

Submission to the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council

This submission is in response to an invitation from
the Hon Martin Dixon MP.

It is submitted by the Friends of Somers Foreshore Inc.
trading as The Friends of South Sea Foreshore Reserve, Somers.

Introducing the Friends of Somers Foreshore Inc.

The Friends were formed in early 2008 by a group of retired members of Somers Foreshore Committee of Management together with some long-term community volunteers. The Group planned to help the then current Committee of Management finish an Envirofund Grant and to then continue to maintain that grant and all the previous grants undertaken since 2002 on the area of the Crown Land known as “the Eastern Cliffs”. In late 2009, due to a recurring management issue, the Friends reluctantly walked away.

In early 2010 the Friends of Somers Foreshore Inc., now trading as The Friends of South Sea Foreshore Reserve Somers, entered into an agreement with Mornington Peninsula Shire to begin restoring a section of Mornington Peninsula Shire-managed Foreshore Reserve. In early 2011 the Friends included a section of adjoining Crown Land into a WPP CMA Community Grant program, with the written consent of the then Somers Foreshore Committee of Management.

The Group is still working to restore and maintain the South Sea Foreshore Reserve under a Memorandum of Understanding with the MPSC and with the support of Parks Victoria, now the appointed Committee of Management of the Crown Land Foreshore Reserve.

Rosemary Birney

Hon. Secretary

Friends of Somers Foreshore Inc.

t/a Friends of South Sea Foreshore Reserve, Somers

The coastal strip of land around Westernport includes Commonwealth land, Mornington Peninsula National Park, French Island National Park, MPSC reserved land, freehold land and State-managed Crown Land, Phillip Island Reserves and others.

The reserved land helps to protect the freehold land inland from it from the forces of tides and wind and the reserved lands also protect the Ramsar site of Westernport.

Many of the Crown Land Reserves around Westernport are reserved for 'Public Use' and are managed by the Victorian State Government on behalf of the people of Victoria.

Many of the Reserves have appointed Committees of Management who are responsible to the DELWP.

Some Reserves have income from camping areas, from leases to Yacht Clubs and Surf Clubs and other coastal-dependent activities. Some have no income.

The Asset Value of Westernport's Crown Land and other Reserves

The indigenous vegetation of the reserves stabilizes the composite earth cliffs and the sand areas and helps to slow the effects of climate change, sea rise, pollution, population pressures and unsustainable development.

The trees provide a wind break for the built environment behind. The ground cover filters and slows ground water entering the bay and the living eco system not only provides a clean and healthy environment for the local community but also provides a vital connection between nature and the general public.

In Westernport the Sea Grass that shelters the fish nurseries and feeds the swans sheds great mounds of discarded leaves that wash onto the beaches in autumn, nourishing the beaches and acting as an amazing natural erosion barrier, as the huge piles provide a resilient resistance to the waves – dissipating the energy of the waves.

The public land around Westernport hosts yacht clubs, surf clubs, boat-launching ramps, jetties, car parks, camping grounds, gyms, pools and cafes, marinas, boat-repair facilities, toilets, changing facilities, picnic areas, playgrounds, access roads and tracks, walking tracks, seating and viewing areas.

Surfing, swimming, fishing, canoeing, paddle-boarding, sailing, diving, snorkelling, wind surfing, kite flying, walking, rock-pool looking and more are all dependant on the health of the land and water connection.

Maintaining the viability of the coastal-dependant activities requires maintaining the sustainability and health of the land form, the indigenous vegetation and the health of the aquatic environment.

The various Government Acts and Strategies that have been developed to preserve the natural environment require a strong, neutral and knowledgeable Authority – at arm's length – to support on-ground managers, as personal or group 'wants' can become local 'imperatives' that override good governance and good management.

Seeking a simple, clear system of categories that will support effective and efficient public land management will not be easy but is certainly needed.

A look locally

The Mornington Peninsula Shire has a very good and dedicated Natural Systems Team but money is scarce, personnel are overworked and the Shire relies, as does the DELWP, on volunteers to carry out restoration and maintenance work on all but the most important Reserves within the Shire.

Somers has had an appointed Committee of Management for a long, long time, with variable support from the Department of Constant Name Change.

Over time the supporting Government Acts and Strategies strengthened the management of the Somers Foreshore Reserve and the management became more professional and more focused on restoring the sustainability of the land form and the indigenous vegetation, became more aware of the need to make the Crown Land more accessible and welcoming to the general public and tried to balance the needs of the immediate 'neighbours' or pressure groups with the health of the reserve and with the expectations of the general public – but along with these improvements came resentment and disapproval of a few who agitated hard and made life very difficult for locally living members of the Committee of Management.

The Somers Foreshore Committee of Management, from 2008 until 2013 (?), has achieved really great results on the western section of the Reserve (it would be nice if someone on the Assessment Council would come and look) but it is also really easy to see where coping with the constant angst from a few individuals has left areas of the Reserve to the very untender mercies of the neighbours!

For now, having Parks Victoria as the appointed Committee of Management of Somers Foreshore Reserve is working well but the work load is unsustainable long term for Coolart's Head Ranger, Brian Thomas.

In conclusion

The Coastal Reserves around Westernport help to maintain the value of the freehold land by slowing the erosive effects of climate change, sea rise and increasing catastrophic weather events.

The indigenous trees and shrubs on the Reserves provide a wind break for the built and farming environment behind. The grasses and other ground cover slow and filter the ground water, preventing erosion and insuring that the water entering the bay is clean.

The restored vegetation reduces the risk of bush fire, increases biodiversity of flora and fauna and provides an opportunity for the public to connect with nature.

The Reserves provide access to the bay and the recreational opportunities it provides.

The health of the bay depends to some extent on the quality of the water entering the bay and all the more active recreational activities that take place in the bay have to gain access to the bay through the Reserves or through land leased to organisations dedicated to those activities.

The Coastal Reserves of Westernport are a very important asset that need and deserve an 'at-arm's-length' Authority that will promote effective management of public land whilst supporting and championing the volunteer workforce that is still going to be needed as the Green Army will not be able to do the constant follow-up work and there is never going to be sufficient funding to pay professional environmental workers to do all that is required.

15 May 2015