

## Environment Victoria submission to the Inquiry into Victoria's ecosystem decline

August 2020

Environment Victoria (EV) is an independent and not for profit organisation that has been campaigning to look after Victoria's environment since 1969. With more than 40-grassroots member groups and 200,000 individual supporters, Environment Victoria is a growing community of Victorians standing up for a safe climate, healthy rivers, and a sustainable future.

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to provide a submission to this Inquiry. Broadly, we consider Victoria's natural environment and the unique ecosystems it supports to have been chronically undervalued and de-prioritised by successive state governments. This is consistent with each successive *State of the Environment* report for the state finding a track record of ecosystem decline, with interventions that have thus far proven insufficient at turning the tide in a systematic way.

This very welcome inquiry will hopefully be a circuit-breaker in this trajectory – both ecologically and politically – and spark a much-needed and long-overdue commitment from all sides of politics and Parliament to prioritise restoration of our ecosystems and the laws that protect them.

What we do not value, we will not protect. What we do not protect, we will lose.

The ever-growing pressures of climate change, urbanisation and unsustainable economic activity are making this statement painfully true.

Over recent years, the majority of our work relating specifically to Victoria's ecosystems has related to the freshwater ecosystems of Victoria's rivers, with a particular focus on those in the Murray-Darling Basin (ie. northern Victoria). For commentary on terrestrial, marine and coastal ecosystems and a broader perspective on Victoria's nature laws, we would endorse the submissions of our colleague organisations Environmental Justice Australian and the Victorian National Parks Association.

This submission is presented in 3 main parts:

1. Ecosystem decline in Victoria's rivers
2. The shortcomings of Victoria's threatened species legislation
3. A summary of responses to a survey distributed by Environment Victoria to its supporter base, completed by approximately 1400 individuals

### **1. Ecosystem Decline in Victoria's Rivers**

#### **I. Background**

In recent years, the condition of Victoria's rivers, wetlands and floodplains has continued to decline. While individual iconic sites can be fenced, protected and managed, the critical delivery of water to these sites requires system-level attention to water resources, which are much less secure.

This insecurity is characterised by three issues: decreasing supply, as a result of climate change; inadequate water sharing arrangements, characterised by over-allocation to consumptive uses; and poor connectivity, as water cannot reach the floodplain and wetlands, or move reliably downstream.

**a. Decreasing supply as a result of climate change**

The resilience of our rivers depends on the water flowing through them. Water-stressed rivers struggle to cope with extreme weather events, meaning that the worst fish kills can result from cold snaps and bushfire runoff – as witnessed in early 2019 at Menindee Lakes and early 2020 at Mannus Creek in New South Wales.<sup>1,2</sup>

As the climate changes, less water is available. Without adequate and urgent global effort to reduce emissions, temperatures are expected to rise by 3.2°C by 2050.<sup>3</sup> Even a 1°C increase in temperature could mean up to 22% less run-off.<sup>4</sup>

Surface water in rivers, creeks and wetlands has already declined substantially over the last 20 years. Each river basin in southern Victoria has experienced decline, from 4 percent in the Otways to 21 percent in the Corangamite basin.<sup>5</sup>

In northern Victoria, the Murray Region, the CSIRO projects that climate change might reduce river flows by 41 percent by the year 2030.<sup>6</sup> Water flows into the Murray River have already reduced by 50 percent over the past twenty years compared to the century before owing to drought, worsened by climate change.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Academy of Science (2019). *Investigation of the causes of mass fish kills in the Menindee Region NSW over the summer of 2018–2019*

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/feb/15/last-population-macquarie-perch-nsw-river-carnage-bushfire-ash-fish-species>

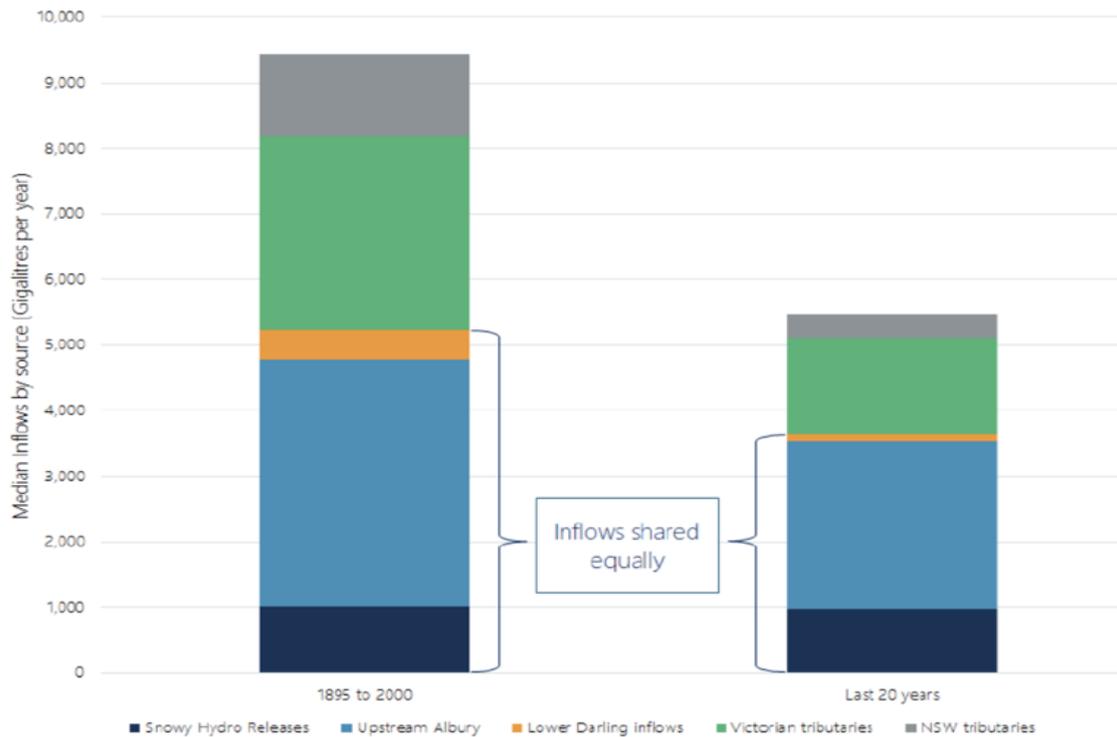
<sup>3</sup> United Nations Environment Programme (2019). *Emissions Gap Report 2019*. UNEP, Nairobi.

<sup>4</sup> CSIRO (2012). *South Eastern Australian Climate Initiative Program Annual Report 2011/12*. CSIRO, Australia.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (2020). *Long-Term Water Resource Assessment for Southern Victoria*. Melbourne, Victoria. p49

<sup>6</sup> CSIRO (2008). *Water availability in the Murray. Summary of a report to the Australian Government from the CSIRO Murray-Darling Basin Sustainable Yields Project*. Australia.

<sup>7</sup> Interim Inspector-General of Murray–Darling Basin Water Resources (2020). *Impact of lower inflows on state shares under the Murray–Darling Basin Agreement*.



*CHANGE IN RIVER MURRAY SYSTEM INFLOWS, 1895 TO 2000 (left side) AND PAST 20 YEARS (right side) – FROM INTERIM INSPECTOR-GENERAL REPORT ON STATE SHARES*

### b. Inadequate water sharing arrangements characterised by over-allocation

While water flowing into Victoria’s rivers is declining across the board, the environment’s share has been the hardest hit. Victoria’s rivers are shared between different uses. In regulated river systems, users like agriculture, industry, commerce and cities have water entitlements – property rights that allow them to access water.

But most of the environment’s share isn’t so clearly protected. Victorian taxpayers have purchased some water entitlements, dedicating them toward river health, but they are a small percentage of the water required to maintain a resilient ecosystem.

In southern Victoria for example, public environmental entitlements make up just 1 percent of the water going toward the environment. Another 4 percent of the water is for pushing these entitlements downstream where they are needed. But 95 percent of water for the environment is simply what remains after every other user has taken their share.<sup>8</sup>

In this arrangement, the environment’s share is primarily composed of leftover water. When there isn’t much left, as has been the case more frequently with climate change, the health of the river, and river communities who depend on it, takes the hit.

<sup>8</sup> Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (2020). *Long-Term Water Resource Assessment for Southern Victoria*. Melbourne, Victoria. p103

Even after rule changes and recovery of water entitlements for the environment, the environment's share cannot keep up with the pace of climate impacts. The share of water for the environment has not increased in any basin in Victoria.<sup>9</sup>

In northern Victoria, the Murray Region, the Murray-Darling Basin Plan has provided a framework for addressing over-allocation. The plan emerged from a recognition that the amount of water taken for irrigation is threatening the river's ability to survive.

It put forward three pathways to begin reviving the river: buying back water from irrigators directly; paying for expensive irrigation efficiency upgrades to save water; and developing "offset projects" that theoretically enable fish and frogs to live with less water.

Each pathway contains risks of further impacts on communities and ecosystems as well as opportunities to facilitate their protection.

### **c. Poor connectivity with water unable to reach floodplains and wetlands**

Taxpayers have already invested in water to nourish the floodplains – using environmental water to ensure occasional moments when rivers have enough water in them to spill onto surrounding floodplains, helping to keep both river and floodplain healthy. These water entitlements make up a small portion of the water necessary to sustain Victoria's river and floodplain ecosystems. However, we can expect more value for this water and future water recovered by relaxing constraints on the delivery of environmental water.

Reducing system constraints means addressing rules about how dams operate as well as physical constraints like low-lying bridges that limit the large pulses of water necessary to nourish the floodplain. Addressing these constraints would give water managers more flexibility to send water where it needs to go while modernising river management and adapting local infrastructure to natural flood cycles.

Interventions to improve connectivity mean more value for water. The Murray-Darling Basin Authority's *Constraints Management Strategy* identifies that overcoming constraints 'would mean that the area that can be watered increases significantly – to about 75 percent of the wetlands and dominant vegetation communities of the floodplain'.<sup>10</sup> In the Murray system, this translates to an additional 35,000 hectares of floodplain forests receiving environmental flows – critical for the survival of those ecosystems.

## **II. Addressing Over-Allocation: Recovering and Protecting Water for the Environment**

Water flowing into the river has declined as a result of climate change. Preventing the most disastrous impacts on surface water supply requires an urgent reduction in global emissions, in which Victoria must contribute its fair share – estimated to be at least 43% emission cuts by 2025 and 67% emissions cuts by 2030.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p116

<sup>10</sup> MDBA (2013). *Constraints Management Strategy*. Murray-Darling Basin Authority. Canberra.

<sup>11</sup> For more information about what constitutes Victoria's fair contribution to addressing climate change, see Environment Victoria's submission in response to the Independent Expert Panel's report advising on climate targets for Victoria:

Regardless of the total water supply, it is necessary to guarantee the river's survival with adequately protected water entitlements. In southern Victoria, legislative reform may be required to increase the security of the environment's share. In northern Victoria, the framework for water recovery is provided by the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

#### **a. Southern Victorian Catchments**

To restore security in the southern catchments, it is necessary to address over-allocation and provide greater protection for the environment's share. The image below shows the decline in water availability across each catchment in southern Victoria, linked to the health of those freshwater and riparian ecosystems.

##### **i. Addressing over-allocation with overdue licensing framework**

Interception activities such as stock and domestic dams and changes in land use have a strong bearing on long-term water availability, however DELWP has been unable to quantify these impacts.<sup>12</sup> This is an extraordinary situation given Victoria's commitments under the National Water Initiative agreed between the states and Commonwealth in 2004. The agreement makes specific reference to interception activities and states that by 2011:

'in water systems that are fully allocated, overallocated, or approaching full allocation:

- a) interception activities that are assessed as being significant should be recorded (for example, through a licensing system);
- b) any proposals for additional interception activities above an agreed threshold size, will require a water access entitlement ...
- c) robust compliance monitoring regime will be implemented;<sup>13</sup>

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<https://environmentvictoria.org.au/2019/07/29/environment-victoria-submission-independent-expert-panels-recommended-targets-survey/>

<sup>12</sup> Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (2020). *Long-Term Water Resource Assessment for Southern Victoria*. Melbourne, Victoria. p67

<sup>13</sup> National Water Initiative s57

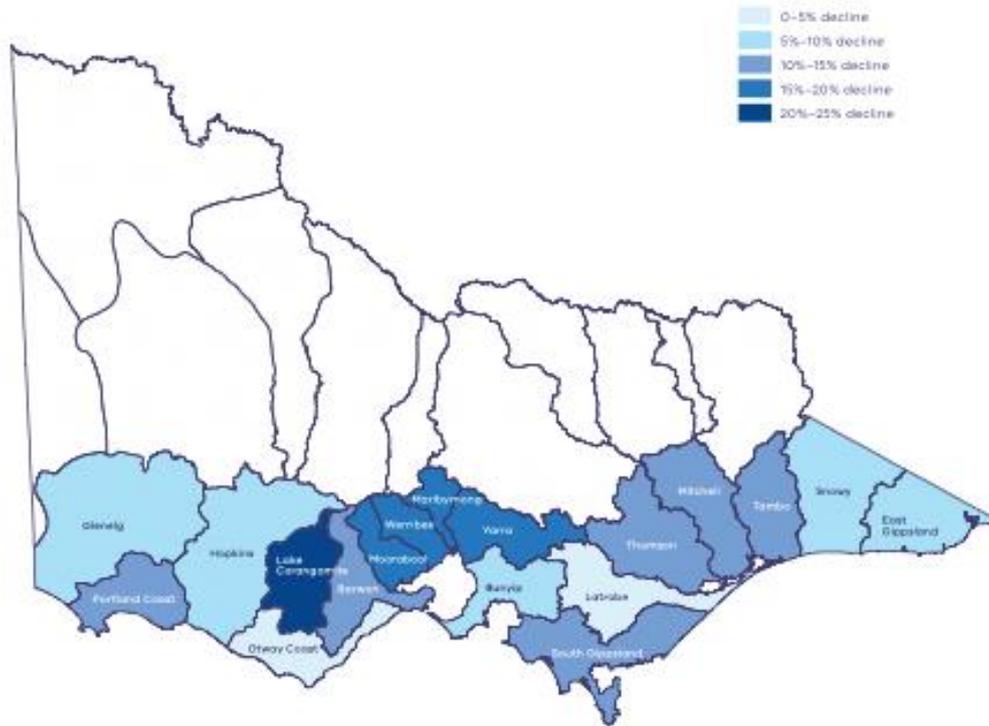


Figure 12: Declines in long-term surface water availability, by percentage, by basin, step A of B

PERCENTAGE DECLINES IN LONG-TERM WATER AVAILABILITY ACROSS SOUTHERN VICTORIA – FROM DELWP'S LONG-TERM WATER RESOURCE ASSESSMENT

Victoria's Long-Term Water Resource Assessment for southern Victoria identified several catchments as being most likely to be affected by increases in interception – the Moorabool, Barwon and Bunyip are all fully allocated and should be covered by the National Water Initiative commitment.

**RECOMMENDATION 1**

As inflows decline, a greater portion of water is captured by stock and domestic dams or by water-thirsty vegetation. The Victorian government must urgently address the problem and include stock and domestic use in the licensing framework.<sup>14</sup>

This is critical for understanding the true extent of water use and achieving equity between different categories of users and the environment, fairly sharing the water available.

**ii. Protecting the environment's share**

<sup>14</sup> Environment Victoria (2015). *Aquaprint: A community vision for water reform in Victoria*. Melbourne, Victoria. p22

Last year's Long-Term Water Resource Assessment for southern Victoria sought to determine whether long-term water availability had declined and whether any decline has fallen disproportionately on the environmental water reserve. It demonstrated that even after rule changes and environmental water recovery, the environment's share has not increased by more than 1 percent in any basin.<sup>15</sup>

With declining water availability disproportionately impacting the environment's share, it is worth pursuing two pathways: reviewing water sharing rules which have been inadequate in distributing the burden of decline and reviewing the security of the environmental water reserve.

### **RECOMMENDATION 2**

The catchments that show the largest decline in the environment's share of water are those with the highest level of consumptive use: Latrobe, Werribee, Barwon, Moorabool and Yarra. These catchments require a review and changes to water sharing rules, as actions to date have been inadequate to halt the decline of the environment's share.

It is notable that the creation of an environmental entitlement for the Thomson and rule changes in the Maribyrnong have averted major declines in the environment's share to date. Given the overall decline in water availability in these catchments, however, an examination of whether current arrangements are adequate to prevent an environmental decline is also warranted.

As mentioned previously, the environmental water reserve is composed primarily of 'above cap' (read: leftover) water – making up 95 percent of the reserve. Environmental entitlements, the most reliable category, make up just 1 percent; the remaining 4 percent is composed of 'passing flows' which push entitlements for all users downstream, theoretically benefitting the environment on the way.

The Long-Term Water Resource Assessment reinforces the importance of passing flows as a component of the environmental water reserve, particularly in dry years.<sup>16</sup> However, it is critical to recognise that in times of drought and water shortage, passing flows are often 'qualified' by the Water Minister and redirected to other uses. At the height of the Millennium Drought, between September 2006 and June 2010, the Water Minister reallocated surface water to meet critical needs 65 times. Of these changes, 42 involved restricting environmental water rights.<sup>17</sup>

### **RECOMMENDATION 3**

Qualification of environmental water rights should be a last resort even as a temporary measure, and the environment's share of water should be given greater protection from qualification under the Water Act. The Act could be amended to prioritise critical human and environmental needs over other consumptive uses.

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<sup>15</sup> Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (2020). *Long-Term Water Resource Assessment for Southern Victoria*. Melbourne, Victoria. p114

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p105

<sup>17</sup> Victorian Auditor General (2010). *Restricting Environmental Flows during Water Shortages*.

Because the consumptive share is composed of more-reliable entitlements – as well as favoured in the redirection of elements of the environmental water reserve – it is much less impacted by dry conditions. Legislative reform may be required to increase the security of the environment’s share.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 4**

Rivers need a guaranteed share of their own water, a ‘sustainable baseflow’ that is secure under all climatic conditions.<sup>18</sup>

#### **b. Northern Victoria – Murray-Darling Basin**

The Murray-Darling Basin Plan was developed to facilitate ‘the return to environmentally sustainable levels of extraction for water resources that are allocated or overused’.<sup>19</sup> The framework it adopts is based on establishing an *environmentally sustainable level of take (ESLT)* which would preserve key ecosystem assets, ecosystem functions, the productive base of the water resource and environmental outcomes.

In 2010, the Murray-Darling Basin Authority produced research to inform this approach. The results suggested that a range of water recovery could deliver these ecological outcomes throughout the system, assigning different levels of certainty. It recommended between 3,856 GL (low likelihood of delivering ecological outcomes) and 6,983 GL (higher likelihood) of surface water should be returned to the river system from an annual consumptive use of 13,623 GL.<sup>20</sup>

In 2012, the Authority’s Board refused this advice, putting forward a Basin Plan to recover 3,200 GL of surface water. It put forward three pathways to begin reviving the river: buying back water from irrigators directly; paying for expensive irrigation efficiency upgrades to save water; and developing “offset projects” that theoretically enable fish and frogs to live with less water.

Even with this reduced target, over 1,000 GL remains to be recovered. This includes 46.7 GL to ‘bridge the gap’ toward the new river-level caps on extraction (Sustainable Diversion Limits); 450 GL from efficiency projects; 60.1 GL of other efficiency projects because 605 GL of proposed offset projects have exceeded their contribution limit; and 70 GL which was removed from the target following the Northern Basin Review.

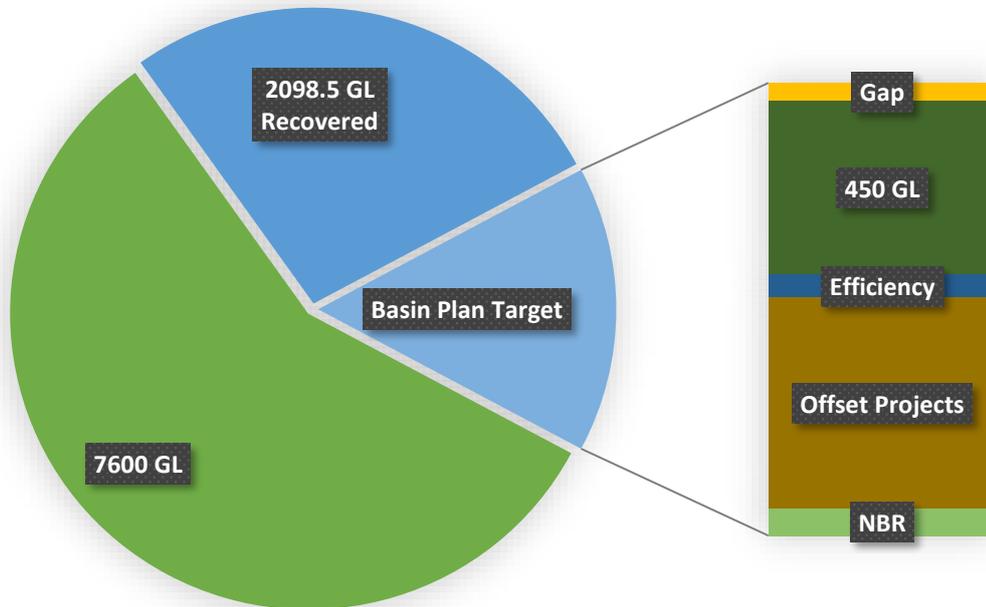
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<sup>18</sup> Environment Victoria and Environment Defenders Office (2010). *Bringing the Victorian Water Act into the 21<sup>st</sup> century*.

<sup>19</sup> Water Act 2007 Part 3 (d)(i)

<sup>20</sup> MDBA (2010). *The Guide to the proposed Basin Plan: Technical background Part 1*. Murray-Darling Basin Authority. p.114

### Freshwater Ecosystem Recovery in the Murray-Darling Basin



Reducing the amount of water taken from the river by 7,600 GL per year would provide high certainty of maintaining key ecosystems. -- MDBA, Guide to the proposed Basin Plan – Technical Background (2010)

While Victoria has recovered water to ‘bridge the gap’ to the new Sustainable Diversion Limits (the 46.7 GL remaining primarily in the northern Basin), our obligations to the Basin Plan are far from complete. Over the next four years, Victoria will be responsible for recovering much of the 450 GL (dark green), as well as the water prematurely offset from supply measures projects (brown) and their associated efficiency measures (dark blue).

Preservation of Victoria’s freshwater ecosystems requires thoughtful progress toward these obligations.

#### i. Recovering 450 GL for the full implementation of the Basin Plan

Modelling and analysis conducted by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority showed that recovering 2,750 GL of water would only achieve 57 percent of environmental flow targets at important indicator sites.<sup>21</sup> These targets would not deliver pristine conditions; they merely represent the minimum to maintain basic ecological functions.

The full implementation of the Basin Plan, recovering 3,200 GL and relaxing constraints on the capacity to deliver water would achieve 94 percent of flow indicators on the Murray. The difference of that additional 450 GL (from 2,750 GL to 3,200 GL) results in substantial gains for the area of wetlands and flood-dependent vegetation inundated, increasing from 45,000 to 80,000 hectares.

<sup>21</sup> MDBA (2012). *Hydrologic modelling of the relaxation of operational constraints in the southern connected system: Methods and results*. Murray-Darling Basin Authority: Canberra, Australia. p. 129.

To date, Victoria and New South Wales have opposed any further water recovery in their jurisdictions, adopting obstructionist stances toward the full implementation of the Basin Plan. This culminated in the imposition of unachievable social and economic conditions attached to water recovery projects.<sup>22</sup>

Recovering this volume is made more difficult by the restrictive conditions of the *Water for the Environment Special Account (WESA)*, which was established under the *Water Act* to help deliver the Basin Plan. It committed \$1.775 billion to pay for projects to achieve the 450 GL difference between 2,750 GL and 3,200 GL. However, funding may only be designated toward water recovery through expensive irrigation efficiency projects.

Of the two options for recovery water – efficiency projects and entitlement buybacks – irrigation efficiency projects stand out as exceedingly risky and expensive. Most funding in the Basin so far, approximately \$4 billion, has been directed toward such water-saving infrastructure. On average, irrigators receive subsidies worth \$400,000. The government claims it has acquired 700 GL through these projects, however there are no adequate site-level measurements to confirm changes in stream flow.<sup>23</sup>

These large payments, alongside the reprioritisation of infrastructure subsidies ahead of open tender buybacks, raise several issues. Industry lobbyists may be capable of transferring government benefits to well-connected irrigators while irrigators may be much more likely to hold out for a subsidy.

The projects are also the most expensive way to recover water, nearly three times higher than buying it directly.<sup>24</sup>

#### **RECOMMENDATION 5**

Victoria should commit to providing its share of the full 450 GL of water recovery, ensuring that funding contracts and proposed water savings account for the impact of efficiency measures on site-level stream flow, providing appropriate monitoring and auditing. This would dramatically improve the ability of river ecosystems to survive.

#### **ii. Offset projects and associated efficiency measures**

When the Basin Plan put forward a 3,200 GL target for surface water recovery, it included the option to adjust this amount by initiating projects which could produce ‘equivalent’ environmental outcomes.

Such projects include ‘supply measures’ – or offset projects – intended to provide the same or better environmental outcomes using less water. These measures include pumps and concrete regulators to deliver water to isolated sites rather than recovering water directly for the river.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.mdba.gov.au/media/mr/murray-darling-basin-ministers-meet-melbourne>

<sup>23</sup> R. Quentin Grafton & John Williams (2020). *Rent-seeking behaviour and regulatory capture in the Murray-Darling Basin*, Australia, *International Journal of Water Resources Development*, 36:2-3, 484-504.

<sup>24</sup> S.A. Wheeler, E. Carmody, et al. (2020). *The rebound effect on water extraction from subsidising irrigation infrastructure in Australia*, *Resources, Conservation & Recycling*, 159.

These engineering solutions are fraught with uncertainty. The Independent Review Panel charged with assessing the offset methodology – determining equivalent ecological outcomes to be expected from the supply measures – stated that the “process described in the Basin Plan is policy operating in ‘unchartered waters’ from both a scientific and management perspective. No one should assume that the adoption of [the method] is without significant uncertainty or risk”.<sup>25</sup>

The method presents inherent challenges to the maintenance of a site’s ecological character. First, it allows environmental outcomes to be traded if regional outcomes are maintained. The Murray-Darling Basin Authority’s fact sheet for the environmental equivalence test presents a summary:

‘While regional environmental outcome scores must be maintained, the test does allow for tradeoffs between selected environmental outcomes. This can be tradeoffs within and/or between river reaches (for example improved outcomes in one of the nine reaches in the Southern Basin region and decreased outcomes in another reach), or a tradeoff between different ecological classes and elements (for example improved outcomes for plants and decreased outcomes for fish)’.<sup>26</sup>

In application, this will enable watering of low-lying floodplains at the expense of higher floodplains – prioritising River Red Gums over Black Box forest. In testimony for the South Australian Murray-Darling Basin Royal Commission, Professor Jamie Pittock argued that the mechanism’s discrimination is not compatible with Australia’s obligations under the Ramsar Convention to conserve representative areas of different ecosystems and species. The commissioner accepted ‘the unchallenged evidence’.<sup>27</sup> At the Nyah project site, for example, the project proposes to inundate 421 ha (57 percent) of the 744 ha red gum ecosystem, but only 4 ha (6 percent) of the 64 ha black box woodland.

Second, the projects fail ‘to apply existing floodplain inundation and climate change models’.<sup>28</sup> It is unclear whether environmental water will be able to reach wetlands in the future under a range of water availability scenarios. This is particularly concerning given that the use of the projects functionally precludes the recovery of the offset quantity of environmental water. The survival of the wetlands is made to depend more heavily on engineering works which may have unreliable inputs.

These are outstanding risks with regard to the rationale and development of offset projects. The trade-off of regional outcomes and lack of consideration of climate change cast uncertainty on how these projects can be expected to maintain representative areas of ecosystems over time. It is also worth recognising the risks to ecosystems and species presented by the specific project proposals.

The Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists evaluated the supply measure projects using eleven conditions agreed by Basin governments and sourced from the Basin Plan, as well as one further condition drawn from an independent stocktake of supply measure projects commissioned by the

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<sup>25</sup> Independent Review Panel (2014). *SDL Adjustment Ecological Elements Method Development Report – Review of final project report*

<sup>26</sup> Murray-Darling Basin Authority. Fact Sheet: *Environmental equivalence test (for SDL adjustment assessment)*

<sup>27</sup> Walker, Bret SC Commissioner (2019). *Murray-Darling Basin Royal Commission Report*. p.309

<sup>28</sup> Pittock, Finlayson, Howitt (2012). *Beguiling and risky: 'Environmental works and measures' for wetland conservation under a changing climate*

Authority in 2015. The conditions are safeguards against ‘unacceptable risks to communities and the environment (e.g. salinity, blackwater, unforeseen collateral damage’).<sup>29</sup>

The assessment showed that no projects in Victoria met the conditions necessary for approval. Many of the projects require additional information before proper assessment can even be undertaken. This includes the Nyah Floodplain Management Project, for example, which has already been referred for planning approval under the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (EPBC). The project proposes to water nearly 500 hectares of floodplains. The project falls short on several conditions: the need to demonstrate an exceedance of natural flows, to secure long-term governance arrangements, ensure the natural operation of structures, ensure the project can operate within cost limitations and include provisions for monitoring to support operations and water accounting.<sup>30</sup>

Six supply measures projects in Victoria have been referred to date.<sup>31</sup> Each present common environmental risks: water quality impacts, salt migration, blackwater, eutrophication, increases in pest fish species, native fish stranding, limited protections of black box floodplain forests, and unreliable water in climate change conditions. Each present obstacles to the Ramsar Convention’s requirements for the wise use of wetlands and the maintenance of their ecological character.

Of particular relevance to EPBC Act referral are the potential negative impacts on populations of threatened species and migratory birds. At present, there appears to be no fish survey in the Murray adjacent to the projects. This obscures or ignores the presence of EPBC Act listed threatened species which may be impacted, including fourteen migratory species. The site surveys also ignored records from Birdlife Australia, while carrying out work in a dry period, potentially failing to record the presence of some migratory species.

Moreover, the basin-wide hydrological model to assess the bundle of offset projects makes the relationship between the equivalent outcomes at each site and the Basin Plan’s environmental targets exceedingly difficult to determine. The proposals do not include information on how much water will be offset by the project that would provide for a fair analysis of alternatives, accountability for public spending, analysis of hydrological modelling or an evaluation of whether offset flows compromise the prospects of meeting Basin Plan targets.

While these projects have been endorsed in principle through the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council, it is clear that there are significant barriers toward meeting the objectives of the EPBC Act. The projects fail to meet criteria put forward by the government for SDLAM projects, while lacking comprehensive justification. It is positioned as the sole opportunity to maintain habitat and flood the forests while other actions — such as water recovery and relaxation of upstream constraints — remain unconsidered, and effectively precluded. They are expensive projects that demands further scrutiny.

The Basin Plan has reinforced the importance of overbank flows for wetland and floodplain health.<sup>32</sup> Water spilling out of the river channel and onto the floodplain is critical for maintaining wetlands, triggering breeding events, and sustaining trees like River Red Gums. The Plan expressly aims to

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<sup>29</sup> Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists (2018). *Requirements of SDL adjustment projects to ensure they are consistent with the Water Act 2007, Basin Plan 2012, MDBA policies and intergovernmental agreements*. p.1

<sup>30</sup> Ibid Attachment A. p. 21-23

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.vmfrp.com.au/planning-approvals/>

<sup>32</sup> Murray-Darling Basin Authority (2012). *Assessment of Environmental Water Requirements for the Proposed Basin Plan*

deliver ‘healthy and resilient ecosystems with rivers and creeks regularly connected to their floodplains’.<sup>33</sup> By restoring an environmentally sustainable level of take and recovering water for the river, Victoria’s wetlands would have the water they need to maintain their ecological character.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 6**

Rather than recovering water, Victoria has increasingly worked to drive the water recovery target down by implementing offset projects, which do not meet the criteria set out in the Water Act or the Basin Plan.<sup>34</sup> Unproven environmental engineering solutions are a poor substitute for directly returning real water to our rivers and wetlands. As proposed, they are incompatible with the objectives of the Ramsar Convention.

Proposed supply measure projects must be evaluated with regard to their cumulative impact, and locally to meet the 12 conditions of approval as required by the Basin Plan and other government agreements, based on transparent assessment.

#### **iii. River operation limits to protect against market-driven impacts**

In the Australian Competition & Consumer Commission’s June 2020 interim report on the Murray-Darling Basin water markets inquiry, the market’s impact on waterways was identified as a key problem:

‘there is a disconnect between the rules of the trading system and the physical characteristics of the river system. For example, on-river delivery capacity scarcity, conveyance losses and adverse environmental impacts are not considered in the process of trades that change the location of water use, except through some blunt and imprecise rules, such as limits on inter-valley trade/transfers’.<sup>35</sup>

These impacts are most acutely evident in the lower Goulburn River. In the past, Lake Eildon has sent cold water for irrigation downstream. Below Nagambie, however, the flow of water was more natural – allowing for swimming and providing a breeding refuge for native fish.

Market settings made this site vulnerable to changes in farming across the Basin. Dry conditions and over-extraction in Queensland and New South Wales have meant that less water reaches the Menindee Lakes. Water flowing into the lake system has reduced by 80 percent over the past 20 years compared to the century before – as a result, less water flows from the lakes into the Murray River.<sup>36</sup> The same trends are at play along the Murrumbidgee River where more water is being used to grow cotton and less is available overall.

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<sup>33</sup> *Basin Plan 2012* (Cth) sec 5.02(2)(c)

<sup>34</sup> Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists (2018). *Murray-Darling Basin Plan: Requirements for SDL adjustment projects*

<sup>35</sup> ACCC (2020). *Murray-Darling Basin water markets inquiry – Interim report*. Australian Competition & Consumer Commission: Canberra, Australia.

<sup>36</sup> Interim Inspector-General of Murray–Darling Basin Water Resources (2020). *Impact of lower inflows on state shares under the Murray–Darling Basin Agreement*.

At the same time, irrigated industries downstream are expanding – particularly in the Sunraysia region. Demand for water in the Basin is intensifying and neither the Darling nor the Murrumbidgee can deliver it.

To address the supply crisis downstream, summer flows down the Goulburn River have grown from 1,000 megalitres per day up to 3,000. When flows double over the baseline, Murray cod recruitment drops 30 percent. This is a substantial threat, as the Murray cod that breed in the lower Goulburn travel hundreds of kilometres. These native fish nurseries thrive when there are large pools in the river, slow-flowing water and healthy plant cover.

The cold water rushing downstream also cuts away riverbanks, destroys critical habitat and undoes the benefits of vegetation and seed spreading that Victoria has worked years to provide.

Flow limitations and clear trade rules in place for the Barmah Narrows provide sensible guidance. However, these restrictions have also laid bare the perverse outcomes that result from partial and limited market controls – damage may be shifted to other streams, undermining their long-term health.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 7**

Flows in the Goulburn River should be designed to emulate natural flow conditions, which have historically been 600-800 megalitres per day from spring through autumn – mid October through April, which is a high risk period for the environment and critical for fish spawning and recruitment. This is necessary to curb notching and slumping river banks as well as ongoing damage to vegetation, while maintaining sites of cultural significance.

A seasonally-based rule would be able to provide this protection for the Goulburn River while continuing to support downstream users. This should include a clearly defined limit of no more than 940 megalitres per day.

The implementation of sensible flow limits to protect the Goulburn River is essential to the preservation of river communities. But it is also critical that a holistic approach is undertaken to the compounding issues faced by the Goulburn River and those who depend on it. This should include reforms to water trading frameworks.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 8**

As a general rule, we believe beneficiaries should bear the cost of service. Under current rules, downstream users have not been assigned costs from environmental damage or delivery losses that impact all entitlement holders, including the environment. Considering the potential for changing delivery patterns – overbank transfers, increased reliance on mid-Murray storages or increased reliance on alternate supply routes – losses from seepage and evaporation may become more significant. This must be considered in order to curb ongoing trends of over-extraction.

### III. Improving connectivity by enabling water to reach floodplains and wetlands

Hydrological modelling utilised to inform the Basin Plan analysed several water recovery scenarios, comparing flow indicators with 2,800 GL and 3,200 GL water recovery to the baseline scenario. The scenarios were also modelled with and without the removal of constraints – physical infrastructure and policy restrictions that impede the flow of environmental water.

The results showed that baseline conditions would achieve 0 percent of environmental flow indicators while 2,800 GL water recovery would achieve 61 percent of those targets (with or without the removal of constraints). The 3,200 GL recovery target would only achieve 72 percent of flow indicators, but could achieve 94 percent with relaxed constraints.<sup>37</sup>

On the one hand, this highlights the Basin Plan's underestimated recovery target – even full implementation will not achieve 100% of the environment's water requirements. On the other hand, it is necessary to recognise that the Basin Plan is a political compromise; and in that framework, the relaxation of constraints makes a tremendous difference for Murray River ecosystems.

In May 2018, Federal Water Minister David Littleproud and Shadow Minister Tony Burke agreed that 'full implementation of constraints relaxation in the Southern System by 2024' was necessary to 'ensure the capacity of river managers to achieve flows of 80,000 ML/d at the South Australian border' – referring to the outcome outlined in the Constraints Management Strategy.<sup>38</sup>

These constraints removal projects have been drafted and proposed by state governments. However, in their current form they are inconsistent with the 94 percent flow targets put forward by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority. In the case of the Goulburn River, flow constraints would worsen compared to 2012. The Goulburn constraints project proposed flows up to 20,000 megalitres per day, the same flow rate identified in 2012, and well shy of the target set for the Victorian Government of 40,000 megalitres per day.

The Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists estimates that with the current constraints proposals, only 32 percent of the wetlands and floodplain vegetation along the Murray River will be inundated – a 47,000 hectare reduction compared to the MDBA target.<sup>39</sup> These are floodplains and wetlands that are not served otherwise – and placed at risk by the offset projects described above, which further reduce the volumes capable of delivering overbank flows.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 9**

Victoria must commit to modifying and implementing constraints to align with the targets put forward by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority in the Constraints Management Strategy. This includes the Murray River downstream of Yarrawonga and the Goulburn River at McCoys Bridge. The projects should ensure real improvements over the 2012 benchmarks are achieved.

<sup>37</sup> MDBA (2012). *Hydrologic modelling of the relaxation of operational constraints in the southern connected system: Methods and results*. Murray-Darling Basin Authority: Canberra, Australia. p. 129.

<sup>38</sup> <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22media%2Fpressrel%2F5951652%22>

<sup>39</sup> Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists (2018). *Submission to the Murray-Darling Basin Royal Commission*. p21

## **2. The shortcomings of Victoria's threatened species legislation**

Victoria's *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act (1988)* began life as a landmark piece of legislation, with a range of powerful tools that could be used by the Minister or the Department to manage or avoid pressures on the state's threatened species and threatened ecological communities.

An Auditor-General's report found its first 20 years of implementation to have been very ineffective, noting that "the full range of powers provided in the Act must be used as intended."<sup>40</sup>

The submission to this inquiry by Environmental Justice Australia goes into detail on a range of the questions raised during the Departmental review of the Act in 2017-2018. We will only comment here on one particular aspect of the original legislation which persists in the recently amended version. That is, the prevalence of Ministerial and Secretarial discretion in the use of the Act's most important conservation tools.

While the Act mandates the preparation of Action Statements, it does not, at any point, mandate critical habitat declarations (s.20(1)), the preparation of management plans (s.21(1)), or the making of habitat conservation orders (s.26(1)).

For critical habitat determinations, the Act specifies that such a determination "*must not be made unless*" a range of criteria are met (s.20(2)), but nowhere does it require that a determination *must be made if* other criteria are met.

Mandatory declarations of critical habitat are not particularly onerous or challenging in a regulatory sense, because the primary action that flows from the declaration is a requirement that the Secretary try to reach an agreement with any affected land managers.

Likewise, section 26(3) specifies that a habitat conservation order "*must not be made unless*" a range of criteria are met, but for this tool as well, the Act is silent on circumstances under which such an order *must* be made.

The Act makes clear that habitat conservation orders can take a variety of forms and allows a range of measures to be implemented. Therefore, even if a conservation order *must* be issued, there is still scope for the Minister to decide how best or most appropriately to intervene, for instance through determination of the content of an order. It would at least, however, enforce some kind of activity to protect and restore a threatened species or ecological community.

Ultimately, habitat conservation orders are the last line of defence – this is where the buck stops for the Minister of the day. For an Act that claims to provide a 'guarantee' for species survival, the lack of any mandatory, even last-ditched measures to require intervention sits rather awkwardly, and continues to leave Victorian flora and fauna exposed to the whim of the Minister or government of the day.

With Ministerial and Secretarial discretion at almost every step in the amended legislation, we remain concerned that the Auditor-General's 2009 critique of the implementation of the original Act

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<sup>40</sup> Victorian Auditor-General's Office (2009). *Administration of the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988*. <https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/flora-fauna-full-report.pdf>

(that is, the failure to use the most powerful tools) will also plague the implementation of the amended Act.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 10**

Amend the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act* to specify circumstances under which the Minister and Secretary, respectively, *must* make habitat conservation orders or critical habitat declarations, to ensure the legislation serves as a stronger guarantee for the survival of threatened species.

Further recommendations relating to this Act are:

- Provide DELWP with additional resourcing to ensuring adequate implementation of all parts of the Act (not just the administration of threatened species listing procedures);
- DELWP should prepare an implementation plan for the subordinate instruments specified in the Act, to maximise that chances of tools being used (noting that ideally the Act should set a list of circumstances in which the use of those tools becomes mandatory).

### **3. Survey responses from Environment Victoria's supporters**

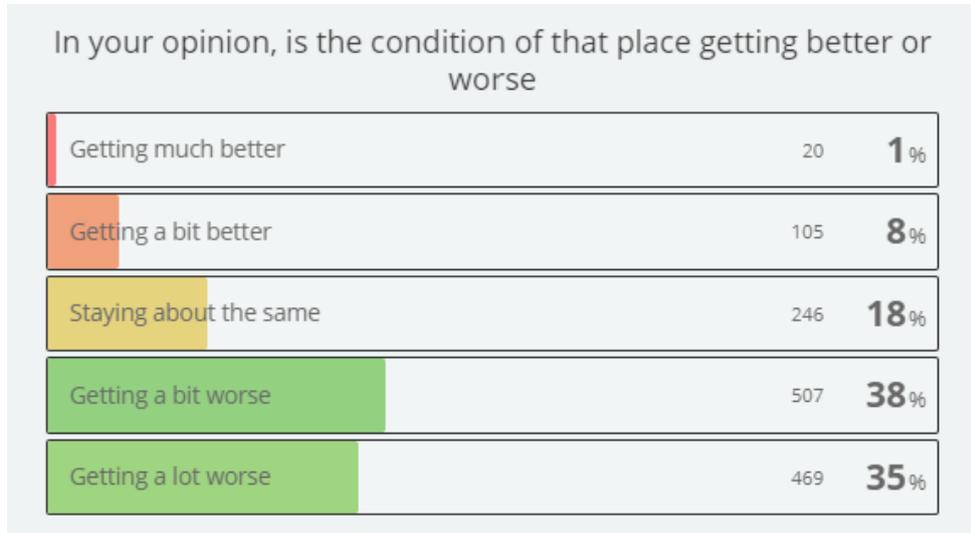
In order to provide the Inquiry with a broader perspective on how concerned Victorians see the decline of Victoria's ecosystems, we surveyed individuals in our supporter base to capture their perspectives and observations.

This is not a scientific survey nor one taken from a representative sample of the population. It is unashamedly gathering the views of those who care deeply about Victoria's environment and who are, unsurprisingly, almost unanimously "extremely concerned" about its condition.

We asked people to identify a specific part of Victoria's natural environment that is important to them, for whatever reason. The maps below show that there are special parts of nature in all corners of the state, and that even within metropolitan Melbourne there are pockets of nature that are important to residents.



either in poor or unknown condition, and, in terms of trajectory, 60% indicators were either deteriorating or on an “unclear” trajectory.



Amongst those who felt that the condition was improving, they mostly identified the following reasons:

- Community-led effort at revegetation, clean-ups or removing invasive species
- A reduction in local industrial activity
- Upgrades to facilities to improve amenity and/or accessibility
- Good maintenance by Parks Victoria rangers

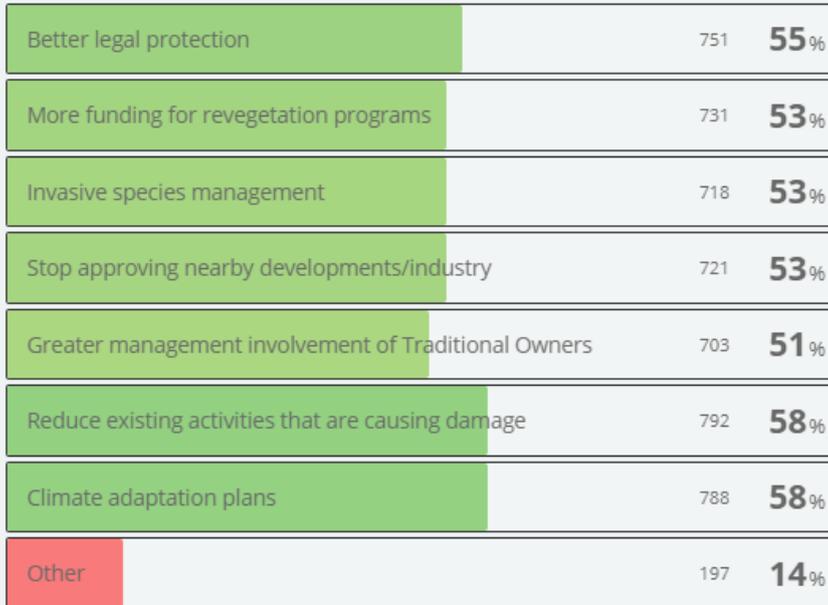
Where people said they thought it was getting worse, they mostly identified:

- Reduced environmental water flows in rivers
- Additional new industrial developments
- Vegetation removal
- Encroaching urbanisation
- Logging

There was a broad support for a range of measures that could be implemented to improve environmental condition in specific places.

### What do you think needs to change for the condition of that place to get better?

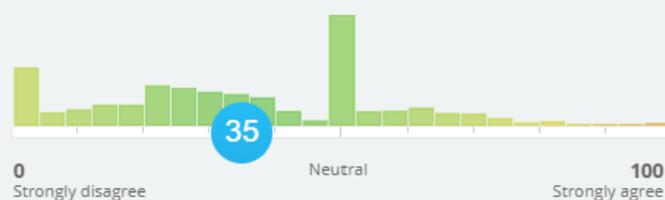
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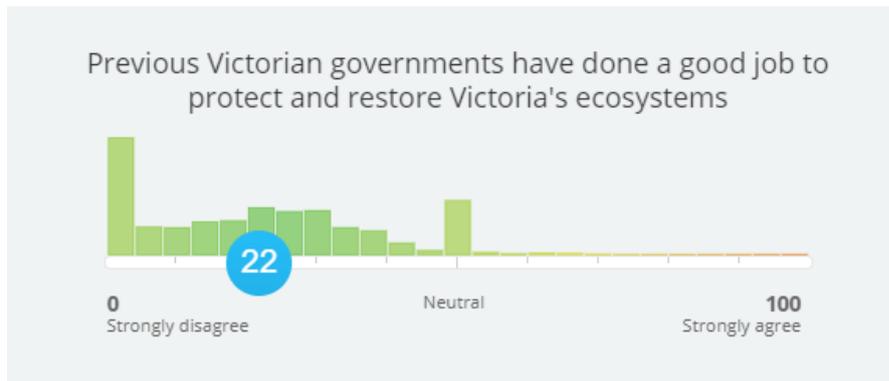


When asked what they had personally done to help improve the condition of their special place, 37% said they had been involved in practical restoration work (like Landcare or with a “Friends of” group) and 53% had taken action in a campaign to protect or restore the site.

On the whole, respondents had a slightly negative view of the performance of the Andrews government when it came to protecting and restoring Victoria’s ecosystems, with an average score of 35/100. State governments prior to the Andrews government fared worse, scoring on average 22/100.

### The Andrews government has done a good job to protect and restore Victoria's ecosystems





We also asked respondents to provide their opinion on whether key government agencies had what they need to arrest the decline in Victoria's ecosystems. People were asked to score DELWP and Parks Victoria out of 5 on whether they had enough (1) power/authority, (2) funding, (3) willingness, to address environmental problems.

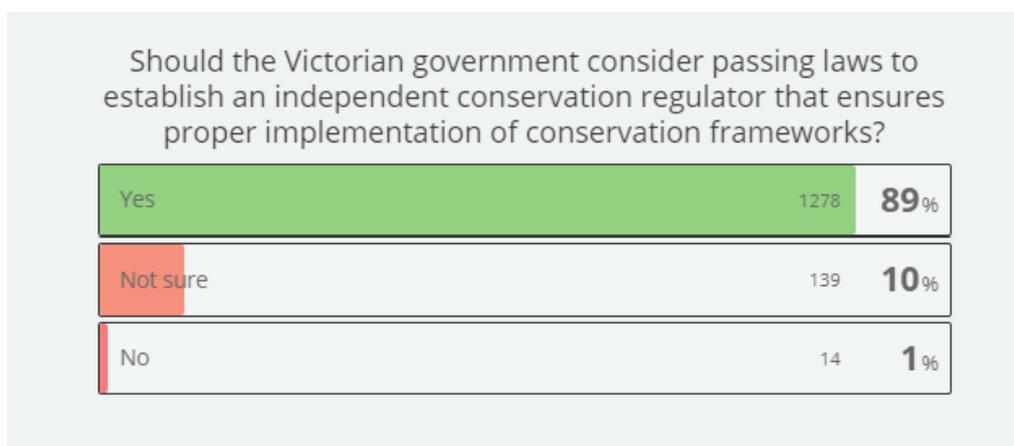
Perception of whether key agencies have... (scored out of 5)	DELWP	Parks Victoria
...Enough power/authority	2.1	2.0
...Enough funding	1.7	1.7
...Enough willingness	2.2	2.6

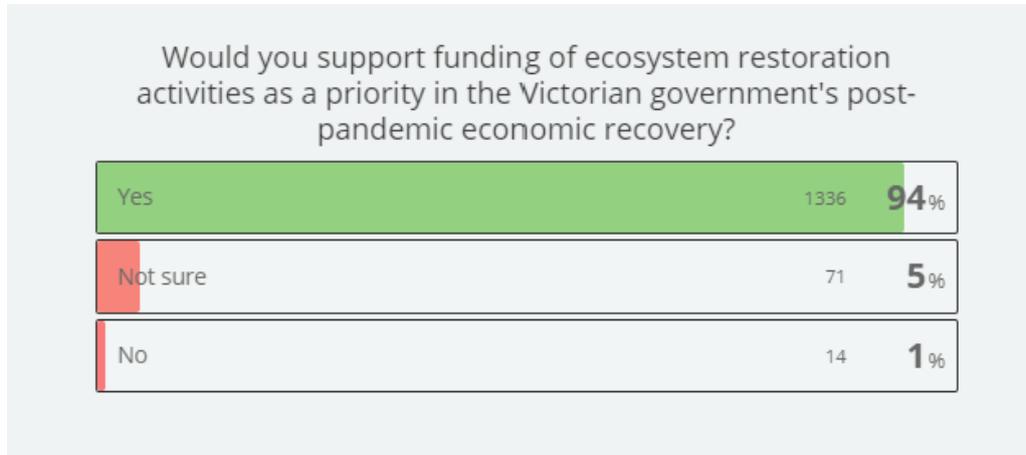
There is a clear perception that neither DELWP nor Parks Victoria have the funding necessary to protect and restore the state's ecosystems. There is also a view that these agencies lack the powers or authority they need, and there is also some pessimism about the extent to which these agencies are doing everything they could.

The survey also asked two specific questions:

- Should the Victorian government consider passing laws to establish an independent conservation regulator that ensures proper implementation of conservation frameworks?
- Would you support funding of ecosystem restoration activities as a priority in the Victorian government's post-pandemic economic recovery?

Both questions received overwhelming support.





Victoria has a recently established Office of the Conservation Regulator (OCR). While this is a welcome development, this position is not an independent statutory authority (ie. it has no legislative basis and could therefore potentially be abolished at the stroke of a pen). A further point is that the OCR sits within DELWP, rather than reporting directly to either the Minister or Parliament. These two points reduce the perception of OCR's independence and its ability to genuinely hold government agencies to account for their implementation of conservation laws and regulations.

On the issue of economic recovery from the pandemic, polling conducted in July for the National Landcare Network found that 81% of Victorians would support state and federal governments funding “tens of thousands of jobs undertaking practical conservation activities like tree-planting, removing weeds and restoring rivers”.<sup>41</sup> The idea of using economic stimulus measures to address environment and climate challenges has been endorsed by myriad and diverse voices, including organisations that traditionally do not have an environmental focus, such as the World Economic Forum and International Energy Agency. Domestically, over 80 landcare, environmental, farming and conservation groups are backing the prioritisation of landscape restoration work in immediate stimulus measures.<sup>42</sup>

**At the end of the survey, we asked respondents if there was anything else they wanted to add. These are not necessarily the views of Environment Victoria, but are shared as an indication of community sentiment on these issue, from people who perhaps could not otherwise have their say in this Inquiry.**

**Here is a selection of verbatim quotes from those responses:**

“Our wilderness and natural areas are precious and once they are destroyed there is a cascading effect on other systems.”

“Business as usual' post the horrendous destruction of Victoria's ecosystem from bushfire in 2019-20 borders on criminal negligence for our living environment. An immediate moratorium on logging and 'development' should be imposed while environment plans and policies are reviewed in the

<sup>41</sup> <https://nln.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Media-statement-Public-support-for-conservation-stimulus-200820.pdf>

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.smh.com.au/environment/conservation/farming-and-conservation-groups-call-for-4b-post-pandemic-jobs-boost-20200402-p54gic.html>

context of the bushfires and before the next bushfire season starts. Independent regulators should be appointed to remove the imperative of making money from our extremely valuable natural habitats, including forest habitat, waterways and coast. Create jobs in the care of protection, restoration and management of our natural heritage and listen to the custodians.”

“We need decisive legislation and the political will to create a recovery from the pandemic that is protecting the environment and conserving biodiversity, developing renewable energy projects and phasing our fossil fuels as energy sources, providing the infrastructure for a responsible, proactive and economically sensible recovery.”

“We need to protect the uniqueness of our stunning land, fauna and flora for future generations.”

“There needs to be action taken, from horses and deer from the alpine regions to increasing the national park reserve across Victoria and end the logging of native forests.”

“Victoria needs more stringent policies and laws to protect the existing quality of native vegetation, overseen by an independent body and allocated sufficient funds so that laws can be rigidly enforced. Current legislation is not adequate and infringements are rarely prosecuted resulting in farmers, private landholders and councils doing what suits them and not protecting our country for future generations.”

“Logging of old growth forests must stop immediately. More Aboriginal park rangers are needed. It is good that Aboriginals are now started to be consulted about fire, but more importance must be placed on this. The Great Forest National Park MUST happen. It could attract many tourists and could create many jobs. The Aboriginal Custodians of this land must be able to see this land protected and be able to get jobs there. It is so important to have this beautiful area protected. I have visited parts and always feel such a sense of awe. We cannot afford to lose any of this.”

“The best investment in the future is environmental repair/stewardship and subsequent employment in eco management/tourism and clean food production.”

“If the Victorian Government is serious about our environment, logging old growth forests, the proposed gas terminal in Westernport and agricultural land clearing need to stop immediately. Land revegetation programs need to be massively expanded. This year's apocalyptic fires destroyed a massive amount of our unique flora and fauna even by Australian standards and it is only going to get worse.”

“Make sure where there are legal protections for protection of endangered species that development does not occur. Need more protection for conservation of habitat that is not eroded when governments change over.”

“We must immediately stop interfering with any remaining old growth forests. They must be preserved at all costs.”

“The Victorian Government needs to prioritise biodiversity and environmental values above economic infrastructure. Population needs limiting. Building more houses and buying stuff is not planning a sustainable future for Victoria. Agricultural practices need to change quicker. Logging of old growth forest needs to stop NOW. I would like to think my grandchildren will see indigenous forests, grasslands, alpine, riparian and maritime ecosystems but I feel the short-term politicians and

land developer councillors show no leadership or understanding of value of the environment to our continued existence.”

“As a farmer I have a willingness to plant a significant portion of my property to trees, but not the financial capacity to do so. The last time I was able to access assistance to plant trees was 18 years ago. Similar schemes would be well received, with the benefits well established.”

“Ban glyphosate and other chemical herbicides and pesticides from all agriculture, parks, playing fields, golf courses, and replace them with sustainable practices to restore and regenerate our soil, water and air.”

“The list of endangered fauna is shameful and the loss of native grassland and other flora is a disgrace.”

“The responsible authority for protection of the environment falls to Council in Victoria, and they usually do not have the funds, people or the will to protect it. We need to change the way this is done. Rather than allowing a slow decline, we need to properly manage and prosecute people that do not play by the rules, rather than turning a blind eye to these practices.”

“We need to be able to protect critical habitat for endangered species. The Minister has powers to stop bad things from happening and declare critical habitat, but doesn't use them.”

“These seems a real unwillingness for inter-agency cooperation to tackle environmental issues especially along shorelines and riverbanks where responsibilities overlap. I feel there are powers available to authorities to effectively improve environmental outcomes but continuous bickering over who will fund vessel recovery, shoreline repairs, hazard removal and pollution prevention often results in poor environmental outcomes. I would like to see all agencies work better together to achieve positive outcomes rather than trying to handball issues.”

“Parks Victoria and DEWLP do their best... or those staff whom I know personally work hard to achieve great results. But those organisations are treated like political footballs after each election and smashed in terms of staffing, funding and constant restructures. Those organisations need to be better supported, funded and staffed to continue and increase the works they do rather than only being left the option of locking up parks and land because of budget cuts and staffing loss. Yes a \$30 padlock is cheaper but neglect is not conservation or an acceptable land management practice.”

“Protections for native species and habitat need strengthening against all the threats from people. This includes both laws and funding to implement programs and enforce laws.”

“DELWP has too many conflicts of interest in its structure. The environment is often a poor last in its decisions and private profit often seems to be the prime consideration.”

“No more logging in natural forests, we need big efforts and financial incentives to establish plantation industry. Our existing national parks need a much bigger permanent work force to properly maintain them, this could be a great boost to regional youth employment and training as well.”

“Better environmental outcomes require whole-of-government approach. The current balance of power between business-as-usual and commercial interests versus fragmented environmental

protections and community volunteer activism means too little is being achieved to prevent ongoing decline.”

“We need to protect the natural environment for our mental health as well as for its intrinsic value. We need to keep our ancient forests for the clean water they produce, the protection they provide to our native animals and the carbon that they keep out of the atmosphere. We all need more access to nature, not less. We could learn a lot from First Nations people about how to look after the natural environment.”

“I would like to see government departments more active in ecology. Many issues are up to volunteer organizations to do, such as survey areas for endangered species before they are logged, and to vet EIS documentation from large companies before major projects. A lot of the time it seems that the government departments that are supposed to be protecting and conserving the environment are "missing in action". I also like the idea of renaming any species deemed extinct after the Prime Minister that makes the announcement. It would leave an indelible legacy.”

“Using local bushland reserves during Covid 19 has increased my appreciation of them enormously and it is my intention to join a Friends group once we are able to so I can make a practical contribution to conserving these important natural places. I believe local governments should publicise the conservation work they do more.”

“It would be so wonderful to see our native animals return to these places where they have disappeared. We need strong protection for them. Once they are gone there is no way to get them back.”

“We are so blessed and privileged to have such a beautiful country to call home, and our bushland and native species are a vital part of our country. Once they're lost, they're lost forever. We cannot risk that happening. Action needs to be swift and decisive to save our native species before even more become extinct.”

“Housing developments and the expanding urban growth boundaries are significantly impacting native vegetation. We must protect the farm land we have on the edge of our cities to stop farming being pushed further out into the bush where agricultural land will inevitably replace trees and nature. Housing policy plays a critical role in the protection of our natural environment.”

“Much of the work being done to protect and restore local environments is being done by groups of unpaid volunteers working in environmental groups, who are passionate about the environment and often devote days out of their week every week. If you counted this in paid hours, this volunteer work would be the equivalent of billions of dollars every year. The government needs to understand this.”

“It is far cheaper and effective to prevent extinction than it is to try to restore environments. Restoration is never as complete as a naturally evolved ecosystem. Extinction is forever; we must do all we can to not let it happen. We must implement actions right now to reduce climate change impacts.”

“From my experience, Parks Vic needs to work with local Landcare and Friends groups to care and restore land instead of blowing in and barking orders about what you can't do. DELWP doesn't have

enough money or employees to DO anything. Melbourne Water work well with local groups and landowners.”

“Laws are to be enhanced, enforced, protected and not short-circuited to appease, embolden, encourage or support lobby groups, interested industry blocks, greedy developers and other misdirected groups.”

“I am very anxious about the post-pandemic period. I fear that the environment will be disregarded in the race to restore economic growth.”

“After the catastrophic bushfires, many flora and fauna species which were threatened are now endangered. We must do all we can to protect them and help them recover.”

“We should also look at what habitats and wildlife corridors can be maintained in our large areas of urban/suburban sprawl through planning policies and management of public space. The beautiful pardalotes, Eastern spinebills and thornbills have sadly disappeared from my garden in recent years.”

“The growth in visitation to National Parks during the current Covid-19 pandemic illustrates that Victorians value the state's natural heritage. It is about time that our parliamentarians did more to protect it for future generations and for its own intrinsic values.”

“Forest protection, management and restoration must be planned with the legitimate & funded involvement of Aboriginal custodians. All projects should provide employment opportunities to Aboriginal Victorians and local residents.”

“There are lots of grassroots groups doing their bit at a local level, but it is frustrating when governments at all levels and authorities don't deliver meaningful programs with large outcomes on the ground. It seems too many government resources go into managing the bureaucracy/PR and duck shoving responsibility. Back the environmental groups with resources to scale up what they have proven locally to get outcomes.”

“There is no point putting band aids on environmental degradation / destruction after the fact when the degradation can be stopped beforehand. eg AGL LNG Gas at Crib Point. Any damage this causes cannot ever be undone.”

“We definitely need much stronger laws to protect our environment. At present our laws seem almost toothless when it comes to the crunch, and we can't afford to constantly be fighting battles to legally protect our flora and fauna and climate when there are more urgent physical battles (i.e. bushfires) to fight.”

“It's absolutely critical that the Victorian government makes protection and restoration of natural places/environment and biodiverse ecosystems, its top priority, including stemming the tide of fauna and flora extinctions. I want to see the Victorian government be a national leader in a gas free (and fossil fuels free) economic recovery.”

“I am very worried about VicForests. I think it should be disbanded as it does not obey the regulations and I think the environment issues do not get addressed. Old growth forests in Victoria

should not be logged as they cannot be replaced. Timber jobs can be replaced by other jobs like environment protection jobs or tourism.”

“I would really like to see more funding for the protection of our ecosystems, and the authority and willingness to enforce laws made to protect them.”

“Threatened species legislation has no real teeth. Governments are not bound to act on threatened species listings; dingoes must not continue to be treated as invasive pests along with foxes, goats and rabbits. The use of poisons in the Australian natural landscape is far too liberal. Pest animal control currently confuses agricultural protection and environmental protection.”

“DELWP's counter-productive prescribed burning and VicForests' logging are seriously degrading forests ecosystems and biodiversity by increasing forest flammability, diminishing ecosystem diversity and EVCs. The so-called post-fire timber 'salvaging' is a disaster compounding the bushfires' destruction. The associated clearing by Forest Fire Management Victoria and its creation of supposed 'safe working environments' has resulted in the removal of numerous road and track-side mature habitat trees which are becoming increasingly rare. The resources devoted to all this destruction should be redirected to ecosystem and habitat rehabilitation and protection. This would create more jobs than logging and FFMV's current strategies.”

“The environment is Dan Andrew's blind spot. We still do not have the Great Forest National Park. Parks Victoria is still very underfunded and Vic Forests poses huge conflict of interest as does govt ownership of sawmills. The federal govt is doing absolutely nothing to fund Victorian conservation efforts and is now proposing environmental laws be devolved to states, removing the last little fig leaf of protection and oversight of our shared environment. This mustn't happen!”

“More funding is needed for research particularly on farmland, many farmers would like more information and want to do revegetation works, and those who have would like to have some research done to see what the differences are. Farmers need more support for when they are making efforts to restore the biodiversity.”

“The state government has often approved logging practices in the past which have had detrimental effects on the environment and occasionally the logging companies have logged in areas that were prohibited to them and were not prosecuted for this. Logging companies do not do enough to restore the areas they have logged and cleared land not only destroys habitat and decreases water catchment it leaves areas vulnerable to invasive weeds like bracken and blackberry.”

“New laws to protect ecosystems are vital however they must be enforced and have effect on the ground otherwise they are just bureaucratic box ticking.”

“From my understanding (via employees), DELWP is a bureaucratic organisation that does not prioritise environmental sustainability, has restricted funding and is not 'hands on'. On the other hand, Parks Victoria seems to be under-resourced to cope with the vast regional areas under its care. Forest management is therefore under threat due to lack of funding and proper planning. These two organisations could be better resourced to provide better protections, management and sustainability. Community engagement is another strong source of ground level support for land management.”

“I believe this government and those previously have not taken environmental issues seriously. Environment budgets are always well under funded and government lacks commitment to make strong, effective changes.”

“Generally, we have reasonably good laws and regulations. The biggest problem is lack of willingness to apply them (at departmental level), and too low priorities and funding from government.”

“I trust this government to do a better job than any other in recent history and I hope they will know they have a mandate and responsibility to go far beyond what has so far been achieved or planned in order to adequately meet the climate emergency we are in.”

“I am distressed and worried by the lack of care given to the environment. Many of us have given considerable time and effort as volunteers over many years (I am 80 yrs old) to make a difference. It is a continual fight to hang onto any gains we make. It is not possible to relax your guard and presume you have achieved a permanent change. Always there are people wanting to make money at the expense of the environment and they have far too much influence on Governments. This is why we need to strengthen laws to protect the environment and an independent body to oversee them.”

#### **For further information**

Dr Nicholas Aberle  
Campaigns Manager  
Environment Victoria  
[n.aberle@environmentvictoria.org.au](mailto:n.aberle@environmentvictoria.org.au)