



Newham & District Landcare Group

PO Box 314, Woodend, VIC. 3442

Website: <http://www.newhamlandcare.info/>

18 August 2017

Victorian Environmental Assessment Council
PO Box 500
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Dear Sir / Madam

Submission to VEAC's Central West investigation

Newham and District Landcare Group (NDLG) began in 2004 with a stated vision "to enhance biodiversity and natural ecosystems within the local environment", which is in line with VEAC's stated purposes to "*a) identify and evaluate the condition, natural and biodiversity values and cultural, social and economic values and the current uses of public land in the specified area*" and *b) make recommendations for the balanced use and appropriate management arrangements to conserve and enhance the natural and cultural values.*"

Following our Secretary Helen Scott's participation in the community drop-in session on 27 July in Woodend, NDLG is pleased to make this submission to VEAC's investigation.

We argue strongly that the personal and economic wellbeing of all Victorians is dependent on the health of the natural environment. Macedon Ranges Shire has a unique and beautiful environment with high biodiversity values. These come from a diverse geology supporting varied flora and fauna species. However the environment is under constant threat from development pressures, proximity to Melbourne, destructive practices, and inappropriate tourism strategies. For example the Macedon Ranges Shire Council's (MRSC) draft *Macedon Ranges Visitor Economy Future Directions Paper 2017-2027* (offline as comments closed 14 August) repeatedly talked of nature based offerings being a key attraction and proposed several strategies exploiting natural resources (eg a chair lift, more rock climbing, yoga at Hanging Rock, horse trail rides, camping), without a mention of environmental protection. Preservation of priceless, significant but vanishing ecosystems is vital.

NDLG is one of many Landcare groups energetically working on programs relating to biodiversity and catchment management, with biolinks being a major focus. A major strategic focus for NDLG is the Campaspe-Maribyrnong Headwaters Bio-link project. This aims to establish "a network of native vegetation linking Macedon Regional Park with Cobaw

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Forest via Hanging Rock Reserve” and to improve water quality in the Maribyrnong and Campaspe river catchments. To this end funding grants in the order of \$500,000 have been secured and administered since 2005 to support on-ground works within the Biolink area. This Biolink is in line with the documented strategies of both Port Philip & Westernport and North Central Catchment Management Authorities and matches the Cobaw Biolink as identified in MRSC Planning Scheme.

The high significance of southern Australian highland areas is becoming more apparent as scientists are considering the impacts of climate change on biodiversity. Recent modelling is showing that the higher-elevation areas of Victoria will be very important climate refuges for species (Reside et al, 2013 - *Climate change refugia for terrestrial biodiversity* <http://www.academia.edu/download/39263531/00b7d51a2ea7231d9b000000.pdf>). This highlights the added importance of managing these landscapes for their ecological values and enhancing landscape connectivity so species can move to these refugial areas.

NDLG works on both public and private land. It is public land that provides the framework for rebuilding connectivity across a central Victorian landscape that is largely cleared. Our submission addresses the Cobaw Forest, Macedon Regional Park and Hanging Rock Reserve, stressing the importance of the latter within the Campaspe-Maribyrnong Headwaters Biolink. The Campaspe-Maribyrnong Headwaters Biolink is a key area within Victoria as a whole, enabling connectivity between the Wombat Forest and the Great Eastern Ranges Initiative.

We argue that rural roadsides as public land also deserve better protection. Endangered species have been identified and are technically protected under the state Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988, under review, and the federal Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999. However current management by local government and VicRoads contractors is causing incremental, ongoing damage.

We support Wombat Forestcare Inc’s arguments in support of the Wombat Forest being protected under the National Parks Act 1975. It is a vital part of the Central Victorian Biolinks Network, of which NDLG is a member.

Cobaw State Forest

We recommend that the Cobaw State Forest be protected under the National Parks Act 1995 to reflect its high conservation values and as part of a vital link of landscape connectivity in central Victoria’s fragmented landscape.

It is a moderately sized area of native vegetation (2,220 hectares) in a surrounding landscape that is largely cleared, and so provides vital habitat for a diverse range of native flora and fauna. We argue that its size means it is not viable for commercial forestry use. The forest is almost totally comprised of threatened vegetation types with the depleted Herb-rich Foothill Forest widespread and the vulnerable Valley Grassy Forest also common. Both these vegetation types are under-represented in the conservation reserve system.

Threatened fauna species within the forest include Eastern Pygmy-possum, Powerful Owl,

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Brush-tailed Phascogale and Brown Treecreeper (south-eastern ssp.). Threatened flora includes the Weak Daisy (*Brachyscome debilis*).

Proximity to Melbourne and its suburban spread, to Sunbury for example, means that the Cobaws and Macedon Regional Park are under ever-increasing pressure as a first port of call for recreational use.

A quick web search on Cobaw State Forest shows its popularity with 4Wdrive clubs and trail bike riders, with some photos of “adventures” to be had involving vehicles in deeply rutted tracks and muddy camping. Such current recreational use has caused immense damage. Although it is illegal to ride motorbikes and drive 4WD vehicles off-road in all Victorian state forests, tracks additional to those mapped as permissible have been created, resulting in massive erosion and destruction of habitat. Mapped tracks that could be used for management and fire emergencies are becoming impassable. Clear information on permitted and illegal activities is not readily available. For example, the Cobaw Trail Bike Visitor Area with signs (TBVA) is available only at the southern end of the Cobaw Range. Firewood collection is not allowed but occurs illegally.

An enforcement presence should be maintained on holidays and weekends. Occasional policing is publicised (eg 26/10/2016 <https://www.forestsandreserves.vic.gov.au/media-releases/dont-bet-against-the-odds-when-visiting-state-forests-this-weekend>) but has not prevented illegal activity. Cameras are increasingly used for wildlife monitoring. **NDLG recommends consideration of concealed cameras on public land for monitoring compliance.**

Pest animals are another threat to biodiversity in the Forest. Goats, feral pigs and deer are known to cause serious damage as do rabbits and foxes. Shooting is one management option but is an intrusive and potentially dangerous activity in any forest open to the public. It therefore needs to be tightly controlled as in the Parks Victoria program to cull deer in collaboration with Sporting Shooters Association of Australia and the Australian Deer Association in Victorian State Parks.

The issue of fire management is well-canvassed, particularly since the Cobaw Ranges fire in 2015. Hot fires and many fuel reduction burn targets are counterproductive, and **we support the arguments, evidence and recommended actions put forward by Central Victorian Biolinks Alliance under *Fire management* in their submission to VEAC.**

Although currently designated as a Special Protection Zone, the Cobaw State Forest requires further protection of its conservation values. Hence our recommendation that it be protected under the National Parks Act 1995.

Macedon Regional Park

Macedon Regional Park protects 2,379 ha of native vegetation near southern end of the Great Dividing Range. Its altitude and size give it the capacity to be a significant refuge for native species. It is significant part of large-scale landscape connectivity in Central Victoria, providing links via Hanging Rock Reserve to the Cobaw forest and beyond. The smaller

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bushland patches nearby, such as Stanley Park, have high conservation value as habitat for species to live and breed, and as stepping stones across landscapes which have become fragmented.

NDLG recommends that the Macedon Regional Park be protected under the National Parks Act 1995 to reflect its high conservation values and as part of a vital link of landscape connectivity in central Victoria's fragmented landscape.

Table 1 of *The Macedon Regional Park Management Statement 2009*

(http://parkweb.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0015/313341/Macedon-Regional-Park-Strategic-Management-Statement-2009.pdf) is a Summary of recreation activities permitted in management zones. Zone 3 - Conservation and water catchment areas, 82% of the Park, has major and minor visitor nodes. It permits a limited range of recreational activities subject to special conditions to protect water supply values.

We submit that motorised trail bikes and horse riding are incompatible with conservation and water supply values in Management Zone 3 of Macedon Regional Park and recommend they be removed from the list.

Hanging Rock

Since the 1987 reservation of Hanging Rock Reserve for water access and recreation there have been major advances in the science of biodiversity conservation which we believe warrant reclassification of HRR to indicate its importance ecologically and as a key component of landscape connectivity between Cobaw State Forest and Macedon Regional Park.

HRR has an inordinately important role in maintaining a resilient landscape. This is out of proportion to its size due to the varied habitats that lie within - open grassland, wooded areas and rocky outcrops are all present - and because it lies within a predominately cleared broader landscape that is largely privately owned.

In the Central Victorian Uplands bioregion only 29% of its native vegetation remains, but disproportionate clearing of certain types of vegetation has occurred. Only 2.1% of Plains Grassy Woodlands remains (once 50%) and only 25% of the original extent of Herb Rich Foothill forest. The ecosystems present at HRR are not protected elsewhere in the bioregion.

As a result of its 1987 classification (reserved for water access and recreation) HRR is managed by the MRSC Department of Recreation and Sport. Budget allocations and the focus of management have been sport, recreation and tourism whilst the 'environmental' values of the site have largely been ignored.

We support the arguments and recommendations made in the submission by Friends of Hanging Rock to VEAC.

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NDLG recommends that the classification of Hanging Rock Reserve be changed to indicate the significance of its natural assets (geological, ecological) and its importance in landscape scale connectivity.

Summary of recommendations

- We support Wombat Forestcare Inc's arguments in support of the Wombat Forest being protected under the National Parks Act 1975. It is a vital part of the Central Victorian Biolinks Network, of which NDLG is a member.
- We recommend that the Cobaw State Forest be protected under the National Parks Act 1995 to reflect its high conservation values and as part of a vital link of landscape connectivity in central Victoria's fragmented landscape.
- An enforcement presence (in Cobaw State Park) should be maintained on holidays and weekends.
- NDLG recommends consideration of concealed cameras on public land for monitoring compliance.
- We support the arguments, evidence and recommended actions put forward by Central Victorian Biolinks Alliance under *Fire management* in their submission to VEAC.
- NDLG recommends that the Macedon Regional Park be protected under the National Parks Act 1995 to reflect its high conservation values and as part of a vital link of landscape connectivity in central Victoria's fragmented landscape.
- We submit that motorised trail bikes and horse riding are incompatible with conservation and water supply values in Management Zone 3 of Macedon Regional Park and recommend they be removed from the list.
- We support the arguments and recommendations made in the submission by Friends of Hanging Rock to VEAC.
- NDLG recommends that the classification of Hanging Rock Reserve be changed to indicate the significance of its natural assets (geological, ecological) and its importance in landscape scale connectivity.

Yours sincerely



Helen Scott
Secretary, Newham & District Landcare Group

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