



Acknowledgment

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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Acknowledgements

The Eminent Panel for Community Engagement acknowledges the contributions and is thankful of everyone who contributed. This includes all who have participated through community engagement sessions, meetings On Country and with peak bodies, and the Engage Victoria website. The Panel is thankful for the time and insights provided by current land managers and government agencies. The Panel also thanks Mosaic Lab and staff for their support in preparation of engagement and engagement reports.

Photo credits

Front cover image: Tall Forest of the Strathbogie Ranges. Credit: $\ensuremath{\mathsf{DELWP}}$

Back cover image: Strathbogie Ranges Forests. Credit: C. Gottgens

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1. FOREWORD

The Eminent Panel for Community Engagement (the Panel) has been appointed by the Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change, the Hon Lily D'Ambrosio MP, to provide independent advice and recommendations on the future uses of state forest in eastern Victoria.

The Panel is pleased to present this report and the recommendations within it for the Immediate Protection Areas (IPAs) of Mirboo North and the Strathbogie Ranges.

The Panel has, through its Terms of Reference, carefully considered its findings and recommendations based on a wide range of evidence.

The Panel has considered the needs of Traditional Owners for Country in each location and advice received from the Victorian Environment Assessment Council (VEAC) 'Assessment of Values' reports for each location. Included in the VEAC reports are individual biocultural values assessments from both Taungurung and Gunaikurnai Traditional Owner organisations.

The Panel has taken care and time to understand knowledge gained through a wide range of engagements and conversations with community groups, individuals and agencies in both Mirboo North and the Strathbogie Ranges district and in particular 'what matters to people regarding these newly protected forests'.

Advice and comments through discussions with peak bodies and current land managers has also been important to build the picture of what is required for the future of these forests.

The Panel's partnership with Traditional Owners and VEAC through direct membership on the Panel has been important to ensuring the recommendations in this report reflect the appropriate requirements for the future health of, and activities in, these forests for current and future generations to appreciate and enjoy.

Through these engagements it is clear to the Panel the significance and importance of these forests for Traditional Owners, local communities, and the wider community. People value these forests for a wide range of reasons. What is also clear to the Panel is how the protection of these forests must be commensurate with the significance of these areas and the natural values present.

The Panel recognises and appreciates the support provided by the many people who have contributed time, knowledge, expertise and passion in assisting this report to be written in the best interests of the forests involved and the communities of Victoria.



Photo: Panel members for Strathbogie Ranges IPA Mellissa Wood, Nicola Pero, Karen Cain and Mike Nurse. Credit: DELWP



Photo: Panel members for Mirboo North IPA Nicola Pero, Karen Cain, Mellissa Wood and Lisa Hocking. Credit: DELWP



FUTURE USE AND MANAGEMENT OF MIRBOO NORTH AND STRATHBOGIE RANGES IMMEDIATE PROTECTION AREAS RECOMMENDATIONS OF EMINENT PANEL FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT - FINAL REPORT

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Eminent Panel for Community Engagement (the Panel) has been established to provide recommendations on the public land category of the Immediate Protection Areas (IPAs) and future management and use of State forests in eastern Victoria.

In undertaking its work, the Panel has considered the needs of Traditional Owners for Country in each location, considered advice received from the Victorian Environment Assessment Council (VEAC) assessments of values, including biocultural assessments conducted by Traditional Owner organisations, and conducted direct engagement with the Victorian community.

Through April to May 2022, the Panel conducted face to face engagement with local communities; consulted with peak body stakeholders; and undertook a state-wide Engage Victoria program. The Panel was guided by its Strategic Engagement Plan, and supported by engagement consultant Mosaic Lab, to deliver an extensive consultation program:

- Strathbogie Ranges IPA: over 580 engagements across 21 targeted sessions held with community groups, local land holders and local councils; four drop-in sessions with over 25 participants
- Mirboo North IPA: over 470 engagements across 28 targeted sessions were held with community groups, local land holders and local council: four drop-in sessions with over 115 participants
- Engage Victoria: over 8000 page views, with 717 responses received, including 479 map pin responses received
- Peak bodies: 12 meetings spanning conservation, recreation, Traditional Owner interests
- Consultations were also undertaken with land management agencies

Key themes arising from the Panels engagement included:

- Broad support for Traditional Owners to lead managing Country
- Strong support for the future protection of the forests
- Community action and further engagement
- Current management of the IPAs
- Current and future recreational and other activities
- Private landholders and connection to the IPAs
- Economic and local development opportunities

The Panel, through its Terms of Reference for the Mirboo North and Strathbogie Ranges IPAs and its partnership and engagement work over six months, identified an important opportunity and willingness for collaboration amongst people connected to these sites for the future (Panel's Terms of Reference available at Appendix 1).

Good evidence exists to support Traditional Owners, land managers, volunteers, community organisations, local government, researchers both local and beyond and people who engage with these important sites, working together on planning, shared management, and activities. What is required is time and support for the development of this approach in the two locations and demonstrate the benefit for people, their communities and the environment, and a better way of working together.

A key challenge for the Panel has been to consider recommendations which are fit for purpose, contemporary and aligned to the future of the public land management framework yet provide for the most effective pathway for designating new or amended reservation status and management arrangements under existing legislation. As such, the Panel is proposing a pilot approach in some instances, with interim recommendations to government as a pathway to more enduring outcomes which will come with the proposed public land legislative reforms.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MIRBOO NORTH IPA

Public land category, activities and uses

The Mirboo North IPA along with the adjoining Mirboo North Regional Park and Lyrebird Walk are significant forests. This includes for the threatened species supported by them, Gunaikurnai Traditional Owners and local Mirboo North community. The establishment of an IPA for this forest, providing protection from native timber harvesting, represents significant efforts by local community members and groups to advocate for their local forest.

Considering the future use and management of the Mirboo North IPA, it was clear the local community values this forest area and are seeking that the forest continues to support balanced use along with greater conservation protection. This includes maintaining a wide range of activities that are currently legally permitted, such as hiking and trail bike riding on formed roads and tracks. The Panel, in considering the additional information it has collected through Traditional Owner partnership and extensive community engagement, considers there is a need to enhance the protections and management of the values within this forest.

Recommendation 1

Recommend that the Mirboo North IPA be managed in accordance with a Conservation Park public land category and uses associated with this category.



Photo: Mirboo North IPA forests. Credit: DELWP

Connectivity

Through its engagement, the Panel heard from species experts and naturalists that the forest is supporting higher than usual levels of species and that expanding protections throughout the region is critical to maintain and enhance biodiversity. The Panel is aware the Victorian Government has agreed to VEAC undertaking an investigation of the wider Strzelecki Ranges prior to 2028. This includes considering areas of remnant vegetation within softwood plantation areas, known as the 'Cores and Links' project. The Panel recommends that the Victorian Government prioritise investigation into enhanced landscape connectivity throughout the Strzelecki Ranges.

Recommendation 2

Recommend that the Victorian Government prioritise investigation into enhanced landscape connectivity throughout the Strzelecki Ranges. This includes assessment of adjoining Regional Park for inclusion as part of a larger Conservation Park

Traditional Owner Partnerships and community collaboration

The Panel heard strong support for Gunaikurnai management of Country. There is a desire to respect, learn and understand how Gunaikurnai managed Country and what this might look like going forward. In line with Gunaikurnai's interests for this forest and Country more generally, the Panel recommends the Victorian Government support Gunaikurnai joint management of the Mirboo North IPA, should Gunaikurnai wish to pursue these arrangements in the short or longer term.

Recommendation 3

Recommend that the Victorian Government support Gunaikurnai joint management of the Mirboo North IPA and surrounding public forests including cultural overlays, should Gunaikurnai wish to pursue these arrangements in the short or longer term. This includes consideration of a Committee of Management function under the joint agreement arrangements (e.g., joint management of the Knob Reserve).

The Panel considers an opportunity exists for the community to come together, building on their good work so far, to enhance community partnerships and drive effective future use and management of this forest. This includes enhanced collaboration between the Land Manager, Gunaikurnai Traditional Owners, and local community, determining agreed priorities for the management of the forest, to guide community use and contribution. This includes two-way education and knowledge sharing, which is seen as a foundation for collaboration.

Recommendation 4

Recommend the appointed Land Manager with GLaWAC co-design and establish an interim community joint working group, that would form the basis for a future committee of management under a Joint Management arrangement between GLaWAC and Parks Victoria. The interim working group will:

- a. inform development of a comprehensive management plan to direct the balanced use and management of the Mirboo North Immediate Protection Area
- b. use the principles of collaborative governance in its design and operation.

In partnering with Gunaikurnai through this process the Panel has heard of opportunities to support reconnection to and management of Country by Gunaikurnai for this forest. As identified in the GLaWAC values report, the Strzelecki Ranges have not been well surveyed for Traditional Owner cultural heritage values, tangible or intangible, but the area is of high significance. This collation of values is considered an important step in preparing for future management and use of the Mirboo North IPA.

Recommendation 5

Recommend that funding be provided to GLaWAC to complete a Reading Country assessment to reconnect with Country and further understand context and cultural priorities for the Mirboo North IPA and adjoining public forests.

Enhanced resourcing for on-ground land management and co-ordination

For future management objectives of the Mirboo North IPA to be successful, management arrangements need to be suitably resourced. The Panel noted many stakeholders and community groups indicated strong support for a local land manager presence in Mirboo North. This includes as a point of contact for community members, understanding local matters, and being on-location to respond to local concerns. This role is seen as critical to developing the long-term relationships required to establish a changed management approach and drive collaborative management of the IPA.

Long term sustainable funding is required to support the new governance, planning and management model and deliver active forest management and supporting infrastructure at a level commensurate with contemporary policy and community expectations.



Photo: Mirboo North IPA forests. Credit: DELWP

Recommendation 6

Recommend adequate resources be provided to support:

- a. governance and facilitation by the Land Manager and Gunaikurnai
- b. a dedicated local Land Manager staff member
- c. a Gunaikurnai Ranger
- d. a locally based position to build on current engagement, coordinate and support the committee of management.

Recommendation 7

Recommend that sufficient funding be provided to the Land Manager to deliver comprehensive land management in accordance with the proposed land category and new management model.

Additional considerations of the Panel - threatened species

There are records of koalas in the IPA and across the Strzelecki Ranges. As noted in VEAC's report, though not currently identified as a threatened species in Victoria, the koala population of South Gippsland is of special interest because it has much more genetic diversity than all other Victorian koala populations. The Strzelecki koala (or koala generally) is not protected in Victoria's statutory conservation documents. The Panel has heard that this framework lacks the ability to consider the genetic significance of species, such as the koala.

Recommendation 8

Recommend that an assessment of the status of the Strzelecki koala takes place, to inform recognition of the Strzelecki koala as a distinct genetic unit within the Victorian conservation framework, including future management actions and conservation advice.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRATHBOGIE RANGES IPA

Protection of the Strathbogie Ranges IPA from timber harvesting represents immense efforts of local community members and groups. The Victorian Government's decision to cease timber harvesting reflects the importance of the IPA forests to the community and the natural values present.

Through its partnership with Taungurung, and through the Taungurung biocultural report, it is clear the vision of Taungurung is to heal and care for Country of the Strathbogie Ranges IPA. This includes management in a way that is consistent with Taungurung obligations to heal and care for Country, for the Strathbogie cultural landscape. Within local communities there was acknowledgment and support for identification of options to support Traditional Owner management of the IPA.



Photo: Rocky outcrops in Strathbogie Ranges IPA. Credit: C. Gottgens

In considering the options available within the current public land legislation framework for permanent reservation of the Strathbogie Ranges IPA, the Panel has learnt of many challenges and barriers to self-determination within this current framework. The Panel's Traditional Owner representatives have provided advice that the current public land categories available for consideration by the Panel do not fully meet the needs of these groups to heal and care for Country in a culturally appropriate way and in a way that supports self-determination.

Public land category, activities and uses

The Panel considers the Strathbogie Ranges IPA provides a timely opportunity to pilot a new approach to reserving and managing public forests that supports self-determination and healing Country, while meeting the expectations of local communities who regularly use and enjoy this important area for a range of recreation activities and who have expressed strong ambition for the future conservation of environmental values.

The Panel considers this can be achieved through appointing Taungurung as a formal land manager over the Strathbogie Ranges IPA, through an interim arrangement that pilots the concept of a new land category - Cultural Reserve. The Panel notes that, importantly, recommendations about a pilot Cultural Reserve outlined in this report relate specifically to the Strathbogie Ranges and recommends that reforms be worked through with other Traditional Owner Groups and the relevant government processes to develop an enduring statewide Cultural Reserve category.

This interim approach of a pilot Strathbogie Cultural Reserve will set the foundations for a carefully managed transition, which will see Taungurung working in partnership with the current land manager to engage local communities in management planning processes.

The need for an interim pilot arrangement

Taungurung has communicated that while governance, planning and management arrangements need to change, this will require a process of transition they want to pursue in partnership with existing public land managers and the community. These interim arrangements should therefore include collaborative governance arrangements between Taungurung, the current Land Manager (DELWP) and community.

This transition will need to take place to provide time to establish settings including the principles and practices for collaborative governance, healing and caring for Country and cultural safety.

Recommendation 1

Recommend the Strathbogie Ranges IPA be managed in accordance with the principles and purposes of a new Cultural Reserve public land category, as identified in the Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Landscapes Strategy.

Recommendation 2

Acknowledging that a Cultural Reserve public land category does not currently exist in Victoria, the Panel recommends the enduring arrangements for a Cultural Reserve are developed as part of the current renewal of Victoria's public land legislation, in partnership with all Traditional Owner Groups.

In developing its recommendations, the Panel has considered:

- Recommendations made by the Panel regarding a Cultural Reserve are specific to the Strathbogie Ranges IPA area.
- It is critical in the application of a Cultural Reserve over the Strathbogie IPA that these forests are afforded a level of protection providing community surety that commercial timber harvesting has ceased, and other harmful activities are managed.

Panel proposed activities and uses under an interim pilot arrangement

Uses and activities for Cultural Reserve are not prescribed within the current public land legislation framework. The Panel has made recommendations for uses and activities to support community and user understanding of permissible activities within a Strathbogie Ranges Cultural Reserve, however, notes that further work will be required between Taungurung and local communities to identify appropriate enduring arrangements.

All permissible uses will be consistent with the management purpose: to 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. The Panel acknowledges Traditional Owner rights to take and use natural resources and that the definition of management uses and activities should not impinge on these rights nor inadvertently create barriers to the application of indigenous cultural land management practices in healing and caring for Country.

Recommendation 3

Recommend that, in the absence of a legislated Cultural Reserve land category, the Victorian Government implements a pilot approach for a Cultural Reserve for the Strathbogie Ranges IPA, as soon as practical.

This will be a process of change and transition and Taungurung want to pursue this journey in partnership with existing public land managers and the community.

The Panel recommends that this involves:

- 3.1 Enabling the following management purposes, while the Cultural Reserve category is finalised and legislated:
- 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
- b. Restore, protect and enhance cultural values associated with features, landscapes, culturally significant species, spiritual associations and kinship relationships
- c. Protect the natural and biocultural values, including biodiversity and biocultural diversity
- d. Provide for sustainable use of natural resources where consistent with the purposes above
- e. 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
- f. Provide opportunities for recreation associated with the enjoyment of nature, and education, where consistent with the purposes above.
- 3.2 Providing a suitable basis for development of sole management by the Taungurung, through the appointment of Taungurung Land & Waters Council as a Category 1 Committee of Management
- 3.3 Taungurung to work closely with the current Land Manager, and that all existing allocated management resources remain in place to support this new pilot approach
- 3.4 Appropriate resources and support are identified and provide for the existing land manager to work with Taungurung Land & Waters Council as a partner and in a culturally safe way
- 3.5 The Panel recommends applicable interim uses are above at Table 3 and again at Appendix 5. These may be further considered in development of enduring arrangements through legislation.

Taungurung to build relationships with local community and develop a collaborative management plan

Development of a contemporary management plan for the forest is essential to set clear direction for forest management and health. Taungurung will need to collaborate closely with already engaged communities as soon as practical, to build relationships in making decisions about how to heal country, support self-determination and provide guidance in this context for the undertaking of a variety of activities within the Strathbogie Ranges by community.

The Panel recommends a collaborative management planning process be initiated for completion within two years. The management plan will reflect the advice, knowledge and understanding of the local community, Taungurung Traditional Owners and land management partners.

Recommendation 4

Recommend Taungurung begin work as soon as possible to build and develop working relationships with the current land manager and local community.

This should include development of a collaborative management plan within two years, that provides guidance for managing the local needs and interests while healing and caring for Country.

This management plan should also consider the application of immediate management actions and establishing a monitoring program with community and research partners.

Resourcing for success

Resourcing is required to support transition arrangements and to set up the conditions for success.

New management, planning and collaborative governance arrangements are required to be developed during the first two years to support establishment of a Cultural Reserve and its management. This includes active management of threatening processes including pest plants and animals, establishment of infrastructure to manage visitation and use, and delivery of educational signage and information.

Recommendation 5

- 5.1 Recommend resourcing be provided to support establishment of new governance, planning and management arrangements, and active management on Country, including:
- a. funding a dedicated Executive Officer position within TLaWC to oversee the transition
- b. the establishment of collaborative governance arrangements with the Land Manager (DELWP) and the local community
- c. providing the resources required to support community engagement and management planning processes
- 5.2 The Panel recommends an uplift in ongoing funding be provided to deliver comprehensive land management commensurate with strengthening all values. This includes applying both cultural and conservation practices. This includes:
- a. the current Land Manager in partnership with Taungurung to deliver interim measures to support priority works, including to manage pest and weeds in high value areas, establish infrastructure to manage recreation use at priority sites, and establish educational signage throughout the IPAs to support visitation and informed use
- b. the current Land Manager in partnership with Taungurung to deliver enhanced compliance and enforcement to implement regulations and conduct education programs to inform users of the forest of the values of this area and to complement any change in permitted uses/activities.



PROPOSED USES APPLICABLE TO RECOMMENDED LAND CATEGORIES

The proposed uses and activities applicable to recommended land categories are listed below (Table 1). Additional explanation about uses and activities is included in the recommendations section of this report.

Table 1 – proposed permissible uses and activities for Conservation Park and Cultural Reserve and current uses and activities for State Forest

Activity	State forest (existing)	Conservation Park* (proposed)	Strathbogie Ranges Cultural Reserve** (proposed)
Bushwalking, nature observation and picnicking	Yes	Yes	Yes
Camping	Yes	Yes – in designated areas	Yes - in designated camping areas only
Car touring, including four-wheel driving on publicly available formed roads and tracks	Yes	Yes	Yes
Trail bike riding on publicly available formed roads and tracks	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mountain biking and cycling on publicly available formed roads and tracks	Yes	Yes	Yes
Horse riding on formed roads and tracks	Yes	Yes, as specified by Land Manager	Yes – unless specified by the Land Manager
Dog walking on lead	Yes	No, except as specified by Land Manager	Yes
Apiculture at licensed sites	Yes	Yes	Yes
Grazing by domestic stock	Yes	No	No - except as specified by the Land Manager
Prospecting	Yes	No	No - except as specified by the Land Manager
Recreational hunting	Yes	No	No - except as specified by the Land Manager
Timber harvesting	Yes	No	No
Domestic firewood collection	Yes, in designated areas	No	Within designated areas only
Exploration and mining	Yes	Yes, subject to National Parks Act minister's consent.	No, except where a licence predates the reserve

^{*}Conservation Park land use classification and associated uses outlined in this table may be subject to change in accordance with the outcomes of the proposed public land legislation reforms.

^{**} Strathbogie Ranges Cultural Reserve uses outlined in this table may be subject to change following management review. All permissible uses will be consistent with the management purpose: to 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. Note, that in accordance with the Panel's recommendations, 'Land Manager' in this instance refers to the relevant governance function, such as Committee of Management, responsible for Strathbogie Cultural Reserve Area.

3. INTRODUCTION

3.1 FUTURE USES OF STATE FOREST IN EASTERN VICTORIA

In November 2019, the Victorian Government announced the immediate protection of more than 96,000 hectares of high conservation value forest from commercial timber harvesting. This was announced as part of the Victorian Forestry Plan, which includes the transition out of native forest timber harvesting by 2030.

The Immediate Protection Areas (IPAs) are located across the Central Highlands, East Gippsland, Mirboo North and the Strathbogie Ranges (Figure 1). This is in addition to existing protections and brings the total area of IPA forests to more than 146,000 hectares. The creation of these IPAs is the first step in phasing out commercial timber harvesting in all native forests on public land by 2030

The IPAs will help protect the future of the Greater Glider, alongside the Leadbeater's Possum and more than 35 other threatened species. They are also important areas for water supply, connect areas of the parks and reserve network and support community enjoyment, including for recreation and nature conservation.

In August 2021, the Victorian Government announced a scientific and engagement process to determine the public land category, future use and management of the IPAs. The first phase of this process was to consider Mirboo North and Strathbogie Ranges IPAs. Central Highlands and East Gippsland IPAs would be considered later. This included:

- The Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) will identify values of the IPA and threats to these values. The Council's assessments will also consider suitable land categories aligning with these values and assess potential economic implications of proposed land use changes proposed by the Panel
- Community engagement will be undertaken by the newly established Panel to understand what the community values most about these forests
- Traditional Owners will have formal membership on the Panel.

The Panel will provide recommendations and a timeline for the government to reclassify each of the current IPAs and consider longer-term strategies for how State forests in eastern Victoria are managed with native timber harvesting ceasing in 2030.



Photo: Damp gully forest in Mirboo North IPA Forest. Credit: DELWP

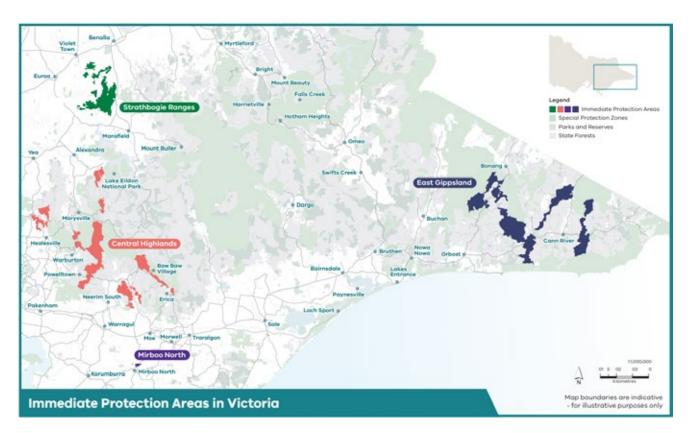


Figure 1: Location of IPAs and State Forest in eastern Victoria, Map source: DELWP

3.2 ESTABLISHMENT OF THE EMINENT PANEL FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The establishment the Panel was announced by the Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change in August 2021.

Members of the Panel appointed by the Minister include the Chair, a Traditional Owner member for each Traditional Owner Country location, and two additional members including the VEAC Chair. The Panel began its work mid-January 2022.

The Panel membership includes:

- Karen Cain, Chair
- Mellissa Wood, member; Chair of VEAC
- Nicola Pero, member; CEO Food & Fibre Gippsland
- Lisa Hocking, member; nominee of the Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation
- Mike Nurse, member; nominee of the Taungurung Land & Waters Council

The Panel is supported by a Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) Secretariat.

3.3 MIRBOO NORTH IMMEDIATE PROTECTION AREAS

The Mirboo North IPA is a small area of State Forest (approximately 440 hectares) located around 3 km north of the Mirboo North township in the Strzelecki Ranges, about 130 kilometres south east of Melbourne (Figure 2)

The Mirboo North IPA comprise areas of Strzelecki Darlimurla Block State Forest. It is approximately 420 ha in total, combining 240 ha of existing protected State Forest (Special Protection Zone).

The Strzelecki Ranges is one of the most heavily cleared bioregions in Victoria retaining less than one third of the original extent of native vegetation and one of the lowest proportions in the protected area system at 1.5 per cent. Much of the surrounding landscape is used for agriculture.

The IPA is surrounded by forested public land, including:

- The four forested blocks that make up the Mirboo Regional Park
- Several softwood plantations and some small blocks of State Forest
- Further afield are the Mount Worth State Park, the Brataualung Forest Park and the Tarra-Bulga National Park.



Photo: Mirboo North IPA. Credit: M. Wood

Mirboo North IPA key highlights:

- Supports habitat for key species including the greater glider, powerful owl and Narracan burrowing crayfish
- Significant number of plants recorded including examples of endangered damp forest and warm temperate rainforest vegetation communities.
- Supports many local recreation activities and is nearby to the Lyrebird Forest Walk and the popular nearby tourist route, The Grand Ridge Trail
- Provides connectivity for protected forest with adjoining Mirboo North Regional Park.

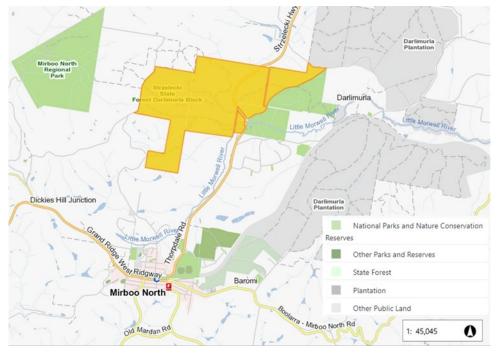


Figure 2: Map of Mirboo North IPA (orange shading). Source: DELWP Map Share

3.4 STRATHBOGIE RANGES IMMEDIATE PROTECTION AREAS

The Strathbogie Ranges IPA is made up of the entire Strathbogie State Forest located about 120 kilometres north east of Melbourne, east of the Hume Highway at Euroa. Several small townships are nearby including Strathbogie, Swanpool and Violet Town. Benalla lies to the north and Mansfield to the south east (Figure 3).

The Strathbogie Ranges is estimated to cover an area of about 240,000 ha north of the Great Dividing Range situated between the Goulburn River to the west, the Broken River to the east and the Hume Highway to the west and north. Surrounding areas are largely cleared for mixed farming and grazing, softwood plantations and rural residential lifestyle properties.

The IPA is approximately 24,000 ha, currently classified as State Forest, of which 5000 ha is currently Special Protection Zone. The Toorour and Glen Creek reference areas, the Lima South education area, and a small inlier of the Tallangallook – Dry Creek historic area are also within the boundary of the IPA.

Areas of public land in the vicinity of the IPA include Reef Hills State Park to the north near Benalla, the Tallangallook-Dry Creek Historic Reserve abutting the IPA to the south, Mount Samaria State Park and Tolmie-Toombullup state forests to the east across the Midland Highway, and the Mount Wombat-Garden Range Nature Reserve to the west.

Nearly 80 per cent of the IPA is within the Highlands - Northern Fall bioregion. The remainder, in patches towards the northern and eastern edges of the IPA is in the Central Victorian Uplands bioregion.

Strathbogie Ranges IPA key highlights:

- Supports habitat for key species including one of the most abundant populations of southern greater glider in Victoria as well as the powerful owl, Murray spiny crayfish and brush-tailed phascogale
- Plant species including centuries old trees, the listed Lima Stringybark and tall leafy greenhood orchid
- Includes the existing popular recreation areas. Rocky Ned Lookout, James Reserve, Tallangalook Road Picnic Area, Goldworthys, Ruoaks and Lima East
- Extends connectivity of protected forest areas including the adjacent Mt Samaria State Forest, Boho Bushland Reserve, Murraweeny Bushland Reserve, Reef Hills State Park and Mount Wombat-Garden Range Flora and Fauna Reserve, Tallangalook-Dry Creek Historic Area, and the Sevens Creek Wildlife Reserve.

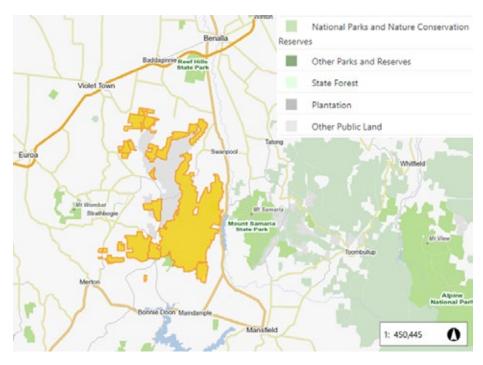


Figure 3: Map of Strathbogie Ranges IPA (orange shading). Source: DELWP Map Share

3.5 THE CONFLUENCE OF TWO KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

For over 60,000 years and up until colonisation of Australia by Europeans, First Peoples have lived with and cared for Country, including her plants, animals and ecosystems. This long relationship of establishing understanding of and a cultural response to Australian landscapes and ecology has returned benefits to local and regional Indigenous cultures, who embedded specialised knowledge about caring for Country in cultural practices, balancing the production of food and fibre with the health of the lands, waters, animals and plants that provide and sustain prosperity¹.

Through its engagement processes, the Panel heard clear messaging around prioritising Traditional Owners as land and water managers and spent considerable time learning about and discussing Traditional Owner knowledge systems and cultural landscape approaches and practices. Emerging efforts to meaninafully connect different knowledge systems are overdue and welcomed by the Panel, who support the need to better connect western science and Indigenous biocultural knowledge for improved public land governance, planning and management. With the goal of evolving western science and Traditional Owner knowledge and practices to achieve a confluence of knowledge systems, the Panel believes the transition to Traditional Owner management of Victorian public lands will be assisted in a trusting and culturally safe

Indigenous biocultural knowledge incorporates the concept of biocultural diversity, encompasses the diversity of life in all its manifestations: biological, cultural and linguistic – which are interrelated and possibly coevolved within a complex socio-ecological adaptive system. Indigenous biocultural knowledge is one of three types of Indigenous Knowledge related to management of Country. The three types are: Indigenous Biocultural Knowledge, knowledge of place and contemporary conservation land management knowledge.

Therefore, conservation and land management knowledge is acknowledged and has been embedded into Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. The application of this knowledge in practice is also a reflection of a confluence of two knowledge and practice systems. In the framework of western concepts of planning and management, the application of knowledge in practice will achieve



Photo: Cascading waterfall, Strathbogie Ranges. Credit: DFI WP

conservation outcomes, including the protection of biodiversity, together with the strengthening of biocultural values.

Identifying 'touch points' or bridges between western and Indigenous knowledge systems will facilitate this confluence and build better connections. Examples of these could be like-for-like touch points which serve similar roles in each system. One example could be keystone species and totemic species, where both are used for similar purposes in ensuring a balance in managing Country/ecosystems. Another touch point is using cultural landscapes as a bridging tool, in enabling dialogue between Traditional Owners, scientists, landowners and communities within a framework that does not exclude either the Indigenous or the 'western' world view.

When it comes to understanding and addressing the complex and unpredictable threats facing our natural and social systems, western science has recognised that traditional single disciplinary approaches are insufficient. Scientific knowledge systems have therefore evolved towards transdisciplinary approaches where different disciplines work collaboratively to integrate and move beyond discipline-specific approaches to create a holistic approach for solving complex problems. This form of complex socio-ecological adaptive system approach also lies at the heart of Indigenous biocultural knowledge. The application of Indigenous biocultural knowledge in the practice of cultural land management and western transdisciplinary system approaches illustrates another major touch point opportunity.

¹ The Royal Society of Victoria, 2022, in prep. More information on the Royal Society of Victoria available at: https://rsv.org.au/

4. EVIDENCE CONSIDERED BY THE PANEL

4.1 OVERVIEW OF PANEL'S CONSIDERATIONS

The Panel, with consideration of the requirements of its Terms of Reference has undertaken a thorough examination of the information provided through:

- current policy context, settings; processes; strategies; plans and priorities
- commissioned reports, including VEAC and Traditional Owner biocultural reports²
- extensive community and stakeholder engagement.

The Panel has also considered advice from policy areas for its work. This has been critical for the Panel to understand the context within which it is operating, and in particular, for the Victorian Government's proposed reforms to the public land legislation. This also includes the Panel's work in understanding the confluence of two knowledge systems, and considerations for the biodiversity and climate crises.

This information, along with the partnership with Traditional Owners and community engagement, has assisted the Panel in its sensemaking and forming of recommendations (Figure 4).

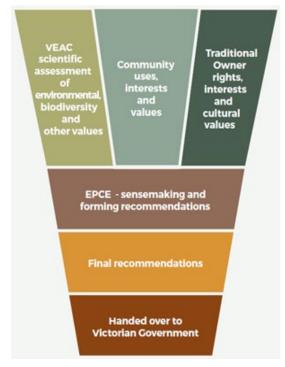


Figure 4: Overview of considerations of the Panel and process for providing recommendations

² Available at: https://www.veac.vic.gov.au/investigations-assessments/current-assessments/investigation/assessment-of-the-values-of-immediate-protection-areas-in-the-strathbogie-ranges-and-mirboo-north

4.2 POLICY CONTEXT AND OVERVIEW

Victoria is currently experiencing biodiversity extinction and climate crises. Victoria is the most cleared state in Australia with more than one third of the plants and animal species native to Victoria being classified as rare, threatened or near threatened. This loss of biodiversity has profound ramifications for clean air and water, productive agriculture, pollination and human well-being³. Victorian forest ecosystems, such as the magnificent mountain ash forests, are at direct risk of climate change. Increasingly more frequent and severe bushfire is changing the landscape and damaging forest values.

Victoria is also undergoing a significant process of reform that is making a significant contribution to reconciliation with Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Victorians through the advancement of self-determination, truth-telling and Treaty⁴. Recent state-wide Victorian Traditional Owner policies concerning cultural fire practice, cultural landscapes, hunting and game management, Sea Country management, traditional foods and botanicals, enable new approaches to the planning, management and governance of public land and are also reflective of other national and international approaches to Indigenous led Cultural land management.

The work of the Panel to determine the future use of IPAs and State Forest in eastern Victoria occurs within this context. In considering these matters the Panel has drawn on a wide range of policy and strategy to inform and guide its work.

Below are some key policy considerations that have informed this work.

Biodiversity 2037⁵

Protecting Victoria's Environment – Biodiversity 2037 is Victoria's plan to stop the decline of our native plants and animals and improve our natural environment. It is the strategy for Victoria's biodiversity, required under the *Flora Fauna Guarantee Act 1988*, that sets out how flora and fauna conservation and management objectives are to be achieved.

It has a vision of Victoria's biodiversity being healthy, valued and actively cared for. Its two goals are that: all Victorians value nature; and Victoria's natural environment is healthy.



³ The Royal Society of Victoria, 2022, in prep.

⁴ Further information about truth telling process: https://yoorrookjusticecommission.org.au; Treaty in Victoria https://www.firstpeoplesvic.org

⁵ Available at: https://www.environment.vic.gov.au/biodiversity/biodiversity-plan

Victoria's Climate Change Strategy⁶

Natural Environment Climate Change Adaptation Action Plan 2022–2026⁷

Victoria's Climate Change Strategy is a roadmap to net-zero emissions and a climate resilient Victoria by 2050. The initiatives in the Climate Change Strategy will support communities and businesses to make the changes we need to reduce the impacts of climate change and continue to support our economy to grow.

Resilient forests are a key component of Victoria's Climate Change Strategy. This includes revitalising and protecting our forests.

Victoria's natural environments are already being impacted by climate change. These impacts are expected to worsen through this century. Reducing greenhouse gas emissions can limit climate change and its impacts. Yet, some climate change is now unavoidable and will occur even if emissions are significantly reduced.

Adaptation is how we adjust actions and decisions to prepare for and respond to the impacts of climate change. This could mean planting trees that are better suited to the dryer and hotter conditions expected in the future or moving populations of species to areas that will be more resistant to climate change impacts. Acting now will help to reduce the impacts on the environment, as well as our society and the economy.



Public land legislation reforms8

The Victorian Government is developing proposals to renew Victoria's public land legislation, including the creation of a new Public Land Act.

The government is proposing to replace three existing Crown Land Acts (the *Crown Land (Reserves) Act 1978, Forests Act 1958* and *Land Act 1958*) with a new Public Land Act. The new Public Land Act will operate alongside the *National Parks Act 1975*, which will continue to protect significant parts of Victoria's diverse natural environment.

The Panel has considered possible future public land categories as part of its recommendations.



⁶ Available at: https://www.climatechange.vic.gov.au/victorias-climate-change-strategy

⁷ Available at: https://www.environment.vic.gov.au/natural-environment-adaptation-action-plan

⁸ More information available at: https://engage.vic.gov.au/renewing-victorias-public-land-legislation

Traditional Owner Cultural Landscapes Strategy⁹

The Cultural Landscapes Strategy (CLS) provides a framework for the planning, management and governance of public land, through the lens of a cultural landscape.

The implementation of the CLS requires the development of bridging tools, that aim to bridge the ontological differences between Indigenous world views and 'western', between NRM and caring for Country. Bridging tools support two-way learning and link cultural elements with policy and planning instruments. Adoption of these tools will enable Traditional Owner groups and Government partners to navigate a transition phase from sick Country to healthy Country, and from government led planning and land and water management to Indigenous led planning and management.

Bridging tools include:

- Reading Country methodologies for water and land, including cultural and biocultural values assessments
- Planning instruments for cultural landscape and Cultural Reserve
- Collaborative governance arrangements for cultural landscapes
- New management (healing and caring for Country) that places primacy on Indigenous knowledge and practices but that also walks both worlds, using conservation and land management practices as well as cultural practices to be able to heal Country in contemporary context.



Traditional Owner Game Management Strategy¹⁰

The Traditional Owner community has led the development of a Strategy that reflects a Traditional Owner led holistic view to promoting healthy populations of animals on healthy Country.

The Strategy aligns with the Cultural Fire Strategy and the Cultural Landscapes Strategy in enabling the application of Indigenous knowledge and practice to heal and care for Country; together with collaborative management arrangements for governance, planning and management.



⁹ Available at: https://www.delwp.vic.gov.au/futureforests/what-were-doing/victorian-cultural-landscapes-strategy

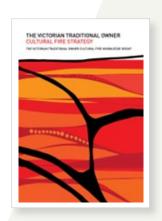
 $^{10\ \} Available\ at: \underline{https://djpr.vic.gov.au/\underline{data/assets/pdf}}\ file/0010/1978561/Traditional-Owner-Game-Management-Strategy.pdf$

Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy¹¹

Victoria's Traditional Owners have strong aspirations to ensure cultural fire management is reintroduced into Victoria's cultural landscapes to allow for healing and caring for Country and to ensure cultural fire knowledge and practice can be passed between generations.

The Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy provides a set of principles and strategic priorities to facilitate greater self-determination for Traditional Owners and provide a policy and practice framework for effective Traditional Owner-led cultural fire management in Victoria.

The Strategy was authored by Traditional Owners with the support of a partnership between the Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations (FVTOC), DELWP, Parks Victoria and the Country Fire Authority.



The Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework 2018-2023¹²

Pupangarli Marnmarnepu 'Owning Our Future' the Aboriginal Self-Determination Reform Strategy 2020-2025¹³

Self-determination is the ability for Indigenous people to freely determine their political status and pursue their economic, social and cultural equity, based on their own values and way of life.

Self-determination is one of the current pathways being progressed by the State of Victoria towards reconciliation with Traditional Owner and Aboriginal Victorians.

These policies outline principles, priorities and a commitment to work in true partnership with Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Victorians to support their right to self-determination.



 $^{11\ \} Available\ at: \underline{https://www.ffm.vic.gov.au/fuel-management-report-2018-19/statewide-achievements/cultural-fire-strategy}$

¹² Available at: https://www.firstpeoplesrelations.vic.gov.au/victorian-aboriginal-affairs-framework-2018-2023

 $^{13\ \} Available\ at: \underline{https://www.delwp.vic.gov.au/aboriginalselfdetermination/self-determination-reform-strategy}.$

Victorian Auditor-General's Office: Protecting Victoria's Biodiversity¹⁴

In October 2021, the Victorian Auditor-General's Office completed a report to Parliament on Protecting Victoria's Biodiversity. This report examined how well DELWP is acquitting its responsibilities under the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* and in Protecting Victoria's Environment—Biodiversity 2037 to better protect threatened species. This includes considering if the management of Victoria's biodiversity loss will halt the decline of threatened species.

Victoria's biodiversity continues to decline. The State of the Environment 2018 report states that a third of all of Victoria's terrestrial plants, birds, reptiles, amphibians, mammals, invertebrates and ecological communities are threatened with extinction.

The report concludes that DELWP cannot demonstrate if, or how well, it is halting further decline in Victoria's threatened species populations.

DELWP accepted all nine recommendations of VAGO about improving:

- its monitoring, and reporting the impacts of its prioritised management actions
- the currency and comprehensiveness of the data and knowledge underpinning its decision-support tools
- its use of the available legislative tools
- its advice to government about funding needs and species prioritisation.



¹⁴ Available at: https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/report/protecting-victorias-biodiversity?section=

4.3 COMMISSIONED REPORTS

Traditional Owner 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.

Taungurung findings for Strathbogie Ranges IPA

Biocultural values

The Strathbogie Cultural Landscape is central to Taungurung Country and an area of high cultural significance. For thousands of years prior to European settlement, Country and all within it was wisely and sustainably managed. Taungurung People are staunchly committed to caring for Country.

Prior to European settlement Taungurung society was based on an intimate and dynamic relationship with forest ecosystems. Timber, bark and forest plants were primary materials for creating tools, vessels, fire, shelter, medicines, instruments, weapons, craft materials and transport. The forest also provided a range of animals used for food and clothing. Fire was used to encourage fresh growth of plants for animals to graze, to promote edible plant foods, expose edible roots, create pathways, clear sites for dwellings and camps, and keep this vital infrastructure safe from wildfire. The forests also contained places of spiritual significance and areas used for traditional cultural ceremonies.

Biocultural values were identified in the Strathbogie Ranges through a rapid assessment for the purposes of this report. Traditional practical use values were identified and incorporated into the VEAC assessment report. Cultural and ceremonial values were identified but not documented. All biocultural values informed Taungurung recommendations of the future categorisation of the Strathbogie Ranges IPA.

Taungurung recognise the values different people identify within the Strathbogie Ranges IPA.

Taungurung support continued access for a range of activities, in accordance with principles of caring for Country. Having people visiting areas helps rebuild their connection with the environment. Better connections between people and the environment helps identification of appropriate management actions.

Cultural landscape context

Taungurung people view Country as a connected whole, afforded the same respect that a family member is given, acknowledging the agency of Country and its many layers of ancestral meaning. Assessing the Strathbogie IPA in isolation of the surrounding landscape is not possible. Separating people, biocultural diversity, Aboriginal cultural heritage (tangible and intangible) and social values is impractical.

The Strathbogie Ranges IPA is located in the Strathbogie Cultural Landscape (Figure 5). A rapid biocultural assessment undertaken by Taungurung knowledge holders considered the Strathbogie Cultural Landscape as the general area south of the Hume Freeway between the Seymour and Benalla, Mount Samaria to the east and various streams, catchments and spurs to the south.

The Strathbogie Cultural Landscape is central to Taungurung Country and an area of high cultural significance before and during the colonial period. The Strathbogie Cultural Landscape includes the traditional lands of the Yowung-illam-baluk clan – one of the fifteen clans that make up the Taungurung Nation.

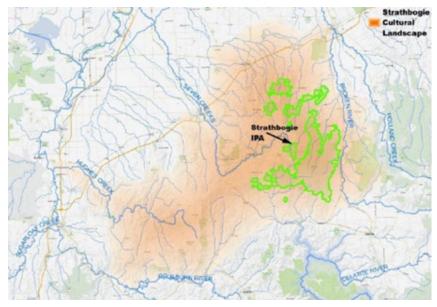


Figure 5: Strathbogie Cultural Landscape shaded in orange, with the IPA area highlighted in green outline. Source: Taungurung Land & Waters Aboriginal Council

Gunaikurnai findings for Mirboo North IPA

The five clans of the Gunaikurnai include the Brabralung, Brataualung, Brayakaulung, Krauatungalung and Tatungalung groups. The Mirboo North IPA is in proximity of the Brayakaulung (meaning men of the west) Clan Group, and the Brataualung (men of the south) Clan Group boundaries (Figure 6).

The Mirboo North IPA is extremely important to the Gunaikurnai people, just as all Country is important. The Strzelecki Ranges have not been well surveyed for Traditional Owner cultural heritage values, tangible or intangible, but is an area of immense cultural significance.

Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Council (GLaWAC) conducted two preliminary peripheral site visits to the Mirboo North IPA. These visits have concluded with the initial impressions that Country is not healthy. There is in sections clear lack of plant diversity, trees growing close together, straight and with repressed canopies, weeds, evidence of pest animals, and unfettered recreation and off-road track creation. There are however some pockets where Country is healthier, where the Little Morwell River meanders, and where plant regeneration is mimicking what nature intended more closely – noting these observations are not conclusive and need testing.

The area is known as culturally very significant including as part of the Gunaikurnai creation storyline where Borun, carrying his canoe, travelled from the mountains in the north to the place called Tarra Warackel – now known as Port Albert – on the coast of the southern of the IPA.

Mirboo North is also a known journey route from the Latrobe Valley to the coast. Just 3.5 kilometres from the Mirboo North IPA, is a site that anecdotally was an old fish trap on the Little Morwell River, and a gathering place a bit further along toward Stony Creek. The stones are not on the river anymore but are still on the adjacent property.

As noted in many accounts, and evidenced from the current cultural landscape, in the early days of (un)settlement clearing the land was the initial priority of the settler. More recently re-foresting the land became the imperative for plantation harvesting. As a result of all of the above, the Mirboo North IPA is symptomatic of substantial human intervention over a very short period of time, that has changed the area considerably.

GLaWAC highlight the need to understand the breadth and depth of Traditional Owner cultural values, to increase understanding but most importantly hopefully to ensure these values help drive outcomes that enable Traditional Owner self-determination and what is best for Country, and best for the Gunaikurnai people. From GLaWAC's initial work, it is clear further surveys need to be undertaken on the Mirboo North IPA to determine:

- plant, orchid, fungi, animal species of cultural significance
- cultural heritage areas of significance tangible and intangible
- archival research
- consideration of how the IPA sits within the broader cultural landscape, as a journey route and part of the Creation Story.



Figure 6: Gunaikurnai Clan Map. Source: GLaWAC

VEAC assessments

In November 2021, VEAC was requested by the Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change, the Hon Lily D'Ambrosio MP, to carry out an assessment of the values of state forests in the areas identified as IPAs in the Strathbogie Ranges and Mirboo North.

Unlike previous VEAC investigations and assessments, VEAC was not requested to undertake community consultation or receive submissions. The VEAC scientific assessments of the IPAs were used to inform the community consultation undertaken by Panel.

Scope of the assessments

The purpose of the assessments specified in the terms of reference was to:

- a. identify the biodiversity, ecological, geological and geomorphological values of the specified area
- b. identify the cultural heritage, social and economic values of the specified area
- c. identify the current and likely future threats to those values, including climate change
- d. identify the typical land use categories commensurate with the identified values
- e. assess the potential economic implications of proposed land use changes recommended by the Panel and provided to the Council

VEAC's approach to the assessment

In preparing the VEAC reports, information was sourced from government datasets such as the Victorian Biodiversity Atlas, published reports, external publicly available datasets, meetings with scientists, land managers, resource managers, and information and reports from community groups and forest users where available.

VEAC's initial assessments were published in March 2022. These reports were a key consideration of the work of the Panel¹⁵.

Traditional Owners' self-determination

In its work, VEAC acknowledged there are significant gaps and limitations in the current legislation that pose barriers to enabling Traditional Owners' self-determination and supporting cultural land management, and the current public land legislation

reforms provide opportunity to address these. VEAC noted support for the future incorporation of Traditional Owners' cultural landscapes approaches into the categorisation and management of the Strathbogie Ranges native forests, as well as reforms to enable Traditional Owners to directly manage land.

VEAC reproduced in its reports the biocultural assessments of the Taungurung and Gunaikurnai People as the Traditional Owners of the Country that includes the two IPAs. To provide a more thorough picture, both Traditional Owners seek to undertake further cultural heritage survey work and conduct Reading Country Assessments and associated research. This is a step towards enabling a dialogue between Traditional Owners and VEAC within a framework that does not exclude either the Indigenous or the 'western' world view using cultural landscapes as a bridging tool.

VEAC findings for Mirboo North IPA

Biodiversity and ecological values

The biodiversity and ecological values of the IPA assessed by VEAC are summarised as follows:

- The IPA forms a core part of the area of highest biodiversity value in the western half of the Strzelecki Ranges; this relatively small area forms a belt from Mount Worth in the west to Morwell National Park in the east
- It is a key site for the threatened species: southern greater glider, Narracan burrowing crayfish, South Gippsland burrowing crayfish and potentially South Gippsland spiny crayfish
- The IPA is known or is likely to contribute to the conservation of several other threatened
- species, including the powerful owl and lace monitor, as well as the genetically diverse Strzelecki (or South Gippsland) koala population
- The IPA plays a key role in mitigating species loss risk as the only substantial patch of high-quality habitat in the western Strzeleckis that links patches further west and east



¹⁵ Available at: https://www.veac.vic.gov.au/investigations-assessments/current-assessments/investigation/assessment-of-the-values-of-immediate-protection-areas-in-the-strathbogie-ranges-and-mirboo-north

- If the protected area system in the Strzelecki Ranges bioregion is to meet nationally agreed comprehensiveness, adequacy and representation (Comprehensive, Adequate, Representative) targets, almost all of the IPA should be included
- Despite some recent wildfire, its proximity to settled areas, and a long history of use, the forest is in as good or better condition for biodiversity than comparable forests elsewhere
- The forests of the IPA make up a significant part of the catchment area for the northern arm of the Little Morwell River, which is the source of Mirboo North's water supply.

Social and economic values

Recreational use – and associated tourism – of the forest for activities such as four-wheel driving, horse riding, trail bike riding, bushwalking, and mountain biking is valued. Local residents use the forest for wellbeing, health and social values associated with access to and connection with natural areas.

Summary of threats

Threats and threatening processes include:

- Climate change more dangerous fire weather, more days over 35 degrees Celsius, more heatwaves and changes in rainfall are all projected to affect the Gippsland region
- Invasive plant and animal species (such as blackberry and deer)
- Wildfires and planned burning
- Further loss and fragmentation of habitat putting greater pressure on remaining habitat in an already extensively cleared bioregion
- Growing regional community leading to more recreational/human use pressures
- Soil disturbance and creation of unplanned tracks from illegal off road recreational activities e.g., trail bikes and mountain bikes.

Public land use categories commensurate with the identified values

The very small size of the area and the requirement to assess the land in isolation from other public land provided some challenges for VEAC.

Given the very small size of the IPA, VEAC considered regional park the most appropriate land use category for the Mirboo North IPA. VEAC considered this category fits well into the landscape with similar forest in the contiguous block of the Mirboo Regional Park and affords protection for the high natural values from sawlog and pulpwood harvesting, while facilitating continued use of the forest for a broad range of activities. It also provides management continuity and simplifies land boundaries to support public understanding of allowed activities.

However, if size and management viability were not a consideration VEAC determined the land use category most commensurate with the identified values of the Mirboo North IPA is Conservation Park. As a Conservation Park, under-represented Ecological Vegetation Classes (the standard unit for classifying vegetation types in Victoria) in the Strzelecki Ranges bioregion would be added to the protected area system and the IPA would be managed for the protection of its natural values, while allowing an appropriate level of access and a range of recreational activities valued by the community.

VEAC further observed that its initial assessment suggests the values of the surrounding regional park areas outside the IPA may warrant increased protection commensurate with the Conservation Park category, subject to further assessment. The Mirboo North IPA area on its own is much smaller than any existing Conservation Park, but its high natural values combined with the likely comparable values of the surrounding regional park areas, would be commensurate with Conservation Park.

VEAC supports future work on the concepts of cultural landscapes and Cultural Reserves being explored by Traditional Owners for public land and their possible future incorporation into the categorisation and management of the Strzelecki Ranges native forests.



Photo: Mirboo North IPA forests. Photo credit: DELWP

VEAC findings for Strathbogie Ranges IPA

Biodiversity and ecological values

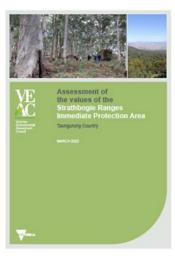
- The Strathbogie Ranges are a distinct outlier to the northwest of the main Dividing Range in northeast Victoria, of similar biodiversity value to comparable areas of the main range
- In the context of the rest of the Strathbogies which are mostly cleared, the IPA comprises the largest remaining consolidated area of highest biodiversity value, despite the incursion of pine plantations into the landscape. Within the IPA, the areas of highest biodiversity value are mostly in the northern third
- The IPA contains the headwaters of Seven Creeks – a waterway of very high strategic biodiversity value
- It is a key site for the threatened southern greater glider, eastern horseshoe bat, grey rice-flower, tall leafy greenhood, and hairy hop-bush
- The IPA is known or is likely to make a valuable contribution to the conservation of the threatened brush-tailed phascogale, powerful owl, and Murray spiny crayfish
- Compared to the rest of the Strathbogies, the forests of the IPA are in generally good condition. This is despite a long history of various uses and some weed invasion particularly in the southwest and along the northern edges. The forests of the tableland, approximately between Mt Barranhet and Mt Strathbogie, are outstanding in terms of their condition. They have an abundance of large hollow-bearing trees and fallen wood, and minimal evidence of disturbance. They are also likely to be among the forests most resilient to climate change in this part of Victoria
- Including areas of the IPA into the protected area system in both Central Victorian Uplands bioregion (mostly in the northern third of the IPA) and Highlands - Northern Fall bioregions would contribute to meeting nationally agreed comprehensiveness, adequacy and representativeness (Comprehensive, Adequate, Representative) targets.

Social and economic values

Recreational use of the forest includes activities such as camping, four-wheel driving, horse riding, trail bike riding, bushwalking, birdwatching, hunting and scenic driving. There are several established but low-key visitor sites, including picnic areas and

campgrounds, walking tracks and lookouts. Parts of the IPA have rich historical associations with gold mining and timber harvesting.

VEAC identified current resource uses and other licensed uses of the IPA include two quartz mines, apiculture, domestic firewood collection, grazing licences in the northern area of the IPA, adjacent education camps, and licensed tourism operations.



Summary of threats

Threats and threatening processes include:

- Climate change hotter days (especially during the summer months) and warmer night temperatures, more days over 35 degrees
 Celsius and less rainfall annually (especially during spring and winter) but a greater likelihood of summer storms and heavier downpours are all projected for the Hume region
- Invasive plant and animal species (such as blackberry and deer)
- Wildfires and planned burning
- Further loss and fragmentation of habitat putting greater pressure on remaining habitat in an already extensively cleared bioregion
- Growing regional community leading to more recreational/human use pressures
- Illegal firewood collection including tree felling
- Soil disturbance and creation of unplanned tracks from illegal off-track vehicle use e.g., trail bikes and mountain bikes.

Public land use categories commensurate with the identified values

VEAC considered Conservation Park the most appropriate public land use category commensurate with the values of the central and northern parts of the Strathbogie Ranges IPA. For the remaining southwestern part of the IPA, Forest Park was considered the most appropriate land use category.

Areas of the IPA in a Conservation Park would be managed for the protection of their natural and cultural values, while allowing access for a range of recreational activities. Important threatened species habitat, including many large, hollow-bearing trees, would have a high level of protection. Underrepresented EVCs, including those in the Central Victorian Uplands bioregion in the northern part of the IPA and in the east near Lake Nillahcootie, would be added to the protected area system.

Forest Park in the southwestern part of the IPA would facilitate continued use of the forest for a broad range of activities and could accommodate firewood collection, hunting, mining and recreational prospecting.

VEAC acknowledged that the report provided by Taungurung and reproduced in section 3.1 of the VEAC report proposed a different approach to that arrived at by VEAC through its scientific assessment and VEAC supported this discussion continuing through the engagement processes of the Panel. VEAC noted this will enable a shared understanding to be reached regarding the possible management, planning and governance arrangements for the different public land categories while the landmark reforms to Victoria's public land legislation are further developed and finalised.



Photo: The Strathbogie Ranges provide widespread habitat for Taungurung moiety Bundjil (Aquila audax). Photo credit: Taungurung Land & Waters Council.

VEAC supports future work on the concepts of cultural landscapes and Cultural Reserves being explored by Traditional Owners for public land and their future incorporation into the categorisation and management of the Strathbogie Ranges native forests.



Photo: Walking in Strathbogie Ranges IPA. Photo credit: DELWP

4.4 COMMUNITY AND STAKEHOLDER 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 (see Appendix 2).

The Panel committed to genuine partnership and engagement with Traditional Owners and direct discussions with local communities, stakeholders, peak bodies and the Victorian people. As such the Panel committed to the following principles.

Engagement principles

The Panel's engagement is purposeful and guided by strong principles that seek to support it in determining the future use and management of the IPAs and eastern State forests.

Traditional Owners have the opportunity for self-determination on the future management of Country

The first Panel meeting was held on Country with Traditional Owner representatives for each location. The Panel spent time listening to and learning about the cultural importance of the IPA.

Each Traditional Owner community representative Panel member has assisted the Panel to continue to understand the cultural importance of each site on behalf of the community and assist with specific information for consideration by the Panel.

Genuine engagement opportunities will be offered to local communities and stakeholders to ensure they are listened to and able to influence outcomes

A range of engagement opportunities were organised to ensure individuals and organisations could contribute their views and ideas in a way that allowed time, ease of participation and different methods.

This included the Panel visiting each location on three occasions and spending a number of days talking with a range of organisations, individuals and agencies to understand their views, ideas and hopes for the IPAs. Documented discussions were shared with each contributor and where applicable, further advice was sought beyond the direct engagements for the Panel's consideration.

The Panel also reached out to key peak bodies through meetings in person and online to gain a perspective on the work they undertake, the experience they have and advice to the Panel on activities within the two IPAs.

Individuals and organisations have also been able to provide additional views and information through a dedicated Engage Victoria site set up to allow specific input on each location.

The communities most impacted by the outcomes have the opportunity to meet with and be listened to by the Panel

A key and important approach undertaken by the Panel was to meet personally with many local people, organisations, and groups in the IPA local area over the months between April and June. This included business owners, local councils, land managers, private landowners, school students, Landcare groups, volunteer groups, local organisations, conservation groups, recreational groups and individuals.

The Panel will meet in places that work the for the local communities

Advice was sought through local networks on the type of contact sought with the Panel and adapted over time based on feedback. As a result, formal meetings and drop-in sessions were organised in a number of locations and at different times during the day and evening to maximise participation and range of people.

Key themes will be captured from the conversations and shared publicly

Key summary points from meetings were recorded and provided back to the participants/s for further feedback and advice.

Photo: Panel discussion in Strathbogie Ranges IPA. Photo credit: DELWP

5. ENGAGEMENT FINDINGS

5.1 OVERVIEW OF ENGAGEMENT PROCESS AND FINDINGS

A range of engagement methods were used to seek and identify local interests and values of the forest, and to gather input into strategies for future use and management of the Mirboo North and Strathbogie Ranges IPAs.

The engagement activities included:

- On Country meetings with Taungurung and Gunaikurnai Traditional Owners
- Targeted small group conversations and workshops
- Local drop-ins
- Engage Victoria online survey
- Peak body conversations
- Local Council discussions
- Forest visits to view current impacts.

These activities enabled the Panel to meet with representatives of each stakeholder, community group or peak body, to:

- Discuss the role of the Panel and the engagement process for the IPAs
- Listen to participants' interests and concerns for each IPA and surrounding area
- Outline the next steps of the process and discuss timings for key stages.



Photo: Panel members in Strathbogie Ranges IPA. Credit: DELWP

Key engagement statistics:

- Strathbogie Ranges IPA: over 580 engagements across, 21 targeted sessions held with community groups, local land holders and local councils; four drop-in sessions with over 25 participants
- Mirboo North IPA: over 470 engagements across 28 targeted sessions were held with community groups, local land holders, school groups and local council: four drop-in sessions with over 115 participants
- Engage Victoria: over 8000 page views, with 717 responses received, including 479 map pin responses received
- Peak bodies: 12 meetings spanning conservation, recreation, Traditional Owner interests
- Consultations were also undertaken with land management agencies

The data was then analysed across all the engagement activities and has been captured in engagement reports (Appendix 3). Where possible, the data has been displayed visually to show the recurrence of themes in the conversations. It is important to note some themes were discussed more than others, even though every effort was made to hear from a balance of perspectives.

The process for analysing the 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 number of comments and percentages against each theme were calculated based on the total number of comments received in relation to that specific area of interest, activity or, in some cases, the frequency within the theme.

5.2 KEY THEMES

In analysing the many conversations undertaken by the Panel, several consistent themes emerged which are important to understand in the context of the recommendations in this report:

Broad support for Traditional Owners to lead managing Country

This was particularly the case at a local level where recognition of local Traditional Owners as important partners in the future of the IPAs was highlighted. Current land managers also re-iterated the important opportunity the changes associated with the IPAs can have to advance stronger Traditional Owner management, partnership and practice with state agencies.

Local community organisations were keen to learn more about partnership opportunities with Traditional Owners to assist with and contribute to a longer-term shift to Traditional Owner management of Country.

Strong support for the future protection of the forest

Most stakeholder groups in both locations recognised the high value of the forest and supported their conservation. They raised the need to include community in this protection and supported a continuation of acceptable recreation uses and access to the forest. Many acknowledged that more people accessing and enjoying the forest will deter those who engage in unacceptable or illegal activities.

The local conservation groups hold significant local expertise and knowledge. They supported the information identified in VEAC reports and some groups also provided both VEAC and the Panel with their own detailed reports on the high habitat value for threatened species the IPA forests provide.

Community action and further engagement

In both locations it was obvious that local people have been active over a number of years in advocating for the IPAs with a general knowledge and understanding of the need for sustainable environmental practices across the landscape.

Numbers of individuals, organisations and experts in their field have come together to investigate and be informed about the needs of the IPAs and the importance of ensuring healthy forests into the future that people can still enjoy. Many want to continue to have a role in decision making through formal partnership and work with land managers and other organisations e.g., local council.



Photo: Panel members meeting with Gunaikurnai Elders and representatives at Mirboo North. Credit: DELWP

In addition, it was seen as an important opportunity to harness the skill and knowledge of local people to understand the current IPAs and play a role in education and positive involvement of a range of local people and visitors who will access the IPAs in the future.

As such the importance of formally establishing a collaborative partnership and governance model as one of the first key undertakings in each location was raised and discussed.

Current management of the IPA's

Specific issues raised with the Panel included:

- Insufficient resources available to current land managers to undertake their responsibilities now in the IPAs. This included concern about funding for either DELWP or Parks Victoria to carry out any new requirements for the IPAs following the determined public land category. In addition, future authority and resources be available to either organisation to adjust their practices for the changed conditions was raised as an important matter
- Concern about current conditions seen to need addressing:
 - > fire management and mitigation
 - > track, road, trail and firebreak maintenance
 - > poor signage
 - > weed and pest control
 - > rubbish dumping
 - > tree removal for safety and track maintenance
 - > waterway management
 - > protection of species
 - > firewood collection
 - > illegal activity such as firewood collection, camping and campfires in non-designated areas, off track vehicle access and other illegal recreation activities.

- It was clear a gap exists regarding explicit knowledge of issues, reason for current practices and what is possible and needed for the future of the IPAs
- Regulation and compliance (on the ground monitoring, presence and authorised officers) was identified as an important response to illegal and poor behaviour and seen to be lacking
- The importance of growing and sharing knowledge and information on the IPAs through a range of means. This included the need for more signage that is engaging, informative and clear about what is acceptable and good for the forest and also for those activities that are not acceptable in the IPA. Other ideas included online platforms being available to the public to share the history of the area and places to visit. The role and value of citizen science mechanisms was also raised.



Photo: Panel members meeting with Taungurung representatives at Strathbogie Ranges. Credit: DELWP

Current and future recreational and other activities

A significant number of Panel conversations occurred with people who currently participate in recreation in the IPAs. This included walkers, trail and mountain bike riders, horse riders, four-wheel drivers, citizen scientists, hunters (Strathbogie Ranges only), naturalists, dog walkers.

A number of people emphasised the importance of family activities for health and well-being and the role of adults in learning about, modelling and developing appropriate behaviours for children. Concerns about type, extent and impact of current activities and what will be allowable in the future was raised consistently by many people.

It was recognised that more work needs to be done in and with communities to learn from, educate and involve a range of participants who have an interest in the IPAs. This includes in the solutions for future activity type, single purpose and shared spaces and how they align with the conservation and cultural requirements within the IPAs and in other locations.

It was heard, if changes on any level are to occur, that time to transition to new ways of managing the IPAs is needed.

Apiary as a semi and full commercial activity for hive location, collection and sale of honey was an issue raised by both apiarists and others. Apiarists indicated a need for clarity on conditions for continued apiary practice. The relationship between hives established in the IPAs and in bordering private property was also raised concerning better understanding of the impacts, if any, of both native bees and European bees occupying the same forest.

Private landowners and connection to the IPAs

The Panel talked with several Landcare groups and private property owners, including farmers and forestry plantation staff close to the IPA boundaries.

Issues and opportunities identified included:

- Seeking and implementing opportunities to improve the connectivity of the IPA with native vegetation across the region with private landowners and existing and future private and public reserves
- Habitat and waterway management across corridor landscapes connected to the IPAs particularly for pest and weed control, use of chemicals, habitat development
- Education and engagement with absentee landlords, particularly in the Strathbogie Ranges district to improve management of pests and weeds
- Need for better targeted grants and funding decision making at a local level with flexibility and longer timeframes to support the strong volunteer base that exists
- Opportunity to extend conservation areas with covenants across private land e.g., Trust for Nature.

Economic and local development opportunities

In talking with small business owners, tourism operators and organisations, the Panel heard townships in each IPA location want to be seen as a growing destination for tourists. This includes both day and longer-term visits and connected to other attractions in the area. Being connected to the broader regional tourism story was seen as being important but there was recognition that creation of change through increased local tourism opportunities – including within the IPAs – required more work to be done on branding, visitor information and support facilities, local business support and engagement with each community on the future opportunities.

Peak Bodies

The Panel reached out to a wide range of peak bodies to understand current key issues and opportunities from a local, state-wide, and national level with relevance to each IPA. Peak bodies included conservation groups, recreation groups, membership-based organisations, and state agencies. A full list of peak body groups the Panel met with is available at Appendix 4.

Understandably there were a variety of views expressed with some common threads. This included:

- Interest in the balance between conservation/ protection and recreational activity and how this will be managed
- Understanding of the need to look after the forests in the IPAs for the future
- From the recreation member-based organisations, an observation was made that the model of membership-based organisations assists with regulation, education and sustainable activity versus individual social media organised activities that do not necessarily use organisational agreed behaviours and rules for organised activities, particularly with less passive activities e.g., trail bike, four-wheel drive and hunting activities



Photo: Forests of Mirboo North IPA. Credit: M. Wood

- Individually organised activities appear to be on the increase due to the changing ways in which people organise social activities and the change in demographics of organised membership bases. In member-based groups, membership age is increasing, with most members 40-60 years of age. As a result, there are implications for how to communicate with this increasing number of people participating in activities in new ways
- Participants for activities undertaken in the state including at current IPA locations include a mixture of local and further afield people who travel either for day experiences or longer through organised camping/accommodation in the area
- The Panel observed there was mixed understanding of the impact of some activities on habitat or forest health with little reference to recent relevant science or studies to back up claims of little or no impact over time.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE USE AND MANAGEMENT OF IMMEDIATE PROTECTION AREAS

6.1 OVERVIEW OF PANEL'S RECOMMENDATIONS

This section of the report presents the Panel's recommendations for future use and management of the Mirboo North and Strathbogie Ranges IPAs. In accordance with its Terms of Reference, the Panel is required to provide recommendations relating to public land category, permissible uses, and activities within each IPA and the timing for this to occur.

In presenting these recommendations the Panel has also identified opportunities for enhanced partnerships, resourcing, and other key considerations for the future use and management of each IPA.

A key challenge for the Panel has been to consider recommendations that are fit for purpose, contemporary and aligned to the future of the public land management framework yet provide for the most effective pathway for designating new or amended reservation status and management arrangements under existing legislation. In some instances, the Panel is proposing a pilot approach, with interim recommendations to government as a pathway to more enduring outcomes that are aligned to the Victorian Government's proposed public land legislative reforms.

Each recommendation is prefaced with the key findings the Panel has considered in coming to its conclusions and outlines any change that is proposed.

These recommendations have been formed on the information available to the Panel, including information the Panel gathered through its partnership with Traditional Owners and extensive community engagement.

6.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MIRBOO NORTH IPA

Public land category, activities and uses

The Mirboo North IPA along with the adjoining Mirboo North Regional Park and Lyrebird Walk are significant forests. This includes for the threatened species supported by them, Gunaikurnai Traditional Owners and local Mirboo North community.

In their report, GLaWAC highlight the Mirboo North IPA is extremely important to the Gunaikurnai people. The area is culturally very significant, including as a central part of the Gunaikurnai creation storyline where Borun, carrying his canoe, travelled from the mountains in the north to the place called Tarra Warackel – now known as Port Albert – on the coast south of the park. It's also a known journey route from the Latrobe Valley to the coast.

Natural values within this forest are of local, regional and national importance. Both GLaWAC and VEAC reports, along with the work local field naturalists and scientists, show the forests support many threatened species, including the greater glider and species of burrowing crayfish. Iconic and regionally important species including the Strzelecki koala and powerful owl also occur in this forest. Many plants and ecosystems found in the Mirboo North IPA are restricted or depleted elsewhere, such as the endangered Damp Forest and Warm Temperate Forest ecosystems. The area is a catchment for the Little Morwell River, providing drinking water supply for the Mirboo North township.

"Greenhood orchid is very rare and in the area. They are so insignificant and tiny but unless you are aware of them, you just wouldn't know." - engagement participant

The establishment of an IPA for this forest, providing protection from native timber harvesting, represents significant efforts by local community members and groups to advocate for their local forest. This sentiment was resounding during the Panel's engagement, with community members and stakeholders from all interests indicating their support for this decision. The contemporary valuing and caring for this forest extends to the work of local volunteers, donating their time to help to study, maintain and manage parts of this forest and the adjacent Mirboo North Regional Park and Lyrebird Walk.

Through its engagement, the Panel heard from many residents who frequently utilise and visit this forest area for recreation and enjoyment. This includes for a range of activities such as bushwalking, mountain bike riding, horse riding, four-wheel driving and trail bike riding. Even for community members that were less frequent users of the forest, this area was seen as an important cultural link to the town, as the gateway to Mirboo North and the surrounding range. The Panel also heard of the significant investment throughout the Gippsland region for recreational offerings, such as mountain and trail bike parks and the opportunity and challenges this may pose for the Mirboo North IPA.

Considering the future use and management of the Mirboo North IPA, it was clear the local community values this forest area and are seeking that the forest continues to support balanced use along with greater conservation protection. This includes maintaining a wide range of activities that are currently legally permitted, such as hiking and trail bike riding on formed roads and tracks.

VEAC in its report identified the most applicable category for the Mirboo North IPA as Regional Park. This assessment noted that if management viability and size were not considerations, then Conservation Park would be the most applicable land status.

The Panel, in considering the additional information it has collected through Traditional Owner partnership and extensive community engagement, considers there to be an opportunity to enhance the protections and management of the values within this forest. Considering the importance of the natural and cultural values present, the Panel recommends the Mirboo North IPA be managed as a Conservation Park.

In making this recommendation, the Panel acknowledges Traditional Owner rights to take and use natural resources¹⁶ and that the definition of management uses and activities should not impinge on these rights nor inadvertently create barriers to the application of indigenous cultural land management practices in healing and caring for Country.

What is a Conservation Park?

Conservation Park is a public land category accepted in principle by government in its response to VEAC's Statewide Assessment of Public Land and included in the government's recent consultation paper on public land legislation reform. It consolidates and provides a clear purpose for a number of existing 'other parks' under schedule 3 of the National Parks Act including coastal parks.

The government is currently implementing two new Conservation Parks in the Central West forests: Cobaw and Hepburn Conservation Parks.

The purpose of a Conservation Park is to:

- 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.

Uses and activities that are not permitted include: dog walking (unless as specified by land manager), grazing, prospecting, recreational hunting, timber harvesting, domestic firewood collection.

The applicable uses with this category are at Table 2 and included at Appendix 5.

¹⁶ Taungurung Recognition and Settlement Agreement with State of Victoria, commencement 11 August 2020.

In making this recommendation the Panel notes that this classification will:

- Support Gunaikurnai rights and interests for the Mirboo North IPA and broader cultural landscape
- Provide clear management purpose to support appropriate management of values present
- Continue to enable undertaking of legal recreation activities including four-wheel driving and trailbike riding on formed roads and tracks
- Contribute to protection of regionally significant and under-represented Ecological Vegetation Classes in the permanent reserve system
- Designated firewood collection would not be permitted the Mirboo North IPA recognising that designated firewood areas are available in the surrounding area
- Grazing by domestic stock, prosecting and recreation hunting would not be permitted which is consistent with engagement information collected, where these activities were not seen to be undertaken in the Mirboo North IPA.

Table 2 – proposed permissible uses and activities for Conservation Park compared with current uses and activities for State Forest

Activity	State forest (current status)	Conservation Park* (proposed)
Bushwalking, nature observation and picnicking	Yes	Yes
Camping	Yes	Yes – in designated areas
Car touring, including four-wheel driving on publicly available formed roads and tracks	Yes	Yes
Trail bike riding on publicly available formed roads and tracks	Yes	Yes
Mountain biking and cycling on publicly available formed roads and tracks	Yes	Yes
Horse riding on formed roads and tracks	Yes	Yes, as specified by Land Manager
Dog walking on lead	Yes	No, except as specified by Land Manager
Apiculture at licensed sites	Yes	Yes
Grazing by domestic stock	Yes	No
Prospecting	Yes	No
Recreational hunting	Yes	No
Timber harvesting	Yes	No
Domestic firewood collection	Yes, in designated areas	No
Exploration and mining	Yes, subject to Nation Yes Parks Act Minister consent	

^{*}Conservation Park land use classification and associated uses outlined in this table may be subject to change in accordance with the outcomes of the proposed public land legislation reforms.

Recommendation 1

Recommend that the Mirboo North IPA be managed in accordance with a Conservation Park public land category and uses associated with this category.



Photo: Forests of Mirboo North IPA. Credit: M. Wood

Connectivity

In recommending the Mirboo North IPA be managed as a Conservation Park, the Panel considers there is a significant opportunity to manage the IPA forest as the core of what could possibly become a larger conservation area, including other adjoining parks and reserves. This supports VEAC's proposal that further assessment of the surrounding regional park areas be undertaken to consider its suitability as a combined Conservation Park.

For the Gunaikurnai, Country has been drastically altered since colonisation. Isolation of the forest due to land clearing for farming, mining or towns has enormous impact on the ability of Country to sustain the cultural values of the Traditional Owners of land and waters. When Country is sick, the people whose custodial obligation it is to care for it cannot be healthy.

The Mirboo North IPA and adjoining parks and reserves represent islands of native vegetation within a largely cleared agricultural landscape. The Strzelecki Ranges is one of the most heavily cleared bioregions in Victoria retaining less than one third of the original extent of native vegetation. As such, areas of remnant vegetation including the Mirboo North IPA are critical to support biodiversity in this landscape.

Through its engagement, the Panel heard from species experts and naturalists that the forest is supporting higher than usual levels of species and expanding protections throughout the region is critical to maintain and enhance biodiversity. In one example, the high abundance of the unique Strzelecki koala was considered a result of there being limited remaining suitable habitat in the region, with the IPA forests serving as a refuge for the koala. The Panel heard it was unlikely the forest could maintain this level of carrying capacity for this

iconic species. Increasing connectivity between forest habitat areas through wildlife corridors is one pathway to support koalas to successfully move to other forest areas and conserve this genetic diversity.

The Panel also heard from dedicated local landholders, community members and peak-body stakeholders of substantial programs seeking to enhance landscape connectivity within the Strzelecki Ranges. This included waterway and riparian vegetation restoration on private land, land holders utilising covenants to protect bushland on their property, and the work of adjacent public land managers to create wildlife corridors through targeted revegetation and protection projects. The Panel notes that achieving continuity in management objectives across the landscape would support a landscape management approach and achieve better outcomes for forest values.

The Panel is aware the Victorian Government has agreed to VEAC undertaking an investigation of the wider Strzelecki Ranges prior to 2028. This includes considering areas of remnant vegetation within softwood plantation areas, known as the 'Cores and Links' project. The Panel recommends the Victorian Government prioritise investigation into enhanced landscape connectivity throughout the Strzelecki Ranges. This includes assessment of adjoining Regional Park for inclusion as part of a larger Conservation Park.

Recommendation 2

Recommend that the Victorian Government prioritise investigation into enhanced landscape connectivity throughout the Strzelecki Ranges. This includes assessment of adjoining Regional Park for inclusion as part of a larger Conservation Park.



Photo: Restoration of a creek line nearby the Mirboo North IPA Credit: DFI WP

Traditional Owner Partnerships and community collaboration

The Gunaikurnai are the Traditional Owners and Native Title holders of a large area of Gippsland spanning from Warragul in the west to the Snowy River in the east, and from the Great Divide in the north to the coast in the south. This area covers approximately 10% of the State. GLaWAC is the Registered Aboriginal Party that represents the Gunaikurnai people as determined by the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council under the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006.

The State of Victoria has also entered into Recognition and Settlement Agreement with the Gunaikurnai People. The Recognition and Settlement Agreement, executed under the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act 2010*, affords Gunaikurnai people rights relating to the use of public land within their agreement area.

As part of the package of agreements in the Traditional Owner Recognition and Settlement Agreement, the Gunaikurnai were granted Aboriginal Title over 10 national parks and reserves. This affords joint management in a partnership between Gunaikurnai and the State. The longer-term objectives of the Gunaikurnai and the Gunaikurnai Traditional Owner Land Management Board (GKTOLMB) is to move to full management of all Aboriginal Title land, generating cultural and economic benefits for Traditional Owners, and environmental and social benefits for the broader community. This has most recently been expressed in the GKTOLMB Strategic Plan¹⁷.

The Panel heard strong support for Gunaikurnai management of Country. There is a desire to respect, learn and understand how Gunaikurnai managed Country and what this might look like going forward.

"Showing recognition and respect for the Gunaikurnai people as the Traditional Owners enabling their full participation in the Reserve's development, cultural planning, and ongoing management." – engagement respondent

GLaWAC and the GKTOLMB have expressed that joint management of the Mirboo North IPA is consistent with objectives of the Gunaikurnai Joint Management Plan. In line with Gunaikurnai's interests for this forest and Country more generally,

the Panel recommends the Victorian Government support Gunaikurnai joint management of the Mirboo North IPA, should Gunaikurnai wish to pursue these arrangements in the short or longer term.

Recommendation 3

Recommend that the Victorian Government support Gunaikurnai joint management of the Mirboo North IPA and surrounding public forests including cultural overlays, should Gunaikurnai wish to pursue these arrangements in the short or longer term. This includes consideration of a Committee of Management function under the joint agreement arrangements (e.g., joint management of the Knob Reserve¹⁸)



Photo: Walking in the Mirboo North IPA. Credit: DELWP

The Panel noted the significant actions of local community members and groups in caring for and managing this forest. This ranged from local community groups maintaining walking trails, ecologists documenting species, cleaning up illegally dumped rubbish, and adjoining landholders participating in river health programs.

The Panel considers an opportunity exists for the community to come together, building on their good work so far, to enhance community partnerships and drive effective future use and management of this forest. This includes enhanced collaboration between the Land Manager, Gunaikurnai Traditional Owners, and local community, determining agreed priorities for the management of the forest, to guide community use and contribution. Two-way education and knowledge sharing was seen as a foundation for this collaboration.

¹⁷ Available at: https://gunaikurnai.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/GKJMP 01 Intro-StratPlan.pdf

¹⁸ Further information available at: https://gunaikurnai.org/our-country/joint-management/the-knob-reserve/

"By utilising volunteers to assist land managers give the users a feeling of ownership by employing their assistance to maintain the forest while reducing required funding." – engagement respondent

A management plan is essential to balancing management use, setting clear priorities, and establishing mechanisms for monitoring effectiveness and performance. The Panel recommends the Land Manager, together with GLaWAC, co-design and establish an interim community working group that would, in the future, form the basis for a committee of management under a Joint Management arrangement between Parks Victoria and GLaWAC. The interim working group should be set up as soon as possible and use the principles of collaborative governance in its operation. The group's work should inform development of a comprehensive management plan to direct the balanced use and management of the Mirboo North IPA.

What is collaborative management?

Collaborative Management is an approach to managing natural resources that incorporates sustainable use, using natural resource management systems that are founded on Traditional Ecological Knowledge and practice. The end goals are the conservation of ecosystems and habitats, together with associated cultural values.

Recommendation 4

Recommend the appointed Land Manager with GLaWAC co-design and establish an interim community joint working group, that would form the basis for a future committee of management under a Joint Management arrangement between GLaWAC and Parks Victoria. The interim working group will:

- a. inform development of a comprehensive management plan to direct the balanced use and management of the Mirboo North IPA
- b. use the principles of collaborative governance in its design and operation.

In partnering with Gunaikurnai through this process the Panel has heard of opportunities to support reconnection to and management of Country by Gunaikurnai for this forest. As identified in the GLaWAC values report, the Strzelecki Ranges have not been well surveyed for Traditional Owner cultural heritage values, tangible or intangible. This understanding of values is considered an important step in preparing for future management and use of the Mirboo North IPA.

As such, the Panel recommends funding be provided to GLaWAC to complete a Reading Country assessment to reconnect with Country and further understand context for the Mirboo North IPA and adjoining public forests. The Panel acknowledges timelines to deliver these works must be driven by GLaWAC's priorities, as the basis of self-determination.

Recommendation 5

Recommend that funding be provided to GLaWAC to complete a Reading Country assessment to reconnect with Country and further understand context and cultural priorities for the Mirboo North IPA and adjoining public forests.

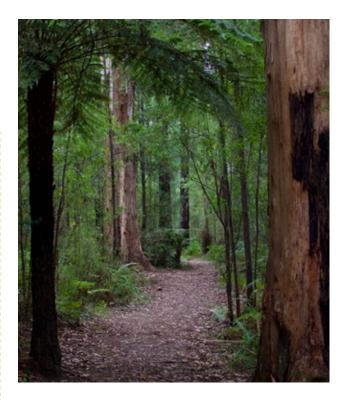


Photo: Lyrebird walking track. Credit: DELWP

Enhanced resourcing for on-ground land management and co-ordination

For future management objectives of the Mirboo North IPA to be successful, management arrangements need to be suitably resourced.

The Panel heard from a range of community groups and stakeholders of the resourcing challenges land management agencies face. This was noted to be a key limitation for effectiveness of on-ground management outcomes for forests. Many community groups also noted their own resourcing challenges. These included challenges working within grant funding timeframes and specifications that often don't align to when community groups have capacity or when is suitable for the works to take place.

"There needs to be sufficient funding to support the management, it is so important" – engagement respondent

The Panel noted many stakeholders and community groups indicated strong support for a local land manager presence in Mirboo North. This includes as a point of contact for community members, understanding local matters, and being on-location to respond to local concerns. This role is seen as critical to developing the long-term relationships required to establish a changed management approach and drive collaborative management of the IPA.

Long term sustainable funding is required to support the new governance, planning and management model and deliver active forest management at a level commensurate with contemporary policy and community expectations. As such, the Panel recommends adequate resources be provided which includes dedicated staff within the Land Manager and Gunaikurnai, and a dedicated resource to co-ordinate and support the community working group.

Recommendation 6

Recommend adequate resources be provided to support:

- governance and facilitation by the Land Manager and Gunaikurnai
- b. a dedicated local Land Manager staff member
- c. a Gunaikurnai Ranger
- d. a locally based position to build on current engagement, coordinate and support the committee of management.

Recommendation 7

Recommend that sufficient funding be provided to the Land Manager to deliver comprehensive land management in accordance with the proposed land category and new management model.

Additional considerations of the Panel - threatened species

The Panel heard from many people about the importance of the Strzelecki (or South Gippsland) koala. As noted in VEAC's report, though not a threatened species in Victoria, the koala population of South Gippsland is of special interest because it has much more genetic diversity than all other Victorian koala populations.

This is thought to be because the koalas of South Gippsland comprise a remnant population that survived the dramatic population decline and bottleneck of the early 20th century. Unlike elsewhere in Victoria, the Strzelecki koala subpopulation is not the result of subsequent translocations from French and Phillip Islands between 1923 and 2006. It is, therefore, of particular conservation, scientific, and management interest.

There are records of koalas in the IPA and across the Strzelecki Ranges. There is a substantial community monitoring, studying, managing and conserving the local population, which estimates the Strzelecki koala population is between 1500-2000 animals, or approximately 0.5% of Victoria's current estimated koalas population. It is a nationally significant population¹⁹.

The Strzelecki koala (or koala generally) is not protected in Victoria's statutory conservation documents. The Panel has heard that this framework lacks the ability to consider the genetic significance of species, such as the koala.

Given the significance of the Strzelecki koala to the Mirboo North IPA and species more broadly, the Panel recommend that an assessment of the status of the Strzelecki koala takes place, to inform future management actions and conservation advice.

Recommendation 8

Recommend that an assessment of the status of the Strzelecki koala takes place, to inform recognition of the Strzelecki Koala as a distinct genetic unit within the Victorian conservation framework, including future management actions and conservation advice.

¹⁹ More information available at: Koala Surveys Strzelecki Ranges/Gippsland Regions December 2019 — July 2020, Friends of the Earth. https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/friendsofearthmelbourne/pages/3195/attachments/original/1597907882/KoalaFinalAug20.pdf?1597907882

6.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRATHBOGIE RANGES IPA

THE NEED FOR A NEW APPROACH

What we've heard

Through its engagement, the Panel heard from local community members and groups who frequently utilise and visit the Strathbogie Ranges IPA for recreation and enjoyment. This includes for a range of activities such as bushwalking, mountain bike riding, hunting, horse riding, prospecting, four-wheel driving and trail bike riding. The natural values of this forest, with its towering trees and diversity of wildlife, were seen as an important element to people's enjoyment of this area.

Community have also played a key role in developing a contemporary understanding of and caring for the Strathbogie Ranges forests. This includes the efforts of many citizen scientists, documenting plants and animals and monitoring threatening processes. The Panel also heard of local's efforts to ensure visitors understand and appreciate the value of this forest.

Protection of the Strathbogie Ranges IPA from timber harvesting represents immense efforts of local community members and groups. The Victorian Government's decision to cease timber harvesting reflects the importance of the IPA forests to the community and the natural values present.

Through its partnership with Taungurung, the Panel has heard of the cultural importance of the landscape within and around the Strathbogie Ranges IPA to Taungurung people. The biocultural values revealed through rapid assessment demonstrate Taungurung people's extensive knowledge of their environment. This includes:

- Knowledge and use of the environment are underpinned by cultural practices
- Traditional obligations to understand and care for Country continue
- Country is at the heart of Taungurung identity
- The right and responsibility to care for Country, Culture and People are critical to the identity and well-being of Taungurung People now and into the future.



Photo: Strathbogie Ranges view from Rocky Ned lookout – Mirboo North. Credit: C. Gottgens

Through its partnership with Taungurung, and through the Taungurung biocultural report, it is clear the vision of Taungurung is to heal and care for Country of the Strathbogie Ranges IPA. This includes management in a way that is consistent with Taungurung obligations to heal and care for Country, for the Strathbogie cultural landscape.

Within local communities there was acknowledgment and support for identification of options to support Traditional Owner management of the IPA.

A new public land category – "Cultural Reserve"

In considering the options available within the current public land legislation framework for permanent reservation of the Strathbogie Ranges IPA, the Panel has learnt of many challenges and barriers to self-determination within this current framework. The Panel's Traditional Owner representatives have provided advice that the current public land categories available for consideration by the Panel do not fully meet the needs these groups to heal and care for Country in a culturally appropriate way and in a way that supports self-determination.

Given this, the Panel considers the current reforms to Victoria's public land legislation provide a unique and timely opportunity for the Victorian Government to formalise such a land category arrangement in legislation. As such, the Panel recommends a new public land category be created and considered through the public land legislation reform processes currently underway, and the details of this be worked through in partnership with government and all relevant Traditional Owner groups.

Strathbogie Cultural Reserve – a pilot approach for a new public land category

The Panel considers the Strathbogie Ranges IPA provides a timely opportunity to pilot a new approach to reserving and managing public forests, that supports self-determination and healing Country, while meeting the expectations of local communities who regularly use and enjoy this important area for a range of recreation activities and who have expressed strong ambition for the future conservation of environmental values.

The Panel considers this can be achieved through appointing Taungurung as a formal land manager over the Strathbogie Ranges IPA, through an interim arrangement that pilots the concept of Cultural Reserve while reforms are being worked through with other Traditional Owner Groups and the relevant government processes for an enduring state-wide Cultural Reserve category. This approach will set the foundations for a carefully managed transition, which will see Taungurung working in partnership with the current land manager to engage local communities in management planning processes.



Photo: Strathbogie Ranges landscape. Credit: C. Gottgens

Developing proposed pilot uses and activities for a Strathbogie Cultural Reserve

The Panel heard through its community engagement that some of the current practices and activities that take place in the Strathbogie Ranges are damaging forest values. Threatening processes identified in VEAC's report include soil disturbance and creation of unplanned tracks from illegal off road recreational activities e.g., trail bikes mountain bikes. Local community also provided the panel with information of a network of unapproved tracks, including horse riding tracks, passing through areas of high natural value.

Within engagements with local landholders, the Panel heard of illegal hunting activities occurring throughout the Strathbogie Ranges IPA and instances of hunters shooting on private property, and in some instances with domestic animals being shot on private property. These actions pose a significant safety risk for forest users and the local community.

The Panel also observed significant numbers of informal campgrounds in the Strathbogie Ranges IPA. These campsites were often associated with evidence of illegal felling of trees. There exist opportunities to enhance the campground offerings in the Strathbogie Ranges IPA. This would provide an accessible and positive visitor experience while managing impact of uncontrolled camping.

The Panel notes while some immediate changes are recommended for permissible uses and activities to control impacts to forest and community health, more work needs to be done in and with communities to learn from, educate and involve the range of participants in solutions for future activity type, mix and extent both within the Strathbogie Ranges IPA.

As Cultural Reserve is not a current category in Victoria's public land framework, uses and activities for Cultural Reserve are not currently prescribed. As an interim step, the Panel has considered a list of permissible uses and activities for a Strathbogie Ranges Cultural Reserve. This is intended to balance forest use and protection while not creating barriers to application of Traditional Owner practices. The Panel recommends the permissible uses and activities defined may be subject to further consideration through a detailed management planning process.



Photo: Hyacinth orchid (Dipodium punctatum) in Strathbogie Ranges. Credit: M. Wood

RECOMMENDATIONS

Public land category, activities and uses

The Panel recommend the Strathbogie Ranges IPA be managed in accordance with the principles and purposes of a new Cultural Reserve public land category.

What is a Cultural Reserve?

The concept of a Cultural Reserve as a potential land category is identified in the Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Landscapes Strategy. Its purpose is to facilitate management of culturally important place or area within a cultural landscape.

Key to the strategy is that cultural landscapes are managed by Traditional Owners through shared governance arrangements. To achieve this, solemanagement (Indigenous Nation led) arrangements will be established for the management of Cultural Reserves within identified cultural landscapes.

Management is aligned to International Union for Conservation of Nature Category V²⁰, Indigenous knowledge and practice led. The asset is managed using cultural objectives to achieve, ecological, social and economic benefits, with Traditional Owners as land manager.

In making this recommendation the Panel notes that:

- A Cultural Reserve is the most appropriate pathway for Taungurung to activate rights and interests to heal and care for Country of the Strathbogie Ranges
- Any recommendations made by the Panel regarding a Cultural Reserve are specific to the Strathbogie Ranges IPA area
- It is critical that in the application of a Cultural Reserve over the Strathbogie IPA these forests are afforded a level of protection that provides community surety that commercial timber harvesting has ceased, and other harmful activities are managed
- The Panel acknowledges Traditional Owner rights to take and use natural resources²¹ and the definition of management uses and activities should not impinge on these rights nor inadvertently create barriers to the application of indigenous cultural land management practices in healing and caring for Country

- Uses and activities for Cultural Reserve are not prescribed within the current public land legislation framework. The Panel has made recommendations for uses and activities to support community and user understanding of permissible activities within a Strathbogie Ranges Cultural Reserve, however, notes that further work will be required between Taungurung and local communities to identify appropriate enduring arrangements (see below recommendation 3)
- Through this interim period any existing land management overlays should be retained pending further management review and recommendation. This includes existing land management overlays in the area include the Toorour and Glen Creek reference areas, the Lima South education area, and a small inlier of the Tallangallook – Dry Creek historic area. Additional work is required to determine the interaction between such overlays and a Cultural Reserve category
- The Panel notes the importance to community that the Strathbogie be incorporated into the National Reserve System. The interaction between the proposed Cultural Reserve and the National Reserve System is an area for further consideration and development, including taking into account the confluence of two knowledge systems. Taungurung considers the incorporation of the Strathbogie Ranges IPA into the National Reserve System may be advanced through development as an Indigenous Protected Area.

Recommendation 1

Recommend the Strathbogie Ranges IPA be managed in accordance with the principles and purposes of a new Cultural Reserve public land category, as identified in the Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Landscapes Strategy.

 $^{20\ \} More\ information\ is\ available\ at: \underline{https://www.iucn.org/our-work/protected-areas-and-land-use}$

 $^{21\} Taungurung\ Recognition\ and\ Settlement\ Agreement\ with\ State\ of\ Victoria,\ commencement\ 11\ August\ 2020.$

Recommendation 2

Acknowledging that a Cultural Reserve public land category does not currently exist in Victoria, the Panel recommends the enduring arrangements for a Cultural Reserve are developed as part of the current renewal of Victoria's public land legislation, in partnership with all Traditional Owner Groups.

The need for an interim pilot arrangement

In the absence of a legislated Cultural Reserve land category, the Panel recommends a pilot program be established to develop a Strathbogie Ranges Cultural Reserve for an interim period while enduring arrangements for a Cultural Reserve are established.

Taungurung has communicated that while governance, planning and management arrangements need to change, this will require a process of transition they want to pursue in partnership with existing public land managers and the community. These interim arrangements should therefore include collaborative governance arrangements between Taungurung, the current Land Manager (DELWP) and community.

This would involve the establishment of Committee of Management for the Strathbogie Ranges IPA as a pathway to enduring arrangements for sole management through a potential new Cultural Reserve established through legislative reforms. This transition will need to take place to provide time to establish settings including the principles and practices for collaborative governance, healing and caring for Country and cultural safety.

Panel proposed activities and uses under an interim pilot arrangement

The panel proposes Strathbogie Ranges Cultural Reserve uses and activities as outlined in Table 3 below (also at Appendix 5).

All permissible uses will be consistent with the management purpose: to 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. Note, that in accordance with the Panel's recommendations, 'Land Manager' in this instance refers to the relevant governance function, such as Committee of Management, responsible for Strathbogie Cultural Reserve Area.

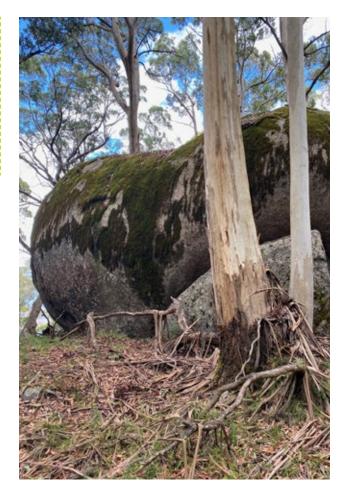


Photo: Landscape high on the Strathbogie Ranges. Credit: M Wood

Table 3 – Proposed permissible uses and activities for a Strathbogie Ranges Cultural Reserve (compared with and current uses and activities for State Forest)

Activity	State forest (current status)	Strathbogie Ranges Cultural Reserve* (proposed)
Bushwalking, nature observation and picnicking	Yes	Yes
Camping	Yes	Yes - in designated camping areas only
Car touring, including four-wheel driving on publicly available formed roads and tracks	Yes	Yes
Trail bike riding on publicly available formed roads and tracks	Yes	Yes
Mountain biking and cycling on publicly available formed roads and tracks	Yes	Yes
Horse riding on formed roads and tracks	Yes	Yes – unless specified by the Land Manager
Dog walking on lead	Yes	Yes
Apiculture at licensed sites	Yes	Yes
Grazing by domestic stock	Yes	No - except as specified by the Land Manager
Prospecting	Yes	No - except as specified by the Land Manager
Recreational hunting	Yes	No - except as specified by the Land Manager
Timber harvesting	Yes	No
Domestic firewood collection	Yes, in designated areas	Within designated areas only
Exploration and mining	Yes	No, except where a licence predates the reserve

^{*} Strathbogie Ranges Cultural Reserve uses outlined in this table may be subject to change following management review. All permissible uses will be consistent with the management purpose: to 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. Note, that in accordance with the Panel's recommendations, 'Land Manager' in this instance refers to the relevant governance function, such as Committee of Management, responsible for Strathbogie Cultural Reserve Area.

Recommendation 3

Recommend that, in the absence of a legislated Cultural Reserve land category, the Victorian Government implements a pilot approach for a Cultural Reserve for the Strathbogie Ranges IPA, as soon as practical.

This will be a process of change and transition and Taungurung want to pursue this journey in partnership with existing public land managers and the community.

The Panel recommends that this involves:

- 3.1 Enabling the following management purposes, while the Cultural Reserve category is finalised and legislated:
- 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.
- b. Restore, protect and enhance cultural values associated with features, landscapes, culturally significant species, spiritual associations and kinship relationships
- c. Protect the natural and biocultural values, including biodiversity and biocultural diversity
- d. Provide for sustainable use of natural resources where consistent with the purposes above
- e. 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
- f. Provide opportunities for recreation associated with the enjoyment of nature, and education, where consistent with the purposes above.
- 3.2 Providing a suitable basis for development of sole management by the Taungurung, through the appointment of Taungurung Land & Waters Council as a Category 1 Committee of Management
- 3.3 Taungurung to work closely with the current Land Manager, and that all existing allocated management resources remain in place to support this new pilot approach
- 3.4 Appropriate resources and support are identified and provide for the existing land manager to work with Taungurung Land & Waters Council as a partner and in a culturally safe way.
- 3.5 The Panel recommends applicable interim uses are above at Table 3 and again at Appendix 5. These may be further considered in development of enduring arrangements through legislation.

Taungurung to build relationships with local community and develop a collaborative management plan

Local communities and businesses have demonstrated to the Panel how varying, personal and deep their relationships are with the Strathbogie Ranges are. The Panel understands Taungurung is keen to get to work as soon as possible to build relationships with local communities and ensure community aspirations are considered in managing and healing Country.

Development of a contemporary management plan for the forest is essential to set clear direction for forest management and health. Taungurung will need to collaborate closely with already engaged communities as soon as practical, to build relationships in making decisions about how to heal country, support self-determination and provide guidance in this context for the undertaking of a variety of activities within the Strathbogie Ranges by community.

The Panel recommends a collaborative management planning process be initiated for completion within two years. The management plan will reflect the advice, knowledge and understanding of the local community, Taungurung Traditional Owners and land management partners.

Recommendation 4

Recommend Taungurung begin work as soon as possible to build and develop working relationships with the current land manager and local community.

This should include development of a collaborative management plan within two years, that provides guidance for managing the local needs and interests while healing and caring for Country.

This management plan should also consider the application of immediate management actions and establishing a monitoring program with community and research partners.

Resourcing for success

The Taungurung biocultural values assessment and engagement with the current Land Manager (DELWP) revealed the current poor health of Country. The Panel understands significant threats to health of Country are exacerbated by the limited capacity of the current land manager to manage those threats under the current resourcing and institutional arrangements.

Resourcing is required to support transition arrangements and to set up the conditions for success. New management, planning and collaborative governance arrangements are required to be developed during the first two years to support establishment of a Cultural Reserve and its management.

Resourcing requirements are additional to the existing budget allocations to the current land manager (DELWP), which is largely used for roading and fire protection. To meet the expectations of community and key stakeholders, a significant uplift in management of natural, cultural and social values of the Strathbogie Ranges IPA is required.

This includes active management of threatening processes including pest plants and animals, establishment of infrastructure to manage visitation and use, and delivery of educational signage and information. Complimenting this is greater land management presence in the forest. This includes for compliance and enforcement, which will be critical to support education programs and enforcement of the new management approach.

Recommendation 5

Recommend resourcing be provided to support establishment of new governance, planning and management arrangements, and active management on Country, including:

- a. funding a dedicated Executive Officer position within TLaWC to oversee the transition
- b. the establishment of collaborative governance arrangements with the Land Manager (DELWP) and the local community
- c. resources required to support community engagement and management planning processes

The Panel recommends an uplift in ongoing funding be provided to deliver comprehensive land management commensurate with strengthening all values. This includes applying both cultural and conservation practices. This includes for:

- a. the current Land Manager in partnership with Taungurung deliver interim measures to support priority works, including to manage pests and weeds in high value areas, establish infrastructure to manage recreation use at priority sites, and establish educational signage throughout the IPAs to support visitation and informed use
- b. the current Land Manager in partnership with Taungurung deliver enhanced compliance and enforcement to implement regulations and conduct education programs to inform users of the forest of the values of this area and to compliment any change in permitted uses/activities.

The rapid biocultural assessment produced by Taungurung revealed initial findings for a contemporary reading of Country. Further Reading Country work is required to understand health of Country and to develop management actions to heal and care for Country that are consistent with all values and the health of the Strathbogie Ranges IPA forest within its cultural landscape context.

There is also significant citizen science understanding, local datasets and knowledge to improve understanding of the cultural and conservation context for management. Through the relationships established through the Panel's engagement, the wealth of knowledge and information the community have developed for this forest has become apparent. The Panel recommends Taungurung, the current Land Manger (DELWP) and the community work together on developing a collective understanding of forest values and threats to these values. This will be a critical step in developing appropriate management strategies for the Strathbogie Ranges IPA.

Recommendation 6

Recommend that funding be provided to Taungurung to prepare a Reading Country assessment, building on previous work undertaken through the Values Assessment, to establish a baseline for health of Country in the Strathbogie Ranges and inform future management planning to direct the balanced use and management of the Strathbogie Ranges.



Photo: Forest of Strathbogie Ranges. Credit: DELWP

7. CONCLUSION

In compiling this report, based on extensive review of many contributions and knowledge sources between January and June 2022, the Panel anticipates opportunities into the future for a broader vision of forest management collaboration in protected areas.

The partnerships already established in local communities, the interest and desire of many people to be engaged with ensuring the health and safety of the forests of the Mirboo North and Strathbogie Ranges forests is a testament to this opportunity.

The coming together of western science and Traditional Owner practice and cultural values associated with the two IPAs addressed in this report presents opportunities for strengthening forest management. Key to the success of this new management will be strengthening Traditional Owner partnerships and management with communities, land managers, peak bodies, government agencies and people who enjoy their time in the forests.

This has been illustrated by the shared environmental knowledge provided through the commissioned VEAC Assessment of the Values for each IPA and the biocultural values assessments undertaken by both Taungurung and Gunaikurnai Traditional Owner organisations.

The challenge for the Panel has been balancing the need for long term management of conservation, Traditional Owner self-determination to activate rights and interests, and achieving balanced use of the forests for recreational and other uses.

Over the period of its engagements and information gathering, the Panel has learnt much about the potential for different ways of working and the careful, detailed effort required to progress the recommendations in this report over time.

The importance of reaching out to a range of people and organisations to understand what matters at this point of time was instrumental to the conclusions the Panel came to. It also demonstrated the importance of synthesising knowledge from diverse experiences, undertakings and work already done to fully comprehend the significance of evidence already available associated with the forests in question.

It also revealed more work is required to fully understand these forests and that there is an opportunity to build a comprehensive education and knowledge base for future decisions.

In considering its findings and conclusions, the Panel acknowledged the importance of work to be done in the next two to three years. This includes alignment of the Panel's recommendations to work underway as part of Victorian Government reform to public land legislation. As indicated in the recommendations, establishing the conditions for effective collaborative governance arrangements will take time and is an opportunity to test what is required for success.

There is further opportunity to apply this learning in other parts of the State.

The Panel believes the success of this work into the future will lead to stronger, enduring ways of working that respects and supports Traditional Owner rights and self-determination in partnership with communities across Victoria.

The Panel recognises the commitment from many people and organisations for the future of the Mirboo North and Strathbogie Ranges forests as important environmental, cultural and societal places of importance.

8. APPENDICES

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THE PANEL'S TERMS OF REFERENCE

This document is attached separately

COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT PLAN

This document is attached separately

ENGAGEMENT REPORTS

This document is attached separately

LIST OF PEAK BODY STAKEHOLDERS THE PANEL MET WITH

Peak body conversations were conducted with representatives of state and national peak bodies.

This included:

- Australian Motorcycle Trail Riders Association
- Australian Trail Horse Riders Association
- Bushwalking Victoria
- Federation of Victorian Traditional Owners
- Four Wheel Drive Victoria
- Motorcycle Victoria
- Outdoors Victoria
- The Wilderness Society
- Trust for Nature
- Victorian Apiarist Association
- Victorian Hound Hunters Association
- Victorian National Parks Association

TABLE OF USES

Table 1 – proposed permissible uses and activities for Conservation Park and Cultural Reserve and current uses and activities for State Forest

Activity	State forest (existing)	Conservation Park* (proposed)	Strathbogie Ranges Cultural Reserve** (proposed)
Bushwalking, nature observation and picnicking	Yes	Yes	Yes
Camping	Yes	Yes – in designated areas	Yes - in designated camping areas only
Car touring, including four-wheel driving on publicly available formed roads and tracks	Yes	Yes	Yes
Trail bike riding on publicly available formed roads and tracks	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mountain biking and cycling on publicly available formed roads and tracks	Yes	Yes	Yes
Horse riding on formed roads and tracks	Yes	Yes, as specified by Land Manager	Yes – unless specified by the Land Manager
Dog walking on lead	Yes	No, except as specified by Land Manager	Yes
Apiculture at licensed sites	Yes	Yes	Yes
Grazing by domestic stock	Yes	No	No - except as specified by the Land Manager
Prospecting	Yes	No	No - except as specified by the Land Manager
Recreational hunting	Yes	No	No - except as specified by the Land Manager
Timber harvesting	Yes	No	No
Domestic firewood collection	Yes, in designated areas	No	Within designated areas only
Exploration and mining	Yes	Yes, subject to National Parks Act minister's consent.	No, except where a licence predates the reserve

^{*}Conservation Park land use classification and associated uses outlined in this table may be subject to change in accordance with the outcomes of the proposed public land legislation reforms.

^{**} Strathbogie Ranges Cultural Reserve uses outlined in this table may be subject to change following management review. All permissible uses will be consistent with the management purpose: to 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. Note, that in accordance with the Panel's recommendations, 'Land Manager' in this instance refers to the relevant governance function, such as Committee of Management, responsible for Strathbogie Cultural Reserve Area.

