

Submission to the Regional Forest Agreements Modernisation Program

This paper answers the question –

“What should the RFAs aim to achieve over the next 20 years?” with reference to the Independent consultation paper by Dr William Jackson.

The answers come from the perspective of a volunteer with no environmental qualifications but a lifelong interest in all things natural and a desire aid in helping to protect and restore our unique natural heritage.

In Summary, I place priority on a holistic approach which must include -

1. Protection and improvement the biodiversity of every EVC and all areas of the CAR system.
2. Providing resilience for listed species across a number of protected habitats through more National Parks and linked parks.
3. Providing resilience to climate change and catastrophic events
4. Replacing control burns with rapid response to all fires, restoration of habitat devastated by fire and weed control.
5. Provision of clearly defined areas for recreational pursuits.
6. Reduction to zero of logging activities in native forests with provision of jobs in the following areas –
7. Encouraging and increasing non-destructive forest industries.
8. Increasing replacement of wood harvesting with recycled plastic products, which would also help our waste problem.
9. More trained professional staff to ease the current burden on citizen scientists who are increasingly elderly.
10. Education about, publicity & enforcement of the current laws
11. Real input from and research into indigenous culture and practises

1. Protection and improvement the biodiversity of every EVC and all areas of the CAR system and
2. Providing resilience for listed species across a number of protected habitats through more National Parks and linked parks.

At 3.1.1 Dr Jackson finds that Parks Vic. rate only 40% by area of their parks as in good or excellent condition. This means that 60% by area is in fair or poor condition. That is a fail mark by anyone's standards. The graph at 3.1.2 puts only half of Victoria's bioregions within Parks at 15%. Thus is also a dismal record if we hope to save and restore Victoria's biodiversity.

Putting serious effort into improving that percentage means that more unique species will survive and thrive. I fully support the suggestion by the VNPA that 1% of Victoria's budget be spent on rescuing our forests. Any pocket of endangered or vulnerable species should receive National Park status with a buffer of state park where feasible. In SW Vic the state forests of Drajurk, Dergholm and Anya all have areas of wonderful species diversity which need National Park protection, especially as they are part of the Red-tailed Black Cockatoo habitat.

It is necessary to provide Corridors between habitats and multiple habits for flora and fauna listed as vulnerable or endangered to ensure species can thrive and survive threats. This has been well documented and common knowledge for decades and yet it has not happened on the scale that it needs to and known corridors have been destroyed for access, firebreaks, farming etc.

Victoria is the only Australian state able to showcase a range of forest types as being thriving habitats for flora and fauna and part of a thriving, sustainable economy.

3. Providing resilience to climate change and catastrophic events.

North-South Corridors have been planned (such as Habitat 141) but pine and blue gum plantations break up green corridors. These corridors have been discussed for at least 4 decades that I know of. The hard yards of actually making them happen is now imperative if our wild life is to survive climate change and have escape routes

from catastrophic events. Roadsides cannot be used as wildlife refuges as in the UK because the roadsides are too narrow and our wildlife bigger and road kill is a constant threat to both wildlife and humans. Therefore other public land must be properly set aside.

4. Replacing control burns with rapid response to all fires, restoration of habitat devastated by fire and weed control.

Dr Jackson states in 3.3.2 that the Code of Practice for Bushfire management includes –

“To maintain or improve the resilience of natural ecosystems”

The state forests are not being maintained or improved. The current control burns regime is destroying undergrowth over areas that are often too large and at times not near buildings. They require huge amounts of expensive equipment, manpower and time and spread invasive weeds so that instead of wildflowers and orchids being given a chance, a monoculture of an invasive weed degrades the landscape. Instead a rapid response to any and all threats of natural fire anywhere and proper patrols using new technologies such as drone cameras and 360 degree hill top lookout cameras would be money better spent. The smaller and ground dwelling species would not then be burnt out of existence. Lizards in particular are burnt escaping under logs from danger, fungi mycelia in the compost layer are burnt meaning plants that depend on them cannot grow. A great deal more research on particular ecosystems has to be done before artificial burns can be conducted with confidence. But no natural fire, no matter how remote from infrastructure should be left to burn in current climate conditions. We have water bombing aircraft; we can put fires out as soon as they start and save our carbon dioxide eating and rain producing trees. The cooler months could then be spent controlling the spread of invasive weeds and pest animals and revegetating habitat.

5. Provision of clearly defined areas for recreational pursuits.

Some recreational pursuits such as trail motor bikes and 4x4 driving can be destructive to access tracks for fire fighting and to

fragile habitat and wildlife, so should be contained in either corridors alongside or buffer zones around National Parks. All tracks should be obvious and maintained. . Many recreational users of the bush actually cannot tell a native tree from an exotic weed. A well advertised “Be a good mate to the Bush” campaign could emphasise good practise e.g. washing off the mud from tyres and boots between trips. Simple wash trenches could be installed. Duck shooting should be ended; there are plenty of feral pests to kill.

Some landowners put illegal roads through conservation zones to the beach or drive on the beach or put illegal boat ramps and jetties in protected estuaries for their recreational pursuits. There is no money or Govt. backing for Parks Vic or DELWP or Fisheries to properly police the laws of the land so they are being increasingly flouted to the detriment of the environment. Humans need to comply with the law in their recreational pursuits or we all suffer in the medium and long term.

Eco tourism is a mixed blessing needing huge bus parking areas and amenities so should be confined to areas without fragile or vulnerable habitat but, well placed, more could be made of active, adventure experiences in bush settings.

6. Reduction to zero of logging activities in native forests with provision of jobs in the following areas –
7. Encouraging and increasing non-destructive forest industries.
8. Increasing replacement of wood harvesting with recycled plastic products, which would also help solve our waste problem.

Logging decimates native habitat and could be phased out if more use is made of recycled plastic and paper products instead of wood. The State government needs to deal with the mountains of waste plastic and paper. Recycling, which has to happen anyway would reduce demand for wood for paper production and many construction projects. This could provide the jobs needed for loggers made redundant if factories are placed where jobs are needed. Rotting signs, fencing, picnic settings, boardwalks etc could be replaced with recycled, fire resistant plastic in National parks and State forests. Increased Eco tourism is going to need better and more signage and amenities which should not be built

with flammable materials in a warming and drying climate. **Replas** in Ballarat has shown what can be done.

9. More trained professional staff to ease the current burden on citizen scientists who are increasingly elderly and disillusioned.

This is a big concern. A lot of effort has been required of volunteers over the last several decades to find, monitor and keep records of threatened species and use mapping apps, to control weeds, to replace lost vegetation, to employ landcare facilitators etc.

Technology and modern accountability skills among older natural scientists are scant and many will not share their discoveries having experienced both wanton and thoughtless destruction by the general public and businesses in the past.

The VBA is too difficult to use and needs simplifying. Replication of amateur sightings can mean a rare animal seems common, (as has happened in the past).

I have recently attended a VBA mapping review with DELWP staff present where respected amateur naturalists queried how to find the sightings they had entered over the last 20 years. They do not exist! They seem to have been removed by government employees. This makes it a hopeless case to prevent extinctions. Who would bother to volunteer their time in the face of such dishonest behaviour? How are the Vic Govt. departments to regain the trust of their citizens who are passionate to allow our flora and fauna to survive in the face of callous indifference and preferential treatment for human activities (such as Vic Forests logging) which may be regularly breaking the law?

We environmental volunteers have felt increasingly frustrated, overwhelmed and depressed in recent years. After 35 years, many landcare groups are struggling or disbanding. The burden of many hours spent on professional standards of accountability and reporting as volunteers without the degree level training means that many no longer choose to volunteer or are incapable of the tasks required. **We need leadership from the government and its professionals.**

Some private landowners have done a lot under Landcare to modernise farming practises and save remnant vegetation while

professional DELWP staff have lit fires and highly trained Parks Vic staff have cleaned toilets. A rethink of staffing requirements is well overdue, volunteer organisations, landcare groups etc are finding it almost impossible to find able bodied volunteers. Overseas volunteers, unused to hard physical work and Australian conditions are not the answer either as we have learned the hard way. Properly qualified and trained professionals are needed to deal with these crises of climate change, species extinction and destruction by non-sustainable practices. The SWIFFT teams at DELWP has given us some much needed positive feedback. Can we please also have real support for weed eradication and forest restoration? Many of us can remember the forests and farms of 60 years ago. The farms and roadsides are in many places more treed than then, but the forests we see today are dreadful neglected travesties of the wonderful forest giants in the midst of lush understoreys that we remember. A lot of the degradation occurred when Vic Forests just kept reducing the legal girth of trunks they could log, instead of logging and revegetating sustainably. The Otway Ranges come up repeatedly as an example of forest degradation and loss. Today's younger generations are completely ignorant of what we once had and that would include most employed in our forest parks and probably includes the Premier himself !

10. Education about and publicity of the current laws put simply then consistent enforcement.

Dr Jackson states that the legislation regarding the environment is satisfactory and indeed meets world best practice. There is therefore a gaping hole in the practical outworking of those laws.

The Office of the Conservation Regulator (OCR) is a big step in the right direction for legal use of our forests. More can be done by educating the public on the simple version of those laws and how they benefit society as a whole.

Even after logging is stopped the OCR will be needed for a variety of other industries and uses of our public lands.

If there are no consequences for infringements of the laws, the laws become universally ignored. It is pointless having the world's best practice in legislature if no-one heeds it. The practical

outcomes of our laws and monitoring are both far more expensive and essential.

Meeting the concurrent challenges of climate change, degradation of forest values, non-sustainable profiteering, and extinction of species is going to take all Victorians, Government at all levels, public and private ownerships to work together as never before to achieve the rescue of our natural heritage for future generations. The task is now hard but essential and a major public education and publicity campaign will need to happen. This consultation period is a good start but all Victorians need to know they are valued stakeholders and participants.

11. Real input from and research into indigenous culture and practises.

Much can be done to heal the wounds of the past by researching and taking into consideration the indigenous cultures and treatment of the landscape. The tokenism of the past has no place in today's world which needs real answers to solve current problems.

As a non-indigenous member of the community, I cannot discuss the how, but can only support the rights of our indigenous citizens to have their tribal memories properly heard and understood, which may not be by our usual means of western understanding, but is more valuable as a means of relating sustainably to our landscape.