



COMMENTS ON THE

Protecting Victoria's Environment – Biodiversity 2036

CONSULTATION DRAFT

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The Victorian Landcare Council thanks the Victorian Government for the opportunity to contribute to the development of a vision for enhancing and protecting Victoria's natural infrastructure, and in particular discuss how the whole community can play a role in implementing this vision in the future. We welcomed the invitation to be part of the stakeholder engagement process during 2015, and we have taken the opportunity to further document and support our contributions at these sessions in the following comments.

Rather than responding to each of the 26 Consultation Questions dotted throughout the document we would like to focus on some key issues and we believe that these can be covered under the five strategic goals of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (p6 of the Biodiversity 2016 document):

- **Address the underlying causes of biodiversity loss by mainstreaming biodiversity across government and society.**
 - **Reduce the direct pressures on biodiversity and promote sustainable use.**
 - **Improve the status of biodiversity by safeguarding ecosystems, species and genetic diversity.**
 - **Enhance the benefits to all from biodiversity and ecosystem services.**
 - **Enhance implementation through participatory planning, knowledge management and capacity building.**
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- **Address the underlying causes of biodiversity loss by mainstreaming biodiversity across government and society.**

We strongly endorse the first Goal, **“To encourage more Victorians to value nature “**. We believe that a focus on embracing all of the community in shared responsibility for the future of Victoria's natural infrastructure is at the heart of the Vision that **“Victoria's biodiversity is healthy valued and actively cared for”**.

We believe that developing a credible **“Business Case”** for investment in the ecosystem service provided by an healthy well managed natural infrastructure is of the highest priority. This needs to include a value on biodiversity for not only agriculture but other industries such as tourism (A Koala Clancy Foundation has been recently launched to tap into tourism dollars and use them to enhance koala habitat on public and private land).

We strongly endorse the development of a set of environmental accounts that will meet the needs of government decision makers, land managers and the wider Australian community. These accounts should inform choices about effective programs, and allow the NRM sector to make the case for public investment in our natural infrastructure.

Since the mid-2000s, NRM budgets have steadily declined as a percentage of government spending, expenditure on community Landcare has fallen, and the broader community concern for the environment per se has also waned. One factor contributing to all these shifts is a failure to accurately measure and demonstrate change in environmental health and the relationship this has to the social and economic health of the nation.

Systems for monitoring environmental condition are fragmented across different assets and jurisdictions. The purpose of monitoring systems is split between accountability for public spending, and development of scientific knowledge of ecosystems, with little accountability to resource users.

Monitoring focuses too much on activities, or on resource condition, and not much on the links between activity and condition.

- **Reduce the direct pressures on biodiversity and promote sustainable use.**

We need to make biodiversity profitable! Whilst there is some mention of integrating biodiversity into productive agricultural systems, we believe that this needs to be a high priority. 65% of Victoria's land area is privately owned and over half of this is used for food production. With food security in Australia an imperative, it seems that the focus of the strategy on covenanting large tracts of land will only find traction in non arable areas, and not get the take up required to get significant biodiversity gains. We believe that there needs to be an acceptance of the model where embedding biodiversity protection into the private landscape is part of business as usual, and adds economic, environmental and social value to farming systems.

There is also no mention of integrating productive trees into biodiverse plantings. Agroforestry, which promotes the selective harvesting of single speciality and managed trees in revegetation sites and is a great marriage between production and conservation. Managing the site for the productive value of the timber has the added bonus of also managing the site for the biodiversity values. This is how most of the native forests in Europe are managed, why isn't there more universal acceptance of it here?

- **Improve the status of biodiversity by safeguarding ecosystems, species and genetic diversity.**

We also endorse the second Goal, ***"To Ensure That Victoria's Natural Environment Is Healthy"***.

It is pleasing to see an acknowledgement in the document that what once was may not be reproducible, and the changes in environmental conditions, especially soil fertility and climate, since European settlement have made the reintroduction of local provenance species in some landscapes nigh impossible.

If we are serious about reintroducing native biodiversity into the landscape then the rules need to be reassessed regarding the need to stick rigidly to an EVC. Revegetation guidelines should provide a degree of freedom around the EVC to allow landholders to adapt to his/her conditions. For example precluding farmers in the VVP area from any support for revegetation if it is not an exact replica of the VVP is impractical. Most of the cleared land in this area is no longer suitable for this ecological class.

Public land versus private land. *"Parks Victoria manages over 3.7 million hectares of protected areas and almost 206,000 hectares of non-protected areas. Victoria's parks protect ecosystem assets of high significance for the State and internationally. Specifically, national, State and wilderness parks present large areas of native vegetation, accounting for 38% of all native vegetation in the State. In addition, the parks network as a whole accounts for 60% of wetland areas of international significance in the State. Based on modelled data on vegetation quality, native vegetation in parks is found in better condition than outside park areas across all ecological vegetation classes."* (1)

The public landholder should have the same responsibilities towards protecting and enhancing native biodiversity as the private landholder. With nearly 35% Victoria owned by the public, continuing to manage this for biodiversity outcome should be the highest priority. Catastrophic events, such as wild fire, and severe weed and pest animal infestations could significantly impact on this reserve and adjoining private land and management for this should be a priority.

- **Enhance the benefits to all from biodiversity and ecosystem services.**

Not only do we need to “make biodiversity profitable” as described above but also continue to build the case that **Biodiversity is essential for community health**. This is all part of the Business Case but to continue with regard to public land, the Literature Review, “Healthy Parks, Healthy People”, discusses the value of the ecosystem service provided by our state parks on human health and well-being. “ recent research shows that ‘green nature’, such as parks, can reduce crime, foster psychological wellbeing, reduce stress, boost immunity, enhance productivity, and promote healing. In fact, the positive effects on human health, particularly in urban environments, cannot be overstated. As a result, urban planning should ensure that the communities have adequate access to nature”(2).

- **Enhance implementation through participatory planning, knowledge management and capacity building.**

In the long term if we are to be successful in achieving landscape change then our private landholders and the broader community need to be involved. The central plank of community implementation of natural resource management, is building a participatory process in strategic planning for landscape change. In many instances this term is used synonymously with the word “community engagement” However what does this mean?

Is it.....

- *“Informing of the community of policy directions of the government.*
- *Consulting the community as part of a process to develop government policy, or build community awareness and understanding.*
- *Involving the community through a range of mechanisms to ensure that issues and concerns are understood and considered as part of the decision-making process.*
- *Collaborating with the community by developing partnerships to formulate options and provide recommendations.*
- *Empowering the community to make decisions and to implement and manage change”. (3)*

Most members of the landcare community have been exposed over many years to all 5 of the above approaches. A clear definition of what actual form that community engagement will take is essential. The cost of building a relationship with the community is also considerable, and requires mutual responsibility and reciprocity. This is resource intensive requiring an investment not only in terms of physical commitment in time, from all partners, but also in facilitating community participation. “Community Engagement” requires long term investment.

The benefits though are widespread. These include :-

- The value adding provided by community. Conservative estimates put this at a figure of at least a 5 to 1 return on external investment.
- The intellectual capital and experience provided by generational land managers.
- The “ownership” of outcomes resulting in long term commitment to project management, “outside the contract”, and often beyond the terms of professional staff.
- The opportunity to build programs across property boundaries to achieve landscape outcomes.

Currently the CCMA is trialling an NRM Portal tool to assist landcare networks in planning for landscape action at the local level. There is the potential to scale this digital spatial approach

both down to the actual farm level and also up to the regional and state level so that all stakeholders can have input into decision making.

The lack of a comprehensive set of indicators of catchment health for Victoria we believe is not only impeding external investment into NRM (what better way to reward investors than to show what they are doing is making a difference) but it is also disenfranchising the most important investor, the landholder, who believes what he or she is doing is resulting in a healthier environment but lack of hard data means that there is no broader recognition that all the hard work is paying off.

We believe that the community has a significant role to play in achieving this goal, and given the right tools and resources could be a major asset. The key though is to

- Assure that measures & indicators are negotiated and agreed to at and between NRM levels
- People at all levels willingly apply measures & indicators to guide data collection
- Reporting on performance & outcomes is shared by all and informs improvements that are negotiated across all NRM levels, starting from local level up.
- That the language used in defining the key indicators is able to be understood by all stakeholders from the landholder, local community group through to state and federal investors and ultimately the international sphere.
- That the measures and indicators are available for planning from the local level through to the state and federal level
- That investment in “citizen science” to leverage long term community ownership of the MERI process, is embedded in the framework

1. Valuing Victoria' Parks, Parks Victoria (2015)

2. Parks, Nature and Health, Literature Review Deakin University and Parks Victoria (2008)

3. DEPI website (2013)