



Future use and management of state forests in the Central Highlands

Recommendations of Eminent Panel
for Community Engagement

Final Report

Cover image

Central Highlands forests. Credit: DEECA

We acknowledge and respect Victorian Traditional Owners as the original custodians of Victoria's land and waters, their unique ability to care for Country and deep spiritual connection to it.

We honour Elders past and present whose knowledge and wisdom has ensured the continuation of culture and traditional practices.

We are committed to genuinely partner, and meaningfully engage, with Victoria's Traditional Owners and Aboriginal communities to support the protection of Country, the maintenance of spiritual and cultural practices and their broader aspirations in the 21st century and beyond.

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1. FOREWORD

On behalf of the Eminent Panel for Community Engagement (the Panel), I commend this report as an opportunity for joint effort to support the future of the Central Highlands forests so that communities, people, including local people, can continue to enjoy recreational activities, benefit from economic opportunities and care for the important cultural and environmental values of this special place.

In undertaking its work, the Panel recognises Country of the Taungurung, Gunaikurnai, Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Bunurong peoples across the Central Highlands and pays respect to Elders and self-determination in the Panel process.

Over the last eight months, the Panel has talked with many passionate individuals, organisations, volunteers, agencies and subject experts, both locally and more broadly, to understand and recognise the past and current context and the importance they place on future opportunities in Central Highlands forests.

It has also examined the interest and advice provided through the Engage Victoria online engagement site and the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) interim report Assessment of the values of state forests in the Central Highlands.

This Panel report captures the outcomes of this engagement in considering future directions and advice. It has resulted in several identified common features as well as important specific concerns and views about decisions regarding the future of the forests that could impact both people and the forests in question.

The Panel has carefully considered the range and extent of information resulting from its engagement in forming its recommendations.

In addition, the experience and knowledge provided by many people and organisations has assisted in identifying opportunities for exploring positive solutions to both local and broader issues. It has also revealed contested views on a number of issues that are relevant to the future of forests in the Central Highlands and more broadly. The report has included summaries of both and suggested further work to be done where appropriate.

The report also highlights the importance of people and forests in local communities by considering specific information on state forests in targeted locations as part of its decision-making process.

It has been a privilege to learn from so many people who have been generous with their time and sharing of knowledge for the Panel to carefully consider its decisions. This includes members of the Panel and support from the Panel secretariat to complete this report.

On behalf of the Panel, we thank you for your genuine interest and advice in assisting us to reach the conclusions detailed in this report and hope that people who care for a range of reasons about the forests in the Central Highlands can work more closely together for a positive future.



Photo 1 – Panel members: Chris Vassos, Karen Cain, Mellissa Wood, Mike Nurse (credit: DEECA)

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter provides an overview of this report. Further information for each section is available in subsequent report chapters.

Overview

In 2021, the Victorian Government established the Eminent Panel for Community Engagement (the Panel) to hear from Victorian communities about their history and relationships with Victoria's forests, to inform recommendations for the future of these forests following the ending of native timber harvesting.

The Panel's latest work has considered approximately 390,000 hectares (ha) of state forests in the Central Highlands Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) area. This builds on the Panel's first work completed in 2022 for the Strathbogie Ranges and Mirboo North Immediate Protection Areas.

This report details the Panel's partnership and engagement work, key findings and recommendations for the Central Highlands state forests.

Further detail on the work and engagement area is at **chapter 3**.

Partnership and engagement

The Panel was established to learn about and understand the interests, knowledge and experiences of Victoria's much-loved forests from a wide range of people. This was considered in making recommendations on how state forest areas should be managed into the future now that native timber harvesting no longer occurs in Victoria.

This also involved a new way of partnering with Traditional Owners and listening to local communities on forest matters.

The Panel's engagement program commenced with targeted conversations held in late 2023. Broader community engagement ran through March – May 2024. This included face to face engagement with communities in which the Panel heard directly from local people and groups, consultations with peak body stakeholders, and a state-wide Engage Victoria program.

Through its work, the Panel sought to understand and respond to the cultural priorities of First Nations people in the Central Highlands. The four registered Traditional Owner groups in the Central Highlands; Bunurong, Gunaikurnai, Taungurung and Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Traditional Owners, self-determined how they worked with the Panel. This included through formal Panel representation, meetings on Country and knowledge sharing.

Box 1

Summary of Central Highlands engagement

The Panel's extensive engagement program ran through March to May 2024:

- over 70 targeted engagement sessions held with organisations and community representatives from over 80 groups
- nine open community drop-in sessions held with over 1,000 people attending across Noojee, Healesville, Warburton, Yarra Junction, Gembrook, Wandong, Marysville, Drouin and Alexandra
- an Engage Victoria page that received over 60,000 unique page visitors and 14,000 survey responses
- consultations were also undertaken with land and water management agencies.

In addition to its community engagement, the Panel considered information from a range of sources to help inform its work. This included an interim report prepared by the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) *Assessment of the values of state forests in the Central Highlands* and published in December 2023, information provided by Traditional Owner groups and other information provided through conversations with community members

The Panel has also considered the wider policy context in which it operates. This included key considerations for recreation and activities undertaken in forests, the history and connection of local communities with their local forests, Traditional Owner self-determination and Treaty, climate action and the Victorian and Australian government's commitment to biodiversity protection.

More details on the Panel's considerations, methodology and analysis are at **chapter 4, 5 and 6**.

Key findings

The overwhelming sentiment from the Panel's engagement conversations was the value people have for Central Highlands forests.

From its engagement work, the Panel has identified seven cross cutting themes, including:

- the importance of the Central Highlands landscape to people
- the uniqueness of the Central Highlands
- forest activities
- governance, planning and managing forests for the future
- strong communities with sustainable futures
- effective compliance and regulation
- funding for success.

For each of the themes the Panel has identified key learnings, challenges, opportunities and considerations for government. This work has informed the Panel to make general recommendations that apply across the Central Highlands state forests and more broadly.

From its work, the Panel has identified 11 indicative forest and community location groupings for the Central Highlands forests. Grouping communities and associated forests was intended to recognise and understand the specific nature of communities' connection with local forests. This includes the importance of activities and recreation undertaken, and the history, cultural landscapes and condition of the state forests within this location. The Panel intends this grouping as an opportunity and potential for future collaborative work between communities, Traditional Owners and public land managers with associations refined as these connections are further understood and developed.



Photo 2 – community engagements (credit: M. Wood)

Key findings and recommendations were made for state forests for each of the 11 forest and community locations groupings identified, including:

- Warburton, Healesville, Yarra Junction, Powelltown
- Erica, Baw Baw
- Noojee, Neerim, Warragul, Drouin, Neerim South
- Broadford, Tallarook
- Rubicon
- Alexandra, Taggerty
- Toolangi, Kinglake, Glenburn
- Wandong, Wallan, Kinglake West
- Marysville, Buxton
- Waring, Upper Goulburn
- Labertouche, Beenak, Tarago, Tonimbuk.

A comprehensive description of the Panel's findings is at **chapter 7**.

Traditional Owner Country statements

The Panel's work in the Central Highlands occurs on the lands of the Bunurong, Gunaikurnai, Taungurung and Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Traditional Owners.

As part of its work the Panel sought statements from Traditional Owner groups involved in this work.

Statements were provided by Bunurong, Taungurung and Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Traditional Owners. These statements have been included in full and articulate each Traditional Owner group's vision for management of forest Country in the Central Highlands. Gunaikurnai did not provide a statement as part of this work.

A summary of each statement is provided below and full statements are provided at **chapter 9**.

Taungurung

Taungurung's statement presents a long-term vision for collaborative management and partnerships for forest Country.

This includes activation of collaborative management models and piloting of cultural reserves with land managers and local communities to manage cultural landscapes in this forest area.

A case study of work underway at Corop Cultural Waterscape shows what is possible when partners and community walk together with Taungurung to develop conditions that support health and care for Country (See **box 7, pg. 108**).

The full Taungurung statement is at **pg. 104**

Bunurong

Bunurong forests are distinct and unique to the terrestrial and coastal landscapes across Bunurong country. We are fortunate that our Bunurong ancestors have left behind this awesome, powerful and significant landscape for the next generation of Bunurong community to nurture and care. We will always advocate for the protection and preservation of our Bunurong forests.'

The full Bunurong statement is available to read at **pg. 113**

Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung

Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people seek to be embedded as active partners in all land management planning processes to enable cultural practices and reestablishment as managers and healers of Country.

A key first step is Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung being provided resources and time to undertake a Reading Country assessment.

The full Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung statement is at **pg. 114**

"All forests across Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country are significant, including flora, fauna, and sites associated with them. Forests are cultural links to the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people of the past and present. Development from the period of European contact in Australia onwards has resulted in the destruction of around 80% of Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Aboriginal cultural heritage, and it is vital that the biodiversity and heritage values of the Central Highlands forests are investigated and protected wherever possible."

(Allan Wandin, Ron Jones, and Bobby Mullins (Cultural Heritage Unit Elders))

Recommendations

The ending of native timber harvesting now presents a once in a generation opportunity to reset the management of forests in the Central Highlands. Through its work, the Panel has heard of the many challenges and new opportunities for management of these forests, acknowledging the resilience of these forest ecosystems is under threat.

The Panel's report presents 33 recommendations for the future use and management of Central Highlands state forests.

Recommendations of the Panel provide a long-term vision for Central Highlands forests, one that builds on greater collaboration between public land managers, Traditional Owners and local communities to ensure the health of the forests and ensure that forests are safeguarded for all to enjoy into the future.

These recommendations have been made in partnership with Traditional Owners, consider the findings and information collected through Panel's extensive engagement program, VEAC's scientific assessment of values and threats, and the contemporary policy context in Victoria and broader national conditions.



Photo 3 – Central Highlands forests (credit: C. Gotgens)

The Panel has made 11 general recommendations for cross cutting themes that apply across the Central Highlands. All general recommendations and conditions are intended to apply to all forest locations considered in the Panel's work.

For forest and community locations, 22 recommendations have been identified. This includes proposed land categories and associated conditions for the future governance, planning and management of state forest areas.

Overall, the Panel's recommendations:

- identify the need for greater collaboration between communities, Traditional Owners and land managers as necessary support land management outcomes
- balance current recreational experiences as well as recognise the significant natural and cultural values of these areas and need for enhanced environmental management
- provide for multiple use forests that support a range of activities and experiences across forest park and state forests categories
- support Traditional Owner rights and interests to explore new pathways to heal and care for Country including activation of cultural reserves for specific forest areas
- add to existing Yarra Ranges and Mount Baw Baw National Parks for areas of significant environmental and cultural significance
- note the conditions needed to enhance environmental management across proposed state forest and forest park areas; support more joined up work across tenures and public land managers at a landscape scale; and provide appropriate resourcing for land and environmental management across all Central Highlands forests.

An overview of the Panel's land category recommendations is provided at **Figure 2.1**.

Further detail on the Panel's recommendations is at **chapter 8**.

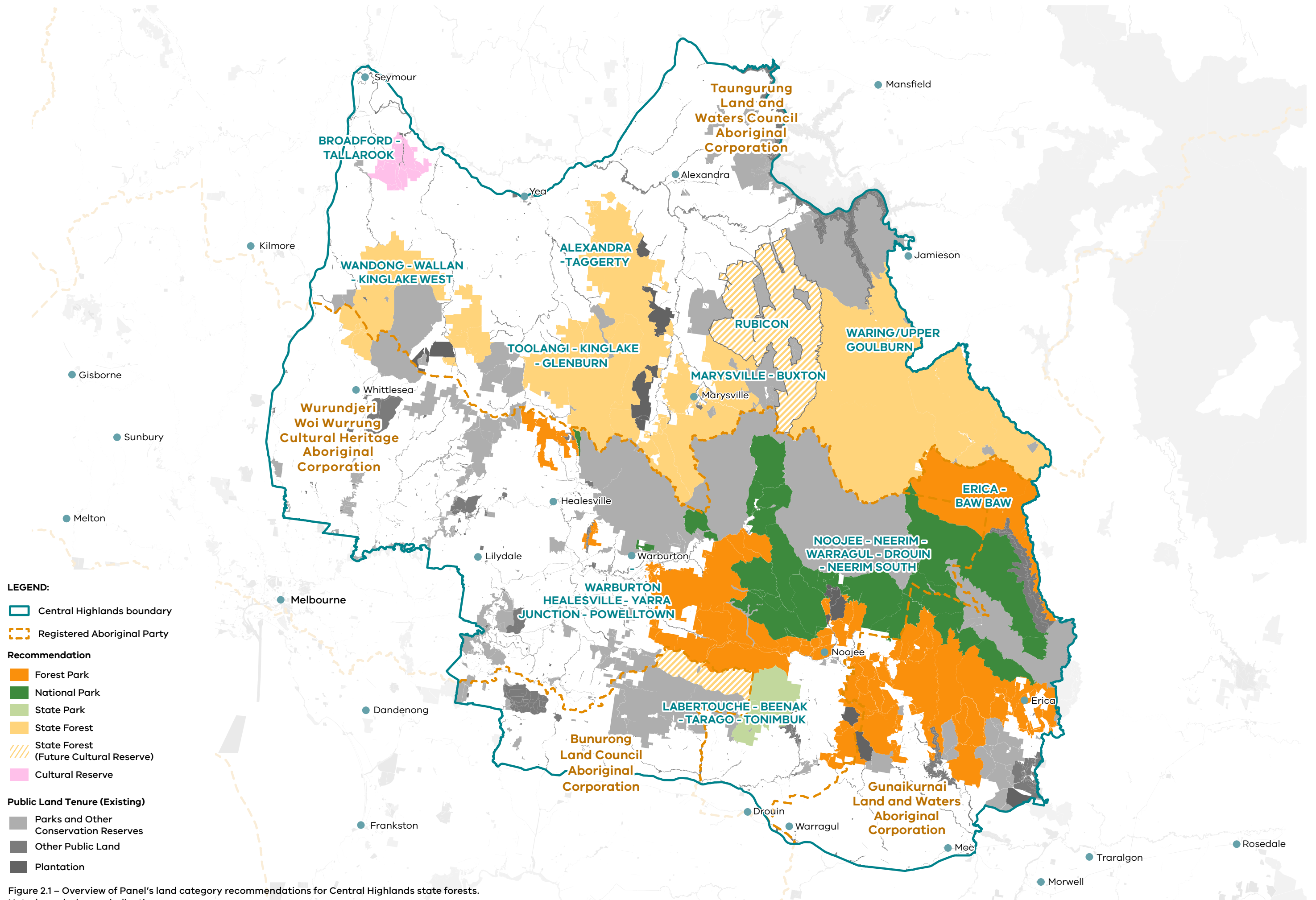


Figure 2.1 – Overview of Panel’s land category recommendations for Central Highlands state forests.
Note: boundaries are indicative.

3. INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the Panel's work, engagement area, membership and terms of reference.

3.1 Purpose

The Panel has considered the future use and management of approximately 390,000 ha of state forests in the Central Highlands RFA area (**Figure 3.1**). This includes 52,000 ha of Immediate Protection Areas established in 2019.

These forests are an hour's drive northeast of Melbourne and represent a landscape of immense ecological, cultural, and economic significance.

For over 60,000 years, these lands have been home to Traditional Owners, including the Bunurong, Gunaikurnai, Taungurung, and Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung peoples, who have lived on and cared for Country.

The end of native timber harvesting in Victoria provides an opportunity to consider how to best support the health of our forests. This includes how we can ensure they remain a part of the Victorian landscape well into the future for all to enjoy.

This is now a significant opportunity to look ahead and plan for what will be increasing pressures on forests including from climate change, population growth and extreme fire or weather events.

The Panel was established to listen to a range of views across the community about the future of these forests and provide recommendations to the Victorian Government.

This report details the Panel's partnership and engagement work, key findings and recommendations for the Central Highlands state forests.

3.2 Central Highlands engagement area

At the heart of the Central Highlands lies the globally significant mountain ash forest ecosystem, covering about 157,000 ha. This remarkable environment is dominated by mountain ash (*Eucalyptus regnans*), the world's tallest flowering plant, which towers over a rich understory of other eucalyptus species, shrubs, and iconic tree ferns. The mountain ash forests, along with the drier eucalypt forests in areas like the Tallarook Ranges and Big River area, create a mosaic of habitats that support an extraordinary array of plant and animals.

The ecological significance of the Central Highlands state forest areas cannot be overstated. The Central Highlands is home to 400 threatened animal and plant species. Among the most iconic of these are the endangered Leadbeater's possum, Victoria's faunal emblem, and the southern greater glider. The vulnerable yellow-bellied glider also calls these forests home, along with a diverse range of arboreal marsupials, bird species, and aquatic life. The Baw Baw frog and sooty owl are other endangered species that rely on the unique habitats provided by these forests.

Beyond supporting rich biodiversity, the Central Highlands forests provide crucial ecosystem services that benefit both the local communities and the broader population of Victoria. They form important catchment areas for major rivers, including the Yarra, Latrobe, Thomson, and Goulburn, which supply drinking water to Melbourne and various regional centres (see **Box 2**). The forests' ability to capture, filter, and gradually release water is invaluable for maintaining water quality and quantity. Additionally, these forests, particularly the old-growth areas, act as significant carbon sinks, playing a vital role in mitigating climate change by sequestering and storing large amounts of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

The forests extend across multiple local government areas and include two alpine resorts, forming a diverse and complex ecosystem on the doorstep of Victoria's capital city, Melbourne.

The recreational and tourism value of the Central Highlands forests is substantial, offering a wide range of outdoor activities for locals and visitors. Popular pursuits include bushwalking, camping, fishing, horse riding, four-wheel driving, trail biking, prospecting, hunting and mountain biking. The Ada Tree Walk, featuring a 300-year-old giant mountain ash and one of Victoria's largest trees, stands out as a key attraction. Throughout the year, the forests host various events, from cycling competitions and trail running to car rallies.

The cultural and historical significance of the Central Highlands forests adds another layer to their importance. These forests are important cultural places for Traditional Owners and cultural landscapes exist throughout this area, connecting people and Country from the high mountain ridges through to river flats. The area's rich colonial history, shaped by the gold rush, timber industry, and water supply development, is evident in the 145 registered historic sites scattered throughout the state forests.

Box 2

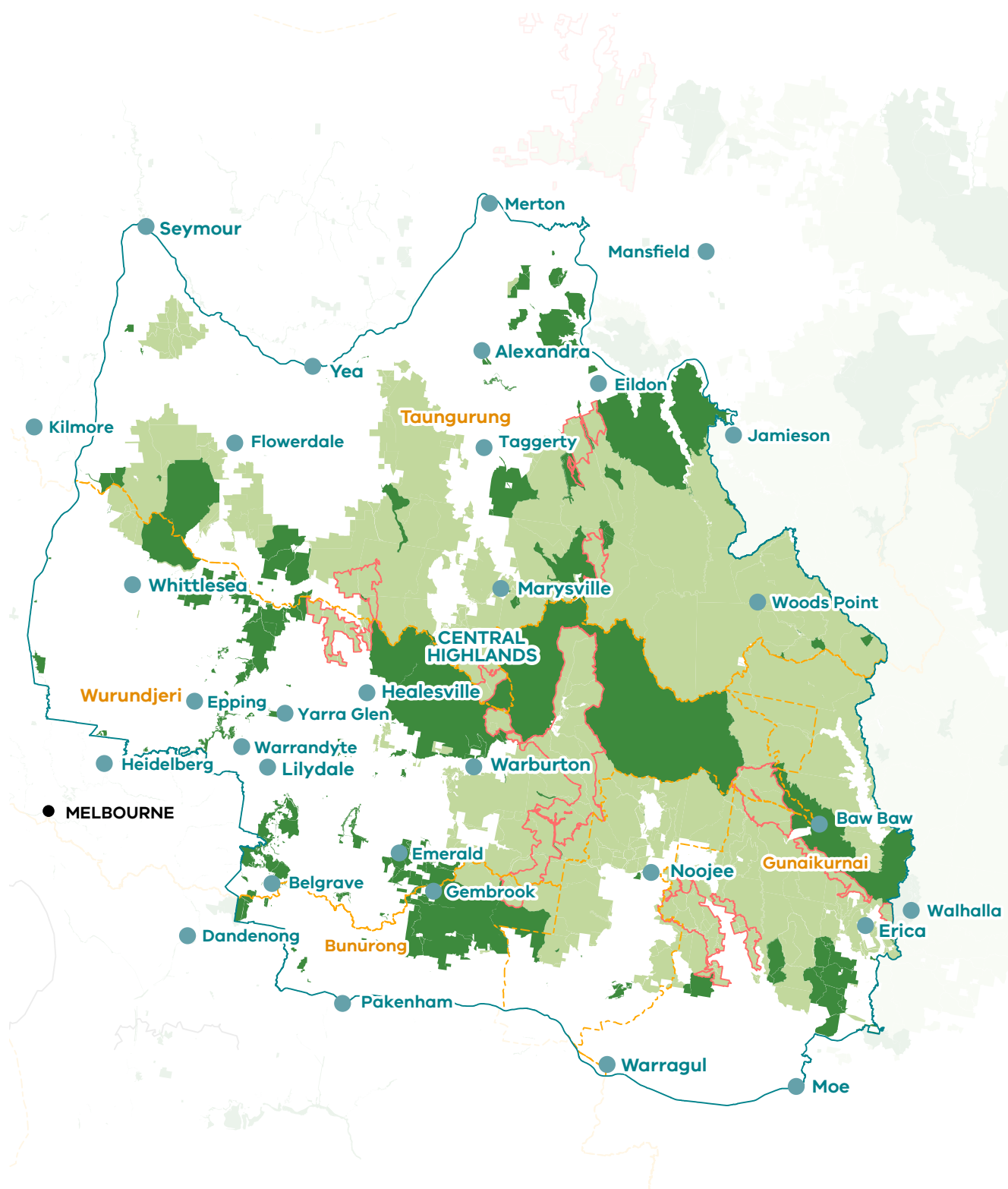
Melbourne's water supply

A significant area of the Central Highlands contributes to Melbourne's drinking water supply. The forested catchment contributes to Melbourne having some of the cleanest water in the world, with water filtering through forests into reservoirs before being piped to the suburbs and city. Melbourne Water is the authority responsible for managing Melbourne's water supply.

To protect this catchment area and ensure high quality water supply, approximately 96,000 ha of forests in the Central Highlands are designated closed catchments. These areas are closed to the public to securely manage drinking water supply, quality and quantity. Activity in the catchments can introduce threats to water quality including through contamination from camping and toileting, faeces or urine from pets, introduction of untreatable pathogens, rubbish left behind and sedimentation from distributing soil in the catchment.

A significant portion of the closed catchment (74,000 ha) is included in the Yarra Ranges National Park established by the Kennett government in 1995. A smaller portion of state forests are designated closed catchments (14,000 ha) mostly occurring east of Warburton.

It is estimated that the closed catchment saves Victorians billions of dollars annually from avoided costs for water treatment.



LEGEND:

- State Forest (SF)
- Parks and Reserves (SP, NP)
- Immediate Protection Areas
- Central Highlands
- Local Aboriginal Community Boundaries (RAP)

Figure 3.1 – Map showing Central Highlands state forests engagement area. This map displays state forest (light green shading) and the 2019 Immediate Protection Areas (red outline). Parks and reserves are also displayed (dark green) though not in scope for the Panel's work.

There are several public land overlays or areas that apply to state forests in the engagement area. This includes:

- education areas: Castella, Kinglake and Fumina South education areas – support education activities to occur in nearby state forests
- heritage rivers: Big River, Thomson River – provide protection along river reaches that have significant nature conservation, recreation, scenic or cultural heritage values
- reference areas: Bennie Creek, Hawthorn Creek – set aside to limit human disturbance as far as possible to be comparable for scientific studies.

The forest area also supports a range of economic and resource uses. This includes for mining and extractives; small forest produces and licenced activities including grazing and bee keeping. The broader Central Highlands region supports a range of significant tourism and regional economies. This includes the many wineries, art galleries and cultural attractions including the iconic Yarra Valley.

Despite their value and importance, the Central Highlands forests, particularly the mountain ash ecosystem, face significant threats to their long-term survival. Climate change, with rising temperatures and reduced rainfall, threatens to alter the forests' environmental conditions. Increasing frequency and severity of bushfires pose another serious risk, especially when intense fires occur at intervals of less than 20 years, before the young trees have set seed, potentially leading to ecosystem transformation with mountain ash stands being replaced by other species such as wattles.

Previous logging activities have significantly impacted the forest structure and ecology. The combination of bushfires and logging practices can create a 'landscape trap'. This phenomenon pushes the ecosystem into persistent short-interval disturbance cycles, making it increasingly difficult for the mountain ash forest ecosystem to recover and maintain its ecological integrity in the Central Highlands.

Pest plants and animals occur throughout the region. Various species of deer have spread rapidly in recent years and occur widely throughout the forest area, now encroaching on urban fringes of Melbourne.

The interplay between these various threats – climate change, altered fire regimes, previous logging, pest plants and animals, and their cumulative effects – presents a complex challenge for forest management. As these pressures mount, balancing the diverse values and uses of these forests while ensuring their long-term ecological health will be crucial for safeguarding this irreplaceable natural heritage for future generations.



Photo 4 – Damp forest waterway (credit: M. Wood)

3.3 Eminent Panel for Community Engagement

In August 2021, the Victorian Government established the Panel to provide independent advice and recommendations on the future uses of selected state forest areas in Victoria. The Panel has worked in accordance with its terms of reference set by the Minister for Environment.

The Panel's core purpose was to hear from communities and consider a range of information sources to inform recommendations to government about whether changes in land categories are required to meet the future needs of our forests and our communities. This included considering the rights and interests of Traditional Owners, advice and information regarding environmental, social, recreational and economic matters through direct engagement with stakeholders and communities and the findings of the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) scientific values assessments report.

The Panel's Phase 1 work commenced in 2021 with assessment of two Immediate Protection Areas at Mirboo North and Strathbogie Ranges that were protected from timber harvesting in November 2019. In August 2022, the Panel's first report was released and contained 14 recommendations to enhance the future use and management of these areas. This included recommending new approaches to governance, planning and management of public forests to bring together community, Traditional Owners and land managers to care for and heal forests.

Following the Victorian Government's decision to end native forest timber harvesting from 1 January 2024, the Minister for Environment extended the scope for the Panel's Phase 2 work in the Central Highlands beyond the Central Highlands Immediate Protection Areas to consider the future use and management of the approximately 390,000 ha of state forests within the Central Highlands RFA area (see **Figure 3.1**).

Panel membership

Panel members are appointed by the Minister for Environment and include a Chair, a Traditional Owner member for each Traditional Owner Country within the engagement area, and the VEAC Chair.

Membership of the Panel for Central Highlands work included:

- Karen Cain, Chairperson
- Melissa Wood, Chairperson of VEAC
- Mike Nurse, Taungurung Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (TLaWC)
- Chris Vassos, representative of Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation (WWWCHAC)
- Shani Blyth, Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation (BLCAC)
- Katherine Mullett, Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLAWAC).

The Panel was supported by a Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) secretariat.

An external provider, MosaicLab with support of Cochrane Research, was engaged to support the Panel's engagement planning, delivery and analysis.

Terms of reference

Under its terms of reference, the Panel was required to produce a written report on future use and management of state forests in the Central Highlands. The report provides advice and recommendations to the Minister for Environment, including:

- land classification of state forest areas
- permissible uses in those areas, and
- proposed timing for the advice and recommendations to occur.

The Panel also was required to consider Traditional Owner self-determination and acknowledgement of Traditional Owner rights, interests and aspirations for these forests and lands.

In its work, the Panel was also required to consider:

- findings of VEAC scientific values assessments
- provision for a wide range of community uses of forest areas
- opportunities for the management of public land by Traditional Owners
- the potential for cultural overlays
- environmental protections, including protecting habitat and for biodiversity under climate change
- potential for improving connectivity between proposed and existing conservation reserves
- measures to maintain the long-term integrity of water catchments
- commitments and application of key policies and frameworks in use.

The Panel committed to hearing from a wide range of people in person and through other means on the future use and management of these forests. The Panel submitted an engagement plan to the Minister that guided this engagement work.

The following areas were not within the Panel's scope of work:

- recommendations for reclassification of existing parks and reserves
- forest areas outside of the Central Highlands RFA area, except where this supported a Traditional Owner cultural landscapes approach or management continuity outcomes
- the Victorian Government's commitment to end native forest timber harvesting and broader transition support program, including the forest contractor program and matters relating to commercial timber harvesting
- fire management and planning.

4. WHAT THE PANEL CONSIDERED

This chapter details what the Panel has considered in its work.

4.1 Overview

Forests in the Central highlands have a history going back tens of thousands of years. The Panel sought to understand the nature of these forests, the role that people have had in that history and the changes that have occurred more recently in the forests due to a range of factors. Understanding this context has helped the Panel learn about challenges and opportunities for how the forests may be managed both sustainably and to support communities and people to connect, enjoy and continue important activities into the future.

The Panel undertook to understand the importance of the forests in the Central Highlands to First Nations peoples and seek advice on what was needed to ensure each Country Traditional Owner's requirements were respectfully included in the process.

The Panel has considered the significant community and broader interests associated with the Central Highlands including connection to these forests through a range of activities, lifestyles, livelihoods and land management practices over several generations. The Panel also considered the unique biodiversity and ecosystem services provided by these forests, including providing low-cost, high-quality water to Melbourne, and the threats they face.

Consequently, the Panel became aware of a significant body of knowledge about these forests that exists across a range of people and places. This knowledge has contributed to supporting the Panel's understanding of contemporary values, past and current impacts to these values, challenges and opportunities for management.

4.2 Understanding the health and values of the Central Highlands forests

The Panel is aware of the work and knowledge of many organisations that have and continue to contribute to the scientific understanding of these forests. The Panel has taken time to examine the biological and environmental values of the forests and consider the importance of these in its recommendations. This includes advice received from VEAC's interim values assessment report that was published in December 2023, as required by its terms of reference.



Photo 5 – Central highlands forests (credit: DEECA)

The Panel also considered knowledge gained from a range of people involved in caring for and understanding the health of these forests.

This included:

- knowledge on forest ecosystems
- dedicated local community and environment groups that have studied local forests and advocated for protections and cared for them
- the many volunteers, clubs, peak bodies and other groups that have contributed to land management and restoration works
- international agencies such as the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) that have supported analysis and studies of Central Highlands forests including understanding the critically endangered mountain ash forest ecosystem¹
- Traditional Owner groups working with local community groups to heal and care for Country and communities
- scientists and academic institutions such as the University of Melbourne and the Australian National University that have been involved in significant scientific activity, conducting field surveys and long-term monitoring in the Central Highlands forests for over 40 years contributing to significant scientific research
- current forest and land managers and various agencies that continue to care for and manage forests.

4.3 The importance of local communities, recreational, other activities

A key task of the Panel was to consider the importance of the Central Highlands forests to community. The Panel drew on significant knowledge and information from its engagement work to understand the type, importance and scope of activities that occur in the Central Highland forests and how people value these important areas. This included understanding who, where and what people enjoyed doing, what was valued and what needed improving.

The Panel also considered the important knowledge of clubs, community groups and volunteer activity. This included understanding ways of working, building skills and knowledge to care for, enjoy and improve the state of their local forests. Ideas for improving coordination, knowledge, monitoring and information sharing was considered by the Panel.

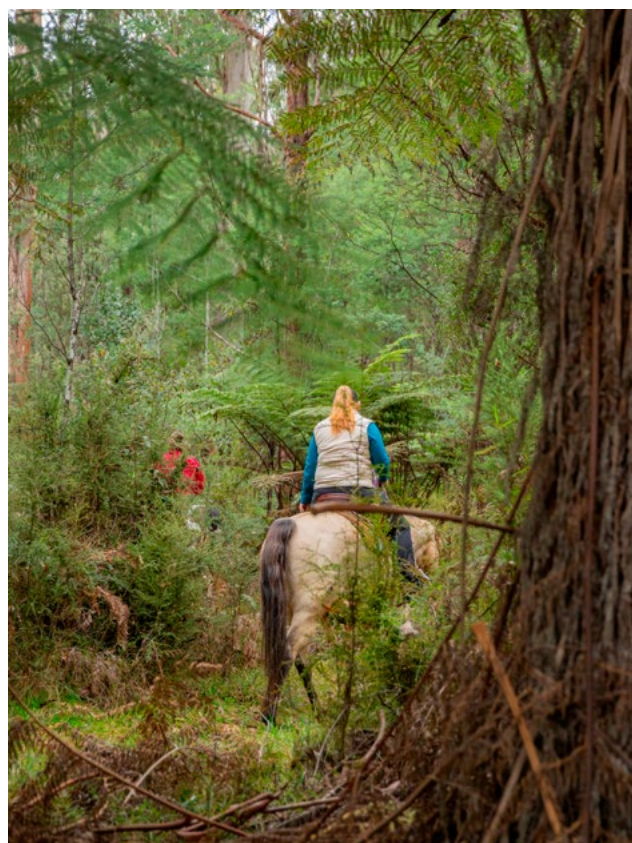


Photo 6 – horse riding (credit: DEECA)

¹ <https://assessments.iucnrl.org/assessments/16>

4.4 How to support Traditional Owners caring for Country

The Panel through its terms of reference and sessional Panel members from each of the Traditional Owner group on the Panel, has considered carefully the advice and information provided regarding priorities for the Central Highlands. Importantly, the Panel has sought to understand and consider the reform process and progress underway in Victoria that is making a significant contribution to reconciliation with Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Victorians through the advancement of self-determination, truth telling and Treaty.

The Panel has considered observations in the Yoorrook Justice Commission hearings, that Victoria's framework for management of public lands has limited and reduced rights for Traditional Owners and First Peoples.

It has been important to understand recent state-wide Victorian Traditional Owner policies. These include cultural fire practice, cultural landscapes, hunting and game management, Sea Country management, traditional foods and botanicals. These policies and strategies enable new approaches to the planning, management and governance of public land and are also reflective of other national and international approaches to Indigenous and local community led Cultural land management.

An important example is the proposed reforms to Victoria's public land legislation and amendments to create a new Public Land Act and amendments to the National Parks Act 1975 that intend to put in place the mechanisms to support Traditional Owners to heal and care for Country across all public land categories.

The Panel has sought to understand and consider the importance of First Peoples world view, identity, caring for and healing Country and how fundamental self-determination is to these and the future of the forests in question.

Box 3

What is self-determination?

Self-determination in the context of forest Country means Traditional Owners determining their own pathways to activate rights and interests for governance, planning and management of forest areas.

Victorian Government action to enable self-determination acknowledges that Aboriginal Victorians hold the knowledge and expertise about what is best for themselves, their families and their communities.

While Aboriginal self-determination means different things to different people, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples describes self-determination as the ability for Indigenous people to freely determine their political status and pursue their economic, social and cultural development. It also describes self-determination as a right that relates to groups of people, not individuals.

Self-determination is the key approach that has produced effective and sustainable improvement in outcomes for Indigenous people across many jurisdictions.

4.5 Economic opportunity

The Panel considered information regarding opportunities for local businesses and economic development especially associated with tourism. Understanding local government plans and priorities, local business group activities and challenges, tourism activities and plans, work already underway and other local priorities has also assisted the Panel.

The Panel has also considered past and current economic activity in the Central Highlands, including:

- the rich history that has shaped the region's landscape and development. This includes through the gold rush, timber cutting, water supply development and tourism
- the role of timber harvesting having been a primary usage of state forests. Victoria's first state forests were declared in the mid-1800s primarily as a method for setting aside areas for timber production. Since then, various iterations of government legislation, regulation and agencies have been enacted to manage Victoria's state forests. Timber cutting intensified during the gold rush and to meet the resource demand of a growing population. Numerous sawmills and infrastructure were established to service this need. Ash species were prized for their straight and appealing grain, and subsequent use in paper production, with extensive harvesting in these forest types. Timber harvesting ended in state forests in Victoria in 2024 with a significant program of community and industry transition support to move towards a plantation-based supply (see **Box 4**)
- the role of mining and mineral exploration and extraction that occurs in the area with areas of interest in critical minerals and gold throughout the RFA region. Parts of the Central Highlands region also have an extensive history of gold mining, with remnants of former settlement still existing today
- commercial businesses that run education and environmental programs including for school groups; licenced uses such as bee keeping, and licences or leases including for use of public land including for grazing activity
- the role of tourism, given this unique region is only an hour's drive from Melbourne. Its stunning forests, high quality vineyards, art galleries and culinary options from local pubs to fine dining restaurants, offer many tourism opportunities from day trips to weeklong itineraries.

Box 4

Ending of native timber harvesting

Commercial native forest timber harvesting in Victoria's state forests ended 1 January 2024.

The work of the Panel is taking place alongside industry and community transition work. This includes the Local Development Strategies underway to support communities through the native timber transition.

Within the Central Highlands, local development strategies are in development for communities in Murrindindi, Noojee and the Yarra Ranges. This includes embedded staff supporting local communities to transition and identification of new local economic opportunities.

The Panel has worked closely with local councils and local development strategy teams to understand this work and opportunities to support and leverage work already underway.



Photo 7 – Central Highlands forests (credit: C. Gotgens)

4.6 Related policies, frameworks and existing land management practices

Current and future use and management of the Central Highlands forests takes place within state, federal and international policy contexts.

The Panel has considered advice from policy areas for this report. This has been critical for the Panel to understand the context within which it is operating.

A context analysis was undertaken to help situate key policies, local strategies and plans in relation to local forests.

Key policy considerations included:

- biodiversity conservation and protected areas, including Victoria's Biodiversity 2037 plan, Australia's National Reserve Strategy and targets to increase protected area coverage to 30% of landmass by 2030
- supporting regional growth, economic development and tourism, including Local Development Strategy work underway communities in the Central Highlands
- Aboriginal self-determination and Treaty, including consideration of Traditional Owner Country plans, the Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Landscape Strategy.
- Victorian Government renewal of Victoria's public land legislation.

Existing land management practice

The Panel has considered a range of views and proposed approaches to land management practices.

The last strategic assessment of public land use in the Central Highlands was in 1994, conducted by the then Land Conservation Council in its Melbourne District 2 Review.² Since that time there have been significant changes in policy direction, changes in use of these forests and major events including the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires.

Ending of native forest timber harvesting in Victoria now presents a timely opportunity to consider the future use of state forest areas in the Central Highlands. This includes considering how current land management arrangements are performing, alignment with current government policy and setting up land managers for success to deal with contemporary land management opportunities and challenges.

The Panel is aware that the Victorian government is developing proposals to renew Victoria's public land legislation, including the creation of a new Public Land Act and reforms to the National Parks Act 1975. Passing of these reforms is expected to support more modern land management.

The Panel has considered current descriptions of active and adaptive management to understand how this knowledge could be applied and found they were lacking. As a result the Panel has suggested a more contemporary definition for consideration (see **Chapter 7.4**).

Another key consideration has been what new thinking is required in biodiversity conservation to bolster resilience against climate change and other threats. This includes:

- integrated landscape approaches to enhance connectivity between protected areas and surrounding landscapes
- climate adaptation strategies that incorporate new thinking around active and adaptive management practices
- supporting Traditional Owners to actively heal and care for Country
- land custodianship
- the increasing risks from forest fires, pests, and weeds accelerated by climate change
- appropriate valuing and management responses to human recreational and well-being values.

² Available at: <https://www.veac.vic.gov.au/investigations-assessments/government-decisions-on-lcc-recommendations/investigation/melbourne-area-district-2-review-final-recommendations-annotated>

5. METHODOLOGY

The Panel, with consideration of the requirements of its terms of reference, has examined wide ranging information gathered through a planned engagement approach. This chapter covers the process and methodology for this work.

5.1 Engagement approach

Engagement plan

The Panel took a hands-on approach to leading its engagement work and committed to respectful personal engagement.

The first undertaking of the Panel was to create a communications and engagement plan outlining a timeline of identified activities that would lead to a report and recommendations being completed within the time required.

The Panel sought to meet with as many people in person as possible, on location in the Central Highlands Forest areas and local communities. The Panel committed to genuine partnership with Traditional Owners and hearing from a wide range of people from communities, organisations and peak bodies interested in these forests. It was important that the Panel meet with people from a range of different viewpoints and experiences.

Timeline

The Panel's engagement program commenced with targeted conversations with key agencies and land managers held in late 2023. Broader community engagement ran through March – May 2024.

The first stage of engagement commenced in December 2023. This included early meetings with a range of stakeholders to discuss the Panel's approach to its work, face-to-face or online with a broad range of peak bodies, community organisations, state and local government authorities.

The second stage of engagement was conducted from March to May 2024. This stage focused on local engagement activities and was centred around in-depth, targeted conversations with local communities (either individually or in groups), special interest groups and peak bodies with a wide range of views and experiences. For those who the Panel was not able to meet with in this way, public drop-ins in each location were made available as well as online engagement via Engage Victoria, the Victorian Government's online engagement platform. Online options provided opportunities for the wider community to provide ideas and feedback on the future use of the Central Highlands state forests. There was a strong level of interaction with the site over the seven weeks it was live, from 18 March to 6 May 2024.

Who we engaged with and how

The Panel engaged with a range of individuals, organisations and entities across a range of sectors.

This included in depth conversations with:

- peak bodies – conversations were conducted with representatives of over 20 state and national peak bodies. Representatives of various state and national peak bodies were invited to meet with the Panel in a series of targeted conversations. The peak bodies the Panel met with represented a range of conservation groups, recreational users and commercial industries. Meetings were conducted face-to-face or online and involved a one-hour to two-hour conversation.
- local communities – including individuals and representatives of over 40 community groups, recreation users, local Landcare groups, friends of groups
- universities – including meetings with key researchers from two universities
- local councils and shires – including meetings with five councils, including those where Local Development Strategy work is underway (see **Box 4, chapter 4.5**)
- broader community – including Victorian community and more broadly
- Researchers – including from universities, citizen scientists
- clubs – including a range of recreational clubs
- Traditional Owners – as well as partnership through direct membership, the Panel had on Country meetings with Traditional Owners
- current land managers and authorities – including forest visits and meetings with Parks Victoria, DEECA and meetings with Melbourne Water, Resources Victoria, and Catchment Management Authorities, Zoos Victoria
- policy and program experts

See **Appendix 1** for a full list of organisations engaged.

Information collected

The Panel also received information from a range of sources throughout the engagement period, including reports prepared by community groups, scientific research papers from academics, and proposals.

5.2 Reports and information provided to the Panel

VEAC report

At the request of the Minister for the Environment, VEAC conducted an interim assessment of the state forests in the Central Highlands RFA area.³ The interim report, *Assessment of the values of state forests in the Central Highlands*, was published in December 2023 and included a summary of forest values, threats to those values as well as identifying land use categories that may apply to those areas. VEAC's report did not include recommendations, which was the responsibility of the Panel for this current study.



Moreover, VEAC did not undertake community engagement to test initial report findings with stakeholders and community reference groups nor request submissions, as this was not required under its terms of reference. For this assessment, VEAC compiled and analysed information on the values and threats of the state forests to categorise broad tracts of land according to environmental and ecological values, some social and economic values, and the types and patterns of land use.

The Panel received detailed briefings and relevant spatial datasets from this analysis for use in their deliberations.

In light of the diverse values, threats and uses of these forests, VEAC identified six broad tracts of state forest, each with varying combinations of environmental values and potentially conflicting uses.

Due to the desktop nature of VEAC's work, detailed boundaries for these land use categories were not provided.

VEAC's report identified:

1. large areas of high environmental value in the north and south suitable for national park designation, linking existing protected areas
2. northeast area with moderate natural values, potentially suitable for forest park or regional park designation and needing community input for appropriate designation.
3. Upper Thomson catchment with outstanding natural values, requires further consideration due to potential conflicts with uses like mineral extraction
4. western area north of Kinglake National Park needing more detailed assessment and community input for appropriate designation.

In line with its terms of reference, VEAC will complete its assessment, including its economic assessment of the Panel's recommendations, and produce a final report following the completion of the Panel's report. VEAC's report is submitted to the Minister separately for consideration.



Photo 8 – Panel site visit (credit: DEECA)

³ Available at: <https://veac.vic.gov.au/investigations-assessments/current-assessments/investigation/assessment-of-the-values-of-the-immediate-protection-areas-in-the-central-highlands-and-east-gippsland>

Taungurung rapid biocultural values report

Reading Country to reveal biocultural values and expressions was one way for Traditional Owner groups to share knowledge and input into this process (see **Box 5**).

Taungurung Land and Waters Council (TLaWC) undertook a rapid biocultural values assessment of forests on Taungurung Country. This was published online in February 2024⁴. This report is the first of its kind for the Central Highlands area by Taungurung and supports the Panel process and community understanding. It articulates Taungurung's long term view to heal and care for forest Country.

This report contains significant Cultural information and must be treated respectfully. Further information about Taungurung's report and findings is detailed in Taungurung's statement at **chapter 9**.

Rapid biocultural values reports were not undertaken by Traditional Owner groups for other Country areas in the Central Highlands, though this is something these groups may wish to pursue in the future.

Box 5

Reading Country and biocultural values assessments

In the precolonial period, Elders and other knowledge holders walked Country to understand health of Country, the times and places to harvest and the times and places to apply healing and caring practices. In a contemporary context, Reading Country is an expression of that walking of Country. It is a bridging tool which expresses a respectful integration of Indigenous oral cultural practices of knowledge protection and transfer (e.g., dreaming stories) and Western applied research.

Reading Country involves seeking the areas of change between different elements and systems of Country. It has two main components; firstly, biocultural values are identified and recorded. These values may be cultural heritage, intangible heritage as song, dance, stories, places and living biocultural values – such as culturally significant plants and animals. These values are examined through narrative and yarning with Elders, mentors, peers or knowledge keepers. The second component is interaction (data analysis, interpretation and sharing as knowledge) that then manifests as priorities and actions required to heal and maintain health of Country.

Biocultural assessments are necessary to provide evidence that guides planning and management. In contemporary context, biocultural assessments are undertaken with western science subject matter specialists, working side by side with Traditional Owners to reveal context specific evidence from science, in a walking both worlds approach. In this way, biocultural values and conservation values are respectfully aligned and analysed to together guide planning and management.

4 Available at: https://taungurung.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/RapidBioculturalAssessment_CHRFA_Final_20240319.pdf

5.3 Community engagement

The Panel worked with an external provider, to identify and contact community representatives and residents from a wide range of interests for one-on-one meetings, to ensure depth of understanding of the issues raised. Additionally, the Panel provided opportunity for more broad participation at a Statewide level.

There were various engagement options offered to the community. A summary of engagement participation is provided at **Figure 5.1**.

Key activities included:

- **targeted stakeholder and community meetings:** 79 face-to-face and online meetings with local people as well as representatives and members of stakeholder organisations, interest groups, community organisations, and local groups to share specific views, issues and opportunities with the Panel. These conversations were in-depth and open conversations that allowed people to put forward to the Panel anything they thought relevant. Facilitators recorded notes during these meetings which were confirmed for accuracy by all participants and then taken into consideration in the Panel's deliberations
- **drop-in sessions:** nine open face-to face options were provided for participants to raise and discuss their own views drawn from lived experiences. These were located across the Central Highlands area and held after hours. Participants recorded and displayed their own feedback. The Panel and engagement staff were also available to scribe the feedback and discuss Panel work. Drop-in sessions were held in: Noojee, Healesville, Warburton, Yarra Junction, Gembrook, Wandong, Marysville, Drouin, Alexandra. Participation at these drop ins ranged from between 45 to 550 people.
- **Engage Victoria:** online feedback form with an option to submit demographic information and in-depth personalised feedback on topics of interest; and mapping tool where participants could provide personalised feedback on specific locations.



Photo 9 – engagement session (credit: DEECA)

FAST FACTS



19,670
participants involved
in ALL engagement
activities



1,229
Overall attendance across
ALL conversations
- Stages 1 & 2



10
Drop-ins



1,080
Total drop-in
attendance



344
Total Panel hours
in conversations
at drop-ins



249
Overall 1:1 meeting
attendance



79
stakeholders/peak
bodies - Stage 1 & 2

OVERALL MEETING ATTENDANCE



Overall meeting attendance
(Dec 2023)



Meetings



Groups/
organisations

**STAGE
1**

33

13

12

**STAGE
2**

1,196

58

67

ENGAGE VICTORIA (MARCH - MAY 2024)



157,287
page
views



60,638
unique
visitors



18,447
contributors

FROM



14,684
feedback
forms



3,763
map
responses

Figure 5.1 – overview of engagement program participation (Source: MosaicLab)

Who we heard from

The communication and engagement programs were effective in achieving a high level of participation and the Panel heard from a wide range of people. Over 19,670 participants were engaged across all activities throughout the engagement period.

Demographic and personal information was optionally provided by some of the participants who responded to the feedback form on Engage Victoria. Demographic information was not collected at in-person or local engagements.

A summary of the core statistics is provided below:

- 1,229 stakeholder meeting participants and 392 Engage Victoria feedback form participants indicated they were representatives or members of, peak bodies, associations, businesses, community organisations, clubs, councils or shires and local community groups.
- most Engage Victoria feedback form participants reported postcodes within Victoria (**Figure 5.2**). At least one third of participants live local to the Central Highlands area (35%), almost one third reside in metropolitan Melbourne (30%), and others live in regional Victoria (27%)
- in relation to age, Engage Victoria feedback form participant responses ranged from under 18 years through to over 65 years. Around one third of participants were 35 to 49 years (32.6%), and many were 18 to 34 years (30.6%) or 50 to 65 years (26.9%).

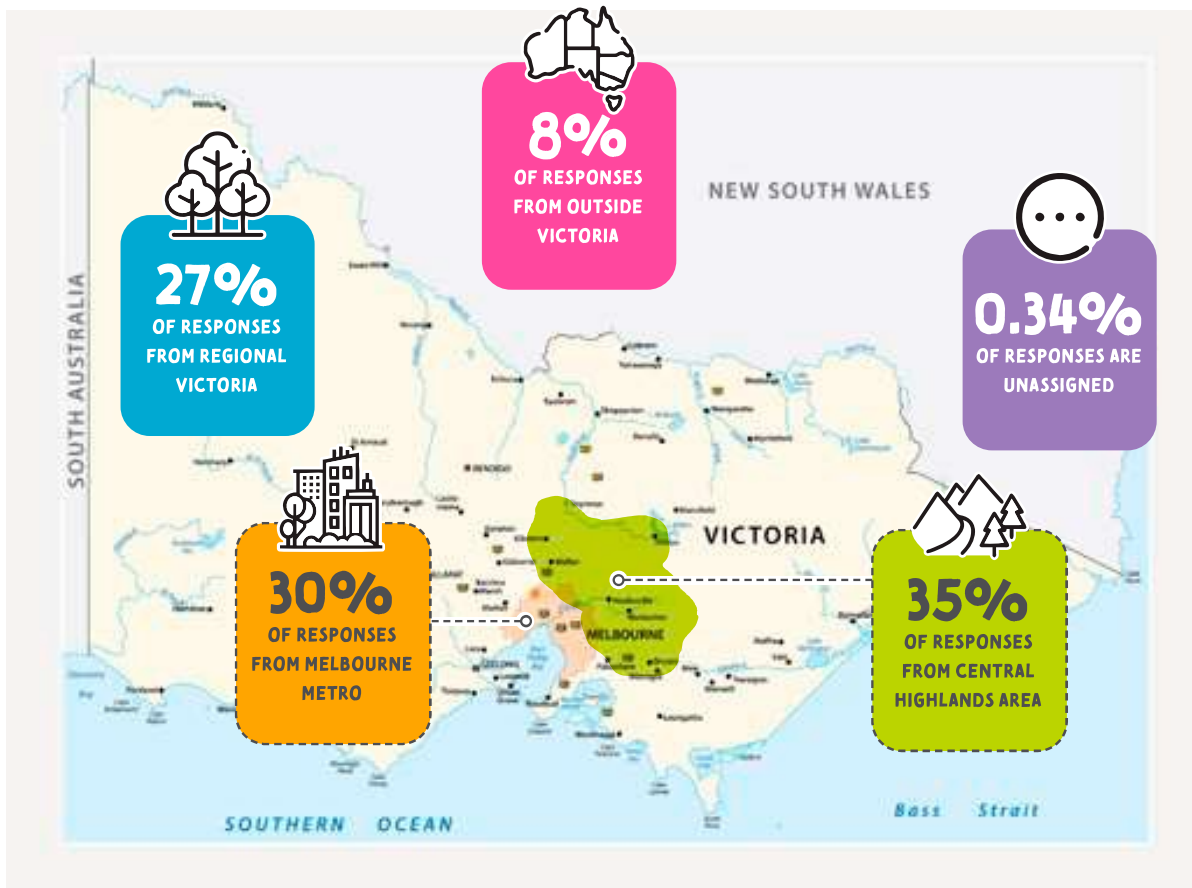


Figure 5.2 – location of community engagement participants who contribute to the Engage Victoria feedback form (Source: MosaicLab)

6. ANALYSIS

This chapter provides details of the Panel's analysis, identification of themes and locations.

6.1 General overview of analysis undertaken

A significant amount of data and information was collected as part of the Panel's engagement program. The Panel undertook analysis work across a range of levels including regional, Traditional Owner, local community and forest and community location groupings. This information was analysed by the Panel and considered in the preparation of its recommendations (Figure 6.1).

Importantly, the Panel's engagement was not a voting exercise. All information collected was considered appropriately and informed the Panel's understanding of the various values and interests in the Central Highlands forests.

The Panel was aware of a rise in contributions from interest groups and peak bodies from campaigns outside the region about halfway through its engagement program. This included attendance at local engagement drop ins and campaign submissions to the Engage Victoria page.

Analysis covered information gained through processes that included:

- review of community and stakeholder meetings: Notes were taken of all individual meetings with information checked directly with participants for accuracy post meetings. These notes were used to analyse and understand local forests and identify challenges and opportunities
- written information: including reports, further advice provided by organisations and individuals – written information provided was used to elicit subject data, issues, advice, expertise and location subject specific information examined for findings, general themes and location related associated with recommendations
- location visits: observations through visits to sites by the Panel were noted and included in information analysed
- context analysis undertaken to understand key information associated with other relevant and connected activity across government departments and agencies e.g. tourism, water, industry transition
- theme analysis: all information was analysed to identify key common themes across the Central Highlands region, including analysis work from the Panel's external engagement support providers

- spatial analysis: mapping was analysed to understand overlays associated with VEAC values assessments and analysis of threatened species and communities, fire history and other disturbance history, biodiversity values, recreation assets and uses, forest age and type, economic uses and water catchments, and Cultural Landscapes.
- local community specific analysis across the state forests under consideration, an analysis of 11 grouped forests associated with local communities was undertaken to understand specific conditions.
- online responses: were screened to determine whether the findings presented in this report are affected by multiple submissions. This included screening of multiple responses submitted from a single IP address; screening of same response being submitted from different IP address; or campaign submissions where organisations provided a generic feedback response for people to submit.

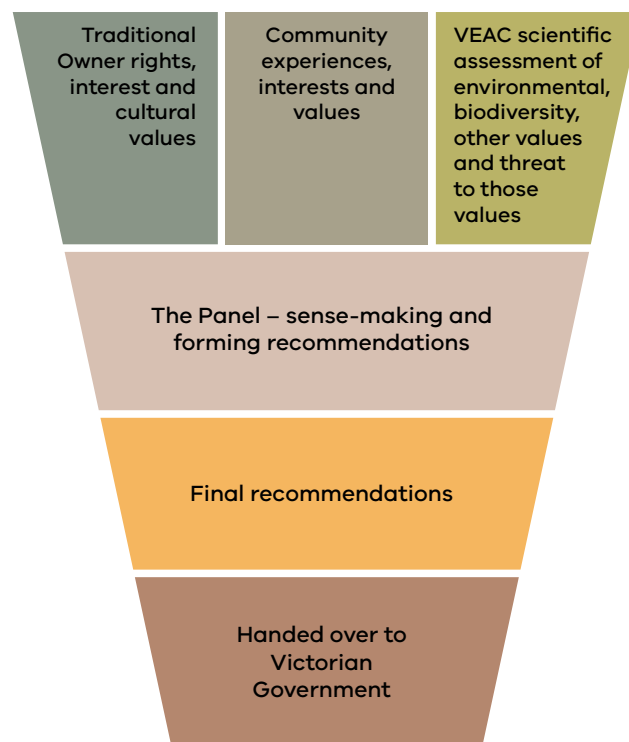


Figure 6.1 – overview of Panel's considerations and process.

6.2 Themes – how themes were determined

The process for analysing engagement data involved examining common or like themes and grouping them together. The themes were then analysed based on the frequency and type of comment and explained with a narrative to provide differing perspectives.

The Panel's analysis of numerous conversations revealed consistent patterns, which are important for understanding the context of this report's recommendations. It's worth noting that some themes received more attention than others.

6.3 Locations – how these were identified

From its work, the Panel observed community location groupings associated with state forest areas. The Panel identified 11 indicative groupings for the Central Highlands forests.

Grouping of forests and associated communities was intended to recognise and understand the specific nature of these communities, the importance that people place on activities and recreation undertaken, and the history, cultural landscapes and condition of the state forests within this location.

The Panel intends this grouping as an opportunity and potential for future collaborative work between communities, Traditional Owners and public land managers with associations refined as these connections are further understood and developed.

These groupings were the basis of analysis the Panel conducted for its engagement findings, information considered and development of recommendations.

The 11 indicative community groupings include (Figure 6.2):

- Warburton, Healesville, Yarra Junction, Powelltown
- Erica, Baw Baw
- Noojee, Neerim, Warragul, Drouin, Neerim South
- Broadford, Tallarook
- Rubicon
- Alexandra, Taggerty
- Toolangi, Kinglake, Glenburn
- Wandong, Wallan, Kinglake West
- Marysville, Buxton
- Waring, Upper Goulburn
- Labertouche, Beenak, Tarago, Tonimbuk.

Analysis was conducted for community groupings to assist in identifying key information relevant to each forest location and for recommendation forming. A key part of this analysis was the overlay of spatial information including from sources such as:

- VEAC's interim values assessment
- Traditional Owner Country and cultural landscape
- A range of biodiversity data and information including, rainforest extent, Ecological Vegetation Classes (EVC), threatened species locations, Habitat Distribution Models
- Forest type, disturbance history (including harvesting and fire), modelled old growth, Forest Management Zones
- recreational activities data including hunting areas, recreation assets and sites, tracks and trails, road network
- forest resource use information including firewood collection, apiary sites and grazing licences
- water and catchments information, including Melbourne Water catchments and assets
- historic history data and sites of significance
- public land management and overlays
- mining information
- data on compliance and safety.

Key overlays and analysis outputs are included at **Appendix 2**.

Much of the spatial data and information used by the Panel is publicly available at DataVic (<https://www.data.vic.gov.au/>).



Photo 10 – Central Highlands forests (credit: DEECA)

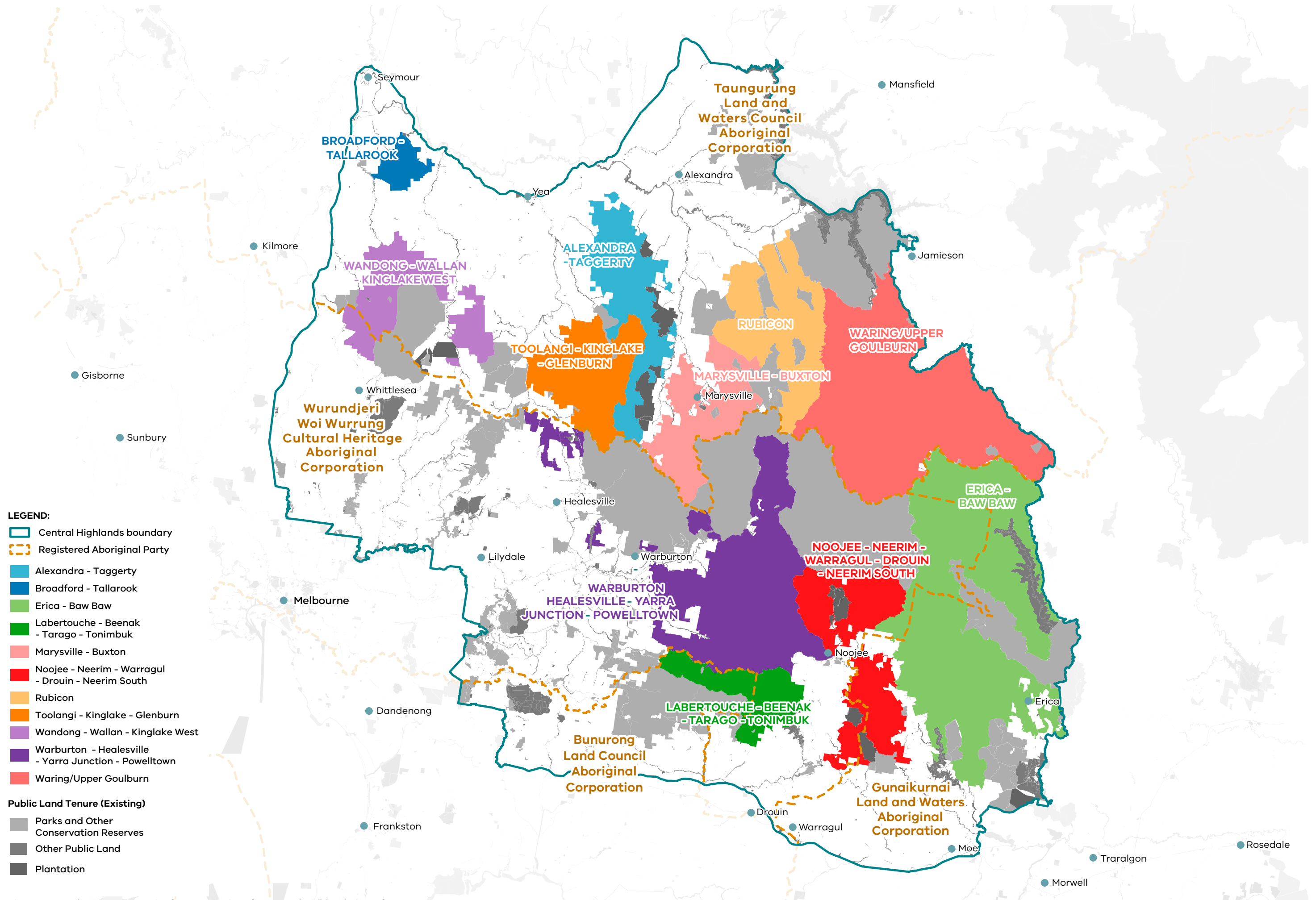


Figure 6.2 – Indicative community forest groupings for Central Highlands state forests

7. FINDINGS

This chapter of the report presents the Panel's findings.

Following extensive engagement, the Panel has identified several key themes relevant to its considerations. The themes identified cut across a range of issues and apply generally across the Central Highlands engagement area. These themes provide valuable insights into current challenges, future opportunities, considerations for government and areas requiring further investigation.

Key themes included:

1. the importance of the Central Highlands landscape to people
2. the uniqueness of the Central Highlands
3. forest activities
4. governance, planning and managing forests for the future
5. strong communities with sustainable futures
6. effective compliance and regulation
7. funding for success.



Photo 11 – Central Highlands forests (credit: M. Wood)

7.1 The importance of the Central Highlands forests to people

People and place

The Panel has heard clearly of the importance of the Central Highlands landscape to people and communities. Overwhelmingly, people want to see these forests safeguarded and better managed for future generations to enjoy.

Benefits for people

The significance of the Central Highlands forests, their natural and cultural values, underpin a range of experiences and activities. The Panel heard extensively about the importance of people spending time in and having suitable access to the forests for a range of recreation, activities and experiences.

Detailed findings on recreation and activities are provided at **chapter 7.3**.

The benefits of people experiencing these forests was noted, including:

- the forest landscape, its beauty and environment support a range of positive experiences
- better health through physical activities, a sense of calm, wellness and peace from being in nature
- visiting and experiencing locations and undertaking activities that elicit feelings of enjoyment, happiness and well being
- time spent in nature with family and friends and group activities including recreation clubs
- improving knowledge, expertise and skills through personal and group activities (e.g. organising and running 4WD training)
- contribution to research and own knowledge and interests associated with plants, animals, ecosystems (e.g. research and citizen science)
- contributing to improvements for activities and restoration of land through working bees, volunteering and caring for forests (e.g. track maintenance, habitat restoration works).

The Panel also heard of the important role and work of dedicated public land managers in the Central Highlands who contribute to understanding and management of these forests. Many land managers have had a long association with these forests, live in and around forest communities and have strong connection to the management of these areas. This provides an important sense of connection to the forest area and its values.



Photo 12 – Redwoods area (credit: M. Wood)

Growing visitation

Across the public land estate, visitation to forests increased significantly in recent years. This includes following the COVID-19 pandemic which saw major increases in people accessing nature and a movement of people out of cities to regions and closer to forest areas.

Evidence from land managers and local communities suggests forests in this area have also seen a major increase in visitation. Key visitor sites such as the Ada Tree, Warburton redwood plantation and Noojee trestle bridge are often very busy on weekends, with car parks overflowing.

Access to new types of equipment and technology has also changed the way people engage with forests. Camping and outdoor gear is now widely available. Many people and families now have access to four-wheel drive vehicles, with sales of recreational 4WD vehicles and recreational trail bikes significantly increasing in recent years⁵. Information about tracks and trails is now accessible via mobile phone apps and local attractions are advertised and promoted on social media. The growing use of social media being used by people to arrange meet ups or find out information on activities was noted in the Panel's engagements. In some instances, this is occurring in place of people joining traditional recreational clubs that provide training opportunities and support education on codes of conduct in particular for people new to those activities.

Victoria's population is currently 7 million people⁶, having doubled since the 1970s. Melbourne is now the fastest growing city in Australia, with a population that has continuously surged over the past decade. By 2051 Victoria's population is forecast to be 10.3 million⁷ and this will see more people wanting to explore and experience the bush, placing greater pressures on management, environmental and biocultural values.

While more people experiencing the bush is seen as positive, careful management is required to deal with the impacts large numbers of visitors have. This includes managing waste and toileting, compaction and illegal track creation, parking and infrastructure, and bringing of domestic animals. Being aware of the impact of individual and group activities in forests and how to support sustainable and responsible behaviour for all types of activities has been an important focus for the Panel to consider. This also requires people to carefully consider how they experience and enjoy forests. For example, the way things were done in the past may not be as appropriate today for a range of reasons. There is a significant opportunity to foster a caring and stewardship approach with new and current forest visitors that supports the health of forests.

5 Available at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-07-13/4wd-tracks-see-boom-in-drivers-damaging-landscape-high-country/104049400>

6 Available at: <https://forecast.id.com.au/australia/about-forecast-areas?WebID=110>

7 <https://www.planning.vic.gov.au/guides-and-resources/data-and-insights/victoria-in-future>

Challenges

As indicated by the data received from the Panel's extensive engagement, the desire for people to continue to participate in activities they currently enjoy in the Central Highlands is high. Generally, it appears that most people are keen to act responsibly and value their experiences in caring for the forests they visit. One obvious challenge identified is that not enough knowledge is available to people on the impacts of activities in particular locations of sensitivity including multiple activity impact and incompatibility. There is also a perception of some activities that may be based on misinformation or misunderstanding which can create tensions between people and communities

The way people interact with and value the Central Highlands forests is crucial to future health of the forests. A healthy forest ecosystem is vital including through the provision of essential benefits such as maintaining safe and clean drinking water supplies, biodiversity and storing and absorbing carbon from the atmosphere. As populations grow, an increasing number of people are seeking to enjoy these forest areas for various recreational activities. At the same time, there are mounting pressures from biodiversity loss and climate change impacts. Without appropriate management, there is a risk that these forests may be enjoyed beyond their capacity to sustain such use.



Photo 13 – Noojee trestle bridge (credit: DEECA)

Another key point the Panel has noted, is that at present there are no adequate systematic data collection or spatial data systems in place for recreation and tourism. A 2023 VEAC report into recreational data in Victoria noted the importance of improving the significant knowledge gaps and recommended establishing an evidence base over time including a Recreation Knowledge Framework and a robust methodology for a recreational user census to be undertaken every 5 years⁸. The report also recommended that the Recreation Reference Group established for the VEAC report be maintained.

The Panel is also aware of mis- and dis-information in community about land management and activities. Misconceptions about land management practices are common, particularly regarding the perceived right to unrestricted access to state forests and the "limited" range of activities permitted in national parks. The complexity of public land arrangements in the Central Highlands, including the presence of closed and restricted water catchments, presents a significant challenge to public understanding. There is a clear need for accurate information and messaging about forests and appropriate allowable experiences.

Communities want to be involved in management of their local forests. There are many groups doing good work contributing to track maintenance, citizen science, weed control and restoration works. The Panel has heard of challenges in communities being able to contribute to this, including bureaucratic approvals processes, lack of collaborative models, and exhaustive grants processes. The Panel is also aware that at the same time there are many examples of good work progressing for collaborating with communities, Traditional Owners and land managers (see **Box 6**, Latrobe River campground case study).

⁸ Available at: <https://veac.vic.gov.au/investigations-assessments/current-assessments/investigation/advice-on-aspects-of-public-land-use-information-1>

Box 6

Case Study: Latrobe River Campground, picnic area and walking track

This case study demonstrates how local partnerships and investment can improve behaviour, reduce compliance issues and enhance the forest recreation experience for a range of users. Through the work of the local DEECA crew and partnerships with user groups, an upgraded campsite, picnic area and walking track at Latrobe River has had positive outcomes for the environment, behaviour and peoples experience.

Latrobe River Campsite

The Latrobe River campsite is a popular camping location located in Latrobe State Forest and close to the Latrobe River – on the boundary of Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and shared country.

The campsite is enjoyed by visitors as a scenic natural area which is accessible to Melbourne. It is also an area where people base themselves to enjoy the surrounding forest experience, including fishing, walking, swimming and trail bike riding.

While a popular location, the environment and people's experiences were being negatively impacted at the site due to poor behaviour. People were expanding the footprint of the campsites and camping and driving on surrounding vegetation. This was leading to compaction of tree roots, erosion issues and creating muddy bog holes, reducing the area for people to camp in comfort. An area was being used for toileting near the river. There was also no formal track to the river, so people were creating their own tracks, expanding the impact to the vegetation and impacting the sensitive aquatic environment. Due to the state of the campground, it was attracting poor behaviour and a lack of care from visitors. Combined, this created a campsite that was leading to environmental damage and an area that was not appealing to families and people trying to do the right thing.

Partnerships and investment

Through initiative funding from the State Government, the DEECA land managers commenced a project to revitalise and upgrade the campsite in 2018. DEECA worked with 4x4 associations to design layouts and install infrastructure that met the needs of users. A key feature of this was testing site design and vehicle pathways to ensure visitors with larger camper trailers or motor bike trailers could access and exist the sites safely, with enough room, reducing damage on surrounding vegetation.

Bollards were installed and campsites redesigned so that designated sites were clear, and vehicle movement limited to set paths, reducing the impact and compaction of surrounding vegetation. The installation of the bollards was done with the local DEECA crew and volunteers



Photo 14 – Latrobe River site upgrades (credit: DEECA)



Photo 15 – Latrobe River walking track (credit: DEECA)

from 4x4 clubs, with a weekend working bee set up to do the works in partnership – enhancing pride and support from these stakeholders. Directional signage and information boards support users to do the right thing when camping in this scenic environment.

The land manager identified the issue of people toileting in the forest, so two new toilets were installed, including the replacement of an outdated toilet. This created more accessible and appealing toilets with easy access from all campsites to ensure people used them. Picnic tables were installed, and a walk-in campsite established to support a variety of different user groups.

Stage two of the project involved the design and installation of a boardwalk and designated walking track down to the Latrobe River. This created a more accessible short walk, with scenic views and access to the river, and reduced compaction and erosion issues along the riverbanks.

Key learnings

The project has achieved positive outcomes including increased safety, recreation values, compliance and community education.

The site is now a well maintained and appealing camping location, reducing negative behaviours due to the maintenance and 'cues of care'. The partnership with user groups such as 4x4 associations means the site works for a range of user groups and enhances compliance through good design and investment. Anecdotally, the presence of the land managers at the site, passing through, collecting rubbish etc. has enhanced behaviours, and it is now a family friendly site with robust infrastructure to encourage compliance.

The site and investment demonstrate that through local partnerships and investment, the forest experience for people, and the environmental values at the site, can be enhanced and maintained.

Opportunities

The Panel recognises there is now a significant opportunity to harness community interest and passion for the Central Highlands forests. This includes bringing people together to support and care for these forests into the future and support sustainable recreation. A collaborative approach to land governance, planning and management is required to support greater involvement of communities in decision making and shared responsibility for their forests.

As part of this, forest management needs to be refocussed to landscape as well as local levels. There is no one size fits all approach to the Central Highlands forests and their management. Each forest and its communities are unique. The local community and forest level is the level at which land management practice needs to be discussed and demonstrated to support the best outcomes for forests and their values.

The balance between continuing opportunities for people to benefit from their time in forests and restoring and maintaining the health of the forests is compatible and possible but will require significant collaboration and support. Even when people act responsibly, with the predicted population pressures from a growing Melbourne already evident, more innovative approaches to governance, planning and management is required, including collaborative decision making, better infrastructure, clear signage, recognition and action on environmental values, management zoning and seasonal activities.

Conclusions

The Panel has identified several important considerations for the Victorian Government to support people to experience the Central Highlands forests in a responsible way as supported by key investments to create an enabling environment for collaborative land management approaches.

Work should be undertaken by future land managers to educate and provide accurate advice to individuals, peak bodies, groups, and agencies regarding:

- activities unsuitable for environmentally sensitive locations and the reasons why (myth busting on what is or isn't permitted and why). Options to be explored for identification and management of alternative sites, for activities to continue to be enjoyed alongside environment management.
- accessible and current information for all interested people and organisations regarding local forest work and progress updates on forest health projects (e.g. community groups work, land managers programs)
- opportunities for a range of groups and people (e.g. communities, forest users and recreation clubs) to engage with and participate in land management activities with land managers and researchers
- community education, experience knowledge building about the importance of well managed forest values is needed. This could occur through opportunities to learn about research projects, monitoring programs, and activities associated with environmental values management. Available updates, through organised site visits, websites, signage, guides and interpretations etc. could also help keep people informed.
- encouragement of club membership and/or training for motorised activity users – (membership results in more responsible, community minded uses/access).
- an up-to-date approach to providing responsible recreation information should be actively disseminated through trusted sources and channels, emphasising proactive rather than punitive messaging. Information about current activities and their rationale should be made accessible on-site through up-to-date sources such as websites or QR code technology, rather than static signage that quickly becomes outdated.

Key investments that create an enabling environment and mechanisms for more innovative land management approaches between community, Traditional Owner and land manager partnerships include to:

- support and harness community and recreational users to contribute to land management: e.g. community and volunteers, greater citizen science opportunities, knowledge sharing and collaboration, collab management pilots
- better collect visitor, recreation and tourism data
- better monitor, analyse and evaluate practices and apply knowledge for improved management.

Traditional Owners and Country

Traditional Owners' relationship to Country is deeply spiritual, and often difficult for other members of the community to fully comprehend. This connection has been developed over thousands of generations and Aboriginal peoples have been confirmed by recent archaeological evidence to be the oldest continuous living culture in the world.

This connection has been significantly impacted since colonisation with deliberate dispossession and forced removal from ancestral country, affecting sense of identity and prevention of cultural expression through language, ceremony or cultural practice. This has been particularly painful for Traditional Owners. Groups involved in this Panel process have expressed deep sadness and concern for the health of Country as a result of land management practices undertaken in the past – which some groups have said will take hundreds of years to address.

For Traditional Owners, Country exists beyond the current system of land boundaries and tenure. The process of considering Country and management options within lines on a map is often very challenging and confronting for Traditional Owners.

The Panel, through its terms of reference, has taken seriously the need to work closely with Traditional Owners and support opportunities for change. The Traditional Owners involved in the process have made a significant contribution of their time and knowledge to inform the Panel's and communities' understanding of these important issues.

The Panel has explored opportunities for management of Country by Traditional Owners on public land. Additionally, it has looked at potential institutional reforms that will result in systemic change that will help to build the reconnection to Country Traditional Owners say is necessary to assist them in the healing process.

Challenges

Despite efforts to acknowledge this, more needs to be done to understand, recognise and redress the past injustices for Traditional Owners. This includes considering how present practices including those for land and water management and decision making are taking place and if these support Traditional Owners. This includes addressing barriers that inhibit self-determination and actions needed to support Traditional Owner communities practicing and celebrating their culture on Country in the Central Highlands. This has been identified as a critical requirement for enabling cultural management practices and partnership.

In some instances, the objectives and interests of Traditional Owners are not well understood in community and by public land managers. The Panel considers there is a need to further develop a shared understanding of both the historic, contemporary and future context of Traditional Owners and Country within community and public land managers, including for concepts proposed through this report such as cultural landscapes which is a lens by which Traditional Owners will often describe Country that goes beyond the current concepts of land management and designation of land categories. Cultural landscapes are described in more detail in the Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Landscapes Strategy that was released in 2021⁹.

Successful management of Country will require a coming together of Traditional Owners, communities and public land managers, and while processes like this Panel process will assist in connecting the knowledge systems, more work is required by land managers and communities to build their own understanding.

Opportunities

There are important and significant cultural landscapes across the Central Highlands where work is already underway to strengthen the connection to Country through Traditional Owner led work in partnership with other agencies and communities. Support for this work from government, local communities, other knowledge holders and land managers to demonstrate new ways of working and collaboration should demonstrate the future changes required at a broader system level for this to grow.

Legislation, policy and funding reform could and should address conditions required to support collaborative approaches, cross department and coordinated programs and funding that reflects a cultural way of working and being. Supporting and demonstrating the benefit of this approach could lead to testing new ways of working that strengthen partnerships, collective knowledge building and value the ongoing long-term work required to return health to Country.

Traditional Owners support the opportunity to work closely in collaboration with communities and government to heal and care for forest Country. Cultural land management is an opportunity to demonstrate relationships between Nations, community and Country. With the contemporary challenges that our forests face, the Panel considers this an important offer to take up.

⁹ Available at: <https://fvtoc.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Cultural-Landscapes-Strategy.pdf>



Photo 16 – Central Highlands (credit: M. Wood)

Conclusions

While each Traditional Owner group has its own vision and pathways, the Panel has identified some common considerations relevant to supporting Traditional Owner rights and interest for forest Country in the Central Highlands. There are significant opportunities here for the Victorian Government to support Traditional Owners, community and land managers to work together on the future of forests in the Central Highlands.

Key considerations to support this include:

- developing greater understanding in community of our shared history and Traditional Owners caring for Country, rights and interests
- greater partnership and establishing trust between Traditional Owners and public land managers – to leverage strengths in governance, planning and management of forest Country
- development of governance, planning and management arrangements that support Traditional Owner self-determination, including a Cultural Reserve public land category and cultural landscapes approach
- bridging western science and Traditional Owner world views through testing and demonstrating of practice at local levels
- supporting capacity building for Traditional Owner corporations.

7.2 The uniqueness of the Central Highlands

The Central Highlands is a globally significant landscape. The forests, experiences and values in the Central Highlands are not found elsewhere in the world.

These forests comprise significant areas of biodiversity importance and are home to unique and endangered species. They are remarkable for their size and beauty, offering breathtaking vistas. Moreover, they provide essential ecosystem services such as Melbourne's water supply and carbon storage. The forests also hold considerable scientific, recreational, and tourism value.

The biodiversity and ecological significance of the Central Highlands forests cannot be overstated. They serve as a stronghold for mountain ash (*Eucalyptus regnans*) forests, the world's tallest flowering plants. Other overstorey tree species include alpine ash (*E. delegatensis*) and shining gum (*E. nitens*) at higher elevations, or messmate (*E. obliqua*), mountain grey gum (*E. cypellocarpa*) and red stringybark (*E. macrorhyncha*) at lower elevations. These forests also support diverse midstory and shrub layers.

The region is home to nearly 400 threatened plant and animal species, underscoring its critical role in biodiversity conservation¹⁰. Forest-dependent species include the endangered Leadbeater's possum, southern greater glider, Baw Baw frog and sooty owl and the vulnerable yellow-bellied glider, along with various other arboreal marsupials, a wide array of bird species and several fish species in its aquatic environments.

According to VEAC's assessment, 17 of Victoria's 152 Ecological Vegetation Classes (EVCs) occurring in the area are underrepresented and do not meet Victoria's target of 15% of pre-1750 vegetation area protected. Cool temperate rainforest in the three bioregions of Victorian Alps, Highlands – Southern Fall and Highlands – Northern Fall have a shortfall, requiring 100% of the available vegetation in the state forests to be included in the protected area system to achieve this target.

Beyond their ecological importance, these forests play a crucial role in water and biodiversity security and carbon sequestration. The ash forests are vital freshwater sources for Victoria, including Melbourne's drinking water supply (see box 2, section 3.2) and are recognised globally for their contribution to climate change mitigation efforts.

¹⁰ VEAC, 2023. Assessment of the values of state forests on the Central Highlands, Interim report



Photo 17 – Central Highlands forests (credit: DEECA)

Valuing forest carbon

Forests play a crucial role in regulating the planet's climate by sequestering carbon dioxide (CO²) from the atmosphere and storing it in various parts of the forest ecosystem, including trunks, branches, foliage, roots, forest debris, and soil. These carbon sinks are vital for mitigating human-induced climate change and meeting the Paris Agreement's global warming targets.

Victoria's national parks and reserves stand out as major carbon sinks, storing more than 270 million tonnes of carbon, which is equivalent to almost 1 billion tonnes of CO². These national parks and reserves store, on average, 40% more carbon per hectare than state forests¹¹.

The mountain ash forests of the Central Highlands are particularly noteworthy in this context. These forests contain the highest density of carbon in the world, storing about 1,867 tonnes of carbon per hectare¹². This figure surpasses even the carbon storage capacity of the Amazon rainforest in Brazil, highlighting the global significance of the Central Highlands in climate change mitigation efforts.

To put this into perspective, if all the carbon stored in Victoria's national parks and reserves were to be released, it would cost an estimated \$15 billion to offset these emissions. This significant carbon storage capacity underscores the importance of preserving and expanding these protected areas.

The significant change in forest management, particularly the decision to end logging in state forests, will enable these forests to regenerate. Data shows that this approach is an effective mitigation strategy for both reducing emissions from the forestry sector and simultaneously increasing removals of CO² from the atmosphere¹³. Experts emphasise that while tree planting is often promoted as essential for climate stabilisation, the mitigation potential of planting trees is relatively small compared to the benefits of protecting primary forests and supporting the natural regeneration of previously logged forests. Ceasing deforestation and degradation of primary forests offers an immediate mitigation benefit. In contrast, carbon stored in newly planted trees will take many decades to make a significant contribution to reducing atmospheric CO².

Climate Change

Climate change is a significant issue in the Central Highlands, impacting various aspects of the ecosystem and necessitating local and national decision-making. It acts as a risk accelerator, compounding and interacting with other threatening processes. This complex interplay necessitates careful consideration in future decision-making processes.

The effects of climate change in this region manifest in two primary ways. Gradual impacts, such as overall warming, exacerbating existing environmental pressures. Simultaneously, the region faces an increased frequency and severity of extreme events, including bushfires, floods, and droughts. Over the past two decades, devastating bushfires and severe storm damage have significantly compromised the resilience and regenerative capacity of these forests. Growing concerns surround the impact of rising temperatures on habitats, weather patterns, and the intensity of these events.

¹¹ DELWP 2019. Fact Sheet 8: Valuing forest carbon. www.delwp.vic.gov.au

¹² Dellasala et al., 2020. June 2020 / Vol. 70 No. 6 BioScience 445

¹³ Mackey et al 2022 Environ. Res. Lett. 17 054028



Photo 18 – Central Highlands forests (credit: DEECA)

Victoria, like many areas globally, is experiencing biodiversity loss directly linked to climate change. As the most cleared state in Australia, Victoria faces a pressing conservation challenge, with over one-third of its native plant and animal species classified as rare, threatened, or near threatened. This erosion of biodiversity carries profound implications for ecosystem services such as clean air and water provision, agricultural productivity, pollination, and overall human well-being.

The mountain ash forests stand at particular risk from climate change. These ecosystems have already undergone significant transformation. Currently spanning 156,700 ha, the mountain ash forests have seen a dramatic reduction in old-growth areas. From an estimated 47,000 ha (30% of the total) in 1750, old-growth forest has dwindled to a mere 1,700 ha (1%) as of 2011. Projections suggest a severe decline in large old hollow-bearing trees, from approximately 3.77 per ha in 2011 to between 0.29 and 0.82 per ha by 2067. This alarming trend has led to the classification of the mountain ash forest ecosystem as Critically Endangered under IUCN criteria.

Challenges

The cessation of timber harvesting has brought to light several issues associated with past state forest management, revealing policies, planning approaches, and practices that are no longer fit for purpose. The challenges facing these forests are multifaceted, with both immediate and long-term ramifications. Scientific studies, observations from land managers, and community reports all indicate that the resilience of the Central Highlands forests is under severe threat. Experts warn that these ecosystems are approaching a tipping point, requiring urgent action and management changes to prevent irreversible damage.

In addressing these challenges, experts emphasise that the most effective, immediate, and cost-efficient solution lies in prioritising the regeneration of carbon-rich, primary forests. This strategy, particularly when applied to carbon-dense areas like the Central Highlands' Mountain ash forests, offers substantial benefits for both climate change mitigation and biodiversity conservation. By focusing on these ecosystems, we can simultaneously address climate concerns and preserve vital habitats, underscoring the interconnected nature of environmental challenges and solutions.

As we move forward, it is crucial to develop and implement comprehensive, science-based management strategies that account for the complex interplay of climate change, biodiversity, and ecosystem health. This includes strategies that support Traditional Owner self-determination and take a holistic approach to management of biocultural values. These efforts will be essential in safeguarding the unique and valuable forests of the Central Highlands for future generations.

Opportunities

There is a significant opportunity to celebrate and acknowledge the importance and uniqueness of the Central Highlands forests. This includes building a broader understanding within community and visitors of the importance and values of these forests.

Key feedback the Panel heard was the need to elevate and improve environmental management across all forests in the region. This includes for state forest areas currently managed by DEECA as well as across other public land, including parks and reserves managed by Parks Victoria. The Panel heard that conservation planning or works are not taking place due to a range of factors, including lack of funding and resourcing.

There is an opportunity to further promote the uniqueness of the Central Highlands as a world class destination. The proposal for a Great Forest National Park was a campaign run by environmental advocate groups that had significant backing from some parts of the international and domestic community and had the support of investors. This momentum could be built upon to continue to promote suitable public-private partnerships that harness infrastructure resources supporting more people to access the forests and enhance community recognition and understanding of the value of these forests.

The Panel heard of many local tourism and forest attraction proposals. This includes a range of offerings including multi day hikes, linking bike trails, mountain bike developments, educational opportunities to name a few.

Conclusions

A new way of working in and management direction is required for the Central Highlands forests. One that appropriately recognises and celebrates the uniqueness of these forests and addresses contemporary and future land management challenges.

Key considerations include:

- elevating and improving environmental management across all land categories (refer **Chapter 7.4**)
- a campaign to celebrate and promote understanding of the Central Highlands forests and possibly building on existing efforts with private investors and philanthropists
- acknowledgement of important services that exist within the Central Highlands including crucial water catchments that supply Melbourne's water
- supporting local and regional development and tourism opportunities with appropriate and sensitive infrastructure and offerings.

7.3 Forest activities

The Panel heard from a wide range of stakeholders and community about what activities and uses are occurring in the Central Highlands state forests.

This includes feedback across bushwalking, hiking and trail running, camping and picnicking, dog walking, fishing, mountain biking, four-wheel driving, firewood collection, horse riding, prospecting and fossicking, trail bike riding and other vehicle use, hunting (including hound hunting and stalking), events, education, rock climbing and abseiling.

Key findings from this included:

- the importance of a range of activities and experiences across the landscape for people and communities

- most people are recreating responsibly and care about the forest
- concerns that a change to land categories and management will affect the activities they can undertake in certain forests
- the need for appropriate management of uses and activities to maintain balance and reduce conflicts between users and impacts on the environment
- the importance of good access and management, regardless of tenure, to facilitate a range of experiences (e.g. well-maintained tracks and trails with signage)
- activities in state forests are highly valued for wellbeing, mental and physical health – certain activities are of particular importance to particular groups, e.g. horse-riding has high engagement from women and girls and prospecting for some war veterans
- clubs and peak bodies play an important role in supporting safe and appropriate use as well as maintenance of tracks and facilities
- state forests provide opportunities for social and competitive events and rallies that cannot be readily undertaken on private land
- state forest, can also provide personal use resources, such as firewood and meat from deer, which for some people in the community is an important way of life and reduces cost of living pressures

More information is available on specific activities is at **Appendix 3**.

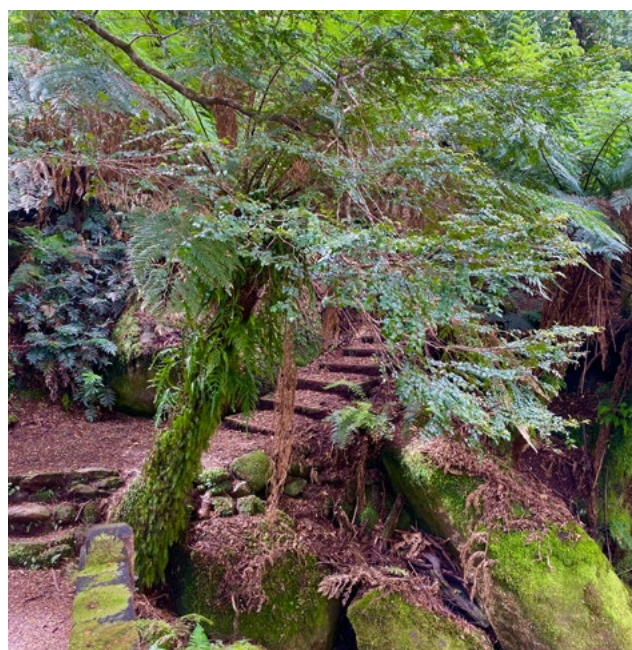


Photo 19 – forest walk (credit: M. Wood)

Challenges

The Panel has observed a number of challenges associated with management of activities in the Central Highlands state forests.

There are now more people than ever looking to recreate in the Central Highlands and this is only going to increase as Melbourne's population grows. Increasing numbers of visitors undertaking a wide range of activities creates additional pressures on areas, including already crowded sites.

Some of the challenges the Panel heard about included:

- roads, tracks and trails were a key theme, with many people concerned that future maintenance of roads and tracks would diminish if land categories and managers changed – there was a fear that access would be limited, and people would be “locked out”
- growing visitation is placing pressures on limited recreation infrastructure, with the popularity of campgrounds, carparks and picnicking areas leading to a reduced experience for visitors
- limited information on experiences and offerings in state forest areas
- lack of information and misunderstanding of the impacts that certain activities can have on the bush or other user's experiences
- a shift away from club or association membership to social media arranged meet ups or groups means people aren't getting exposed to safe ways to recreate, codes of practice or instructional information
- conflicts between user groups are increasing in some areas, in particular on multi use trails where walkers, mountain bikers, horse riders, motorbikes and 4WDs can converge
- illegal behaviours in some areas, including driving or riding off tracks, damaging infrastructure, uncontrolled firearms use (see more **Chapter 7.6**)
- lack of accessible infrastructure for all abilities
- illegal firewood collection can have impacts on biodiversity and threatened species that depend on woody debris
- budgets of land managers are limited for maintenance and upkeep of infrastructure and assets that supports recreation and experience, with what little funding is available often spent on repairs following illegal activities.

Opportunities

The Panel heard of many opportunities for better management of recreation activities and experiences.

Core to this is land managers working more collaboratively with communities, user groups and peak bodies to build a culture of care and support a range of experiences. There are already many groups out there doing great work. This includes peak bodies such as 4WD Victoria that support education of drivers, track maintenance and seasonal clearing. There is a significant opportunity to support and expand on this.

Key opportunities include:

- working with local groups, clubs and peak bodies to support their work and promote safe levels of use
- education campaigns to support people to recreate safely and in a way that doesn't harm the bush or negatively impacts others
- undertaking a strategic roading and track/trail network plan across the Central Highlands to prioritise roads, tracks and trails for specific activities and uses with appropriate maintenance and signage
- strategically considering recreation activities and experiences across the Central Highlands holistically across tenures so offerings are complimentary
- enhanced maintenance of existing infrastructure using models of 'cues to care' to support improved behaviour
- improved zoning and designation of areas for active and passive recreation so everyone gets they experience they are looking for
- well managed and regulated firewood collection, including the reintroduction of a permit system to get better data on levels of take
- exploring formalising areas for users to undertake high impact activities in a legal way – e.g. designated single track trail bike, mountain bike or horse-riding areas.



Photo 20 – vehicle damage (credit: M. Wood)

Conclusions

Conclusions include:

- enhancing education, bush ethics and codes of practice for different user groups to demonstrate and encourage best practice recreation activities
- developing strategic recreation plans to designate areas of passive and active recreation zones, and exclusion areas, to minimise conflicts and protect sensitive environments (e.g. Bunyip recreation framework)
- strategic review of roading, tracks and trail access to identify levels of management and ensure access to key recreation areas
- sustainable funding model for roading, trail and track maintenance, and other recreation infrastructure maintenance including the potential of local social enterprise and benefits programs
- undertaking regular market research to identify recreational users, emerging trends, satisfaction and infrastructure availability
- expanding data collection e.g. traffic counters, trail counters, firewood permit system to understand trends in use
- regularly consult with user groups to ensure there are sustainable visitor opportunities
- conducting research and trials into permit systems for high impact activities or access to areas with sensitive ecosystems
- supporting peak bodies and user groups to deliver training and education for people interested in getting into new activities
- enhancing accessibility for all-abilities and ages
- cross agency collaboration and programs to support responsible hunting.

7.4 Governance, planning and managing forests for the future

The Panel has heard that governance, planning and management of state forests needs to change.

Commercial timber production has been a main management focus for Victoria's state forests. This has resulted in institutions, cultures and frameworks that are centred around timber production and managing risks associated with this and not focused on the full suite of forest values.

A subsequent important focus of state forest management was the maintenance of roads and access associated with timber harvesting. Some roads and tracks are also used for other management purposes and support recreation. Alongside this activity, the Panel is aware that most recent management planning has focused on fire

mitigation management, safety of people undertaking recreational activities and some weeds and pest management. There appears to be an overall approach to managing risk to values as opposed to considering enhancement of forest values.

For example, the Forest Management Zone (FMZ) – an important tool for planning and land management operations – has been primarily used to manage timber production, risks to some biodiversity values and recreation considerations. In its current state the FMZ does not support a holistic approach to management and enhancement of values.

The Panel also heard that existing forest management plans for the Central Highlands state forests are over 20 years old, and these urgently need to be updated to reflect contemporary policy direction and challenges. The Panel heard that while this work was started by DEECA in 2022, it has since halted. There is a need to consider planning across land categories and ensure forest management plans are aligned with Traditional Owner Country plans, and park and reserve management and conservation plans of Parks Victoria.

Approaches to ensuring healthy forests was also a debated topic, with different views across sectors, research and practitioners around appropriate practices.

The Panel is aware that varying definitions of active and adaptive forest management exist and tend to be based on the specific management purposes (i.e. conservation, fire, or forestry disciplines). Most active forest management definitions are rooted in traditional northern hemisphere forestry frameworks, such as the Montreal Process Criteria and Indicators, United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation's Temperate and Boreal Forest Assessments and Australia's National Forest Policy Statement¹⁴. Definitions often overlook Traditional Owner bio-cultural knowledge, land custodianship, healing and caring for Country; and the dynamic increasing nature of environmental risks including those accelerated by climate change. Moreover, current levels of governance involving broader community, agencies and Traditional Owners are insufficient for new ways of working that meet community aspirations for collaborative land management.

While the Panel's engagement scope did not include consideration of fire management and planning, the Panel did hear that fire prevention and response was a concern, with many people and organisations raising the matter of current practice and its effectiveness including views about alternate practices seen as needed.

14 Available at: https://www.agriculture.gov.au/sites/default/files/sitecollectiondocuments/forestry/australias-forest-policies/nat_nfps.pdf



Photo 21 – forest road (credit: C. Gotgens)

Challenges

A general observation of the Panel is that the resilience of forests in the Central Highlands across all land tenures are under threat.

Key challenges include:

- outdated public land categories and instruments no longer reflect contemporary values and governance
- current management plans, strategies and practices are old and not fit for purpose
- competing views and perceptions of what is needed for the future of the forests in the Central Highlands are exacerbated by conflicting experiences of the past and apparent gaps and disagreement between diverse groups in the community, researchers, and practitioners
- confusion surrounding conflicting research findings, positions on approaches, terminology
- lack of landscapes-based planning that allows for collaboration across and within land managers and communities (Traditional Owners, volunteers, citizen scientists, researchers, local action groups, local government, education providers etc.)
- since the 1960s, 40% of state forests in the Central Highlands have been harvested or thinned. The resulting age structure of forests is currently unbalanced
- rehabilitation of logging sites, including replanting, remains a challenge due to lack of and unsuccessful rehabilitation practices, and threats from browsing deer, soil compaction and erosion, and poor seeding processes and follow up remediation
- poor inclusivity and access due to mobility constraints, poor or damaged infrastructure and lack of suitable access information and signage for assisting multicultural and other communities enjoy the forests (signage, maps, apps)
- both the forest and communities have been negatively impacted by significant events including fires and windstorms, which are predicted to become more frequent and intense with climate change
- the Panel heard that there are pockets of good work taking place with existing land managers often requiring dedicated local driven staff to progress outcomes with limited institutional support.

Opportunities

Given the diverse ecological values of the Central Highlands, there is room for various uses and protections, and a shared responsibility to understand, care for, and enhance the ecological and broader biocultural health of these forests. This requires community support, particularly from urban dwellers, and a substantial increase over time of government funding to enable action. Australia's tradition of community Landcare and volunteering should be leveraged, with communities and groups contributing labour and expertise in collaboration with land managers and Traditional Owners for land restoration and active management. We've seen many examples of how this can work on the ground.

To address the current inadequacies in current forest active management definitions, we must adopt a more holistic and adaptive approach that braids scientific and Traditional Owner knowledge, acknowledges the interdependence of ecological and human values, and is responsive to dynamic, growing environmental challenges. Rethinking the concept of joint management as collaborative management, with supporting tools and practice for people and organisations could lead to better collective outcomes. The current interest in forest management could facilitate a new way of engaging in forest management and provide an opportunity for a more coordinated and collaborative way of working with potential greater benefit and delivery of multiple benefits.

Understanding the current practices and future forests management requirements has provided the Panel with insights into the need for innovative thinking and action for the future which will require new ways of working and practice.

Avoiding polarisation and being able to address fundamental issues without falling into debates that undermine genuine discourse and actions, will be key to realising the opportunities below.

The active, adaptative forest management definition specifically developed for this report, includes emphasis on Traditional Owner biocultural land management and their collective nature as affects Country 'health', land stewardship, ecological processes, biodiversity conservation, forest structure and human interdependence on the health of Country, in a time of accelerating climate change impacts.

Given the persistent degradation of landscapes, as evidenced by State of the Environment and State of the Forest reporting; the current frameworks, practices and levels of resourcing are inadequate. There is a need to develop new approaches to forest protection, use, reserve systems, and active management, characterised by:

- identifying overarching purpose(s): for active management and the characteristics/values required as framing to achieve the purpose. The Traditional Owner concept of healthy country is a good example
- piloting and testing: new frameworks should be tenure-blind, place-based, and developed through pilot projects at Place and Cultural Landscape scales. Pilot projects will offer opportunities to develop and test collaborative forms of governance, planning, management and cultural practice using a both worlds approach
- tenure blind: a focus on being tenure blind but place-based
- dynamic ecosystem recognition: emphasise a dynamic landscape approach to forest-human relationships that integrates the dynamic nature of ecosystems with human interdependence, leveraging Traditional Owner knowledge systems
- integration of systems: combine the strengths from the two knowledge systems to create a cohesive active management strategy, focusing on complementarity (a both worlds approach).
- human/cultural influence: redefine active management to include a strong human/cultural interdependence as fundamental to environmental stewardship, particularly for restoring lost ecological values and rehabilitating degraded areas. Stewardship evolving into custodianship as landscapes are healed and move into management as Caring for Country.
- adaptive and risk management: adaptive management is an approach to managing Country that acknowledges the uncertainty inherent in ecological systems and seeks to address it through a flexible, iterative process of learning and decision making. Focus on adaptive management and risk mitigation is needed in the healing phase, particularly in the contexts of accelerating climate change and recovering from the mismanagement of the colonial period. Examples include strategies for managing fire or pest outbreaks as we transition back to healthy Country.

Conclusions

Core elements of active and adaptive management plans for the Central Highlands should include:

- braiding of science and Traditional Owner knowledge: Apply pilots in scientific methods and Traditional Owner knowledge to test impact on ecological and biocultural axiology, to re-build resilience, and support all core values arising from bio-cultural expressions, economic (arising within safe limits that are consistent with healing and Caring for Country e.g. ecosystem services), recreational (as above, within safe limits) and biodiversity. Such approaches should be tailored to local ecological conditions and community values, biocultural expressions of Country as reflected in Country type, health of Country starting with TO values, as well as consideration of landscape/ regional scale issues and not a one size fits all.
- reframe on-ground management to: improve overall biocultural system health and include: protection – (e.g. old growth, maintain climate and ecosystem refugia, protect hydrological networks), restoration – (reseeding, replanting, management to strengthen biocultural values, including ecological structure and function), disturbance management and threat mitigation – (fire suppression, invasive species management, pathogen management, passive protection-oriented management to minimise, over-development and harmful levels of use)
- landscape re-configuration (redevelop and maintain connected landscapes, structural heterogeneity and diverse forest conditions that support functioning and relationality across all domains – biophysical, spiritual and social-cultural).
- monitoring – application of new technology systems that provide up to date regular biodiversity/forest health monitoring capability would greatly assist in integrated knowledge bank in real time for better decision making, with multiple sources of data available for customised application. This could assist with bringing together Cultural, social, economic and environmental priorities for cross benefit.
- human infrastructure improvement: Improve infrastructure management, such as roads and trails, to concentrate and mitigate human impact, and provide essential facilities like basic roads, bridges, interpretation and signage, facilities and camping areas. Low hanging fruit as these can deliver major benefits for low levels of upkeep.
- enhanced compliance systems: Strengthen compliance systems to ensure adherence to behavioural guidelines and combat illegal activities.
- be placed-based: approaches should be tailored to local ecological conditions and community values, biocultural expressions of Country as reflected in Country type, health of Country beginning with TO values, and considering landscape and regional scale issues to avoid a one-size-fits-all solution.
- learn from and build on the approach currently in place in 11 communities across Victoria undertaking local development strategies as part of the Forestry Industry Transition.
- resource allocation: Allocate significantly more secure, on-going resources to fund the above elements effectively and bring greater efficiencies and effectiveness to existing operational resources, through establishing new governance arrangements that support society's values including collaborative partnership and transition.
- the establishment of new policy and frameworks that enable collaborative governance, planning and management including current land managers in partnership with the broader community and Traditional Owners at a localised place.



Photo 22 – previous timber coupe (credit: M. Wood)



Photo 23 – Central Highlands forest (credit: C. Gotgens)

7.5 Strong communities with sustainable futures

Ensuring strong rural and regional communities and the opportunity to build sustainable futures alongside management and care of forests was seen as important to both state and local people and organisations.

Having local towns that can be involved in and support sustainability over time through businesses, employment and services was a strong feature of engagement messages. Likewise having sustainable interest and activity from external investors in supporting local economies and valuing the future of forests beyond economic gain was seen as important. This included tour and camp operators, hospitality and accommodation development, along with strategic and sensitive forest infrastructure to support visitor access and experience, and innovative ways of funding including private public ventures.

Population growth in peri urban locations south of the Central Highlands and increasing visitor numbers was seen as both an advantage and concern particularly associated with interest in popular locations.

Increased interest in experiencing nature-related, family friendly and group activities across from diverse sections of society was identified for consideration. In particular activities that could support people from multi-cultural communities, the importance of supporting aged and ability challenged was raised consistently.

Challenges

The importance of future sustainable tourism for several local communities was raised. Along with the impact of bushfires, population and demographic changes and industry change, frustration about how to deal with this change and what is needed was clear. It was evident that each small location within a district was dealing with similar issues, however, there did not appear to be a wider strategy for collective action that could benefit the local and broader community.

Risks associated with large numbers of visitors at any time to popular sites were seen as significant. For example, safety associated with large numbers of parked vehicles in overcrowded locations including along household streets, associated lack of facilities to cater for numbers and the impact this has on forest locations including vegetation, pathways, waterways and soil erosion and compaction.

Inclusive information and understanding of opportunities for experiences in forests appeared poor especially for new arrivals to Australia where English is still a second language among older family members.

Opportunities

- work with state and local tourism organisations, local government and businesses to identify opportunities for a campaign to promote and attract visitors to the Central Highlands
- support and encourage local tourism operators and businesses to provide unique experiences and systems that support both local and international interest
- understand the current support and opportunities for diverse peoples to engage with and enjoy forest activities including multi-cultural communities and all abilities groups
- work with peak body and tourism agencies to harness Yarra Valley drawcards and include Central Highlands forest areas as part of the experience
- look to support local government infrastructure priorities that improve recreation access and experiences e.g. mountain bike trails, multi-night hikes through trail connections, visitation infrastructure for improved visitor experiences and community/economic benefits
- improve monitoring of visitor numbers, type and patterns of locations of interest.

Conclusions

Conclusions include to:

- develop a comprehensive tourism approach for the Central Highlands that supports local economies
- investigate the current programs, support and activities that enable diverse peoples to access and enjoy forests in the Central Highlands including the role of agencies, local government and land manager practice.

7.6 Compliance and regulation

The Panel has identified several challenges and opportunities associated with compliance and regulation of activities across the Central Highlands.

One of the key findings coming out of the many conversations with people and organisations was a general understanding and support for responsible care of the forests where people undertake and enjoy activities.

The Panel has heard that local community groups already play a role in supporting people to behave responsibly and care for their local forests. There is an opportunity to build on this through support for this view and organisations, including clubs that support codes of conduct with their members. Actively drawing on this sentiment and encouraging responsible, caring behaviour is a way of shifting from a reactive negative experience associated with compliance to one of involved, proactive, and recognised support for responsible behaviour. This could also be reinforced and supported through the collaborative model described in this report for partnership across groups at a local level.

Importantly there is a need to build knowledge across recreation and tourism regarding the risks associated with all types of activities and responsible behaviours.

The Panel also identified compliance issues of a specific nature, especially associated with forests closer to Melbourne and in more isolated forests. Discussion with the Officer of the Conservation Regulator (OCR) and compliance officers identified suggested changes are needed for prosecution of serious illegal behaviour. The Panel heard of complications with pursuing prosecutions in courts, with processes often lengthy and outcomes not deterring behaviours.

Land managers and compliance officers in forests closer to Melbourne as well as local people noted an increase in the dumping and burning of cars (presuming having been stolen).

The felling of trees and illegal firewood collection for sale appears also to have increased with suggestions of organised crime being involved.

There are also instances of people without secure accommodation using forest camping areas to live long term.

Increasing illegal activity

There has also been an observed increase in the scale and type of offending and illegal activity taking place in the Central Highlands state forests, which may hinder effective management.

Key areas for noncompliance noted by land managers and the OCR include Mount Disappointment, Black Range, Toolangi, Paul Range, Marysville, Yarra, Beenak, Labertouche, Tarago and Neerim state forests. For example, in the period of June 2021 and June 2024, the OCR noted the following instances in the Central Highlands state forests:

- 376 instances of illegal vehicle use – the most observed type of offending in the Central Highlands and Victoria, includes driving on seasonally closed roads/tracks, driving offroad or on illegal tracks. Land manager gates are often targeted and removed illegally to access tracks that are closed for safety or maintenance reasons
- 236 reports of illegal removal of firewood – second most observed and has a significant impact on habitat for native wildlife. Domestic firewood collection on public land can only be collected from designated collection areas in permitted seasons
- 188 instances of illegal dumping, littering has been increasing in state forests in recent years, this includes dumping of building rubble, asbestos materials, domestic waste etc that land managers then have to spend time and budget cleaning up
- 47 illegal campfires – including people lighting fires during total fire bans, outside of formal fireplaces, leaving campfires unattended.

The Panel also heard of illegal firearms use across public land.



Photo 24 – dumped rubbish in forest (credit: M. Wood)

Challenges

The following challenges have been identified:

- building on current work to shift from a negative penalty approach to compliance to one that encourages and support recreation and community groups
- misinformation and misunderstanding of risks associated with activities in forests e.g. social media being used to promote off track 4WDing
- a view from some that they are entitled to have unrestricted access to go wherever they wish and do whatever activities they want, regardless of the existing management in place
- limited support to build knowledge, understanding and cooperation across different recreation groups
- lack of signage, interpretation and infrastructure that supports knowledge and understanding of specific locations for increased responsible behaviour that is accessible and supports diversity of users
- effective mechanisms to deal with increasing serious illegal behaviour needing prosecution.

Opportunities

Given the importance of sustainable recreation and environmental values in state forests in the Central Highlands the following could assist with addressing the challenges identified:

- working with user groups, communities, peak bodies to build awareness and understanding of safe levels of use
- a focus on supporting and recognising positive, proactive behaviour
- actively addressing misinformation and misunderstanding of risks associated with recreational and other activities including through peak bodies, clubs, organisations to support and find solutions
- infrastructure that encourages positive experiences and behaviour and knowledge of specific locations
- better understanding of the degree, prevalence and type and impact of serious illegal behaviour, where and when and current responses
- better communication of closures and safety concerns when accessing public land on high risk fire danger days and for other emergencies
- further advice from activity specialists, agencies, peak bodies on the problems and opportunities.

Conclusions

Conclusions include to:

- work with agencies, peak bodies, clubs and recreation groups to encourage and support responsible behaviour and increased safety and skill in undertaking activities (e.g. codes of conduct, training and skill tickets, group activities to share knowledge and use of equipment, how to care for the locations and forests including through working parties with land managers)
- identify and consider replicating good infrastructure design that encourages responsible behaviour and inclusivity
- investigate level, degree and location of serious illegal behaviour across the Central Highlands
- investigate the number, suitability and type of prosecutions, penalties available that currently occur associated with the type of illegal behaviour that reaches the court system
- investigate the regulation of the sale of firewood through registration of commercial firewood providers to encourage people to purchase through legitimate supplies.
- investigate sale of firewood through online platforms.

7.7 Funding for success

Funding for forest management and future activity was a regular issue raised with the Panel during engagement across a range of interested groups.

These funding concerns targeted areas for improved forest and community outcomes including:

- restoration of forests and regeneration of logging coupes
- ongoing maintenance for existing tracks and trails
- asset maintenance and further development
- ongoing forest health monitoring
- use of technology for better knowledge collection and dissemination
- project funding models that support long term planning and collaborative and Cultural approaches to management.

Funding requirements and availability for future management and opportunity was a common theme with acknowledgement that access to, and activities undertaken in forests, should remain free of charge to the public.

Challenges

General comments from across a range of groups, local communities, agencies and peak bodies reflected a perception that current funding is inadequate to meet both recreational and environmental needs in the Central Highlands forests,

regardless of location and land category. Funding for forest access such as roads and tracks and amenity infrastructure was seen as a major issue.

The Panel heard and noted that many people using forest infrastructure across a range of activities identified the decline in maintenance over time including access, signage, tracks, bridges and campgrounds. In addition, the observation of unmanaged pests and weeds impacting both visual amenity, access and environmental damage, including habitat was noted.

Further, concern was raised regarding future funding being made available for current track and road maintenance following the end to commercial timber harvesting ending.

The Panel acknowledges that current funding levels will be insufficient for supporting the recommendations contained in this report and will require further work and innovative thinking.

Opportunities

While funding was a major issue identified for the Panel, there were also opportunities yet to be harnessed that were put forward. These centred around Victorians' passion for their local forests, as well as local, international and private financial interests that may be currently underutilised. The Panel heard of many examples of people wanting help and care for forests but found barriers within the current systemic arrangements to do so. The Panel also heard of innovative financial solutions that could be further explored by government.

The Panel has identified opportunities for improved funding including:

- exploring public-private partnerships, particularly associated with infrastructure projects and iconic sites
- enabling and supporting communities that actively contribute to land management works and infrastructure maintenance
- better use of funding already available at a local level through partners involved in collaborative governance, planning and management practices
- leveraging new funding partners through local projects including not for profit, investors, philanthropic sources
- recognition of time and knowledge contributions provided by partners including volunteers, support groups, researchers
- leveraging local economic benefit contributions through local/regional that supports local businesses with local knowledge and community interest
- improved funding processes that allow for collaboration and joint activities, deliverables and outcomes.



Photo 25 – Ash forests (credit: C. Gotgens)

Conclusions

Conclusions include:

- a review of current funding approaches be considered to assess the ability for funding that supports new collaborative approaches to land management practices detailed in this Report (7.4 Governance, planning and managing forests for the future)
- exploration of appropriate public-private partnerships for large infrastructure projects commensurate with the tourism potential and uniqueness of the Central Highlands
- funding to support a specific tourism campaign that encourages more people to visit and enjoy the Central highlands leading to greater appreciation of the forests, interest in private investment and better economic outcomes for local communities.

7.8 Findings for forest and community locations

Key findings and recommendations are detailed in **Chapter 8**.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter presents the Panel's recommendations to the Victorian Government for cross cutting themes and forest location.

8.1 General recommendations

The Panel has identified 11 general recommendations that apply across the Central Highlands engagement area. This includes recommendations for cross cutting themes identified in **Chapter 7**.

Recommendations of the Panel provide a long-term vision for Central Highlands forests, one that builds on greater collaboration between public land managers, Traditional Owners and local communities to ensure the health of the forests and to that forests are safeguarded for all to enjoy into the future.

8.1.1 The importance of the Central Highlands landscape to people

Core to the Panel's recommendations is the importance of the Central Highlands landscape to people. The Panel's recommendations seek to balance the importance of people and communities experiencing and enjoying forests with the need to protect and enhance these values.

How people interact and appreciate the Central Highlands forests is integral to their future. A healthy forest ecosystem is critical to our community, including to maintain safe and clean drinking water supplies, biodiversity, storing carbon from the atmosphere and providing a sense of wellbeing. As populations grow, more people are seeking to enjoy these forest areas including for a range of recreation activities. There are also growing pressures of biodiversity loss and climate change impacts. Without appropriate management there is a risk of these forests being enjoyed beyond their means and losing the values we love about them.

The Panel wants to see people experiencing, appreciating and caring for these forests. This needs to be done in a safe and responsible way that recognises and safeguards the significant natural and cultural values that are core to people's enjoyment of this area.

There is a strong indication that communities want to be involved in the management of their local forests. There is already considerable work taking place in some locations, with people and groups dedicated to caring for forests. This includes the significant work of local environment groups, long term scientific studies and researchers, recreation clubs, Traditional Owner corporations and current land managers.

The Panel recognises there is now a significant opportunity to harness community interest and passion for the Central Highlands forests in a new collaborative model of land management. The Panel recommends new collaborative approaches be

developed for the governance, planning and management of Central Highlands forests. This includes to enable collaboration between land managers, Traditional Owners, community and other institutions to support people to connect to forests and work together to care for these areas. This will help to build a sense of stewardship within broader community towards the care of and health of forest

As part of this, forest management needs to be refocussed to both landscape and local levels. There is no one size fits all approach to the Central Highlands forests and their management. Each state forest area and its communities are unique. Broad generalisations about management or ideologies do not support the nuanced management required for specific forest systems. The local community and forest level is the scale at which land management practice needs to be discussed and demonstrated to support the best outcomes for forests and values.

Change occurs where people can see practical examples of the practices being demonstrated. Key to this will be piloting and testing of collaborative approaches. The Panel has provided specific recommendations for pilots at forest locations, which are detailed in later forest and community recommendations sections. Learnings from this can help scale up these approaches for application to other forest areas and across the State. Further detail on recommendations for governance, planning and management is provided in **Recommendation 7**.

Recommendation 1

Recommend that new collaborative approaches be developed for the governance, planning and management of the Central Highlands landscape that bring together community, Traditional Owners, land managers, scientists and researchers to care for forests. This should include pilots for demonstrating the approach.

Public land management frameworks

The Panel has heard of challenges associated with the current land management framework in the Central Highlands that presents barriers to collaboration for land management. Change is required to setup this framework for future success of the Central Highlands forests.

The Panel has also heard that the current public land categorisation system reflects an outdated view of land management and is not suitable for future management. There are currently challenges to managing landscapes and forest and community values holistically across land categories and tenures, with various separate institutions, plans and approaches involved. Change is required to setup these systems for future successful management that align to contemporary public values of public land. This includes embracing new concepts such as cultural reserves.

The Panel is aware of confusion in community about the public land framework. This includes misunderstanding about public land management, different land categories and systems, and what activities can or can't be undertaken in certain places and why.

The Panel acknowledges that the proposed public land legislation reforms will assist in consolidating the number of public land categories. It is recommended that the Victorian Government progress these reforms to setup frameworks, institutions and partnerships for success.

Recommendation 2

Recommend reforms to Victoria's public land legislation are progressed as a priority to address:

- consolidated public land categories
- supporting collaborative governance
- confusion around permitted uses and management purposes
- supporting a landscapes approach.

Traditional Owners and Country

While each Traditional Owner group has its own vision and pathways, the Panel has identified some common recommendations relevant to supporting Traditional Owner rights and interest for forest Country in the Central Highlands. These seek to address some of the concerns the Panel has heard around the current land management systems not being fit for purpose.

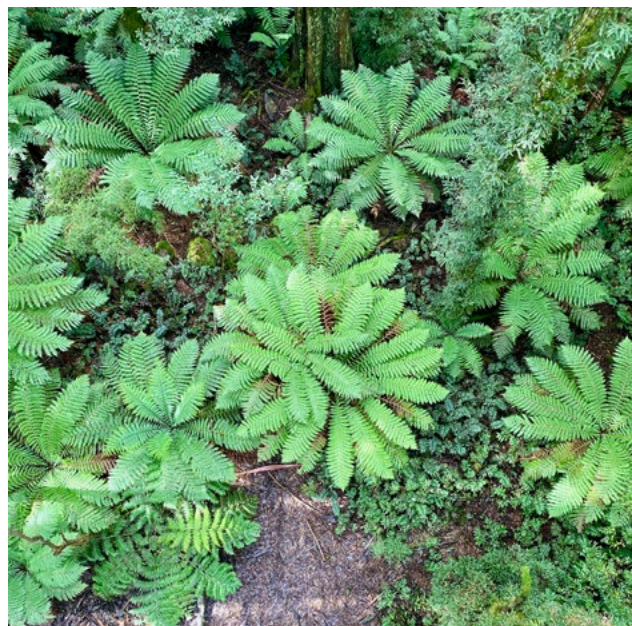


Photo 26 – Tree ferns (credit: M. Wood)

This includes:

- to develop greater understanding in community of our shared history and Traditional Owners caring for Country
- furthering trust and partnership between Traditional Owners, community, researchers and public land managers
- development of governance, planning and management arrangements that support Traditional Owner self-determination, including a Cultural Reserve public land category and cultural landscapes approach
- braiding western science and Traditional Owner world views through testing and demonstrating of practice at local levels
- supporting capacity building for Traditional Owner corporations.

There has been a consistent message from some Traditional Owners and the Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations that the current public land category arrangements do not support self-determination. This includes limitations to activation of rights and interests and partnerships for areas of parks and reserves.

Traditional Owners are working with government to identify pathways for healing and caring of Country for all existing public land categories, including national park, as well as creation of a new land category, cultural reserve, that supports cultural practice and management.

In its first work in 2022, the Panel recommended the Victorian Government progress a cultural reserve public land category to pilot new arrangements for specific forest landscapes. The Panel understands that this work is currently progressing as part of reforms proposed to Victoria's public land legislation.

The Panel reiterates the importance of development of a cultural reserve public land category as a key mechanism to support Traditional Owners to work with communities to activate rights and interests. This is a fundamental step to creating the enabling conditions required for the management of culturally important landscapes and to remove barriers associated with current land systems.

The Central Highlands landscapes require a holistic management approach to get the best outcomes for people and nature. Nature doesn't adhere to arbitrary boundaries on maps and management of values and risks in isolation may result in poor outcomes. The Panel has heard of the need for more joined up approaches to governance, planning and management (see **recommendation 1**). This includes practices and partnerships that leverage local community support and knowledge.

The Traditional Owner cultural landscapes approach presents an important model to consider forests more holistically. This supports a coming together of Traditional Owner knowledge, science disciplines and land management practices. The Panel is also aware of work taking place with interested landholders to contribute to broader landscape scale management. There exists a significant opportunity to explore this further.

The Panel has heard that changes are required to Victoria's land management system to support activation of this across the Central Highlands landscapes. This includes the development of a cultural landscapes overlay to support a consistent approach to governance, planning and management across tenures, including public land and interested landholders.

Such an overlay will support planning and management across whole landscapes and importantly provide an opportunity for the various agencies, interested land holders and Traditional Owners to cohesively plan for and deliver across public land categories and tenures for the best outcomes.



Photo 27 – tall forests (credit: M. Wood)

The Panel has made recommendations to support development of cultural landscape overlays for specific forest locations detailed in below sections. This is supported by an overarching recommendation that the Victorian Government develop provisions for a cultural landscape overlay in Victoria's land management framework. In undertaking its work in the Central Highlands, the Panel acknowledges this recommendation could be considered for wide state-wide application.

Recommendation 3

Recommend that provisions for future cultural governance, planning and management be put in place across the suite of existing land tenures for the Central Highlands. Additional options such as the new cultural reserve public land category and a cultural landscape overlay in Victoria's land management framework should be progressed in consultation with Traditional Owners, to remove barriers and maximise opportunities into the future.

A key consideration of the Panel following the cessation of timber harvesting in state forests is the opportunity to consider how cultural reserves can contribute to Victoria's protected area system.

At present, 17% of Victoria's terrestrial land is in formally protected areas. Consideration of other areas effectively managed for conservation will be important for Victoria to meet its commitment to United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity – Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework 2030 targets, including conserving 30% of all land, sea and waters¹⁵. This may include consideration of areas outside parks and reserves, including future cultural reserves.

Recommendation 4

Recommend that the contribution of cultural reserves and areas effectively contributing to conservation over time be assessed and considered for addition to Victoria's protected area system.

8.1.2 The uniqueness of the Central Highlands

Environment

The Central Highlands mountain ash forests are globally significant forests and contain some of Victoria's most unique landscapes, plants and animals.

The ending of native timber harvesting now presents a once in a generation opportunity to reset the management of forests in the Central Highlands. Through its work, Panel has heard of the many challenges and new opportunities for management of these forests, acknowledging the resilience of these forest ecosystems is under threat.

Given the persistent degradation of our forests, as evidenced by State of the Environment reporting¹⁶, it is evident that past and current land management frameworks, practices and levels of resourcing are inadequate to effectively manage the significant Central Highlands landscapes.

A core theme identified by the Panel is the need to develop new approaches to strengthen environmental management across all forests in the region in line with the significant values that are present. This should take a tenure blind approach and include state forest areas currently managed by DEECA as well as parks and reserves managed by Parks Victoria. While there are many dedicated land managers working to support the Central Highlands forests, more needs to be done to actively focus on building resilience to climate change threats and protecting environmental values. This includes for threatened species, critical and vulnerable ecosystems and communities.

The Panel endorses a focus on active and adaptive management to build resilience and reflect the significant values of these forests. It is important that this work is place-based and enhances biodiversity values and manages threatening processes while balancing other values and experiences.

While state forest is the focus of the Panel's work, the Panel recognises the importance of holistic land management across the Central Highlands landscape. It has heard of the challenges that all land managers, including Parks Victoria, face for delivering effective management that delivers protection, ecosystem restoration, disturbance management and threat mitigation, and monitoring (refer **chapter 7.4**). The Panel notes there is more work to be done to resource land managers to rethink environmental management and has considered this in **Recommendation 11**.

Recommendation 5

Recommend reframing environmental management to better build resilience and reflect the unique and significant values of these forests. This includes designing and implementing active and adaptive management- including protection, ecosystem restoration, disturbance management and threat mitigation, and monitoring for state forests. Such approaches should be placed-based and tailored to local ecological conditions, community values, and biocultural expressions and health of Country.

Considering landscapes and regional scale issues, the Panel notes the relevance of this recommendation to supporting environmental planning and management across all public land.

¹⁵ Available at: <https://www.cbd.int/gbf/targets>

¹⁶ Available at: <https://www.ces.vic.gov.au/soe2023>

8.1.3 Forest activities

The Panel heard from a range of people about the importance of the activities and experiences in the Central Highlands for them. This includes a broad range of recreation activities including bushwalking, camping, fishing, horse riding, 4WDing, hunting and prospecting.

Access to these activities supports people's wellbeing, community connections and sense of place.

It is a shared responsibility for all people experiencing the Central Highlands forests to care for and support the health of these forests.

While most people are doing the right thing, it is clear that more needs to be done to support people to participate in activities safely and reduce harm to environmental and cultural values. This includes identifying safe levels of use and building understanding of why certain activities cannot take place in certain areas.

Key to this approach will be to build on the relationship between people and forests for collective benefit. The Panel heard of the significant work of local clubs, peak bodies and local groups to support people to explore and appreciate the Central Highlands. These groups are playing an important role in contributing to knowledge, training and responsible activities including preparation of codes of conduct to safely and sensitively enjoy this environment. One example of this is the advocacy and training work undertaken by 4WD Victoria to support driver education and safe use of forest tracks. There is a significant opportunity to leverage the work of clubs and associations and encouraging membership to these to support people's entry to forest activities and recreation.

Further specific recommendations for compliance and enforcement and fostering a model of bush stewardship are made at **Recommendation 10**.

Another key consideration for this, especially with a growing Melbourne population, is supporting clear messaging for use across the diversity of communities who experience the Central Highlands. This includes for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities and all-abilities access users.

To support this a significant education and change program is required to support communication and understanding of public land management. This includes developing understanding within communities of what are permitted and legal activities, what can be undertaken where and why there might be some limitations on certain activities in areas.

Recommendation 6

Recommend that education and communication programs be developed that supports better understanding of responsible experience in the Central Highlands forests, including the difference between public land categories, safe levels of use and restoring forest health.

This should:

- build on the relationship between people and forests for collective benefit
- be accessible and support a diversity of users
- support understanding of Traditional Owner connection, care and healing of Country
- targeted education campaigns around 'bush ethics', responsible behaviours and how to enjoy these forests safely.

8.1.4 Governance, planning and managing forests for the future

In its work, the Panel has heard of the many challenges facing the Central Highlands forests, communities and land managers. These include:

- lack of contemporary management plans
- complex management arrangements
- need for greater, effective invasive species management, including targeted control of deer
- rehabilitation and restoration of previous timber coupes and landscapes for ecosystem structure and function
- reducing the current threats to the remaining areas of cool temperate rainforest and vulnerable, young mountains ash forests that are yet to reach seed production maturity
- insufficient and inadequate planning, management and practice for strengthening biocultural and environmental values, including habitat, system structure and function, threatened species, soil and hydrological environments
- limited collaboration with and barriers to community groups supporting land management
- lack of inclusivity for infrastructure, access, information and maps.

Ways of working need to adapt to reflect contemporary and future challenges and opportunities. As noted in **recommendation 1**, new collaborative arrangements for land management need to be developed that leverage current strengths of land managers and support Traditional Owner and community aspirations. Land management requires detailed understanding of the interconnectedness of forest systems health, values and condition and of what strategies and actions are required to manage them to build system resilience. This needs to be supported by a systems approach that enables this, including monitoring, evaluation, data, knowledge and enabling institutions.

Place-based management plans and strategies are critical to drive management decisions in a transparent and open way. With the cessation of timber harvesting, there is a need, now more than ever, for contemporary management plans for the Central Highlands forests that reflect the current and future context to drive effective management.



Photo 28 – previous timber coupes (Credit: DEECA)

A core consideration that the Panel has noted is that currently, there is no overarching legislative management purpose for state forests and existing regional forest management plans for these areas are over 20 years old. The Central Highlands Forest Management Plan that guides and informs management was created in 1998. There appears to be no contemporary strategic vision or direction for the management of state forests. What plans do exist are centred around management of forestry and the risks to environmental values from this activity.

The Panel notes generally there is a need to shift from viewing and managing forest values through a risk lens, to one that is more holistic and based on enhancing values. New plans should support innovative approaches to planning for landscapes and Places.

A core theme the Panel heard is the need to reimagine the road, track and trail network to support a range of experiences. One opportunity is to use more dynamic models of visitor management including opening and resting areas of bush and tracks through time to shift visitor experiences in the landscape and rehabilitate areas. For example, formalise a range of trails in an area, with periodic shifting of which trails are open to allow areas to be rehabilitated before they open again. Shifting activities around the landscape also supports people to experience new trails and keep experiences novel.

The Panel is aware that DEECA had been developing new forest management plans, though this work has not progressed for a range of reasons. It is strongly recommended management planning take place as a priority along with an overarching strategy and implementation approach.

The Panel has also identified several important conditions critical to enabling this approach in **Recommendation 8**.

Recommendation 7

Recommend that as soon as practicable, a new overarching forest management strategy, collaboration road map and subsequent management plans be developed for the Central Highlands forests.

These management plans should:

- identify overarching management purposes
- pilot and test new frameworks and practices
- adopt a landscapes approach regardless of tenure, as well as a focus on Place and local context
- recognise the important and dynamic relationships between forests and people
- support 'braiding' – the bringing together and making stronger – of Traditional Owner and environmental science (including conservation and forestry) thinking and practice
- redefine active and adaptive management and the role of people in landscapes
- practice adaptive, responsive and innovative approaches through a flexible, iterative process of learning and decision making
- establish direction and planning for landscape restoration programs, including for previously harvested coupes.

Recommendation 8

Recommend investment in establishing the enabling conditions for **Recommendation 7**, including:

- upgrading spatial data and information systems to support planning and management (e.g. roads, tracks and trails that supports a range of recreational activities and experiences)
- delivery of a comprehensive cross tenure invasive pest plant and animal control programs, particularly deer
- reimagine the road track and trail network and forest/park infrastructure to tailor towards new set of management objectives and fit for multiple purposes with sensitive design
- resourcing for reading Country, for land and water assessment of biocultural values
- resourcing of delivery partners to support collaborative governance, planning and management and development of new land management frameworks
- better temporal and spatial planning that shifts activities and experiences in the landscape to provide for a variety of experiences as well as resting and rehabilitation of areas
- design and resource active biocultural and biodiversity mapping and monitoring programs, that can deliver biodiversity health monitoring capability to support real time management decision making. Efforts could be supported by researchers, citizen science, communities and philanthropists and would include reseedling for forest restoration, erosion control, habitat restoration (i.e. nestboxes), invasive species control.

8.1.5 Strong communities with sustainable futures

A core theme identified by the Panel was the role of Central Highlands forests in supporting communities to have strong and sustainable futures.

Many people, families and communities rely on these forests to support their livelihoods. This includes licenced tour operators that run their businesses in these forests, as well as the adjacent businesses in townships and communities that benefit from visitation to Central highlands forests.

The Panel heard of the significant tourism opportunities for the Central Highlands forests and the importance of enabling this for local communities and regional towns. There is a significant opportunity to build on existing and create unique visitor experiences that are a drawcard for tourism. This includes offerings that compliment and leverage the already established winery, food and art trails in the area.

Licensed tour operators that work in the region provide opportunities to bring visitors into this environment for a range of experiences. The Panel heard of the important role this experience can have in supporting people to understand the environment, how to recreate and do certain activities and safe levels for use.

There are opportunities to attract more visitors and cater to a range of experiences across the Central Highlands through sensitive and appropriate infrastructure and offerings. This includes leveraging the work underway as part of community transition work and Local Development Strategies, regional tourism boards and councils that have identified future economic pathways for local communities.

Key considerations for investment include:

- eco-tourism co-investment initiatives in the Great Forest National Park proposal, such as zipline, treetop walk and eco-lodges
- opportunities to support work of Local Development Strategies that have identified tourism and forest experience opportunities
- complimentary experiences across the suite of public land, including state forests and parks and reserves to cater to a range of experiences.
- providing accessible information on forests, experiences and access points
- delivering on existing “low hanging fruit” opportunities for specific forests, including linking up walking and bike trails, improvement of existing forest and park infrastructure.

There is a significant opportunity to celebrate and acknowledge the importance and uniqueness of the Central Highlands forests. This includes building a broader understanding within community and visitors of the importance and values of these forests.

At present there appears to be little to no marketing or communication of information for Central Highlands forests (including state forests) or experiences they provide and limited accessible information on the forest area, its values and experiences. Information is split across different land manager websites and often not up to date. There is currently a vacuum in harmonised messaging around responsible and safe behaviours at a coordinated level across the Central Highlands. The Panel is aware that mis- and dis-information is filling this void.

The Panel recommends a tourism and implementation campaign to promote the significance of the Central Highlands. Further recommendations for specific forest areas have also been identified and detailed in later sections.

Recommendation 9

Recommend implementation of a tourism campaign to promote the significance of the Central Highlands forests.

This includes:

- a single source of information on central highlands forests, values and experiences
- recognising and supporting commercial operators such as licenced tour operators, recreational organisations and club membership to promote responsible use, education and training opportunities
- promotion of destinations, local tourism and experience opportunities (e.g. existing draw cards, wineries, art galleries)
- supporting a range of audiences including culturally and linguistically diverse communities and all-abilities access.

8.1.6 Compliance and regulation

Compliance and regulation were a key theme the Panel heard about.

The Panel heard that most people undertake forest activities in safe and responsible ways. However, the Panel also heard of some of the challenges in particular locations for illegal behaviours and unsafe levels of use. Not all people are deliberately doing the wrong thing and there is need for more information and education for people visiting forests. This needs to be in a range of languages and accessible to a large audience (see **recommendation 6 and 9**).

In other locations there are more serious issues with deliberate and damaging illegal uses occurring. For example, at Mount Disappointment, the Panel heard of significant challenges in managing illegal firearms use, illegal firewood collection, wildlife poaching, illegal vehicle use, driving off-track and dumping of rubbish and cars. These behaviours are dangerous to other people trying to enjoy these forests as well as to environmental and cultural values of the area. The Panel heard from some community members who no longer feel safe to visit this forest area. The prevalence of some of these behaviours requires targeted work to ameliorate risk issues. Approaches need to be systematic and targeted, to ensure problems that are solved in some areas don't result in problematic behaviours shifting to other locations.

A core theme the Panel has heard of is the need for greater compliance and regulation and support for land managers and community to manage harmful uses described above. While compliance and enforcement are a current critical way of managing unsafe levels of use or illegal activities, the Panel considers managing this behaviour should be seen as part of a longer-term strategy of building knowledge and stewardship in communities and people who experience these forests. There is a significant opportunity to leverage work underway with community groups, user groups and peak bodies who are looking to help people do the right thing.

The Panel acknowledges the good work already underway with land managers, agencies, the Office of the Conservation Regulator, user groups and clubs as well as dedicated community members looking out for their forests. This includes collaborative management examples to manage high impact areas as seen in the Latrobe River campground work (see **box 6, case study**). The Panel heard projects such as these help local communities to celebrate and care for forest areas, contributing to a safer and more enjoyable space.

Other key considerations include having land manager and community presence in the forest and acknowledging people when doing the right thing is important to show that forests are cared for and encourage appropriate behaviours; and clear roles and responsibilities for agencies and groups involved in compliance and enforcement.

The Panel has made specific recommendations for specific forest locations in the following sections where it has heard and identified opportunities for further work.

Recommendation 10

Recommend resourcing of programs to address unsafe levels of use, including:

- supporting local clubs, user groups and peak bodies to provide or support training and forest stewardship education programs to all members
- targeted compliance and enforcement programs in priority locations
- supporting broader community understanding of safe forest use.

8.1.7 Funding

Funding for land management has been a major point of discussion with communities and stakeholders.

The Panel has heard existing land managers in the Central Highlands operate on a dependency model, reliant on initiative funding from government on up to four-year funding cycles. This often results in departments and agencies having limited budgets. There is often little or no funding available for active environmental management programs and on ground delivery. This includes for both DEECA and Parks Victoria land managers.

The current funding model appears to be inadequate to deliver on the long-term change identified in this report for the ensuring resilient and healthy forests.

The Panel recognises the need for innovation in funding of land management. This includes through:

- better targeting of existing funds at a local level (e.g. funding of maintenance of existing infrastructure, tracks and trails, as opposed to new capital investments)
- enhanced collaboration with local groups and volunteers who invest a significant amount of time and knowledge to forests
- investigation of public-private partnerships, philanthropy and innovative financing models under the new Nature Repair Market¹⁷
- consideration of alternate ongoing funding streams
- investing in locally based on ground rangers/staff.

In its 2022 work for Strathbogie Ranges and Mirboo North Immediate Protection Areas, the Panel recommended further funding for land managers to deliver an uplift of on ground management as well as support for a dedicated local resource to drive local forest collaboration.

The Panel notes that progressing this approach at Mirboo North could be a good site to test and develop new funding approaches for public land.

The uniqueness and significant value of the Central Highlands also lends itself to opportunities for public-private partnerships or natural capital markets. The Panel is aware of emerging markets for nature repair, including green bonds for biodiversity and carbon.

These potential innovative financing mechanisms offer additional funding to enhance the core state funding for public land management and are not a replacement. More work is needed to understand these approaches. This includes how such investment or markets can support Traditional Owner self-determination.

Recommendation 11

Recommend a review into the current funding framework for public land in the Central Highlands and identify new, innovative pathways for enhanced funding for public land outcomes.



Photo 29 – Kaltha tree (credit: C. Gotgens)

¹⁷ <https://www.dcceew.gov.au/environment/environmental-markets/nature-repair-market>

8.2 Forest and community location recommendations

As noted in **Chapter 6**, the Panel has conducted analysis for its findings based on 11 indicative forest and community locations.

For each location the following is identified:

- key findings, observations and opportunities
- recommendations for land categories
- recommendations for governance, planning and management conditions.

A summary of the Panel's analysis is provided in **Chapter 6**. Of note, the Panel focused on biodiversity values, connectivity between existing reserves, water catchments, supporting a range of recreational activities and experiences, and the enabling conditions required to support collaboration with communities and support Traditional Owner self-determination. This included spatial analysis to understand overlays associated with cultural Landscapes, VEAC values assessments and analysis of threatened species and communities, disturbance history and biodiversity values.



Photo 30 – Central Highlands forests (credit: M. Wood)

Overview

An overview of the Panel's land category recommendations is provided at **Figure 8.1**. It is important that this is considered with the relevant context and rationale provided for each forest and community location including in below report sections.

Overall, the Panel's recommendations:

- identify the need for greater collaboration between communities, Traditional Owners and land managers as necessary support land management outcomes
- balance current recreational experiences as well as recognise the significant natural and cultural values of these areas and need for enhanced environmental protection
- provide for multiple use forests that support a range of activities and experiences across forest park and state forests categories
- support Traditional Owner rights and interests to explore new pathways to heal and care for Country including activation of cultural reserves for specific forest areas
- add to existing Yarra Ranges and Mount Baw Baw National Parks for areas of significant environmental and cultural significance
- note the conditions needed to enhance environmental management across proposed state forest and forest park areas; support more joined up work across tenures and public land managers at a landscape scale; and provide appropriate resourcing for land and environmental management across all Central Highlands forests.

A description of each land category proposed in the Panel's recommendations is provided below (Table 2). Please note that these descriptions are to be read alongside a purpose relating to protecting the rights and interests of Traditional Owners and native title holders and their cultural values across all categories.

Within the recommendations the Panel notes that some state forest areas are proposed to remain as state forest, while some move into forest park. In making this recommendation the Panel does not intend to change existing recreation conditions, and all previously available state forest activities continue to be permitted under a forest park land category. The only notable exception is forest park does not permit commercial timber harvesting.

As noted earlier in this chapter, the Panel has made general recommendations that apply across this area. This includes for the uplift of environmental management; enhanced collaboration with community, Traditional Owners, and land managers; and better funding of land management. All general recommendations and conditions are intended to apply to all forest locations below.

The Panel notes that while best intentions have been made to accurately reflect forest boundaries, further refined mapping work will need to take place to establish land category changes.

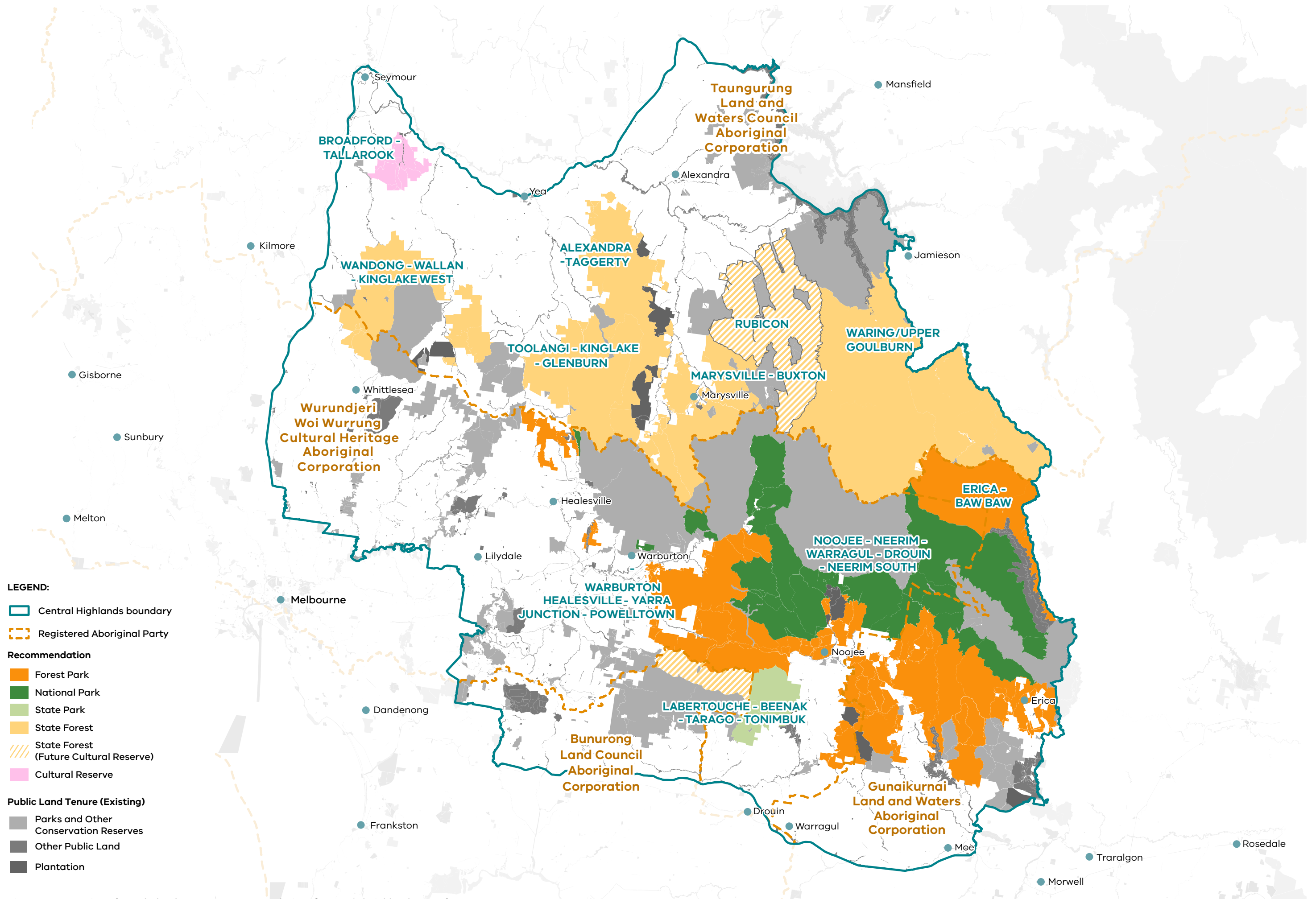


Figure 8.1 – Overview of Panel’s land category recommendations for Central Highlands state forest

Table 2 – Overview of public land categories included in Panel recommendations. Note that these descriptions are to be read alongside a purpose relating to protecting the rights and interests of Traditional Owners and native title holders and their cultural values across all categories.

Land category	Description and general management purposes* (*as proposed in Consultation Paper – Realising the value of Victoria's public land ¹⁸)
Forest park	Area of native forest providing opportunities for recreation and minor extraction of some natural resource products. Includes the following management purposes: • Provide opportunities for recreation and education. • Protect the natural environment including biodiversity. • Supply water and protect catchments and streams. • Protect and maintain natural, cultural, or historic features and scenic landscapes. • Provide for a range of forest uses including the supply of forest products, but excluding sawlogs and pulpwood <i>E.g. Otway Forest Park, Cobboboonee Forest Park</i>
State forest	Extensive areas of land supporting native forest and other native vegetation with a range of diverse conservation and recreational values and containing a range of resources to supply community demands. Includes the following management purposes: • Provide for a range of forest uses including recreation and education. • Provide for a range of forest products (this will not include large scale commercial native timber harvesting) • Protect the natural environment including biodiversity. • Supply water and protect catchments and streams. • Protect and maintain natural, cultural, or historic features and scenic landscapes <i>E.g. Big River State Forest, Toolangi State Forest</i>
National Park/ State Park	Extensive area or areas often with national significance with outstanding natural values and diverse land types contributing to representativeness of parks and reserves in the state. Includes the following management purposes: • Protect the natural environment including biodiversity. • Protect and maintain natural, cultural, or historic features and natural landscapes. • Provide opportunities for informal recreation associated with the enjoyment of nature, and education, where consistent with the purposes above <i>Note: Certain parts of Kinglake and Yarra Ranges National Parks are designated water supply catchment areas.</i> <i>E.g. Yarra Ranges National Park, Kinglake National Park, Alpine National Park</i>
Cultural Reserve	May include the following management purposes* (*as described in the Panel's Phase 1 report¹⁹): • Maintain, restore and heal Country and its cultural landscapes, protect Traditional Owners' biocultural values and knowledge and Traditional Owners' rights and interests in and connections to Country • Restore, protect and enhance cultural values associated with features, landscapes, culturally significant species, spiritual associations and kinship relationships • Protect natural and biocultural values, including biodiversity, biocultural diversity • Provide for sustainable use of natural resources where consistent with the purposes above • Provide for active management to heal and care for Country through the application of Traditional Owner knowledge and practice as well as contemporary conservation and land management practices • Provide opportunities for recreation associated with the enjoyment of nature, and education, where consistent with the purposes above. <i>No current examples in Victoria – Pilot recommended for Strathbogie Immediate Protection Area by Panel in 2022</i>

¹⁸ <https://engage.vic.gov.au/download/document/16808>

¹⁹ https://www.deeca.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0041/587966/EPCE-Final-Report-Future-Use-and-Management-of-Mirboo-North-and-Strathbogie-Ranges-IPAs.pdf

8.2.1 Warburton, Healesville, Yarra Junction, Powelltown

This area includes Latrobe, Mt Toolebewong, Woiwurrung, Paul Range and Yarra state forests, as well as the Upper Yarra Tributaries Forest Reserve, on Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Country.

The forest area consists of a range of high value forests, including:

- cultural places for Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung
- communities living in and adjacent to forests
- a range of recreation activities experiences along with supporting infrastructure
- critical water supply areas
- high ecological value forests including mountain ash, rainforest and threatened species.

Engagement findings

1,814 feedback form responses, 332 map responses were received to Engage Victoria for this location. Three drop-in sessions were held at Healesville, Yarra Junction, Warburton with over 100 attendees. Targeted meetings with local government, peak bodies, local user groups and environmental groups.

Key engagement findings included:

- a mix of views were heard around the state forests in this area ranging from increased recreation access to greater need for conservation and protection
- the significant value of the forest in this area in protecting Melbourne's drinking water supply
- the need for sufficient funding for land management, managing weeds and pests, controlling invasive species, increasing patrols for safety and security, and improving camping facilities and amenities, and signage
- improving access and facilities to attract more visitors, maintaining and clearing tracks
- need for active management and conservation to protect the biodiversity and ecological health of the forest
- greater collaboration with local communities and user groups for better management and maintenance
- education and awareness programs to promote responsible use and environmental conservation
- specific areas for future opportunities included investment in multi-day walks linking Yarra Valley and Warburton to Walhalla, expanded/enhanced 'walk into history' trail and delivery of the Warburton Mountain Bike Destination.

Forest values, uses and proposed land categories

Designation of areas as forest park supports the maintenance of current community activities, including recreation, firewood collection, dog walking, recreational hunting (including hound hunting) and vehicle use and horse riding on formed tracks and trails subject to local management planning. Forest Park is recommended for Mt Toolebewong and the western section of Paul Range state forests. Forest park designation also prohibits commercial timber harvesting, which has ended in Victoria.

Other areas contain large portions of outstanding biodiversity value and these are recommended for addition to the adjoining Yarra Ranges National Park. In particular, areas of cool temperate rainforest and damp forest which are an under-represented Victorian Ecological Vegetation Classes, remain in areas in the state forests of Latrobe, Yarra Tributaries and to a smaller extent, Yarra. The mountain ash forest in these areas provides high habitat value for the threatened southern greater glider and Leadbeater's possum. The Yarra State Forest and Yarra Tributaries Forest Reserve are existing water catchment supply protection areas and many of these areas are already closed to the public to protect water quality and supply and recommended for addition to the adjoining national park. These catchments also provide habitat for the threatened curve-tail burrowing crayfish. The Bernie Creek Reference Area is located in the Latrobe State Forest.

Some parts of the Yarra State Forest support significant tourism and outdoor recreation opportunities which are recommended for forest park category. This includes the proposed Warburton Mountain Bike Destination and opportunities being developed through the Upper Yarra Local Development Strategy.

Similarly, parts of the Latrobe State Forest support significant community and recreational use. This includes the corridor along the Little Yarra and Latrobe River. It is recommended this particular area be managed as a forest park to maintain consistency in management of this area. The Ada River Sawmills Historic Area was not under consideration in this process and continues to be managed by DEECA.

Woiwurrung State Forest is surrounded by the Yarra Ranges National Park. This area does not contain any known recreational assets and has limited public access. It is recommended this area be added to the adjoining national park. Given the significance of the name of the forest being *Woiwurrung*, the Panel recommends close consultation with Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung when determining the future name of the park area to ensure significance in the naming is considered.

Recommendation 12

Warburton, Healesville, Yarra Junction, Powelltown – proposed land categories

Recommend that as per the map at **Figure 8.2**:

- 12.1** The western and southern (i.e. around the Latrobe River and south of the Ada River) sections of Latrobe State Forest be managed as a forest park, with area northeast of the Ada River be managed as a national park and added to the nearby Yarra Ranges National Park
- 12.2** Mt Toolebewong State Forest be managed as a forest park
- 12.3** The majority of Paul Range State Forest be managed as a forest park, with the eastern section adjoining Mt St Leonard be managed as national park and added to the adjoining Yarra Ranges National Park
- 12.4** Woiwurrung State Forest be managed as a national park as per the adjoining Yarra Ranges National Park. It is recommended that government work with Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung to confirm the name of the park addition
- 12.5** The majority of Yarra State Forest be managed as forest park, and the area north of McMahons Creek be managed as a national park and added to the adjoining Yarra Ranges National Park
- 12.6** Yarra Tributaries Forest Reserve be managed as a national park and added to the adjoining Yarra Ranges National Park.

Conditions for governance, planning and management

The Panel notes the need for enhancement of environmental management across the forest area by the land manager, regardless of land category. On DEECA managed land, this includes shifting from past risk-based management approaches associated with managing forestry impacts to genuine conservation management for enhancement of environmental values.

A clear message heard in the Panel's engagement was that strategic planning and active management at a local scale is required to deliver conservation and use outcomes for these forests. As per the Panel's general recommendation that strategic management planning be undertaken for all forest areas in the Central Highlands, forests in this area would benefit greatly from more localised management planning.

Reading Country

A key foundation for this will be contemporary understanding of cultural values for Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung. A cultural values assessment has been identified by Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung to be the key next step for them to be able to reconnect and guide planning and management of these forests.

The Panel recommends that Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung is supported to undertake a cultural values assessment for forests in this area.

Collaborative management

Communities associated with these forests care about their health. The Panel has provided a general recommendation for implementing new collaborative management models for Central Highlands forests. It is acknowledged that piloting and testing of collaborative arrangements is needed.

Communities within this forest area are looking for opportunities to participate in collaborative governance, planning and management of forests into the future. It is recommended that communities and areas be identified for pilots, considering towns with strong relationships to their forests such as Powelltown and Warburton.

Enhancing visitor experience and appreciation

Through its work, the Panel has identified some site-specific recommendations for forest areas. This includes 'low hanging fruit' investments.

Key opportunities include:

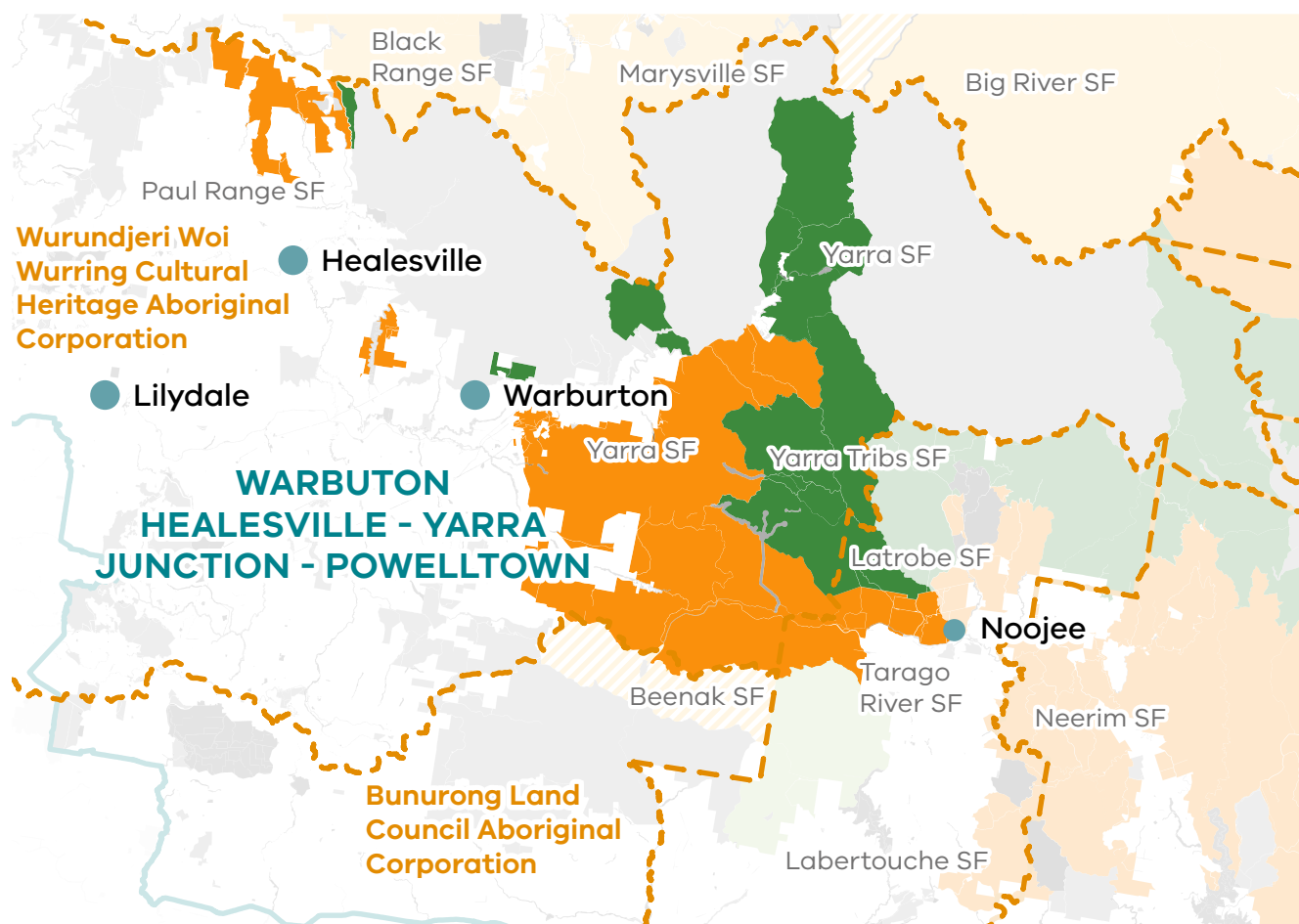
- improving existing recreation assets such as trails, roads and visitor facilities and all abilities access for forest infrastructure to support and balance user experience and accessibility for a range of visitors – including for areas where there are currently no formalised assets for a range of activities such as Paul Range; and upgrade of the 'walk into history' which was noted by community
- installation of appropriate signage and information to educate community about public land management and why certain activities can or can't take place in locations
- targeted programs for compliance in priority areas
- a visitation management model for key visitor sites that extends across the landscape and considers adjoining park and reserve areas that see high visitation (e.g. redwoods area) to help balance and manage peak visitation impacts.

Recommendation 13

Warburton, Healesville, Yarra Junction, Powelltown – governance, planning and management conditions

In addition to general recommendations that apply across all forest areas, recommend the following conditions be implemented along with land category recommendations for this area:

- 13.1** for proposed new forest park areas, activities currently permitted in state forest (e.g. dog walking, hound hunting), except for commercial timber harvesting, continue to be permitted in line with local management planning considerations
- 13.2** uplift of environmental management and planning across all forest park areas by the land manager
- 13.3** mapping and monitoring of key environmental values at risk, including the cool temperate rainforest and mountain ash forests which provide high value habitat for the threatened southern greater glider and Leadbeater's possum to enhance management of these key values across all land categories
- 13.4** opportunities for collaborative management be explored with local communities, Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and public land managers. Possible community for pilots including Powelltown and Warburton
- 13.5** that funding be provided to Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung to undertake a cultural values assessment / reading Country work



LEGEND:

Recommendation

- Forest Park
- National Park
- State Park

- State Forest
- State Forest (Future Cultural Reserve)
- Cultural Reserve

Public Land Tenure (Existing)

- Parks and Other Conservation Reserves
- Other Public Land
- Plantation

- Registered Aboriginal Party

Figure 8.2 – Land category recommendations for Warburton, Healesville, Yarra Junction, Powelltown. Note: boundaries are indicative; names of state forests listed represent current land category status.

8.2.2 Erica, Baw Baw

This area includes Carrang Carrang and Erica state forests that occur on Gunaikurnai Country.

Tanjil State Forest and Thomson River Forest Reserve occur across Gunaikurnai, Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and shared interest Country areas.

Gunaikurnai hold Aboriginal title over some areas of public land in this area. The Gunaikurnai Country plan identifies pathways for enhanced partnerships with land managers, community and private sector tourism to improve management outcomes.

This forest areas includes:

- important cultural places for Traditional Owners
- an engaged community wanting to collaborate on management
- areas of significant environmental value including long unburnt forests, habitat for threatened species including Leadbeater's possum and a variety of under-protected ecosystem types
- support for a range of activities and experiences.

Engagement findings

1,635 feedback form responses and 406 map responses were received to Engage Victoria for this location, along with targeted meetings with local government, peak bodies, local user groups and environmental groups.

Key engagement findings included:

- a mix of views were heard around the state forests in this area including for increased recreation access to greater environmental protections
- a wide range of recreational activities were noted including deer hunting, 4WDing, trail bikes, bushwalking, mountain biking, dog walking, gemstone collection and fishing.
- need for management planning to differentiate forest areas for different uses
- more targeted regulation: rubbish, littering and illegal dumping was noted as prevalent; greater information on where to report illegal activity.
- signage and education needed to support understanding of forest and its values
- uplift in infrastructure that supports a range of experiences including roads, walking tracks and camping areas
- areas around the Baw Baw plateau have significant environmental values including unburnt strongholds for threatened species
- need for rehabilitation of previous timber harvesting coupe sites

- specific areas for future opportunities included investment in connecting day walks between Erica, Noojee, Baw Baw and Walhalla, including upgrading information and promotion on these walks, investment in mountain bike destination at Erica.

Forest values, uses and proposed land categories

The forest park category is recommended for large southern areas of Erica State Forest, Tanjil State Forest and northern part of Thomson River Forest Reserve. These areas generally have lower ecological values than other areas in this grouping; and also support a range of activities and experiences.

Other areas that contain significant environmental values are recommended for addition to the adjoining Yarra Ranges National Park or Baw Baw National Park. This includes Carrang Carrang State Forest and the northern parts of Erica State Forest that adjoins the remote Baw Baw National Park that contains high ecological and threatened species habitat values including cool temperate rainforest, both mountain ash and alpine ash forests and sub-alpine heathland areas. They also support remnants of cool temperate rain forest, which are an under-represented Victorian Ecological Vegetation Class, and contains the Aberfeldy and Thomson Heritage Rivers and Pretty Creek Reference Area. The northern area of Tanjil State Forest is also recommended for addition to the adjoining Yarra Ranges National Park. This area contains significant wet forest values, including rainforest and areas of mountain ash forest. The southern and eastern areas of Thomson River Forest Reserve, adjoining Thomson Dam, Baw Baw National Park and Yarra Ranges National Park are recommended to be added to the adjoining national park due to the significant environmental values present in these areas.

Extending national park areas will reduce the current mosaic in land category arrangements to provide clear and connected boundaries of national parks to the west of the Thomson Dam. Reduced and managed human use of this area is critical for maintaining clean water supply while maintaining a range of recreation opportunities away from the catchment.

The Panel is aware of significant mineral interests in this area, for northern forest areas around the Thomson. The forest park destination supports future consideration of minerals exploration, subject to appropriate environmental, cultural and community consideration.

A small portion of Boola Boola State Forest occurs within the Central Highlands boundary in this forest grouping. As the majority of this state forest areas sits outside of the Central Highlands engagement area, Boola Boola State Forest has not been considered by the Panel for recommendation. This area may be considered by future work of the Great Outdoors Taskforce that will consider future use of a larger area of forests in Gippsland.

Recommendation 14

Erica, Baw Baw – proposed land categories

Recommend that as per the map at **Figure 8.3**:

- 14.1** Carrang Carrang State Forest be managed as a national park and added to the adjoining Baw Baw National Park
- 14.2** The area of Erica State Forest primarily south of South Face Road be managed as a forest park and provide access and use for recreation activities consistent to that which currently exists, and the areas north of South Face Road be managed as a national park and added to the adjoining Baw Baw National Park
- 14.3** Southern parts of Tanjil State Forest be managed as a forest park and the northern areas be managed as a national park and added to the adjoining Baw Baw National Park or Yarra Ranges National Park
- 14.4** The northern part of Thomson River Forest reserve be managed as a forest park and the southern area and west of Thomson Dam be managed as national park and added to the adjoining Baw Baw National Park or Yarra Ranges National Park
- 14.5** Boola Boola State Forest be considered as part of the Great Outdoors Taskforce process.



Photo 31 – Central Highlands forests (credit: C. Gotgens)

Conditions for governance, planning and management

Gunaikurnai, like many of the Traditional Owner groups, has expressed sentiment that the currently available land category options do not meet the needs of Traditional Owners with regards to healing and caring for Country. For Panel recommendations relating to Gunaikurnai Country, and where a national park status is recommended, the following conditions apply:

- Gunaikurnai is involved in advising on overarching legislative and institutional changes required that address barriers to and support healing and caring for Country across the range of public land categories
- governance, planning and management arrangements are established in close consultation with Gunaikurnai.

For shared interest Country, the Panel notes that further work is required with First Nations groups with an interest in this area to determine future governance, planning and management arrangements.

From its engagement, the Panel has heard of some important investments and considerations for management of this important area.

This includes:

- an approach to rubbish, litter and dumping and supporting a carry in carry out ethic
- Destination Gippsland has identified Tanjil, Carrang Carrang and Erica forests as priorities for future tourism opportunities

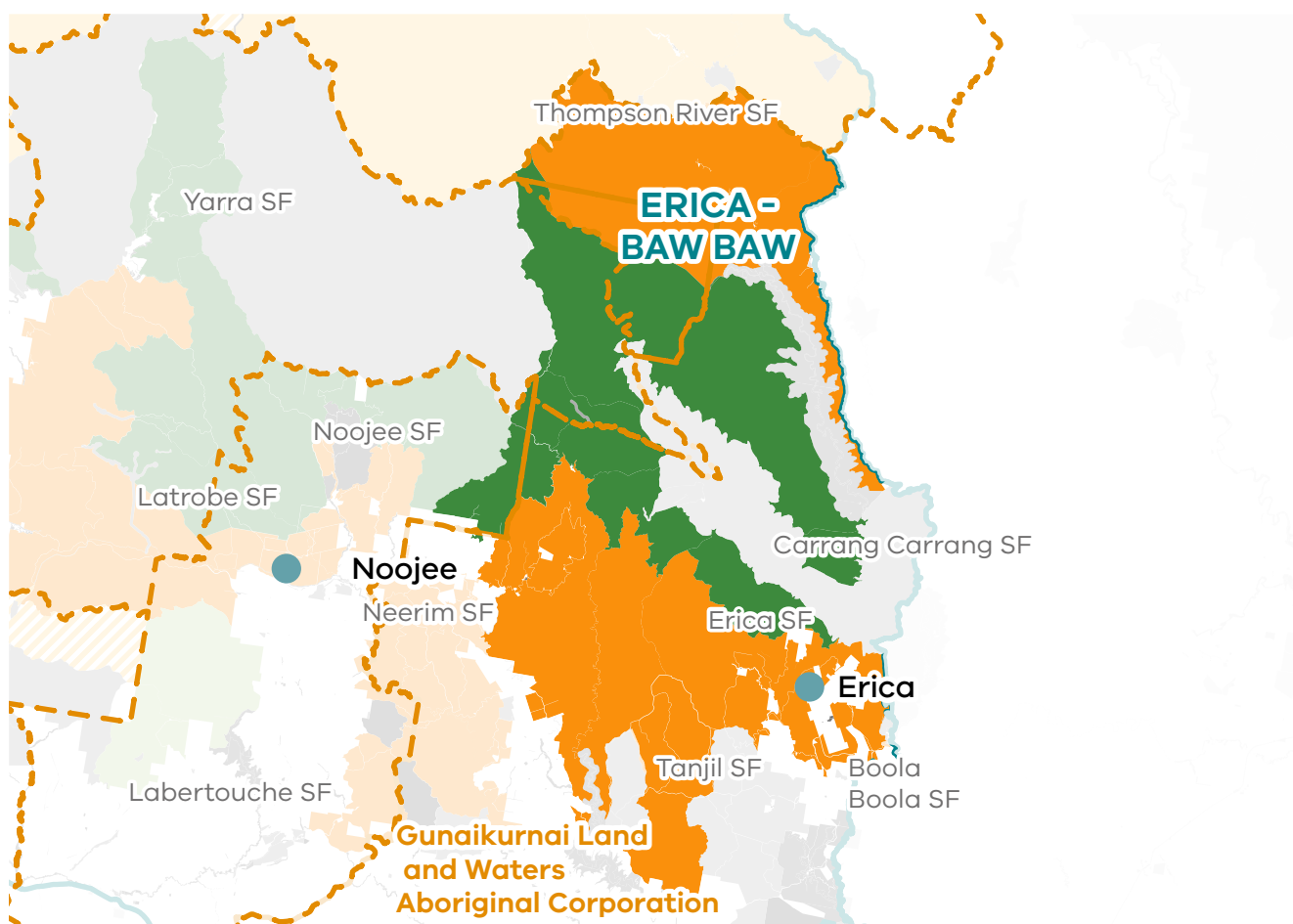
- opportunity to point to historic heritage values and strong association of community in this area for example self-guided tour of historic heritage sites across Erica, Carrang Carrang and Baw Baw forests
- consider strategic planning work to better zone and support spread of appropriate and multiple range of activities and experiences; this includes opportunities to uplift and formalise visitor infrastructure as well as investigate a tracks and trails strategy for the area to enhance management of the significant assets such as the Australian Alps Walking Track that is gaining in popularity.
- there is significant opportunity to leverage existing policy, strategy and planning direction for this area. This includes from the West Gippsland Regional Catchments Strategy priorities for the Great Dividing Range. This will support a landscapes approach and opportunities for collaboration between land managers, Traditional Owners and community.

Recommendation 15

Erica, Baw Baw – governance, planning and management conditions

In addition to general recommendations that apply across all forest areas, recommend the following conditions for be implemented along with land category recommendations for this area:

- 15.1** for new forest park areas, activities previously permitted in state forest (e.g. dog walking, hound hunting), except for commercial timber harvesting, continue to be permitted subject to local management planning considerations
- 15.2** uplift of environmental management and planning across all forest park areas by the land manager
- 15.3** for recommendations relating to Gunaikurnai Country, and where a national park status is recommended, the following conditions apply:
 - Gunaikurnai is involved in advising on overarching legislative and institutional changes required that address barriers to and support healing and caring for Country across the range of public land categories
 - and governance, planning and management arrangements are established in close consultation with Gunaikurnai.
- 15.4** strategic planning work be undertaken to better zone and support spread of appropriate and multiple range of activities and experiences; this includes opportunities to uplift and formalise visitor infrastructure as well as investigate a tracks and trails strategy for the area to enhance management of the significant assets such as the Australian Alps Walking Track.



LEGEND:

Recommendation

- Forest Park
- National Park
- State Park
- State Forest
- State Forest (Future Cultural Reserve)
- Cultural Reserve

Public Land Tenure (Existing)

- Parks and Other Conservation Reserves
- Other Public Land
- Plantation

- Registered Aboriginal Party

Figure 8.3 – Land category recommendations for Erica , Baw Baw. Note: boundaries are indicative; names of state forests listed represent current land category status.

8.2.3 Noojee, Neerim, Warragul, Drouin, Neerim South

This area includes Neerim State Forest on Gunaikurnai Country and an area of shared interest Country.

Noojee State Forest occurs across shared interest Country.

Key findings of the Panel for this area include:

- strong community association with forests, historic heritage and range of recreation opportunities
- Noojee State Forest supports high ecological values including rainforest, wet forest, ash species, greater glider populations and other threatened species habitat
- Neerim State Forest has comparatively lower ecological values and supports a range of recreational activities and experiences including motorbike, 4WD, horse riding and hound hunting
- local development strategy work underway has identified ecotourism and hunting initiatives.
- As noted for the previous location, Gunaikurnai hold Aboriginal title of some areas of public land within this area and have strategic direction for the future in the Country Plan.

Engagement findings

1,995 feedback form responses, 176 map responses were received to Engage Victoria for this location. Two drop-in sessions were held at Noojee and Drouin with over 300 attendees. Targeted meetings with local government, peak bodies, local user groups and environmental groups.

Key engagement findings included:

- the area supports a range of activities and uses, including, trail bike riding, mountain bike riding, hunting (stalking and with hounds), prospecting, and firewood collection in designated sites.
- large numbers of visitors from outside the local area visit on public holidays and during longer holiday periods e.g. Christmas and school holidays.
- in particular, an interest in four-wheel driving and camping in the forests is a key drawcard
- local deer hunters highly value the ability to hunt in these forests including stalking and hound hunters
- current recreation facilities are used however are inadequate for peak tourist periods
- natural beauty of areas such as fern gullies noted as important for visitors – with strengthened environmental management important to maintain them

- a greater management role is required, including managing pest and weeds, degraded areas, improving road safety and managing fire risk, waste and toilets
- enhancement of signage and facilities is needed, e.g. campsites, picnic area upgrades, areas for horse floats and trailer parking
- desire for improved communication and engagement with local communities and forest users on day-to-day forest management and involvement in maintenance
- need for greater visitor education to understand responsible use
- specific areas for future opportunities included opportunities arising from the Noojee Local Development Strategies included for ethical hunting and eco-tourism, connecting existing day walks between Erica, Noojee, Baw Baw and Walhalla and expanding track network linking Powelltown, Yarra Junction and Noojee and Gippsland Trail Bike Safety Pilot Project.

Forest values, uses and proposed land categories

The Panel recommends a majority of the northern section of Noojee State Forest be managed as national park and added to the Yarra Ranges National Park. This forest includes areas of high biodiversity value and more remote areas, consisting almost entirely of the under-protected Damp Forest Ecological Vegetation Class, including Montane Damp Forest, which is currently fragmented. While completely burnt in 1939, except for a small fringe near Neerim township, minimal large-scale fires have impacted the Noojee forests since then.

Western and southern sections of Noojee State Forest that support higher community use and a range of non-passive activities are recommended to be managed as forest park. The forest park category provides for a wider range of activities similar to that of state forest and will therefore continue to support a diversity of activities and experiences noted as being important

Neerim State Forest is recommended to be managed as a forest park. As noted above, very little rainforest or ash forest exists in this state forest and this designation will continue to support a range of activities and experiences.

The balance of land categories provided for this location is intended to support access to a range of recreational activities for nearby communities and visitors from Melbourne.

Recommendation 16

Noojee, Neerim, Warragul, Drouin, Neerim South – proposed land categories

Recommend that as per the map at **Figure 8.4**:

- 16.1** The majority of Noojee State Forest be managed as a national park and added to the existing Yarra Ranges National Park; with southwestern parts of Noojee State Forest managed as a forest park, with no change from existing recreational uses
- 16.2** Neerim State Forest be managed as a forest park with no change to existing recreational activities.

Conditions for governance, planning and management

For shared interest Country, the Panel notes that further work is required with First Nations groups with interest in this area to determine future governance, planning and management arrangements.

The Panel has heard of many opportunities for this forest area. This includes for:

- enhanced environmental and conservation value management
- greater on-ground presence of land managers to support management and visitor education
- further investment in visitor infrastructure and services, including tracks and trails that cater for a wide variety of visitor experiences and activities and increased interest in this forest for recreation. e.g. parking areas for recreational vehicles and trailers, or smaller tracks for remote multiday hikers
- greater collaboration with recreational groups including 4WD clubs and peak bodies.

The Noojee Local Development Strategy work has identified opportunities that the Panel recognises the importance of supporting community to pursue. This includes:

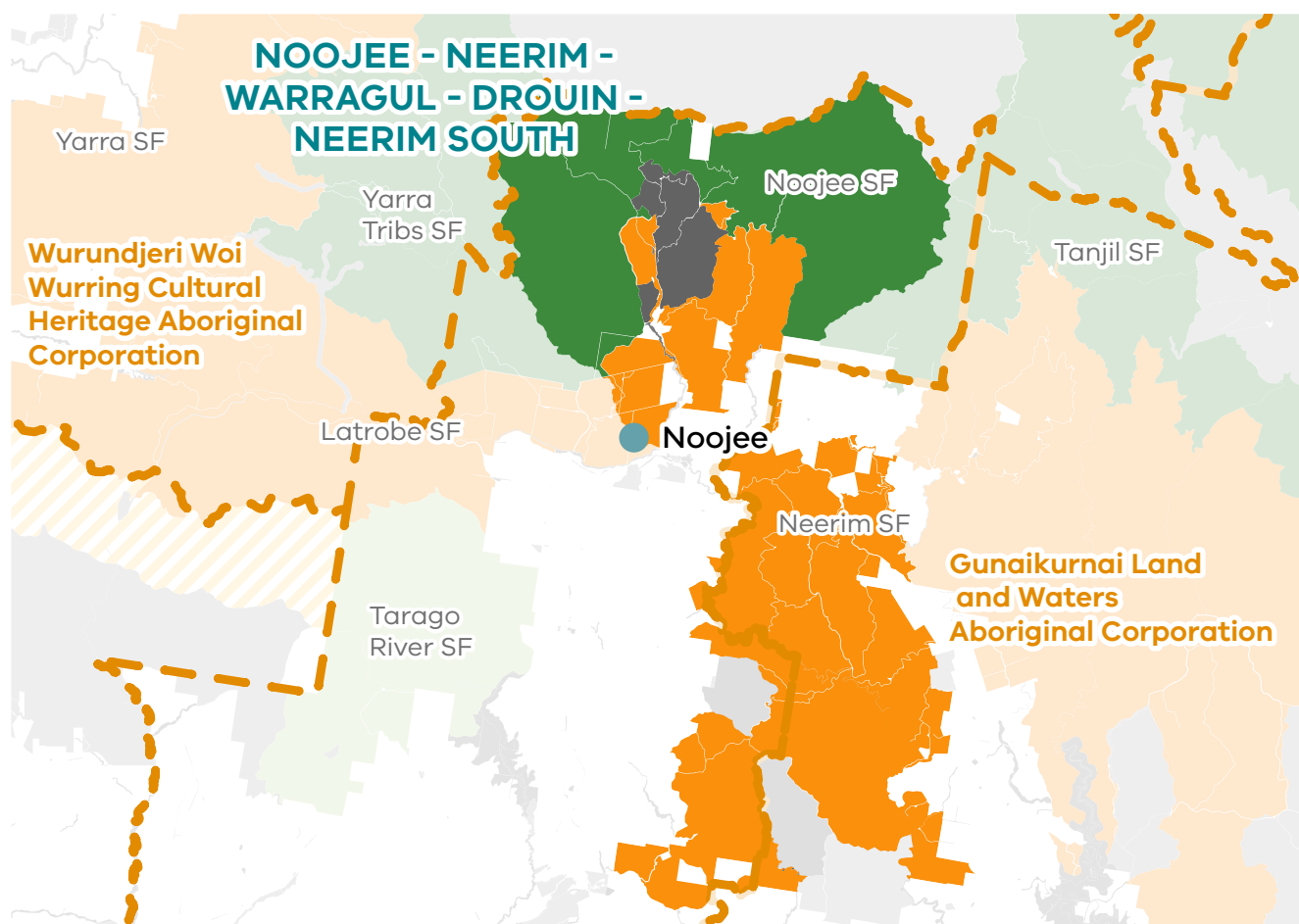
- eco-tourism – two initial areas of focus: forest therapy & trail centre
- environmental education centre creation
- ethical hunting with opportunity for commercial produce.

Recommendation 17

Noojee, Neerim, Warragul, Drouin, Neerim South –governance, planning and management conditions

In addition to general recommendations that apply across all forest areas, recommend the following conditions for be implemented along with land category recommendations for this area:

- 17.1** for new forest park areas, activities previously permitted in state forest (e.g. dog walking, firewood collection, hound hunting), except for commercial timber harvesting, continue to be permitted subject to the usual ongoing local management planning considerations
- 17.2** for new forest park areas, uplift in environment and conservation planning is required by the existing land manager, including identification of priority areas for environmental management and restoration / regeneration of forests affected by native timber harvesting
- 17.3** that for areas of new proposed national park, the land manager considers the following management priorities:
- whether existing camping sites and tracks and trails be considered for maintenance and access
 - whether opportunities exist for areas for dog walking on leash
 - consideration be given to whether hunting deer by stalking should be maintained in some form, as part of the deer population management effort
- 17.4** for recommendations relating to Gunaikurnai Country, and where a national park status is recommended, the following conditions apply:
- Gunaikurnai is involved in advising on overarching legislative and institutional changes required that address barriers to and support healing and caring for Country across the range of public land categories
 - and governance, planning and management arrangements are established in close consultation with Gunaikurnai.



LEGEND:

Recommendation

- Forest Park
- National Park
- State Park
- State Forest
- State Forest (Future Cultural Reserve)
- Cultural Reserve

Public Land Tenure (Existing)

- Parks and Other Conservation Reserves
- Other Public Land
- Plantation



Registered
Aboriginal
Party

Figure 8.4 – Land category recommendations for Noojee, Neerim, Warragul, Drouin, Neerim South. Note: boundaries are indicative; names of state forests listed represent current land category status.

Recommendation 17 (continued)

- 17.5** targeted investment in visitor infrastructure and services, including tracks and trails that cater for a wide variety of visitor experiences and activities e.g. parking areas for recreational vehicles and trailers, or smaller tracks for remote multiday hikers
- 17.6** investigate how Local Development Strategy identified projects can be supported and implemented including the creation of an environmental education centre.

Taungurung Country

The following community groupings and state forest areas occur primarily on Taungurung Country, including Broadford, Tallarook; Rubicon; Alexandra, Taggerty; Toolangi, Kinglake, Glenburn; Wandong, Wallan, Kinglake West; Marysville, Buxton; Upper Goulburn/Waring.

As noted in the statement provided, Taungurung has identified pathways to restore health and connection with Country (see **chapter 9**). A core component of this is greater collaboration with communities, Traditional Owners and public land managers to come together to govern, plan and manage these forests.

Through its engagement and deliberations, the Panel is aware that the current land management system and settings present barriers and challenges to activation of this pathway. Existing public land categories are not suitable to support the collaborative models of land management Taungurung seeks to activate. The proposed reforms to Victoria's public land legislation and introduction of a cultural reserve public land category will go a long way in addressing many of these barriers however they are several years away from implementation.

There is now a significant opportunity to begin to test, develop and implement new settings at a local level for the conditions of cultural reserves with collaborative management that can inform future wider application of this. The Panel, in partnership with Taungurung, has identified a phased approach for cultural reserves in key state forest areas. This includes commencing with managing Tallarook State Forest as a cultural reserve, with longer term activation of conditions for cultural reserve at Rubicon State Forest, with other state forest areas to follow when conditions are suitable.

This will be long term work. Taungurung has identified a 100-year transition for return of health to Country and restoration of balance and resilience to forests and strengthened community relationships. This timescale provides the time required to develop and test the conditions for success, establishing trust and relationship with forest communities. Activation of cultural landscapes approaches, in terms of the establishment of collaborative governance and management plans at landscape scale will initially take about five years for each landscape.

8.2.4 Broadford, Tallarook

This area includes the Tallarook State Forest on Taungurung Country.

These are significant forests for Taungurung and part of the Yawang (Stone Country) cultural landscape that links through to the Strathbogie Ranges. Taungurung assessed the biocultural health of Country as poor and that culturally informed land management is critical to re-establish biocultural relationships.

The Tallarook forests have important ecological values and different communities to the tall wet forests found elsewhere in the Central Highlands. VEAC identified these areas as having lower overall value for threatened forest dependent species compared to other Central Highlands forests.

The Panel has heard forest experience is important for local communities. There are several designated campsites and the forest receives high visitation levels for active recreation.

Engagement findings

730 feedback form responses, 65 map responses were received to Engage Victoria for this location, along with targeted meetings with local government, peak bodies, local user groups and environmental groups.

Key engagement findings included:

- a mix of responses regarding protections and access for recreation and experiences
- participants use and experience the forest area for a variety of recreational and outdoor activities. Many participants engage in recreational activities such as camping, hiking, bushwalking, trail bike riding, horse riding, motorbike riding, fishing, four-wheel driving, touring, car rallies, and moto events
- some participants note hunting, collection of firewood
- the forest is also used for educational purposes, outdoor education, teaching children about the environment and wildlife, birdwatching, and wildlife photography
- responses note sustainable tourism development opportunity to support local townships, e.g. through expanded/formalisation of camping offering
- note the importance of Traditional Owner self-determination and cultural significance of forest area
- there is a high diversity of flora and fauna including southern greater, warranting higher levels of protection.

Forest values, uses and proposed land categories

This area was identified by Taungurung as a priority landscape for the development of new governance, planning and management arrangements for state forests within the Yawang (Stone Country) cultural landscape in a cultural reserve.

Progressing a cultural reserve approach at this location presents a significant opportunity to build on existing relationships between Taungurung, the local community and the current land manager, DEECA. The Panel notes future arrangements should consider leveraging DEECA functions including roading, recreation asset management and maintenance, compliance and enforcement to support with capacity to manage this landscape.

In its engagement, the Panel noted strong support from local community groups for partnerships and scope for a more collaborative approach to management. The Panel recommends these strengths are leveraged and the Tallarook State Forest be managed as a cultural reserve.

Recommendation 18

Broadford, Tallarook – proposed land categories

Recommend that as per the map at **Figure 8.5**, the Tallarook State Forest be managed as a cultural reserve. This includes close work with Taungurung, existing land manager DEECA and community to develop collaborative governance, planning and management models.

Conditions for governance, planning and management

As noted previously, a cultural reserve land category is being progressed in proposed reforms to Victoria's public land legislation. In the interim, governance conditions to test a cultural reserve should be created through an enabling environment with the current land manager.

The Panel acknowledges the work taking place for the Corop cultural waterscape as a good model to draw on to support collaboration required between land managers, Taungurung and other organisations (see Corop case study, **Box 7, chapter 9**). To support this, the Panel has some specific recommendations for conditions for a cultural reserve at Tallarook State Forest.

The Panel and Taungurung recognise the importance of recreational activities and experiences for people in the Tallarook State Forest. The Panel is aware there are also notable challenges with managing illegal activity and harmful uses in this forest area. This includes for off-track vehicle use; uncontrolled firearm uses and illegal dumping. In the short term, existing activities and uses should continue while a longer term collaborative change process takes place. A key first step for this area will be working together to identify safe levels of use and conditions needed to restore health to Country, moving towards longer term models of stewardship and custodianship.

Cultural landscapes approach

Management of values and risks requires a landscape scale approach. The Panel has made a general recommendation for the establishment of a cultural landscape overlay in Victoria's public land management framework.

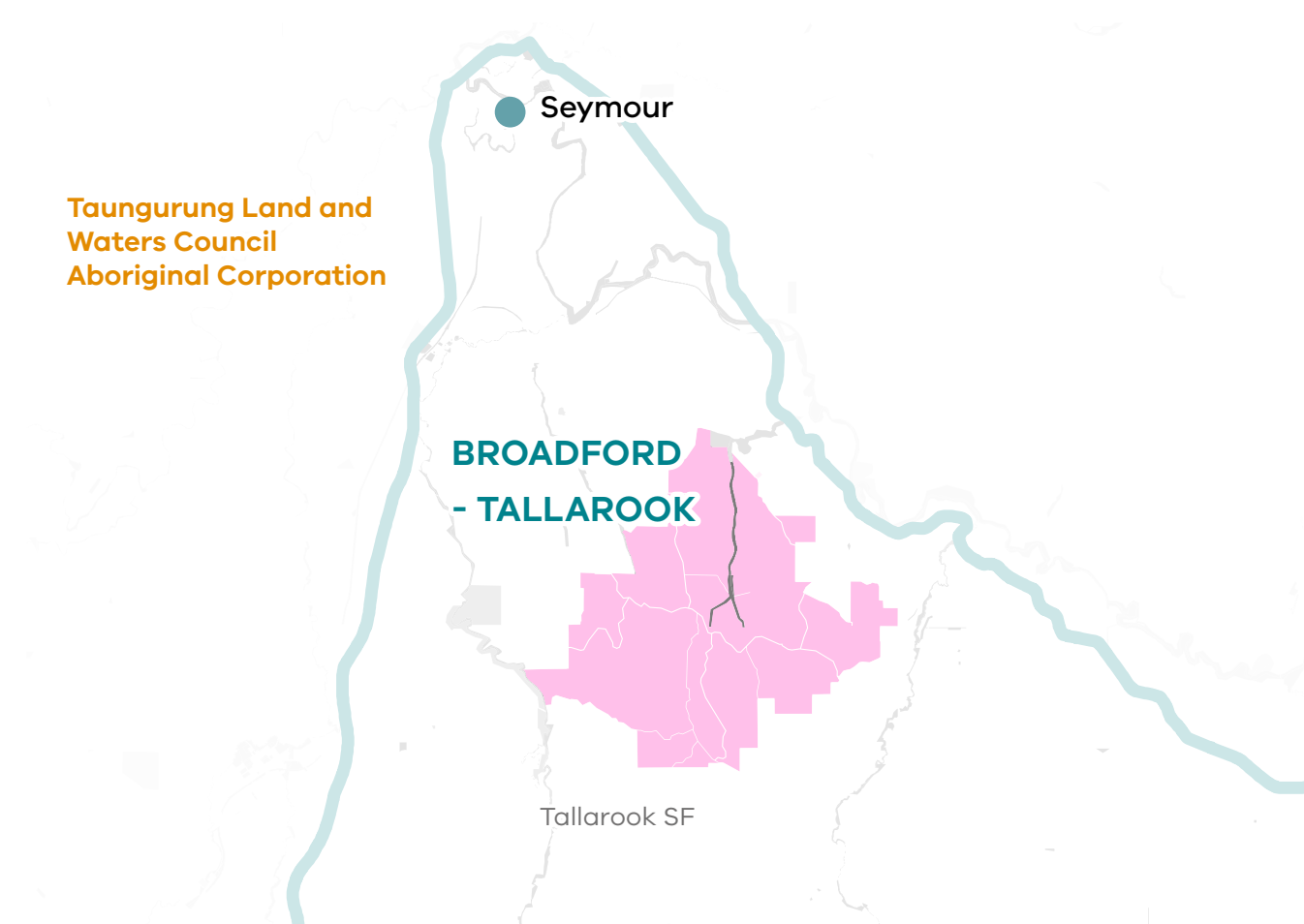
There is a significant opportunity to implement a cultural landscape overlay for the Yawang (Stone Country) cultural landscape that supports joined up governance, planning and management for Tallarook State Forest and adjoining parks and reserves. This includes an opt-in opportunity for private landholders including those supporting conservation and covenants to join a cohesive approach to landscape, planning management and decisions.

Recommendation 19

Broadford, Tallarook – governance, planning and management conditions

Recommend the following conditions relevant to piloting a cultural reserve at Tallarook State Forest, including:

- 19.1** governance: establish TLaWC as committee of management, then public land legislation transition to cultural reserve
- 19.2** planning: provide TLaWC funding to undertake reading Country to establish the health of Country, followed by management planning that looks at Country health and that trigger remedial actions
- 19.3** uses and activities: existing uses, activities and licences apply while a longer term collaborative change takes place to move from uses, to stewardship to custodianship and safe levels of use.
- 19.4** OCR and DEECA work with Taungurung and community to undertake compliance and enforcement program in the area to address harmful usage, in ways that are consistent with uses for health of Country
- 19.5** assess how the cultural reserve and its management can contribute to national reserve targets.
- 19.6** incorporation of Tallarook State Forest in cultural landscape overlay for Yawang (Stone Country). This includes the testing of conditions for governance, planning and management across the cultural landscape to support a holistic approach to land management and decisions; and invitation of community to participate.



LEGEND:

Recommendation

- Forest Park
- National Park
- State Park

- State Forest
- State Forest (Future Cultural Reserve)
- Cultural Reserve

Public Land Tenure (Existing)

- Parks and Other Conservation Reserves
- Other Public Land
- Plantation



Registered
Aboriginal
Party

Figure 8.5 – Land category recommendations for Broadford, Tallarook. Note: boundaries are indicative; names of state forests listed represent current land category status.

8.2.5 Rubicon

This area includes Rubicon State Forest on Taungurung Country.

These forests form part of the Nun nun tun and Deberra biik cultural landscapes. Taungurung has assessed the biocultural value of these forests as poor and restoration of cultural management is recommended to restore these forests to health.

These are important forests for a range of values. They are dominated by mountain and alpine ash and include important habitats for southern greater glider, Leadbeater's possum, barred galaxias and sooty owl. The area is highly valued by community and supports a range of experiences, recreation sites and historic sites.

Significant work has been taking place by community groups in this area to understand and conserve their local forests including citizen science efforts. There is now an opportunity to leverage this with greater collaboration with Traditional Owners and land managers to develop and test the conditions for collaborative management.



Photo 32 – Rubicon River (credit: C. Gotgens)

Engagement findings

822 feedback form responses, 166 map responses were received to Engage Victoria for this location. One drop-in session was held at Alexandra with close to 550 attendees. Targeted meetings with local government, peak bodies, local user groups and environmental groups were held.

Key engagement findings included:

- opportunity to work with local communities to understand, plan for and activate projects that will work on the restoration and regeneration of forests and identification other areas for priority work
- highly enthusiastic community who want to engage on their work and who been involved in monitoring and assessing the condition of the local forests for some time

- a mix of responses were received regarding greater environmental protections and access for recreation and experiences
- wide range of activities was noted including camping, hiking, trail running, mountain biking, horse riding, motorbike riding, fishing, hunting, collecting firewood, prospecting, four-wheel driving, car rallying/touring, bushwalking, exploring, birdwatching, photography and as a place to relax and connect with natural environment
- identified need to maintain and improving condition of tracks and roads, campground facilities
- raising awareness and education on responsible behaviours, respect for environment
- consider ecotourism opportunities, including visitor centres at trail heads and more trail offerings
- involve community in monitoring and caring for the forests
- water supply was also noted, including protection of waterways and catchment health
- significant restoration needed of areas previously harvested including areas of failed regeneration
- work with Traditional Owners around forest land management and decisions
- noted ecological importance of the Snobs creek catchment and opportunities for tourism
- specific areas for future opportunities included tourism opportunities associated with historic heritage in Rubicon area (e.g. hydro station), regeneration of harvested forests, public transport access to support a range of experiences.

Forest values, uses and proposed land categories

It is recommended that Rubicon State Forest be activated as a cultural reserve over a longer time, based on Taungurung and community readiness. In the interim the public land category will remain as state forest, with specific conditions such as increased environmental management across large areas identified to accompany this recommendation.

Taungurung holds Aboriginal title over areas of public land within this landscape, which it seeks to activate for direct management, in advance of establishment of the cultural reserve if appropriate.

Taungurung notes that a core cultural Place in this landscape is the Cathedral Ranges which is currently managed as a state park by Parks Victoria. The Panel notes that while parks and reserves are not in scope for the Panel's land category recommendations, to adopt a fully holistic approach to managing this cultural landscape requires improved collaboration across tenures. The Panel recommends that this concept be explored through the application of a new collaborative planning process, such as a cultural landscape overlay, over the cultural landscape.

Recommendation 20

Rubicon – proposed land categories

Recommend that as per the map at **Figure 8.6**, the Rubicon State Forest continue to be managed as a state forest, with a view to prioritising for activation as a cultural reserve, when Taungurung, community and resourcing are ready to do so.

Conditions for governance, planning and management

Given the work already undertaken by active community members who have developed ideas for improved monitoring and data collection of forest conditions it is a great opportunity for collaboration between current and future land managers to work together on this as a priority.

The Panel notes the important work taking place as part of the Murrindindi Local Development Strategy. This strategy along with work of other community groups and organisations has identified significant tourism opportunities in this area. The Panel recommends that community identified projects in the area be progressed to support regional development opportunities, including to create more experiences for outdoor adventuring.

Some of the opportunities identified include:

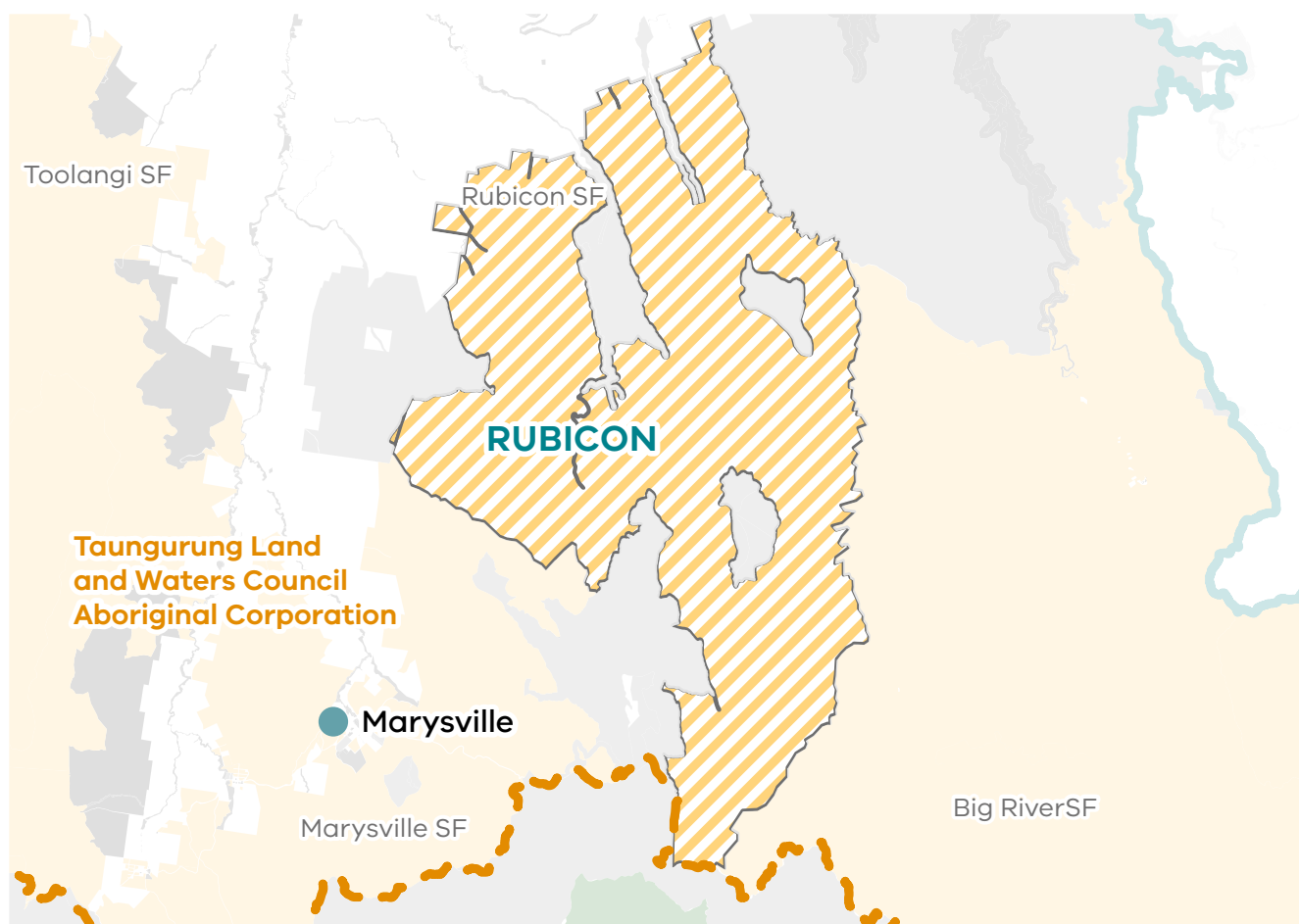
- build, extend and maintain a variety of multi-use tracks and trails – for walking, cycling, and horse riding. With opportunities to connect and extend these tracks from Marysville through to Rubicon, Eildon and beyond to Yarck
- Rubicon Historical area – linking the line to Alexandra, tours into Rubicon power station.

Recommendation 21

Rubicon – governance, planning and management conditions

In addition to general recommendations that apply across all forest areas, recommend the following conditions be implemented along with land category recommendations for this area:

- 21.1** current land manager DEECA to place priority focus on restoration and health of the Rubicon forests, working with local community groups who are concerned about ecosystem collapse
- 21.2** work with Taungurung and the Biik Land Management team of TLaWC, specialist forest ecologists and dedicated community to improve the health of Country in the forest with particular focus on restoration of areas of failed regeneration and management of pest and weeds
- 21.3** close work with Taungurung, existing land manager DEECA and community to develop collaborative governance, planning and management models that plans for appropriate levels of recreation as well as tourism and infrastructure projects
- 21.4** incorporation of Rubicon State Forest and other public land in cultural landscape overlay for Nun nun tun and Deberra biik to explore direct and collaborative management approaches for key landscapes, including areas that are under Aboriginal Title
- 21.5** that community identified projects in the Rubicon area be progressed to support regional development opportunities including to create more experiences for outdoor adventuring
- 21.6** support implementation of identified projects in the Murrindindi Local Development Strategy



LEGEND:

Recommendation

- Forest Park
- National Park
- State Park

- State Forest
- State Forest (Future Cultural Reserve)
- Cultural Reserve

Public Land Tenure (Existing)

- Parks and Other Conservation Reserves
- Other Public Land
- Plantation

- Registered Aboriginal Party

Figure 8.6 – Land category recommendations for Rubicon. Note: boundaries are indicative; names of state forests listed represent current land category status.

8.2.6 Alexandra, Taggerty

This area includes the Black Range State Forest as well as some areas of unnamed state forest on Taungurung Country. The area includes the Nyagaroon property (former Acheron Youth Camp) and its forested Country; transferred to Taungurung in 2023.

These forests occur across the Banit Ngarrap and Nun nun tun cultural landscapes. Taungurung's assessment of health of this forest area is as poor. A new paradigm of management is required for these forest areas to bring them back to health. This includes management that puts Country first and re-establishes the currently missing biocultural relationships within this area as a viable way forward.

This area includes some significant environmental values, including an area adjoining the Toolangi State Forest. Despite being fragmented, Black Range is still incredibly habitat rich. It has a high presence of important and threatened species like yellow bellied gliders, southern greater gliders, threatened owls and the remnant hollow bearing trees that house them and vulnerable common dunnarts. There are also priority vegetation classes including grassy dry forest and smaller areas of cool temperate rainforest adjacent to the Yarra Ranges National Park.

The area also supports a range of community activities and experiences. This includes for families and dog walking. The Black Range State Forest adjoins the Murrindindi River Natural Features Scenic Reserve which is a popular camping and recreation area. Stanley Homestead is an existing trail head location for trail bike, 4WD camping in northern end of Black Range State Forest.

Engagement findings

640 feedback form responses, 97 map responses were received to Engage Victoria for this location. One drop-in session was held at Alexandra with close to 550 attendees. Targeted meetings with local government, peak bodies, local user groups and environmental groups were held.

Key engagement findings included:

- greater environmental management for key animal species that occur in the area
- a desire to see greater economic opportunity unlocked through forest tourism
- greater advocacy for promoting respectful use of forests and enhancing facilitates to support activities like walking and mountain biking which are growing in popularity in region
- highlighting the work of Traditional Owners in region and engagement opportunities with further interested community groups
- forest caters to a range of activities including, 4WDing, hunting, fishing, hiking, camping and time with families and pets
- noted importance of Buxton Mountain Bike Park
- continued access to tracks and trails for a range of activities including 4WD was a key consideration from engagement feedback. Some stakeholders noted the importance of more user education, with some misunderstanding and misinformation about what activities are permitted in areas and why.
- occurrences of vandalism, damage to gates and public infrastructure was noted.

Forest values, uses and proposed land categories

The Panel recommends Black Range State Forest continue to be managed as a state forest with several conditions including uplift in environmental management, targeted recreation investment and consideration of longer term management options for Taungurung.

In making this recommendation the Panel notes existing arrangements in Victoria's public land legislation are not suitable for Taungurung to activate rights and interests and new pathways are required. Further work with Taungurung and government, in collaboration with community, is required to set the right foundations for future governance, planning and management arrangements for this area. While this occurs, state forest category is appropriate with several additional considerations.

Recommendation 22

Alexandra, Taggerty – proposed land categories

Recommend that as per the map at **Figure 8.7**, Black Range State Forest continue to be managed as a state forest, with a view to activation as a cultural reserve in the future, when Taungurung, community and resourcing is ready to do so.

Conditions for governance, planning and management

This recommendation comes with specific conditions to enhance environmental, biocultural and conservation planning and management for state forest areas.

The existing land manager, DEECA, in partnership with Taungurung should continue to expand on existing partnerships and collaborative management opportunities with local communities.

The Panel also heard of challenges associated with some uses of this area. This included the need for targeted behaviour change programs to address illegal and damaging uses.

Recommendation 23

Alexandra, Taggerty – governance, planning and management conditions

In addition to general recommendations that apply across all forest areas, recommend the following conditions for be implemented along with land category recommendations for this area:

- 23.1** enhancement of environmental management across state forest areas by the land manager, DEECA
- 23.2** work with Taungurung, local communities on collaborative planning and management for this area
- 23.3** appropriate management of significant environmental values in the area including rainforest, southern greater glider, yellow bellied glider, threatened owls and common dunnart
- 23.4** targeted user information, education and compliance program to support better environmental management.



LEGEND:

Recommendation

- Forest Park
- National Park
- State Park

- State Forest
- State Forest (Future Cultural Reserve)
- Cultural Reserve

Public Land Tenure (Existing)

- Parks and Other Conservation Reserves
- Other Public Land
- Plantation

- Registered Aboriginal Party

Figure 8.7 – Land category recommendations for Alexandra, Taggerty. Note: boundaries are indicative; names of state forests listed represent current land category status.

8.2.7 Toolangi, Kinglake, Glenburn

This area includes Toolangi State Forest on Taungurung Country.

These forests occur across the Banit Ngarrap, Waring and Nun nun tun cultural landscapes.

Taungurung has identified the biocultural health of these forests as poor. Cultural land management is critical to reestablish biocultural relationships.

These are forests of significant environmental value. They are important forests for listed species including Leadbeater's possum, barred galaxias, spot-tailed quoll, southern greater glider, and gang-gang cockatoo.

The iconic tall forests of Toolangi are closely associated with people's experience and knowledge of the Central Highlands.

The area has a history of forest education with the Toolangi Forest Discovery Centre located here. The Castella Education Area is also adjacent to Toolangi State Forest just north of Toolangi.

There is an existing array of forest infrastructure that supports a range of experiences.

Engagement findings

1,179 feedback form responses, 286 map responses were received to Engage Victoria for this location. Targeted meetings with local government, peak bodies, local user groups and environmental groups were held.

Key engagement findings included:

- greater emphasis on and recognition of Traditional Owner partnerships, practice, including integrating Indigenous land management techniques and cultural practices to enhance the ecological health of the forests and consider science-based management
- the ecological value and biodiversity of the forest, including its role in carbon storage and water and catchment functions
- the cultural and historical significance of the forest, including its connection to Indigenous heritage and Traditional Owners
- the economic benefits to local communities and tourism associated with use of the forest
- the mental health and well-being benefits from relaxing and spending time connecting with a peaceful natural environment
- raising awareness and educating visitors and school students about the ecological significance of the forests, the need to protect and preserve them, the responsible and sustainable use of forests and local Indigenous culture
- specific feedback about reactivating the Toolangi forest discovery centre.

Forest values, uses and proposed land categories

The Panel recommends Toolangi State Forest continue to be managed as a state forest with several conditions including uplift in environmental management, conservation management in partnership with the forest conservation community, targeted recreation investment and consideration of longer term management options for Taungurung.

In making this recommendation the Panel notes existing arrangements in Victoria's public land legislation are not suitable for Taungurung to activate rights and interests and new pathways are required. Further work between with Taungurung and government, in collaboration with community, is required to set the right foundations for future governance, planning and management arrangements for this area. While this occurs, state forest category is appropriate with several additional considerations.

Recommendation 24

Toolangi, Kinglake, Glenburn – proposed land categories

Recommend that as per the map at **Figure 8.8**, Toolangi State Forest continue to be managed as a state forest with increased focus on environmental management by the current land manager and longer term consideration and activation as a cultural reserve when Taungurung, community and resourcing is ready.

Conditions for governance, planning and management

This recommendation comes with specific conditions to enhance environmental, biocultural and conservation planning and management for state forest areas.

The existing land manager, DEECA, in partnership with Taungurung should continue to expand on existing partnerships and collaborative management opportunities with local communities.

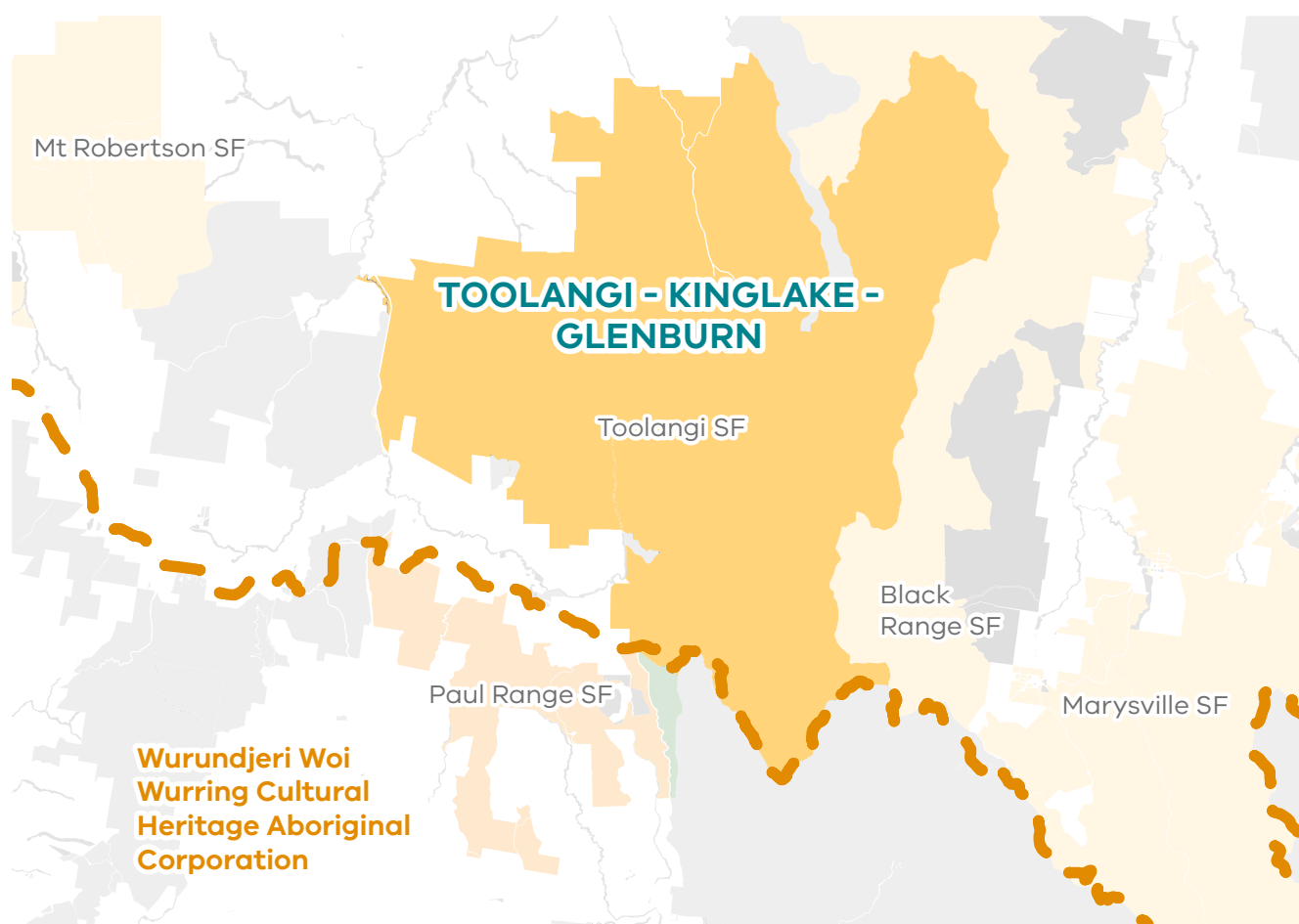
The Panel heard of the importance of reopening and utilising the Toolangi Forest Discovery Centre for education and interpretation.

Recommendation 25

Toolangi, Kinglake, Glenburn – governance, planning and management conditions

In addition to general recommendations that apply across all forest areas, recommend the following conditions be implemented along with land category recommendations for this area:

- 25.1** enhancement of environmental and conservation management across state forest areas by the land manager, in partnership with local conservation groups. This will include habitat restoration for threatened species and other biocultural values.
- 25.2** work with Taungurung, local communities on collaborative planning and management for this area
- 25.3** support forest education initiatives in this area that support raising awareness and educating visitors and school students about the ecological significance of the forests, the need to protect and preserve them, the responsible and sustainable use of forests and local Indigenous culture.



LEGEND:

Recommendation

- Forest Park
- National Park
- State Park

- State Forest
- State Forest (Future Cultural Reserve)
- Cultural Reserve

Public Land Tenure (Existing)

- Parks and Other Conservation Reserves
- Other Public Land
- Plantation



Registered
Aboriginal
Party

Figure 8.8 – Land category recommendations for Toolangi, Kinglake, Glenburn. Note: boundaries are indicative; names of state forests listed represent current land category status.

8.2.8 Wandong, Wallan, Kinglake West

This area includes parts of Mt Disappointment State Forest and Mt Robertson State Forest on Taungurung Country.

Taungurung note this forest area occur as part of Banit Ngarrap, and Waring cultural landscapes. Biocultural health of these landscapes was identified as very poor.

A section of Mt Disappointment State Forest occurs on Wurundjeri Land.

These forests are generally lower in environmental values than other forests in the Central Highlands engagement area. Mount Disappointment has some areas of damp forests at higher elevations though is typically characterised by drier forests.

The forests see high recreational use, in particular due to their proximity to Melbourne. There are challenges for managing such intensity of use with a range of activities and user groups.

The area has seen intensive timber harvesting systems, with resulting forest structure highly mixed. Forest areas significantly impacted by the 2009 Black Summer fires.

Engagement findings

1,212 feedback form responses, 160 map responses were received to Engage Victoria for this location. 20 people attended one drop in session in Wandong. Targeted meetings with local government, peak bodies, local user groups and environmental groups were held.

Key engagement findings included:

- the forest areas see significant recreational usage due to its proximity to Melbourne and regional towns and communities. This includes significant CALD community visitation. A range of activities and experiences are sought in these forests, including more active pursuits of 4WD and trail bike riding
- the Panel heard of prevalence of illegal activities and impacts in this forest area. This included illegal use of firearms, off track 4WD use, damaging of forest infrastructure, dumping of rubbish

- in some instances, the Panel heard of conflict between forest users and different activities. These behaviours and impacts result in some people feeling unsafe in this forest area, in particular for families looking to enjoy and recreate in the area
- the Panel also heard of confusion in community around what activities are permitted and allowed on public land. There is lack of easily accessible information in some instances. The shire council note there is a strong need for clearer information to communities and visitors on these forests, their health and what activities are safe and permissible
- this area also adjoins closed water catchments, in the adjoining national park. The Panel is aware that there is misunderstanding in the community around access to closed water catchments and the national parks. There is an identified need for clearer information about forest access locations in this area and clear explanation of the water supply protection areas
- specific opportunities for investment included access points to Mount Disappointment need to be formalised, upgraded and maintained, enhancements to reduce people feeling unsafe in Mt Disappointment including compliance and enforcement, designating zoning for the use of firearms, expanded camping opportunities at Anderson Gardens

Forest values, uses and proposed land categories

The Panel recommends Mt Disappointment and Mt Robertson state forests continue to be managed as a state forest with a number of conditions including uplift in environmental management, targeted recreation investment and consideration of longer term management options for Taungurung.

In making this recommendation the Panel notes existing arrangements in Victoria's public land legislation are not suitable for Taungurung to activate rights and interests and new pathways are required. Further work between with Taungurung and government, in collaboration with community, is required to set the right foundations for future governance, planning and management arrangements for this area. While this occurs, state forest category is appropriate with several additional considerations.

Recommendation 26

Wandong, Wallan, Kinglake West – proposed land categories

Recommend that as per the map at **Figure 8.9**, Mt Disappointment State Forest and Mt Robertson State Forest continue to be managed as state forests, with a view to prioritising for activation as a cultural reserve in the future, when Taungurung, community and resourcing is ready to do so. Work with Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung for future management of the areas of Mt Disappointment state forest that exists on Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Country.

Conditions for governance, planning and management

Several conditions and opportunities have been identified to accompany this recommendation.

This recommendation comes with specific conditions to enhance environmental, biocultural and conservation planning and management for state forest areas.

The existing land manager, DEECA, in partnership with Taungurung should continue to expand on existing partnerships and collaborative management opportunities with local communities.

Other key opportunities include:

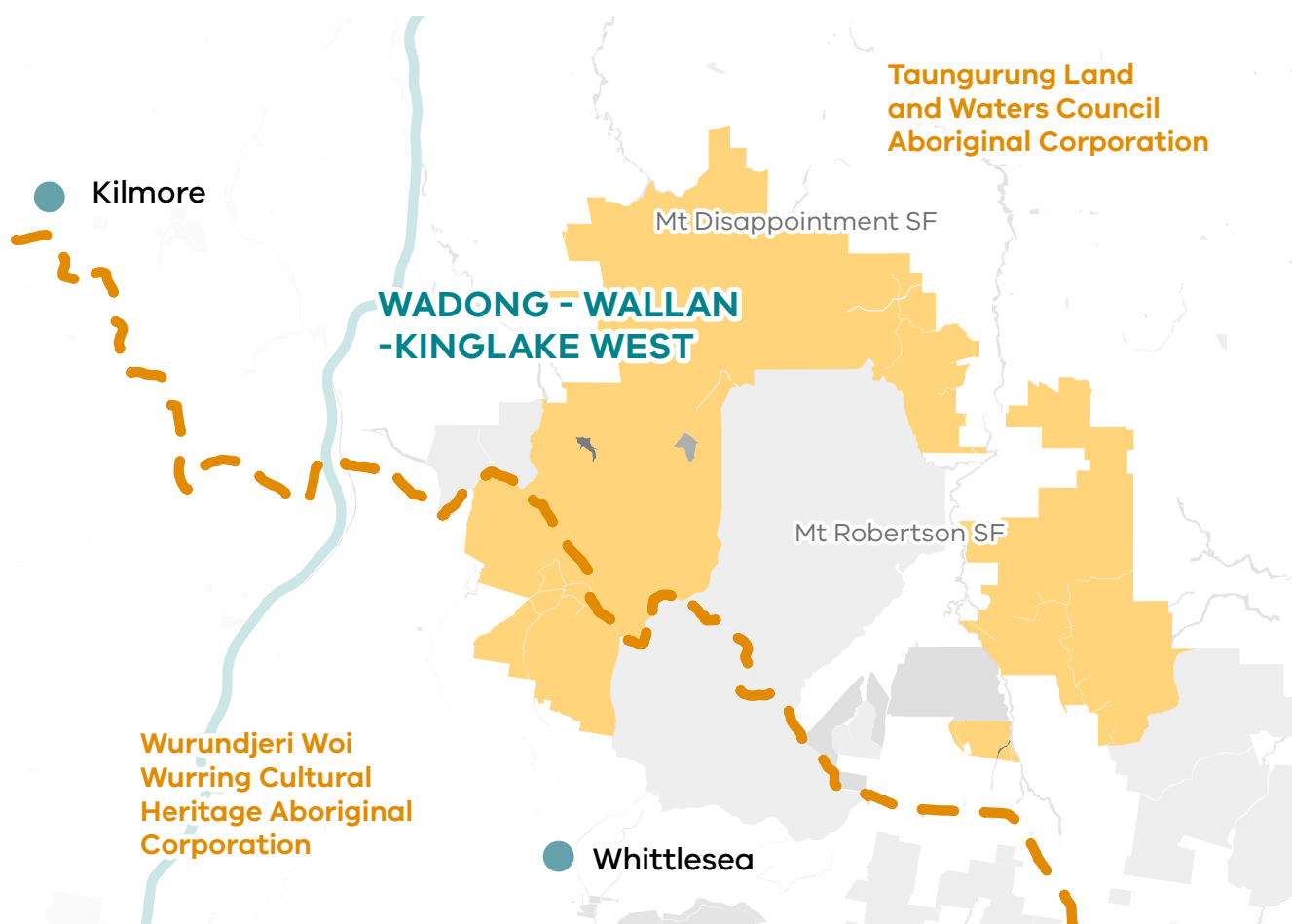
- an education program and information about the role of closed catchments and the Yarra Ranges National Park
- enhanced zoning of recreation experiences to separate out more active 4WD/trail biking and hunting areas from quiet enjoyment areas
- better define access points to forests to help with visitor experience around the closed catchment areas
- enhanced environmental management is required for this area, this includes a focus on priority values, threatened species and managing risks including pest plants and animals
- creation of new tracks for all abilities – current lack of all ability trails that allow access to forest areas and short trails suitable for wheelchairs and prams.

Recommendation 27

Wandong, Wallan, Kinglake West – governance, planning and management conditions

In addition to general recommendations that apply across all forest areas, recommend the following conditions be implemented along with land category recommendations for this area:

- 27.1 enhancement of environmental management across state forest areas by the land manager
- 27.2 work with Taungurung, and Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung for relevant area, and local communities on collaborative planning and management for this area, when and where appropriate according to resource availability and readiness
- 27.3 targeted user education and behaviour change programs to support appreciation and safe use of forest areas in particular for Mount Disappointment
- 27.4 review of forest infrastructure, trail network, and accessibility to manage high visitation and balance a range of activities and experiences including zonation strategies
- 27.5 an education program and information about the role of closed catchments in national park areas and clearer information on forest access locations.



LEGEND:

Recommendation

- Forest Park
- National Park
- State Park

- State Forest
- State Forest (Future Cultural Reserve)
- Cultural Reserve

Public Land Tenure (Existing)

- Parks and Other Conservation Reserves
- Other Public Land
- Plantation

- Registered Aboriginal Party

Figure 8.9 – Land category recommendations for Wandong – Wallan – Kinglake West. Note: boundaries are indicative; names of state forests listed represent current land category status.

8.2.9 Marysville, Buxton

This area includes Marysville State Forest on Taungurung Country.

The forest area occurs as part of the Nun nun tun, Waring and Banit Ngarrap cultural landscapes. Debera Biik, that covers much of the Rubicon and Marysville State Forests, supports important Debera (Bogong moth) populations, a key culturally identified species for the Taungurung Nation. Taungurung considers that forest areas require new paradigm of culturally led land management. Cultural land management critical to reestablish biocultural relationships.

Significant high value wet forests occur throughout this area. Some smaller areas of cool temperate rainforest occur throughout the northeast corner, towards the Yarra Ranges National Park.

Approximately half of the forest type is mountain ash. Important areas for southern greater glider and other threatened species.

Extensive timber harvesting has occurred in this area, including in the last decade. There is very limited old growth forest, and forest structure is largely even aged and regenerating.

These are important forests for forest townships and communities. People have strong associations with these forests. Marysville was identified as a Local Development Strategy community and work is taking place to identify future forest opportunities including for tourism and encouraging visitors to stay in the shire area longer. This includes to build, extend and maintain a variety of multi-use tracks and trails for walking, cycling, and horse riding, with connection and extension of these tracks from Marysville through to Rubicon, Eildon and beyond to Yarck.

This area supports a range of outdoor and recreational activities. High day trip visitation occurs from Melbourne to the area. The Bicentennial National Trail passes through this area which was originally conceived as a route for long distance horse trekking (Healesville to Cooktown in Queensland).

Engagement findings

981 feedback form responses, 138 map responses were received to Engage Victoria for this location. 55 people attended one drop in session in Marysville. Targeted meetings with local government, peak bodies, local user groups and environmental groups were held.

Key engagement findings included:

- importance of the forest area to the local community with key feedback for economic opportunities from forest tourism; fire management; balancing a range of uses; increased investment in campgrounds and overnight stays; rubbish and toilet facilities
- the value of horse riding in the area and how this activity supports people, in particular women, to get into nature
- supporting opportunities arising from Murrindindi Industry Transition
- support for Taungurung activation and custodianship
- potential for critical minerals exploration around Marysville
- significant environmental values including rainforest, wet forest and waterways.

Forest values, uses and proposed land categories

The Panel recommends Marysville State Forest continue to be managed as a state forest with a number of conditions including uplift in environmental management, targeted recreation investment and consideration of longer term management options for Taungurung.

In making this recommendation the Panel notes existing arrangements in Victoria's public land legislation are not suitable for Taungurung to activate rights and interests and new pathways are required. Further work between with Taungurung and government, in collaboration with community, is required to set the right foundations for future governance, planning and management arrangements for this area. While this occurs, state forest category is appropriate with several additional considerations.

Recommendation 28

Marysville, Buxton – proposed land categories

Recommend that as per the map at **Figure 8.10**, Marysville State Forest continue to be managed as a state forest with a view to prioritising for activation as a cultural reserve in the future, when Taungurung, community and resourcing is ready to do so.

Conditions for governance, planning and management

This recommendation comes with specific conditions to enhance environmental, biocultural and conservation planning and management for state forest areas.

The existing land manager, DEECA, in partnership with Taungurung should continue to expand on existing partnerships and collaborative management opportunities with local communities.

The Panel notes the importance of work taking place in close collaboration with the Marysville community. This will be particularly important for future forest management planning which is required to set a clear contemporary direction for local forest management.

Key opportunities include:

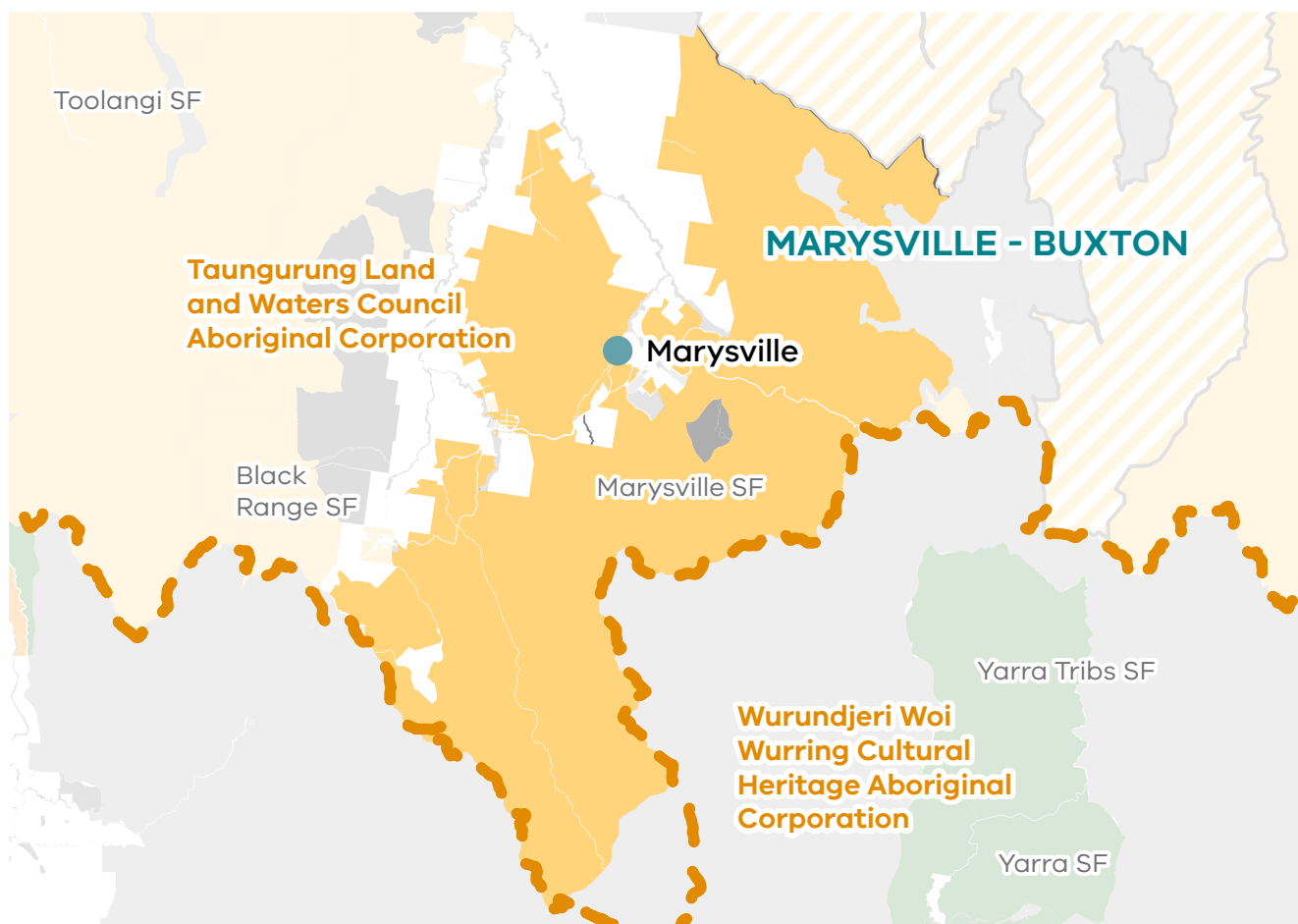
- regeneration and restoration program for area of previously harvested forests
- supporting tourism opportunities in area including mountain biking, family friendly nature adventure offerings
- formalise track and trail network to cater to different activities e.g. dedicated horse riding trails
- tracks maintained post timber harvesting.

Recommendation 29

Marysville, Buxton – governance, planning and management conditions

In addition to general recommendations that apply across all forest areas, recommend the following conditions for be implemented along with land category recommendations for this area:

- 29.1** enhancement of environmental management across state forest areas by the land manager, including particular focus on regeneration and restoration program for area of previously harvested forests
- 29.2** work with Taungurung, local communities on collaborative planning and management for this area
- 29.3** close collaboration with Marysville community to identify opportunities and future management strategies for forests through local forest planning including activation of LDS projects
- 29.4** consider opportunities to formalise track and trail network to cater to different activities e.g. dedicated horse-riding trails, mountain biking.



LEGEND:

Recommendation

- Forest Park
- National Park
- State Park
- State Forest
- State Forest (Future Cultural Reserve)
- Cultural Reserve

Public Land Tenure (Existing)

- Parks and Other Conservation Reserves
- Other Public Land
- Plantation



Registered
Aboriginal
Party

Figure 8.10 – Land category recommendations for Marysville, Buxton. Note: boundaries are indicative; names of state forests listed represent current land category status.

8.2.10 Waring / Upper Goulburn

This area includes Big River and Waring/Upper Goulburn state forests on Taungurung Country.

The Big River and Waring State forests are both remote. Though having been affected by gold mining in the 1860's and the 1939 wildfire event, large areas have been undisturbed since. Impacts of commercial timber harvesting have been confined to the more productive areas in the south of both forest areas.

These areas are rugged and steep, with slopes of gentle relief being confined to either ridgelines or the narrow river valleys of the Big (Mulmulang), upper Waring Rivers and associated tributaries.

Both forest areas occur as part of Banit Narrap and Debera Biik cultural landscapes.

Taungurung note that Big River State Forest is in poor biocultural health and Upper Goulburn State Forest/Waring is in very poor biocultural health. No current Traditional Owner led governance or management. Cultural landscape management critical to re-establish biocultural relationships.

Engagement findings

1,438 feedback form responses, 438 map responses were received to Engage Victoria for this location. Targeted meetings with local government, peak bodies, local user groups and environmental groups were held.

Key engagement findings included:

- areas of significant natural beauty and conservation value – land management needed to address weeds and restoration of degraded Mountain Ash forests
- desire to maintain access and current use
- forests provide a range of recreational experiences including 4WD, trail bike riding, ability to bring dogs, prospecting and hunting
- importance of area for water catchment and significant rivers

- a desire to create more designated low-maintenance camping areas and picnic facilities
- collaborating with local communities and interest groups for better management and conservation of the forests
- interest in Traditional Owner governance and land management
- considerations for mining that takes place in the area.

Forest values, uses and proposed land categories

The Panel recommends Big River and Upper Goulburn state forests continue to be managed as a state forest with a number of conditions including uplift in environmental management, targeted recreation investment and consideration of longer-term management options for Taungurung.

In making this recommendation the Panel notes existing arrangements in Victoria's public land legislation are not suitable for Taungurung to activate rights and interests and new pathways are required. Further work between with Taungurung and government, in collaboration with community, is required to set the right foundations for future governance, planning and management arrangements for this area. While this occurs, state forest category is appropriate with several additional considerations.

Recommendation 30

Waring / Upper Goulburn – proposed land categories

Recommend that as per the map at **Figure 8.11**, Big River and Upper Goulburn State Forest continue to be managed as state forests with a view to prioritising for activation as a cultural reserve in the future, when Taungurung, community and resourcing are ready to do so.

Conditions for governance, planning and management

This recommendation comes with specific conditions to enhance environmental, biocultural and conservation planning and management for state forest areas.

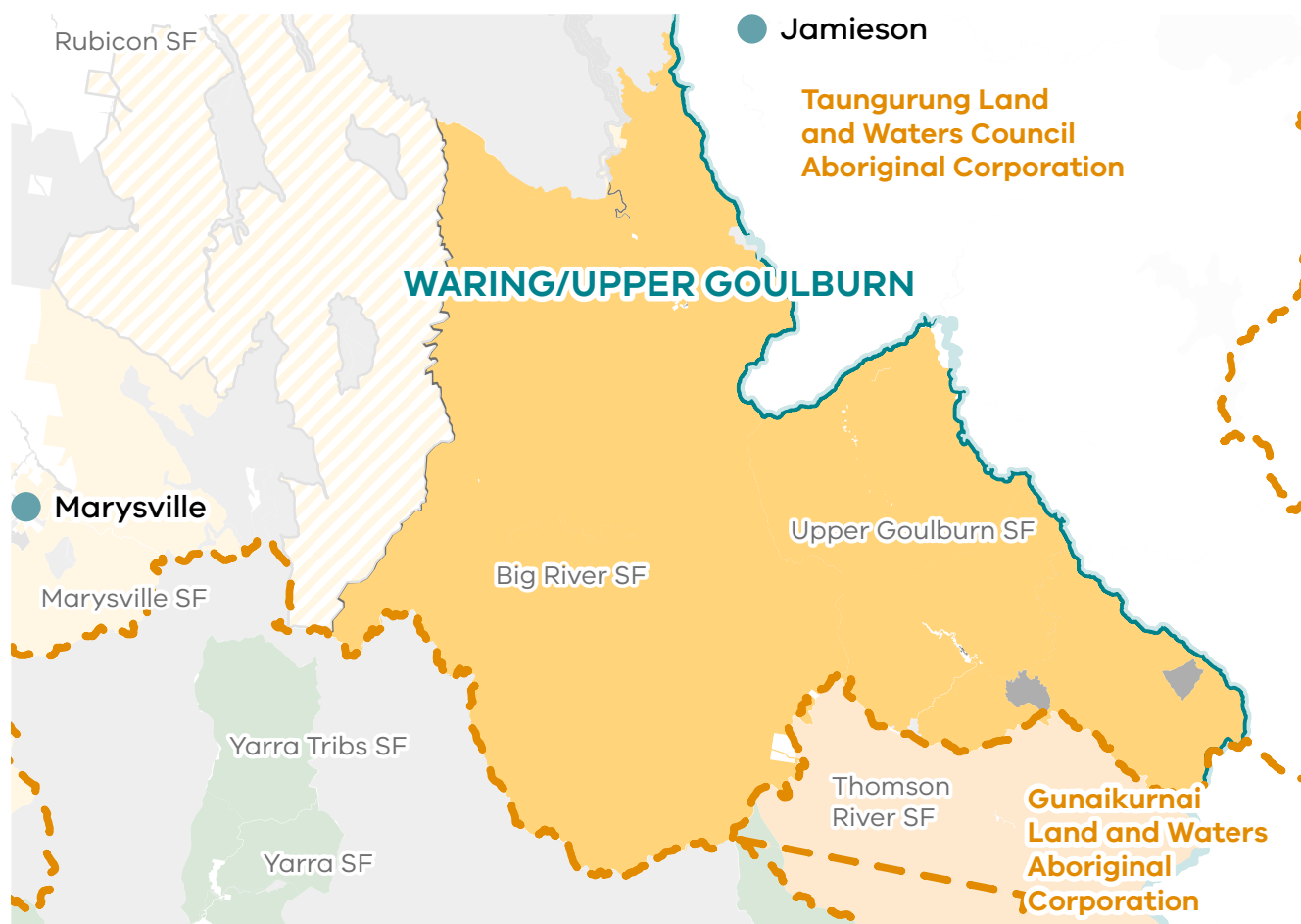
The existing land manager, DEECA, in partnership with Taungurung should continue to expand on existing partnerships and collaborative management opportunities with local communities.

Recommendation 31

Waring / Upper Goulburn – governance, planning and management conditions

In addition to general recommendations that apply across all forest areas, recommend the following conditions for be implemented along with land category recommendations for this area:

- 31.1** enhancement of environmental management across state forest areas by DEECA in partnership with TLaWC through Biiik Land Management. Priority given to works to improve the health of Country in the forest, including restoration of areas of failed regeneration, management of pest and weeds
- 31.2** work with Taungurung, local communities on collaborative planning and management for this area
- 31.2** work with local communities to understand opportunities for designated low-maintenance camping areas and picnic facilities and priority infrastructure maintenance.



LEGEND:

Recommendation

- | | |
|--|---|
| Forest Park | State Forest |
| National Park | State Forest (Future Cultural Reserve) |
| State Park | Cultural Reserve |

Public Land Tenure (Existing)

- | |
|--|
| Parks and Other Conservation Reserves |
| Other Public Land |
| Plantation |

- Registered Aboriginal Party

Figure 8.11 – Land category recommendations for Waring / Upper Goulburn. Note: boundaries are indicative; names of state forests listed represent current land category status.

8.2.11 Labertouche, Beenak, Tarago, Tonimbuk

This area includes Beenak State Forest on Bunurong Country; and Labertouche, Tarago River state forests on shared-interest Country.

Key findings for these forests include:

- significant forests for Traditional Owners
- these forests support outstanding biodiversity values including large areas of mountain ash, wet forests in Beenak and Tarago State Forests and endangered or vulnerable rainforest sites in Tarago and Labertouche State Forests.
- important water supply area in the Tarago catchment

- local communities have close associations with the forests, and significant visitation is also seen from greater Melbourne communities; support a range of activities and experiences including lapidary
- identified need for more effective management of invasive pest plants and animals; maintenance of infrastructure including 4WD tracks; need for further compliance and enforcement to target illegal uses including dumping of rubbish.

Engagement findings

987 feedback form responses, 89 map responses were received to Engage Victoria for this location. One drop in session was held at Gembrook with 41 people in attendance. Targeted meetings with local

government, peak bodies, local user groups and environmental groups were held.

Key engagement findings included:

- feedback indicated a mix of responses regarding greater environmental protections and access for recreation and experiences
- some responses noted the convenience of this location for variety of outdoor recreation activities; the natural beauty of this area; significant ecological values; historic significance; access to firewood
- Tarago River has high quality environmental values, for example gully grevillea, cool temperate rain forest, ash species
- the need for well maintained and patrolled infrastructure (e.g. camp sites, walking tracks etc); improved signage; education of visitors about ecological value and camp ethic; restoration and maintenance of 4WD tracks
- noting the cultural significance of forest areas for First Nations groups and need to respect this heritage

- more effective forest management, including fire practice, regeneration of degraded areas, pest plant and animal control; protection of key ecological areas
- collaborating with First Nations, local communities and user groups and stakeholders in forest management care and decision-making processes.
- significance of Tarago Reservoir for water supply.

Forest values, uses and proposed land categories

Bunurong has provided a statement through this work of its interest in pursuing new arrangements for management of state forests on its Country area. This includes testing and developing conditions of a cultural reserve land category.

The Panel notes there is further work required to partner with Bunurong to understand the conditions for success here. Bunurong has identified a pathway forward that includes working with local communities and the shire council to understand how cultural objectives can best be supported and activated. To support this work, it is recommended that Beenak State Forest continue to be managed as a state forest with longer term consideration of activation as a cultural reserve when Bunurong are ready to do so.

For forest areas on shared interest Country, the Panel recommends these areas transition to state park to support continuity with adjoining Bunyip State Park and protection of wider water supply catchment area. This includes the Tarago River and Labertouche state forests. Under the proposed reforms to the National Parks Act, the Panel understands the state park category would merge with national park in the future. The Panel notes that further work is required with First Nations groups with interest in this area to determine future governance, planning and management arrangements.

The Victorian Government has previously accepted recommendations of a 2011 VEAC investigation that Tonimbuk state forest be added to Bunyip State Park²⁰. The Panel notes that some databases still show this area as being state forest when the accepted recommendation is it be state park which should be rectified. As this area should be managed as a state park, it is subsequently out of scope for the Panel's work and no specific recommendations are made.

The Panel also notes that boundary alignment between state forest areas and Bunurong Country around existing Latrobe and Yarra state forests will be required for implementation.

Recommendation 32

Labertouche, Beenak, Tarago, Tonimbuk – proposed land categories

Recommend that as per the map at **Figure 8.12**:

- 32.1** Beenak State Forest and areas of Tarago River and Labertouche state forests on Bunurong Country, continue to be managed as state forests with longer term consideration and activation as a cultural reserve when Bunurong are ready to do so
- 32.2** Tarago River and Labertouche state forests on shared interest country be managed as a state park; with engagement with First Nations groups with an interest in this area on the implementation of this.

Conditions for governance, planning and management

This recommendation comes with specific conditions to enhance environmental, biocultural and conservation planning and management for state forest areas.

The existing land manager, DEECA, in partnership with Traditional Owners should continue to expand on existing partnerships and collaborative management opportunities with local communities.

Partnerships for the future

Bunurong has identified a pathway and steps to assess health of Country and develop management strategies for the future as a pathway to cultural reserve activation. This includes further community engagement and work with the shire council to understand opportunities for this area.

Bunurong identified key activities include:

- undertake a biocultural assessment of Country in these forests to inform further understanding and knowledge of Country
- undertake a feasibility study focussed on climate adaptive repurposing and identifying social and economic mutual opportunities and benefits through collaborating and working with local communities including local government
- from the feasibility study, develop an agreed plan for progressing social and economic opportunities including the development of a 'climate adaptive cultural economic business plan', directing future management of the forests and a timeline for agreed action
- when ready, begin resourcing for infrastructure and staffing to enable the Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation to manage cultural reserves

and enable culturally and economically based practices to be trialled as pilots.

The Panel acknowledges the importance of supporting this proposal. Further work is required to work in partnership with Bunurong to understand the details of this and work and scope for application to state forest areas.

Forest experience

The Panel also heard of need for immediate investment in forest health and infrastructure. This includes an important education piece to support understanding within community and visitors from Melbourne of how to safely and appropriately enjoy these forests.

Other key considerations include enhancing forest infrastructure around existing visitor sites, formalising assets and trails, balancing uses such as local community prospecting and lapidary values, consider maintenance of firewood access if applicable with other forest values

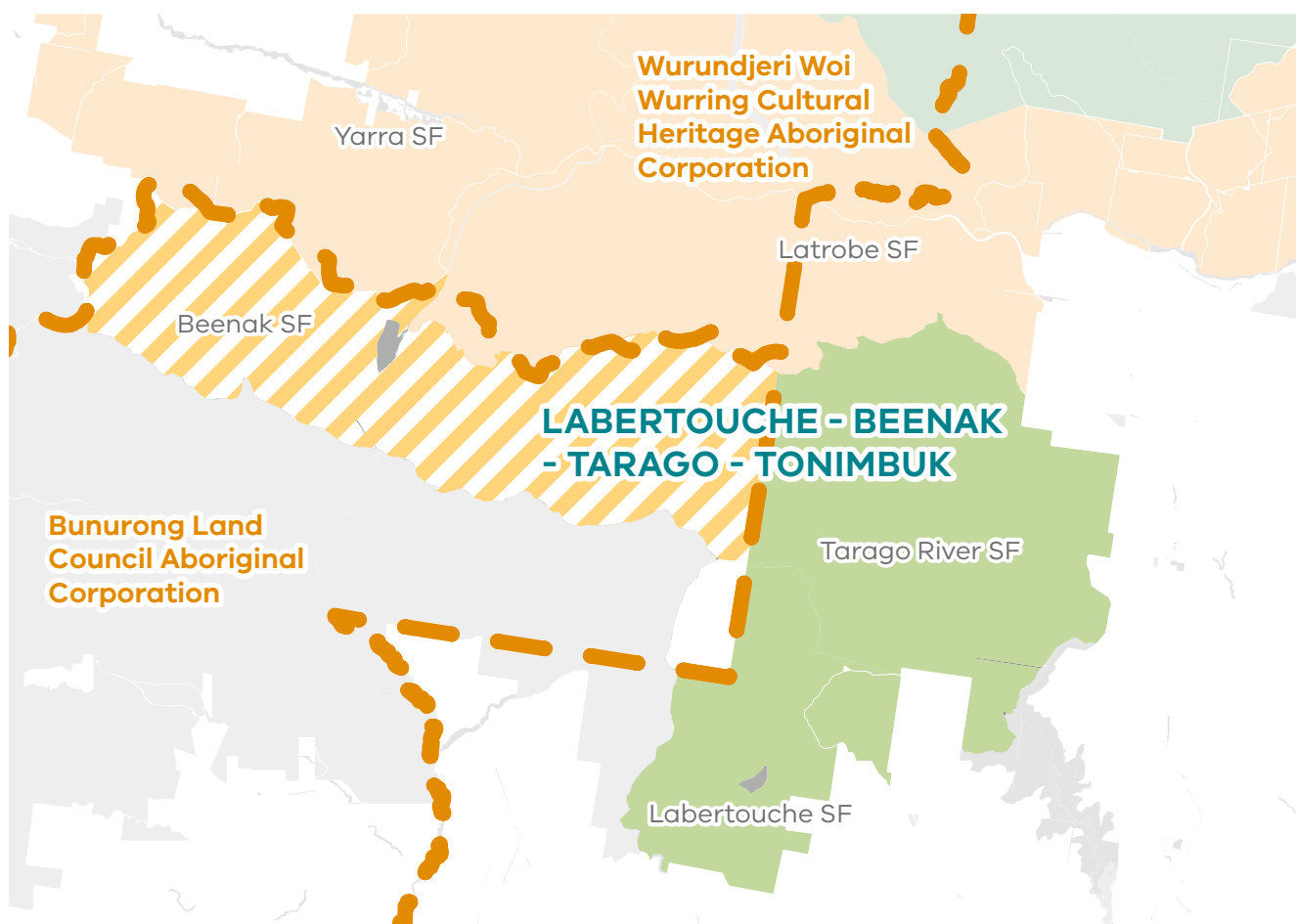
The Panel considers this a priority for contemporary management planning development – for which a general recommendation has already been made.

Recommendation 33

Labertouche, Beenak, Tarago, Tonimbuk – governance, planning and management conditions

In addition to general recommendations that apply across all forest areas, recommend the following conditions for be implemented along with land category recommendations for this area:

- 33.1** recommend Bunurong is resourced to undertake to develop understanding of health of country and actions for the future, including biocultural assessment, feasibility study and future forest plans
- 33.2** enhancement of environmental management across state forest areas by the land manager including targeted education and compliance programs to support broader understanding of safe levels of use
- 33.3** work with Traditional Owners, local communities on collaborative planning and management for this area.
- 33.4** consider opportunities for enhancing forest infrastructure around existing visitor sites, formalising assets and trails.



LEGEND:

Recommendation

- Forest Park
- National Park
- State Park

- State Forest
- State Forest (Future Cultural Reserve)
- Cultural Reserve

Public Land Tenure (Existing)

- Parks and Other Conservation Reserves
- Other Public Land
- Plantation

- Registered Aboriginal Party

Figure 8.12 – Land category recommendations for Labertouche, Beenak, Tarago, Tonimbuk. Note: boundaries are indicative; names of state forests listed represent current land category status.

9. TRADITIONAL OWNER STATEMENTS

This chapter presents Traditional Owner statements for Country. Statements were provided by Bunurong, Taungurung and Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Traditional Owners. Gunaikurnai did not provide a statement as part of this work. These statements have been included in full and articulate each Traditional Owner group's vision for management of forest Country in the Central Highlands.

9.1 Taungurung Land and Waters Council

A new paradigm for Country first

What we've heard

Through its partnership with Taungurung and engagement with local communities and stakeholders, the Panel has heard of strong support for new models of partnership to support caring and healing for Country. Many local communities do important work in their local forests. A significant opportunity exists to harness this for the next phase of these forest areas towards a collaborative approach for forest management.

A collaborative approach embraces partnership in decision making for planning and management; and multiple uses that are consistent with healing and managing healthy Country.

The Panel also heard of the many challenges and barriers that exist to activation of rights and interests for healing and caring for Country by Taungurung. This includes barriers in the existing legislation, regulations and institutional arrangements that have historically and currently govern how public forests are planned for and managed.

Taungurung's rapid biocultural values assessment published in March 2024 presents a long-term vision for collaborative management and partnerships for forest Country in the assessment area. This is over a time scale of 100 years, the timeframe Taungurung identifies as required to support healing of Country and knowledge. Central to Taungurung's 100-year plan is the activation of culturally informed governance, planning and management arrangements when Taungurung is ready to do so. This pathway provides time for collaborative partnering, planning and management arrangements to be tested and developed and for Taungurung nation to self-determine when and how it activates interests for forest areas.

Walking a both worlds approach

The proposed Public Land Act reforms will bring about much needed change to support activation and enabling of Taungurung objectives for governance, planning and management of public lands. This includes enabling Traditional Owners to directly manage public land, including National Parks, according to management purposes that support the conservation and protection of bio-cultural values, through healing and caring for Country.

While these broader reforms are underway, key actions are required now to create an enabling environment for partnership and to develop conditions required for collaborative management of cultural landscapes. This includes an authorising environment that supports equitable decision making along with adjustments to existing processes and institutional arrangements for land and water management.

The Panel considers there is a need to further develop and implement bridging tools that support a holistic and respectful coming together of Traditional Owner and western science world views. This includes demonstrating practices for healing and caring for Country at local and landscape scale. Testing these processes through pilots will support Taungurung, other land managers and communities to come together and walk a both worlds approach to understand and establish the right conditions for partnership. This will provide a platform for partners to build trust and capability in working together and for Taungurung to continue to build capacity and activate rights and interests for broader areas of forest Country over medium and longer term.

Taungurung statements

Country Speaks

Taungurung forests are diverse, flowing from and into Waring. Waring (the Goulburn River) is the lifeblood of Taungurung biik. Banit ngarrap (thick forest) protects the headwaters of Waring where they emerge in the high places in the south and east. The open forests of Yawang (Stone Country) lie to the north and west. When the forests are healthy, they are full of life and food and medicine can grow in abundance. The plants and the weather show when the time is right to travel next. In the hot months, the high forests offer refuge from the heat and the abundance of debera (bogong moth) supports gathering and ceremony.

All forests are places of people. Before colonisation, people applied right fire to Country creating open grassy woodlands to provide the conditions for new plants and animals to grow and thrive. Ceremony, initiation, connection, dance and stories all flow when forests are managed by Taungurung according to lore. Country must be known from bottom to top.

Taungurung people showed the invaders our Country and what was important to us only to have it stolen. The invaders tried to stop Taungurung from caring for Country in the right way. Taungurung suffer from this theft. Country is badly damaged. Right fire has gone. Nothing is in balance. Forests are stripped bare through logging or suffocated by neglect, choked and overrun with the wrong plants and animals. Fire is wrong. Everything is disturbed. No-one is managing Country properly and she is sick.

Forests will return to the care of Taungurung. Cultural practice and connection will heal Country and forests will thrive from right management. Cool, healing fire will move across the landscape once again providing light and space for all the entities. When others visit Country, it is Taungurung languages, names and stories that they will hear. Taungurung will stand strong in cultural authority. Country will guide and, one day, others will come to Taungurung to learn the right ways.

Introduction to findings from Reading Country

Biocultural expressions and cultural landscapes were identified that are associated with the area known as the Central Highlands Regional Forestry Agreement (CHRFA) area, specifically the CHRFA area falling on Taungurung Country. Information was revealed through using internally developed methodologies which centre a cultural governance process to inform assessment research design, data collection and analysis.

Statement of Cultural Landscapes

The Cultural Landscapes presented below have been identified as part of this assessment in collaboration with Taungurung Elders, other Taungurung knowledge holders and the Taungurung Forests and Fire Knowledge Circle. The mapping units presented here represents the output of Reading Country methods that combines both biocultural and biophysical information. Cultural Landscapes represent more than 'planning units of choice' but represent a contemporary expression of Traditional Owners rights and obligations to heal, manage and care for Country.

Where practicable and in the context of this assessment, Cultural Landscapes have been fully considered, irrespective of the boundaries of the assessment Landscape in order to demonstrate the importance of interconnectedness across Taungurung Country. A summary of all Cultural Landscapes shown in Figure 9.1.

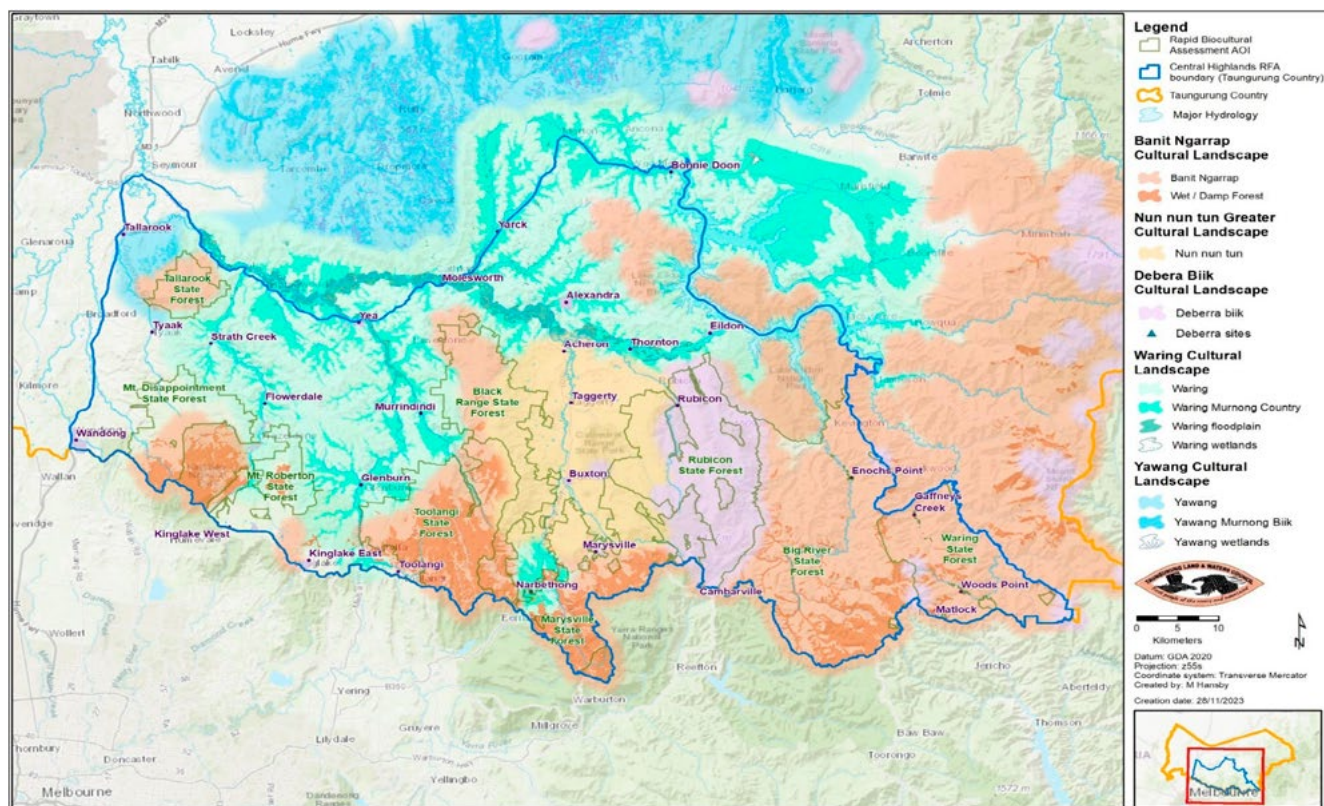


Figure 9.1 – spatial representation of the interconnectedness of Taungurung Cultural Landscapes associated with the assessment landscape²¹

Statement of Biocultural Expressions

Biocultural expressions exist within and across these landscapes. As discussed above, biocultural expressions cannot be easily reduced to their component parts. Whereas the colonial state speaks to individual, and typically tangible, entities (plants, animals, archaeological materials etc), correctly framed biocultural expressions necessarily describe a more connected system of knowledge.

The following biocultural expressions as articulated by the Taungurung Nation characterise the assessment area: Relationality, Ceremony, Fire, Reciprocity, Water.

Biocultural Health of Country

The biocultural lens that is at the centre of indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing perceives only holistic relationships. Plants, people, animals, food, fibre, waterways, snow, seasons, Language, Cultural Heritage, ceremony; these and all things are related and we cannot approach one without approaching all. Thus, in the context of the assessment, biocultural ‘health’ describes how intact such connections or relationships are both within a specific Country Type, and across the Cultural Landscapes more broadly.

All State Forests within the assessment area were considered poor or very poor in terms of biocultural health.

²¹ Disclaimer: Taungurung Land and Waters Council makes no representation or warranty regarding the accuracy or completeness of the information in this document. Taungurung Land and Waters Council further accepts no responsibility for any omissions or inaccuracies that may exist and disclaims all liability for any loss or damage which may arise directly or indirectly from reliance on the information in this document, whether or not that loss is caused by any negligence on the part of Taungurung Land and Waters Council or its employees.

Taungurung Findings and Recommendations

Findings: The case for healing and caring for Country through the biocultural lens of Cultural Landscapes

The case for healing and caring for Country through the biocultural lens of Cultural Landscapes is compelling. This assessment has identified that five cultural landscapes that intersect the assessment landscape. Biocultural relationships, such as culturally identified flora and fauna, cultural stories, kinship with landscape entities, song lines, travel routes, lore and obligation are all encompassed by the biocultural expressions revealed. The statements of biocultural expressions and cultural landscapes in this document are the result of restricted time on Country with community and should not be considered exhaustive, but as the starting point for a new way to engage with our forested landscape.

Rights and obligations: the trajectory of change in policy and legislation to meet Taungurung's pathway and develop the conditions for healthy Country

The proposed Public Land bill identifies Direct Management arrangements. Under Direct Management arrangements, the Traditional Owner Group Entity will engage with partners (DEECA, community representatives) in collaborative governance, undertake a collaborative planning process and heal Country through a both worlds approach. This regime is suitably enabled through development of a new public land category called Cultural Reserve, with a Cultural Landscape Overlay. This meets the current pathway needs for Taungurung.

In parallel with the development of cultural reserves over public land and cultural landscape overlays, an application will be made to incorporate each cultural landscape into the Commonwealth Protected Area Program. This will enable incorporation of the cultural landscape and its component reserves into the National Reserve System, aligned with Category V (for individual reserves) and Category VI (for cultural landscapes). It will also bring complementary resourcing for planning and management.

Piloting of cultural landscape development programs on Taungurung Country, e.g., within the Corop Cultural Waterscape (see Case Study as Box 1 below), propose that a 100-year timeline will be required to achieve sufficient healing of Country and knowledge to be able to activate sole management arrangements. Sole management is applied when Country is healed and cultural governance able to be fully activated. At this point, Country is once again governing (speaking through the Nation). In recognition of the reality of those relying on Country for a range of contemporary uses (e.g., tourism, farming), collaborative governance (equitable participation in decision making amongst partners) and collaborative planning processes will likely

remain in place, with Country providing direction through the Nation, to ensure system balance and health.

What this means for economic activities like tourism and production agriculture is decision making in partnership, at each stage of healing the landscape. The intention is to support economic activities within safe limits for Country. Those safe limits may be supported by technology advances in agriculture, management practice advances, upgraded infrastructure e.g. fit for purpose road and trail development, set asides to allow certain areas to be healed or managed discretely; and seasonal access to separate uses that may provide risk if undertaken in the same area e.g. four wheel driving and bush walking.

Recommendations: Policy and Institutional change

At a Nation (policy and program) level, we seek to activate provisions in the Cultural Landscapes Strategy, the Game Management Strategy and The Taungurung Cultural Land Management Strategy for Taungurung to develop and apply a framework to heal and manage public land on Taungurung Country, in partnership with existing land managers. We seek to develop suitable provisions (including an enabling environment) and resourcing, to be able to apply the bridging tools of collaborative planning, collaborative governance and a both worlds approach to management to support this objective.

This will enable a long term (in perpetuity) and holistic, respectful integration of two world views, across whole of Country, through a cultural landscape lens.

The chart illustrates a sequence of long term (approx. 100 year) change, as healing Country is undertaken in parallel with enabling legal, policy and institutional reform (**Figure 9.2**).

The left-hand side of the chart illustrates contemporary rights under Recognition and Settlement Agreements, including Joint Management of Parks and Reserves (ref: Taungurung RSA). A Traditional Owner Land Management Board (TOLMB) is established to guide a planning process, with land management authority remaining with Parks Victoria.

The centre of the chart identifies Direct Management arrangements as outlined in the proposed Public Land bill. Under Direct Management arrangements, the Traditional Owner Group Entity (TOGE) will engage with partners in collaborative governance, undertake a collaborative planning process and heal Country through a both worlds approach. This regime is suitably enabled through development of a new public land category called Cultural Reserve. This meets the current pathway needs for Taungurung.

Collaborative Management

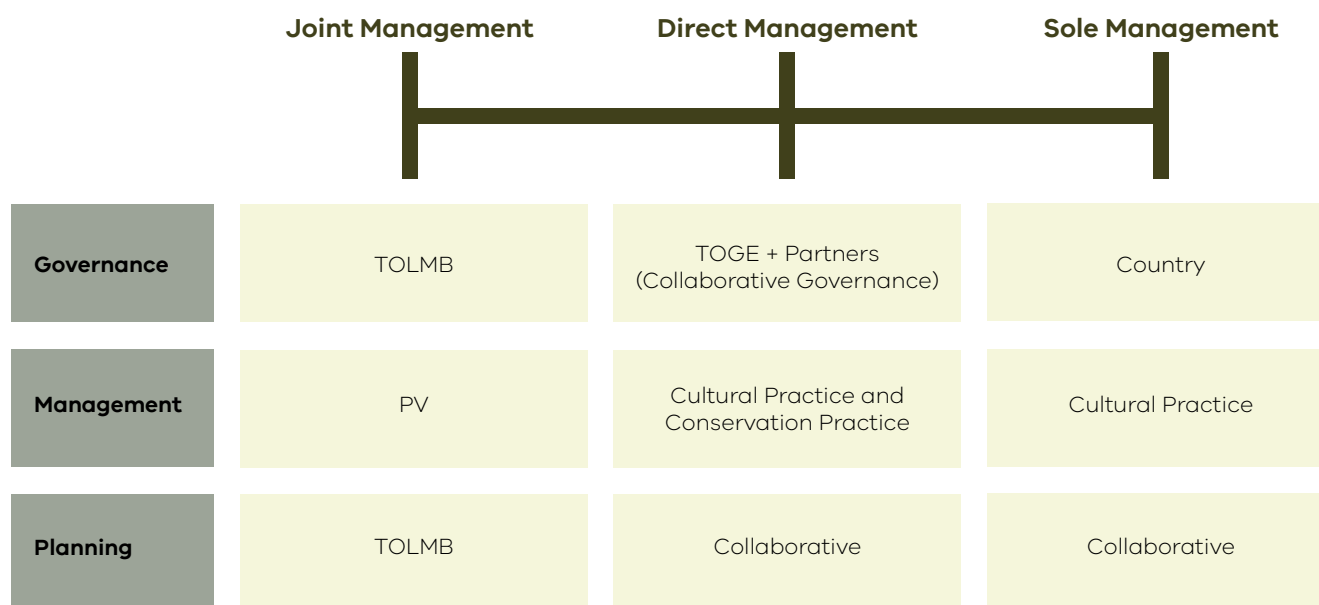


Figure 9.2 – the chart illustrates a sequence of long term (approx. 100 year) change, as a collaborative management²² regime is applied, healing Country is undertaken in parallel with enabling legal, policy and institutional reform.

Piloting of cultural landscape development programs on Taungurung Country, e.g., within the Corop Cultural Waterscape, propose that a 100-year timeline will be required to achieve sufficient healing of Country and knowledge to be able to activate sole management arrangements. Sole management is applied when Country is healed and cultural governance able to be fully activated. At this point, Country is once again governing (speaking through the Nation). In recognition of the reality of those relying on Country for a range of contemporary uses (e.g., tourism, irrigation agriculture), collaborative governance (equitable participation in decision making amongst partners) and collaborative planning processes will likely remain in place, with Country providing direction through the Nation to ensure system balance and health.

Taungurung Land and Waters Council is currently developing methodologies for key bridging tools (collaborative planning, collaborative governance and two-worlds management), through the development of cultural landscape programs, as pilots.

In order to establish each cultural landscape pilot, we seek development of an authorising environment (at Department senior executive level) that will support equitable decision making and potential adjustments to existing processes, agency partner roles and/or institutional arrangements to enable positive action based on cultural direction and scientific evidence, in a walking both worlds approach.

²² Collaborative management is a partnership in which government agencies, local communities and resource users, non-governmental organisations and other stakeholders negotiate, as appropriate to each context, the authority and responsibility for the management of a specific area or set of resources. Collaborative management arrangements are described in the framework on page 46 of the Cultural Landscapes Strategy.

Box 7

Case Study: Corop Cultural Waterscape

This case study demonstrates current work underway to develop new governance, planning and management arrangements for a cultural landscape, the Corop Cultural Waterscape on Taungurung Country.

This includes the bringing together of Traditional Owners, land managers, government agencies, private landholders and community to collaboratively develop and test this methodology.

The Corop Culture Waterscape is a significant opportunity to trial and apply the pathways established by Water is Life for Traditional Owner self-determination in water management as well as key elements of the Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Landscape Strategy.

Corop Cultural Waterscape

The Corop Cultural Waterscape is of high cultural importance for Taungurung people.

Located west of Stanhope in northern Victoria, the waterscape encompasses three Country types. This includes the Corop wetlands complex, forested Country around the wetlands and Reedy Lake.

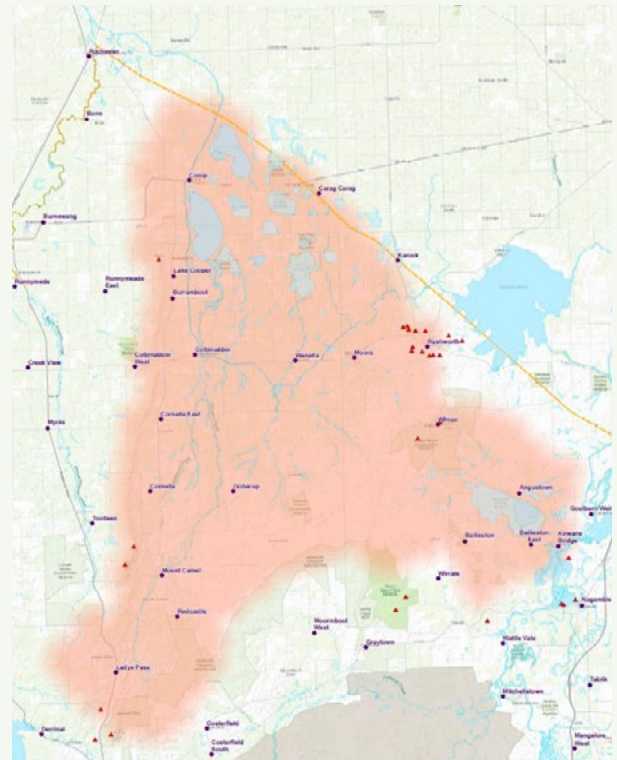
Each of these places contains significant biocultural value associated with plants, animals, habitats and their functions. This includes for key species such as the culturally significant Brolga and ecologically significant Australasian Bittern.

The waterscape occurs across a mixture of land types and arrangements. It includes four State game reserves and one wildlife reserve managed by Parks Victoria; State forest areas managed by DEECA; water assets managed by Goulburn Murray Water; and adjoining private land. Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority and the Victorian Environmental Water Holder are also key partners.

The number of land managers and complexity of arrangements means management is often fragmented and there is no holistic approach to managing the landscape.

A new model of partnership

TLaWC seeks to transform the current management of the individual wetlands, rivers and forests to a holistic landscape approach that focuses on the system as a whole. This will be achieved through activating Taungurung culture, knowledge and decision making at the centre



of the way Country is governed, planned for and managed.

This approach will restore the health of the waterscape system and improve the efficiency of the environmental water delivery and benefits. It will also contribute to the connection and protection of the biocultural, recreational and environmental values of the sites.

At the core of this approach is TLaWC being established as a land management partner in the development of governance, planning and management arrangements for the waterscape.

TLaWC has led a co-design process with partners to develop a blueprint for the future of the Corop Cultural Waterscape. The work is phased to support development of conditions that build success, including:

- visioning with partners
- feasibility to understand the landscape
- activation on Country, knowledge braiding, healing Country
- implementation to heal Country, systemic change and catalyse the change.

DEECA has provided authorising support for this program and funding for the first two stages.

Vision for the future

Through this process it is clear a long-term plan is required to achieve sufficient healing of Country and knowledge, and to build collaborative decision-making systems.

To guide this work, a shared vision for the Corop Waterscape has been developed with partners. This vision is for 100 years, the timescale needed to support return of health of Country.

The journey

As part of this work, Taungurung knowledge and practices need to be rooted within institutions and frameworks of the State, in a walking both worlds approach.

The first phase of visioning work is now complete. TLaWC has developed a program plan for a feasibility assessment under collaborative governance arrangements. A journey map that lays out the transformation required has been developed, which includes governance, management and planning. Principles have been developed which apply to Taungurung and their partners in implementation.

A theory of change underpins this work. This helps to step out immediate, medium and longer-term outcomes so all partners are clear about objectives.

Currently, the program is in its feasibility stage. This includes analysis of environmental, bio-cultural, economic, institutional and social aspects of the program. This analysis will lead to development of Healing Country Plans for four pilot projects within the Corop Cultural Waterscape including understanding of their cultural landscape context.

Phase 3 includes developing a cultural landscape management plan. This will take on a landscape approach which focuses on the entire system as a whole. Landholder representatives, community NRM institutions and government partners will be invited to participate in ongoing collaborative governance. Planning and management will be consistent with the healing and caring for Country across the entire waterscape.

Phase 4 will occur in perpetuity through the ongoing healing and caring for country.

A 100-year vision

“The Corop Wetlands is a healthy and thriving cultural waterscape that supports and sustains all beings. The waterscape is governed through right- way decision making founded on collaborative partnerships, partnering principles, and trusting and reciprocal relationships. This enables us to act together on Cultural obligations to care for Country and ensure that all practices applied within the waterscape are consistent with healing and caring for Country.”

“We will read Country together so that we can start to heal and care for the Corop Wetlands Cultural Waterscape. We will adopt the partnering principles to engage across the institutional systems which determine how the waterscape is managed now and invite others to collaborate with us. Along the way, we will build right- way decision making and carry out actions to serve the 100-year vision.”

Key learnings

This program has shown what is possible when partners and community walk together with Taungurung to develop conditions that support health and care for Country.

The pilot nature of this work means learnings will continue to inform progress as new ways of working are tested.

Key learnings so far include:

- development of collaborative governance arrangements that provide for equitable participation in decision making
- support from government agencies in providing an authorising environment and sufficient funding
- co-design of the process with partners to build understanding and buy-in for the future
- opportunity to develop methodologies for collaborative planning and a two-worlds approach to management
- while there will be immediate benefits change and restoration of health and Country will take time.

Specific recommendations

Specifically, we seek:

1. With reference to the Cultural Landscape Strategy (CLS) as public policy (launched by the Minister for Environment and Climate Change in August 2021); we seek the Minister's authority to designate all the State Forests within the Central Highlands RFA (Regional Forest Agreement) region that falls on Taungurung Country for activation as Cultural Reserves under collaborative management, according to the framework outlined in the Cultural Landscape Strategy (see CLS: p46). This will be activated upon the advice of Taungurung Land and Waters Council to DEECA (and to the Minister for the Environment in the interim while the Public Land legislation is being prepared) and will be provided by TLaWC when resourcing and Nation capacity exists for each state forest and for the collective of state forests within the landscape, respectively.

Specific arrangements for management, planning and governance for each reserve (e.g., whether DEECA management, joint management, direct management or sole management) will be negotiated with partners based on information revealed through Reading Country (including a Country Speaks Statement), together with scientific data and analysis. This will ensure that conditions are being created to meet the needs of Country at that time and place. We will also seek to ensure consistency with the strategic objectives and shared vision for the cultural landscape.

- We refer to the framework outlined in the Cultural Landscapes Strategy (see CLS: p46) and the Eminent Panel phase 1 report (August 2022). Strathbogie Ranges State Forest has been identified by the Eminent Panel as a Cultural Reserve for the development of new governance, planning and management arrangements for state forests within the Yawang (Stone Country) cultural landscape. We seek authority to immediately extend these arrangements for Tallarook State Forest, to be activated once sufficient resourcing and Nation capacity exist. We also seek to extend the arrangements to Mount Wombat-Garden Range Nature Conservation Reserve, which is a Reserve within the Yawang landscape that is under Aboriginal Title and currently managed by Parks Victoria. We seek enabling of Direct Management rights consistent with new arrangements for Joint Management of Parks and Reserves in the Public Land bill. To be activated once sufficient resourcing and Nation capacity exists

2. Nun nun tun (Greater Cathedrals Cultural Landscape) has been identified as central to Taungurung rights and interests. We seek authority to activate Nun nun tun as a cultural landscape for development, and to extend new governance, planning and management arrangements for state forests as Cultural Reserves within the Greater Cathedrals Cultural Landscape, once sufficient resourcing and Nation capacity exists. We also seek to extend the arrangements to Parks and Reserves within the landscape that currently managed by Parks Victoria. We seek enabling of Direct Management rights consistent with new arrangements for Joint Management of Parks and Reserves in the Public Land bill. To be activated once sufficient resourcing and Nation capacity exists²³.
3. Debera Biik Cultural Landscape has also been identified as central to Taungurung rights and interests. We seek authority to activate Debera Biik Cultural Landscape as a cultural landscape for development, and to immediately extend new governance, planning and management arrangements for state forests as Cultural Reserves within the Debera Biik Cultural Landscape, once resourcing and Nation capacity exists. We also seek to extend the arrangements to Parks and Reserves within the landscape that currently managed by Parks Victoria. We seek enabling of Direct Management rights consistent with new arrangements for Joint Management of Parks and Reserves in the Public Land bill. To be activated once sufficient resourcing and Nation capacity exists⁸.

Regarding strengthening of resourcing and partnership capacity:

4. In the interim, operational funding held by existing public land managers be incorporated into a regional governance arrangement (DEECA Hume Regional Director, Hume DCFO, DEECA Director Forest Policy and TLaWC CEO) and allocated in partnership to support a multi-generational transition to new governance, planning and management arrangements for public land.

²³ New arrangements include inclusion in the Public Land Act of a clear process to re-categorise public land that is in another public land category to Cultural Reserve

Additional requirements if new National Parks are created:

5. All Public Land categories can be re-gazetted as Cultural Reserve, in a process defined in the Public Land Act.
6. All Public Land categories are to be managed consistently with the management purposes of a Cultural Reserve. The Public Land Act therefore places primacy on the management purposes for Cultural Reserve in all Public Land categories (including National Parks).
7. National Park Regulations are amended to support exemptions to culturally informed active, adaptive management. This is expressed through a both worlds approach to management, with Traditional Owner cultural practices being applied and braided with conservation practices.
8. Additional requirements if conservation covenants exist or are created:
9. The covenant deed and its management plan support exemptions to active, adaptive management.
10. Covenants remain eligible for National Reserve System inclusion.
11. A new management plan template is developed that supports protection and enhancement of biocultural values.

Table 3 – Trajectory of change

Phase (100-year timeframe)			
Theme	Now	Transition Phase (activated once Nation capacity; an authorising environment and sufficient resourcing for pilots exists)	Enduring arrangements (activated once Nation capacity; enabling legal, policy and institutional arrangements and sufficient ongoing resourcing exists)
Planning	Tallarook State Forest; Big River State Forest; Toolangi State Forest; Mt Disappointment State Forest; Mt Robertson State Forest; Waring State Forest; private land parcels; Cathedral Range State Park; Kinglake National Park; Lake Eildon National Park	Incorporation of Tallarook State Forest in Cultural Landscape Overlay for Yawang (Stone Country). Activation of Tallarook SF as a Cultural Reserve Incorporation of other State Forests, Parks and Reserves in cultural landscape overlays, with Direct Management arrangements, once Nation Capacity and resourcing exists	Cultural Reserves for each State Forest asset, under Direct Management (collaborative planning process). Cultural Reserve Management Plan. Cultural Landscape Overlay. Cultural Landscape Management Plan. Direct Management arrangements for Parks and Reserves (Joint Management Plan prepared by agreement) ²⁴
Management	Protections on commercial timber harvesting implemented through Immediate Protected Area designation for sites within Rubicon State Forest, Toolangi State Forest and Marysville State Forest.	Continue existing DEECA role and functions: forest roading, forest compliance and fire & emergency management. Support recreation and tourism opportunities (where consistent with healing and caring for Country). Consider application of IUCN Category 5 and 6 Protected Areas, for the reserve and landscape, respectively (consistent with the Indigenous Protected Area program). Enable active, adaptive management to heal Country, using a both worlds approach. DEECA contracted by TLaWC for land management functions in transition phase, as described in a Transition Plan	Continue to support forest and fire management until Country is healed. Support recreation, tourism and other economic development opportunities (where consistent with healing and caring for Country). Consider cultural covenants and/or credits with support of private landowners. Embed Indigenous management practices to care for Country.
Governance	DEECA (Parks Victoria for Parks and Reserves)	TLaWC appointed Committee of Management of public land. Development and establishment of Collaborative Governance. Regional and statewide governance arrangements with DEECA, through a Transition Task Force.	Collaborative management (including sole management) of public land. Collaborative Governance of Cultural Landscape.

²⁴ New arrangements include inclusion in the Public Land Act of a clear process to re-categorise public land that is in another public land category to Cultural Reserve.

9.2 Bunurong

The Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation (BLCAC) supports the establishment of cultural reserves on Bunurong Country in the Central Highlands. This will provide the Bunurong community with access to natural resources essential for the continuation of their cultural practices.

The Bunurong people have a deep connection to the land and sea, a relationship that is integral to our identity, history, and way of life. The ability to access traditional resources is not only a matter of cultural significance but also a vital aspect of their right to self-determination and the preservation of their cultural heritage. The creation of these cultural reserves would ensure that the Bunurong community can sustainably manage and utilize these resources in a manner that aligns with their traditional knowledge and practices.

A cultural reserve is a space that is managed in alignment with Bunurong and First Peoples knowledge and practices, reflecting the deep connection between people, communities and country. Establishing cultural reserves would offer numerous benefits, including the preservation of endangered cultural practices, the revitalization of traditional knowledge, and the enhancement of biodiversity through the maintenance of indigenous land management techniques. The Bunurong community has long been at the forefront of advocating for the protection and recognition of their cultural rights. By supporting the establishment of these cultural reserves, we are taking a crucial step toward honouring our contributions and ensuring that our cultural practices continue to thrive for generations to come.

The establishment of Cultural Reserves for the Bunurong community would protect vital cultural resources and demonstrate our shared dedication to the preservation of Bunurong heritage and the environment.

Pathway for establishing cultural reserves on Bunurong Country in the Central Highlands.

Currently the Tonimbuk and Beenak State forests within the Central Highlands exist on Bunurong Country. The Bunurong community has identified a pathway and framework for establishing cultural reserves in these State forest areas:

- undertake a biocultural assessment of Country in these forests to inform further understanding and knowledge of Country. This would require funding to support completion by December 2025
- undertake a feasibility study focussed on climate adaptive repurposing and identifying social and economic mutual opportunities and benefits through collaborating and working with local communities including local government. Identify usage limitations within the planning scheme and legality requirements
- from the feasibility study, develop an agreed plan for progressing social and economic opportunities including the development of a 'climate adaptive cultural economic business plan', directing future management of the forests and a timeline for agreed action. This would require funding to support this action to completed by December 2025

When ready, begin resourcing for infrastructure and staffing to enable the BLCAC to manage cultural reserves and enable culturally and economically based practices to be trialled as pilot at these two State forests.

9.3 Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung

We, the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung, the First People, belong to this Country. This Country is part of us as we are a part of Country.

Country is alive, has a heart, a spirit and is part of our Dreaming. We have lived with and known Country since the beginning.

Bunjil, the great Eagle, the Creator spirit, made the land, the sky, the sea, the rivers, flora and fauna, the lore. He made Kulin from the earth. Bunjil gave Waa, the crow, the responsibility of Protector. Bunjil's brother, Palliyang, the Bat, created Bagarook, women, from the water and the land.

Since our beginning it has been known that we have an obligation to keep Country alive and healthy — for all generations to come.

The Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people of the Eastern Kulin Nation are the Traditional Custodians of a large area in central-southern Victoria that includes much of Greater Melbourne and environs. Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country extends from the Werribee River in the west, north to the Great Dividing Range and beyond, east to Mount Baw Baw in the Australian Alps and south to Mordialloc Creek. We take our name from the Woi-wurrung language word “wurun” meaning the Manna Gum (*Eucalyptus viminalis*) which is common along “Birrarrung” (Yarra River), and “djeri” the grub which is found in or near the tree. Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people are the “Manna Gum People.” Our Ancestors have lived on this land for more than 65,000 years and are part of the oldest continuing living culture in the world.

The Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation (WWCHAC) represents the descendants of the Woi-wurrung speaking local descent groups who inhabited traditional Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country for many thousands of years. These include the *Wurundjeri-balluk*; *Gunung-willam-balluk*; *Kurung-jang balluk*; *Ngaruk-willam*; *Balluk-willam*; *Marin-balluk*; and the *Wurundjeri-willam*.

We, the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people have created this statement to recognise our birth rights, continuing unbroken connections to Country, and our obligations to care for Country. Country is the physical world, land, sky, water, earth, all present and past life, spirit world through Dreamtime and connection with Ancestors, knowledge, story, dance and lore. Country is interconnected and holistic.

For Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people, connection to Country is expressed within the notion that caring for Country is a generationally conferred law from the Ancestors, spoken of as Bunjil's law. For the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung community today, caring for Country is carrying out our responsibilities of cultural heritage protection and natural resource management; respecting the creation Ancestors and totemic or spiritual beings which underpin traditional laws and beliefs; and preserving the natural environment that provides a relief from the city and suburbs now consuming much of our traditional homelands.

We aim to inform the Victorian Government, ‘the Government’, of our expectations so we can work together as partners and provide a greater understanding of our rights and responsibilities for Country. This statement represents the position of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Corporation that represents the interests of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung community, and it should be recognised that the views expressed may change as information, recognition, and directions are developed.

At the core of this statement is the unwavering assertion that our sovereignty has never been ceded. Land was forcefully taken from us and our neighbours nearly 200 years ago and has been retained by the state through physical, structural and legislative barriers. Our people's cultural practices have been impacted but never extinguished. The physical and cultural displacement caused by colonisation continue to impact us as a community but our spiritual connection with our Country remains ever present.

Central Highlands investigation area is being conducted on the traditional Country of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people. The Government engages with us based on state-determined Registered Aboriginal Party (RAP) boundaries. Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people continue to assert our rights and cultural responsibilities to the entirety of our traditional Country.

The purpose of this statement is to determine and outline our objectives for Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country within the Central Highlands Eminent Panel for Community Engagement investigation area and has been developed through partnership with Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Elders, community and Wurundjeri Corporation staff. We expect that this statement be genuinely understood and acknowledged by the Government as an essential part of this report.

Since colonisation, our forest Country has been mismanaged through logging, inappropriate fire practice, and poor land management. The Wurundjeri Corporation welcomed the cessation of native timber harvesting on 1 January 2024 and are committed to working towards healing Country.

Historically, Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people's rights to the management of Country have been excluded from legislation, planning processes, policies, and programs. These rights and obligations have never been surrendered, and they are yet to be protected through treaties. Our rights and responsibilities to care for Country must be returned and respected first and foremost – this is a foundational element of the reconciliation process. Legislation, systems, and processes must establish the necessary mechanisms to overcome the barriers we face in accessing Country and maintaining our cultural rights and access to resources on Country. As the sovereign custodians of our Country, we seek genuine commitment from the Government that enable our cultural practices, our ability to reconnect to places we have been removed from and the reestablishment of our rightful role as managers and healers of Country.

For more than 65,000 years Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people have maintained custodianship and management of our Country, with the knowledge that healthy Country is vital for healthy people. For Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people Country is our mother and we have obligations to care for her.

Today, Country is sick. This is the legacy of our dispossession from parts of Country, and in turn the exclusion of our management practices. Exploitative forest resource practices and inappropriate management of protected areas have compounded this. Irrelevant of the tenure, damage or changes to Country, the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung connection remains.

If Country is sick, people are sick. As Traditional Custodians, Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people assert our rights and objectives to access our Country and embark on the process of healing Country. To do this, Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people seek the opportunity to access and read Country, so we can identify where and how to heal our Country and apply cultural and land management practices.

Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country contains cultural heritage places and Cultural Values that are a record of Country and the activities of our Ancestors. Cultural sites and places on traditional Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country link contemporary people and our Ancestors, who cared for those places over millennia. Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people retain our custodianship over our cultural landscape.

Aboriginal Places and areas of land under the custodianship of Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people have a special significance and all Aboriginal Places in the activity area are considered to share this cultural significance. Forests within the Central Highlands area hold particular significance due to the establishment and operation of the Coranderrk Aboriginal Mission in Healesville. Coranderrk was home to many of our people and Ancestors in the 19th and 20th centuries, including highly respected Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung ngurungaeta (leaders) Simon Wonga and William Barak. Aboriginal Places such as Coranderrk Aboriginal Mission form part of the tangible cultural heritage of the area, but there are also intangible cultural values and strong feelings of connection. These are but one part of an ongoing connection between our people and the broader Central Highlands Forest area.

Many Aboriginal Places in the greater Melbourne area have been destroyed by land clearance and land use practices in the historic period that continues to this day. As a result, all Aboriginal Places in the greater Melbourne region are a diminishing resource and we feel strongly that these should all be protected.

“All forests across Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country are significant, including flora, fauna, and sites associated with them. Forests are cultural links to the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people of the past and present. Development from the period of European contact in Australia onwards has resulted in the destruction of around 80% of Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Aboriginal cultural heritage, and it is vital that the biodiversity and heritage values of the Central Highlands forests are investigated and protected wherever possible.”

(Allan Wandin, Ron Jones, and Bobby Mullins (Cultural Heritage Unit Elders))

300 registered Aboriginal Places are currently recognised within the state forests, state parks, and national parks of the Victorian Central Highlands. Of these, more than 80 per cent include scatters of stone artefacts, and culturally modified trees comprise most of the remaining registered Aboriginal Places. A boomerang has been identified within the section of the Central Highlands that lies within the former boundary of Coranderrk Aboriginal Mission. This represents a vital point of reconnection to the lives of Aboriginal Ancestors at Coranderrk. Alongside the culturally modified trees found within the Central Highlands, the forests serve as resting places for culturally modified trees relocated from across Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country and serve as reminders of the widespread destruction of Country.

Further investigations into the Aboriginal cultural heritage of the Victorian Central Highlands forests may mirror the findings outlined above, however, vast areas within remain undeveloped, and as such, little is known about them. Extensive ground surveys could identify areas of archaeological potential within the Victorian Central Highlands, knowledge that could subsequently be applied to develop predictive models and define areas of cultural heritage sensitivity.

Most of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung RAP area has been, or is being, developed. The Central Highlands forests, however, represent relatively intact areas of Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung biodiversity, activity traces, and Cultural Values that must be further preserved, managed, and protected. The known and unknown cultural heritage of the Central Highlands is an integral part of Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung identities and history, and a deeper understanding of this heritage is essential.

For the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung community there is

no separation between “nature” and “culture”- the natural world is a cultural world, therefore, the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people have a special interest in preserving not just our cultural objects, but the natural landscapes of cultural importance. The acknowledgement of broader attributes of the landscape as Cultural Values that require protection (encompassing, among other things, a variety of landforms, ecological niches, and habitats as well as continuing cultural practices) is essential to the identity and wellbeing of Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people. For a holistic approach to assessing a landscape for Aboriginal heritage potential, it is imperative to conduct archaeological investigations and to ascertain cultural perceptions of the landscape or Places held by Aboriginal people. There has not been the opportunity to record the specific Aboriginal Cultural Values of the Central Highlands Forest area, therefore, the statement below is a general statement of cultural significance for the Central Highlands Forest area:

For Aboriginal people, there are many kinds of Cultural Values associated with the landscapes that were once lived in by our Ancestors who knew how to look after Country. These include the tangible values normally recorded during archaeological investigations, such as artefact scatters and scarred trees, or other places discovered in the area known as the Central Highlands Forest. These places are physical reminders of the cultural lives of our Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Ancestors and a special connection therefore exists between those places and contemporary Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people.

This special connection underpins the high significance of these places. There are other values that the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people connect to in landscapes including the waterways, stony rises, mountain ranges, land, and vegetation. These provided a resource base given by Bunjil including food, fibre, medicine, and tools, and possibly stone quarries for traditional Woi-wurrung speaking people. The natural values, such as remnant vegetation, eucalypts, Austral Grass trees (*Xanthorrhoea australis*), and the landscape views from the activity area are all integral to the cultural landscape in which Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Ancestors lived for many thousands of years. These landscape characteristics are therefore significant in accordance with Aboriginal tradition. Best practice heritage management, in terms of avoidance of harm to cultural heritage and, where harm cannot be avoided, proper management of the disturbance of those values, and the protection and revitalisation of those values is integral in the management of these significant cultural places.

Recommendation

Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people must be provided the necessary time and resources to access and read Country

Due to the ongoing impacts of colonisation, Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people's rights to manage Country have been excluded from legislation, planning processes, policies, and programs. These rights and obligations have never been ceded or forfeited, and they are yet to be protected through treaties. Our rights and responsibilities to care for Country must be returned and respected first and foremost. As Traditional Owners and custodians of Country we assert our right as decision-makers on matters impacting our Country and seek to be engaged by all levels of Government.

We assert our rights, as Traditional Owners, to lead decision-making on our Country and will work to support this approach in partnership through self-determining processes. These rights have never been ceded and extend to the cultural, spiritual, environmental, social, and economic uses of Country in previous and future contexts.

To enable our Elders and community to make informed decisions about the future management of our Country, including forests, waterways, stony rises, mountain ranges land and vegetation, Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people are seeking support to undertake a Reading Country assessment of the areas proposed in the Central Highlands Investigation. This project will afford our community the opportunity to access and assess areas of our Country that we have been unable to access under previous and existing legislation. This project will enable the principle of self-determination and Free and Prior Informed Consent that will inform decisions for future management of these areas. Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people and the Wurundjeri Corporation are seeking a commitment from the Government to provide the necessary resourcing and time to undertake this assessment.

Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung community sees many opportunities to educate and share knowledge with the broader community, particularly regarding our people's connection with Country. Efforts to bridge the gap in knowledge between First Nations and non-Indigenous people will move us towards reconciliation and a shared understanding of our people's connection to Country, our cultural practices, and the impacts we continue to face from colonisation and the dispossession of land, language, and Culture.

Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people acknowledge that our forest Country is valued and used by the broader community in a variety of ways. We acknowledge that these close connections have developed since colonisation, and we wish to harness this value and collaboratively. With this shared connection comes shared responsibility for all people and communities (including every level of government) to support, collaborate, and take pride in contributing to the health of Country. There are opportunities to apply Western and community science alongside our cultural knowledge and protocols to improve the health of Country, and in turn to provide benefits and values for all future generations of people. Through our Reading Country assessment we will consider the values and connections the broader community have established with our forest Country and the importance of collaboration in healthy Country management.

Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people seek to be embedded as active partners in all land management planning processes and reserve the right to assume management responsibilities for Country at the time and under arrangements determined by us. Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Elders and community express the prevailing view that this should apply to all existing State and National Parks and Reserves within the Central Highlands investigation area, and across all Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country.

10. CONCLUSIONS

This report, produced by the Eminent Panel for Community Engagement, has drawn on the knowledge, experience and interest of many people. It reflects the importance a diverse range of organisations and individuals place on the special characteristics and uniqueness of these forests.

Importantly it identifies the need to capture and capitalise on the recognition that there are diverse views, perspectives and knowledge that could with the right conditions bring people together to collaborate and work on a shared understanding for contributing to future for these forests.

The Panel has partnered with Traditional Owners to understand and represent the importance of cultural landscapes within and across the Central Highlands and consider this within its recommendations. Importantly this work has led to discussion and thinking about pathways for change and collaboration as part of this.

The Panel set out to talk directly with as many people and organisations as possible at a broad and local level to understand what is important about the forests, and challenges and opportunities for the future. In particular, the Panel sought to understand the range of activities undertaken in these forests from recreation to research, the environmental and biocultural values and the economic benefits. Through visits to local communities and meetings with peak bodies and local organisations and groups the Panel spoke with over 1,200 people with input from over 18,000 responses via the Engage Victoria website.

It also examined and considered reports provided to the Panel including the VEAC 2023 Values Assessment, current policy and land management practices over time and potential changes required to manage a range of factors for future sustainability.

Through analysis of the comprehensive information available to the Panel, a number of themes emerged, included in the report as part of the recommendations made.

Following learning from stage 1 of the Panels' work in The Strathbogie Ranges and Mirboo North, one of the important decisions undertaken by the Panel was to examine particular places across the Central Highlands to understand the context and more detailed information regarding these locations. The state forests were grouped according to cultural landscapes and local community locations. Specific spatial information including recreation sites, biocultural and environmental values, forest disturbance e.g. fire history, and engagement findings were analysed for each of the 11 groupings.

Recommendations have been made on both theme level and location level analysis and findings.

This Report has recognised the importance of understanding the past and the potential of the Central Highlands for future generations of people to enjoy, benefit from and care for, and for what might need to be done differently to achieve this.

11. GLOSSARY

BLCAC – Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation. BLCAC was registered on 30 June 2000 as the Registered Aboriginal Party that represents the Bunurong language group area. BLCAC provides cultural heritage advice in accordance with the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006 and the Aboriginal Heritage Regulations 2018.

braiding of knowledge – braiding refers to the bringing together of multiple ways of knowing in a respectful way that does not interfere with the qualities and processes of each other knowledge system.

DEECA – Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action. Previously the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP). DEECA is a government department in Victoria. It is responsible for various matters related to the environment, energy and climate action.

EVC – Ecological Vegetation Classes. Are the standard unit for classifying vegetation types in Victoria. EVCs are grouped based upon floristic, structural and ecological features.

FMZ – Forest Management Zoning. A commonly used land management tool that spatially describes permitted uses and priorities for certain areas. There are three different zones under the FMZS, Special Protection Zones (SPZs), Special Management Zones (SMZs), General Management Zones (GMZs). Each zone has defined management priorities and permitted use.

GLaWAC – Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation. Registered on 23 May 2008 as the Registered Aboriginal Party that represents the Gunaikurnai people under the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006. GLaWAC is legally recognised by the Federal Court of Australia under the Commonwealth Native Title Act 1993. GLaWAC consented that these powers were transferred to the State to enter into a Recognition Settlement Agreement (RSA) under the Traditional Owner Settlement Act 2010.

IPA – Immediate Protection Areas, areas of state forest protected from timber harvesting in the 2019 Victorian Forestry Plan.

IUCN – International Union for Conservation of Nature. An international organization working in the field of nature conservation and sustainable use of natural resources. The IUCN developed a global framework for categorising the variety of protected area management types.

LDS – Local Development Strategies, are Victorian Government supported initiatives to support communities and industry through the forestry transition. There are currently 11 communities across Victoria undertaking local development strategies.

OCR – Office of the Conservation Regulator. Responsible for the regulation of fire prevention, use of public land, wildlife and biodiversity.

RFA – Regional Forest Agreement. The Central Highlands RFA area relates to the boundary of the RFA that was first described in the 1990s when a comprehensive assessment of the forest area was undertaken to support development of RFAs, an agreement between the Victorian and Australian governments that provided framework for the sustainable management of the forests in the Central Highlands RFA region.

TLaWC – Taungurung Land and Waters Council. Registered on 16 July 2009 as the Registered Aboriginal Party that represents the interests of the Taungurung people under the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006. TLaWC is the corporate representative and ‘face’ of the Taungurung people and serves to uphold their interests with respect to culture and country.

VEAC – Victorian Environmental Assessment Council. The Council is established under the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council Act 2001 to provide independent and strategic advice to the Victorian Government relating to the protection and ecologically sustainable management of public land. For the Central Highlands process, VEAC conducted an assessment of forest values that informed the work of the Eminent Panel for Community Engagement.

WWWCHAC – Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation. On 22 August 2008 Wurundjeri Council were appointed as the Registered Aboriginal Party that represent the Wurundjeri people.





Eminent Panel for Community Engagement