

PARK WATCH



**20TH ANNIVERSARY OF VICTORIA'S
MARINE PARKS AND SANCTUARIES
POLLING ON NATIONAL PARKS
YARRA RANGES NATIONAL PARK
MOUNTAIN BIKE ISSUES
WELLSFORD BIG TREES
BROKEN, PROMISED GRASSLANDS**

MARCH 2022 NO 288



**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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A Southern Fiddler Ray swims through forests of kelp. Victoria's marine environments are truly spectacular. Photo by Tess Hoinville.

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The Victorian National Parks Association acknowledges the many First Peoples of the area now known as Victoria, honours their continuing connection to, and caring for, Country, and supports Traditional Owner joint-management of parks and public land for conservation of natural and cultural heritage. Our office is located on traditional land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. We offer our respect to Elders past, present and future.

Park Watch is printed on FSC certified paper.

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From the President



It is great to start the new year with the freedom to visit and explore our natural areas. Fresh air, exercise and the wonders of nature are even more appreciated after two years of lockdowns during the COVID pandemic.

My family has enjoyed a wide variety of trips to national parks, conservation reserves and protected areas over the past few months, and of course, relaxing and reading. The most insightful book of my recent reading was Victor Steffensen's *Fire Country: How Indigenous Fire Management Could Help Save Australia*. This is a deep dive into his experiences of using and teaching Indigenous fire techniques around Australia, from his apprenticeship with Elders, to frustrating and unhelpful interactions with various "authorities". I found the most interesting discussions related to the Elders' assessment of different ecosystems on the patch scale, applying variable timing for burns for each of these ecosystems. He explained the importance of cultural burning for the Traditional Owners and the need for "praction" for younger people – that being practice followed by action on Country.

VNPA staff have been working hard to remove the threat of ill-conceived proposed mountain bike track developments in the Yarra Ranges National Park (turn to pages 12-13). This park was protected in 1995 to conserve the precious wet forests and habitats in perpetuity – not just until someone comes up with a silly development idea. The state government should just hit this and similar ideas right out of the court as soon as one is mentioned. Perpetuity is a long time, and government funds need to be spent on park protection and management, not destruction.

In the Wellsford Forest near Bendigo, the plight of the wonderful and venerable old Box-Ironbark trees is again on the radar. These trees are 600 years old, older than our current systems of government and before the printing press was invented. As a modern society, we should have established strong protections for these wonders. The continual fiddling and fuzzy thinking by the responsible authorities are a blight on our collective will to respect and protect our natural treasures. Learn about them on pages 16-17.

What remains of our native grasslands is also being undermined by lack of action on agreed plans. The Grassy Plains Network is increasing pressure for the implementation of conservation commitments by the Victorian Government. Not even half of those plans have come to fruition. One wonders how Treasury can undertake budgeting for all of the required conservation commitments in Victoria when they cannot get to grips with just 1% of grassland left in Victoria (read more on pages 22-25).

On a positive note, 2022 is the 20th anniversary of the creation of our marine parks system in Victoria. This was a world-leading initiative to protect our marine environment. What a great achievement to celebrate! Most people do not appreciate that this part of the underwater world is more biodiverse than the Great Barrier Reef. We have much to admire and conserve, which is one reason our ReefWatch program is so well attended. The benefits of conservation reserves in the marine environment are now well established for biodiversity, environmental restoration, stabilising coastal environments, enhancing

recreation, providing low-impact tourism, and with big spinoffs for the fishers who reap benefits without doing anything (turn to pages 5-11 for our feature).

This year also marks VNPA's 70th anniversary. The VNPA Council and Committees have been discussing a range of activities to help celebrate the continuing vision of the founders of VNPA and the achievements of our campaigns. Victoria is a very different place from that of 1952, when the nation was recovering from the dislocation and costs of World War Two. We are now a much more prosperous and confident country. We have numerous environmental protections and conservation reserves that were only dreamed about in 1952. However, Victoria is much more cleared and nature more fragmented and threatened than in 1952. We look forward to our members and supporters participating in our celebrations. There will be more in the next issue of *Park Watch* and in our email communications.

I would like to thank our members and supporters for their kind words and support over the festive season. It is greatly appreciated by VNPA Council and staff. • PW

Bruce McGregor, VNPA President

We are sad to hear of the passing of John Landy, legendary Australian athlete, former Victorian Governor, and dedicated conservationist and VNPA supporter. He died aged 91 on 24 February.

We will have a full tribute in the June edition of *Park Watch*.

Did you recently receive our 2022 Supporter Survey?

The supporter survey helps us get to know you – our community of members and supporters – better. Your responses will help us understand what's important to the VNPA community, and how we can continue to earn your support.

If you've not yet completed the survey, we'd greatly appreciate you taking the time to do so. It should only take a couple of minutes, and your answers will be kept private and confidential – no one outside VNPA will see your responses.



Rabbit Ears in the Pyrenees Ranges.

PHOTO: JAMES CORDWELL

Project Hindmarsh Community Planting

Project Hindmarsh hopes to be back again in 2022 after two frustrating years absence. This year will be the 25th planting year, and if all goes well, 11,000 trees, shrubs, herbs and grasses will be planted at two sites near Dimboola.

When: Friday 1 July to Sunday 3 July 2022.
Where: Dimboola Showgrounds.

More details in next *Park Watch*, or visit www.hindmarshlandcare.org.au

Bushwalking and Activities

We are working to get the program back on track. There is no printed Autumn 2022 program but any upcoming activities will be sent to our email list, which you can join at vnpa.org.au/bwag-sign-up

Environmentalists honoured

Congratulations to those from the VNPA community who received Medal of the Order of Australia Awards in January 2022.

Professor Ary Hoffman AC

For eminent service to science, particularly evolutionary biology and ecological genetics, through research, mentoring and education, and to professional scientific organisations. Ary has provided VNPA with valuable scientific expertise in many areas, particularly the VicNature2050 initiative to help Victoria's natural environment adapt to our changing climate.

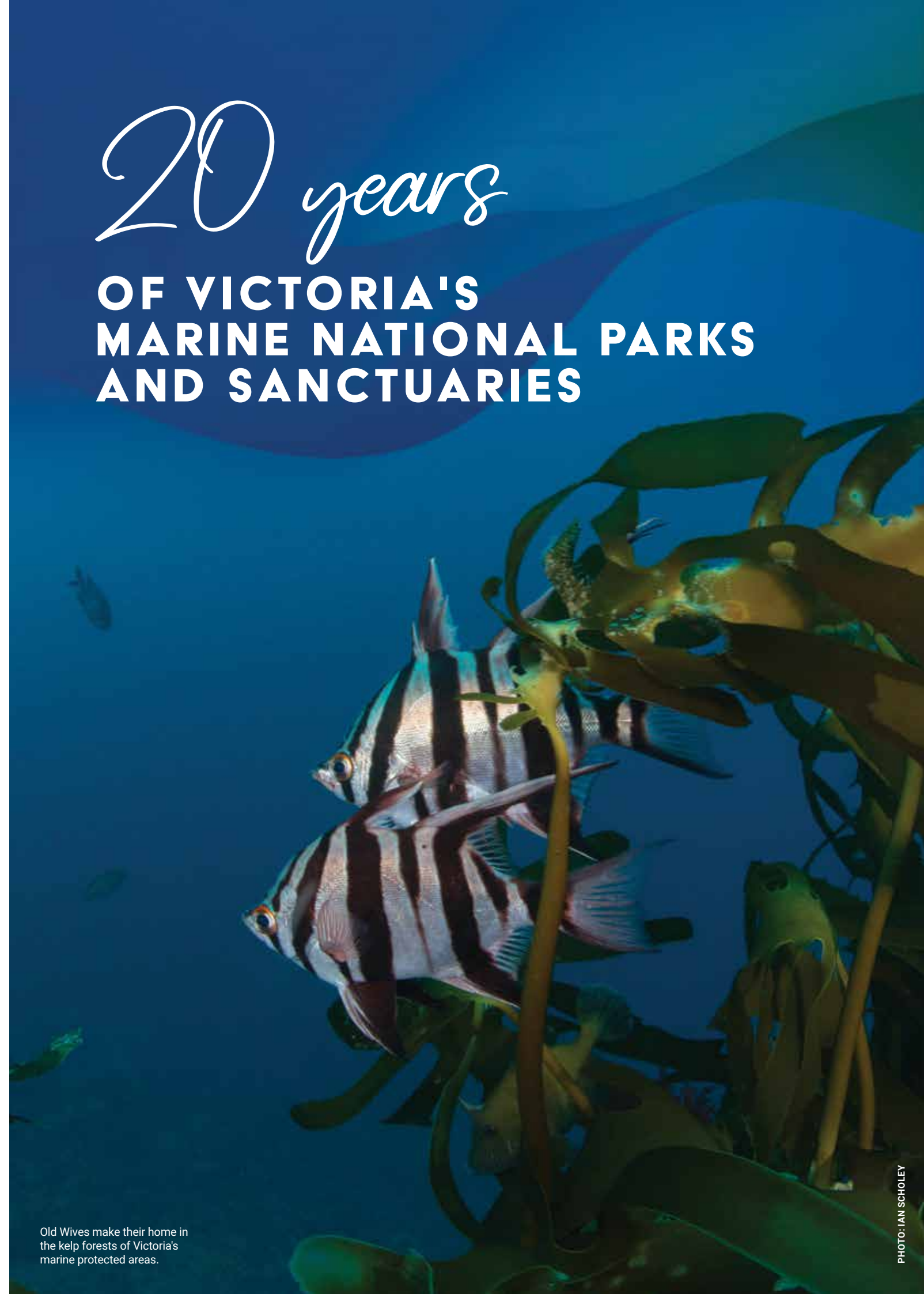
Ms Eve Kantor AO and Mr Mark Wootton AO

For distinguished service to the community through philanthropic support for a range of organisations, and to the environment. Eve and Mark have generously supported many organisations working to protect nature, including VNPA.

Ms Victoria Marles AM

For significant service to conservation and the environment, and to the community. Victoria is CEO of Trust for Nature, a valued partner organisation of VNPA.

20 years OF VICTORIA'S MARINE NATIONAL PARKS AND SANCTUARIES



Old Wives make their home in the kelp forests of Victoria's marine protected areas.

PHOTO: IAN SCHOLEY

Twenty years ago, on 16 November 2002, Victoria's world-first network of marine protected areas was established.

Our 24 marine national parks and sanctuaries – from the whale nursery grounds of Discovery Bay Marine National

Park in the west to the kelp forests of Cape Howe Marine National Park in the east, and all of those in-between – are precious gems for our state and the nation.

In this and the following editions of *Park Watch*, we will show you these

marine marvels, look back at their history and forward to their future, share discoveries and learnings, and recognise some of the exceptional individuals and groups who have made substantial contributions.

Right: Wilsons Promontory Marine National Park is a wonderland of living colours, shapes and textures.

Safeguarding our seas

CAMPAIGNER **SHANNON HURLEY** INVITES US TO CELEBRATE TWO DECADES OF VICTORIA'S NETWORK OF MARINE NATIONAL PARKS AND SANCTUARIES.

Victoria's marine reserve network was created to protect representative samples of Victoria's marine biodiversity and maintain ecological processes for the long term.

Our 13 parks and 11 sanctuaries conserve marine habitats in their natural condition – including rocky reefs, sponge gardens, towering kelp forests, sandy seafloors, seagrass meadows, mangroves and saltmarsh.

This network protects some of our state's most iconic and charismatic species: Weedy Sea Dragons, Eastern Blue Devilfish, Southern Fiddler Rays and the Eastern Blue Groper.

Leading scientists from around the world agree that establishing marine national parks is the best way for marine ecosystems to survive and thrive.

Marine national parks and sanctuaries can:

- protect rare species
- protect unique habitat
- improve species and habitat diversity
- create opportunities for research and education
- provide scientific reference areas as benchmarks
- store large amounts of carbon, especially in saltmarshes, seagrass meadows and mangroves, and will aid the fight against climate change
- help marine life withstand climate change impacts by reducing stressors

And, of course, they allow Victorians and visitors alike to experience our sponge gardens with snorkels, cuttlefish on a scuba dives, and seals from kayaks. Swimming, surfing, windsurfing and boating are other ways these areas can be enjoyed for recreation and tourism.

Critically, commercial and recreational fishing is not permitted. Extractive or damaging uses such as aquaculture, exploration drilling, oil and gas extraction, dredging and waste disposal are also prohibited.

These underwater safe havens are places where management efforts are also focused on reducing impacts from threats such as marine pest invasions.

If done well, they can even have benefits for the surrounding areas outside the parks. They can even help achieve more sustainable fisheries as they provide places for fish to breed and grow.

However, with marine pests rife in various parts of our state's waters, and infestations outside of parks being a constant source of infestation within parks, monitoring and controlling them is no easy task. No less challenging is warding off those who would undertake fishing in these no-take areas. Parks Victoria, as the manager of the network of marine national parks and sanctuaries, has significant limitations in its capacity. Lack of resourcing is not just a problem for national parks on land;

the situation is even direr for our marine reserves.

They are in desperate need of:

- Increased investment in Parks Victoria's capacity to monitor and recover reefs from marine pests in marine national parks and sanctuaries across the state.
- Increased capacity within the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) to deal with marine pests in areas outside of the marine reserve network.
- Restore funding for Parks Victoria's marine program to reduce other threats, including adequate capacity for compliance work, and an increase in marine staff capacity.

While they are a fantastic legacy, expert government inquiries (including by the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council and the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability's *State of the Environment Report*) have identified critical gaps and limited protection of habitats in Victoria's marine protected area network. We will cover more of the challenges for marine protection in next editions of *Park Watch*.

It is essential that we maintain and improve our marine protected areas. Victoria marine national parks and sanctuaries are the foundations for conservation and care of our seas and shores, and will be critical as climate refuges for marine life.

Let's celebrate!

Throughout this year, Victorian National Parks Association, Parks Victoria, and local Friends groups will be holding events in honour of our marine protected areas.

To start, our ReefWatch marine citizen science program is running a special Sea Slug Census at Cape Conran 24–26 March. If you are interested in joining us visit vnpa.org.au/marine-parks-anniversary

To learn more about our marine campaigns and how you can get involved in the 20th anniversary events, sign up at vnpa.org.au/marine-champions

IN THIS AND THE FOLLOWING EDITIONS OF *PARK WATCH*, WE WILL TAKE YOU ON AN UNDERWATER TOUR OF VICTORIA'S 24 MARINE NATIONAL PARKS AND SANCTUARIES, TO GIVE YOU A CLOSER LOOK AT WHAT'S BENEATH THE WAVES. HERE WE START WITH THE EAST OF OUR STATE, AND WE WILL VISIT THE CENTRAL AND WESTERN VICTORIA REGIONS IN THE NEXT EDITIONS.

Let's dive under marine protected areas of Victoria's east



THE EAST OF OUR STATE HAS EIGHT SPECIAL AREAS FORMALLY PROTECTED IN VICTORIA'S MARINE RESERVE SYSTEM. LET'S TAKE A DIP INTO WHAT YOU MIGHT FIND BELOW IF YOU WERE TO PUT ON SNORKEL OR SCUBA DIVING GEAR (SEE MAP ABOVE FOR LOCATIONS). WE ALSO REVEAL SOME IMPORTANT WORK BEING DONE BY PARK RANGERS AND VOLUNTEERS TO PROTECT THE RESERVES, INCLUDING SOME UNEXPECTED VISITORS!

Bunurong Marine National Park

A giant rock structure called Eagles Nest is a defining feature of this coastline, rich in geological history. Between towering cliffs lie vast intertidal rock platforms that are fantastic for rockpool rambling at low tide. If you immerse yourself in the cool, nutrient-rich waters, you may find yourself swimming among seagrass meadows or underwater gardens of swaying kelp.

Monitoring by Parks Victoria and partners has revealed the discovery of 'rhodolith beds' – a marine community of plants on the seafloor previously known to be at risk and uncommon in Australian waters.



PHOTO: PARKS VICTORIA

Beware Reef Marine Sanctuary

Off the coast of Cape Conran, this is a diver's paradise to explore an isolated rock rising abruptly out of the sandy Gippsland seafloor. As well as incredible fish life, you can also see the remains of numerous shipwrecks.

A successful program by Parks Victoria over the past two years has culled native Long Spined Sea Urchins, which had become overabundant, and the kelp forests they were devouring are starting to show signs of grow back. A success story that shows how intervention can facilitate kelp restoration, and that when there is adequate resourcing and funds to undertake proper work there are real wins for biodiversity and people.

Continued overleaf

Wilsons Promontory Marine National Park

The largest and most famous of all of our marine national parks. Sea caves covered in walls of yellow coral-like animals known as Zoanthids, and sponge gardens where bright pink anemones shine are a joy for any scuba diver to swim through. You might also spot a Southern Eagle Ray gliding by or an Australian or a New Zealand Fur Seal blowing bubbles. In calm conditions, you can explore the southern end of Norman Beach by snorkel.

Research by Parks Victoria and partners has discovered underwater black holes and sand dunes, and confirmed that the Prom has healthy fish and Rock Lobster populations. This will be an important climate refuge now and into the future.



PHOTO: PARKS VICTORIA

Corner Inlet Marine National Park

Known for its seagrass, this is the only place in Victoria with extensive areas of *Posidonia australis* meadows. Seagrass (along with mangroves and saltmarsh) capture and store carbon at rates greater than forests on land, meaning protecting these areas is important to help us adapt to climate change. Seagrasses are also places for juvenile fish to feed and find shelter. You might even spot Pipefish (the same family as the seahorse) camouflaging in it.



PHOTO: TESS HOINVILLE, PARKS VICTORIA

Ninety Mile Beach Marine National Park

Vast underwater sandy plains extend in every direction. Although one might think there is not much to be found in the sand, this habitat is known to have one of the highest species diversity levels of any place on the planet, with 860 species discovered within 10 square metres. These sand dwelling critters can include tube building worms, small molluscs and many tiny crustaceans.



PHOTO: PARKS VICTORIA



PHOTO: JONATHAN STEVENSON, PARKS VICTORIA

Continued from previous page

Point Hicks Marine National Park

The granite cliffs of Point Hicks beautifully frame the marine park. Granite subtidal reef, intertidal rock platforms and offshore sands are found, with the seafloor descending to 90 metres, making it one of the deepest marine areas within Victoria.



PHOTO: PARKS VICTORIA

Cape Howe Marine National Park

Near the border with NSW this seascape features rocky reef, kelp forests and Fur Seals. Experiencing the Eastern Australian Current, this park is at the forefront of climate change because it is where the biggest changes are happening in species movement and temperature rise. This means it is an important indicator site to help to plan for what changes might happen in the future.

Research has helped to uncover species movements, including a very unusual but welcome visitor to the park – the Grey Nurse Shark, detected using baited underwater video technology (pictured is a still). The last confirmed Victorian sighting was at Mallacoota in the 1970s. The Grey Nurse Shark is listed as critically endangered, and only a small handful of aggregating locations exist on the east coast.



PHOTO: PARKS VICTORIA

Local marine champion

SO MUCH HAS BEEN LEARNT ABOUT OUR MARINE ENVIRONMENT OVER THE LAST 20 YEARS, THANKS IN GREAT PART TO THE DEDICATION OF VOLUNTEERS WHO SPEND COUNTLESS HOURS ABOVE OR BELOW THE WATER, EXPLORING, OBSERVING, MONITORING AND SHARING THEIR FINDINGS FAR AND WIDE.

THE FIRST LOCAL MARINE CHAMPION WE WOULD LIKE TO RECOGNISE IS **ALAN WILKINS**, REPRESENTING THE INCREDIBLE WORK OF THE FRIENDS OF BEWARE REEF MARINE SANCTUARY.

Q. Tell us about the Friends of Beware Reef.

After the proclamation of Victoria's marine parks, a small group of dedicated divers from the Bairnsdale Scuba Club acted on a suggestion from Park Ranger Mike Irvine to form the Friends of Beware Reef (FoBR) in 2006. Three members formed the nucleus of the group – Don Love, John Ariens and myself. All three of us had begun snorkelling back in the 1960s then progressed to scuba diving in the early 1970s.

The first project the FoBR undertook was to measure and map the three shipwrecks at Beware Reef.

In 2008 our group was invited by the University of Tasmania to become citizen scientists through the Reef Life Survey program. This training and prescribed survey methods formed the main part of FoBR's diving activities. We conducted surveys on a near-weekly basis – not only at Beware Reef but right across the Victorian coast.

With all this data, we felt the general public who could not dive needed to be shown what lies beneath in our marine national parks and sanctuaries, so we started conducting presentations and producing diving booklets.



Alan (right) with dive buddies John Ariens (middle) and Don Love (left).

Our small group has worked very well due to the experience we all bring and our desire to learn about and record our beautiful marine environment. We also want to educate people on what is just under the waves at their back door. Also, by telling our story, we hope to help secure better protections so future generations can enjoy it too.

Q. What do you love about Beware Reef Marine Sanctuary?

Beware Reef Marine Sanctuary is one of the best dive sites in Victoria. Not only can you explore three shipwrecks, but the fish life and invertebrates provide the diver with an excellent diversity to look at. We have recorded over 100 fish, four marine mammals, one marine reptile, 28 seaweed, 40 sponge and 250 invertebrate species. In a single dive, we have recorded in a transect length of 50 metres 38 different fish and 25 different invertebrate species. Because of Beware Reef's location, where the warmer eastern Australian current meets the cooler westerly current from Bass Strait, the marine life is a unique mix of both warm and cooler temperate species. Some of my favourite species are the Striped Sea Spider, the Barred Leatherjacket, the Tasselled Anglerfish, and all the nudibranch species.

Although it is a little difficult to get there, it is well worth the effort for what you will see.

Q. What are some of your highlights from the last 20 years?

There are many highlights that have occurred over the past 20 years. For me, here are just a few:

- The friendship the three of us (Don, John and I) have must be the greatest highlight. Diving, exploring new areas, finding, photographing and recording new species – all with your mates – is very rewarding for me.
- Sharing stories and photos and footage of Beware Reef to people who are unable to dive.
- Knowing that your work (surveys, data collection and photos) collected over 20 years will help persuade the powers that be to afford the highest protection for our marine national parks and sanctuaries so that future generations will enjoy what I have through my diving.
- Taking my eldest son diving at Beware Reef and showing him the things I have seen.

Q. What were some of the challenges?

Because our marine environment is alien to most people, demonstrating what is down there to the ruling bodies who make the decisions has proven challenging in the past.

Q. What would you like to see in the next 20 years?

This has been my hobby and passion for over 50 years. I feel there is still more to find, see and record. This, and the enjoyment I find being under the waves, keeps me going back for more.

Looking ahead, I hope Beware Reef remains as beautiful and pristine as I have experienced it. I would like to think the work we have started will be continued by some divers with the same dedication and enthusiasm. • PW



Beware Reef is a diver's paradise.

PHOTO COURTESY OF FRIENDS OF BEWARE REEF MARINE SANCTUARY

POORLY PLANNED TRACKS SHOULD NOT BE ALLOWED TO FRAGMENT WILDLIFE HABITAT AND DILUTE NATURE PROTECTION, SAYS CAMPAIGNER **JORDAN CROOK**.

The prime purpose of national parks is for the protection of nature. They are not simply another "piece" of land, and under no circumstances should be playthings for developers.

The Yarra Ranges Council wants to build 44 trails spanning 177 kilometres as part of the 'Warburton Mountain Bike Destination'.

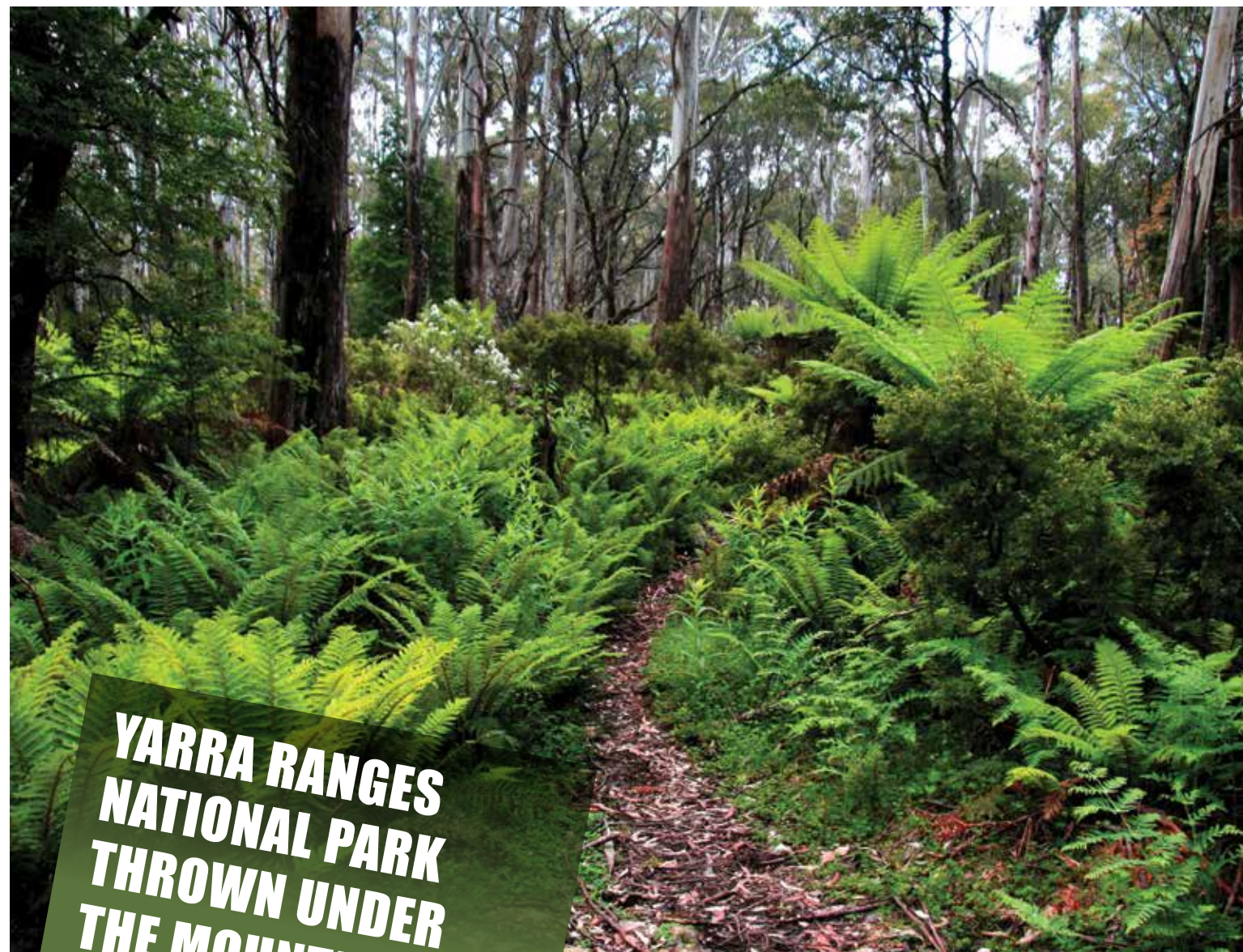
Elements of this proposed project are yet another example of national park protection being thrown aside.

The Yarra Ranges Council, supported with funding by state and federal governments, has spent years trying to develop a viable project. Their Environmental Effects Statement (EES) documents were released to the public in late 2021. The Victorian Planning Minister Richard Wynne had decided in mid-2020 that an EES was required due to the impacts on threatened and endangered species habitat, sensitive waterways and Indigenous cultural heritage, and adverse socio-economic effects of the project.

The Victorian National Parks Association has been monitoring the proposal since 2016/17 due to the proposed track network being within the Yarra Ranges National Park and the known high-conservation values found around the summit of Mount Donna Buang. We held several meetings with project officers at the Yarra Ranges Council and other government departments early in this period, highlighting our concerns, but these fell on deaf ears.

After analysing the EES documents, it is disappointing to see the Council push ahead with its plans to build between five to 22 kilometres of tracks in the national park (up to about 15 per cent of the total trail length). Even though they have no jurisdiction in the national park, and have been warned for many years of the impact the track would have on threatened vegetation types, threatened native animals and park values.

Although bike tracks may appear at face value 'light' in terms of their physical footprint, pushing tracks into previously uncleared areas and increasing the use of those tracks clears the path for the spread of invasive weeds and pathogens, creates highways for pests such as cats and foxes to penetrate further into the forest, and



The Cool Temperate Rainforest of Mount Donna Buang. Clearing healthy, undisturbed natural habitat of threatened wildlife and compromising the biosecurity of the Yarra Ranges National Park contradicts the conservation objectives of the *National Parks Act*.

with best practices and laws on bushfire mitigation, as well as social issues such as the lack of inclusivity of the project to everyone in the community.

While the project did look at an alternative route in the Yarra Ranges National Park, no alternative for what is described as the "heroic" downhill track (Drop aK, Track 1) was considered outside the park. Options could have been in state forest around Powelltown or perhaps already cleared existing fire breaks or power lines around Toolangi, for example. This work should have been undertaken due to the impact of this proposal on the integrity of the park and the sensitive park values. As the Council's EES documents show, the overall project would remain viable without intruding into the national park.

Mountain bike riding and installation of tracks (both legal and illegal) is a growing issue in natural and protected areas, but if properly planned outside of high conservation areas can be done in an appropriate and ecologically sensitive way. Unfortunately, the Yarra Ranges Council has chosen not to seek the least destructive route outside of the park, potentially jeopardising the "clean green" image and reputation of the Council and the mountain biking sport.

For many decades conservationists and custodians have worked to stop logging, mining and other intrusions into Victoria's special natural places. This work has paid off – and those wonderful protected places are attracting more and more recreational users who want to enjoy them. But we have to be careful that what attracts people also doesn't destroy the very thing that draws them to our national parks and reserves.

So where to from here? After the public exhibition closed, submissions were read by the Inquiry and Advisory Committee (the IAC) appointed by the Planning Minister. Public hearings of those who put their hand up to be heard by the IAC will commence from 15 March and will run for three to four weeks. Within 40 days after the hearings, the IAC will present their report of findings to the Planning Minister for consideration. Other decisions and permits will need to be given if the track is to actually move to construction, so it might be premature for ribbon-cutting in a dual election year.

Thank you to everyone who made a submission to the EES process; we will keep you updated on the next stages. • **PW**

results in the removal of surrounding "hazardous" trees (which much of the time are prime habitat trees).

Between three to 6.4 kilometres of new tracks will go through Cool Temperate Rainforest, increasing the risk exponentially for damage to Myrtle Beech (*Nothofagus cunninghamii*), the predominate canopy tree. This will allow the tree-killing pathogen Myrtle Wilt (*Chalara australis*) entry through damaged roots and branches from constructing the track, or later on damage to trunks by bike riders. This is recognised as a potentially Threatening Process under the Victorian *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988*: "Human activity which results in artificially elevated or epidemic levels of Myrtle Wilt within *Nothofagus* dominated Cool Temperate Rainforest" (Action Statement 238).

The tracks within the national park would impact threatened species habitat, including Leadbeater's Possum and Mount Donna Buang Wingless Stonefly, both critically endangered. It would also displace bushwalkers from existing walking tracks. No assessment was done against the purposes of the *National Parks Act 1975*.

The intrusion of the track into the Coranderrk closed water catchment is also of great concern. Melbourne Water Corporation's (MWC) submission was damning, stating "MWC have some concerns that despite proposed mitigations and the assessed 'low risk' status assigned by the proponent, that the scale of the project will introduce a range of cumulative impacts to high value waterway and biodiversity assets in the project area. Particularly within the National Park".

MWC also showed signs of frustration that their advice had been ignored: "Melbourne Water's current strategic approach for both of these catchments is to maintain or improve the level of catchment protection. Consequently, Melbourne Water has previously and consistently provided advice to the Project proponent that mountain bike trails cannot be located within the physical boundaries of either of these water supply catchments."

Local group Upper Yarra Sustainable Development Alliance is also raising broader concerns about the lack of detail around the impacts of the tracks on increasing bushfire risk, poor emergency planning, and the need to comply

PHOTO: MICK STANIC



PHOTO: PARKS VICTORIA

MAJORITY RULES

We want protection, not development, of national parks.

Enjoying the Dandenong Ranges National Park.

IN THE LEAD-UP TO THIS YEAR'S FEDERAL ELECTION WE POLLED THE COMMUNITY ON HOW THEY FEEL ABOUT NATIONAL PARKS AND NATURE PROTECTION. NATURE CONSERVATION OFFICER **ELIZABETH MORISON** SHARES THE RESULTS.

At the Victorian National Parks Association, we pride ourselves on representing our community to tackle the big issues facing Victoria's iconic land and sea environments. And we're not the only ones. In almost every state and territory in Australia, there's a National Parks Association working hard to let our leaders know how much we care about nature and national parks. We collaborate as a coalition of conservation groups called the National Parks Australia Council to deliver impactful work to advocate for nature and wildlife on a national level.

In the lead-up to the upcoming federal election, we thought it was prime time to find out how Australians feel about nature and national parks. Together with the National Parks

Australia Council, we commissioned nationwide polling of over a thousand people. The results showed what we've known for ages: Aussies love national parks, and want to see nature and wildlife protected, not sacrificed for commercial interests and blundering developments.

The vast majority of Australians (88 per cent) agree that protecting Australia's flora and fauna is a core responsibility of state and federal governments. Most of us (89 per cent) also agree that national parks are one of the best ways to protect Australia's nature, especially from resource extraction, including logging, mining and fishing (91 per cent), so it's no coincidence 80 per cent of us want more national parks and conservation areas.

Funding for park management is also of high national concern. More than four in five of us support an increase in government funding for national park management (85 per cent) and staff and rangers (83 per cent).

Despite this, less than 0.5 per cent of Victorian state government expenditure is provided for national park management, and there is virtually no direct federal government support for national parks.

Zooming in, Victorians responded almost identically about inappropriate development in parks. And it's no wonder – it feels like every other day, a flashy new proposal is announced that will see large-scale, high-impact development flatten another precious Victorian ecosystem, even if it's in protected national parks.

Take the proposed Warburton Mountain Bike Destination, for example. The plan is to build 177 kilometres of bike trails, some through the Yarra Ranges National Park. The trails will intersect important wildlife habitat, which the park was established to protect (see previous article).

Furthermore, while local and state governments say it will raise Warburton's profile by bringing in visitors, most Australians and Victorians alike would actually be less likely to visit a national park if it had luxury, large-scale private development (78 per cent Australians, 76 per cent Victorians), or high-impact commercial tours (62 per cent Australians, 66 per cent Victorians). In fact, only 7 per cent of Australians consider large-scale infrastructure including mountain bike tracks to be an important benefit of national parks.

It is abundantly clear that there is a disconnect between public and political priorities. We do not want to see development in national parks

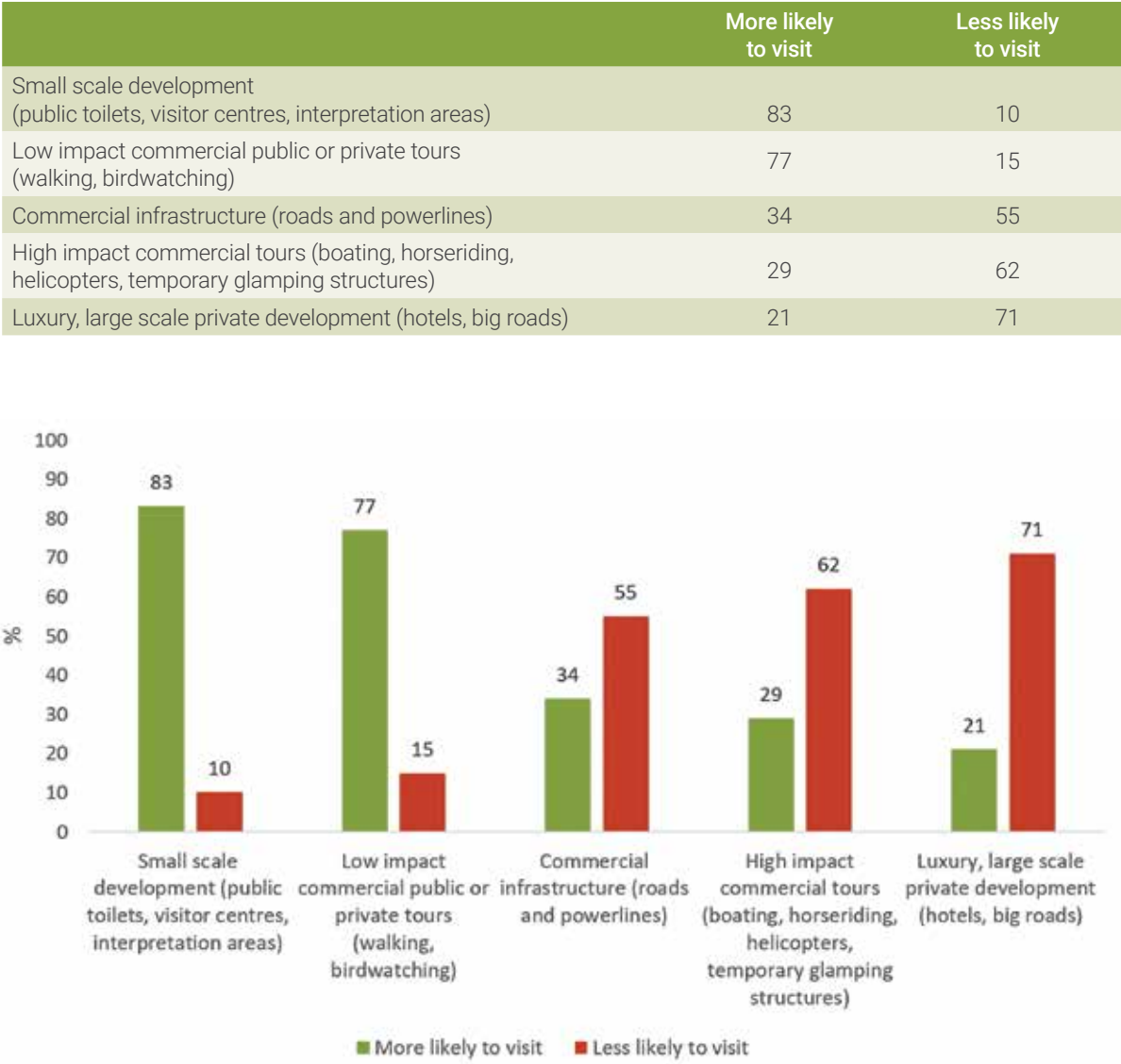
(78 per cent Australians, 74 per cent Victorians), but that's where our politicians keep putting their money and efforts. What we do want to see is small-scale development like toilets, interpretation areas and visitor centres that help people enjoy national parks (83 per cent Australians, 81 per cent Victorians) and development in towns and areas adjacent to national parks and protected areas (66 per cent Australians, 61 per cent Victorians) that will draw attention to Victoria's iconic nature and wildlife, at the same time as growing regional economies.

You might think that would be enough to convince our leaders to step up and represent their communities. However, we know that sometimes we need to spell it out, so we asked how these concerns might change the way Victorians vote. More than half of us said we would be more likely to vote for our local member

of parliament if they actively prioritised and advocated for national parks (50 per cent Australians, 51 per cent Victorians). Only 4 per cent of Australians said that would make us less likely to vote. And again, more than half of us said we would be more likely to vote for a political party at the next federal or state election if they had a policy for better funding for management of national parks and conservation areas (57 per cent Australians, 58 per cent Victorians).

What stood out to us was that we are united on these issues. We care deeply and selflessly about national parks and protected areas, for nature's intrinsic value and for future generations.

These numbers make it obvious: it's good politics, no matter your political stripes, to have a clearly articulated vision for conservation of nature and wildlife, and national parks. Now we've spelled it out, we hope our leaders step up to properly prioritise and advocate for national parks with some clear policy commitments. • PW



STILL STANDING

THE BIG TREES OF WELLSFORD FOREST ARE WELL KNOWN TO THE LOCALS WHO HAVE ADVOCATED FOR THEIR PROTECTION FOR MANY YEARS. **JORDAN CROOK** AND THE CAMPAIGN TEAM WENT OUT TO MEET THESE SURVIVORS IN THE BOX-IRONBARK FORESTS AROUND BENDIGO.

Box-Ironbark Forests were some of the heaviest hit during colonisation, with 83 per cent cleared in Victoria. What remains is still recovering from past logging and mining. So the sight of a big tree, full of hollows, towering above the surrounding forest is quite confronting – they provide living examples of what the forests looked like before colonisation.

Wellford Forest was not included in the parks legislated in 2002 in response to the Environment Conservation Council (ECC) Box-Ironbark Forests and Woodlands Investigation, and protection was well overdue. But its values were finally recognised during the more recent Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) Central West Investigation, which recommended that Wellsford Forest be added to the Greater Bendigo National Park to protect its high conservation values from extractive industries such as logging and mining. Unfortunately, this recommendation was rejected by Environment Minister Lily D'Ambrosio last year.

The Victorian Government has instead committed to changing the tenure of Wellsford State Forest by adding it to the existing Bendigo Regional Park. The government stated in their response to the VEAC recommendations that the rejection of national park status for the Wellsford Forest was “to provide another area for domestic firewood collection (from designated sites) until June 2029, and provide greater flexibility for the North Central Victorian Goldfields Ground Release”. In regards to the latter, the government’s response reveals plans for future expanded mining activity:

“The government supports mining occurring beneath the park addition and *acknowledges that some minimally intrusive surface activity may need to occur in the regional park addition to support this*” (emphasis added). The so called “minimally intrusive surface activity” could likely be venting from under or through the regional park from the existing mine adjacent it.

The lost opportunity of protecting the Wellsford Forest forever in a national park and excluding destructive extractive industries such as logging and mining is very disappointing, especially for the community that has been campaigning for its protection for several decades.

The government’s decision to include Wellsford Forest in the regional park will at least see an immediate end to commercial logging, but logging for domestic firewood will continue until June 2029. This is a serious threat to the health of both the big trees and the threatened species that call Wellsford Forests home, such as Brush-tailed Phascogale and Lace Monitor.

With the knowledge that the big trees will remain under threat until possibly 2029, late last year we joined with Bendigo and District Environment Council to formally survey and document the big trees of Wellsford Forest to better advocate for their protection.

A stone’s throw from Bendigo, we followed locals Stuart, Wendy and John into the forest as they guided us to the big trees. They have spent years walking the Wellsford Forest and finding big trees, and have come to know them and the wildlife that live within their hollows and the wildflowers that flourish below them.



One of the Wellsford Big Trees towers of members of the VNPA team.

As we wrapped our measuring tapes around the big trees, we wondered how these giants had escaped the saw, unlike the coppiced trees surrounding them. However they managed to stay standing, they are now key to the ecological health of the Wellsford Forest. But their continued survival and care rely on knowing where they are and sharing their location with current and future land managers.

Giant Lace Monitors sunned themselves above us in the canopies. These reptiles can grow as long as two metres and weigh as much as 20 kilograms – so they need large hollows that only big trees provide.

Most tree hollows take at least 100 and really over 120–150 years to form in hardwood Eucalypt trees in Australia. Hollows are rare in the Box-Ironbark Forests due to the amount of historical clearing that has occurred and the slow growth of the Box and Ironbark tree species (*Eucalyptus tricarpa* and *macrocarpa*) because of the harsh growing conditions of central Victoria.

We assessed ten trees in Wellsford Forest as ‘Big Trees’. They are of high scientific, social, historic and aesthetic value (although the health of a few is of concern) and, together with the forest areas around them should be

preserved and safeguarded from harmful domestic firewood logging, fuel reduction works and new track creation. They represent why the Wellsford Forest should have become a national park.

Right now, it is unclear which areas will be prioritised and opened up for domestic firewood logging. We are working to ensure the Wellsford Big Trees and the area around them are protected from further disturbance.

We have now submitted our assessment as a Threatened Species Detection Report to the Victorian Government. You can read it here vnpa.org.au/wellsford-big-trees-report

If you would like to support this important work protecting big trees, please turn to the back cover.

Thank you to Stuart Fraser, Wendy Radford and John Bardsley for showing us the big trees and their tireless advocacy for the Wellsford Forest.

The Wellsford Forest is on the land of the Dja Dja Wurrung. • PW

Update:

On 2 March, two of the Wellsford Big Trees were listed on the National Trust’s National Register of Significant Trees.

BIG TREES

How much do you know about Victoria's living giants?

- 1

What is the largest tree species in Victoria?
- 2

The Ada Tree in the Yarra Ranges is one of Victoria's best-known big trees. How old is it? How tall? What is its girth?
- 3

Older trees flower less than younger trees: true or false?
- 4

How many years does it take for hollows to begin to form in most Eucalypt trees?
- 5

Which threatened native animals live in big tree hollows?

a. Greater Gliders

b. South-eastern Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos

c. Leadbeater's Possums

d. All of the above
- 6

What percentage of mammals in Australia rely on tree hollows for their homes?

a. 20%

b. 15%

c. 42%

d. 30%
- 7

How many significant trees in Victoria have we assessed as being in or within 100 metres of proposed logging coupes?

a. 10

b. 62

c. 100

d. 162

Turn to page 35 for the answers.



PHOTO: BRYCE NICHOL

NEW YEAR NEWS *for* Spider Crabs

IT SEEMS THESE MYSTERIOUS CREATURES MAY RETURN THIS SEASON, SHARES CAMPAIGNER SHANNON HURLEY.

The new year isn't just a fresh start and a time for warmer seas. It marks the approach of another season to witness the spectacular migration of Giant Spider Crabs of Port Phillip Bay.

As the crabs sense the change in seasons and prepare for their journey, which history has shown can be any time between March and July, there have also been movements on land in preparation for their arrival.

In 2022 recreational fishers will only be able to take 15 Spider Crabs a day from Victorian waters. This limit came into force last year and has been officially extended for a further 12 months.

We're glad the Victorian Fisheries Authority didn't return the catch limit to 30, as was previously the case when Spider Crabs came under the generic catch limit for crabs. However, an extended reduction *still* doesn't

address the impacts of intensive harvesting in the absence of the completion of scientific research on their lifecycle, and the side effects of marine litter and risk to local marine life from the hauling of large numbers of nets from the pier. We continue to advocate for a no-take break for these unique crustaceans.

In what reads as a pretty cynical act, the public consultation period was set from 24 December to 7 January. Scheduling over the peak holiday period made it difficult for the public to have their say.

We hope in the future, fisheries take the views of stakeholders and community more seriously.

Reporting on some great news, our push with SOS Spider Crab Alliance and others for funded research into Giant Spider Crabs has succeeded! The Victorian Government has

committed to scientific research into crab habits and lifecycles in Port Phillip Bay.

The research is being undertaken by Deakin University, the state environment department and the fisheries authority, and will take place in 2022. Excitingly, the environment department will involve citizen science in its part of the project.

We are very pleased with these initiatives, and stand by our position that until the research is complete, there should be a moratorium on harvesting during a vital part of the crab's lifecycle.

We have already had multiple reports of Spider Crab sightings in deeper water this year. As they make their way for yet another aggregation, you can help by reporting any sightings either above and below the water to Crabwatch at www.vnpa.org.au/crabs

Commitment issues



PHOTO: BERTRAM LOBERT

IT DOESN'T MATTER HOW MANY TIMES YOU SAY IT; YOU NEED TO DELIVER IT BEFORE YOU CAN CLAIM IT, WRITES EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR **MATT RUCHEL**.

The Strathbogie Ranges forest is to be included in the Immediate Protection Areas.

The Victorian Government announced in November last year its "Next Steps To Guide The Future Of Our Protected Forests". It was welcome progress on what has so far been a drip-fed, drawn-out process since the initial announcement back in November 2019.

Part of the Andrews Government's Victorian Forestry Plan, Immediate Protection Areas (IPAs) are more than 146,000 hectares of state forest located in Mirboo North, Strathbogie Ranges, Central Highlands, and East Gippsland to be "immediately" protected.

Finally kicking off the process last August, the Environment Minister Lily D'Ambrosio announced an Eminent

Panel for Community Engagement "to lead conversations with Victorian communities on the future care and management of the land". The process will also include inputs of two technical assessments from the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC).

It is an extensive, multi-layered process. VEAC is already assessing the environmental, recreation and other values for IPAs in Mirboo North and Strathbogie Ranges. Similar efforts in the Central Highlands and East Gippsland will start in mid-2022. This will then be fed into the Eminent Panel for Community Engagement, to do more consultation and make recommendations.

It is hard to fathom why it is such a slow, gradual process, when the boundaries for the IPAs have already been drawn, and the Minister is already claiming them as protected.

There is also little willingness to revisit the basis of the boundaries or the underlying science, even within this long consultation process.

There seem to be commitment issues – grand declarations have been made, but we are still waiting on tangible outcomes.

The Andrews Government needs to be careful with its various, inconsistent claims describing the IPAs. In the one media release, both 96,000 and 146,000 hectare figures

were used. Both figures are correct, with the 96,000 hectares actually scheduled in logging coupes within the total 146,000 hectares of the proposed IPAs. More recently, the government has publicly used the larger 146,000 hectares figure, after previously being careful to use the 96,000 hectares figure.

The original announcement of the Victorian Forests Plan in November 2019 released a Greater Glider Action Statement "to protect the future of the Greater Glider – alongside the Leadbeater's Possum and more than 35 other threatened species – the Action Statement maps out more than 96,000 hectares

of forest across Victoria *immediately exempt from logging*" (emphasis added). It also stated that "this habitat has been identified by experts as being critical to the survival of the Greater Glider and a range of other precious flora and fauna – many of which are not found anywhere else on earth".

Conservationists and scientists have questioned the scientific basis and design of the IPAs to maximise protection of key threatened species such as Greater Glider and Leadbeater's Possum. A coalition of 12 groups wrote to the Minister in October 2020, asking for information about the basis of the design, but no response has been received.

The Minister's media release on 18 January 2021 claimed that:

"Since 2019 the Victorian Government has added more than 250,000 hectares of protected forests in Victoria – including 96,000 hectares of Immediate Protection Areas, 65,106 hectares for the new Central West National Parks and 90,000 hectares of old growth."

While announcements have indeed been made, none of these areas have been legally "added" to the formal protected area system, or new national parks created. It all seems dependent on even more consultation process.

The claim of 90,000 hectares of old growth protected is speculative and (despite what is claimed) not actually protected. The government's qualification of 'old growth' depends on an on-ground assessment prior to logging that has raised serious questions as to how they define this important and dwindling forest habitat type. A serious concern is that the definition deployed will protect some individual stands of old growth; it will not protect old growth overall. (see *Park Watch* December 2020 article vnpa.org.au/old-growth-forests-imperilled-in-victoria).

The impact of the 2019-2020 bushfires on old growth has also not been comprehensively assessed. When old growth forests are burnt, they are no longer considered to be old growth. This leaves the old growth forest estate vulnerable to exploitative logging following fire, even if values on the ground remain and fire severity was less than modelling showed. This loophole is of great concern. It also begs the question of how much old growth is actually left. Old growth was not even mentioned in the summary report by the Major Event Review Panel, set up to assess impact of the fires. (The final report of this process was original due at the end of 2021 and has been delayed some months.)

The announcement to commit to new central west parks was welcomed, but the proposed parks are yet to be legislated. Critically, important areas will be logged at Mount Cole and Mount Buangor, the Pyrenees Ranges and smaller parts of the Wombat Forest *before* being turned into parks at some stage in the future (up to ten years).

It makes no sense to go through a formal expert investigation process taking years to identify the areas with natural values warranting becoming national parks, and then add a clause that allows them to be logged first. It is basically the same impact as logging a national park.

There is no clear policy commitment, timeline or plan for when legislation will be forthcoming to create the new central west parks, which now seems unlikely in 2022 before the state election.

As many of these commitments are both significantly flawed and yet to be completed or fully delivered, it's hard to believe the repeated claims of the Minister's office for "one of the largest environmental initiatives in our state's history ..."

As we said, it doesn't matter how many times you say it; you need to deliver it before you can claim it. • **PW**



PHOTO: ADRIAN MARSHALL

The broken, promised grasslands of Melbourne

ADRIAN MARSHALL, GRASSY PLAINS NETWORK FACILITATOR, GIVES A DETAILED OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION FOR THESE MUCH-LOVED BUT POORLY TREATED GRASSLANDS.

Grasslands such as Ajax Road Grassland (pictured), are unique and vital parts of our urban ecosystems, are home to threatened species, and can provide a rich and profound visitor experience.

The grasslands in and around Melbourne include some of the most outstanding examples of the critically endangered, pre-European landscape of the Victorian Volcanic Plain. These are places rich with biodiversity, home to marvels such as the unique Plains Wanderer and the Striped Legless Lizard, with rare orchids, fleeting ephemeral wetlands, ancient stone circles and the vast, limitless horizons of our land of sweeping plains.

But poor governance, lack of planning controls such as Environmental Significance Overlays, the nature of the offset system (the process of trading the clearance of native vegetation through securing and managing similar vegetation in perpetuity), as well as neglect and insufficient funding, continue to contribute to the ongoing decline of Melbourne's grasslands. It is a complex policy space with a long and controversial history, which we delve into in this article. By understanding that context, we can work to better preserve these magnificent places for generations to come.

Melbourne's grasslands fall into three main regions and policy contexts: the Western Grassland Reserves just outside and west of Melbourne; the 36 conservation areas that were set aside in the new growth areas when land was released for development in conjunction with the expansion of Melbourne's Urban Growth Boundary in 2009; and all the other grasslands within the pre-2009 extent of Melbourne (Fig. 1).

The Western Grassland Reserves – a promised land

Melbourne's Urban Growth Boundary was expanded in 2009 to meet the perceived urgent need for more land for housing. Such was the pressure, property developers were going to get their wish of a streamlined fast-track approvals process that would avoid the need to assess grasslands on a case by case basis.

In reaction to that unfolding ecological disaster, some saw an opportunity: to offset the inevitable loss of environmental values across the 60,000 hectares of the new growth areas. Mapping and modelling showed the last big patches of remnant Victorian Volcanic Plains grassland were just outside the new Urban Growth Boundary. This, it was argued, was a last chance to acquire a contiguous, landscape-scale extent of critically endangered grassland, doubly important because grasslands were significantly under-represented in the state's reserve system.

There were big stakes in play – billions of dollars – and the process was ugly and substantively flawed in its rush. But the Western Grassland Reserves came to be: in 2010, 15,000 hectares of farming land had a Public Acquisition Overlay placed over it as part of the Melbourne Strategic Assessment process, with a target that all the land would be acquired by 2020, with that acquisition and the Reserves' management funded by a levy on development within the new growth areas.

The 36 conservation areas – regional gems

Part of the Melbourne Strategic Assessment process that extended the Urban Growth Boundary is an agreement between the state and federal governments that exempts any developer in the new growth areas from their responsibilities under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act), our overarching national environmental legislation. In effect, this gives developers a free hand to do what they like anywhere in the new growth areas regardless of any environmental values. After much pressure from conservationists, the 2013 Biodiversity Conservation Strategy identified 36 areas of the highest conservation significance for protection, totalling approximately 5500 hectares.

Again: the process was ugly and substantively flawed in its rush. Many good patches were overlooked. Hurried surveys led to flawed modelling that inaccurately identified poor patches as good patches. The state insisted on the conservation areas being large (four of the 36 are under three hectares, most are over 40 hectares): the argument went that large patches would be cheaper to manage and had less edge subject to degradation. But this ignored the fact that many of Melbourne's richest grasslands are small – Evans Street Grassland is only two hectares. And from what the land managers are now saying, huge grasslands are hugely inefficient to manage because their mosaic nature and land-use history make them incredibly complex. As a consequence, much has been (or will be) lost that should never have been.

Some of these BCS Conservation Areas, as they are referred to, are grasslands, others grassy woodland, some are protecting specific species such as the Growling Grass Frogs

or the Southern Brown Bandicoot. The acquisition and management of these conservation areas are also to be funded by the developer levy.

The other, 'urban' grasslands – local gems

The numerous grasslands within the old, pre-2009 Urban Growth Boundary do not have the unique funding, legal and policy context of the Western Grassland Reserves or the BCS Conservation Areas. Instead, they exist under a complex mix of land tenures (rail, water and road authorities, utility easements, council state and federal land etc.), with sizeable patches held by private landholders. Their sizes range from tiny (25 metres by 25 metres excised from a Bunnings car park in Taylors Lakes) to substantial (400 hectares, Galgi Ngarrk or Craigieburn Grasslands), and their management ranges from best-practice to utter neglect.

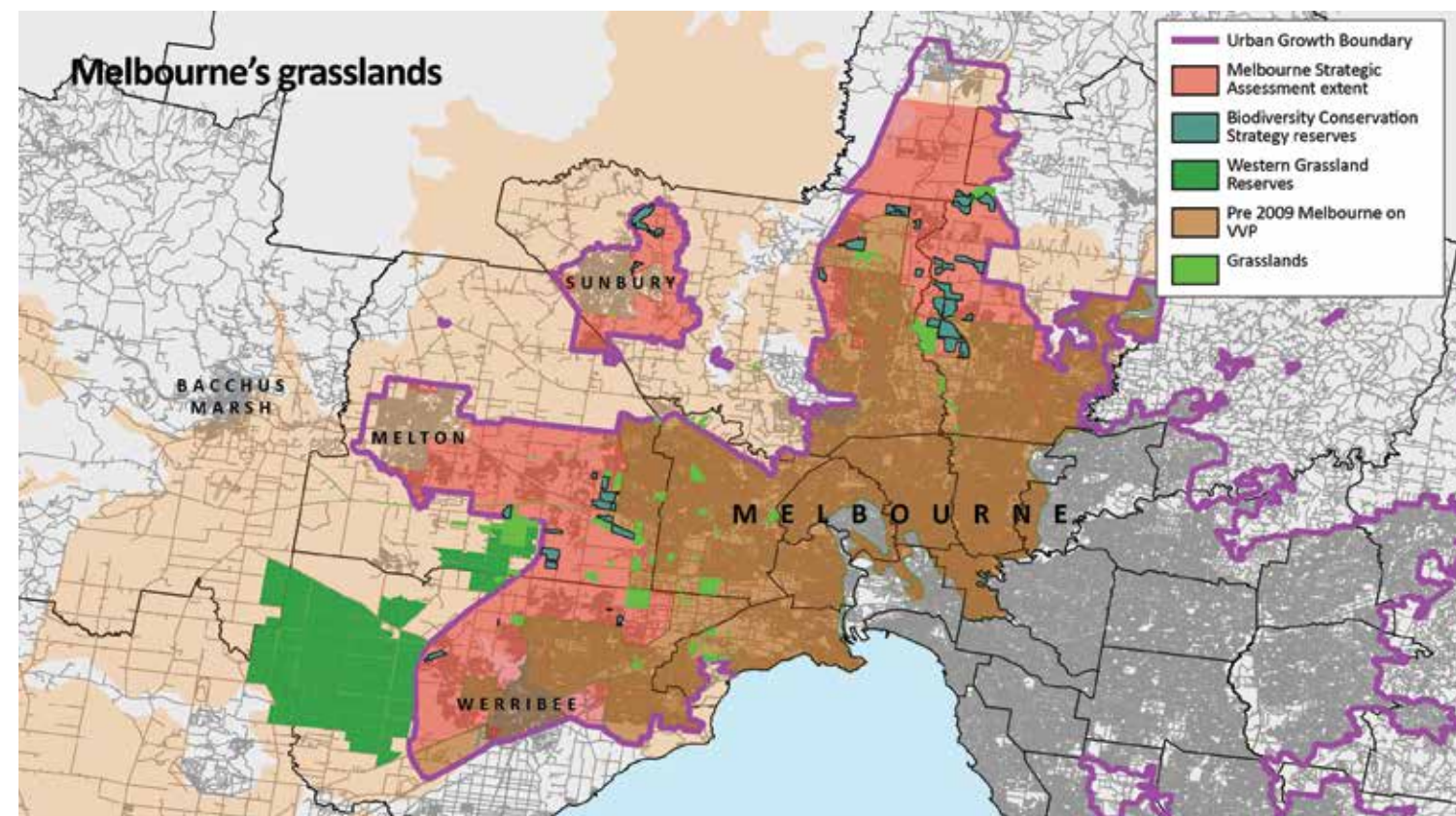
Broken promises

The Western Grassland Reserves have received a lot of scrutiny in recent years. In 2020 the Victorian Auditor-General's Office released its damning report *Protecting Critically Endangered Grasslands*, which highlighted the substantial failure of governance, cost overruns, and that only 10 per cent of the promised land had been purchased. Because of the grossly inadequate funding model for the purchase of the Western Grassland Reserves land, private landholders who had not yet had their land purchased were walking away from their responsibilities to control weeds of national significance, leading to massive weed invasion and ongoing significant loss of biodiversity.

In response, the Victorian Government passed the *Melbourne Strategic Assessment (Environment Mitigation Levy) Act 2020*,

Continued overleaf

Figure 1: Map showing Melbourne's grasslands, including the Western Grassland Reserves, 36 BCS Conservation Areas, the extent of the Melbourne Strategic Assessment, and other grasslands.



and now substantially greater resources are available for land purchase and management. Currently 17.5 per cent of the Western Grassland Reserves have been purchased, expected to rise to 21 per cent by September and possibly 30 per cent by mid-next year. Funds are going to local councils offering landholders incentives to manage their land better prior to purchase. Intensive on-ground and aerial mapping efforts are providing the detailed paddock by paddock data needed to contain the weed problem while (hopefully) not destroying the important grassland values present.

This may all still be too little. The generally degraded quality of the Western Grassland Reserves (much is not as good as originally thought, a consequence of that rushed surveying and inaccurate modelling), combined with the spraying of literally thousands of hectares of weed, means that vast areas of land will need to be restored using seed. There is no native seed industry capable of supplying that, and no vision or apparent will to begin to build the native seed industry towards such a capability, a process that will take years. Frustratingly, the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning's Melbourne Strategic Assessment team is understaffed. DELWP is failing to act against the recalcitrant land-bankers who are in effect illegally clearing native vegetation. And there seems to be some thinking, at the highest levels, that the Western Grasslands Reserves have been somehow "fixed" by the passing of the *Melbourne Strategic Assessment (Environment Mitigation Levy) Act 2020*, when that is far from the case. On the upside, monitoring data suggests that the grassland purchased to date has been stabilised, with decline abated, but still much to do to improve quality.

The situation with the BCS Conservation Areas is much the same as for the Western Grassland Reserves, but not so extreme; more ambivalence than outright failure. Much of the promised land has not been purchased. In numerous cases, the particular environmental values to be protected have not been ascertained through any reliable survey. Management by private landholders is in many cases not subject to the necessary levels of scrutiny. Unlike the Western Grassland Reserves, which have a spread of quality from poor (essentially ploughed crops) to excellent, the quality of the conservation areas was consistently high, which means any biodiversity losses will be of serious concern.

It is important to note that it will take a lot to retain the high-quality biodiversity values in these BCS Conservation Areas as they become surrounded by residential subdivisions. Among the many problems that will arise: lighting will increase at night, dogs and cats will prey on and disturb wildlife, the underlying hydrology will be altered causing permanent changes to the mosaic of species present, and fragmentation will begin to create genetic bottlenecks. The management plans for these reserves – and the residential estates around them – will need to embrace very best practice in biodiversity sensitive urban design.

The recent findings from the Parliamentary Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria contained several grassland-specific recommendations to help secure the future of the Western Grassland Reserves and the BCS Conservation Areas.

Urban grasslands in private hands – a new opportunity

Several large patches of good quality Kangaroo Grass-dominated grassland remain under immediate threat in private hands within the pre-2009 Urban Growth Boundary. These include the Solomon Heights and Broadcast Australia Grasslands in Brimbank, and the Ajax Road and Merton Street Grasslands in Hobsons Bay. Already, the Modeina Estate in Burnside has been allowed to be cleared (read *Park Watch* June 2021 article www.vnpa.org.au/give-me-a-reserve-among-the-factories). And just as we go to print, in late March, the fate of Ajax Road Grassland will be decided at VCAT, with a developer seeking approval to completely clear the native vegetation from one half of the site. The Melbourne-based Grassy Plains Network (see box) are fighting the developer, and they are actively fundraising for legal representation and fees for expert witnesses (donate at vnpa.org.au/save-ajax).

Local councils must carry part of the responsibility for the dire state of these grasslands. In the Ajax Road case, Hobsons Bay City Council had failed to implement controls such as Environmental Significance Overlays on its grasslands, despite clear evidence and the leadership shown by other LGAs such as the City of Hume. Private ownership often can be seen as a good excuse not to look too hard.

To bring such grasslands into the public estate will require active state intervention. In the meantime, they suffer lack of management, lack of biomass reduction, and are losing their biodiversity.

Public grasslands in urban areas

Being part of the public estate doesn't protect grassland biodiversity. Sadly, many land managers decry the poor job that Parks Victoria does in managing grasslands. Lack of resources is a big factor, but not the only one, with lack of the specific skills necessary, and an emphasis on visitor experience infrastructure, often noted.

The Grassy Plains Network

Formed in 2018, the Grassy Plains Network represents land management professionals, academics, ecologists and community concerned about the ongoing decline of grassy ecosystems across Melbourne and its surrounds. We advocate for improved grassland protection and management, and are hosted by the Victorian National Parks Association.

The Grassy Plains Network is currently campaigning to save Ajax Road Grassland. We are working with Hobsons Bay City Council to ensure Environmental Significance Overlays are put on the many significant grassland sites across that LGA. We are also lobbying Brimbank City Council to move forward on plans to establish a conservation reserve at the biodiversity-rich Solomon Heights Grasslands, as well as for DELWP and the Victorian Government to step in to save a suite of the most significant urban grasslands in Melbourne. Members of the Grassy Plains Network are participating in DELWP's Western Grassland Reserves Interim Management Strategy Working Group. Our vision for the future of the Reserves can be found in their Position Paper at www.grassyplains.net.au

Urgent appeal to save Ajax Road Grassland

Ajax Road Grassland is really special – it is home to an exceptional population of critically endangered Spiny Rice-flowers, dense stands of Kangaroo Grass and the rare Arching Flax-Lily.

Extensive, good-quality grasslands like Ajax Road must be protected, not cleared. But that's exactly what the private developer wants to do – clear over 15 hectares of grassland and subdivide.

The Grassy Plains Network worked tirelessly to ensure that Hobsons Bay City Council rejected the developer's planning permit. But now the developer and their lawyers are appealing the decision at the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT).

If we don't act now, this critically endangered grassland will be seriously threatened by development. A win for the developer will likely set a precedent for the destruction of other grasslands.

Please donate to this urgent appeal to fund our legal representation at VCAT and the campaign to save Ajax Road Grassland.

If you donate by 31 March your gift will be matched up to a total of \$13,000 thanks to the generous support of a private donor and a contribution from the Victorian National Parks Association.

Donate at vnpa.org.au/save-ajax or by calling 03 9341 6500.



Lemon Beauty-heads.

PHOTO: COLLEEN MILLER

Looking east to Melbourne's CBD, Ajax Road Grassland in Altona's industrial precinct grades into brackish wetland and forms part of a significant biolink from coastal RAMSAR sites to the Western Grassland Reserves at Melbourne's edge. Such landscape-scale connectivity is vital for urban resilience as sea-level rise and climate change impacts increase.

Lack of appropriate care is not just a Parks Victoria issue. Development Victoria is intent on the removal of significant grasslands in Cairnlea, Brimbank, along the Jones Creek biodiversity corridor. Good grassland patches on VicTrack land have been lost to weeds. Road authorities often put efficiency and human safety above environmental values. The list goes on.

Grasslands are a hard ask for land managers. We know they are less charismatic than wetlands or woodlands. They might be briefly showy in spring. They get trashed by rubbish dumping. They can be easily invaded by weeds. They need biomass management (such as fire) every few years and follow-up afterwards. They might be out in an industrial estate. That they are often quite degraded from a legacy of years of prior mismanagement does nothing to help. All this means they get bumped down on the land manager's to-do list, perhaps seen as more of a problem than a vital part of the urban ecosystems of Melbourne's west and north, and across Victoria as a whole.

That said, attitudes are changing. Many land managers now champion how important these critically endangered grasslands are. And they argue not just in terms of biodiversity, but in terms of engagement, providing wild nature in the urban context, unique experiences, and pushing grasslands as the heart and soul of Melbourne's West.

Keeping the promise alive

With all the problems, flaws, policy mistakes and just plain neglect, there is still opportunity if we as a community act now and continue to act over the decades to come. The Western Grassland Reserves truly can be restored to become a great reserve and a national treasure. The BCS Conservation Areas, too, can become large, well-managed places of rich biodiversity offering powerful nature experiences right in the heart of our suburbs. And our threatened urban grasslands can be rescued from loss through well-targeted intervention, and through land managers embracing the possibilities these unique urban spaces can offer. There is still hope to deliver on the promises of our grasslands, but the horizon for action is fast diminishing. • PW

Woman of the valley

KARA HEALEY WAS A PIONEER: A NATURALIST WITH A PASSION FOR CONSERVATION WHO BECAME THE FIRST FEMALE PARK RANGER OF VICTORIA IN TARRA VALLEY NATIONAL PARK (NOW KNOWN AS TARRA-BULGA NATIONAL PARK). SHE DEDICATED YEARS OF HARD WORK TO THE TARRA VALLEY, WHICH HAS PROVIDED INSPIRATION AND ENJOYMENT OF THE NATURAL WORLD FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS. AMONG THOSE TO HAVE BEEN INSPIRED INCLUDE HER GREAT-GRANDDAUGHTER **KRISTEN AGOSTA**, WHO WROTE THIS PIECE.



Early Life

Kara Moana Elizabeth Vernon, a blacksmith's daughter, was born in Kawhia, New Zealand on 23 June 1904 (ironically, this is the same year Bulga National Park, which she would later be associated with, was proclaimed). Her middle name, Moana, means 'rippling waters', a tribute to her Maori nurse. Her parents were Australians working in New Zealand and Kara was the third of seven children. Moving back to Victoria when Kara was two, her family settled in Mysia, north-west of Bendigo.

On completing her schooling, Kara worked as a teacher's aide near Clunes, where she met and wed her first husband Stan McGreevy. They had eight children together – Dawn, Victor, Wilma, Freda (my grandmother) and Gillian, along with, sadly, another three who did not make it past infancy. Stan had served in World War Two and this, combined with stresses from the Great Depression, took a toll on Kara and Stan's relationship, and they divorced in 1948.

Ranger Life

After separating from Stan, Kara took on work at the local hospital as a cook and often visited many of the patients. It was here that she met Jim Healey, who was the park ranger at Tarra Valley. After Jim and Kara married in 1949, they moved to Tarra Valley, where they lived in a small bush cottage, set on the ridge of a mountain overlooking beautiful fern gullies. Unfortunately, Jim passed away suddenly in 1952. Kara decided to continue living in their "somewhat primitive" cottage and carry on the work of her late husband.

Tarra-Bulga National Park

Located in south Gippsland, Tarra-Bulga National Park is one of Victoria's oldest national parks, having been first set aside in the early years of the 20th Century. It started life as two national parks: Bulga, established in 1904, and Tarra Valley, reserved in 1909, before merging in 1986 to become the much loved Tarra-Bulga National Park.

In the years following, Kara spent much of her time at the cottage alone. The cottage was rather isolated, approximately 23 kilometres from the nearest town, and as Kara did not at that time have a licence, the postman would bring supplies for her with the letters and papers. When asked if she was ever afraid, she responded, "I am at home in the bush and I know there is nothing to fear", though she could not say the same about the city. Kara's fearless respect for nature is exemplified by the following lines she wrote in 1961:

"I had a visitor the other day at home – a little Copperhead snake. He came in the front door and went out the back. He just looked at me. I'd been making jam. I saw the movement and thought it was a bird flying through – they often do. You've got to learn to adapt yourself to the conditions you live in. If I think, oh, there's a snake I can't live there, I must kill it, I'd be worried out of my mind if I tried to kill it and failed. I know some snakes only give you half an hour's grace. But I'm not frightened to die."

Kara's work over the next ten years played a significant role in the history of Tarra-Bulga National Park. Kara was an incredibly resourceful and determined woman who found strength in the many adversities she had faced in her life and put these life lessons to use in her role as a ranger. Her main duties included looking after park visitors, collecting parking fees and lighting the fire at the picnic shelter in the colder months. She also kept herself busy by sweeping paths to clear leaf-litter strewn on the track by lyrebirds.

In addition to her caretaking responsibilities, Kara spent her time collecting a range of specimens (insects, spiders, ferns, grasses, mosses, lichens and fungi) for the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), National Museum of Victoria, the University of Melbourne, and the National Herbarium. Her work with the CSIRO commenced after she responded to an advertisement calling for voluntary collectors of fungi. By 1961 she had collected 160 different types of fungi, with two



Above left: Kara Healey was the Tarra Valley National Park park ranger between 1952 and 1962.

Above right: Checking a Lyrebird chick in its nest. She was a caretaker of both the park's human visitors and wildlife residents.

Left: The bush cottage set on a mountain ridge in the Tarra Valley where Kara lived alone. She would later donate her property to the park.

notable discoveries, *Poria healeyi* and *Lambertella healeyi*, being named in her honour. While Kara was passionate about fungi, this passion stretched to all fauna and flora of the park, and she collected a total of 500 specimens during her time at Tarra Valley. Kara's collections are the reason why Tarra-Bulga National Park has one of the most comprehensive species records of any national park in Victoria.

When Kara retired, she gave her 46-hectare Tarra Valley property to the Bird Observers Club, ordering that the property be donated to the park, which it was in 1962. This decision left a legacy of native forest when she left the valley in 1963, with its stands of old growth Mountain Ash forest now protected in Tarra-Bulga National Park. An information panel outlining Kara's work with original writings, sketches and correspondence can be seen at the Tarra-Bulga visitor centre. • PW

Werribee Gorge State Park

GEOFF DURHAM VISITS AN INCREASINGLY POPULAR PARK.

As a result of COVID, many people have discovered walking, and Google has led them to walks near Melbourne. The Werribee Gorge State Park (575 hectares) is promoted and recommended online by many different sites. There has been an increase in visitors over the past ten years, and particularly since COVID. This has resulted in over 600 vehicles per day at the gorge on many weekends, creating parking problems.

The information shelters at the picnic areas have a map showing the park boundary, but few of the thousands who walk into the gorge along the old aqueduct on the north face realise that the steep bank and rock outcrops on the other side of the river, including the geological features of the Hanging Valley, Daintrees Cliff, Pyramid Rock, the Lionhead, Western Bluff and the Needles, are private property. The boundary of the park is the centre of the river – it could be said that the Werribee Gorge State Park is half of the Werribee Gorge. The land on the other side has fortunately been left in

its natural state. But if ever there was land that should be added to a park, this is it.

The gorge has long been a magnet for geologists. It is a result of uplift on a major fault causing the Werribee River to cut the deep gorge revealing about 500 million years of geological history. Neville Rosengren (1986) rated the gorge as being of “national significance”. Leon Costerman’s forthcoming book on the geology of Victoria will have a section on the gorge.

Werribee Gorge is an important wildlife refuge. Fauna in the gorge includes Koalas, Platypus and nesting Peregrine Falcons and Wedge-tailed Eagles.

The vegetation has been identified as being of state significance with species that are rare or threatened in Victoria. In recent years there have been eight successful volunteer plantings on private property adjacent to the gorge by Conservation Volunteers Australia and Grow West. Grow West aims to

create a bio-link between Brisbane Ranges National Park in the south and Lerderderg State Park in the north. (The Grow West community planting days are supported by the Victorian National Parks Association).

The gorge is a very rugged place – that is one of its attractions. With the increased visitation and many of the visitors being inexperienced walkers, there have been many emergency rescues. Search and rescue incidents average around one each fortnight. These are often people who leave late in the afternoon and attempt inappropriate shortcuts. Most problems arise from people not staying on the walking track and getting lost or injured.

Werribee Gorge State Park is in two sections. The Werribee Gorge section is in the Werribee River catchment, and the Ingliston Block is in the Parwan Creek catchment to the south of the Ironbark/Ballan-Ingliston Road and the Ballarat-Melbourne Railway which run along the watershed.



PHOTO: STEVE COLLIS, FLICKR CC



PHOTO: BEX, FLICKR CC



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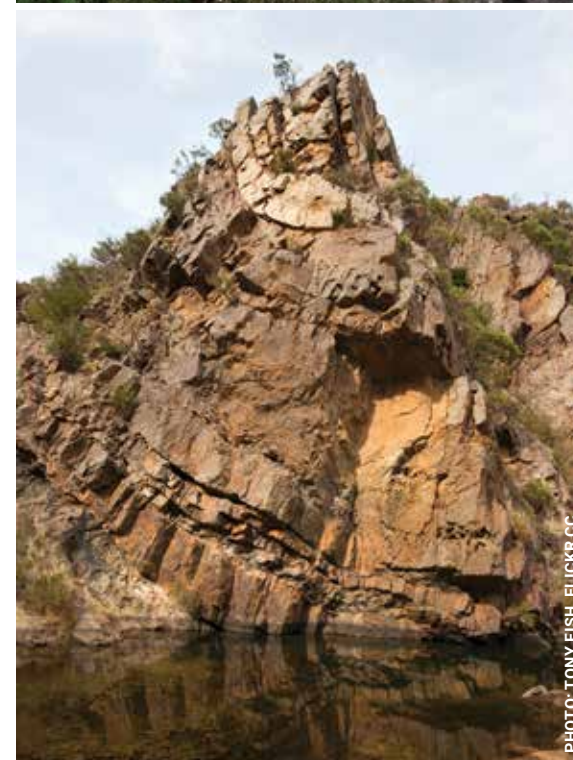


PHOTO: TONY FISH, FLICKR CC

(Clockwise from left)

The Lionhead is one of many geological features on view from the state park but actually located on private land on the other side of the Werribee River.

The challenging Werribee Gorge Circuit takes on the rocky outcrops.

Small details can also be noticed, such as these Pretty Fingers (*Stegostyla praecox*).

Tracks wind along tree lined ridges in the dry open woodlands.

Peregrine Falcons nest in the park.



PHOTO: PAUL BALFE, FLICKR CC

From the Ballan-Ingliston Road, tracks lead into the gorge to Western Bluff, the Granites at the head of the gorge, and Falcons Lookout, the only place where rock climbing is permitted. Access to the Ingliston Block is from this road.

The main access is off the Western Highway about 65 kilometres west of Melbourne and eight kilometres west of Bacchus Marsh. There are two picnic areas with toilets and fireplaces – the Quarry Picnic Area at the end of the bitumen section of Myers Road, and the Meikles Point Picnic Area on the river at the end of the narrow gravel vehicle track from the quarry.

No dogs or camping are permitted in the park.

Because of parking problems, my advice is to avoid weekends.

Some walks

Tracks are sign-posted and are generally un-made with rough and steep sections. Do not divert onto un-signposted tracks.

- Discovery Circuit (about 400 metres) from Meikles Point Picnic area, recently constructed with a good smooth gravel surface.
- Werribee Gorge Circuit (10 kilometres). A very popular challenging walk through the heart of the gorge can be done either clockwise or anti-clockwise from either the Quarry or Meikles Point car park. It involves some cliff-hugging and rock scrambling. Allow plenty of time and do not attempt this walk if the river is in flood.

- Short Circuit Walk from either the Quarry or Meikles Point car park (five kilometres). Follows Kelly's Creek, where artist Fred Williams did his Werribee Gorge paintings.
- Centenary Walk and The Island return walk (12.5 kilometres). Takes off from the Werribee Gorge Circuit Track near Western Viewpoint and descends to Myrning Creek at Junction Pool. Crosses and then up the creek to a very steep climb on an eroded track to the top of the James Whyte Island Reserve with panoramic views.
- Ingliston Gorge Circuit (4.5 kilometres). Clockwise through Sloss's Gully and Whitehorse Creek Gorge. • PW

The volunteer group, the Friends of Werribee Gorge & Long Forest Mallee, has been working in the gorge since 1984. They meet monthly. The contact is Kirsty Reid 0415 107 520. Email: fowglfm@yahoo.com. The website is www.fowglfm.org

Undaria underwater

REEFWATCH INTERN
INDIA AMBLER TELLS US ABOUT
THE INVASIVE KELP TAKING
OVER OUR BAYS – AND OUR
LATEST CITIZEN SCIENCE
PROJECT TO HELP CONTROL IT.

Japanese
Kelp, *Undaria
pinnatifida*.
Our ReefWatch
program
volunteers will
be undertaking
underwater
weeding of this
marine pest.

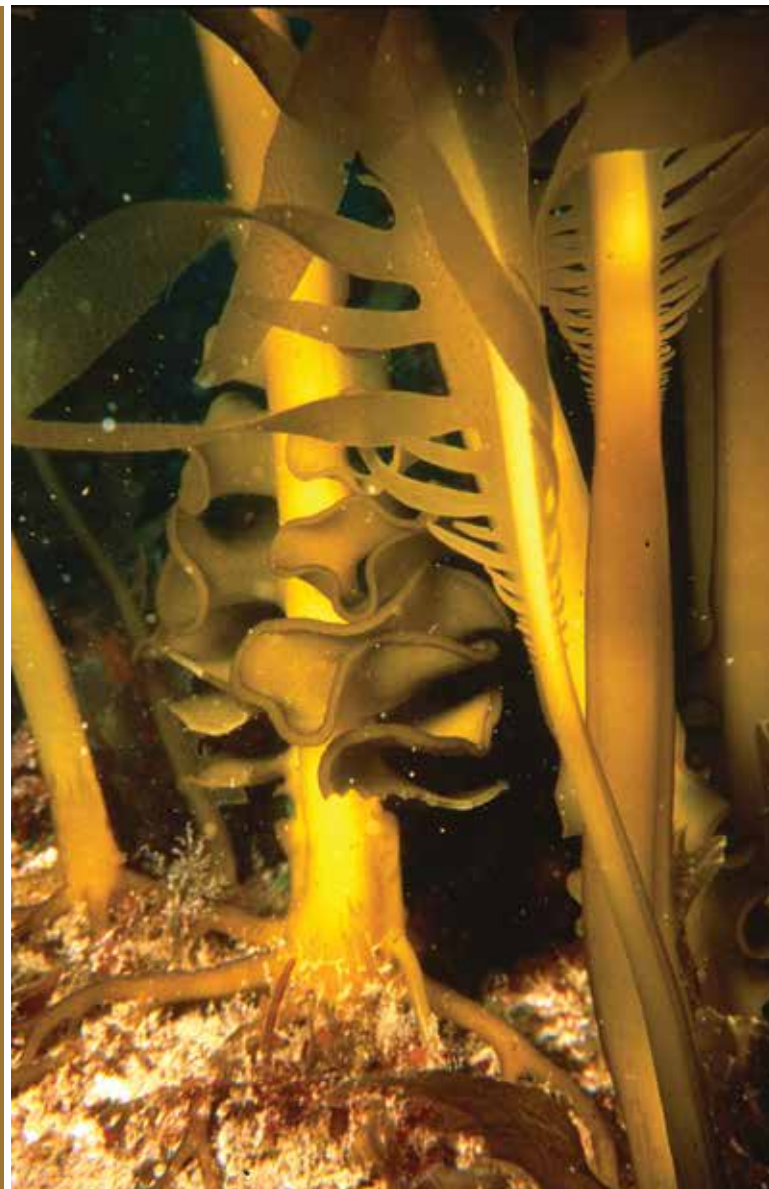


PHOTO: CSIRO



PHOTO: JON SULLIVAN, FLICKR CC

Stroll along the slatted boards of any jetty or pier in Port Phillip Bay, and you may notice, even from the surface, the thriving community of marine plants and animals below your very feet. Barnacles and bryozoans jostle for space with sponges and sea stars. Artificial structures such as jetties and piers support rich and diverse ecosystems, owing in part to their role in providing habitat for colonisation.

But if you were to take a closer look, you'd likely spot a flourish of greenish brown in the water, too. Sizeable fronds may be visible among the other marine life occupying the wooden pylons.

These fronds usually belong to an invasive species known as Japanese Kelp, *Undaria pinnatifida* (or wakame). It was introduced to Australia from the cool waters of the north-west Pacific Ocean, where it thrives along the coasts of Japan, Korea, China and Russia. The species was first

identified in Tasmania in 1988 and in Port Phillip Bay in the late 1990s.

More recently, the appearance of *Undaria* closer to the heads of Port Phillip Bay has raised concerns about it spreading to the open coast and invading previously unaffected areas.

A note on marine pests

Undaria is deemed a nationally significant marine pest species on the Australian Priority Marine Pest List (APMPL) and is recognised as being among the 100 worst invasive species in the world.

Marine pests are invasive plants or animals that threaten the health of marine ecosystems. They usually possess attributes that afford them advantages over other species – and *Undaria* is no exception.

The kelp is capable, for example, of reproducing quickly and in large numbers, enabling it to compete with

and potentially outgrow native kelps. Adults (sporophytes) can release millions of microscopic life stages (zoospores) into the surrounding water at a time – an estimated 100 million per plant each year! These life stages are long-lived and can persist in the water column for long periods and disperse over long distances (hundreds of metres) before settling on the seafloor. Early maturity, coupled with a rapid growth phase (usually between April and June), further contribute to the formidable reproductive prowess of this species.

Undaria can also inhabit a wide range of environments – piers and jetties included. It grows best in sheltered habitats. This may explain why it is often found in marinas and harbours, much to the chagrin of boat owners and fishers alike. It is, however, creeping towards the open coast, raising concern for this as yet unaffected habitat.

What is its impact on the environment?

While the long-term impacts of *Undaria* in our waters are not yet well understood, its appearance in Victoria has raised alarms for many reasons.

Undaria is quick to colonise areas that have been recently disturbed – perhaps due to the dieback of native kelps or grazing by sea urchins. Like a common garden weed, *Undaria* takes advantage of disturbance or patchiness and establishes itself in a new environment, effectively pushing other species out. It has been known to impact upon the habitat of native species, including Golden Kelp (*Ecklonia radiata*) and Giant Kelp (*Macrocystis pyrifera*). A loss of a keystone species like Giant Kelp may in turn alter the structure and function of the marine communities it occupies.

Most of these impacts are still speculative. Scientists are yet to determine just how competitive *Undaria* really is, or if it is simply opportunistic.

The kelp has, however, been known to wreak havoc elsewhere, and the species' ability to 'hitch a ride' on vessels, anchors and mooring lines has helped to facilitate its rapid spread throughout Victoria

What can we do?

It is very difficult to manage marine pests due to the natural connectivity of the ocean. To date, there have been three main management approaches to the introduction of marine pests: do nothing, complete eradication (rarely successful), or containment/control.

Given the pervasive nature and abundance in Port Phillip Bay, *Undaria*'s complete eradication seems unrealistic. We can, however, target key locations throughout Port Phillip Bay to hamper the spread towards the open coast – and that is what our ReefWatch program will be doing.

Kicking off in April, ReefWatch volunteers will be undertaking

underwater weeding on both the Bellarine and Mornington Peninsulas. Using methods developed by Parks Victoria and with the help of local dive stores, *Undaria* will be removed monthly from two sites (yet to be decided) to determine if the citizen scientists can:

1. be trained in identification and removal methods
2. completely remove *Undaria* from a region
3. monitor the population of native kelp (*Ecklonia radiata*)

While the project will ultimately provide information to those responsible for managing marine pests in Victoria, more importantly, it will empower and educate the community on ways they can help protect and preserve their local environments. • PW

This project is supported by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning's Port Phillip Bay Fund.

LONG-FOOTED POTOROO

The Long-footed Potoroo (*Potorous longipes*) is one of Victoria's most threatened marsupial species.

It is the largest species of potoroo and has, you guessed it, especially long feet. Its feet are longer than its head, helping differentiate it from other species of potoroo.

Long-footed potoroos are part of the rat-kangaroo family (Potoroidae), with hind feet resembling their kangaroo family members. They tend to use a four-legged 'pottering' motion but, when threatened, can quickly hop away at speed.

The Long-footed Potoroo is an elusive creature, only discovered in the 1960s and rare to find to this day. They are mostly nocturnal and exist in small, low-density colonies. Currently, there are two main populations in Victoria, one in East Gippsland and the other in the Barry Mountains in north-eastern Victoria.

Their small populations are vulnerable to threats, including bushfires, introduced predators such as foxes and cats, and climate change. The Long-footed Potoroo is currently listed as Endangered in Victoria, nationally, and globally.

The Long-footed Potoroo can live in a variety of vegetation types; however, it prefers habitat with a dense understorey for protection and a mixed-species overstorey. They like an environment with moist soil, such as wet sclerophyll forests, because eucalyptus trees and high soil moisture content provide conditions for their favourite food, sporocarps from fungi, to grow. These fungi make up about 90 per cent of their diet. The Long-footed Potoroo plays an important role in their ecosystem, as when they dig for sporocarps, their foraging spreads the spores through the soil, contributing to forest health.

Our new Life After Fire project conducts citizen science monitoring for Long-footed Potoroos in fire-affected areas in and around Cape Conran Coastal Park. Supported by a grant from the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust, this project is monitoring wildlife recovery across fire-affected areas of East Gippsland with high conservation value, and areas that are important unburnt habitat refuges for key threatened species.

For more on our NatureWatch program's Life After Fire project, visit:
vnpa.org.au/naturewatch

By Chelsi Old, who joined our NatureWatch program as a tertiary student placement from RMIT between July and October in 2021. • PW



Nature Unmasked

See and Interpret Victoria's Ecosystems

AUTHOR: STEPHEN PLATT
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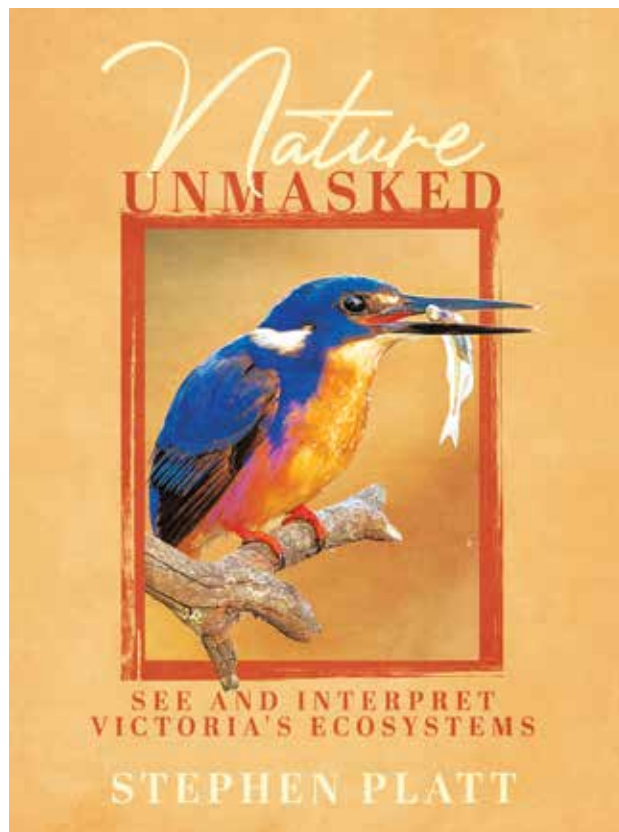
Good things happen.

The recent appearance of a very readable book aimed at enabling the Victorian community's understanding of the complexity of our natural heritage is one of those good things.

The author, Stephen Platt, has compiled a book that serves as a compelling outline of that most fundamental principle of ecology, the need for intact habitats, as well as introducing us to a vast range of individual species and their often peculiar lives.

So many creatures appear here it might be tempting to say the book is comprehensive, but of course, it isn't. The author points out that we have something like 100,000 plus species in the state, and we still know little about most of them.

The richly illustrated chapters (every page has several well-chosen photographs, diagrams or maps) explore ten of Victoria's most characteristic ecosystem types. We're invited into the wonders of the Mallee, wet forests, alpine meadows and, yes, that alien world under the sea. The Grasslands chapter has the helpful



sub-heading 'fire and volcanoes'; Foothill Forests, 'the gentle mosaic'.

The author knows his stuff. He worked for decades in a number of roles in Victoria's variously named environment departments. One of his achievements was the formation of the Land for Wildlife scheme, a program whereby landowners voluntarily dedicate all or part of their land to wildlife management. Their rewards were the satisfaction of contributing to habitat protection, and the regular delivery of Stephen's newsletter full of well-advised tips on habitat improvement and species management.

In his retirement, he has assembled in this book the information gathered over a lifetime of personal observation, his decades of work in the department and his familiarity with Victoria's great suite of biologists and ecologists. He pays tribute to the women and men who have pioneered the exploration of nature in Victoria, and invites the reader to continue that journey.

This is a not-for-profit venture, with hard copies available at cost while a digital version is free online. Publication was supported by a grant from the Wettenhall Environment Trust, and friends, colleagues and others have donated illustrations.

The book is rich in information but an easy read, and it's good to dip into whenever the urge or need arises. Schools should love it! • PW

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QUIZ ANSWERS

(From page 18)

- 1 **Mountain Ash, *Eucalyptus regnans***, are the largest tree species in Victoria. They are also the third tallest tree species in the world.
- 2 The **Ada Tree** is estimated to be 350–400 years old. It is 76 metres tall and has a girth of 15 metres.
- 3 **False**, older trees flower more than younger trees, just one of the reasons they are so important in the forest ecosystem.
- 4 **It takes about 100 years**, give or take, for hollows to begin to form in most Eucalypt trees.
- 5 **d) All of the above.** Big trees and their hollows are critical for the survival of many of our threatened fauna.
- 6 **c) 42% of native mammals in Australia rely on tree hollows.** Did you know 17% of bird species and 28% of reptiles also rely on tree hollows across Australia? Even some native fish use hollow logs in streams for shelter.
- 7 **d) We found 162 significant trees** in or within 100 metres of proposed logging coupes, at real risk of being damaged or destroyed. We are working to ensure the protection of these living giants across our state.

Visit vnpa.org.au/big-trees



WELLSFORD FOREST. PHOTO: SUE FRASER

In the time since colonisation, most of our grand old trees have been destroyed. And the Box-Ironbark trees of the Wellsford Forest are no exception: some 83 per cent of Box-Ironbark have been cleared through mining and logging.

Adding further insult to injury, what's left is not safe. Instead of being protected in a national park as recommended, Wellsford Forest remains open for domestic firewood collection and mining works.

With local groups, VNPA has been out in the Wellsford, formally assessing and documenting the remaining big, old trees to better advocate for their protection.

Please help protect our last living giants by befriending Victoria's remaining large old trees with a tax-deductible gift today.

☒ **Yes – I'll help protect the last of our living giants.**

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