

The Future of Deer Hunting in Victorian State Forests

Part I – Legislative Background and Intent of Reforms

INTRODUCTION

1. This is part-one of a three-part series regarding the Future of Deer Hunting in Victorian State Forests. The aim of this part is to brief readers on several complex topics in a straightforward manner. The series will comprise:

Part 1: Legislative Background and Intent of Future Reforms.

Part 2: Analysis of Issue and Risks to Future Hunting Access.

Part 3: Engagement Strategy to Shape Key Stakeholders

BACKGROUND

2. **Statewide Assessment of Public Land.** MP Lily D'Ambrosio was the Environment Minister from May 2016 – Dec 2022 and directed several Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) investigations. The Council is made up of five members including a Chairperson; the current Chairperson is Melissa Wood. The role of the Council is to *'conduct investigations, assessments and provide advice as requested by the Victorian Government relating to the protection and ecologically sustainable management of the environment and natural resources of public land'* [\[LINK\]](#).

3. MP Lily D'Ambrosio first directed a Statewide Assessment of Public Land in September 2014 [\[LINK\]](#) where the Terms of Reference required *'an inventory on the types of values on public land'* [\[LINK\]](#). VEAC was given until February 2017 (2 years and 5 months) to conduct this Statewide Assessment including public consultation regarding a discussion paper [\[LINK\]](#) which outlined the following recreational hunting values:

- a. Page 91: There is significant hunting (deer, native ducks, quail and pest animals) on public land in Victoria.
- b. Pages 102-105: FY 2013-14 Recreational Hunting: \$439m gross state product of which 60% expenditure occurs in regional Victoria. 1,115 FTE jobs directly from hunting with 1,268 flow-on employment. Total hunting impact of 2,382 jobs.

4. **Conservation Values of State Forests.** MP D'Ambrosio requested a second VEAC assessment concerning the State Forest Conservation Values in September 2016 [\[LINK\]](#). This assessment was to be conducted concurrently to the Statewide Assessment of Public Land and did not include mandatory consultation requirements (Para 1.3.2, [\[LINK\]](#)). The Conservation Values Assessment *'was to focus specifically on biodiversity and ecological values'* and recreational, social and economic *'values and considerations are therefore not included in the assessment'* (para 1.3.4). Page 19 states *'State forests in the Central Highlands, South Gippsland and East Gippsland almost completely comprise land in the highest category of contribution to forest biodiversity conservation'* and Page 34 lists *recreation* as a threatening process or disturbance. No distinction is made between the types of recreation with conservation value (eg, hunting of invasive species) and those without. VEAC was

given 5 months to assess the Conservation Values of State Forests with the final report being delivered in February 2017.

5. Both the Statewide Assessment of Public Land and the Conservation Values of State Forests were due for Government consideration February 2017 per their terms of reference. The Conservation Values of State Forests was delivered on time in February 2017 whereas the Statewide Assessment of Public Land was delivered two months late (April, 2017). It is possible that the short notice tasking of VEAC to assess the Conservation Values impacted their ability to deliver the Statewide Assessment on schedule.

6. **Victorian Forestry Plan.** The Andrews Government released the Victorian Forestry Plan [\[LINK\]](#) in November 2019; this plan:

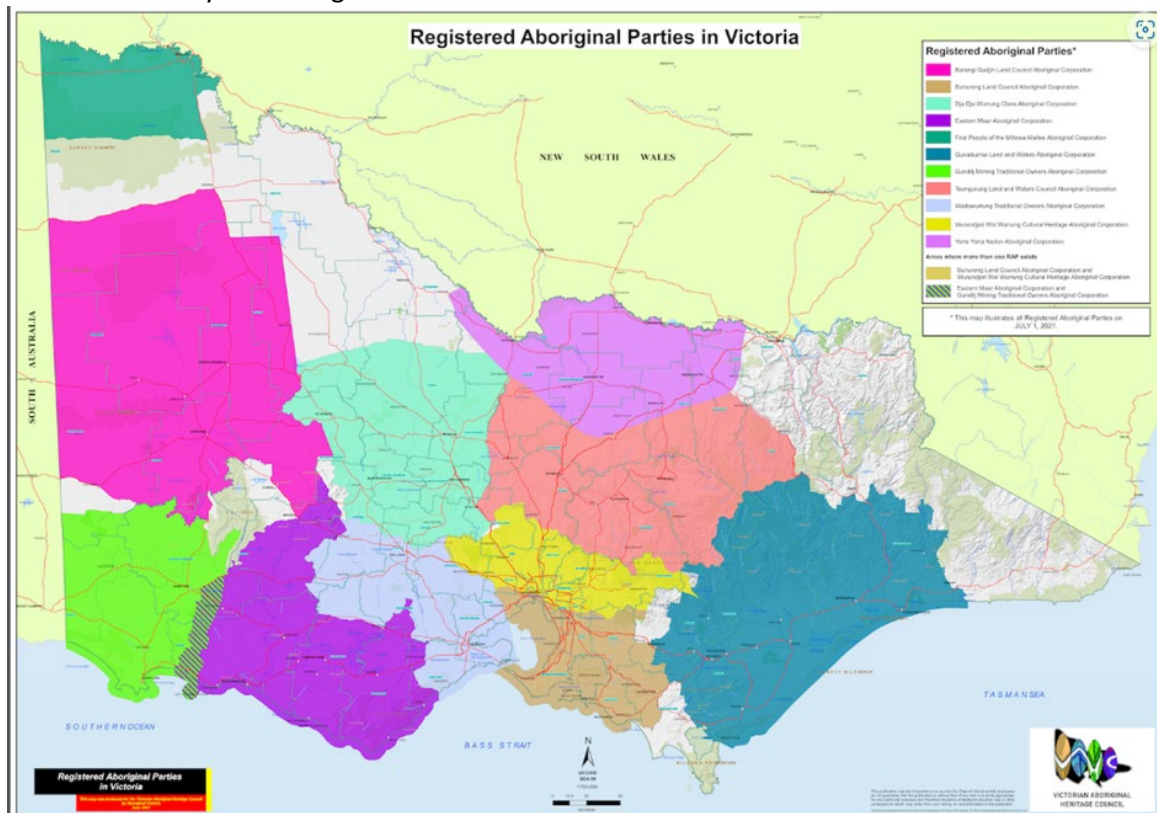
- a. Announced the end of logging by 2030 (later accelerated to 01 Jan 2024), and
- b. Established the Immediate Protection Areas [\[LINK\]](#) of:
 - i. Mirboo North (420 hectares),
 - ii. Strathbogrie Ranges (23,000 hectares),
 - iii. Central Highlands (52,000 hectares), and
 - iv. East Gippsland (72,000 hectares)

7. Hunting is currently permitted in all four IPAs pictured below.



8. **Cultural Landscapes Strategy.** In August 2021 the Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations (FVTOC) released the Cultural Landscapes Strategy [\[LINK\]](#) which outlines a desire for more involvement in the management of state land within native title claims or settlement agreements and the means for a greater degree of self-determination. The Strategy outlines aspirations such as sole indigenous management of public land and cultural covenants on private land (Pages 31, 33). Two Victorian Governments appear to broadly support Cultural Landscape values

and they are likely considered a key component of progression towards the Victorian treaty [\[LINK\]](#), which is currently under negotiation.



9. The Sustainable Hunting Action Plan 2021-2024. The Sustainable Hunting Action Plan (SHAP) 2021-2024 [\[LINK\]](#) is a \$5.3 million investment that will deliver new programs to support safe, responsible and sustainable hunting across the Victoria. The 21-24 SHAP succeeds the 2016-20 SHAP and was released by The Hon Mary-Anne Thomas, MP (the Minister for Agriculture), through the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions in November 2021. The 21-24 SHAP stated that the Government would release a Game Regulatory Reform Roadmap at the same time as the Draft Game Regulations for consultation in 2022. This never occurred. Instead, the Wildlife (Game) Regulations were authorised on an interim basis on 09 Sep 23. The Game Regulatory Reform Roadmap was *'intended to explore future regulatory and legislative reforms and opportunities for game processing, stakeholder engagement, representation and more'* (Page 15). The SHAP 2016-20 also supported the production of two key documents:

a. The Traditional Owner Game Management Strategy [TOGMS, [LINK](#)]. The TOGMS was produced in consultation with the Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations. The TOGMS *'sets out how Victorian Government departments and agencies will partner with Traditional Owners to deliver practical actions that build Traditional Owner participation in hunting, land management and conservation'*. Similarly to the Cultural Landscapes Strategy, the TOGMS' themes include: co-governance, collaborative management and project resourcing/funding. The TOGMS gives some aboriginal perspective on game hunting:

i. *'Traditional Owners consider deer as animals which negatively impact on the health of Country causing destruction to delicate and endangered ecosystems and risks to associated cultural values.'*

- ii. *Elders noted that shooting multiple animals to waste (rather than shooting one or a small number of individuals for food) was not well aligned to cultural norms. However, as part of a holistic approach to healing or restoring and managing Country, there need be no cultural issue with controlling deer to reduce their impact on the health of Country.*

b. Economic Contribution of Recreational Hunting in Victoria [ECRHV, [LINK](#)]. The ECRHV was released in Jun 2020. It found:

- i. *'Victorian Game Licence Holders contribute to regional economies across Victoria'*
- ii. The contribution of game hunting to Gross State Product (GSP) is \$356m and 3,138 jobs.
- iii. 69% of hunting expenditure occurred in the regions (\$244m).
- iv. Derr hunters contributed 56% of the economic activity at \$201m.
- v. There are over 50,000 game license holders and over 40,000 licensed deer hunters (Page 31).
- vi. Some hunters would substitute their economic expenditure if hunting were banned, but that Victoria would still lose \$19-57m GSP and 246-627 jobs (Page 24).
- vii. Hunting activities improved the social capital, personal wellbeing and general health of participants.

10. Appendix 3 of the 21-24 SHAP found that hunting contributed positively to general health, personal wellbeing and the social capital of hunters.

INTENT OF FUTURE REFORMS

11. **Victorian Public Land Legislation Renewal** [[LINK](#)]. The Victorian Government opened consultation on public land legislation renewal for 37 days over 08 Apr – 14 May 2021 [[LINK](#)]. The renewal proposed replacing three existing Crown Land Acts (the Crown Land (Reserves) Act 1978, Forests Act 1958 and Land Act 1958) with a new Public Land Act which will operate alongside the National Parks Act 1975. The consultation found the current Acts are out of date and no longer fit-for-purpose with general support for reforming Victoria's public land legislation. The consultation report does not explore contemporary views and values of public land.

12. The two previous Environment Ministers, MPs Lily D'Ambrosio and Ingrid Stitt, intended to receive advice regarding Renewal of Victoria's Pubic Land Legislation through the following mechanism:

- a. The VEAC provides an interim assessment of conservation and biodiversity values of Immediate Protection Areas and identifies appropriate land use categories, releasing an interim report;

- b. An independent panel considers VEAC’s interim report, conducts community engagement then provides recommendations for IPA land classification and permitted use; and
- c. The VEAC produces a final report that includes an economic assessment of the independent panel’s recommendations.

13. The Government would then to consider both the VEAC and community engagement reports when developing a new Victorian Public Land Act.

14. **The Eminent Panel for Community Engagement (EPCE).** The Eminent Panel for Community Engagement [[LINK](#)] was established in August 2021 to provide written advice and recommendations to the Minister Environment concerning land classification and permissible use of State Forests and IPAs. The EPCE consists of:

- a. A representative from each of the Gunaikurnai, Taungurung and Bunurong Aboriginal Corporations
- b. Melissa Wood (VEAC Chair), and
- c. Karen Cain (Eminent Panel Chair).

15. The Eminent Panel considers:

- a. Findings of scientific assessments of the VEAC,
- b. opportunities for the management of public land by Traditional Owners, managing to cultural values,
- c. environmental protections, including protecting habitat and for biodiversity,
- d. the potential for cultural overlays,
- e. commitments of key policies, and
- f. providing for the wide range of community uses of forest areas.

16. **IPA Assessment Progress.** The VEAC and EPCE’s reports for the Strathbogie Ranges and Mirboo North IPAs are complete. The VEAC has released an interim report for the Central Highlands IPA; the EPCE’s recommendations are due sometime in June 24 and the VEAC’s final report including economic assessment is due July 24 per Table 1 below.

VEAC and EPCE Public Land Legislation Advice and Recommendations			
	VEAC Interim Report	EPCE Recommendations	VEAC Final Report
Strathbogie Ranges and Mirboo North	Superseded by final report and no longer available.	Future uses of our forest and immediate protection areas Engage Victoria	Assessment of the Values of the Strathbogie Ranges and Mirboo North

			Immediate Protection Areas
Central Highlands	Assessment of the values of state forests in the Central Highlands	TBA June 24	TBA NLT 31 Jul 24

Table 1: VEAC and EPCE Public Land Legislation Advice and Recommendations Documents

17. The EPCE Final Report for Mirboo North and the Strathbogie Ranges made recommendations towards joint management of conservation and cultural reserves by aboriginal corporations, funding to aboriginal reading country assessments and funding for additional land management staffing, including indigenous executive officers and rangers from EPCE aboriginal corporations. The EPCE also recommended converting Mirboo to a Conservation Reserve and the Strathbogie Ranges to a Cultural Reserve. The impact of the proposed changes on the IPA and surrounding state forests is detail in Table 2 below:

Activity	Current Classification	Proposed Re-Classification	
	State Forest	Conservation Park (Mirboo North)	Cultural Reserve (Strathbogie Ranges)
Recreational Hunting	Permitted	Banned	Banned, except as specified by the 'land manager'.

Table 2: Proposed VEAC and EPCE Public Land Use Categories

18. **Values and Future Management of Mirboo North.** Although public hunting is currently allowed, Mirboo North IPA was considered unsuitable for hunting by VEAC's due to the IPA's size of 400 hectares and proximity to the Mirboo North township. Consequently, VEAC did not consider hunting to be of economic or social value in Mirboo North (Page 10) and did not conduct an economic impact assessment on the EPCE's proposed hunting ban in their Final Report.

19. **Values and Future Management of the Strathbogie Ranges.** The EPCE's Strathbogie Ranges Final Report recommended an 'interim pilot arrangement' for a Cultural Reserve in the Strathbogie Ranges IPA. The VEAC Final Report recommended that, as part of this interim arrangement, recreational hunting would access would not change for an interim period of 1-3 years, after which hunting access would be reviewed and potentially banned or restricted. Because the EPCE and VEAC had recommended that hunting access would not immediately change, it was concluded that there was no economic impact of hunting use reclassification of the Strathbogie Ranges, and an economic impact assessment was not conducted.

20. **Values and Future Management of the Central Highlands.** At the time of writing, we are awaiting the EPCE final report for the Central Highlands and VEAC's Final Report that includes an economic assessment of the EPCE's recommendations.

21. **The Great Forest National Park (GFNP).** The GFNP is a proposal by the Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA). The VNPA is a private, not-for-profit, incorporated lobby group. It campaigns for 300,000 hectares of State Forest in the Victorian Central Highlands to be reclassified as

a National Park [\[LINK\]](#). The VNPA has spent approximately the last 10 years campaigning for the GFNP Proposal. The GFNP proposal is not currently being directly considered by Government. The GFNP Proposal has been commonly confused with VEAC and the EPCE's *Values and Future Management of the Central Highlands* assessment and recommendations. These are two separate campaigns:

- a. The VEAC and EPCE efforts are requests for assessment and advice from two previous Labor Environment Ministers to enable renewal of Victorian public land legislation whilst supporting Aboriginal self-determination.
- b. The GFNP proposal is conservation activism to secure more National Park.

22. The VNPA made efforts to influence the EPCE's community engagement efforts in the Central Highlands to elevate the GFNP proposal and other conservation values.

23. **Values and Future Management of East Gippsland.** It is unlikely the VEAC and EPCE effort will be repeated for the East Gippsland IPA as there is currently no registered aboriginal party settlement agreement or native title award for East Gippsland. The VEAC and the EPCE's advice to the environment minister regarding public land legislation renewal is likely to conclude with delivery of VEAC's Central Highlands Final Report circa Jul 2024.

24. **The Great Outdoors Taskforce.** The current Minister for Environment, MP Steve Dimopoulos, is also the Minister for Outdoor Recreation and Tourism. MP Dimopoulos is required to consider VEAC and the EPCE's recommendations for Mirboo North, the Strathbogie Ranges and the Central Highlands during his tenure. MP Dimopoulos appointed of the Great Outdoors Taskforce (GOT) on 01 April 24, potentially to offset a perceived biocultural bias in the VEAC's assessments and EPCE recommendations. The GOT will be chaired by former Victorian Minister for Environment Lisa Neville [\[LINK\]](#) and is likely to contain the same board members as the EPCE in addition to:

- a. Graham Dear, Board Chair of the Victorian Fisheries Authority; and
- b. Terry Robinson, CEO of Destination Gippsland.

25. The GOT is the EPCE with the addition of fishing and tourism statutory authorities. The GOT *"will consider opportunities to protect the environment and support recreational, social and commercial opportunities in their recommendations to Government"*. Interestingly, Destination Gippsland's office is in Mirboo North. The GOT's engagement strategy is currently unknown but is forecast to deliver recommendations within 12 months from its announcement. This timeframe would:

- a. Enable delivery of the EPCE's Final Report for the Central Highlands prior to forming GOT recommendations,
- b. Enable delivery of VEAC's Final Report and Economic Assessment of the EPCE's recommendations for the Central Highlands prior to forming GOT recommendations, and

- c. Prohibit the tasking of VEAC and forming of another EPCE to consider East Gippsland before forming GOT recommendations.

FUTURE WORK

26. An analysis of the issues and risks to future hunting access in Victorian state forests will be explored in Part 2 of this series. Part 3 will present a proposed Victorian Deer Association engagement strategy and actions that will shape key stakeholders towards maintaining or expanding recreational deer hunting access on Victorian public land.