



## *Newham & District Landcare Group*

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### **Response to the Macedon Ranges Draft Environment Strategy**

Newham and District Landcare Group (NDLG) began in 1994 with a stated vision “to enhance biodiversity and natural ecosystems within the local environment”. With this in mind we are responding particularly to the Strategy’s key themes of Biodiversity; Catchment Management; and Resource Efficiency. The group and its members are also keenly interested in the theme of Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation, but support the work and echo the submissions of the Macedon Ranges Sustainability Group. We do not see much by way of a plan arising from the policy statement on energy hierarchy on p13.

Recognising that this Strategy is designed to be a high level policy guide rather than a detailed action plan, we commend the Background paper of the Strategy as a useful document, with greater detail such as legislative and governance context for each of the themes. **We recommend that it remain available on the Council website**, along with the accompanying Fact sheets and discussion paper (*A new environment strategy for Macedon Ranges Shire discussion paper: background, context and scope*), which are no longer online. The search engine of the website does not return documents that would be useful, not even the *Natural Environment Strategy 2009-2012*, which has a wealth of information (it was eventually found via an unlikely page at [http://www.mrsc.vic.gov.au/Waste\\_Environment/Weeds/Roadside\\_Weeds](http://www.mrsc.vic.gov.au/Waste_Environment/Weeds/Roadside_Weeds)). By comparison there is a wealth of industry and business strategies available online in an obvious fashion. Notwithstanding Council reasons for needing a new environment strategy (outlined in the first discussion paper) the draft strategy, missing the word “Natural” must not give the Council a way of avoiding spending on an already underfunded area.

What is lacking is a vision of the goal towards which all is directed. We would like to see a much stronger vision statement at the start of the Strategy on why the unique and beautiful environment of the Macedon Ranges Shire is so important – for the wellbeing of residents and the wider community, for passive recreation and tourism... and most importantly preservation of priceless, significant but vanishing ecosystems. The first paragraph in the Biodiversity chapter (p17) does go some way towards this but could be stated at the outset. The personal wellbeing and the economic wellbeing of Victoria are dependent on the health of the natural environment.

**RECOMMENDATION: a strong vision statement**

We strongly urge, and hope to see, the stated vision of the current strategy realised: *“A place where council leads by example and works with the community to maximise improved **environmental outcomes in all aspects of life**”* (p7) - we ask **“what are the environmental outcomes?”** This phrase re-occurs often, but it is not clear what is meant – are they plans?

Unfortunately the new stated vision has not been borne out by experience to date, with very many examples of bad practice (ie NOT leading by example) and lack of meaningful community consultation. NDLG has documented, with photographs, and drawn to Council’s attention, many results of poor practices involving, for example, roadwork drainage and crossover excavation, dumping of spoils and introduction of weeds (on local roads which are Council’s responsibility), destruction of habitat and inappropriate planting in reserves eg Hanging Rock.

NDLG supports the Strategic directions (p7), particularly *“working in a coordinated manner to continuously improve Council’s environmental performance”* and *“partner with the community to deliver a shared vision for a healthier environment”*. Re-framing these as questions *“to be considered by staff in everyday work and by the executive team and Council in decision-making forums”* is a good idea. Being able to update the individual chapters (p7) and providing flexibility for future additional ones is also a worthwhile idea. **NDLG recommends that the strategy should note that when nominating individual themes for updating in future, those updates must include community consultation** (top of page 7).

The first dot point under *“Some key principles”* (p8) should read that the environment strategy should **mandate** the principles to be included in the Council Plan, not *inform*.

Under *“All-of-Council”* actions (p8), add at the end of 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph **“and planning decisions and permit conditions”**. NDLG believes that some planning outcomes are not taking due consideration of environmental outcomes and are driven by financial considerations including maximising the rate base.

Third paragraph p8 – insert *“environmental”* ie *..utilise opportunities provided through programs and partnerships and grants to implement **environmental projects***.

Remove *“where suitable”* which is a weasel phrase rendering the intention worthless. Similarly the words *“as much as possible”* which occur for example in CM1 p30, need to be deleted from any action – they provide a cop-out.

Under the themes of Biodiversity and Catchment Management, there is little to argue with about expressed Objectives and Policy statements, as long as they are in fact acted upon. The following (bolded) should be added to the first policy statement (p23) - *Council recognises the many values of the Shire’s unique biodiversity, and will regard its protection and enhancement as a key outcome when making decisions, **particularly in the area of Planning and Development applications for permits.***

In addition, at the fifth policy statement (p23), no.3 *Offset unavoidable loss of native vegetation through securing remnant native vegetation and facilitating revegetation within the Shire*, add **“by use of Planning Conditions”**.

The meaning of the fourth policy statement (p23) is unclear- *Council will apply best practice adaptive management and conservation techniques for protecting biodiversity and managing threats, including integration and coordination of programs across the organisation*. What is adaptive management?

As always, the devil is in the detail, so the priority ratings for Key Actions are the important bits. Consequently NDLG is very pleased to see a roadside management plan (B2, p25) rated as not too expensive (\$25,000-50,000) and for immediate action. Driven to despair by the ongoing degradation of rural roadsides, two of our members presented a Budget submission for an RMP unsuccessfully to Council in June 2015. NDLG has long argued for progression of the very good draft RMP drafted in the mid 1990's, and has commissioned and paid for surveys of significant roadsides. Our website outlines the active campaign we have been running on protection of rural roadsides, with newsletters, papers and media articles available online (<http://www.newhamlandcare.info/roadsides.htm>). An RMP would at last document what significant vegetation is left to save and inform any future actions, particularly when fear of fire risk is used to justify clearing more native roadside vegetation.

Unfortunately, to date we do not believe that the many roadside-related Council strategies, plans and actions (eg Weed and Pest Animals, Vehicle Hygiene Manual, annual roadside weed program, signs for significant roadside vegetation) have been sufficiently acted upon or effective. To appropriately manage the issues of road safety, fire control and biodiversity, it is vital that roads with remnant, diverse native vegetation are recognised, assessed, mapped and management plans formulated to protect them.

**NDLG recommends immediate development of a roadside management plan in partnership with Landcare and community groups already working on rural roadside preservation.**

There are many other tasks indicated for development of a Biodiversity Strategy (p24-25). **NDLG recommends that a landscape connectivity plan be an important priority**, rather than just part of a program developing a biodiversity strategy (Action B1, p24). We note an absence of discussion on riparian zones and stress their importance in landscape connectivity. The discussion on *Managing the Shire's biodiversity* (p21-22) says *connectivity is provided by roadside vegetation, streamside vegetation and waterways, as well as native vegetation on private land and public reserves (including Council owned land)*. **NDLG recommends adding strategically planned biolinks**. Biolinks are a major focus of environmental and Landcare groups in Victorian shires which lead the way in excellent work and should be supported as per Action B8 p25 (*Continue to support the work of Landcare and Friends groups...*).

We agree with Ross Colliver (Riddells Creek Landcare) that a cautionary note is needed on getting caught up in detailed planning and building monitoring processes when areas of bush are being degraded now and action is needed to protect these. It is to be hoped that *"Reviewing the application and effectiveness of local policy and controls for biodiversity in the Macedon Ranges Planning Scheme"* (p24) will be addressed by the current Ministerial Review set up by the Minister for Planning (<http://www.dtpli.vic.gov.au/planning/panels-and-committees/current-panels-and-committees/macedon-ranges-protection-advisory-committee>)

On *"Continue to implement the Weed and Pest Animal Strategy..."* (B5, p25) (which again, is not listed by a search on the website, only by a serendipitous look at a page called Roadside weeds), we note that weeds is an area where Council does cooperate with Landcare groups (eg through funding them to work on weeds), but we think much more needs to be done. NDLG argues that feral should include cats and dogs, and despite a survey for a curfew on cats and dogs having over 550 submissions which recommended a night curfew no curfew has been enacted. Yarra Ranges Council for example has a strong policy (<http://www.yarraranges.vic.gov.au/Property/Pets/Cat-curfew>). There is no mention of

invasive birds and the efforts being made to combat them, for example Myna trapping by Landcare groups locally.

Under key actions for resource efficiency (p33) **NDLG recommends adding “improve website indexing, archiving and search engine capacity.”**

The Priority “P” for Program has no meaning or ability to monitor unless a timeframe is included. The statement “*to be included in the Council’s work program, subject to funds and resources*” is not enforceable or monitorable to convey urgency. **NDLG urges the strategy to nominate a financial year that can only be varied with community agreement and financial justification.**

NDLG is happy to participate in nominating a timeline in the forward plan to give certainty to the recommendations in the strategy.

## **Community input**

NDLG supports the idea that the Shire needs to own the issues and provide leadership, in articulating direction for example. **We are adamant that Council needs to commit to work more closely with community groups, to integrate their energy and expertise and to acknowledge this.** The draft strategy spells out many actions supporting the work of community groups, but nothing particularly new or immediate – rather - more business as usual. For example:

*“Continue to support the work of landcare and Friends groups for biodiversity protection and enhancement ....(B8, p25) (seen as ongoing with no costs outlined); “Review Council’s Landcare and Environmental Friends Group support program to ensure it aligns with Council and community goals for improving health of land and waterways” (CM3 p30); “Support and promote community or agency initiatives for resource efficiency, within the capacity of council resources” (RE5, p34).*

A key action under Catchment Management is “*Promote and facilitate the application of existing best practice guidelines and codes of practice for different land uses, for example, through Caring for Country: A Guide for sustainable land management in central Victoria, and in Council’s new farmer kit*” (CM5 p30) – we would also use the example of pamphlets on Weeds, Maintaining our Roadsides (not online) and others. It is good to have guidelines to give to people, especially new residents, but community education is much more than this – for instance what targeted action is needed to help Council, agencies and community groups work together to get good practices adopted?

The (preliminary) Communications and Engagement Framework distinguishes (p35) between *communication* (to raise awareness), *engagement* (to facilitate action), and *partnership* (for collaborative planning and action), with an indication of the kind of involvement that will be sought with various audiences cum stakeholders (p36).

For Landcare/Friends Groups working on public land, “Engagement/Partnerships” is proposed. Hopefully that might mean talking with Landcare groups when making specific plans, to tap their understanding of their local biodiversity and what will best protect it. There has always

been great community willingness and expertise to draw on, with many Landcare groups for instance energetically working on programs relating to biodiversity and catchment management.

For Landholders/Landcare groups working on private land, only “Communication/Engagement” is the level indicated. We acknowledge again Ross Colliver (Riddells Creek Landcare) who asks:

“...surely Landcare groups, being made up of private landholders, often people experienced in good land management, are in a good position to contribute to decisions about how to improve management of private land, and warrant a level of collaboration for joint planning of at least some action within the Shire? For example, to decide the mix of actions that might best *“Promote and facilitate the application of existing best practice guidelines and codes of practice for different land uses”*.”

We note that the Environment Committee was disbanded, and **recommend consideration be given to establishing a new one, and that in addition to engaging stakeholder groups it be involved in the processes for implementing Strategy goals and evaluation** (evaluation processes described on p37>).

All of us have a stake in the environment we care deeply for. NDLG wants to see more Shire resources directed to actions rather than strategies, and a more equitable balance struck between environment and industry/business. To reiterate an earlier statement: “The personal wellbeing and the economic wellbeing of Victoria are dependent on the health of the natural environment.”



Nick Massie, President, and Committee members,  
on behalf of Newham and District Landcare Group.

## **SUMMARY OF NDLG RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **A strong vision statement**

**The strategy to note that when nominating individual themes for updating in future, those updates must include community consultation**

**The environment strategy should mandate the principles to be included in the Council Plan, not *inform*.**

**Background paper, Discussion paper, Fact sheets to remain available on the Council website**

**Improve website indexing, archiving and search engine capacity**

**NDLG recommends immediate development of a roadside management plan in partnership with Landcare and community groups already working on rural roadside preservation**

**NDLG recommends that a landscape connectivity plan be an immediate priority**

**NDLG recommends adding riparian zones and strategically planned biolinks to biodiversity plans**

**For Priority P (Program), nominate a financial year that can only be varied with community agreement and financial justification.**

**NDLG recommends that Council must commit to work more closely with community groups, to integrate their energy and expertise and to acknowledge this**

**NDLG recommends consideration be given to establishing a new Environment Committee, which in addition to engaging stakeholder groups is involved in the processes for implementing Strategy goals and evaluation.**