

HAMILTON FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB



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To: Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning

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Protecting Victoria's Environment – Biodiversity 2036 Draft Document

Background

The background and discussion on biodiversity relationship with the economy is excellent. We will, therefore, only comment on other aspects of the draft where we think changes would improve outcomes.

Initiatives that would help preserve and enhance biodiversity:

1. Incentives for protection of remnant vegetation on private land – the Shires should be encouraged to allow rate remission on such land and the Victorian Govt should reimburse the Shires. The area of 'bush' on farms is not great – studies in 1996 & 1997 for the Glenelg and Corangamite Salinity Implementation Survey found that, on average, about 8 ha of remnant vegetation remained on farms in SW Victoria (Amirtharajah and Kearney 1996; Amirtharajah 1997). The financial cost to the Government or advantage to the landholder would not be great; the advantage lies in the landholder being acknowledged for retaining native vegetation and not being penalised by having to pay rates on land that they cannot legally clear or otherwise obtain a financial return from. The 'incentive' should be simple to administer and the result could be that landholders will be less inclined to clear such areas by stealth (e.g. by using goats to destroy the shrubs, as happens now in some areas).
2. Legal issues – fines for illegal removal of timber from National Parks and reserves is far less than for similar activities in State Forests. That should be corrected. The fines should also be raised and a minimum stipulated because some magistrates currently impose very modest fines that do little to discourage illegal activities.
3. Regulations for Flora Reserves, Streamside Reserves and other Reserves – currently it is not possible to legally prevent camping or vehicle movement anywhere on such reserves. That is given as a reason why no signage is erected to prevent the public from degrading sensitive areas in these reserves. That situation needs to be urgently addressed because officers have little authority to intervene where such action occurs. Off-track driving in areas such as the Fulham Streamside Reserve is a very destructive practice that has been encouraged by the lack of any signage requesting vehicles stay on the tracks, and inability to prosecute offenders. It has led to spread of weeds such as Cape Tulip and Sparaxis, deep wheel ruts throughout wet areas and the degradation of the native flora.
4. Categories of reserves – there is an urgent need for VEAC to re-assess the status of some reserves. One example is that of Fulham Streamside Reserve. That 850 ha reserve has some 330 native flora species, including outliers from the Mallee. It is one of the best flora areas in SW Victoria, yet it has no proper protection and horses are allowed to be ridden all over the reserve and to be camped on areas of native flora. It is a popular area for camping and recreation but has no toilet.
5. Staffing of National Parks and Reserves – there are so few staff that little work can be done to control pest plants or animals, including people. Unless that changes nothing will improve in biodiversity outcomes. How are a dozen staff in SW Victoria going to have time be able to make any improvement? **There is a clear disconnect between statements of the economic benefit of our wild places to Victoria and the willingness of Government to pay for its management.** Thus, "\$1.4 billion in spending per year is associated with visits by tourists to parks in Victoria, generating \$1 billion gross value added to the State's economy and 14,000 jobs". Yet, Parks Victoria's budget for 2015-16 is only \$77 million, greatly reduced from the level of \$110 million in 2011-12. **That situation has to change.**
6. Wetland restoration and climate change – with climate change the fate of small wetlands is sealed. The loss of wetlands (some 50% in Western Victoria) is a major issue but not emphasised in this report. Why not? Wetland restoration is relatively easy to do. We contend that, to take a long-term view, it will be necessary to **restore some very large wetlands** that have good catchments and can withstand climate change. If that is not done then the impact on our waterbirds (including migratory waders) will be catastrophic. Restoring large wetlands, such as the 2500 ha Buckley Swamp near Mt Napier, would cost perhaps \$10 million for acquisition of the private land component but the outcome is more certain than spending funds on smaller wetlands that have little future prospects. Some will still be valuable for the period of year when they hold water but most will be ploughed up and cropped. A policy must be developed to put funds aside for the acquisition and restoration of major wetlands.

7. Control of weeds and feral animals – there is no will to eradicate feral horses from Alpine Parks or deer and goats from any park. These animals are destroying the original vegetation but little is done. There are also issues with weeds, but too few staff or funds to make any impact on that huge problem.

Other Issues around loss of biodiversity

The 7 issues mentioned on p. 13 are very apt, but some have not been highlighted. For whatever reasons (perhaps from political dictates), DELWP failed to enforce the few regulations that were in force and the actions (or inaction) of some sections within DELWP appear to be anti-conservation. Some examples are:

1. Failure to enforce the Flora & Fauna Guarantee Act regarding threatened fauna and flora - in particular, the regulations regarding destruction of native grasslands on road and rail reserves, where almost all of the meagre remaining remnants are. Hundreds of hectares of pristine native grasslands were ploughed up or sprayed with herbicide on the Volcanic Plains and adjacent areas near Moyston and Dunkeld, but the only interest came from the Federal Government's EPBC Act. DELWP handed the problem over to the Councils, resulting in little or no action. That lack of response is a major reason why the illegal destruction of native grasslands on road reserves continues.
2. Failure to actively enforce regulations regarding clearing of native vegetation from road reserves and rail reserves when fences are renewed. Fencing contractors are therefore not discouraged from excessive clearing and soil disturbance on public land. A recent example was on the Hamilton-Coleraine Rail Reserve near the Wannon-Nigretta Rd, where up to 3 m was cleared on either side of the fence and all timber pushed into the rail reserve.
3. DELWP's fire section actions showed a lack of ecological balance – in SW Vic there appears to have been little input from ecologists when the fire teams formulate and carry out operational plans. The effect of that has been a loss of biodiversity. Examples include the pre-emptive clearing of fire-lines in Far SW Victoria, ostensibly to reduce chances of accidents when burns are conducted later. The first works in the Weecurra State Forest and near Dartmoor involved trees being cleared up to 50 m from the road, in a region where the max. tree height is invariably only 15-20 m. Public protests and suggestions that most of the trees could be protected by raking around resulted in some reduction to that environmentally stupid practice where old Brown Stringybark used by the endangered Red-tailed Black-cockatoo were ruthlessly removed. The aesthetic effect of wide-scale roadside clearing is appalling.
4. Failure to safeguard the habitat resource for Red-tailed Black-cockatoo – little effort appears to have been made to reduce the damaging impact of prescription burns on the Brown Stringybark forests. The hot fires, which could be moderated by burning in the evenings or on cooler days with higher moisture content, affected foliage 10 m or higher in the canopy. There has been a serious impact on seed-production in the areas that the Red-tailed Black-cockies depend upon for food.
5. Impact of frequent, hot, large-scale prescribed burns in the Mallee region – the impact of that recent mis-management has had a very negative impact on threatened fauna species such as Malleefowl, Black-eared Miner, Mallee Emu-wren and overall biodiversity.
6. Duck hunting – there is an entrenched hunting ethic in DELWP, with vulnerable species affected by DELWP's refusal to prevent hunting on wetlands where large numbers of those species were found. Thus, in 2015, 60 Brolga were roosting on Lake Bullrush but that lake was not exempted from duck hunting and, despite a claim by DELWP, no wetland in the district had water where they might go. Another strange action is to allow shooting on wetlands where fewer than 50 birds of an endangered species (such as Speckled Duck or Blue-billed Duck) were found – i.e. the rarer the species the better the odds to eliminate it! Each year hunters shoot non-target species ranging from Black Swan to Eurasian Coots. Another issue is the major disturbance offered to migratory wader such as Red-necked Stint and Sharp-tailed Sandpipers which are preparing for their long flight to Siberia. **Delaying the shooting season for a month would prevent most of that disturbance.**
7. Restoration of sanctuary status to wetlands – the revision of the Wildlife Act in 1975 resulted in the inadvertent loss of long-held sanctuary status for Lakes Linlithgow and Bullrush. DELWP has steadfastly refused to restore that status, which would give protection to waterbirds, including reducing disturbance to large flocks of Red-necked Stint and Sharp-tailed Sandpipers.

We contend that if the decline in biodiversity in Victoria is to be halted and subsequently improved then DELWP managers have to develop a culture that reflects the vision and intentions of those who prepare documents such as the Biodiversity 2036 draft. DELWP also needs to effectively communicate its messages to the government of the day. Currently there are thousands of disillusioned naturalists in Victoria, observing the decline of flora and fauna across the country as a result of government apathy.

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