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Dear Joan,

Re: Statewide Assessment of Public Land Discussion Paper and Draft Proposals paper

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into both of these documents relating to the Statewide Assessment of Public Land Investigation. Overall Trust for Nature endorses the approach proposed by the documents and commends VEAC's efforts in this area.

Trust for Nature

Trust for Nature is a statutory body established in 1972 under the *Victorian Conservation Trust Act* to conserve flora and fauna and significant habitats on private land. Since its establishment, Trust for Nature has helped landowners to establish more than 1,200 in-perpetuity conservation covenants over their land securing significant native vegetation and contributing over 58,000 hectares to the National Reserve System. Trust for Nature also owns 44 freehold conservation reserves, totalling over 35,000 hectares of natural habitat on private land.

Trust for Nature occupies a unique space within Victoria's natural resource management sector for the following reasons:

- It operates statewide and thus provides a statewide perspective on biodiversity and natural resource management issues on private land;
- It has prepared a statewide conservation plan for all private land in Victoria which underpins its conservation work and provides an integrated framework for the Trust's planning and operations across Victoria. This strategic document complements the strategic land-use planning done by VEAC and its predecessors for public land;
- It is legislated to provide specific functions to support conservation of ecologically significant areas and flora and fauna across Victoria;
- It has the legal power to enter into binding agreements on title with land owners to protect ecologically significant areas in perpetuity and ensure the ongoing management of these protected areas for conservation
- It has the power to purchase land for conservation, either in its own right or as a broker on behalf of the State Government or other bodies;

- Its conservation covenants and reserves are recognised as formal protected areas which contribute to the national reserve system and the global network of IUCN protected areas;
- As a statutory body, its own freehold reserves may be considered a category of public land;
- Whilst its statutory conservation objectives and functions relate only to private land, the realities of land tenure and conservation planning in Victoria requires that strategic approach to conservation in Victoria encompasses both land tenures. The Trust's expertise on conservation issues across the State thus assists with input into all statewide conservation issues.

It is in this context that we provide input into both the Discussion Paper and the draft Proposals Paper.

Clarification of 'protected area' terminology and analyses

We note that the Discussion Paper and associated analyses only consider formal protected areas to be protected areas on public land (e.g. p. 72, table 5.6). Whilst we understand that VEAC's powers are limited by its Terms of Reference, and that the scope of the investigation is only public land, we suggest that that the investigation could be placed within the broader context of all land tenures, including formally protected areas on private land and in indigenous protected areas. This is important for two reasons:

- firstly, to ensure consistency with the guidelines established for protected areas by the national reserve system programme (NRMCC 2009) and the IUCN (Dudley 2008); and
- secondly, to enable an accurate assessment of the current reservation status of Ecological Vegetation Classes (EVCs) across all protected areas and therefore the shortfall in EVC representation in Victoria's reserve system.

Regarding the latter point, Table 5.6 is therefore limited in its current form as it states the public land shortfall (695 000 ha) but does not provide context of what proportion that represents of the overall shortfall across both public and private land tenures. Perhaps VEAC could consider the approach taken in *Trust for Nature's Statewide Conservation Plan for Private Land in Victoria* (2013), which assessed shortfalls in ecosystem representation across both land tenures but focussed on the implications of these findings for private land.

We note that we have recently updated our spatial layers for Trust for Nature owned reserves and land protected under conservation covenant and would be pleased to provide you with relevant data sets and layers if this would assist with revised analyses.

Methodology used for calculating protected area targets

We generally support the approach taken to determining which bioregions should be the focus for more detailed public land-use assessments, using the JANIS criteria as the basis for determining bioregional representation of EVCs in the reserve system. In line with discussions at a recent meeting held between Trust for Nature and VEAC staff, however, we encourage VEAC to consider amending the JANIS criteria and setting as the baseline target 17% of pre-1750 extent of every EVC in protected areas. This would then establish a useful operational precedent for applying the 2010 Aichi targets to Victoria, as is beginning to be done by other State jurisdictions – in Queensland for example (Department of Environment and Heritage Budget papers 2015-16).

Secondly, as shown by comparison with the attached spreadsheet showing recent analyses Trust for Nature has undertaken of protected area shortfalls in every bioregion, the analysis in Table 5.6 does not accurately represent the 'shortfall' status of every bioregion as it is based only on the component of the total shortfall which is on public land. For some bioregions where nearly all land is freehold (e.g. VVP, Riverina, Wimmera), this approach therefore under-represents the shortfall needing to be addressed in terms of additional protected areas. Moreover, this approach fails to recognise the

contribution of private protected areas to the existing reserve estate or as a means of addressing the shortfall in future.

Accordingly, we suggest that it would be useful to:

- Include private land in the shortfall calculations, and
- Specifically note the importance of private protected areas as a means of helping to address the protected area shortfall across all tenures in Victoria.

Proposed areas to be targeted for further land-use investigation – Recommendation 11

Noting our caveats above, we support VEAC's recommendation that the South west region, Strzelecki Ranges and Gippsland Plains bioregions, and Central Victorian Uplands and adjacent bioregions be assessed for their potential to improve the representativeness of the protected area system. We further support the approach outlined in Table 5.6 which specifies the bioregions which might be considered as part of these three proposed land-use assessments.

These three areas all accord with areas identified as priorities for additional protection in our Statewide Conservation Plan (2013). They also all align closely with areas we identified as being 'focal landscapes' (high priorities) for biodiversity conservation on private land, using DELWP's Natureprint (2011) layer as the basis for our modelling (see 3.1 of Plan for detailed descriptions of relevant landscapes).

We additionally suggest that the following areas need further investigation to determine options and opportunities to improve the representativeness of the protected area system, and that the proposals paper should indicate the opportunities for private protected areas to assist in this regard:

- Wimmera, Victorian Volcanic Plain, Victorian Riverina, Murray Fans and Warrnambool Plain bioregions, all of which have very large bioregional protection shortfalls once private land is also considered;
- Inland waterways and wetlands.

With regards to Victorian Riverina and Murray Fans bioregions, whilst we note VEAC's comment that public land in these bioregions has recently been assessed by VEAC or its predecessors, we also think that this study should at least propose options for addressing the large shortfalls remaining, including options on private land.

With regards to waterways and wetlands, our analyses for the Statewide Conservation Plan found that these ecosystems were poorly represented in the reserve system (section 3.3.3) and we recommended a need for strategic approaches to wetland conservation across Victoria. We believe that this would be a useful, additional recommendation to include as part of this public land investigation.

Recommendation 14: proposed inventory of rail reserves, road reserves and riparian land

We are supportive of this recommendation, noting that in many highly cleared areas of the State, these public land reserves often contain a relatively high proportion of remnant habitat and also provide habitat connectivity, thus complementing the remnant habitat found on private land. In keeping with recommendation 11, we suggest that this recommendation could be improved by clarifying that one purpose of the inventory is to assess their potential for improving the representativeness of the reserve system.

Recommendation 15: inventory of state government owned freehold land

Trust for Nature supports establishing an inventory of freehold land owned by state government bodies and assessing it for its values and uses as part of the wider public land estate.

We wish to confirm that the proposed inventory will include all freehold land owned by governmental and quasi-governmental entities, including water authorities, councils and shires. Such an inventory would be highly valuable for taking a statewide, strategic approach to prioritising those parcels which are most valuable from a biodiversity perspective, and those where the protection level should be considered for upgrading.

Such an approach would provide valuable baseline data to implement Priority 21 under Victoria's draft Biodiversity Plan, which calls for a whole-of-government approach. Specifically, the draft Biodiversity Plan notes:

The Victorian Government, as the principal steward of our environmental, social and economic sustainability, will align and co-ordinate decision making and actions across the government sector. ... To achieve our aims, including the economic and social goals of the plan, it is essential that early consideration of biodiversity and climate change becomes an integral and routine part of decision-making across government. Key government agencies outside the traditional environment portfolio will have vital roles in delivering and reporting on their biodiversity commitments. To achieve this, the principles of this plan must be applied to all projects across government that may affect the environment or our sustainability.

We note that there are some complexities relating to Trust for Nature's freehold properties which may not be applicable to most other statutory bodies, as we hold a number of properties which have been gifted to us by individuals or purchased with philanthropic funds, rather than being purchased by the State. We would welcome, therefore, the chance to explore this proposal further with VEAC prior to the final proposals paper being completed.

We would be happy to discuss any of these points in more detail.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Doug Robinson

Conservation Science Coordinator

References

Dudley, N. (ed.) (2008). *Guidelines for Applying Protected Area Management Categories*. IUCN, Gland, Switzerland.

NRMMC (2009). *Australia's Strategy for the National Reserve System 2009-2030*. Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council, Commonwealth of Australia.

Trust for Nature (2013) *The Statewide Conservation Plan for Private Land in Victoria*; available at <http://www.trustfornature.org.au/our-conservation-work/statewide-conservation-plan/>