

13 November 2018

Dear Madam/Sir

Re: VEAC Central West Investigation

I write to register my support of the VEAC Central West Investigation (into public land in the vicinity of the Wombat, Wellsford, Mount Cole and Pyrenees Range Forests) requested by the Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change in March 2017.

I believe this investigation has effectively evaluated the condition, natural, cultural, social and economic values and the current uses of public land in the specified area. VEAC has provided an informed and balanced assessment including ample opportunity for public input and made recommendations for fair and appropriate management arrangements to conserve and enhance natural and cultural values.

I commend VEACs recommendations to establish a comprehensive, adequate and representative system of protected areas, which also contain key areas for threatened species conservation. The implementation of the VEAC recommendations would fill significant gaps in Victoria's current designated conservation areas. I specifically endorse the recommendation for the expansion of the Wombat Forest to form the Wombat-Lerderderg National Park.

Despite a history of exploitation, the Wombat contains some of the last remaining continuous intact areas of forest in Victoria and supports the headwaters of seven waterways, including five major rivers. With the rapid and increasing effects of climate change and local development pressure in the region, it is critical to take a precautionary approach by conserving the remaining forested areas, especially those deemed as high habitat value by the VEAC assessment.

Many species listed under the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1998* (FFG) are present in the Wombat Forest including the endemic Wombat leafless Bossiaea (*Bossiaea vombata*), the iconic powerful owl (*Ninox strenua*) and the greater glider (*Petauroides volans*). However, there are also other species that are known to be rare and possibly endangered, such as fungi within the genera *Sacrodon* and *Auriscalpium*, currently only recorded in the Wombat Forest and the latter only from a single tree. Although fungi have been largely overlooked in Australian biodiversity conservation their ecological significance in underpinning forest functioning and resilience is well established. Given that only one non-lichenised fungus species is listed under the FFG, the only way to protect the forest's diverse mycota and the valuable so-called 'ecosystem services' they provide is habitat protection. These organisms and their habitats are under constant pressure from inappropriate use of fire as well as logging and other destructive activities. Generally speaking, conservation issues are similar for plants, animals and fungi in that they all require intact habitats to exist. Scientists worldwide have advocated habitat protection as the most effective way to protect species, including those that are not yet known. This means retaining habitat continuity and age structure of trees (including woody debris on the ground) and managing for ecologies, not just economies. Moreover, while conservation often focusses on flagship and endangered species, common species also require protection as they contribute greatly to the biomass, function, structure and hence resilience of ecosystems, reinforcing the need for habitat protection.

The Wombat Forest has had the support of conservation groups, specifically Wombat Forestcare that have worked tirelessly to protect the conservation values of the forest. Wombat Forestcare has also supplied much of the knowledge that is known about species distribution within the forest. Its members have provided valuable insights to assist with the better 'management' of the forest, for example, in guiding those implementing burn regimes.

As someone who works extensively throughout Victorian forests, but also in the depauperate and desperate remnants of central and western European forests, I am constantly reminded of the incalculable value of Australia's forests. I trust that Victorians will also recognise their great significance and support the VEAC Investigation.

Yours faithfully,

Alison Pouliot
Ecologist