VICTORIAN NATIONAL PARKS ASSOCIATION

STATE ELECTION 2026
BRIEFING PAPER

Policy proposals to protect and restore nature in Victoria

It's time to prioritise nature

Victorians love nature. We want to look after it. We want it to be given the respect and care it deserves. Between funding cuts, axed staff and forests left unprotected, nature's copping it. And that's not what Victorians want.

We're part of nature. We depend on it for the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the landscapes and wildlife that ground and restore us. And nature depends on us too, on the choices we make, and the choices politicians make for Victoria.

It's time to start shaping those choices around our relationship with nature.

The following nine proposals are what that looks like in practice. Backing them is a chance to give nature the priority it deserves. And to act on what Victorians clearly want for nature. Because when nature thrives, we all thrive.



Glossy Black Cockatoo (Brian McCauley/flickr)

Ten ways Victoria's next government can look after nature

1. **Properly fund our national parks**
2. **Protect the protectors**
3. **Close logging loopholes**
4. **Protect forests in Central Highlands & East Gippsland**
5. **Protect Melbourne's grasslands**
6. **Look after marine life**
7. **Control invasive species**
8. **Look after Western Port Bay**
9. **Bring back VEAC (or create a new one)**

These proposals are outlined in the following pages.

What Victorians think

Victorians love parks – 84% of Victorians say national parks are important to them, and 80% support the creation of new national parks.

Support for new parks is high across rural and regional Victorians (79%), the inner and middle suburbs of Melbourne (81%) and the outer suburbs of Melbourne (82%). It's especially strong among young Victorians, with 85% of 18–34-year-olds backing new national parks.

Parks protection isn't a partisan issue. Support for new parks is shared by voters across the political spectrum and across the state. It's clear Victorians expect our major parties and elected representatives to have policies that protect nature and for them to be announced well before heading to the polling booth.[1]

1 RedBridge Group, 'Victorian Great Forest National Park survey', <www.vnpa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Victorian-Great-Forest-National-Park-survey-Oct-2024-RedBridge.pdf>

Properly fund our national parks

National parks protect our unique wildlife, habitats and landscapes. But they are under pressure from invasive animals and weeds, climate change and many other threats. They need specialist and dedicated management so the wildlife and habitats they protect can not only survive, but thrive.

Covering about 18% of the state, national parks and conservation reserves receive less than 0.4% of State Budget in funding. This is not enough to stop destruction from invasive species, look after threatened wildlife or maintain visitor infrastructure.

National parks need an increase of funding to 1% of the State Budget. That would see their annual budget almost double and importantly it would need to be indexed against state growth. This increased funding is needed to make sure these incredibly special and iconic landscapes are looked after to the standard they and all Victorians deserve.

Proposed policy

- A public commitment to maintain and enhance the management of national parks and protected areas, including:
- A commitment to fund national parks and other protected areas to at least 1% of the State Budget.
- Making sure park management is guided by the best available scientific evidence and Traditional Owner knowledge of Country and this is embedded in an official Statement of Expectations or legal purposes.
- Fully funding protected areas to make sure they are managed by properly resourced, skilled professionals, including First Nations managers and that this is embedded in an official Statement of Expectations or legal purposes.
- Properly funding, strengthen and evolve Traditional Owner management of national parks and other public lands to create genuine partnerships

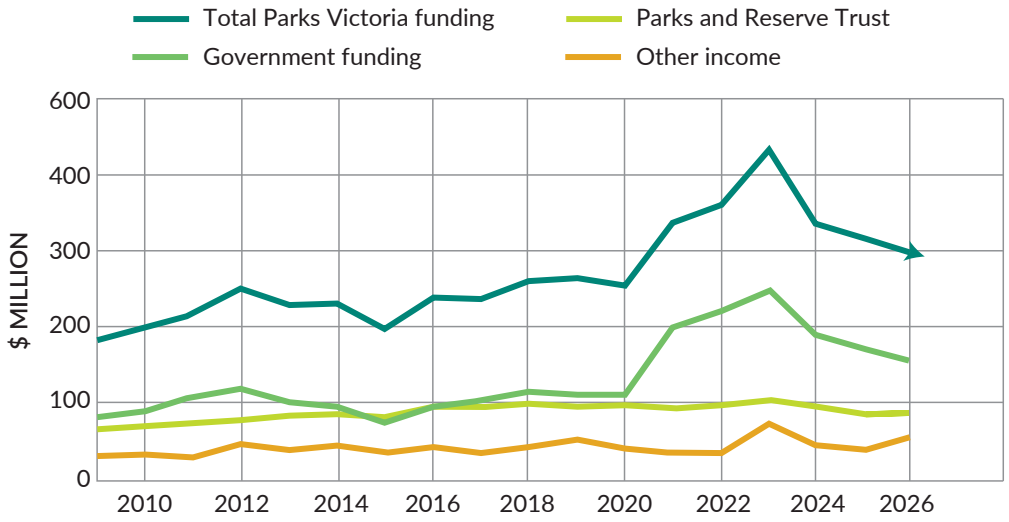
The details

Parks protect nature. National parks and conservation reserves are one of the best tools we have to look after wildlife and habitats. They give nature the space and time it needs to recover and thrive. They keep our air clean, protect the forests that give us clean water, and offer people places to connect with nature for generations to come.

The main purpose of national parks and other protected areas is to protect wildlife, habitats and landscapes across land and sea, forever. This core purpose should guide their management.



Wombat-Lerderderg National Park (Sandy Scheltema)



National parks are under pressure from invasive animals and weeds, climate change, visitor pressures and many other threats. They need specialist and dedicated management to manage both places and people. The role of managers is to protect and enhance each park's natural and cultural values and, at a landscape scale, ecological integrity, informed by Traditional Owner and scientific knowledge.

Currently, Victoria only allocates less than 0.5% of the State Budget to care for our national parks and protected areas, which cover almost 20% of the state and have 50 million visits annually, more if you include all areas managed by Parks Victoria. Yet parks create at least $2 billion in direct economic activity from visitor spending and support 20,000 regional jobs. The Parliamentary Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline recommended increasing funding for parks and reserves to 1% of gross state product.[1]

Chronic under-funding for core operations of Park Victoria means Victoria, once a leader in national park and protected area management, has become a leader in disappointment and neglect of our iconic landscapes and wildlife.

Parks Victoria's 2023-24 budget was $338 million down from $433 million in the previous year, with forward estimates showing further cuts of $94 million. Parks are funded in part directly by State Government core funding, with Government grants for specific projects and the Parks and Reserve Trust (which comes from fees paid by some Melbourne residents).[2]

These cuts have led to a huge loss of experienced and knowledgeable staff from Parks Victoria.

Parks Victoria manages over 3.7 million hectares of protected areas and almost 206,000 hectares of non-protected areas e.g. Metropolitan parks and regional parks. Victoria's parks protect ecosystems of high state and international significance. Specifically, national, state and wilderness parks protect large areas of intact habitats, accounting for 38% of all native plant cover in Victoria. In addition, the parks network covers 60% of wetland areas of international significance in the state. Native vegetation in parks is in better condition than outside park areas across all ecological vegetation classes.

On Monday 5 October 2026, 78,838 hectares of public land across Victoria's Central West and South Gippsland officially transferred to Parks Victoria for management, including over 65,000 hectares of new national parks. These parks have not received additional funding for establishment and have been funded from existing Parks Vic budgets. They need an ongoing permanent increase in funding so Parks Victoria can continue to look after the additional parks and reserves now under its care.

An increase of funding to 1% of the State Budget would make the annual budget for parks and other protected areas almost double and importantly be indexed against state growth. This is what our iconic landscapes and wildlife need, so they can be looked after to the standard they, and all, Victorians deserve.

1 Environment and Planning Committee Inquiry into ecosystem decline in Victoria Volume 1, Victorian Parliament (2021)
2 Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, 'Parks and Reserves Trust Account', <www.deeca.vic.gov.au/our-department/parks-and-reserves-trust-account>

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Protect the protectors

Park rangers and fisheries officers are the guardians of our forests, mallee, alpine peaks, grassy plains, kelp forests and reefs.

They protect wildlife and habitats from damaging illegal activities like firewood theft, over-fishing, animal and plant poaching, and illegal vegetation clearing. There is an urgent need to enhance the capacity in relevant agencies to look after wildlife and habitats and combat crimes against nature.

Proposed policy

- Commit to reinstating sacked fisheries officers, restore park ranger numbers and rebuilding specialist capability and capacity in compliance, biodiversity, heritage, recreation management and park planning.
- Commit to a standalone Environment Minister to control all aspects of the portfolio including public land management, without conflicting portfolio responsibilities.
- Commit to managing national parks for the primary purpose of conservation and the quiet enjoyment of nature and amend the Parks Victoria Statement of Expectation to make this explicit and a key performance indicator for senior management and board members.
- Reverse the decision to introduce recreational shooting into Snowy River and Errinundra national parks and align management with the endorsed Greater Alpine National Parks Management Plan.

The details

Park rangers and fisheries officers are the guardians of our lands and seas. They look after habitats and wildlife, help protect threatened species, control invasive species, welcome visitors and maintain visitor infrastructure. Without them, our parks would be little more than lines on a map.

The Allan Government cut fisheries officers by 50%, from 69 to 39 positions, and closed fisheries stations at Braeside and Altona. These two stations are within Port Phillip Bay, the most heavily populated area of the state, where they are needed most. These cuts are being met with fierce resistance from nature conservationists, fishing groups and concerned Victorians.

Fisheries officers safeguard marine protected areas. With less officers patrolling, reports of illegal fishing are emerging across Barwon Bluff Marine Sanctuary, Ricketts Point Marine Sanctuary and Port Phillip Heads Marine Sanctuary. We need more fisheries officers to make sure marine wildlife and habitats are protected.

Despite growing visitor numbers and an increase in area of land managed, the number of full-time workers in Parks Victoria has been in flux. In June 1998 there was 913 full-time staff & 21 on-going parttime staff (assuming 0.6 average for parttime staff) total of 921 on-going effective full time equivalents. In 2024 there were 880 on-going effective full time equivalents. In 2025 this hit a low of



Rangers at Ricketts Point Marine Sanctuary (Parks Victoria)

801, less than number of permeant staff employed in 1998 when the organisation was set up. This has slightly increased in 2026 to 956. FTE, on-going staff, but considering the increase in the size of the park estate and the population of Victoria, the low level of staffing increase is alarming. In the period 2024-2206 many experienced and senior staff have also been replaced, losing decades of knowledge and skills.

Park rangers safeguard national parks and other protected areas. They restore landscapes, look after threatened species, control invasives species and greet visitors. Park ranger numbers must be increased to make sure parks and other protected areas are properly looked after.

Whilst our national parks and other protected areas play an important role in providing for outdoor recreation, education and nature-based tourism, use of these areas must be shaped by the needs of nature. Conservation objectives and First Nations cultures should be prioritised over other uses and activities.

Not every park can cater for every use. The provision of opportunities for visitor enjoyment is a fundamental purpose of national parks and most other protected areas. However, it needs to be recognised that both ecological integrity and visitor enjoyment can be threatened by overuse.

Managers need to understand and respond to capacity constraints in parks, or at individual sites, to make sure the cumulative effects of visitor use and infrastructure do not destroy the values a park is supposed to protect or the nature-based experiences for which people visit.

This is entirely consistent with community expectations. According to polling by Redbridge Group in late 2024, low impact nature-based activities are the key driver for visiting national parks.[1]

Any government must focus on providing for visitors' enjoyment of low-impact, nature-based recreation activities, such as walking, camping, picnicking, and the peaceful enjoyment of nature.

In terms of Victoria's forests as a whole (whether in a park or outside), the most popular activities for the bulk of Victorians involve passive enjoyment.

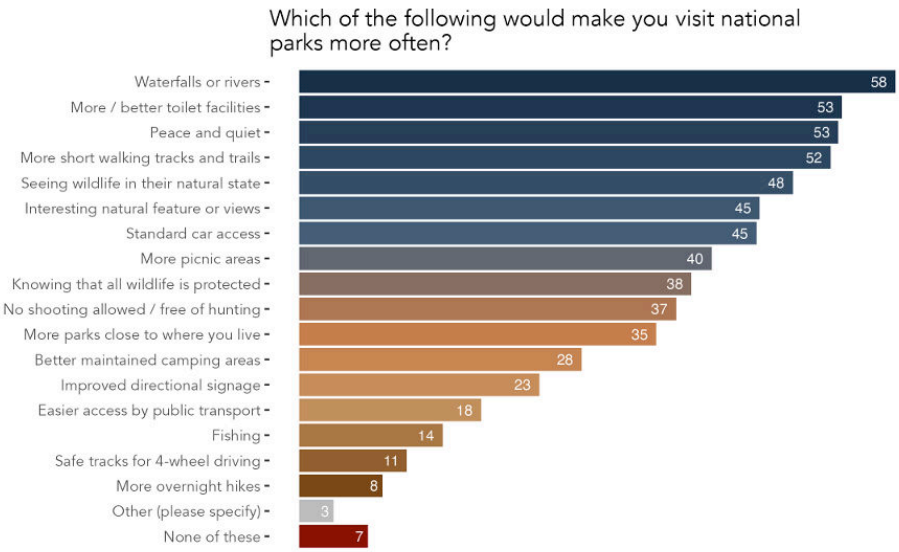
- The most popular forest-based activities for park uers include: short bushwalks, (48%), picnics (36%), photography (21%), multi-day camping (11%), bird watching (11%).
- The least popular forest-based activities for Victorians (under 5%) include: trail-bike riding (motorised), shooting and hunting.

Structured community interpretation and education programs, that facilitate a broad cross-section of the community to access and connect with nature, must be fully funded.

Major new tourism developments must be located outside parks, not inside. New projects must not be permitted in parks if they will impact on nature or cultural values, are costly to build or maintain, or are not supported by an approved management plan.

Recreational planning in parks must enhance visitors' experience of place while minimising conflicts between users, within an ecological integrity framework that prevents park values being compromised by overuse or development. Park management plans have been neglected, with majority out of date, or ignored.

Wildlife and habitats in parks must be protected from illegal activities such as firewood theft, over-fishing, poaching, and illegal vegetation clearing. Increasing park ranger and fishery officer numbers, and a commitment to the primary purpose of parks being conservation and the quiet enjoyment of nature, will go a long way towards achieving this.



1 RedBridge Group, 'Victorian Great Forest National Park survey', <www.vnpa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Victorian-Great-Forest-National-Park-survey-Oct-2024-RedBridge.pdf>

Close logging loopholes

Destructive loophole logging has smashed forests across Victoria, including in the Dandenong Ranges National Park and the newly legislated Wombat-Lerderderg National Park. Huge fuel breaks are also planned across the state. On top of that, our forests are vulnerable to the restarting of commercial logging with the stroke of a pen.

We need immediate legislative changes to protect wildlife and forests from industrial and commercial exploitation under the guise of fire management. And to make sure wide-scale native forest logging isn't reinstated.

Proposed policy

- Publicly commit to maintaining the ban on native forest logging.
- A legislative ban on (or legislative amendments to stop) commercial native forest logging on public land.
- Close loopholes which allow native forest logging on private land by amending the relevant state provisions of the planning schemes.
- Establish a standalone regulator to oversee Forest Fire Management Victoria's fire prevention and logging-like activities and establish clear enforceable standards to protected wildlife and habitats, including critical habitat trees.

The details

Up to $1.5 billion has been spent on a logging industry transition, with little spent directly on restoring nature. There is danger this investment will be wasted if the ban on logging is not maintained and legislative loopholes closed. Given continuing industry pressure, our forests are vulnerable to commercial logging restarting.

Native forest logging 'officially' ended on 1 January 2024, due to a lack of wood supply, bushfires and breaches of nature laws. While VicForests and some related forestry legislation was repealed, many of the laws and practices that enable it are still in place.

The Great Outdoors Taskforce made recommendations to 'change relevant legislation and regulations to prevent the return of large-scale commercial native timber harvesting in state forests' and that the Victorian Government should make 'appropriate and supplementary changes to other Victorian legislation and regulations managing forests and public land' to prevent its return.[1]

These laws and practices include:

- ***The Forests Act 1958***, which enables the issuing of forest produce licences, including for timber. It is the legal mechanism by which forestry was conducted in the east of the state until 2004, when the *Sustainable Forest*

1 The State of Victoria Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, 'Great Outdoors Taskforce Recommendations Report', <https://www.deeca.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0040/768982/Great-outdoors-taskforce-report.pdf>



Loophole logging in the Dandenong Ranges (Meghan Lindsay)

Timber Act was enacted, and in the west of the state until commercial logging ended. A future government could restart logging by issuing new forest produce licences under this legislation. The *Forest Act* needs to be abolished or significantly modified. We understand many of these amendments have been included in a proposed Public Land Bill, which has yet to be brought to parliament.

- ***The Forests (Wood Pulp Agreement) Act 1996***, which gives exclusive access to timber resources in certain areas of the Central Highlands for the supply of logs for pulp. This should be repealed.
- **Private land logging** is allowed through state provisions in municipal planning schemes, under the *Planning and Environment Act 1987*, even though it is inconsistent with Victoria's Native Vegetation Removal Regulations and creates a clear loophole. There has been an increase in logging on private land over the last few years. Local government is responsible for enforcement, yet typically lacks the capacity and specialist expertise to properly regulate. The statewide provision of planning schemes needs to be amended to stop native forest logging on private land.
- **Loophole logging** by Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV) is being done without any independent oversight, under the guise of post-storm 'cleanup' and the establishment of fuel breaks. Recent examples include fuel breaks in Yarra Ranges National Park where ancient eucalypts were destroyed and an Endangered Southern Greater Glider was killed, and storm cleanups in Dandenong Ranges National Park and Wombat Forest (now Wombat-Lerderderg National Park), where threatened plants were flattened. FFMV's tree felling and removal operations need to be brought under a binding, enforceable code of practice and done with oversight by the Office of the Conservation Regulator, or an equivalent independent regulator.
- **Habitat tree removal** involves cutting down large old trees, many containing wildlife hollows. It occurs with little or no objective assessment of the real risk that each tree poses or of the habitat values it provides. They are simply considered hazardous by fire authorities and are rarely properly assessed. Action must be taken to protect habitat trees across Victoria, including protecting old growth forest, protecting significant trees during fire preparation work and mapping significant trees across Victoria.[2]

2 Victorian National Parks Association, 'Protecting our living legacies: A guide to protecting large old trees on public land', <www.vnpa.org.au/publications/protecting-our-living-legacies>

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Protect forests in Central Highlands & East Gippsland

The forests of Victoria's Central Highlands and East Gippsland are home to incredible wildlife like Greater Gliders, Powerful Owls, Lace Monitors and Long-footed Potoroos and towering Mountain Ash forests that store vast amount of carbon and provide clean drink water. These landscapes need protecting in new and expanded national parks.

Proposed policy

- Create a Great Forest National Park or significantly expand and link existing Central Highlands parks, including linking Yarra Ranges, Baw Baw, Kinglake and Lake Eildon National Parks and Cathedral Ranges, Bunyip and Moondarra State Parks.
- Expand and link East Gippsland national parks, including Alpine, Coopracambra, Croajingolong, Errinundra and Snowy River national parks.
- Support Emerald Link, a community-led conservation initiative for East Gippsland.
- Assess and nominate eastern Victoria's forests for UNESCO World Heritage listing.
- Commission an independent statewide assessment (a Victorian Environmental Assessment Council-like assessment) into gaps in the protected area estate across land and sea.

The details

In 2022, nations around the world committed to protecting 30% of lands, freshwaters and oceans by 2030 (the 30x30 target) in networks of protected areas. Nations also committed to making sure the networks were representative and well-connected, as part of the Convention on Biological Diversity's Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

Australia has made a commitment to protecting 30% of lands and oceans at the national level, with the support of all states and territories, including Victoria. Victoria is the most cleared state in Australia. Much of the native habitats that remain are of high conservation significance and home to many threatened species.

With approximately 18% of land protected, Victoria is not currently a national leader. A failure to contribute to protected area expansion would mean that Victoria is expecting other Australian states and territories to do its work for it.[1]

1 Fitzsimons, J.A & Wescott, G. Beyond Logging: The Need for Victoria's State Forests to Contribute to Australia's 30 × 30 Protection Target. https://www.mdpi.com/2073-445X/14/5/1028 May 2025



Central Highlands (Meghan Lindsay)

There is strong community support for national parks in Victoria. Recent statewide polling shows an overwhelming (80%) majority of Victorians support the creation of new national parks.[2]

Victoria has a proud history of adding to the protected areas estate. However, progress in the last decade has been stagnant. With the exception of long overdue central west parks legislated in 2025, the last major addition to the parks estate was the new Redgum parks in 2009.

As part of a statewide review of public land[3], the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) identified gaps in marine protected areas and national parks. Three terrestrial regions of Victoria with under-represented Ecological Vegetation Classes form a distinct cluster: South-west Victoria, Strzelecki Ranges-Gippsland Plain and Central Victorian Uplands. The gaps in the central Victoria Uplands have been largely filled with the creation of new central west parks.

Protecting the Great Forest Landscape

In a recent report on the forests of the Central Highlands, VEAC identified large areas that could be protected in a public land category such as national park, that would link the existing national and state parks in the region. These areas cover the full range of major forest types and landscapes of the Central Highlands, including the wet montane ash forests and rainforests that characterise the region. VEAC considered there to be relatively few uses of the recommended areas that would be inconsistent with national park designation.

The Great Forest National Park, a long running community vision, is supported by Sir David Attenborough, Jane Goodall and Bob Irwin to name a few. The community initiative would protect 360,000 hectares of forests between Healesville and Mount Baw Baw up to Eildon in the north. A modified version of this was recommended by the Allan Governments' Eminent Person Panel into Community Engagement.

The park would protect towering Mountain Ash forests slowly recovering from historic logging, home to Critically Endangered Leadbeater's Possums, Wedge-tailed Eagles and Sooty Owls. These forests store huge amounts of carbon and provide Melburnians with fresh drinking water.

New parks such as a Great Forest National Park would represent the largest national park in Victoria, right on Melbourne's doorstep. It could attract an extra 400,000 visitors annually to the area, creating an additional 750 full-time jobs and adding more than $70 million to the local economy.[4]

Forests in East Gippsland

These forests are strongholds for many rare and threatened plants and animals, once common across the state.[5] They are filled with rainforests, pristine rivers, waterfalls and rare plants and animals. They are some of the last strongholds for threatened wildlife like Long-Footed Potoroos, Glossy Black Cockatoos, Greater Gliders, Spotted-tailed Quolls, Masked and Sooty Owls, Lace Monitors and Giant Burrowing Frogs. These intact habitats support many different plants and animals, with records of over 5000 species. This includes at least 35 species of plants unique to the region.[6]

With the end of native forest logging in Victoria there is a clear opportunity to link existing national parks in East Gippsland and parts of the Alpine areas to improve habitat connectivity and management.

World heritage listing and Emerald Link

A world heritage listing for forests in eastern Victoria would further protect a sea-to-summit arc of internationally unique habitats. Habitats home to over 60 eucalypt species occupying almost every ecological niche from wind-swept mountaintops to coastal lagoons.

World heritage listing would complement and support Emerald Link in East Gippsland, a community-led initiative connecting forests, culture and communities by restoring biodiversity, protecting forests, and creating opportunities for future generations to flourish.[7]

Emerald Link's vision is a stronger regional economy that celebrates biodiversity, restores landscapes and welcomes visitors to experience East Gippsland's natural icons. It includes the creation of new recreational opportunities including nature viewing, walking trails and outdoor classrooms.

2 RedBridge Group, 'Victorian Great Forest National Park survey', <www.vnpa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Victorian-Great-Forest-National-Park-survey-Oct-2024-RedBridge.pdf>
3 VEAC Statewide Assessment of Public Land Discussion Paper, August 2016.
4 Great Forest National Park, 'Great Forest National Park: An Economic Boon', <www.greatforestnationalpark.com.au/reports>
5 Conservation Values of State Forests (VEAC, 2017), https://www.veac.vic.gov.au/investigations-assessments/previous-assessments/investigation/conservation-values-of-state-forests-assessment-report, Victorian Environmental Assessment Council, accessed April 2025
6 East Gippsland Regional Catchment Strategy: Biodiversity, https://eastgippsland.rcs.vic.gov.au/themes/biodiversity/, East Gippsland CMA, accessed April 2025
7 https://www.emeraldlink.com.au/

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Protect Melbourne's grasslands

Native grasslands, dazzling in their diversity of wildflowers, are found on the volcanic plains that stretch from Melbourne right across the west of the state. Since European settlement this fertile land has had a long history of being destroyed for agriculture and, more recently, urban expansion. Of the grasslands that once covered the Victorian Volcanic Plain, only 0.58% survive.

Large new grassland reserves were promised in the western and northern suburbs of Melbourne more than decade ago as part of a trade-off for urban growth. They still have not been created and grassland decline and destruction continues across the state. Grasslands desperately need protection, before any more are destroyed.

Proposed policy

- Commit to creating Melbourne's Grasslands Reserves as outlined in the Melbourne Strategic Assessment (MSA) including the Western Grassland Reserve and Grassy Eucalypt Woodland reserves.
- Improve governance and oversight of the MSA program including significantly increased penalties for illegal clearing.
- Improve protection for all grassland ecosystems across Victoria on both private and public land by using all means available, including planning tools such as Environmental Significance Overlays, key tools in the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act* and beefed-up responsibilities within the Office of the Conservation Regulator to pursue strategic compliance.
- Initiate a statewide assessment (VEAC-like assessment) of grassland ecosystems, their extent, condition (including changes and drivers of change) and recommendations about ongoing management and protection by both public and private managers.
- Equip fire managers both public (Forest Fire Management Victoria, Parks Victoria) and private (Country Fire Authority and landholders) with appropriate ecological support to expand ecological burning of key grasslands including existing reserves, roadsides and on private land.

The details

The latest data from the Arthur Rylah Institute concludes that of the grasslands once covering the Victorian Volcanic Plains, only 0.58% survive, with that report emphasising this is probably an overestimate.[1] The Victorian Government's own State of the Environment Report (2023) notes that of all Victoria's ecosystems, two are considered not to be at least stable: grasslands and wetlands.

The Melbourne Strategic Assessment (MSA) is a 2010 joint Commonwealth-State agreement under part 10 of the

1 Farmilo, B., Batpurev, K., Sinclair, S., White, M. and Griffioen, P. (2021) Spatial model for native grasslands of the Victorian Volcanic Plains. Unpublished Client Report. Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Heidelberg, Victoria.



Bababi Marning Grassland (Chris Clarke)

Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (Cth) (EPBC Act). The MSA's purpose is to ensure protection of Matters of National Environment Significance impacted by the expansion of Melbourne's Urban Growth Boundary.

There are numerous ongoing issues with this agreement, many stemming from the poor set-up process, including reductions in the extent of Conservation Areas and damage to grasslands not yet protected. Weeds are now degrading grasslands across most of the future Western Grassland Reserve, and the 36 MSA Conservation Areas, which have not yet been acquired.

In addition to facilitating a speedy implementation of the MSA, there is a need to protect grasslands and associated ecosystems across the state that fall outside the boundaries of the MSA.

The MSA:

- Guarantees developers can clear Matters of National Environment Significance across all (approx. 60,000 ha) of land in the growth areas except 36 Conservation Areas.
- Charges a Levy on developers, to pay for protections promised by the MSA.
- Promises the acquisition and protection of the 15,000 hectare Western Grassland Reserve outside the Urban Growth Boundary to protect the last large contiguous patch of EPBC-listed Natural Temperate Grasslands of the Victorian Volcanic Plain.
- Promises the acquisition and protection of a 1200 hectare reserve outside the Urban Growth Boundary to protect EPBC-listed Grassy Eucalypt Woodland.
- Promises the acquisition and protection of 36 Conservation Areas within the Urban Growth Boundary (as detailed in the 2013 Biodiversity Conservation Strategy).
- Promises the acquisition and protection of a set proportion of known habitat for three Matters of National Environment Significance – Golden Sun Moths, Matted Flax-lilies and Spiny Rice-flowers.
- Promises the development and delivery of a subregional species strategy for Southern Brown Bandicoots.

To date progress has been slow and piecemeal:

- Only 26% of the Western Grassland Reserve has been purchased.
- Only 40 hectares of the 1200 hectare Grassy Eucalypt Woodland Reserve has been purchased.
- Outstanding land has yet to be acquired to protect:
  - Spiny Rice-flowers – 394 hectares
  - Matted Flax-lilies – 529 hectares
  - Golden Sun Moths – 680 hectares.
- Only seven of the 36 Conservation Areas have been fully purchased, another 11 partially purchased.

The pace of development (of defined areas eligible for offsets) sets the pace at which offset payments are made by developers. Conservation Areas within the Urban Growth Zone are also to be handed over to public management as development around them proceeds, and until that time, are subject to ongoing decline.

In June 2020, the Victorian Attorney-General's Office delivered a scathing assessment of the delivery of the Victorian Government's program to protect Critically Endangered grasslands.

In 2024, to counter a lack of transparency by the Victorian Government, VNPA released our own People's Audit of the 36 Melbourne Strategic Assessment Conservation Areas. The report highlights numerous ongoing issues, many stemming from the Melbourne Strategic Assessment's poor set-up process, but including reductions in the extent of the Conservation Areas and damage to their conservation values.

Because of intensive management post-acquisition, the spread of weeds across acquired areas has more or less stabilised. However, across most of the 75% of unacquired Western Grassland Reserve land, that intensive management is absent and biodiversity decline is ongoing.

Significant issues and failures

- Degradation of grassland due to lack of protection and management.
- Failure to acquire land in a timely manner.
- Lack of compliance action against illegal clearing, including in proposed conservation reserves.
- Failure to meet offset obligations.
- Failure to accommodate newly discovered threatened species like Victorian Grassland Earless Dragons.
- Lack of future vision for completed reserves.

The MSA is a critical project for the future of grasslands which once stretched from Melbourne to Portland. But it must be managed more effectively.

In addition to improving implementation of the MSA, grasslands and associated ecosystems across the state that fall outside the MSA boundaries must be protected. This includes better management of grasslands with ecological burning, which would be beneficial for both public safety and ecological health.

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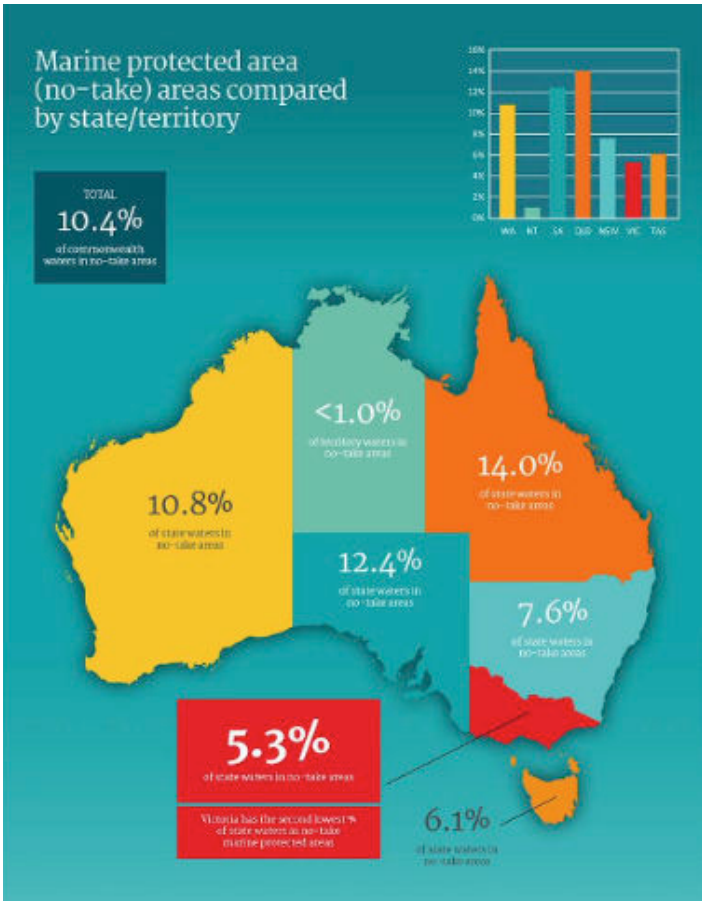
Look after marine life

Victoria protects just 5% of its ocean in no-take marine national parks and sanctuaries, despite being home to globally significant marine biodiversity, and faces growing pressures from climate change, fishing and disease. At the same time, Victoria has cut its frontline Fisheries Officer workforce by almost half, reducing our capacity to protect marine life from illegal fishing and enforce fisheries rules.

More of our marine wildlife and habitats need protection, including building resilience. With strong public support for marine protection, a great place to start is extending Jawbone Marine Sanctuary to include the Crystals at Williamstown, alongside protecting other identified high-value marine areas across Victoria.

The Victorian Environmental Assessment Council has identified significant gaps in Victoria's marine protected area network and recommended, on at least two occasions, an investigation to identify areas to fill these gaps.



Proposed policy

- Commit to reinstating sacked fisheries officers, as stated above in 'Protect the Protectors' to safeguard our marine national parks and prevent illegal fishing in them.
- Extend the Jawbone Marine Sanctuary to include protection for 'The Crystals' at Williamstown.
- Undertake an independent statewide investigation and assessment of gaps in the marine protected area network.



Jawbone Marine Sanctuary (Jack Breedon)

The details

Victoria has around 5% of its marine waters protected in no-take marine national parks and sanctuaries, the second-lowest proportion of any Australian state or territory.

Yet Victoria's marine environment is globally significant. More than 12,000 marine species are found in Victorian waters, many of them found nowhere else in the world. Southern Australian waters are a global marine biodiversity hotspot, with up to 90% of marine life found nowhere else on Earth.

At the same time, our marine life is facing growing pressure from climate change, habitat destruction, fishing pressure and emerging threats such as H5 bird flu. Victoria has also cut its Fisheries Officer workforce by 50%, from 69 to 39 positions, while closing Fisheries stations at Braeside and Altona. These two stations are within Port Phillip Bay, the most heavily populated area of the state, where they are needed most.

Over 80% of people support new marine national parks, but Victoria hasn't had a new marine park since 2002.

We need to do more to protect the marine life that we still have. Expanding our network of marine protected areas would give important habitats and wildlife places where they can recover and build resilience.

High-value areas have already been identified, including Point Nepean's seagrass meadows and dolphin refuges in Port Phillip Bay, Crawfish Rock in Western Port Bay and Cape Otway. More areas are listed in VNPA's Protecting our Seas and Shores: Priorities for marine conservation in Victoria report.[1]

A great place to start is extending Jawbone Marine Sanctuary to include the Crystals at Williamstown. The Crystals are a unique and valued marine habitat, and the proposal already has strong community backing, with a petition attracting almost 6,000 signatures.

With H5 bird flu now detected in Victorian wildlife, including in Little Penguins, seabirds, and seals, protecting important habitat and food sources is more important than ever.

More information on the importance of marine national parks and sanctuaries can be found on VNPA's website.[2]

1 https://vnpa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Protecting-our-Seas-and-Shores-Priorities-for-marine-conservation-in-Victoria.pdf
2 https://vnpa.org.au/marine-national-parks-and-sanctuaries/

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Control invasive species

Invasive species are damaging habitats and killing wildlife right across Victoria. Take feral deer for example. Hundreds of thousands of feral deer now occupy nearly 40% of Victoria. They are trashing and trampling habitats and wildlife from the coast to the high country.

Ecological restoration projects are being damaged by deer browsing. Farmers are losing productivity and forced to build expensive fences. Plantation forestry is being impacted. Gardens are being trashed. Dangerous road accidents involving feral deer are becoming more common.

More resources must be put into controlling invasive species including feral deer, feral cats and weeds across Victoria.

Proposed policy

- Fully fund and implement the Victorian Deer Control Strategy.
- Stop listing deer as protected under the *Wildlife Act 1975* (Vic).
- Commit to eradicating deer in western Victoria before numbers explode.
- Restore funding and frontline capacity to tackle invasive species across the state.
- Allow broad use of Felixer traps for feral cat control, not just specialised eradication programs.
- Increase funding for pest plant and animal control on public land, including reinstating and expanding the Good Neighbour Program.
- List environmental weeds such as English Ivy and Gazania on the *Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994* (Vic).

The details

Hundreds of thousands of feral deer now occupy nearly 40% of Victoria. The spread of feral deer across Victoria over the last 40 years is alarming. They are seriously impacting habitats and wildlife.[1] According to Melbourne University, 469 native species are exposed to additional extinction risk as a consequence of feral deer in the landscape.[1]

Two recent economic impact studies show that if action is not taken, the cost of the impact of feral deer to biodiversity, agriculture, forestry, public safety and the enjoyment of nature will be up to $1.1 billion over the next 20 years [1] and up to $2.2 billion over the next 30 years.[2]

The impacts of feral deer disrupt the overall viability and function of fragile ecosystems such as Alpine Wetlands, Littoral Rainforests, Coastal Vine Thickets and Cool Temperate Rainforests, all listed as threatened under state and federal laws. Australian habitats have evolved in the absence of any heavy hard-hoofed animals and the consequences of large numbers of those animals trampling the landscape are catastrophic.

1 An economic analysis of the impacts of deer in Victoria (2023) Melbourne University & DEECA https://share.google/aDAF4e49N94dHxgkk
2 Counting the doe:an analysis of the economic, social & environmental costs of feral deer in Victoria (2022) Frontier Economics



Invasive deer in native forest (Alex Maisey)

Frontier Economics found that over the next 30 years the losses in agriculture in Victoria due to feral deer impacts will be up to $500 million.[3] Should landowners and managers invest collaboratively in deer control, controlling deer will bring a significant return on investment. It is in everyone's interest to learn from each other and work together to control pests.

A few deer released 150 years ago have now become a large, uncontained and uncontrolled feral population, yet they remain protected under the *Wildlife Act 1975* (Vic). This hangover from the past is no longer justifiable. Protecting feral deer in Victoria is in contrast to every other mainland state, where they are recognised as a pest species and managed as such. Victoria is now the key infestation source of deer on the Australian mainland.

The statutory review of the *Wildlife Act 1975* (Vic) commenced in 2021 with extensive community consultation by an expert advisory panel. The final report released in October 2025 recommended that:

> 'The Victorian Government should pursue a declaration to list all deer as a pest animal under the *Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994*.'

This recommendation was rejected by the Allan Government.

Since then, farmers, conservationists and community advocates have formed a new alliance to push for action on invasive species ahead of the state election.

There is also a strong need to strengthen Victoria's management of cats, both feral and free roaming domestic animals, due to their impact of native wildlife including reptiles, marsupials and birds.

The release of Felixer traps for use in Victoria was welcome, as they are a vital tool to reduce feral cat numbers. But the use of these traps needs to be allowed in more situations, beyond use for eradication programs only.[4] There is a need to roll out the use of Felixer traps across Victoria as another tool in the tool kit to reduce the impact of feral cats.

An increase in funding is also needed to control weeds and pest animals across all land tenures, and blind spots in legislation in weed and pest management across Victoria must be reformed.

Weeds cost the Victorian economy $900 million[5] per year and are causing the collapse of the ecosystems across the state. In recent years there have been significant cuts to funding for weed management across public land including national parks. For long term success in pest management, ongoing funding is a must. Funding cycles should take into account the biology of the pest being controlled and ensure adequate follow up and monitoring to for long term success. Three year funding blocks for weed and pest management should be the minimum.

Loopholes in the *Forests Act 1958* (Vic) that protect feral horses on unprotected public land and state forests as stock, despite the animals being feral, is a blind spot in pest management on public land. Protections for feral horses under the *Forest Act* must be removed to allow for effective and cross tenure management.

Currently, a control stops at the border of national parks, even though feral horses are causing severe damage to sensitive alpine habitats such as the Nunniong high plains and Commonwealth Listed Alpine bogs and fens.

Invasive species are causing devastating damage to habitats and wildlife across Victoria. More funding and legislative reforms are desperately needed to reduce the impacts on nature.

3 https://www.frontier-economics.com.au/counting-the-doe-an-analysis-of-the-economic-social-environmental-cost-of-feral-deer-in-victoria/
4 Felixer cartridge now permitted for use against feral cats in Victoria (2025) Agriculture Victoria
5 Tackling Weeds And Pests On Victorian Roadsides (2021) https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/tackling-weeds-and-pests-victorian-roadsides

Look after Western Port Bay

Western Port Bay is an incredible place. It is Victoria's second largest bay, a sanctuary to 65% of Victoria's threatened bird species and over 1350 marine species. The Bay is an outdoor recreation destination and an internationally significant wetland. But right now it does not have a whole-of-bay plan to protect and manage it from increasing pressures: declining water quality, population growth across its catchment, climate change and increasing development.

Community concern for the bay is high and there is already broad support for a pathway forward for the bay to survive and thrive – through The Western Port Bay Framework. Now is the time to adopt this whole-of-bay plan.

Proposed policy

Commit to implementing the Western Port Bay Framework, the pathway to delivering two practical actions:

- Committing $2–3 million to develop and implement a marine spatial plan for Western Port Bay.
- Commit to a dedicated Western Port Bay Fund (modelled on the successful Port Phillip Bay Fund), $2 million per year over forward estimates.

The details

Despite best intentions, Western Port Bay has seen inconsistent planning, inadequate oversight and monitoring and poor accountability and governance. This is impacting habitats, wildlife, local communities and tourism. A marine spatial plan (MSP) is required to consolidate the different planning and management pieces currently siloed and respond to growing community concern about cumulative impacts from development, industry and renewable energy. The success of the plan will ride on funding to deliver it.

Victoria's Marine and Coastal Strategy proposed to undertake Victoria's first MSP between 2023–2027. Guidelines to develop an MSP have already been developed and the framework for creating a Regional and Strategic Partnership (the mechanism which the plan can be developed through) has already been rolled out in various places across the state. However, no specific marine spatial plan has been committed to.

This is an exciting opportunity to create the state's first MSP in a location where community concern over the impacts of development, industry and the Victorian Renewable Energy Terminal (VRET) are high. The Western Port Bay Framework proposes two practical actions already committed to in existing marine and coastal policy, and has broad support from Traditional Custodians, MPs, businesses, tourism operators, nature conservation groups and local community groups. It has been formally supported by the four Western Port local councils. This is a proactive, solutions-focused investment in the long-term health of one of Victoria's most significant marine landscapes. Now is the time to implement it.



Mangroves in Western Port Bay (Celeste de Vis)

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Bring back VEAC (or create a new one)

For more than 50 years, the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) and its predecessors provided independent, transparent, science-based land use recommendations to government. VEAC investigations, guided by expert panels and strong community consultation, shaped millions of hectares of national parks and protected areas across the state including: Grampians (Gariwerd), Alpine, Box–Ironbark, Redgum and marine national parks and new central west parks.

Out of the blue, the Allan Government largely abolished this long standing and effective institution, with no replacement. VEAC or an equivalent must be reinstated, to provide crucial recommendations about public land use in the face of climate change, population growth and many other threats that our wildlife and unique habitats are facing.

Proposed policy

- Create a new Victorian Land Use Assessment and Planning Council, to make recommendations directly to Government for the uses of public land in Victoria. The Council will:
  - Conduct investigations when requested by government on either a statewide or bioregional basis.
  - Base assessments on a thorough analysis of available information, including environmental, economic, climate and demographic forecasts and models, and acknowledge any uncertainties and knowledge gaps.
  - Conduct rigorous community and stakeholder consultation to gather input and advice and test proposed recommendations.
  - Publish a descriptive report, proposed recommendations and final recommendations that include:
  - A systematic review of the status of values and current uses, including these current or likely.
  - Future impacts of environmental, climate, demographic and economic changes.
  - Recommended land uses, including proposed changes.
  - Estimated economic and social impacts of recommendations.
  - Provide its final recommendations directly to government and the public.
- Abolish the 'Land Access Panel' and or repeal the *Fishing, Hunting and Outdoor Victoria Act 2026*.



Alpine National Park (Adam Ing)

The details

The Bolte Liberal Government created the Land Conservation Council (LCC) in 1971 in an attempt to diffuse ever-growing controversies over public land use decisions. The LCC and its successors, the Environment Conservation Council (ECC) and Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) (which was established by the Bracks Labor Government), proved extremely effective until in recent years, the Allan Labor Government sidelined then finally abolished VEAC in early 2026.

Without VEAC and its predecessors, Victoria would look very different. The Grampians (Gariwerd), Alpine and Barmah national parks, our marine national parks and sanctuaries, and the Mallee parks (to name just a few) would not exist in the way they do today – carefully designed and informed by science and community.

The government of the day has always had the final say. But processes where deals can be made or decisions based on political whim are inappropriate. In this recipe, nature and communities lose.

VEAC and its predecessors served successive Victorian governments well by providing a buffer between government and land use decisions. If small sections of the community didn't like aspects of an assessment's recommendations, the government of the day could lay responsibility at the door of the independent umpire.

The Allan Government's replacement process for VEAC, established under the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability through the *Entities Amendment Act 2025*, returns Victoria to a politicised, divisive and opaque land use planning process, which will likely fuel future disputes and community outrage. The Commissioner may establish an expert panel for an investigation, but this is not a requirement and there is no stipulation of the areas of expertise panel members should have.

Ultimately, any land use recommendations are made by a senior public servant so governments will no longer be able to 'blame the umpire', because the Commissioner is not independent of government.

The new Fishing, Hunting and Outdoor Recreation Victoria Authority *(Fishing, Hunting and Outdoor Victoria Act 2026)* has no statutory nature conservation obligations – its objects are entirely access and promotion focused. The Land Access Panel created by the recently passed legislation has no requirement for nature conservation expertise, no obligation to publish its advice and no duty to assess impacts on nature. It will act without oversight from VEAC. This risks weakening protections for nature on public land, including in national parks, state parks and conservation reserves.

Nature has lost an independent referee. Decisions about public land will no longer be overseen by a council of experts, but effectively assessed within government itself. This weakens transparency, reduces community input, and makes it easier for short-term political pressure to override long-term protection of landscapes.

A new Victorian Land Use Assessment and Planning Council needs to be created, and the Land Access Panel abolished to make sure Victoria has the independent, expert oversight and guidance essential to protect habitats and wildlife.