



Environment Victoria submission to VEAC State-wide Assessment of Public Land

Environment Victoria is the state's leading non-government, not-for-profit environment organisation. Our Healthy Rivers Campaign is dedicated to working with government, business and communities for the restoration and protection of our state's great river systems. Our vision is for a future where healthy rivers sustain abundant life and prosperous communities, providing us with good food, clean water and places to love and enjoy.

We welcome the opportunity to submit to the state-wide assessment of public land. VEAC and its predecessors have made many crucial recommendations over the years which have been the basis for the establishment of national parks and reserves and for their management. It has also made many useful recommendations that have not yet been implemented and we will focus on these in this submission, in addition to identifying gaps and making suggestions for future investigation.

1. Crown water frontages.

This category of public land is missing from the list of public land categories issued by VEAC to assist in this inquiry.¹ This is a remarkable omission given the value of river frontages and the many recommendations made by VEAC in the past.

Stock exclusion from river banks has been a key recommendation of most inquiries into public land management, right back to the LCC *Rivers and Streams* investigation in 1991². The LCC recommended that public land water frontages be used to 'conserve native flora and fauna as part of an integrated system of habitat networks across the State' and made many suggestions about how this might be achieved, including the establishment of consultative groups to develop strategies for management, priorities and timetables for frontage management and maintenance. The LCC proposed allowing grazing to continue where it did not conflict with conservation objectives. This position has been the status quo ever since and is embedded in the Victorian Waterway Management Strategy, despite the lack of evidence that grazing does not affect conservation values.

More recent VEAC recommendations strongly question this view. "... VEAC is explicitly recommending in this investigation that grazing generally not be permitted other than to address a particular environmental or management problem, such as controlling particular weed infestations or maintaining a specific grassy habitat structure. It is Council's expectation that this purpose will arise infrequently and when it does, the framework under which it is managed would be different

¹ Public Land Use Categories Fact Sheet <http://www.veac.vic.gov.au/investigation/statewide-assessment-of-public-land/resources>

² Land Conservation Council (1991) Rivers and Stream Investigation

from the current general approach. That is, domestic stock grazing should only occur to address a specific, explicitly stated problem".³

VEAC recommended that domestic stock grazing be phased out on CWFs in its River Red Gum study area over a 5 year period. This recommendation was extended state-wide by the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability in 2008, who returned to the LCC theme of using riparian vegetation to form the backbone of an integrated habitat network.⁴ The recommendation was reiterated in the VEAC Remnant Vegetation Investigation of 2011 which recommended that 75% of Crown frontages be managed for conservation within 10 years.

Catchment managers have commented that major conservation gains can be made when linear state or regional parks are established (eg. Broken-Boosey, Shepparton Regional Park, connections between reserves along rivers in East Gippsland). There is a major opportunity for VEAC to conduct a brief investigation to establish other high priority areas where the quality of existing vegetation warrants the establishment of linear parks, for example in the Wimmera and West Gippsland where there are extensive areas of continuous CWF, and on the Lower Goulburn adjoining the existing river red gum parks. Such an approach would be a huge step forward in achieving the integrated habitat network envisaged by the LCC and mesh with the Andrews government commitment to a state-wide biodiversity strategy and biolink approach.

Another area in which VEAC may be able to make useful recommendation is in options for managing fenced CWFs. Not all landholders want to take on a riparian management licence when the CWF is fenced off. Other options such as committees of management, Landcare groups or direct management by the CMA or Parks Vic need to be properly explored and VEAC would be well placed to do this work.

Another option would be to add a state-wide conservation overlay to the planning scheme to cover the riparian corridor on both public and private land. This would allow the corridor to be considered as a whole for management, in accordance with current government policy that is tenure neutral, and allow improved management for conservation purposes.

Recommendations

- That VEAC conduct a brief inquiry into Crown water frontages to identify strategic additions to the reserve system and options for improved management, including a planning scheme overlay.

2. Freshwater dependent ecosystems (FDE)

The last comprehensive examination of freshwater ecosystems in Victoria was the Land Conservation Council (LCC) inquiry into rivers and streams in 1991⁵. This inquiry led to many important measures to protect rivers and streams including the Heritage Rivers Act (1992), the declaration of heritage rivers and natural catchment areas, the nomination of representative rivers and the establishment of environmental flow recommendations. The inquiry's recommendations informed the development of the Victorian River Health Strategy in 2002.

³ VEAC (2007) River Red Gum Forest Investigation Draft Recommendations

⁴ Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability (2008) Victoria State of the Environment recs IW3.2-4

⁵ Land Conservation Council (1991) Rivers and Streams Special Investigation

<http://www.veac.vic.gov.au/documents/376-RiversandStreamsSpecialInvestigationReport.pdf>

The investigation could be considered a success but there has been no follow up and many of the recommendations have atrophied over time. The river health strategy has morphed into a Waterway Management Strategy with a focus on social, cultural and economic values in addition to environmental, while the Heritage Rivers Act is a toothless tiger with conflicting objectives and many of our rivers are still short of environmental flows. The investigation did not cover wetlands, estuaries or groundwater dependent ecosystems and the management of these remains fragmented across Acts and authorities. The condition of most rivers and wetlands remains at moderate to poor.

FDEs are still grossly underrepresented in the national reserve system –in 2005 (the most recent estimate) only about 3% of wetland area fell within the terrestrial reserve system⁶. Ramsar sites remain poorly protected and many existing reserves are too small to mitigate catchment impacts on wetland and river health. Water and land management are poorly integrated despite decades of ‘integrated catchment management’. Responsibilities are fragmented and catchment management authorities, the ‘caretakers of river health’⁷, have been starved of funds and capacity to fulfil their obligations.

It is now time for VEAC to take a fresh look.

Recommendations

- VEAC conducts a state-wide investigation into FDEs, including rivers, wetlands, estuaries and groundwater. The investigation should assess the management and level of protection afforded to FDEs and make recommendations for improvements. It should look at the adequacy of both the land based reserve system and the environmental water reserve to protect and restore the health of FDEs, and make recommendations for necessary additions.
- VEAC should review the land tenure of Victoria’s Ramsar listed wetlands to ensure management for conservation and the maintenance of ecological character.. Previous recommendations for the Leaghur-Koorangie National Park⁸ to protect the Kerang Lakes Ramsar site remain only partially implemented, and other sites have not been looked at.

3. Climate change adaptation

Victoria’s system of managing public land and establishing reserves has developed over the last 150 years, long before climate change became an issue. There has been no review of the public land categories in the light of future climate predictions, nor any assessment of migration opportunities between reserves. Some national park systems such as the Alpine National Park or Murray-Sunset are large enough to provide options while other parks remain isolated. The establishment of the Great Forest National Park would provide permanent linkages between existing parks and reserves.

Recommendations:

- Review conservation reserve boundaries, habitat requirements and water needs in light of climate change predictions and test the adequacy of the current system to protect all FFG listed species under the anticipated future climatic conditions.
- Examine connectivity options for the reserve system – the Yellingbo investigation is an excellent example of how this can be done and could be scaled up.

⁶ http://piku.org.au/reprints/2005_Kingsford_etal_call_for_protected_areas.pdf

⁷ CALP Act

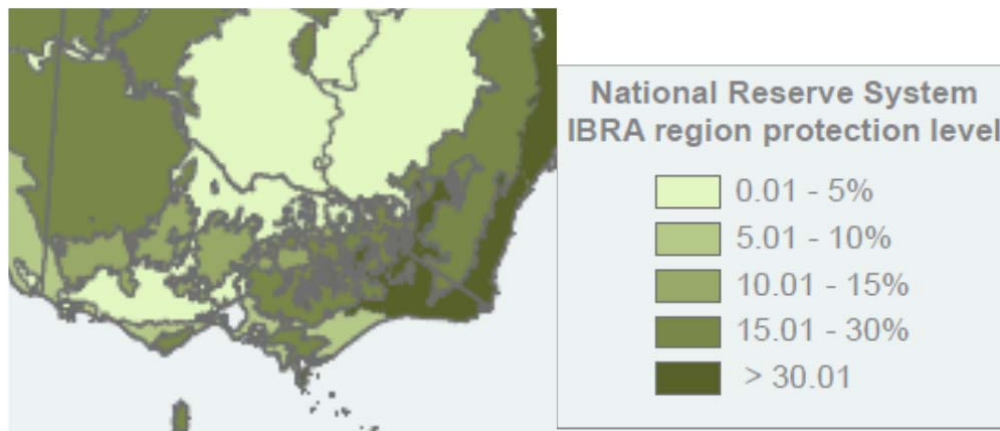
⁸ VEAC River Red Gum Investigation (2008) Recommendation A3

4. Improvements to the reserve system

National Reserve System

This state-wide investigation into public land is the first overview of how well our system is working, and is most welcome in that respect. The Victorian categories of public land and their allocation pre-dates the National Reserve System criteria⁹ (NRS) and so there remain some discrepancies and gaps. There is a huge shortfall in reservation of public land and vegetation types in Victoria. In order to meet the NRS criteria, this must be remedied.. Eight of our 28 bioregions have less than 10% of their area protected in parks.¹⁰ VEAC have previously identified several bioregions where there is potential for more protected areas, particularly in south west Victoria in the Dundas tablelands, Glenelg Plains and southern Wimmera, and has recommended further investigation of the Gippsland Plain and Strzelecki bioregions.¹¹

Figure 1: Representation of Victoria's bioregions in the reserve system¹²



Unfinished business

Following the VEAC River Red Gum investigation, the Brumby government legislated to create the linear Murray regional park. However the park has not been gazetted and the sunset clause on grazing licences along the Murray has not been operationalised. This is a readily implementable change.

Recommendations

- Review the representation of EVCs in the reserve system and identify those with shortfalls
- Explore the potential for more protected areas in under-represented bioregions
- Ask the government to gazette the Murray river parks for which legislation is in place

5. Resource use

⁹ <http://www.environment.gov.au/land/nrs/about-nrs/requirements>

¹⁰ State of the Environment report 2013

¹¹ VEAC Remnant Native Vegetation investigation (2011)

¹² Taken from VEAC Remnant Native Vegetation investigation final report

Since previous LCC, ECC and VEAC investigations, many things have changed significantly in terms of extractive resource use. In many cases, park boundaries have been significantly based upon, or compromised by the needs of a particular timber mill or requirement to access a commercial resource. In a number of cases, timber mills may have either closed, or market demands changed significantly since park boundaries were established. Additionally, many previous investigations have recommended government actions on securing alternatives to products such as firewood from public land by establishing farm-forestry initiatives. In most cases, these recommendations have never been implemented.

Recommendations

- Review park boundaries given changes in the timber and extractives sector (eg. Mill at Rushworth now closed)
- Review, and where appropriate, strengthen or provide new recommendations regarding establishment of agro-forestry, and the need for a switch in government policy from state-forest firewood to farm-grown firewood.

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