

***Victorian Protected Areas Council
Connecting Park Managers - Protecting National Parks
2026 Election Policy Platform***

Policy Rationale

Victorians are fortunate to have an outstanding representative system of national parks and conservation reserves, built over many decades, that provides significant environmental, social and economic benefits for the State. The early creation of this network is notable within Australia and internationally. Yet there are still gaps in the network and the existing parks are dramatically underfunded and resourced to meet their legislative obligations and goals of conserving natural and cultural heritage while providing recreation and educational opportunities that improve the wellbeing of Victorians and others.

Victoria's national parks and conservation reserves, and the critical natural and cultural heritage values they protect, needs to be comprehensive and representative of the diverse ecosystems and landscapes across the State, be well-resourced, effectively managed with First Nations, and appreciated and respectfully enjoyed by the community.

Given their significant value to the State, the establishment and effective management of national parks and other conservation reserves should remain impartial and independent of political affiliations. There is considerable potential to build on the predominantly bipartisan history of park creation over the past 50 years, as well as longstanding management practices, to further acknowledge and support these protected areas. The majority of Victorians expect that the State's principal natural and cultural assets will be conserved and safeguarded through a well-managed parks network that also facilitates sustainable and compatible opportunities for recreation, education, and health.

Policy Themes

Four priorities for nature



Actions

1. Protect and Connect the National Parks Network

Headline policies

1. Complete an independent, expert-led, comprehensive and transparent public investigation into gaps in Victoria's national parks and conservation reserves estate by December 2028.
2. Amend legislation to ensure that national parks and conservation reserves are managed to meet 'ecological integrity' goals.

Other policies

- Commit to managing Victoria's national parks and conservation reserves according to the Statement of Commitment in Appendix 1.
- Make a firm commitment that Victoria's system of national parks and conservation reserves will meet the targets outlined in *Australia's National Reserve System Strategy 2009-2030*¹ and the *National Roadmap for protecting and conserving 30% of Australia's land by 2030*² and develop a state roadmap for how this will be achieved.
- Retain or reinstate specialist advisory bodies including the National Parks Advisory Council, the Victorian Marine and Coastal Council, the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council and the Scientific Advisory Committee (Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988).
- Establish oversight of large tree removal from national parks and conservation reserves (due to fire and emergency risk management) by the Office of Conservation Regulator.

2. Repair and recover high value impacted landscapes and species

Headline policies

1. Significantly increase targeted compliance and enforcement against illegal activities that are impacting nature values, including illegal:
 - a. firewood theft
 - b. rubbish dumping
 - c. fishing (incl abalone, rock lobster, shellfish and other fish) from marine national parks and sanctuaries including reinstating fisheries officer roles recently lost by Fisheries Victoria and boosting marine rangers
 - d. wildlife poaching and plant theft
2. Amend the legal status of deer from 'game' to 'pest' status.

Other policies

- Repair the ecological integrity of wildlife and plant habitats that have been heavily impacted by past land uses and current threats through:
 - Expanding and providing funding certainty for landscape-scale, cross-tenure pest control programs that reduce the impact of introduced predators (fox, cat), introduced grazers (horses, deer, rabbit, pig, goat), and invasive weeds

¹ <https://www.dcceew.gov.au/environment/land/nrs/publications/strategy-national-reserve-system>

² [National Roadmap for protecting and conserving 30% of Australia's land by 2030](#)

- Focus repair and restoration programs in the semi-arid woodlands of the mallee, grasslands, alpine and sub-alpine peatlands and snow gum woodlands, the tall forests and rainforest remnants of the central and eastern highlands and the Otway's, the woodlands of central and south-western Victoria and the Grampians, Wilsons Promontory, marine kelp forests and seagrass meadows and Victorian wetlands of national and international significance
- Further develop and provide funding support for active partnerships with Traditional Owners in ecological and fire management practices and cultural heritage protection, including an indigenous ranger program.
- A new marine pest control initiative to protect highest value habitats
- Carefully manage and monitor overabundant populations of native species (kangaroo, koala), acting on advice from independent scientific and animal welfare experts.
- Create a series of predator-proof (i.e. cat and fox) fenced or 'virtual' fenced areas for recovery of threatened wildlife.
- Create a dedicated Urban Reserves Conservation Initiative to restore biodiversity hotspots in cities and towns in partnership with the community.

3. Futureproof Victoria's National Parks Network

Headline policies

1. **Increase recurrent funding for managing Victoria's national parks and conservation reserves to 1% of the State budget and index budgets to enable continuity of conservation/pest management programs**
2. **Create a dedicated expert panel, including fire ecology and bushfire management experts, to advise the government on ecologically sustainable fire management strategy and practices in a time of climate change.**

Other policies

- Resource the update and completion of park management plans for all Victorian national parks and other protected areas by December 2030.
- Ensure an appropriately resourced, skilled and dedicated parks agency that focuses on meeting goals for ecological integrity, cultural connection, nature-based education (for both schools and community), minimum impact recreation and tourism, and wellbeing for all Victorians.
- Transfer the Great Ocean Road Coastal and Park Authority's (GORCAPA) responsibilities for management of national parks and conservation reserves back to Parks Victoria and minimise fragmentation of management of protected areas across multiple organisations.
- Establish trials of climate change adaptation measures (e.g. seagrass and kelp restoration) in Victoria's bays.
- Establish minimum benchmarks, based on national and international standards³, for the planning and delivery of conservation and visitor use programs (including monitoring, evaluating and reporting on outcomes) and require all managers of national parks and other protected areas to meet them

³ e.g. IUCN WCPA: <https://wcpa.info/index.html>

- Commit to long-term monitoring and evaluation programs that assess changes to the environmental health of Victoria's ecosystems and the social, economic wellbeing benefits for Victorians
- Remove loopholes in native forest logging that threaten national parks, including salvage logging following storm, flood and fire events.

4. Increase Community Connection and Involvement

Headline policies

1. **Create a national park volunteering fund to boost nature-based volunteering in both city and regional areas, including an expansion of citizen science opportunities**
2. **Remove unmanaged and untargeted recreational deer hunting from national parks and replace with expanded formal partnerships with sporting shooter organisations using trained and accredited shooters to reduce the impact of targeted pest (including deer) populations that are impacting on biodiversity values.**
3. **Expand nature education programs and partnerships with schools, universities, outdoor education providers and community organisations to increase involvement of Victorians (especially young people) in understanding, sustainable recreational use (i.e. minimising impacts) to conserve nature.**

Other policies

- Expand cooperative 'Good Neighbour' programs across public / private land interfaces to generate mutual benefits for both agriculture and nature conservation
- Support joint programs that enable more Victorians to sustainably connect with nature for health and wellbeing benefits including:
 - Growing inclusive and accessible nature-based experiences at key sites across Victoria including regional communities to promote understanding of natural and cultural values, encourage respectful use of national parks and support local visitor economies
 - In partnership with the Department of Health, make Victoria a national leader in supporting nature-based social prescribing⁴ programs in parks

⁴ Nature-based social prescribing uses a non-clinical community-based approach to health in which health professionals refer people to undertake activities in nature settings to improve physical and mental health.

Appendix 1: Expectations Statement

Statement of commitment for our national parks and conservation reserves

- ❖ First Nations peoples' rights, interests and leadership will be upheld and enhanced in the management and expansion of Victoria's national parks and conservation reserves estate through self-determination and empowering and healing model of negotiation with the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria and Traditional Owners
- ❖ Victoria's national parks and conservation reserves will be recognised as the core areas of the State managed to meet conservation goals. They will be ecologically connected and complemented by conservation efforts across the broader landscape to support the movement of species and maintain genetic diversity.
- ❖ National parks and conservation reserves will be designed, resourced and managed to retain, enhance and restore natural and cultural heritage values and ecosystem services⁵ into the future. They will protect the full range of Victoria's species and ecosystems and be ⁶ of sufficient size and configuration to maintain long-term ecological viability and resilience in the face of environmental change.
- ❖ National parks and conservation reserves will provide for a broad range of visitor experiences that are fully compatible with the protection of natural and cultural heritage values.
- ❖ National parks and conservation reserves belong to everybody, but not every park should cater for every use. Conservation objectives and living Indigenous cultures must not be compromised by other uses.
- ❖ The national parks and conservation reserves network will be managed in a complementary way with other public land including State forests. Activities that are less compatible (e.g. camping outside of formalised campgrounds without designated fireplaces, fossicking and hunting) with conservation objectives will be allocated to and supported on other suitable categories of public land.
- ❖ The best available scientific evidence and Traditional Owners' knowledge of Country will be used to inform the establishment and management of national parks and conservation reserves. Where there is uncertainty, the precautionary principle is applied. Where the impacts on species and or natural communities are unknown decisions are made in nature's favour.

⁵ Ecosystem Services refers to the benefits of ecosystems for humans. These include provision of water, climate regulation, flood mitigation, nurseries for fishing, pollination for food production, regulation of wildlife disease, tourism, recreation and enjoyment, cultural connection, health and wellbeing benefits, education and scientific discovery.

⁶ See descriptions of Comprehensiveness, Adequacy and Representative under the goal of the National Reserve System in [Australia's National Reserve System Strategy 2009-2030](#).

Appendix 2: Policy background

The importance of Victoria's national parks and other Protected Areas

Victoria's national parks and conservation reserves are the backbone of the State's efforts to preserve and protect cultural and diverse natural heritage for the benefits of all living things and for current and future generations. The network contains representative examples of ecosystems and habitats for our wildlife and plants to survive and thrive - from our tall forests and rainforests to alpine mountains, dry open woodlands, 'outback' semi-arid landscapes, grasslands, wetlands, rocky coasts, kelp forests and seagrass meadows.

Our national parks are fundamentally important places for cultural connection, and provide outstanding settings for inspiration, enjoyment that generate many social and economic benefits for communities. Victoria's national parks are strongly supported by the vast majority* of Victorians, bringing communities together where lifelong memories with families, friends and partners are created. Contrary to the perception of some, Victoria's national parks are not 'locked up'. With over 50 million visits each year our national parks and reserves national parks provide a significant contribution to our health, wellbeing, liveability and economy. In contrast the number of visits to State Forest is 16million-Victorians are voting with their feet.

Our national parks are a 'natural health service' providing significant preventative physical and mental health benefits from sustainable recreation, education and volunteering, with corresponding savings to the State's growing health budget.

In addition to the several billion dollars and thousands of jobs each year from nature-based tourism, our national parks and conservation reserves play an important but under-recognised role in providing regional economic benefits that flow beyond park boundaries including provision of clean water, nurseries for fish and protection of coastal assets. In benefits versus costs to manage they provide a very high return on investment⁷.

The Management Focus

National parks focus on the conservation of significant natural (flora, fauna, landscapes, geology etc) and cultural (Indigenous and non-indigenous) values found nowhere else in Victoria and Australia providing for; nature-based activities consistent with preserving and protecting values of nature and cultural heritage.

State Forest will continue to play an important complementary role in enabling commercial and recreational uses generally not permitted in national parks as well as species protection, but they are not a replacement for the core purposes of national parks and conservation reserves. In essence the two-land statuses represent a continuum of designated public use with State Forest at one end for resources use and National Park at the other for resource protection and conservation. Both being valid land uses.

⁷ Valuing Victoria's Parks, 2015 <https://www.parks.vic.gov.au/about-us/valuing-victorias-parks>

What's the problem and what's at stake?

Many of our national parks and other Protected Areas, and the iconic and unique land and marine wildlife and plants reliant on them, are now at a critical juncture. Our economy and liveability rely on healthy natural environments, but our natural and cultural assets are rapidly depreciating, from a lack of investment into ecological research, reducing threats from pest species, and recreational impact due to little or poor-quality recreational planning that puts the right activity in the right place to withstand the impact of the type of use and the greater visitation that comes with it.

Cumulative impacts from past land uses (e.g. vegetation clearing, grazing, timber harvesting, mining), together with current threats such as illegal activities (e.g. firewood theft and overfishing), invasive plants and animals, more intense bushfires and storm events, and overuse of some fragile sites, threaten urgent conservation goals and obligations.

Climate change is exacerbating many of these threats and directly impacting on the survival of both threatened and once common ecological communities and species as well as significant cultural values.

Introduced deer species have become so widespread that they are directly threatening many native species, agricultural productivity and road safety.

Victoria's network of national parks and other protected areas still has several significant gaps, with some ecological systems poorly represented and key habitat links and corridors not established.

Yet despite our national parks and other protected areas attracting majority community support* and providing significant environmental, social and economic benefits to Victorians, the agencies responsible for their management are significantly underfunded (less than 0.4 % of the State budget)⁸ and have been suffering large cuts to critical conservation programs and visitor services. Global evidence shows that well governed and appropriately resourced national parks and other protected areas are meeting key conservation goals⁹.

** National parks matter to Victorians. Eighty-four per cent say they are very or somewhat important, while just 18 per cent say they are not particularly or not at all important. This is a bipartisan view. Eighty-two per cent of Labor voters, 83 per cent of Coalition supporters and 85 per cent of Greens voters say national parks are important. (Redbridge Group Oct 2024 Victorian Great Forest National Park survey Prepared for the Wilderness Society and Victorian National Parks Association [HERE](#)*

⁸ VNPA analysis of 2025 Victorian budget.

⁹<https://digitalreport.protectedplanet.net/#:~:text=Two%20years%20on%2C%20the%20Protected,benefit%20both%20nature%20and%20people.>