fundamentally different perspective of what Friends groups do and their relationship with Parks Victoria. Friends groups do not exist to volunteer for Parks Victoria – they are motivated to care for land and species that lack care. Friends groups are community partners, with intimate and deep knowledge of the



areas they care for, often built over years of stewardship. As one of our members says:

“We need to get the relationship back to a point where PV recognises and respects the valuable volunteer work that groups undertake in parks. It needs to be more than just counting contribution hours to get a catchy paragraph in the annual report. PV needs to understand the value of what we do. There are too many necessary and important tasks undertaken by volunteers that simply would not happen if left up to PV staff or contractors. From weed control, tree planting, flora and fauna surveys, rubbish collection, track maintenance, public awareness and education, etc.

Groups [need to] feel comfortable in raising contentious issues with local and regional PV staff and working together to come up with solutions. Our biodiversity is under too many threats to waste time and effort in having arguments over who’s responsible for what. We all need to be working from the same page and working towards the same goals. How we get there should be the subject of negotiations. I think PV has decided their way is the only way, but their way will put many volunteer groups offside and create the risk of losing too much valuable volunteer support, at a time when they need it more than ever”.

Since the manual’s launch, there has been a series of correspondence between the VEFN and the CEO of Parks Victoria and, subsequently, the Parks Victoria Board. The VEFN has consistently requested a deferral of the manual’s implementation to allow for a wider and deeper collaborative review between Parks Victoria and environmental groups, so that the final manual is practical, implementable, and supports our mutual aims of effectively delivering environmental and community benefits.

The ball is now in Parks Victoria’s court to come back with a draft timetable and process for establishing regional workshops to:

- build relationships between local Parks Victoria staff and Friends and Landcare groups
- identify issues that impede practical implementation of the manual
- agree a process for addressing the poor usability and complexity of the required administrative system
- find ways to substantially reduce the administrative burden placed on Friends group leaders by the manual
- resolve other issues raised

We will consult with our Friends group members about planning and participating in these workshops. • PW



PHOTO: WOODROW WILSON PHOTOGRAPHY

IN ONE OF THE MOST CLEARED REGIONS OF THE MOST CLEARED STATE IS AN OASIS OF NATIVE VEGETATION, WRITES **JORDAN CROOK**.

Earlier this year, VNPA and local group Save Western Port Woodlands released our report *Western Port Woodlands: Sand Pit or Wildlife Corridor?*

The investigation was undertaken to gain insight into the ecological significance and conservation values of a corridor of remnant woodlands along the eastern side of Westernport Bay.

The Gippsland Plain is one of Victoria's most cleared bioregions, with less than one per cent of the area's native vegetation intact. The Western Port Woodlands consists of a string of conservation reserves and private land that stretches from Adams Creek Nature Conservation Reserve in the north to the Grantville Nature Conservation Reserve to the south. The former Holden Proving Ground site in the centre is the largest intact piece of native vegetation in the area at 855 hectares. (Read the previous article from *Park Watch* June 2020 www.vnpa.org.au/a-once-in-a-generation-opportunity)

Our report found these Western Port Woodlands contain some of the last remaining native vegetation in this region, and provide critical habitat for a number of threatened wildlife that rely on the corridor to move around the

landscape. There are 21 threatened species of fauna and 12 threatened flora species, including the Southern Brown Bandicoot, Powerful Owl, Strzelecki Gum, Green-striped Greenhood orchid, and Tea-tree Fingers, the only fungi species listed under the state's Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act, Tea-tree Fingers.

This indicates the importance of the Western Port Woodlands and of maintaining or improving their integrity and connectivity.

However, through our analysis, we were able to understand the growing impact of sand mining in this area. An Extractive Industry Interest Area covers the vast majority of the woodlands. To our shock, the corridor is set to be severed in many sections due to proposed industrial sand mining operations. This would put at risk the viability of local populations of threatened species and destroy intact and high-quality woodlands.

All levels of government have a role to play in protecting the Western Port Woodlands, as well as private landholders. Our report found that only one per cent of the investigation area was covered by Vegetation Protection Overlays (VPOs). The need to expand

these overlays to give the woodlands basic protections on private land is very much needed, and establishing VPOs over the highest quality vegetation is the first step.

An excellent outcome for the existing reserves and surrounding public land would be a new national park. The campaign to protect the Western Port Woodlands has been going on for decades, with calls for a national park for the area culminating in a petition with over a thousand signatories in 1996.

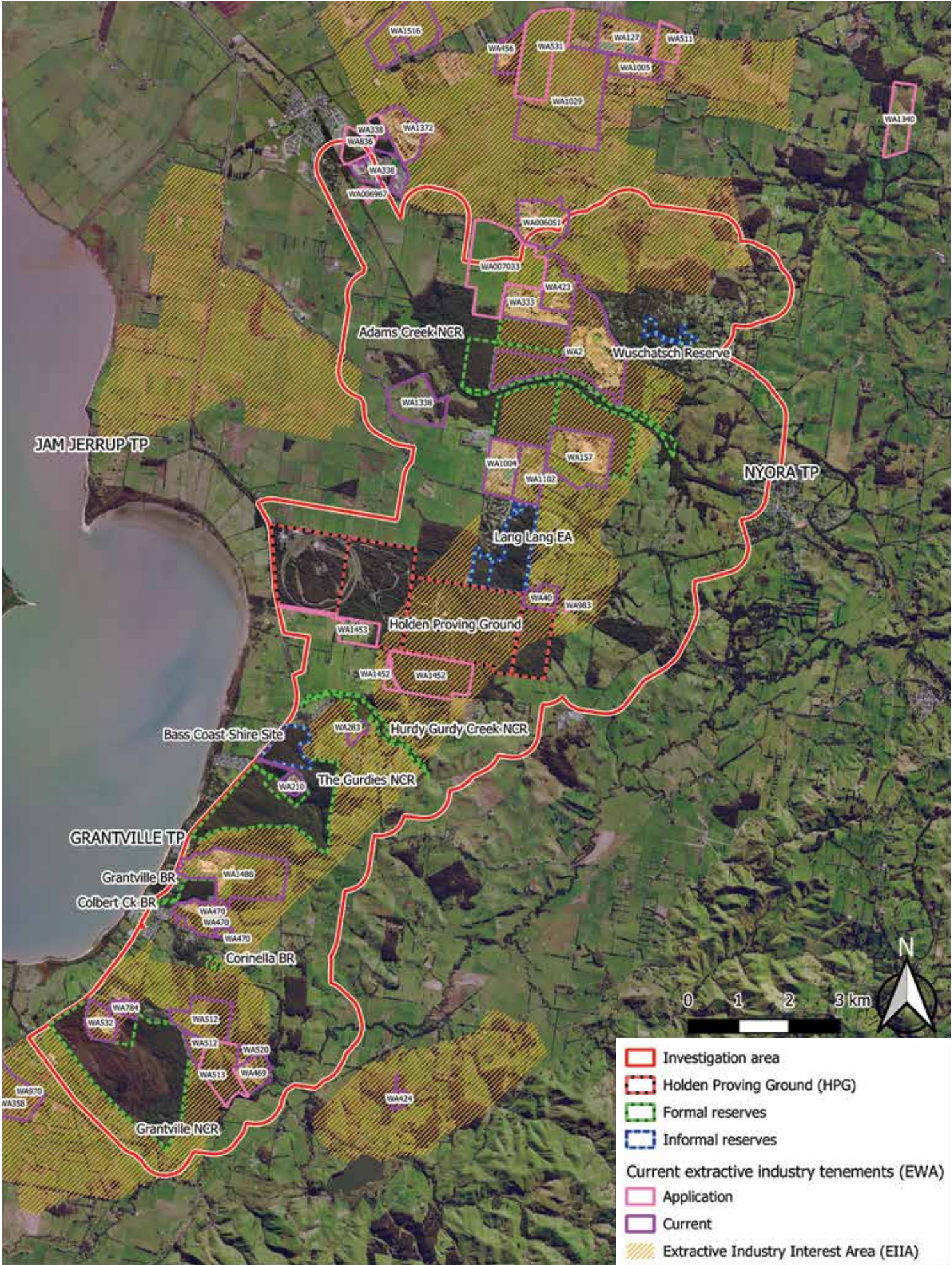
Right now, the Holden Proving Ground site is for sale for the second time in as many years, offering a rare and brief chance for the Victorian Government to acquire the site for biodiversity conservation and public recreation purposes.

The time is now to act on the Western Port Woodlands. Do we want wonderlands, or wastelands?

You can read our full report or order a hard copy at www.vnpa.org.au/publications/western-port-woodlands-wildlife-corridor-or-sand-pit

Please join us in calling on the Victorian Government to purchase the Holden Proving Ground and protect the Western Port Woodlands from the ravages of industrial sand mining: www.vnpa.org.au/holden-opportunity

An Extractive Industry Interest Area covers the vast majority of the Westernport Woodlands



Making the Great Ocean Road great again?

WHAT'S DRIVING THE GREAT OCEAN ROAD MAKEOVER? PHIL INGAMELLS IS A BIT LOST FOR WORDS.

In October this year, the Victorian Parliament passed a particularly puzzling piece of legislation. Puzzling because despite its obvious failings, and despite the perilous precedent it sets, we could make little dint in its passing.

The Great Ocean Road and Environs Protection Bill 2021 was the second round of legislation needed to establish a new Great Ocean Road Coast and Parks Authority. This new agency will set out to manage and govern the future of Victoria's great playground for tourists and locals – the stretch of already well-protected coastline between Torquay and Port Campbell.

There are some fair-enough justifications for a co-ordinating authority for the road:

- Traffic is seriously congested in peak times.
- The many small reserves and campgrounds along the road could do with a bit of consistent and adequate management that wasn't easily achieved under a large range of separate management committees.
- And the toilets on private land over the road from the Twelve Apostles were famously inadequate (though that could easily have been fixed without resorting to legislation!)

But do we need this new tourism-focused authority to take over management of the national parks, marine parks and other large conservation reserves that have been protecting Victoria's western coastline so well?

There are very good reasons why the new authority should have taken a different shape.

- Giving this new agency authority over Parks Victoria's management of its parks – essentially a 'purchaser/provider' system of contracting out park management, takes us back to the Kennett era. It's a strange model for a Labor Government that ended that arrangement for Parks Victoria as recently as 2018.
- Though the important conservation protections in the *National Parks Act 1975* will still apply, it will be up to this new tourism-focused authority to interpret those imperatives. That sets a very dangerous precedent for park management across Victoria.
- The new authority will not be funded by the government. It will be funded by hoovering up fees and charges from the carparks and campgrounds along the road, and may even charge a toll on the road itself. Inevitably it will be looking for new ways to raise revenue, and that must drive consideration of developments in national parks.

A giant Blackwood tree in Great Otway National Park. There is more to managing a national park than managing visitors.



PHOTO: PHIL INGAMELLS

- Despite this 'ground-breaking' notion of a government management agency that doesn't need any government funding, there has been no business case prepared. It is extraordinary, and surely irresponsible, that our representatives in parliament should vote in a new government department when no-one knows how it will be funded – when there has been no scrutiny at all of the shaky funding proposal.

There could have been a very workable Great Ocean Road Authority. One that managed the small parcels of public land, and the road itself, and had a working agreement with Parks Victoria to plan appropriate tourism access along the road.

And Parks Victoria should be given secure and adequate funding to manage Great Otway National Park, Port Campbell National Park, Point Addis Marine National Park, Twelve Apostles Marine National Park, The Arches Marine Sanctuary and Bay of Islands Coastal Park.

These important nature conservation areas should always be managed by a skilled, experienced and dedicated park management agency. • PW

It is the parks that have protected the Great Ocean Road coast for tourists. Visitor numbers to the Twelve Apostles will keep multiplying.



PHOTO: PHIL INGAMELLS

Riverside camping or riparian care

NEW RULES OPENING UP PUBLICLY OWNED WATERWAYS MAY RESULT IN IMPROVED ENVIRONMENTAL OUTCOMES. BY MATT RUCHEL.

In early August, the Andrews Government had a bit of re-think on its approach to rolling out of open slather camping on publicly owned river frontages. The tweaked policy in the new regulations helps deal with at least some of the significant concerns from environment groups, Traditional Owners and farmers about the plans to open up thousands of kilometres of 'Crown water frontages' to camping. Read our previous article from the June *Park Watch* at www.vnpa.org.au/camping-with-cows

Rules for camping on river frontages from 1 September 2021 are set out in the Land (Regulated Watercourse Land) Regulations 2021.

Camping is only permitted on licensed Crown land river frontages that have been assessed and designated as suitable. The ministerial media release stated:

"Camping will only take place on suitable sites, with a rigorous assessment process applied to ensure sites will be safe for camping, with environmental and agricultural impacts considered as well as any impact on Aboriginal cultural heritage." (See www.premier.vic.gov.au/delivering-more-camping-opportunities-all-victorians)

Up to 27 sites along the Goulburn, Broken, Ovens, Campaspe, Loddon and Murray rivers are currently being assessed, with hundreds more to follow.

According to an email from the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning to those who made submissions to the consultation, it also includes the proviso that: "In areas where there is a riparian management licence, or licence for the purpose of conservation, these will not be included as possible camping areas for further assessment".

The changes are important move to towards ensuring our publicly owned waterways are properly managed for all their values, not just recreation and or grazing. The recognition of the riparian licences, which is an alternative to potentially damaging and antiquated grazing licences, is an important shift. Currently only about 15-20 per cent of the 17,000 kilometres of currently licenced river frontage are under riparian licences. Riparian licenses may now be a more attractive option for some adjacent landholders to adopt to avoid public camping. Riparian Licences are certainly better option for the environment than grazing licenses.

Riparian management licenses were created when the current state government allocated \$10 million in 2015/16 and a further \$30 million from 2016/17 to 2019/20 to implement the Regional Riparian Action Plan. This funding was for on-ground riparian works such as stock management fencing, revegetation, weed management and provision of infrastructure to support off-stream stock watering for licence holders. Part of the deal for funding was often changing licences from grazing to riparian.

Environment groups including VNPA campaigned for this package which became a 2014 election commitment by the Andrews Government.

Key outcomes achieved between 2015–2020 include the protection and improvement of:

- nearly 3,500 kilometres of riparian land (140 per cent of the five-year action plan target)
- over 53,000 hectares of riparian land (190 per cent of the five-year target)

Preliminary ecological monitoring also shows that where works were undertaken the following significant changes in vegetation condition attributes were found:

- total native vegetation cover increased ~2-fold;
- native species richness increased ~1.5-fold;
- planted and natural woody recruits increased ~9-fold;
- woody weed abundance decreased to almost zero at most sites;
- bare ground cover did not increase as found in unmanaged sites.

Even though the Regional Riparian Action Plan exceeded its targets and was largely well received, the specific funding for the program was cut two years ago. Some money still exists, but it is not guaranteed that it will be spent on riparian land. The work was far from finished and the program and its specific funding should be reinstated to at least its earlier funding levels for the 20-25 years worth of work still do be done before all Crown land river frontages would be completed. • PW

Our forests: key to a safe climate future

NATURE CONSERVATION
OFFICER **ELIZABETH
MORISON** EXPLAINS HOW THE
LATEST IPCC REPORT APPLIES
TO VICTORIA.

As we emerge from the months of lockdown and start to again explore and enjoy all the beautiful nature that Victoria has to offer, there’s one big question on my mind: what will this summer look like?

Two years ago, a hot, dry winter and spring dried the bush to tinder, and lightning storms brought on by climate change sparked fires that burned one and a half million hectares of land in Victoria and killed three billion animals. Then last year, the La Nina Southern Oscillation mixed with climate change to warm the tropical oceans, evaporate vast volumes moisture and drive it across the continent, and Australia received 29 per cent more rain than usual.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released a report in August that has been dubbed the ‘Code Red for Humanity’. It revealed that since the Industrial Revolution, Australia has already warmed 1.4°C on land – and that now is our last chance to correct our course and stay on target for less than 2°C as per the 2015 Paris Agreement.

To get there, most signatory nations are pledging to achieve net zero emissions by 2050. Net zero means an overall balance between the volume of greenhouse gases emitted into and drawn down from the atmosphere. In most cases, a net zero target involves commitments to reduce fossil fuel consumption and expand carbon offsetting measures.



PHOTO: NICHOLAS JONES, FLICKR CC

In the next decade, there are two interim targets that Victoria has to hurdle to maintain its lead on climate action. While things look good right now, there are a few things to consider when evaluating whether we’re on track for our 2030 interim climate target.

Our Mountain Ash forests have the highest known carbon density of any forest in the world.

But here in Australia, the Prime Minister’s net zero by 2050 ‘plan’ is smoke and mirrors for fossil fuel project approvals in New South Wales, the Northern Territory and Western Australia.

The reality is, Australia is ranked last among the UN member countries on climate action.

Among the more specific predictions of climate impacts in Victoria are sea level rise, more intense and frequent fire seasons, less rainfall overall, worsening droughts, but when the rain does fall, it will be intense with a higher risk of flooding. Our nature and communities have already felt the consequences of climate change, sooner and worse than we thought.

As we head into this uncertain summer after yet another year of weak federal leadership, let’s look a little closer at Victoria’s climate policies.

How does Victoria’s position on climate fit in with the IPCC’s Code Red report? And are we on track?

Victoria prides itself on being a national leader in progressive climate policy. The Victorian Government’s *Climate Change Act 2017* aimed to set policy objectives and guiding principles in alignment with the 2015 Paris Agreement. Part of the Act was the requirement of interim climate change targets, to be checked

at 2021, 2025 and 2030 in the lead up to the net zero by 2050 (Victoria was ahead of the curve and committed to this back in 2016). The first target was to reduce emissions by 15-20 per cent below 2005 levels by 2020 (2005 was chosen as the reference year for the Act because Australia’s emissions peaked at their highest ever). The second was to reduce emissions by 28-33 per cent below 2005 by 2025. By 2030, the target is an emissions reduction of 45-60 per cent below 2005 levels. In contrast, at a national level, the target for 2030 is 26-28 per cent below 2005 levels.

In 2019, an Independent Expert Panel analysed the interim climate change targets and Victoria’s trajectory towards them, making recommendations for actions that could keep the Victorian Government on track. It revealed that right now, we’re at 18 per cent. The Victorian Government claims the 2019 number was closer to 25 per cent. Either way, there’s a long way to go if we’re to hit the top end of the range of emissions reductions by 2025.

Closing Hazelwood Power Station was the major factor that helped Victoria hit the 2020 target. But the retirements of Yallourn and the Loy Yang power stations are already scheduled for 2028 and 2047 respectively, and won’t be enough to help us hit the 2025 or 2030 interim climate change targets. While

the Victorian Government boasts that we’re on track, we are wary that they may be extrapolating from a pattern of coal closure that can’t be replicated in time to meet the 2025 target, or the upper range of the 2030 target.

The Australian Government has come under fire for “clever accounting” tricks that use land sector emissions (including the negative emissions that occur when forests draw carbon dioxide down from the atmosphere) to make their weak climate efforts appear strong. Carbon offset schemes and incentives have also been criticised for lacking accountability and integrity, leaving them open to exploitation. As the Independent Expert Panel reported, carbon offsetting won’t “compensate for weak mitigation efforts in other sectors”. But after decarbonising electricity, the land sector is the largest opportunity in Victoria for climate action, and if used correctly, Victoria’s forests could play a crucial role in a suite of ambitious and science-backed approaches to achieve the interim targets.

Most of Victoria’s carbon sequestration in the past (85 per cent) has come from public forests. They store almost 30 times the volume of Victoria’s annual emissions. The land use, land use change, and forestry industry showed a trend of increased carbon sequestration in the years 2012–2017, removing

Timeline	Victorian Interim Climate Change Targets	Is Victoria on track?
By 2020	15-20% below 2005 emissions	YES. The Independent Expert Panel says we’re at 18%, and the government says we’re at 25%.
2021–2025	28-33% below 2005 emissions	Maybe? With no coal closure in the next five years, the biggest opportunity for emissions reduction is to reform land and forest management in Victoria.
2025–2030	45-60% below 2005 emissions	With the closure of Yallourn in 2028, there will be a ~13% reduction in emissions, a big step towards the 2030 target. But even if we do achieve the 33% 2025 goal and the 13% emissions reduction from the closure of Yallourn, this will only just brush the 45% goal, and is not a safe bet for the climate (The IPCC Code Red report says that any less than 45% below pre-industrial emissions by 2030 will send us well past 2°C warming). To ensure that we hit the upper range of the goal, we must reform land and forest management in Victoria.

11.2 megatonnes of greenhouse gas emissions in 2017. However, without improved land and forest management, this trend of increased sequestration is unlikely to continue.

It’s important to note that 45 per cent below 2005 emissions is the Victorian climate target, but anything less than 45 per cent below pre-industrial emissions is the warning issued in the IPCC’s Code Red report. They may look the same, but they’re based on different baselines: 45 per cent below 2005 emissions is much higher than 45 per cent below pre-industrial emissions. Victoria must strive for the top of the range – and ideally, beyond – their interim climate change targets.

Improving native forest management practices and avoiding deforestation were some of the standout recommendations made by the Independent Expert Panel. They highlighted that “developing policies to support increased emissions sequestration through reforestation and forest management” also presented an opportunity to improve outcomes for biodiversity protection. Mountain Ash forests have the highest known carbon density of any forest in the world – but are particularly vulnerable to heating and drying predicted as impacts of climate change (they thrive in cool, wet habitat). The ash forests of the central highlands are critically endangered, threatened by the additional cumulative impacts of logging and climate exacerbated fire seasons. If they succumb to those impacts, not only will they be prevented from sequestering carbon dioxide into the future, they will also release the carbon that they once stored.

If forests are a key to achieving our interim climate targets, what do we do next?

The next state election is scheduled for November next year, early in the next five-year period for the interim climate change targets. This is a golden opportunity to set the agenda for land management.

Victoria’s existing plans to phase out logging by 2030 align with the UN signatory countries’ recent pledge at the Glasgow Conference of Parties (COP26) to end deforestation by 2030. But there is widespread concern from environmentalists, including VNPA, that this is essentially a green light for another decade of logging. Between the massive volume of forests lost in the 2019–20 fire season and future large-scale fires, and mass deforestation across the state, the climate benefits from Victoria’s forests are at risk.

The recent commitment to create the Wombat-Lerderderg, Mount Buangor and Pyrenees national parks is a step in the right direction, but ahead of their official legislation, logging is planned for significant areas of land in the new national park boundaries up until 2030. Bringing forward the phase out of logging to the next few years could be the critical step that helps us hit our 2025 interim climate target.

We will continue our work to advocate for Victoria’s spectacular – and critically important – forests. We believe that Victoria can be a national leader in climate policy, and that better protection of forests is a safe bet to help us get there. • PW

A GAS EXPLOSION

CAMPAIGNER **SHANNON HURLEY** UPDATES
US ON PLANS FOR OFFSHORE DRILLING
ALONG OUR MOST FAMOUS COASTLINE.



PHOTO: ED LYMAN/NOAA, FLICKR CC

Humpback Whale swim along the Great Ocean Road coastline.

When we think about Australia's top tourism destinations, the Great Ocean Road and the Twelve Apostles are right up there.

Featuring stunning views along coastline-hugging roads and lush rainforest and waterfall delights, it is truly a playground for many who surf, snorkel, dive, walk, or just relax, both visitors and those lucky to call the area home.

It is also a known biodiversity hotspot proven by its national parks that span land and sea, protecting a range of wildlife, including Short-tailed Shearwaters, Humpback and Southern Right whales and kelp forests.

But what is unknown to many is how much this natural treasure trove has been set to be plundered to extract offshore fossil fuels, with multiple companies competing to grab their share of the underground resource.

Earlier June this year, oil and gas extraction was put in the limelight when the federal government opened up bidding for exploratory drilling rights in the Otway and Gippsland basins (as well as other areas around Australia). This would see an explosion of more drilling in these areas.

In August, the Victorian Government approved onshore/offshore gas extraction under the Port Campbell National Park near the Twelve Apostles. This approval was given for Beach Energy's 'Enterprise Project' to convert their existing gas exploration well (located just north of the Port Campbell National Park) to a gas production well.

It seems crazy to allow this type of activity under a national park, especially when the *National Parks Act 1975* is there to protect Victoria's biodiversity for all time. However, under the Act, the state Environment Minister has the power to override this in some circumstances, and in this case has exercised that power in favour of the gas well.

The Enterprise Project is slightly different to other offshore projects in how they access the Otway Basin reservoir. Where most offshore projects access by drilling through the ocean floor in Commonwealth waters, the Enterprise

Project uses extended reach drilling from the onshore well to traverse underneath the Port Campbell National Park and then offshore to access a gas reservoir underneath the seabed near the Twelve Apostles.

Beach Energy's environmental plan has not been released publicly, making it unclear what impacts have been considered and what the risks are for gas extraction going ahead at such a prime location along the Great Ocean Road.

Research on the impacts on our seas from offshore operations generally is limited, and often kept behind closed doors of the companies undertaking the exploration or production. Studies have shown these activities can threaten the lifecycle of important marine life, such as Rock Lobster and Scallops. Also of concern are the potential impacts on groundwater from the extraction process.

Generally speaking, offshore fossil fuel projects seem to be more 'out of sight, out of mind'. In our view, they have poor regulatory frameworks and processes and a poor history of undertaking thorough community consultation.

We have asked for the environmental plan to be released publicly.

The Greens introduced a motion into Victorian Parliament in October to overturn this approval, but there were not enough votes to overturn the decision. Most members voted to allow it to proceed to the extraction stage due to the 'need' to continue to add gas to the market.

We supported moves to reject Beach Energy's drilling plans due to the uncertainty of what impacts have been assessed. We believe the process may not be aligned with Victoria's Marine and Coastal Policy, which states that industry must be planned for and managed in a coordinated way that minimises impacts and risks to the marine and coastal environment, and takes into account and minimise direct, cumulative impacts.

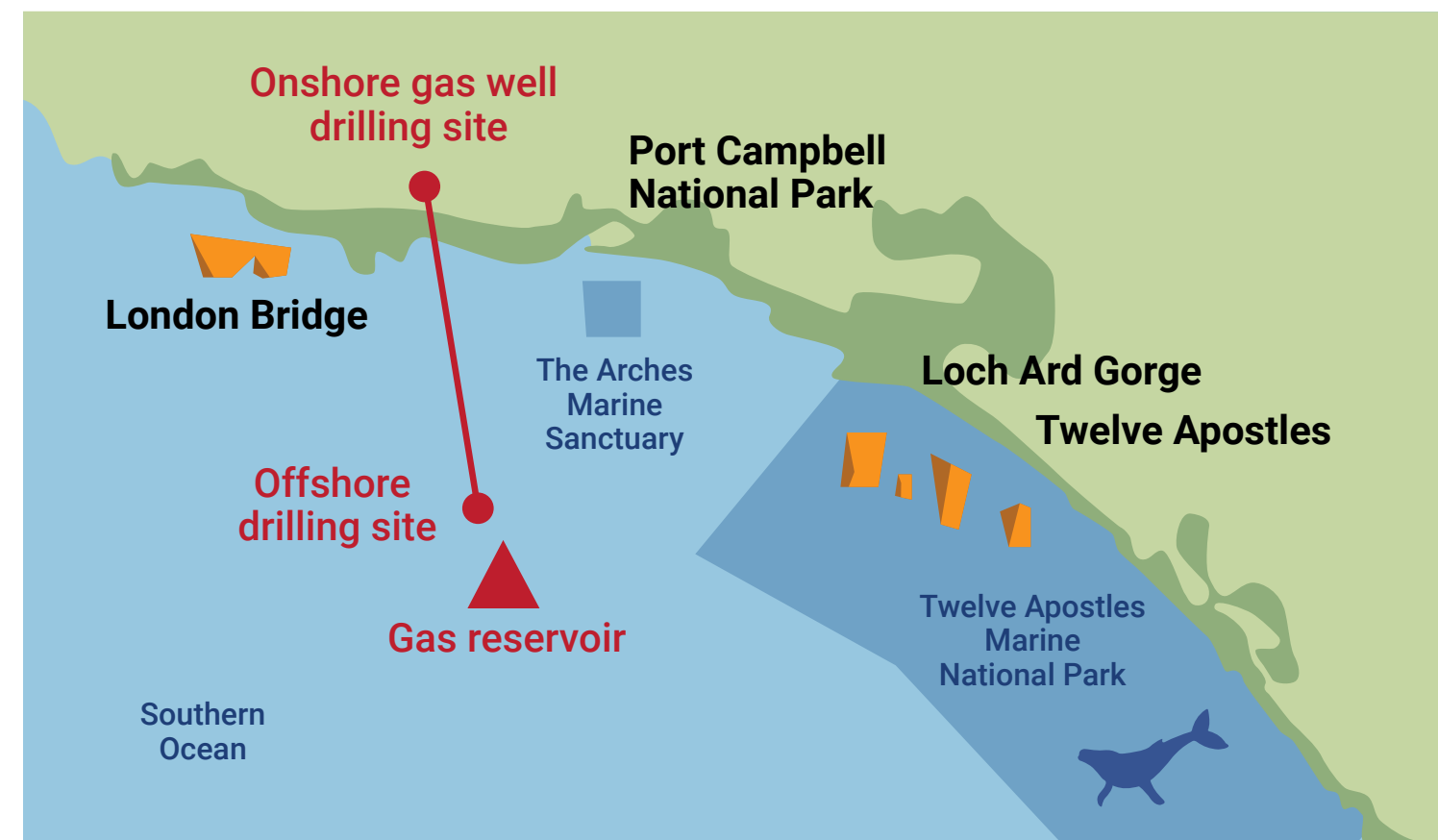
What might the potential cumulative impacts of all offshore oil and gas projects be on the Otway Basin? Has this even been considered by the state and federal governments?

Continuing to open up more of our marine areas to gas and oil exploration and extraction sets a dangerous precedent and doesn't align with the Andrews Government's professed ambitions to mitigate against climate change.

We would like to see more emphasis on managing these issues in the current draft of Victoria's Marine and Coastal Strategy (see page 22). We put forward that the final strategy needs to include the development of a strategic and integrated process for assessing marine energy proposals that embeds thorough community consultation and Traditional Owner engagement.

Whether gas exploration and drilling is in federal waters (beyond five kilometres from the coastline) or operating in Victoria, the state government has a critical part to play in providing consent before any projects 'go down'.

We have attempted to understand what the process from here on is for the Enterprise Project. Given the exploration well is already in place, turning it into a production well involves a new pipeline to connect the well site to the existing gas processing facility, the Otway Gas Plant. There are other consents and approvals that must be sought for the pipeline and gas well before Beach Energy can proceed with gas extraction planned for next summer 2022/3. We will keep you updated. • PW



More ambition needed for our seas and shores



PHOTO: SHANNON HURLEY

SHANNON HURLEY EXPLAINS HOW THE STATE GOVERNMENT'S DRAFT MARINE AND COASTAL STRATEGY DISAPPOINTS.

When over 80 per cent of Victoria's marine life is unique to our waters, the primary strategy in which decisions are made for its management needs to be impressive.

Unfortunately, the draft Marine and Coastal Strategy released in August this year falls well short.

VNPA has worked for years to guide policy-makers to better protect Victoria's marine and coastal environment with a more striving, forward-thinking, evidence-based and comprehensive approach.

These efforts culminated in the creation of Victoria's Marine and Coastal Policy, released in 2020 as a 15-year vision for a "healthy, dynamic and biodiverse marine and coastal environment that is valued in its own right, and that benefits the Victorian community, now and in the future".

This strategy is supposed to bring the policy's vision to life – to be where the wind hits the sails to deliver forward momentum. The actions, timelines and responsibilities it sets out should be ambitious enough to protect Victoria's watery world above and below the surface. This includes all the weird and wondrous critters that call our state home, including the Grey Side-gilled Sea Slug, the

Brain Ascidian, the bryozoan reefs and Elephant Fish. And to protect our own human future and how we interact with and depend on these ecosystems.

We were pleased to see the draft strategy include a central focus on Traditional Owner rights and obligations, and climate adaptation and response. But it is not nearly bold enough and does not set the broader agenda to address the range and depth of threats impacting our marine and coastal environment. Many actions cater for a 'business as usual' approach and what already has funding or political commitment.

Significant issues in the draft strategy include:

- Lack of focus on the broader marine environment
- Lack of ambition for the management of Marine Protected Areas (MPA)
- Missing actions relating to industry and recreational uses, including fishing, oil and gas extraction and tourism
- Marine invasive species action absent
- Neglects actions for threatened species and managing marine invasive species

What we would like to see more of is:

- More actions to address threats from marine invasive species, impacts of extractive industries and tourism, and efforts to enhance the health of our marine protected areas are needed.

- For marine protected areas to be restored with resourcing and funding that has been dramatically cut over the years to help improve resilience of our marine areas to adapt to climate change and other threats.
- Connecting Victorians to our underwater treasures, focussing on education and citizen science programs in marine protected areas.
- Development of a strategic and integrated process for assessing marine energy proposals.
- A comprehensive statewide plan to address threats to the marine environment from invasive species.
- Investigate whether our current marine protected area network is meeting the objectives set out at their creation.
- Complete a risk assessment process for threatened marine species and communities at risk from climate change or habitat destruction.

You can read VNPA's submission into the draft strategy here: www.vnpa.org.au/publications/draft-marine-and-coastal-strategy-vnpa-submission.

Let's hope the final version of the strategy released in the coming weeks improves upon the draft.

While it is the first of three five-year strategies, it is important to get this one right, setting the standard for the following two to come.

Our seas and shores act as carbon sponges, protect our way of life on land, and are essential for the health of our minds, bodies and souls. They need a solid plan to protect them. • PW

Introducing the bryozoan reef

SET TO BE LISTED AS THE SECOND THREATENED COMMUNITY IN WESTERNPORT BAY – **SHANNON HURLEY** SHARES WHAT MAKES IT SPECIAL, AND WHAT MAKES IT AT RISK.

Chances are you might never have heard of a bryozoan reef, let alone its existence in Westernport Bay.

This is likely because the Western Port Bryozoan Reef Community was only formally described a few years ago in 2017. One of the most exciting things about nature is that discoveries are constantly being made. The flip side is many species go extinct before we have a chance to know more about them, particularly in our marine world.

Following our recent awareness of its existence, the Western Port Bryozoan Reef Community has now been recommended for listing under state threatened species laws. We hope this recognition will result in better outcomes.

The Western Port Bryozoan Reef Community is found only in Westernport Bay, as the name suggests.

This tiny network of living reefs is composed of three different types of bryozoan (*Triphyllozoon munitum*, *Triphyllozoon moniliferum* and *Celleporaria foliate*), known as 'lace corals'. They form small colonies of up to 1.5 metres tall, less than eight metres below the surface on the eastern arm of Westernport Bay.

These reefs provide a suitable habitat for invertebrates – dominated by polychaete worms, molluscs, ascidians and sponges of various



PHOTO: FATHOM PACIFIC

species – that would not otherwise occur in this area. The structures provide protection from predators and currents, attachment points for larval stages, and feeding opportunities – and the thriving invertebrates in turn provide a food source for Snapper, Elephant Fish and Gummy Shark.

While bryozoan reefs are distributed worldwide, what makes the Western Port Bryozoan Reef Community so special is its unique species composition, its reef-forming habits, its shallow depth, and the fact that no other community of this kind has been reported elsewhere in Victorian waters.

What qualifies it for listing as a threatened community is its rarity and highly restricted geographical range (it covers an area of approximately 1.74 kilometres square), its slow growth rate, and its fragility to threats which can lead to its extinction. These include physical damage from anchoring given its location as popular for recreational fishing, commercial port operations and additional shipping activity, pollution and increased runoff carrying sediments and toxicants, and potential for marine pests.

To date, there have been limited marine pest incursions reported in Westernport Bay, particularly Port Phillip Bay, but Wakame (Japanese Kelp) poses high direct risks to bryozoan reefs.

Any harm may be irreversible, considering that it is thought that the substrate that originally supported the settlement and growth of the bryozoan reefs is no longer present, and that new recruitment is limited today to on-reef growth rather than expansion.

The recommendation to be listed under the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act* has been put out for public comment. We are now waiting on a final recommendation to the relevant Minister for Environment and Minister for Agriculture for a final decision.

If successfully listed, the Western Port Bryozoan Reef Community would be the fourth marine community to be listed in Victoria (joining Port Phillip Bay Entrance Deep Canyon Marine Community, Coastal Moonah Woodland Community and the San Remo Marine Community), and the second for Westernport Bay (after the San Remo Marine Community).

As history shows, merely listing a species under threatened species laws does not increase the chances of its protection. It needs to be backed up with real action by using the key legislative tools under the FFG Act to strengthen threatened species management, including developing action statements (of which there are far fewer developed for marine species than land species), developing management plans, and using critical habitat determinations for listed marine and coastal species. • PW



PHOTO: GIPPSLAND ENVIRONMENT GROUP

Truck leaving with spoils of Mount Alfred fire break construction.

Fire break shenanigans

AS VICTORIA EMBARKS ON A TRULY MASSIVE FUEL BREAK CONSTRUCTION PROGRAM, THE JUSTIFICATIONS FOR IT ARE WEARING THIN, SAYS **PHIL INGAMELLS**.

The clearing of vegetation for fire breaks, or fuel breaks, has always been a bit of a hit or miss strategy for protecting the community and the environment from fire. Breaks can contain a fire in mild weather, but do nothing to stop fires in extreme weather when spotting by burning embers can reach kilometres ahead. Breaks have also been known to create wind tunnels that can drive a fire.

They do serve as a point from which to conduct remote fuel reduction burns, or back burns in the face of fire, but these operations are also under serious question.

So why is Victoria engaging in an unprecedented fire break construction program, one that far exceeds any other program in the nation?

The Victorian Government has allocated \$35 million to a statewide Strategic Fuel Break Program aiming at a 1447-kilometre expansion of fire breaks by the 2022 financial year.

That's just a start. Victoria's Chief Fire Officer expects the program could expand to a system of some 7000 kilometres of breaks across Victoria, each up to 40 metres wide. That's more than the distance to Darwin and back, and in area it's equal to more than half of Wilsons Promontory National Park.

Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV) claims that this program is in response to recommendations made in two Victorian inquiries into the fires of Black Summer: one by Victoria's Auditor-General (VAGO) and another by the Inspector General for Emergency Management (IGEM).

But, oddly, there is no such recommendation in either of those reports; indeed, fire breaks scarcely rate a mention.

Where the proposal does appear is in the official Victorian Government response to IGEM's 'Recommendation 6'. That response (presumably written by Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV) and accepted by the ministers involved) flags a "major expansion of the strategic fuel break network".

But Recommendation 6 doesn't call for that; it just asks for more mulching and slashing where fuel reduction burning is difficult, such as near communities.

What's driving this?

Is it motivated by a perceived need to employ skilled operators as the native logging industry is scaled down? Is it motivated by a need to 'do something' in the face of climate-induced fire?

We don't know because there has been no public justification for the project other than the fictional claim that two inquiries called for it.

There's another problem.

Before a farmer cuts down a native tree, they are obliged, if the felling is unavoidable, to finance an 'offset': an equivalent level of environmental restoration somewhere that at least balances the loss.

The obligation on our state government, however, is far less onerous. Public land managers must offer an environmental 'counterbalance', but the need for fire protection measures offers an escape clause for the 'unavoidable' criterion, and there appears to be no obligation for FFMV to assess any counterbalancing obligations before they leap into action.

And we have been told by FFMV that they don't record the number of significant habitat trees, including critical hollow-bearing trees, that are removed in these operations. That makes any effective counterbalancing impossible.

Worryingly, one counterbalancing option available to FFMV is 'ecological thinning'. They can compensate for the felling of many thousands of hectares of trees – by felling some more!

Fire management in Victoria needs a skilled, well-resourced, independent umpire. • **PW**



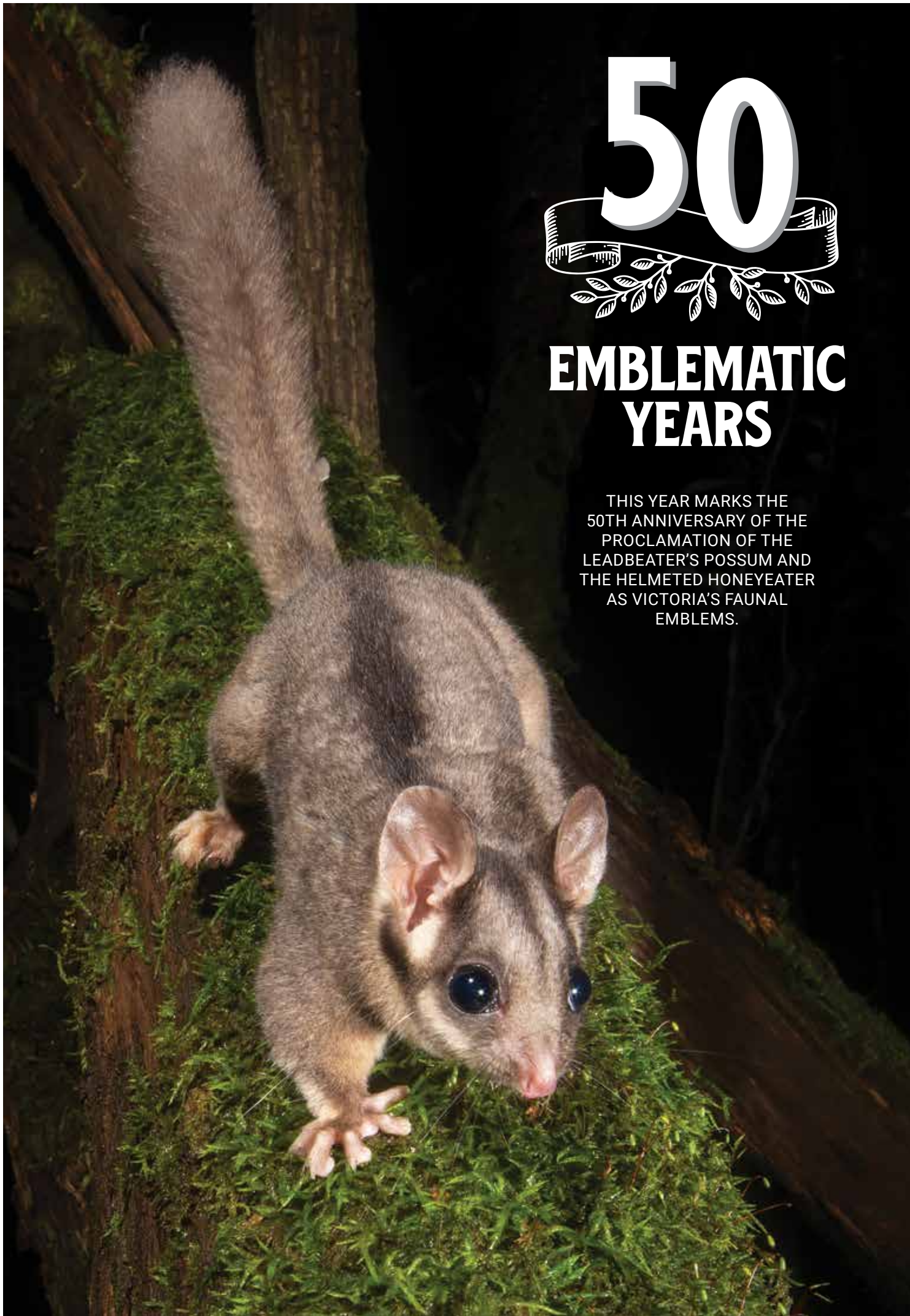


PHOTO: JUSTIN CALLY

50

EMBLEMATIC YEARS

THIS YEAR MARKS THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE PROCLAMATION OF THE LEADBEATER'S POSSUM AND THE HELMETED HONEYEATER AS VICTORIA'S FAUNAL EMBLEMS.

Recognised but still at risk

CAMPAIGNER **JORDAN CROOK** KNOWS FIRST-HAND THE WONDER OF SEEING THIS ICONIC ANIMAL IN OUR NATIVE FORESTS.

It takes a lot of waiting, a lot of knowledge, and a lot of luck to see a Leadbeater's Possum in the wild. Once you do, it's a mix of celebration, excitement, and deep sadness.

The reason they are so difficult to catch a glimpse of is not just because they are small, fast-moving, nocturnal and live in some of the tallest trees in the world – they are also Critically Endangered and found in only a few small patches of forest in Victoria.

I saw my first 'Leadie' many years ago on Taungurung Country in Nolan's Gully in Toolangi State Forest. As the sun set and the birds went to sleep, we sat at the base of a large old tree and peered upwards. Known as 'stag' trees, large old or dead trees are a vital part of the Leadbeater's Possums ecology as these little animals can push through vertical cracks in the trunk to access internal hollows to nest. After searching the darkness, to finally spot a fluffy tail and those big round eyes in among the branches was incredibly thrilling.

Not least because for 50 years, Leadbeater's Possum was thought to be extinct. *Gymnobelideus leadbeateri* was first described scientifically from animals collected from the Bass River in West Gippsland on the edge of the once vast Koo-Wee-Rup swamp. But draining of the swamp and land clearance following European colonisation had a devastating impact on their habitat and populations.

Then in 1961, they were miraculously rediscovered in the forest of Cambarville and Tommy's Bend near Marysville in the Central Highlands by naturalist Eric Wilkinson.

Ten years later, in 1971, Leadbeater's Possum was proclaimed Victoria's mammal emblem, or 'state animal', due to it being our only endemic (only found in a specific area or region) mammal species.

Biologically this marsupial is an oddity, being the only species in its genus, and more closely related to the Striped Possum in Queensland than to the Brushtail and Ringtail possums that run across your roof at night.

Their average length is 33 centimetres, half of which is their long tail. They live in matriarchal family colonies of up to 12 individuals, with one monogamous breeding pair. They



To commemorate the 50th anniversary of the proclamation of the Leadbeater's Possum and Helmeted Honeyeater as Victoria's official faunal emblems, the Friends of the Leadbeater's Possum is selling a limited-edition poster (featured on page 25), with only 150 available. You can buy it on their website: www.leadbeaters.org.au/shop/limited-edition-poster

defend their roughly three-hectare territory and den together in nests they build in tree hollows six to

30 metres above the ground. Emerging at dusk, they forage for insects and nectar and jump through the understory with bundles of shredded bark held in their tails for nest building, like hikers with their swag on their back looking for a place to bunk down.

Despite the recognition of becoming a state emblem, Leadbeater's Possum continues to be vulnerable due to its restricted distribution and loss of hollow-bearing trees, and is increasingly threatened by logging and fire.

The largest population is isolated in the ash forests of the Central Highlands, exposing it to direct conflict with the state government-run native forest logging industry destroying its remaining habitat. Combined with the increasing severity and size of wildfires due to our changing climate, the species is on the precipice of steep declines in its population.

A small subpopulation of the lowland Leadbeater's Possum found in Yellingbo Nature Conservation Reserve in the Yarra Valley also faces great uncertainty. Legislation was passed by the Victorian Parliament in 2020 to create the Yellingbo Landscape Conservation Area, a new category under the National Parks Act 1975. This will help link reserves and remnant vegetation along the local rivers, including the Yarra River and Woori Yallock Creek. Although a lot of restoration work lies ahead, these corridors will help both Leadbeater's Possums and their neighbours Helmeted Honeyeater move through the landscape while also helping improve the water quality in the region.

A monitoring program in the Central Highlands established by David Lindenmayer in 1983 is one of the world's longest-running of its kind and covers different land tenures, including national park, state forest, reference areas and water catchments. This program has found the declines of the Leadbeater's Possum and other species such as the Greater Glider are being caused by the loss of large old or dead hollow-bearing trees from widespread industrial logging.

As such, the campaign to protect the Leadbeater's Possum and other forest-dependent wildlife in the Central Highlands has a significant focus on protecting stag trees. This involves allowing the oldest stands of trees, currently around 80 years old, to grow on and become our old growth forest of the future. And they aren't very far off reaching this age. Hollows necessary for nesting can take 100-150 years to develop in living trees. But being large old or dead trees, they are very fragile and susceptible to destructive logging and fire. The 2009 Black Saturday bushfire burnt 43 per cent of Leadbeater's Possum habitat in the Central Highlands, possibly halving the wild population.

The last state government led action for the Leadbeater's Possum was in 2014 under the Baillieu/Napthine government, which established the Leadbeater's Possum Advisory Group. This Advisory Group delivered recommendations to "support the recovery of Leadbeater's Possum while maintaining a sustainable timber industry". That led to small protections of 200-metre buffer zones for Leadbeater's Possum detected in forests being logged. This was against the scientifically recommended 1000-metre buffers and, more likely than not, doesn't protect the animals nesting place, as the protection is based on where an animal is recorded, which could be several hundred metres away from its denning tree. At the 2014 state election, Labor looked at creating a new national park in the Central Highlands to protect Leadbeater's Possum and other species, but this was blocked after an intervention from the CFMEU and others. The campaign for a 'Great Forest National Park' is ongoing.

As part of the Andrews Government 2019 announcement of a transition out of native forest logging, with 90,000 hectares of what they deem "old growth forest" to be protected across the state and an additional 96,000 hectares to be Immediate Protection Areas (IPAs) to protect Greater Gliders. Unfortunately, very few of the yet-to-be-formalised IPAs are suitable as the Leadbeater's Possum habitat. Until all their habitat is removed from logging plans, their fate is still on the chopping block. Meanwhile, in November this year the Andrews Government legislated variation to the Code of Practice for Timber Production, the rules governing logging, which weakens protection for wildlife and forest ecosystems.

Although the government has largely given up on directly protecting Leadbeater's Possum, the community have stepped up. Groups like Friends of Leadbeater's Possum and Wildlife of the Central Highlands (WOTCH) have continued survey work in the forests, protecting hundreds of hectares of habitat from the bulldozers and have taken on and won a major court battle against the state government's logging agency VicForests about the legality of logging in threatened species' habitat (now under appeal to the High Court).

As President of the Friends of Leadbeater's Possum, Steve Meacher says: "it's the little possum that roared" – and those roars are not getting any quieter.

Surely our state emblem, and the importance and pride that it confers, is worth saving. • PW

To learn more visit www.leadbeaters.org.au

Leadbeater's Possum and Helmeted Honeyeater through the years

- 1867:** Leadbeater's Possum (LP) and Helmeted Honeyeater (HH) first scientifically described
- 1880:** Draining and clearing of the Koo-Wee-Rup swamp began
- 1933:** HH found near Yellingbo
- 1960:** LP not seen alive for 50 years, declared extinct
- 1961:** LP rediscovered in the Central Highlands
- 1965:** First portion of Yellingbo State Fauna Reserve established as a HH sanctuary
- 1971:** LP and HH proclaimed the state faunal emblems of Victoria
- 1983:** Ash Wednesday fires destroyed HH habitat leaving Yellingbo the only remaining population
- 1983:** Long-term monitoring of HH at Yellingbo commenced
- 1983:** Long-term monitoring of LP in the Central Highlands commenced
- 1986:** LP found in Yellingbo Nature Conservation Reserve
- 1989:** Friends of the Helmeted Honeyeater and Helmeted Honeyeaters Recovery Team formed
- 1989:** Captive breeding program of HH commenced at Healesville Sanctuary
- 1991:** First National Recovery Plan for the HH
- 1997:** First National Recovery Plan for the LP, Leadbeater's Possum Management Team (later Recovery Team) formed
- 2004:** Friends of Leadbeater's Possum formed
- 2009:** Black Saturday fires destroyed almost half the LP habitat and population
- 2001:** First HH reintroduction in Bunyip State Park
- 2013:** Leadbeater's Possum Advisory Group established
- 2014:** HH uplisted to Critically Endangered under the EBPC Act
- 2015:** LP uplisted to Critically Endangered under the EPBC Act, new National Recovery Plan promised
- 2015:** Mountain Ash forest listed as Critically Endangered under the IUCN Red List
- 2019, June:** LP retained Commonwealth Critically Endangered status despite lobbying by the logging industry
- 2019, November:** Andrews Government announced phasing out native forest logging in Victoria
- 2020, May:** The Federal Court delivered its judgment in favour of Friends of Leadbeater's Possum, finding that VicForests' logging in 66 areas of habitat critical to the Greater Glider and Leadbeater's Possum contravened federal law – case is ongoing, now under appeal to the High Court
- 2021, July-August:** Most recent HH reintroduction in Yarra Ranges Nationa Park
- 2021, August:** Announcement of establishment process for Immediate Protection Areas (IPAs) involving VEAC, Traditional Owners and an Eminent Committee
- 2021, November:** Victorian Government legislated variation to the Code of Practice for Timber Production, the rules that govern logging, that weakens protection for wildlife and forest ecosystems



A Leadie caught on camera by volunteer citizen science group Wildlife of the Central Highlands (WOTCH).



PHOTO: STEPHEN GARTH

Persistence and passion

DR MELANIE BIRTCHNELL FROM FRIENDS OF THE HELMETED HONEYEATER SHARES THE PLIGHT OF THIS SPECIAL BIRD.

Declared Victoria's bird emblem 50 years ago, the plight of the Critically Endangered Helmeted Honeyeater also is emblematic: it is one of the very many species facing extinction across Victoria's damaged landscapes.

For this beautiful bird, habitat loss was swift and devastating once Europeans arrived and began their substantial modification of the Victorian landscape.

A 'swamp reclamation' project to convert 'The Great Swamp', the Koo-Wee-Rup in West Gippsland, to arable land was devastating. By the mid-1900s, at least 50,000 hectares of swamp and fringing swamp scrub, woodland and other important ecosystems were drained and cleared, desecrating the culturally significant land of the Bunurong People and destroying vital habitat for unquantifiable wildlife. For the Helmeted Honeyeater and Leadbeater's Possum, this extensive devastation continued across their entire range, resulting in a drastic decline in population and extent.

By 1952, the contraction of the range and numbers of the Helmeted Honeyeater was so concerning, the Bird Observer's Club initiated Survey Cassidix, which investigated the population at Yellingbo in the Yarra Valley for ten years. In 1967, Yellingbo State Fauna

Reserve (now Yellingbo Nature Conservation Reserve; soon to be Yellingbo Landscape Conservation Area) was declared specifically for the conservation of the Helmeted Honeyeater.

Lichenostomus melanops cassidix is a subspecies of the Yellow-tufted Honeyeater, distinguishable from other honeyeaters by its distinctive black, yellow and olive-brown feathers and crest or 'helmet'. There is no colour difference between male and female birds. Adult pairs occupy adjacent sites and defend them cooperatively. They rely on dense and often prickly shrubs for nesting and feeding.

In 1971, the Helmeted Honeyeater was proclaimed Victoria's avian emblem or 'state bird'; this subspecies is unique to Victoria and unlikely to have existed outside our state.

Habitat removal continued across the full extent of the Helmeted Honeyeater's original range of swampy and riparian environments. The Ash Wednesday fires destroyed remaining habitat at Cockatoo and Upper Beaconsfield, leaving the Helmeted Honeyeater with just one place where it survived in the wild: Yellingbo Nature Conservation Reserve.

A Helmeted Honeyeater Recovery Team formed in 1989, with the main priorities of expanding the area of suitable habitat and establishing new populations.

Having all its eggs literally in one basket makes the Helmeted Honeyeater incredibly vulnerable. The last naturally occurring population is so isolated in an otherwise fragmented landscape, they are not able to extend into new areas. Regardless, there are no substantial contiguous areas that offer the right complex of vegetation, hydrology, topography, geology and niche habitat requirements. Translocation, then, is a necessary risk-spreading strategy to help the Helmeted Honeyeater establish colonies elsewhere in the landscape. A captive breeding program with Zoos Victoria was also established at Healesville Sanctuary.

Some readers will be aware of the historic releases of Helmeted Honeyeaters into Bunyip State Park that sought to (at least, partially) address the risk of a single-population taxon. This new population flourished for a decade or so until the site failed to sustain the population. Fires and drought were key contributors; the Helmeted Honeyeater Recovery Team learnt much from these releases.

In the middle of this year, a new colony of both captive-bred and wild birds translocated from Yellingbo was established in the Yarra Ranges National Park on the edge of what was likely the historic range. It is early days for this new site, but signs are promising: site fidelity is strong, the released birds are exploring the various elements of the system, and there are signs of breeding activity.

Within Yellingbo, and across the original extent, significant effort is being directed at enhancing, restoring, and creating habitat suitable for the Helmeted Honeyeater. While habitat (extent and quality) is a critical element of the Helmeted Honeyeater Recovery Program, many other factors play a significant role in the success. With around 230 birds in the wild, they are suffering from a loss of genetic diversity. A Research Group at Monash University has worked closely with the Helmeted Honeyeater Recovery Team to implement a complex, carefully constructed genetic rescue program, particularly via Zoos Victoria's captive breeding program.

In 1986, Leadbeater's Possum was discovered also living in the Yellingbo reserve – disjunct from the highland populations of Leadbeater's Possum and completely outside the habitat search held at that time for the species. To me, this totally unexpected discovery highlights both the importance of the reserve system and sustained scientific research: protecting and researching one species meant the discovery and protection of at least one other, critically endangered, species.

Community, of course, plays an enormous role in threatened species conservation. The community came together more than 30 years ago in shared concern for the plight of the Helmeted Honeyeater and formed the Friends of the Helmeted Honeyeater. This volunteer-led environment organisation, which employs several part-time staff, has been a powerful advocate for ecosystem and species conservation. They even run an indigenous plant nursery at Yellingbo that provides plants to the public, local government, and state government and agencies, as well as supplying plants for the Friends' habitat restoration projects. Bequests and donations, including of land, from the community have been a pivotal piece in the jigsaw of the recovery of the Helmeted Honeyeater.

There are many other factors influencing the recovery of Victoria's beautiful bird emblem. Government resourcing to support recovery efforts is vital; this is steady but must be sustained and improved in the long-term for any threatened species recovery program to yield lasting results. There are ways to integrate careful land management with habitat protection and creation to protect a species from extinction. Improved funding of monitoring and research is critical; what we learn about one species and its ecosystems helps us understand the dynamics of the systems in which we all live. In addition, understanding the dynamics of climate change – and planning ahead to support our responses – also will be vital for the future of the Helmeted Honeyeater, as a drying environment directly impacts the hydrology and floristics of their narrow habitat niche. Ultimately, doing nothing is not an option, so future recovery efforts will require us to continue to take lateral approaches informed by science and past learnings, particularly in the face of a changing climate.

Threatened species management is not for the faint-hearted but is full-hearted work. As humans, we each have a responsibility to create a better future: for Earth and future generations of its many inhabitants. • PW

To learn more visit: www.helmetedhoneyeater.org.au

Illustration by Adam Fletcher

Member for life

THE VNPA COUNCIL
AWARD HONORARY LIFE
MEMBERSHIP TO PEOPLE
WHO HAVE PERFORMED
MERITORIOUS SERVICE
TO VNPA. **EUAN MOORE IS
THE LATEST RECIPIENT.**

Euan Moore has made a major contribution to the Victorian National Parks Association through his extensive involvement and support of numerous aspects of the organisation. Euan joined as a member in 1986 and since that time has been, and continues to be, an exceptional volunteer and very generous supporter.

Euan's appreciation of the natural environment grew while working for the New Zealand Forest Research Institute on erosion and feral animal control projects in alpine areas. This was followed by a career in information technology.

Euan then moved to Tasmania, where he served on the Tasmanian World Heritage Consultative Committee, and was an active member of the bushwalking and conservation communities.

When Euan moved to Victoria, he joined VNPA, seeing the benefits of being part of a group that would help him explore the natural wonders of our state through the bushwalking program and contribute to advocacy to protect nature in Victoria.

Euan is committed and very capable, as well as calm and considerate. He is also a 'do-er', and across the VNPA community we have all benefited and learnt from Euan. Over many years he has given a valuable contribution to a wide range of activities, roles and initiatives.

Euan was a member of the VNPA Council for ten years, including three years as President and two as Vice President. He also served on the Conservation & Campaigns Committee for more than a decade, including as Convenor. And he represented the VNPA on the National Parks Australia Council for many years, including as Treasurer.

Euan has been active in the bushwalking and activities program, leading canoe, cycle and cross-country ski trips, as well as habitat restoration and wildlife monitoring activities.

Euan was the lead VNPA organiser for five Forests Forever Easter Ecology Camps in East Gippsland. He participated in the NatureWatch 'Communities Listening for Nature' project, monitoring and analysing bird calls with song meters, hosting staff and volunteers at his and Jenny's home in Castlemaine, and appeared in the video about the project. He also led Wild Families events, such as Birdwatching for Beginners in the field and online, and trips to Hattah-Kalkyne National Park to survey rabbit warrens and weeds. More recently he joined citizen science trips to Mount Cole to monitor wildlife and the threatened Mount Cole Grevillea for our new central west parks campaign.

Back in the office, Euan joined the working group to re-develop the VNPA website, and also proofread VNPA's

2014 *Nature Conservation Review*. He reproduced his photographs as gift cards and tags for the VNPA and has been tirelessly selling VNPA's books at events. He has given numerous talks and presentations to other groups and at VNPA events and social nights. And of course, he always pitches in at major VNPA events, such as the 'We Love Parks Great Forest Picnic' at Mount Donna Buang in 2017.

The list of Euan's work for the VNPA is very long, and shows how incredibly generous he is with his time and skills.

Euan has also joined many other environment groups, and lent his skills as a photographer and bird enthusiast to all the organisations he is involved in. Hence, Euan has become an integral part of a wide network of people and organisations striving to protect nature. This included purchasing land in western Victorian, protected by a Trust for Nature Conservation Covenant.

We also want to recognise the steadfast support of Euan's partner Jenny Rolland. Euan met Jenny on a VNPA bushwalk about 30 years ago. Together with Euan, Jenny is a dedicated and generous member, supporter and volunteer. Euan and Jenny's combined involvement in many activities and projects has been invaluable.

Euan clearly lives and breathes VNPA's vision for "Victoria to be a place with a diverse and healthy natural environment protected, respected and enjoyed by all". All of us at the VNPA – Council, Committee members, staff, members, supporters, bushwalking and activity participants and volunteers unanimously and wholeheartedly support and respect Euan as a well-deserved recipient of an Honorary Life Membership.

Thank you, Euan, for your outstanding support for the VNPA and nature conservation in Victoria. • PW

Euan was awarded Honorary Life Membership at the VNPA 69th AGM on 12 October 2021.

Victorian Environmental Assessment Council 50th anniversary

A MODEL OF DECISION MAKING – UNIQUE IN AUSTRALIA AND INTERNATIONALLY – HAS REMAINED THROUGH TWO NAME CHANGES A RESPECTED AND ENDURING FEATURE OF VICTORIA'S APPROACH TO PUBLIC LAND POLICY AND MANAGEMENT. VEAC'S EXECUTIVE OFFICER **JOAN PHILLIPS** LOOKS BACK AT SOME OF THE MAJOR EVENTS OF THE PAST 50 YEARS.

VEAC's predecessor the Land Conservation Council was established in 1971 in the wake of the fierce dispute over public land in Victoria's Little Desert. It was a state government response to growing community concerns over environmental policies by implementing a suite of reforms, one of which was a systematic and transparent approach for reviewing and recommending appropriate uses for public land. The creation of the LCC was intended to hand the political hot potato of public land disputes to an independent council of experts, upon whose recommendations governments could then act.

Danielle Clode, in her 2006 history *As if for a Thousand Years*, writes about how the Land Conservation Council and its successors the Environment Conservation Council and VEAC developed into a model for science and community consultation, surviving dramatic changes to the political and environmental landscape but remaining a stable force in the battles over public land in Victoria.

In 1971 most of Victoria's prime agricultural land was already cleared. Victoria remains the most cleared state in Australia. Just over one per cent of Victoria was protected in national parks and reserves. The government decided that the use of land in Victoria be rebalanced. When the LCC was established, the legislation set down clearly that it was "to make better provision in relation to the conservation of public land" and to

make recommendations to "provide for the balanced use of land in Victoria". Fifty years later, around 16 per cent of land in Victoria is protected in national parks and other parks and conservation reserves.

Little Desert campaign

In early 1968 minister of Lands, Soldier Settlement and Conservation William McDonald announced the Little Desert Settlement Scheme to clear Crown land to develop 48 wheat farms. Controversy erupted with agricultural experts, economists and conservationists opposing the scheme.

During the 1970 election campaign, premier Henry Bolte promised a full study of Crown lands with the aim of increasing the size and number of national parks, wildlife reserves and forest parks so they preserved at least five per cent of Victoria.

The re-elected Bolte government legislated a radically new system of public land-use decision-making that was systematic, transparent, and informed both by science and public opinion: the Land Conservation Council (LCC).

Alpine parks system

The LCC's investigation of the Alpine region in the late 1970s was its first big challenge. The timber industry and communities, mountain cattlemen and

their supporters, and the conservation movement were all vigorously engaged in the debate on the LCC's draft recommendations in 1978. There were more than 14,000 submissions to this report, to this day the largest number of submissions to a report of the LCC and its successors.

By the time Labor came to power in 1982 with a promise of larger reserves in the alpine area, a review was inevitable. A special investigation was initiated, and in 1983 LCC recommendations saw the parks system again expanded. First put forward by community groups in 1949, following the LCC's 1983 recommendations a single Alpine National Park was legislated in 1989.

Grampians National Park

Lobbying for a national park in the Grampians began in the early part of the last century. It grew from 1978 in response to the LCC's hotly contested South West District 2 study, led by local field naturalist groups and the Victorian National Parks Association. There was fierce opposition to a national park from

sectors including the timber industry, locals concerned about saw milling jobs, and farmers with properties bordering the proposed park.

The LCC's recommendation for a large national park in 1982 led to the establishment of the Grampians National Park in July 1984. Logging continued in parts of the park until 1994.

Today the Grampians National Park is widely considered a case study in gradual community acceptance eventually becoming local pride in this jewel in the crown of Victoria's parks system.

East Gippsland forests

In the LCC's original 1977 East Gippsland study, the pressures to constrain parks were great, and the small parks recommended were mainly forests with relatively low timber values.

The success in Tasmania of the Franklin River campaign in the early 1980s encouraged broader action by a new generation of conservationists. Activists chained themselves to trees and lay in front of bulldozers. Logging interests campaigned in the city with loaded logging trucks encircling parliament.

The LCC's East Gippsland Review 1986 recommendations resulted in protected areas increasing from one quarter to one third of public land; the area available for logging reduced to two thirds.

Controversy continues to this day. In 2019, the Andrews Government announced its intention to phase out all native forest timber harvesting on public land in Victoria by 2030.

Initial assessment complete – one million hectares of national parks

The LCC systematically assessed the state in 17 study areas or regions, some

subdivided into districts. By 1986 the LCC had assessed all study areas at least once. This work was largely completed prior to the death of first chairman Sam Dimmock in 1984. The new chairman, David Scott, oversaw an era of reviews and special investigations, returning to some of the more difficult issues set aside in the first sweep across the state.

In 1971 the LCC commenced its work program with some 210,000 hectares of national parks established across the state. By 1986 the area of national parks reached 1.3 million hectares, achieving the initial minimum target of five per cent of Victoria (1.2 million hectares) promised by premier Bolte in his 1970 election campaign.

In 1997 the LCC was abolished and replaced with the Environment Conservation Council. While the main functions of assessment of public land were retained, under other changes, only the Minister could request an investigation and, while the final recommendations were required to be tabled in Parliament, there was no requirement for the government to respond to them.

Marine protected area system

When the LCC was abolished, the final recommendations for its Marine and Coastal Special Investigation were nearly completed. With refreshed terms of reference from the government, the task was handed on to the newly established Environment Conservation Council (ECC).

In 2000, the ECC recommended the protection of significant environmental values and the sustainable use of Victoria's marine environment, with most attention being given to its recommendations

For 50 years VEAC and its predecessors have been making recommendations for expanding the parks system, including for the creation of the Alpine National Park in 1989.

for a representative 'no-take' system of 13 marine national parks and 11 marine sanctuaries, making up 6.2 per cent of Victorian waters.

It was the culmination of a marathon investigation process – the longest ever conducted by the organisations – which began in 1991 with the LCC and encompassed six formal periods of public comment and about 4500 written submissions.

High levels of controversy continued to dog the investigation after the final recommendations were submitted to government and favourably received, and numerous changes were made to the boundaries of the parks and sanctuaries to ensure bipartisan support in parliament.

The highly protected marine national parks and marine sanctuaries were finally established in 2002, making Victoria a world leader at that time in marine conservation.

Crown land legislation rewrite

In 2001 the Labor government proceeded with its election commitment to restore the powers and perceived independence of the LCC by announcing a new body to replace the ECC – the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC).

As before, the main functions of assessment of public land were retained. Notably, as for the LCC but not the ECC, VEAC's legislation required that government respond to the Council's recommendations.

Twenty-five years after the LCC conducted the first statewide stocktake of public land in 1988, VEAC carried out a second assessment.

The assessment found that Victoria's primary land legislation does not reflect contemporary values and challenges. The *Land Act 1958*, in particular, is a legacy Act dating from the 19th century and European settlement of the state. VEAC recommended that Victoria's public land legislation be rewritten for the 21st century.

The Victorian Government accepted VEAC's recommendations and in 2021 carried out consultation on proposals to renew Victoria's public land legislation, including the creation of a new Public Land Act. • PW

LCC Chairman Sam Dimmock (middle), Director of Land Use Planning Mick Lumb (right) and ski lift owner Des Schuman (left) at Mt Hotham in 1973.



The 'face' of this year's Great Victorian Fish Count, the Senator Wrasse.

PHOTO: ANDREAS MODINGER

The weird and wonderful inhabitants of the Great Southern Reef

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE STAGGERING BIODIVERSITY OF OUR LOCAL REEFS BY REEFWATCH INTERN INDIA AMBLER.

A biodiversity hotspot

The Great Southern Reef is one of Australia's best-kept secrets. It's a biodiversity hotspot, bursting with life and vitality. Although the Great Southern Reef may be starkly different from its well-known tropical sibling, the Great Barrier Reef, that doesn't make it any less remarkable. You might be wondering why this is – what makes the reef so special?

Well, the answer lies in its geographical isolation. Our marine environment has been shaped by years of unusual environmental conditions and ecological processes, both of which have greatly influenced the evolution of its natural habitats.

A rocky reef system spanning 8000 kilometres of coastline along Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales constitutes the backbone of the Great Southern Reef. It connects highly productive kelp forests, their golden fronds reaching up gracefully towards the light, with equally astonishing sponge gardens and vibrant seagrass meadows. Soft and sandy substrates provide further complexity to what amounts to a truly diverse, interconnected reef system. We have previously written about the Great Southern Reef (see: www.vnpa.org.au/what-is-the-great-southern-reef), but now we would like to introduce you to some of the unique creatures that call it home.

Through the looking glass

The species that dwell in the cooler ('temperate') waters of Australia's southern coast are an extraordinary bunch. From the estimated 1,500 seaweed species growing upon the reef to the sponges, crustaceans, echinoderms, bryozoans, molluscs and vertebrates – including the iconic Weedy Seadragon, our state marine animal. Each organism has adapted to its temperate surroundings in order to survive.

Let's take a closer look at some of Victoria's native, or endemic, species. The fish of our southern waters are exceptionally diverse. Old Wives (*Enoplosus armatus*), with bands of dark brown and white, glide through shallow coastal habitats, brandishing their poisonous spines. Leatherjackets are particularly

striking. You may have seen the aptly-named Horseshoe Leatherjacket (*Meuschenia hippocrepis*), which possesses a black horse-shoe marking behind its pectoral fin.

In deeper waters of more than 30 metres, Southern Blue Devils (*Paraplesiops meleagris*) roam the reef (turn to page 22 for picture). This fish has impressively large fins for its size and numerous spots on its startlingly blue body. It commonly dwells in caves or crevices nestled in the reef. But don't let this fool you: the Southern Blue Devil is an inquisitive character, beloved by divers. Impressively, individuals may live for up to 60 years.

Venture closer to the hard, rocky substrate if you've got an eye for detail. The nudibranch, or "nudi", is a personal favourite of divers

worldwide. These soft-bodied molluscs come in an abundance of shapes and colours, lavishly adorned with branch-like gills and horns that protrude from their heads and backs. With a camera in hand, you may find that nudibranchs, with their photogenic attributes and intriguingly diverse appearances, make great subjects. Nudibranchs and their cousins, collectively known as sea slugs, are the focus of our Sea Slug Census project (see: www.vnpa.org.au/sea-slugs)

Keep a close vigil for species that prefer to conceal themselves in the shadows. The Southern Blue Ringed Octopus (*Hapalochlaena maculosa*), a surreptitious predator with a highly toxic venom, is best left to its own devices. While these octopuses are generally passive in nature, their tell-tale rings of iridescent blue become visible when they feel threatened.

Larger marine species like sharks and rays tend to be quite shy. As such, it may take some patience – and a stroke of luck – to spot them. The Spotted Wobbegong (*Orectolobus maculatus*) is well camouflaged, with its patterned body and green-ish brown colouration. It's well-known for the whisker-like tassels that extend from its jaw, a trait that afforded it the name 'wobbegong' (meaning "shaggy beard"), believed to stem from an Indigenous Australian language. Fitting, isn't it?

The face of the fish count

We've come to the end of our brief 'meet and greet' of the marine species that reside in Victoria's portion of the Great Southern Reef – save one. The 'face' of the Great Victorian Fish Count in 2021 is the Senator Wrasse (*Pictilabrus laticlavus*).

This species is sexually dimorphic, meaning that individual appearances vary with sex. It is also a protogynous hermaphrodite. As such, females undergo a sex change during their second to fifth year.

Males are green-bodied, with reddish-violet stripes on their sides. Comparatively, females and juveniles are often a reddish- or greenish-brown in colour, with rows of black spots above the lateral line and dusky bars below it. All individuals are relatively slender in shape and may grow up to 25 centimetres in length.

You'll find this species darting among the kelp at varying depths (3–40 metres). They're good at concealing themselves, so you may need to keep your eyes peeled!

Broader implications

In Victoria, VNPA's ReefWatch program has been working hard to bring the marine life so often overlooked into the public eye. A number of projects are underway to achieve this goal, including the Great Victorian Fish Count and the Sea Slug Census. These initiatives provide opportunities for community members to get involved in important research, learn about the local habitats and species around them, and hence develop a sense of connection with the marine environment.

The Great Victorian Fish Count has enabled us to uncover the identities of many species dwelling in Port Philip Bay and beyond. The effort put in by the community over the years has been invaluable. Excitingly, we now have a dataset that spans over ten years and are working on a report to summarise the key findings. Not only will this data allow us to identify changes in species abundances over time, but it may help to shape our decisions about the management of our marine habitats in the future. • PW

The 2021 Great Victorian Fish Count is on from 13 November to 12 December, for more information and to get involved visit www.vnpa.org.au/fish-count

Spotted Wobbegong

PHOTO: JOHN TURNBULL, FLICKR CC

Old Wives

PHOTO: IAN SCHOLEY

Southern Blue Ringed Octopus

PHOTO: SASPOTATO, FLICKR CC

Horseshoe Leatherjacket

PHOTO: IAN SCHOLEY

Weedy Seadragon

PHOTO: SAM GLENN-SMITH

Organ Pipes National Park

GEOFF DURHAM VISITS A PARK THAT IS AN EXAMPLE OF WHAT PASSIONATE PEOPLE CAN ACHIEVE FOR NATURE.

When I learned of the death of Don Marsh in August, I immediately decided to write an article on Organ Pipes National Park (see page 38 for his tribute). There are some parks that I associate with individuals; for example, Mount Worth State Park I associate with the late Jack Brooks, who campaigned relentlessly for its creation. Organ Pipes National Park I associate with Don Marsh, because on its creation in 1972, he had the vision to see it revegetated not only with indigenous species, but with species of local provenance. He mobilised community support and with the approval of the National Parks Service he formed the first Friends group for parks in Victoria.

Don worked closely with the Ranger Jack Lyale, and the success of the Friends of Organ Pipes (FOOPs) led to VNPA promoting the concept of volunteer Friends groups and its adoption by the then National Parks Service. Don instigated the preparation of an audio-visual presentation and the idea took off. In 1991 at the fifth Friends Conference, Don was the recipient of the inaugural Best Friend Award. His acceptance remarks were brief but powerful: "More – do more".

Organ Pipes National Park is on Jacksons Creek off the Calder Highway about 26 kilometres north-west of the Melbourne CBD. Situated in the Keilor Plains, part of the Western Volcanic Plains, it is a deep gorge with several volcanic geological features – the big attraction being the basalt organ pipes formation. Current visitation is 150,000 people per year, with an increase of an estimated 15-20 per cent during Covid lockdowns. The park is open to vehicles daily from 8.30am to 4.30pm, or 6.00pm during daylight savings.

Organ Pipes National Park (153 hectares) is the smallest of Victoria's national and state parks. It came about through a donation of the land by the E A Green Trust negotiated by the then Director of National Parks, Dr Len Smith.

At the time, it was an ecological disaster – a weed-infested rubbish dump. In 1975 Dr Smith wrote that "the National Parks Service is using this area to illustrate to school excursions the effects of incorrect land-use and to demonstrate the techniques of restoration". Rubbish and weeds were removed, a nursery was established to propagate plants and a visitor centre with an auditorium was erected. The park's 1998 Management

Plan says: "The Park's geological features, varied vegetation and landforms, ongoing revegetation programs and other resources and facilities, including the Visitor Centre, present excellent opportunities for education about the natural environment".

The restoration of indigenous vegetation is impressive. Parks staff and the Friends of Organ Pipes over many years reintroduced grasses, shrubs and trees, many rare and endangered, identifying species that would have occurred in the escarpment, grassland and riparian environments of the park based on remnant patches and historical records. Native wildlife has returned, including Eastern Grey Kangaroos, Black Tailed Swamp Wallabies, Echidnas and Platypus as well as a range of birds, frogs and fish. Bat and Sugar Glider boxes have been attached to trees and Sugar Gliders successfully introduced, and both are monitored by volunteers.

At the ending of lockdowns, I was able to visit the park in late October. Drooping Sheoak trees below the picnic area near the car park are senescing with no apparent regeneration. Desert Cassia were at the end of flowering and laden with seed pods. From the car park, a steep



PHOTO: PARK VICTORIA



PHOTO: DREW DOUGLAS, FLICKR CC



PHOTO: ELIZABETH DONOGHUE, FLICKR CC

Clockwise from top left:
The park is an incredible
example of restoration.
Rosette Rock
Desert Cassia
Sugar Glider
Jackson's Creek
Salt Bush



PHOTO: JULIE BURGHIER, FLICKR CC



PHOTO: LUKE RICHARDSON, FLICKR CC



PHOTO: DREW DOUGLAS, FLICKR CC

bitumen track descends 750 metres to the Organ Pipes viewing platform on the creek. From here there is a track through the restored bushland featuring River Red Gums along the river flat down-stream to a ford and up-stream past Rosette Rock to the Tessellated Pavement formations and another ford. Poa and salt bush on the flat were flourishing. However, the other side of the creek was very weedy.

The park has huge potential still as an education resource for schools. Parks Victoria employs three education officers at Wilsons Promontory, one for Serendip Sanctuary, one for Dandenongs and in two for Yorta Yorta Country, but none at Organ Pipes. It says group interpretations are managed on request and availability of suitably qualified staff. Organ Pipes National Park falls within the Northern Keilor Plains Work Centre, based out of Woodlands Historic Park, which is responsible for Woodlands Historic Park, Organ Pipes National Park and Greenvale Reservoir Park, as well as a number of reserves, including Holden Flora Reserve,

Craigieburn Grassland Nature Conservation Reserve and Cooper St Grassland Nature Conservation Reserve. Five staff work in this area and Parks Victoria says, if needed, other staff can be called on, but staff are thin on the ground.

The unstaffed Visitor Centre is of forlorn appearance. The concept of a Keilor Plains Flora Trail loop walk at the visitor centre has been abandoned and its lookout demolished. There is no longer a nursery. A huge amount has been achieved over the years in controlling weeds, but it is an ongoing task. There has been some recent spot-spraying of Artichoke Thistle and Serrated Tussock Grass. A blot on the park is what is known as Liu's land – a wedge of private land in the north of the park extending from the rim of the valley almost to the creek. Parks Victoria says the possible acquisition of this land is a matter for DELWP, which, as far as I can ascertain, has no present intention to do so.

An often-overlooked aspect of the park is the Keilor Plains above the valley. To manage this as native grassland is a particular challenge. There has been the occasional ecological burn.

We should celebrate the remarkable creation of Organ Pipes National Park, but also recognise its unrealised potential and heed the words of Don Marsh: "More – do more". Oh, that Parks Victoria had the resources and the will to do so! • PW

The Friends of Organ Pipes celebrates its 50th anniversary next year. It meets in the park on the fourth Saturday of the month. Contact Loretta Beliniak on 0401 493 176.

Adjoining the national park is the City of Brimbank's 231-hectare Sydenham Park, which is expected to be open to the public at the end of 2022. The Council has carried out substantial revegetation and prepared a Master Plan. There will be cycling and walking tracks and visitor facilities.

Tributes

Don Marsh 1934–2021

Vale the first Friend of national parks

Don Marsh, who died on 18 August aged 86, was a key figure in developing the concept and establishment of Friends of Parks groups for over 50 years. Don played a major role in the management of Organ Pipes National Park, which became a model for restoring degraded natural environments in Victoria and beyond, and in the identification, propagation and care of indigenous plant and animal species.

Don grew up in the western suburbs, attending Footscray Technical School before becoming a draftsman with the State Electricity Commission, remaining there until he retired and working on the design of power station cooling towers, transmission lines and more.

He married Judy Cakebread in 1963 and had two daughters – living in Niddrie before moving to Taylors Lakes.

In 1954 he joined the Footscray Cycling Club, then took up bushwalking and fishing. This developed into an interest in the bush, bird observing and growing native plants. He was also an early member of the Victorian National Parks Association.

In 1969, Don and two friends formed the Maribyrnong Valley Committee, lobbying politicians for better protection of public land west of Melbourne. When Organ Pipes National Park was gazetted in 1972, he and his committee devoted their lives to restoring this weed-infested area. They formed Friends of Organ Pipes, or FOOPs, one of Australia's first volunteer conservation groups. Don teamed up with Jack Lyale, the park's first ranger, and began organising fortnightly working bees to clear rubbish and remove weeds, then started to plant indigenous species such as sheoaks and wattles.

Don and fellow FOOP Barry Kemp researched the area's original flora and fauna, identified local remnant sites, collected seed and raised seedlings. The group slowly grew, and Don and Barry planned areas to be reclaimed and techniques for restoring degraded land. Don also recorded progress in photos and reports, and wrote copious letters to politicians and bureaucrats.

Don was a strong-minded and determined man who wasn't put off by pessimists declaring the restoration project impossible. In any case, the nay-sayers often changed their views after actually visiting the park and seeing the progress made. National Parks Service staff like Geoff Edwards assisted with planning and fieldwork, and Don gathered many other active supporters.

Don, Barry, Jack and others worked out what became the standard operations model for Friends groups, of which there are now over 1000 in Victoria and other states. Don was also a fine teacher; many now-experienced conservation volunteers learned from him.

In 1989, when cycling home from work, Don was knocked off his bicycle by a passing truck, struck his head on a concrete kerb and suffered brain damage. Yet despite gloomy predictions from doctors, he survived, learned how to walk and (with difficulty) talk again, and lived on for another 32 years, always deeply interested in the Organ Pipes and the Friends. He received the first Friends Network Best Friend award in 1991, and later gained a Kookaburra award from Parks Victoria.

Don (left) with Jack Lyale (middle) and Barry Kemp (right) in the early days of the restoration work.



The FOOPs are still going strong, and next year celebrate 50 years since their founding. The group has been through several generations of leadership, mostly gaining their conservation knowledge and skills under the supervision and mentoring of Don Marsh. • PW

Tribute compiled by FOOPs members Robert Bender and Robert Irvine.



PHOTO: PARK VICTORIA

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Bob Whiteway, OAM

The Victorian National Parks Association was deeply saddened to hear of Bob Whiteway's passing on 12 September 2021.

Bob was a tireless advocate along his patch of coast and worked closely with VNPA on the marine national parks campaign.



At the forefront of his remarkable legacy of coastal conservation is the Ricketts Point Marine Sanctuary. At one point it seemed like the sanctuary might not happen, and it was Bob's successful efforts to initiate a public campaign that helped get it over the line in only a few weeks.

After its creation, Bob was instrumental in the establishment of the Marine Care Ricketts Point volunteer organisation to care for it and be influential in the sanctuary's management. Marine Care Ricketts Point thrives today with over 200 members.

A title well earned, Bob is known as the father of the sanctuary.

Although Bob's energy, enthusiasm and intellect will be sadly missed, he has mentored and nurtured a new group of advocates who will make their mark, just like he did, and continue his legacy.

Our sincere condolences to Bob's family and friends and all those people who had the good fortune to enter his orbit. • PW

Explorer's corner

TIPS AND TRICKS FOR GETTING IN TO NATURE

Catching the ferry to
French Island National Park.

Adventures by public transport – day walks



PHOTO: PARK VICTORIA

Walking the lush forests close to Melbourne in the
Dandenong Ranges National Park.

Now that restrictions have lifted, many of us are returning to nature. But it is as important as ever to tread lightly and lessen our impact on these precious places we love. Taking public transport is one way to minimise your carbon footprint, as is walking, and combining the two can lead to one great day out.

Melbournians especially have missed out on many months of outdoor adventures, so here we'll focus on two fantastic day walks that are accessible by public transport from Melbourne. Keep an eye out for future 'Explorer's Corner' articles on weekend, overnight hiking, and even snorkelling opportunities that are also accessible by public transport.

Make sure you use Public Transport Victoria's Journey Planner to plan your adventure; www.ptv.vic.gov.au and check for the latest national park information, including walk maps and accessibility, on the Parks Victoria website www.parks.vic.gov.au.

Day Walks

Close to Melbourne and short in duration – perfect for your daily nature hit!

DANDENONG RANGES NATIONAL PARK

The Dandenong Ranges is about as close to mountains as Melbourne can get! Take a walk through the lovely mountain ash forests that it has to offer and challenge yourself to the 1000 steps Kokoda Memorial Trail at three kilometres in length. It may be busy on weekends, so you might want to plan around the crowds – mid-week or early morning are often quieter. Other walks in the area include the Belview Loop at 4.5 kilometres, or if you're after something shorter, the Ramblers Track Loop is an easy 1.5 kilometres.

Getting there:

Hop onto the Belgrave Line Train from Flinders Street Station to Upper Ferntree Gully Station. From there, it's just over a one-kilometre walk to the base of the Kokoda Memorial Trail, where there are three different loop tracks to tackle.

Park information/maps:

www.parks.vic.gov.au/places-to-see/parks/dandenong-ranges-national-park

Note that there are several facilities (picnic grounds, toilets) in the area currently closed due to weather damage and other changed conditions, so it's worth checking the Parks Victoria website before you go.

FRENCH ISLAND NATIONAL PARK

French Island is a walkers' paradise with a variety of tracks. Cycling is also popular on the island, and you can bring your own bike on the train or hire one at the general store, one kilometre away from Tankerton Jetty. Home to a large population of koalas, there is also a diverse range of environments from mangrove saltmarshes to woodlands that are worth exploring and campgrounds if you'd like to make your journey longer. The Old Coast Road Track also starts at Tankerton Jetty and is a flat five kilometres each way track that gives you the best of all environments. The West Coast Wetlands Walking Track is also popular for birdlife and orchids and includes the Pinnacles Lookout for spectacular views of the wetlands, bay and land across it.

Getting there:

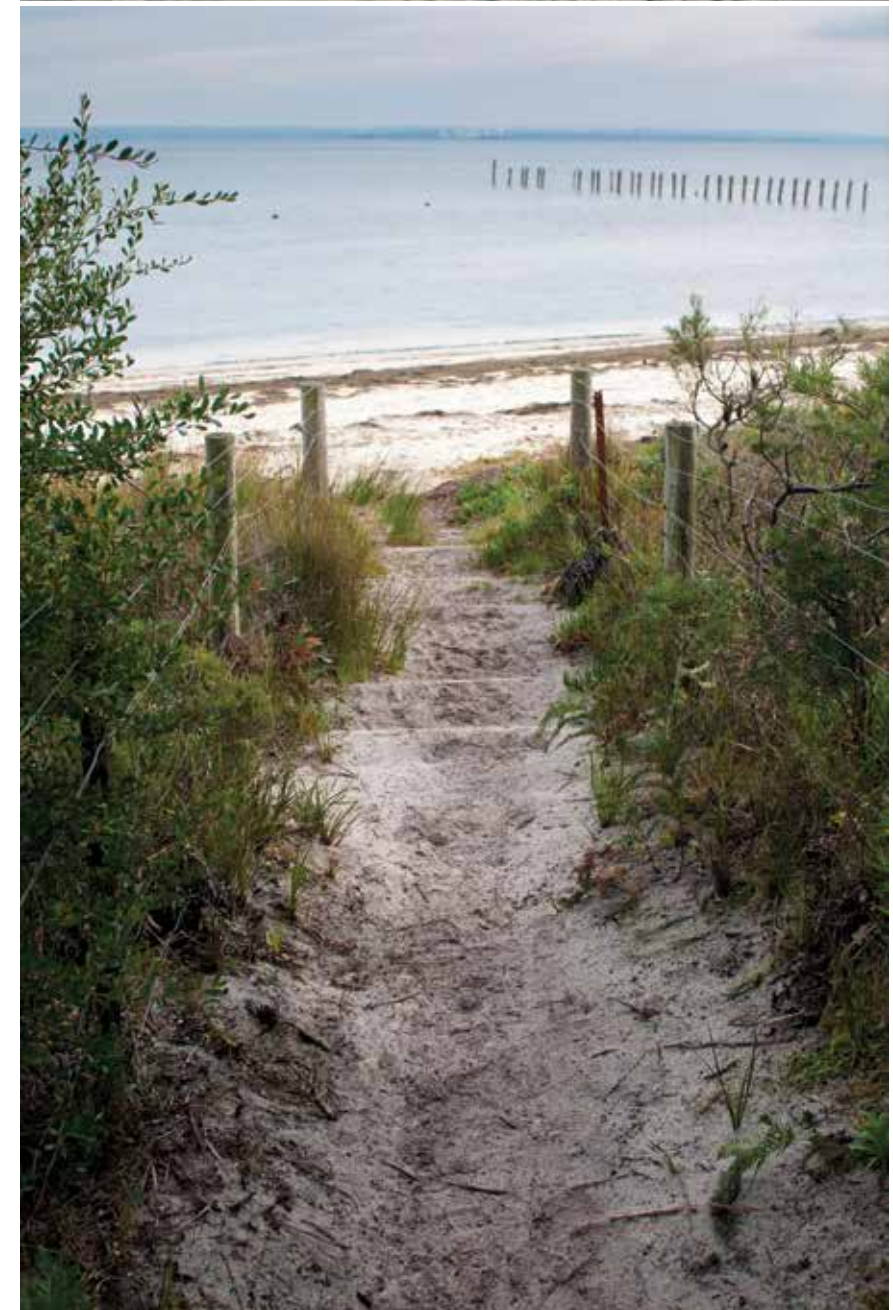
Jump on the Frankston Line from Flinders Street to Frankston Station, then onto the V/Line service to Stony Point. From here, you'll need to get on a passenger ferry to French Island's Tankerton Jetty. Check timetables and book tickets here: www.westernportferries.com.au

Park information/maps:

www.parks.vic.gov.au/places-to-see/parks/french-island-national-park



ILLUSTRATIONS BY TRACE BALLA



PHOTOS: PARKS VICTORIA

Make a rubbish fish

This is a fun way to reuse plastic and paper waste around the home. Make your favourite fish species or invent your own – it can be any shape, size and colour you can imagine!

You will need:

- clean household recyclables/rubbish (plastic bottles, milk cartons, aluminium cans, cardboard boxes, disposable cutlery etc.)

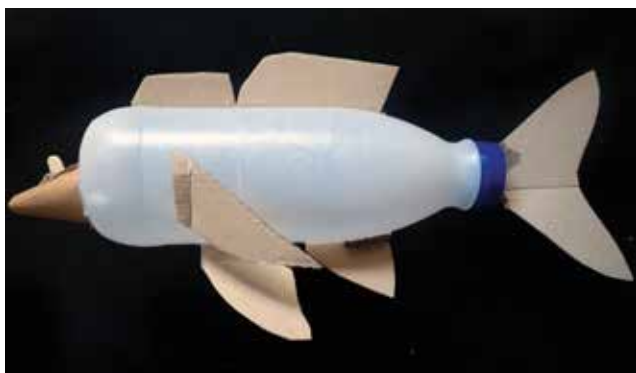
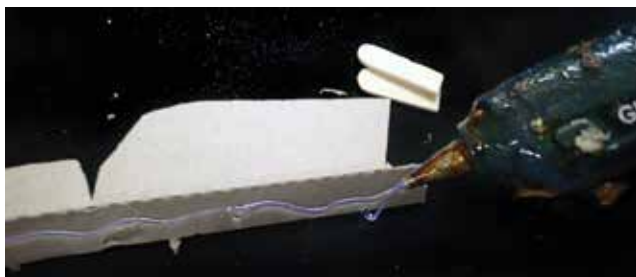
- adhesive, e.g. masking tape, tacky craft glue (not PVA), or hot glue to attach fins and eyes (be careful not to touch the hot glue or the glue gun tip)
- paper scraps (e.g. old wrapping paper, craft square offcuts, toilet paper wrappers)
- PVA glue for sticking on paper 'fish skin', and to use as a top-coat to protect your project
- acrylic poster paints
- googly eyes (or other craft materials to decorate your fish with creature features)

Steps

- 1) Collect your materials.
- 2) Plastic bottles and milk cartons make good fish bodies. Clean the inside of any bottles and leave to dry.



- 3) Cut out the fins and head shapes out of cardboard and work out where you'd like to attach them.
- 4) Stick the body parts on your fish using glue or tape. If using tacky craft glue, wait for the glue to dry before moving on. Note: PVA glue will not work very well for attaching fins to round containers!



- 5) Put a hole in the base of the fish and insert a bamboo skewer (blunt end first) and glue in place so your fish can stand up in the ground. Or, put a hole in the top (dorsal) fin if you want to hang your fish with string instead.



- 6) Tear up strips of paper to cover your fish frame.
- 7) Use PVA glue to stick the paper all over the fish. Make sure any plastic is completely covered. You could even use colourful paper and cut your scraps into 'scales'.
- 8) If you don't cover your fish frame in paper you can also paint a base layer of white poster paint.



- 9) Add details and patterns with paint or paper, then attach googly eyes and any other fancy features.
- 10) All done! You can spray with fixative or use a top-coat of PVA glue to seal the fish if you want the paint/paper finish to last longer.



Things to think about when making your fish

- How many fins does your fish have?
- Does it look like most fish, or is it a different shape? Why do you think that is?
- Does your fish have spines or big teeth to protect itself?
- Is your fish brightly coloured or dull coloured? Why do you think that is?
- Where in the ocean, lakes or rivers do you think your fish would live?
- If you made up your own fish, what is it called? Why did you choose that name?

Fish Fins

Fish fins come in many different shapes and sizes. Some help a fish swim really fast, while others help disguise it from predators by looking like fronds of seaweed. Here are a few tail fin shapes to inspire you when you are making your fish. • PW



Seadragon



Sweep



Wrasse



Cowfish



Leatherjacket

Thank you and Season's Greetings

Through yet another challenging year, it has been the support, encouragement and generosity of the Victorian National Parks Association community that has kept our organisation going. Thank you.

Despite the difficulties, together we have advocated for our shared vision of nature conservation, and celebrated some significant wins in 2021.

We thank each and every one of you for being part of our community – you make our work possible and even more meaningful. Thank you.

Our warmest wishes for a safe and nature-filled festive season.

