



## **Submission by the Victorian National Parks Association to the Great Ocean Road Coastal Trail Design (Fairhaven to Skenes Creek)**

**August 2022**

*We acknowledge the trail is proposed to be located on Gadubanud Country, Eastern Maar Nation.*

The Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA) is an independent member-based organisation, working to improve protection of Victoria's biodiversity and natural areas, across land and sea. The VNPA has been actively working to protect Victoria's national parks and biodiversity for 70 years.

The VNPA welcomes the chance to make a submission to the Great Ocean Road Coastal Trail Design (Fairhaven to Skenes Creek) process and all the work that has gone into developing the Draft Master Plan (The Plan).

The VNPA encourages all Victorians to visit and connect with the wonderful Great Otway National Park, and the plants and animals that call it home. However these experiences should not be at the cost of the ecosystems, wildlife and plant life the national park was gazetted to protect in perpetuity.

While there are many elements of the plan we are supportive of, given the majority of the proposed tracks are within the Great Otway National Park, 53% of the tracks would be new tracks, and result in the clearing of native vegetation. This is our biggest concern, along with the potential for development creep (additional infrastructure added later on).

We outline below in more detail the elements of the draft Master Plan we are supportive of, opposed to, and provide suggestions on how to improve.

### **We support the following elements of the master plan:**

- strong cultural focus and identification of cultural values outlined in the biocultural landscape
- the focus on utilising existing accommodation is welcomed, and only two small campgrounds proposed means impacts to biodiversity values will be minimised (we however do not support the proposed roofed accommodation, see below)
- appreciate the focus on short walks, which supports visitors utilising townships for accommodation and food, to support local economies

- we support the reduced number of suspension bridges to lessen the impact on the landscape, both biodiversity values and visually.

## **We have concerns for these elements of the master plan:**

### **1. The Purpose of a National Park, National Park Act and Park Planning Process**

While common sense alone would dictate that any habitat giving necessary support to threatened species should be managed with the utmost care, there is a considerable raft of State and Commonwealth legislation that unambiguously mandates diligent care, practically on public authorities.

In Victoria, land designated as National Park comes under the National Parks Act 1975.

The objectives of Victoria's National Parks Act 1975 include (with our added emphasis):

- *the preservation and protection of the natural environment, including wilderness areas and remote and natural areas in those parks*
- *the protection and preservation of indigenous flora and fauna and of features of scenic or archaeological, geological, historic or other scientific interest in those parks*
- *the study of ecology, geology, botany, zoology and other sciences relating to the conservation of the natural environment in those parks*
- *the responsible management of land in those parks*
- *to make provision in accordance with the foregoing for the use of parks by the public for the purposes of enjoyment, recreation, or education and for the encouragement and control of that use.*

The National Parks Act obliges Parks Victoria to manage the park according to the above objectives, and to prepare a plan of management to achieve those objectives.

In addition (if additional clarity was needed), the Parks Victoria Act 2018 obliges Parks Victoria to: *"protect, conserve and enhance Parks Victoria managed land, including its cultural and natural values. For the benefit of the environment and future generations".*

While listed threatened species are also covered by national and/or state legislation wherever they might be, that protection is clearly already mandated by the above Acts which protect all species in the park, whether threatened or not.

In addition to the above, in 1993 Australia has signed and ratified the International Convention on Biological Diversity, a treaty ratified by 168 countries that seeks to guarantee the survival of the great many species that have evolved on this earth.

The Convention on Biological Diversity obliges Australia to, among other things:

- *establish a system of protected areas or areas where special measures need to be taken to conserve biological diversity;*
- *promote the protection of ecosystems, natural habitats and the maintenance of viable populations of species in natural surroundings;*
- *prevent the introduction of, control or eradicate those alien species which threaten ecosystems, habitats or species.*

The Draft Master Plan acknowledges that the majority of the track network will be within the national park, but fails to mention the legislation the park is managed under, being the *National Parks Act 1975*. The Draft Master Plan also does not contain any reference to the Great Otway National Park and Otway Forest Park Management Plan, December 2009 (Amended November 2019), nor has an assessment been done of the project against the objectives and purpose of the National Parks Act 1975.

As the management plan states the *“Great Otway National Park and Otway Forest Park were created as a result of the Victorian Government’s acceptance of the majority of final recommendations made by the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC 2004) following a two-year investigation. Great Otway National Park was included on Schedule Two to the National Parks Act 1975 (Vic.) on 11 December 2005.”*

This is a disappointing oversight by DELWP and needs to be rectified and worked into the planning of the track routes to avoid the values highlighted in the management plan and the zoning framework outlined in the document.

## **2. Funding and future maintenance**

The estimated maintenance works for the proposed trail between Fairhaven to Skenes Creek will be \$962,790 per year for the trail. It is unclear if the maintenance works include extra ecological maintenance, such as new pest plant and animal works brought about by the disturbance caused by the new track installations throughout the park.

It is also unclear where the extra funding for the proposed track network will come from, or if it will be taken out of existing budgets of Parks Victoria. Our concern, is that it could be taken out of other vitally important and already underfunded work of ecological management e.g. pest plant and animal control, restoration works and monitoring works.

We would like to see more detail on where this extra resourcing is planned to come from, considering ranger staff is already stretched. We hope there would be additional staff/resources allocated, and it shouldn’t be taken away from ecological management.

## **3. Biosecurity**

Heathlands and Cool temperate Rainforest are particularly sensitive to the spread of the plant killing pathogens, such as phytophthora and myrtle wilt. We were pleased to see the threat of phytophthora raised in the document, however there were no plans for soil testing or biosecurity matters put forth in the document. This is the detail that should be covered in plans like this one to show that Parks Victoria are taking their responsibilities under the National Parks Act seriously.

The creation of new tracks will also facilitate the spread of not only pathogens, but also pest animals such as cats and foxes, that will use the tracks to further penetrate into natural areas and increase the threat of predation of small mammals in the area.

No plans to mitigate or reduce the threats of pest plants and animals as well as the spread of pathogens were found within the document. This is disappointing and unacceptable particularly at the start of the process when these measures should be at the fore front of everyone’s mind when

planning the route.

#### **4. Loss of native vegetation – including endangered vegetation types**

The proposed track network, shows there will be impact on two Vulnerable and Endangered Vegetation communities, within the Great Otway National Park:

- Damp Sands Herb-rich Woodland (EVC 3)
- Cool Temperate Rainforest (EVC 31) mostly within a Protected Area being the Great Otway National Park.

There was no proof or reasoning to show that the proposed project had tried to avoid and minimise impacts on rare EVCs and other native vegetation. What is of concern, is we still do not know how much vegetation will be cleared. We are informed this will happen only once final alignment decisions have been made, and by then it's too late to change the alignment. This level of detail should be known prior to finalising the alignment

In total, **42.7 km of the total 90.3 km distance is comprised of existing trails, a percentage of 47%. This means that 53% of the proposed new tracks would require removal of native vegetation** into areas currently without tracks. This does not show that the proposed project has tried to avoid and minimise its impact.

Regarding offsets, and the need to protect biodiversity of the national park, the project should commit to not using the loop hole which allows for the exemption of physical offsets from removal of native vegetation. By doing so would avoid and minimise the impact of the proposed project on native vegetation.

#### **5. Development creep – carparks and roofed accommodation**

We are deeply concerned that the master plan does not include plans for further infrastructure such as carparks, and that this is being undertaken by a different process. This raises scepticism about what is planned. The project in its entirety should be assessed at this point of the project and not tagged on at the end.

We also do not support the proposal for roofed accommodation along the projects route due to the impact on biodiversity, and the principle of in allowing this opens the gate for additional infrastructure later on.

#### **6. Transparent environmental assessment needed**

The Draft Plan states that a *Construction Environmental Management Plan* will be undertaken prior to construction. We urge for any environmental plan should be released publicly to give transparency to the process of environmental assessment, and allow the community to be informed.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment. For further information please contact

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