

An open letter to the Andrews Government: It's time to act for nature in Central Victoria

We write to you about the importance of implementing recommendations for new National Parks in Central Victoria.

In 2017 the state government requested the respected statutory agency, the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC), to undertake an investigation into public land in central Victoria. The areas include the public forests of the Wombat, Wellsford, Mount Cole and Pyrenees Ranges.

The purpose of the investigation was to identify the natural and cultural values and make balanced recommendations about how to best conserve and enhance them.¹

Following the two-year expert investigation, VEAC recommended that large areas (78,229 ha) of these forests become National Parks (50,146 ha), other conservation reserves (8355 ha), and Regional Parks (19,728 ha) to:

- Provide vital habitat for over 370 rare and threatened animal and plant species including Greater Gliders², Powerful Owls³ and critically endangered endemic plants such as the Mt Cole Grevillea⁴
- Store millions of tonnes of carbon, significantly helping our efforts to mitigate climate change
- Create critical water security for farms and communities, by protecting the headwaters of rivers that flow from these forests
- Support rural and regional visitation and nature-based tourism
- Support joint management of new parks with Traditional Owners

These recommendations⁵ present an incredible opportunity for the Andrews' government to create refuges for threatened animals and plants, protect the headwaters of significant rivers, increase rural and regional tourism, carbon storage and joint management with traditional owners.

It is now four years since the VEAC investigation began and in that time the long list of threatened species in Victoria has increased.

The VEAC report was tabled in parliament over 18 months ago, yet the Victorian Government has found time to approve mining exploration leases and logging coupes in sensitive wildlife habitat, while ignoring the recommendations and missing legal requirements to respond.

The response is now 12 months overdue.

The latest Victorian State of Environment Report highlighted that Victoria's natural environment is under significant stress. Most indicators in this report showed much of Victoria's biodiversity and natural areas to be in a poor and declining condition.⁶ With the further devastating impacts of the recent bushfires many native ecosystems, plants and animals are now in further crisis.

The Victorian Government has identified climate change as one of the biggest threats to the future of the State, with warmer and drier conditions projected to have negative consequences for health, infrastructure, agriculture, water, biodiversity, and alpine and coastal areas. The forested areas of this investigation not only store millions of tons of carbon, this increases every year and contributes significantly to the mitigation of climate change.

A survey initiated by Sustainability Victoria showed that nearly 80% of Victorians surveyed are concerned about

climate change, with the majority being very concerned.⁷ A poll conducted in October 2020 showed that four in five (81%) Melbournians support the proposals to expand National Parks in Victoria, around Daylesford, Woodend, Bendigo and Ballarat. The same poll found that more than half of Melbournians say that COVID-19 restrictions have made them value access to natural areas (56%), and National Parks (52%), across Victoria more.⁸

A recent independent economic assessment of the proposed central west parks shows that new National Parks will return between double to four times what is invested. All scenarios assessed resulted in a net economic gain. For every \$1 invested, there is a potential return of \$2.30 - \$4.80 at the societal level.⁹

New parks will protect wildlife, create economic opportunities, facilitate joint management with Traditional Owners in regional Victoria, and accelerate the post-COVID recovery.

Communities would have new parks to explore. Wildlife would have security and protection. Instead we're losing valuable time, and some of the most unique and vulnerable nature in our state.

Creating new National Parks isn't just about saving wildlife and safeguarding beautiful places. It's about clean air and water, a liveable temperature and people's livelihoods.

The organisations listed below represent hundreds of thousands of Victorians and call on the Andrews State Government to protect these natural areas of central Victoria and immediately accept and implement the VEAC Central West Investigation recommendations.

ACF Community Bendigo District	Friends of the Canadian Corridor
Australian Forests and Climate Alliance	Friends of Crusoe Reservoir and No. 7 Park
Australian Plants Society (Victoria)	Friends of Mallacoota
Bacchus Marsh Platypus Alliance	Friends of Werribee Gorge and Long Forest Mallee
Ballarat Environment Network	Gippsland Environment Group
Bendigo Family Nature Club	Hepburn Wind
Bendigo Field Naturalists Club	Humane Society International Australia
Bendigo & District Environment Council	Madden Sainsbury Foundation
Bendigo Sustainability Group	Malmsbury District Landcare
Biolinks Alliance Inc	Moorabool Environment Group
Birdlife Australia	The National Trust Australia (Victoria)
BirdLife Castlemaine District Branch	Newham & District Landcare Group
Bush Heritage Australia	Project Platypus
Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club Inc	Save our Strathbogie Forest
Doctors for the Environment Australia	St Arnaud Field Naturalist Club Inc.
Environment Victoria	Strathbogie Ranges CMN
Environmental Justice Australia	Trentham Sustainability Group
Euroa Environment Group	The Wilderness Society (Victoria)
Field Naturalists Club Ballarat	WWF Australia
Friends of Cornish Hill	Wellsford Forest Conservation Alliance
Friends of the Earth	Werribee River Association
Friends of the Box-Iron Bark Forests	Wombat Forestcare Inc.
Friends of the Brisbane Ranges	Victorian National Parks Association

References and links

- ¹ <http://www.veac.vic.gov.au/documents/ToR-with-extended-date.pdf>
- ² Report Wombat Forest Greater Refuge for Gliders, VNPA & Wombat Forestcare, Feb 2020 <https://vnpa.org.au/greater-gliders-need-a-new-national-park-in-the-wombat-forest/>
- ³ VNPA Mount Cole forest clearfelling critical owl havens; threatened species detection report Mt.Cole State Forest song meter analysis, Feb 2021 <https://vnpa.org.au/powerful-owls-discovered-for-first-time-in-decades-call-for-new-national-park/>
- ⁴ VNPA Threatened Species Detection Report Mt. Cole State Forest, June 2020 <https://vnpa.org.au/a-rare-discovery/> and https://vnpa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/VNPA_Threatened-Species-Detection-Report-Mt-Cole-SF-Archies-Rd-May-2020.pdf
- ⁵ <http://www.veac.vic.gov.au/investigation/central-west-investigation>
- ⁶ Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability Victoria , State of the Environment Report 2018 <https://www.ces.vic.gov.au/reports/state-environment-2018/biodiversity-plants-animals>
- ⁷ Sustainability Victoria, Victorian Perceptions of Climate Change 2020 <https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/research-data-and-insights/research/climate-change/victorians-perceptions-of-climate-change>
- ⁸ Lonergan Research surveyed 1,009 Melbournians aged 18+. between 25 September and 1 October 2020 https://vnpa.org.au/publications/covid_parks_polling/
- ⁹ Sayers Advisory, New Central Parks West, Economic Assessment, 12 February 2021 <https://vnpa.org.au/new-national-parks-for-central-west-victoria-makes-good-economic-sense-says-new-modelling/>