

Innovation in Victoria's parks

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Parks Victoria is well recognised in Australia and internationally for its innovative approach to park management. This chapter outlines Parks Victoria's role, and looks forward to the next 15 years identifying the emerging management approaches and examples of innovation that highlight a resilient organisation and parks system in Victoria.

Parks Victoria: our custodial role

Parks Victoria is a statutory authority responsible for managing most of Victoria's reserve system. In the second reading speech to Parliament that established Parks Victoria 15 years ago, the Minister for Conservation and Land Management at the time said "In doing so it will create a world-class organisation able to deliver park management services for the state's parks, reserves and open space and other related management functions. A focus on sound environmental management will be a feature of Parks Victoria's role as a leading park management agency, while providing compatible services for recreation and tourism."

Parks Victoria currently manages 4.2 million hectares, or 18% of Victoria, on behalf of all Victorians. The park estate includes 1,200 kilometres or 70%, of Victoria's coastline, 45 national parks, 25 state parks, 13 marine national parks and 11 marine sanctuaries, a metropolitan parks system and more than 2,800 nature conservation reserves. It also provides recreational management of Port Phillip, Western Port and much of the Yarra and Maribyrnong Rivers. Victoria's parks contain the state's largest and most undisturbed ecosystems as well as the most intact areas for protection of urban biodiversity (Parks Victoria 2011).



Innovative approaches in park management

Parks Victoria has been recognised by peers for its innovative approaches in managing parks. Two notable examples – ‘Healthy Parks Healthy People’ and ‘Linking Landscapes’ – are summarised below. These two examples explicitly demonstrate that the use of science and knowledge to progress policy change and set new directions in park management is achievable at the national and international levels. Both examples have common threads associated with their success, including quality research and information to support decision-making, leadership, advocacy, and a ‘coalition of the willing’ (a shared commitment and collaborative approach).

Healthy Parks Healthy People

In developing *Healthy Parks Healthy People*, a philosophy which describes the fundamental connection between people and nature, Parks Victoria has defined an approach, created momentum, and taken an international lead in its advocacy to promote the interconnectedness between nature conservation, culture, and community benefits. As the evidence base has expanded, a growing number of park agencies around the world have successfully adopted *Healthy Parks Healthy People*. In 2010 the International Healthy Parks Healthy People Congress captured the global interest and commitment with the ‘Melbourne Communiqué’ being adopted. It is a call to action for leading government agencies and organisations around the world to further our understanding of, and strengthen the connection between, people and nature. Most recently, the United States National Parks Service formally adopted *Healthy Parks Healthy People* as the management basis for strengthening the connection between its public land and public health. Opportunities to build and expand on this work are continuing (Parks Victoria 2012a).

Linking Landscapes

Parks are the core areas for biodiversity in the landscape. However, Victoria’s thinking has evolved in line with international trends emerging out of the 2003 IUCN World Parks Congress which focussed on the integration of strong parks into broader landscape scale initiatives on many tenures under such banners as ‘Islands to Networks’ and ‘Benefits beyond Boundaries’ (IUCN 2005). Parks Victoria has been pursuing landscape connectivity partnerships for several years with catchment managers and non-government organisations. Building on this work, the agency worked

with a range of partners, particularly the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA), to provide the impetus for a national response to the profound threat to our nation’s biodiversity, ecological health, productivity and the wellbeing of society.

As a result of this threat, an unprecedented summit was convened by Parks Victoria, WCPA and partners in Kingscliff, New South Wales in October 2009. Over one hundred representatives came together from the diverse fields of science, land and natural resource management, conservation, NGOs, green carbon, business and the philanthropic sector. The Linking Landscapes Summit was driven by “a shared sense of urgency and called for the development of an innovative national network of landscape scale conservation corridors” (Kingscliff Communiqué 2009).

A key outcome from this Linking Landscapes Summit was the Australian Government’s adoption of the direction in the communiqué as policy and developing a National Wildlife Corridors Plan. There are a number of large-scale connectivity corridors operating across Australia. In Victoria one of those corridors, Habitat 141° was established as a partnership between Greening Australia, Parks Victoria and other groups “to work with communities to conserve, restore and connect habitats for plants and wildlife on a landscape scale from the outback to the ocean” (Habitat 141° 2012).

Building a resilient Parks Victoria: the next 15 years

Parks Victoria’s innovation over the past 15 years has enabled the Victorian park system to grow and maintain relevance. However, with the pressures of climate change, population growth and economic uncertainty, new approaches of doing business are required by park agencies. Parks Victoria is thus developing an approach to increase its organisational resilience.

A resilient organisation can be defined as one that can cope with change and disruptions and continue to deliver its business outcomes and create new opportunities. Healthy organisations can grow and contract depending on circumstances. A resilient organisation is one whose vision and values are shared by all employees and understood by partners.

Over the past decade, Parks Victoria’s staff and Victorian communities have been impacted by and responded to major events of fires, floods and locust plagues, and while not of biblical proportion, these events have had dramatic impacts on the delivery of park services and the connection of communities to parks.



Montane grasslands and grassy woodlands in the Bendoc Nature Conservation Reserve, a former grazing property on the Victorian-New South Wales border acquired for addition to the National Reserve System. ©Photo: James Fitzsimons

In responding to these challenges, Parks Victoria is seeking to establish itself as a resilient organisation that is able to cope, deliver and create new opportunities. The shape and form is still evolving, however innovative approaches to caring for Country with Victoria's Indigenous communities, the delivery of partnerships, and evaluation of policies and programmes are emerging as pathways forward, and are briefly discussed below. Paramount to all areas of our business is a clear understanding of the objectives we are seeking to achieve and engagement and connection of people with these special places we manage on their behalf.

Caring for Country

Parks Victoria continues to support the aspirations of Victorian Traditional Owners in park management and access to Country.

In working with Traditional Owners a number of success factors have been identified and incorporated in a new *Traditional Owner Partnership Strategy*. This strategy identifies a set of organisational principles including:

1. Both Victorian Traditional Owners and Parks Victoria staff will play a vital role in establishing and maintaining the partnerships necessary for building an outstanding park and waterway system.
2. Parks Victoria will support Victorian Traditional Owners in good governance, community strengthening, employment, gathering and meetings, training and business development.

3. Free, prior and informed consent principles will be used in all Parks Victoria processes that involve Victorian Traditional Owners organisations.
4. All Parks Victoria staff are involved in managing parts of Traditional Owners' Country; their environmental and cultural landscapes and heritage involves all aspects of park management, yet only Victorian Traditional Owners through their representative organisation speak for their Country.
5. Culturally and mutually inclusive park management practices will be developed and integrated into all aspects of Parks Victoria business, from individual work plans through to corporate and business plans.
6. Leaders in Parks Victoria will be responsible for building and demonstrating accountability for the Traditional Owner Partnership Strategy.

With the adoption of these principles Parks Victoria believes that both Traditional Owner and park management outcomes will be enhanced.

The 'Ngootyoong Gunditj Ngootyoong Marra' South West Management Plan and the Yorta Yorta Caring for Country Ranger team described below highlight the application of these principles.



Helena Gum Moth. ©Photo: Museum Victoria

‘Ngootyoong Gunditj Ngootyoong Marra’ South West Management Plan

This management plan, currently in preparation, proposes to deliver a number of innovative approaches including:

- A strong and deliberate joint planning approach with the Traditional Owners
- A whole of landscape plan for south-west Victoria covering marine and terrestrial parks and private lands managed by Traditional Owners as protected areas
- Online community engagement tools.

The management plan has a traditional Gunditjmarra name ‘*Ngootyoong Gunditj, Ngootyoong Mara*’ which translated means ‘*Healthy Country Healthy People*’, indicating the importance of managing these conservation areas for their natural, cultural and social values together. The plan is being prepared as a partnership between Parks Victoria and the Gunditjmarra Traditional Owners. This partnership also takes in the statutory co-management arrangements for Mount Eccles National Park with the Gunditjmarra Traditional Owners. The project is overseen by a group of representatives from Parks Victoria, the Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment, Budj Bim Council and the Gunditjmirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation. The planning area covers the conservation areas in the Registered Aboriginal Party area of the Gunditjmarra Traditional Owners including Indigenous Protected Areas, marine and terrestrial parks (Parks Victoria 2012b).

Yorta Yorta Caring for Country Ranger Team

This program will provide training and ongoing employment opportunities for Yorta Yorta people in the management of their traditional lands in the floodplain country of northern Victoria, including land currently managed by Parks Victoria and the Department of Sustainability and Environment.

Historically, training programs for Aboriginal people have delivered variable outcomes with one of the challenges being securing employment at the completion of training programs. The program is providing full-time employment for five participants, developing skills and capacity to establish and manage a Yorta Yorta natural resource management (NRM) business. The key success factor is the link between real on job experience and accredited training graduating to a Yorta Yorta NRM business owned and managed by Yorta Yorta Nations Aboriginal Corporation.

Programs such as this build capacity of both Parks Victoria and Traditional Owners with learnings shared across the state. Parks Victoria recognises the importance of employment (particular on Country) as a major contributor to ‘Closing the Gap’ outcomes, with 7.5% of Parks Victoria staff of Aboriginal descent. The Victorian Government is now supporting similar programs with both the Dja Dja Wurrung (Central Victoria) and Gunaikurnai peoples (East Gippsland).

Delivery partnerships

In establishing a resilient organisation, Parks Victoria recognises the critical role that strategic partnerships play in achieving park management outcomes, increasing relevance and building capacity. Numerous partnerships established with other organisations, including with Conservation Volunteers Australia and Museum Victoria, are briefly described here.

Conservation Volunteers Australia

In June 2009, a partnership was formalised with Conservation Volunteers Australia to strengthen the existing (Parks Champions offers people the opportunity to volunteer in some of Victoria’s most beautiful places) and include the enhanced delivery of other key conservation/volunteer programs. The partnership has included the secondment of a Conservation Volunteers staff member into Parks Victoria to coordinate and support delivery. This partnership resulted in the delivery of 1,741 volunteer days in 32 Parks Victoria locations in 2009/2010 – of which 814 days were from the local community and 927 were from the international community.

The combined value of the Conservation Volunteers-Parks Victoria partnership was costed at greater than \$2.3 million for practical on-ground works in 2009/2010. This represents a substantial return on investment, delivery of a range of conservation initiatives (that would not have been otherwise delivered), and



Yorta Yorta Caring For Country Ranger Team, courtesy Parks Victoria. ©Photo: Misheye

increased engagement with the community in parks. It is an outstanding model and could be emulated by many other agencies.

Understanding our natural history

A new partnership with Museum Victoria has emerged following the successful delivery of the 'Prom Bioscan', a snapshot census of wildlife across all major terrestrial and aquatic systems at Wilsons Promontory National Park generating data to enable assessments of the status of sensitive species (Hooely and Norman 2011).

The survey resulted in the documentation of a number of undescribed species and new species records for the National Park, generated extensive species lists for birds, mammals, freshwater fish, and freshwater, terrestrial and marine invertebrates. It has also resulted in a palaeontology report.

The new partnership will see delivery of multiple outputs: annual parks scans in iconic national parks; natural history online engagement; community support and heritage connection; social history research; marine communications; and the development of park-specific mobile device 'apps'. Overall this partnership will generate a greater understanding of wildlife in parks and increased ability to share information and knowledge with the community.

Goals and evaluating success

All of the innovation described above is ineffective unless we are clear about what we are trying to achieve and knowing when we have arrived. Perhaps one of Parks Victoria's most innovative approaches has been the establishment of our 'Conservation Outcomes Hierarchy' and 'State of the Parks' evaluation. Combined, these two elements are being successfully integrated into Parks Victoria's core business and provide clarity of direction and measures of success.

Parks Victoria's Conservation Outcomes Hierarchy is a framework for developing statements about the desired condition of natural assets in a park or parks, and the limits of acceptable threat to those assets, which management is seeking to achieve. Parks Victoria has recently commenced a fast-track process to define an 'objectives hierarchy' (Figure 1) for parks in the landscape, based on work by Biggs et al. (2003), which will also be the basis of new management plans including the 'Ngootyoong Gunditj Ngootyoong Marra' South West Management Plan described above.

Conservation Outcomes Hierarchy for Adaptive Management

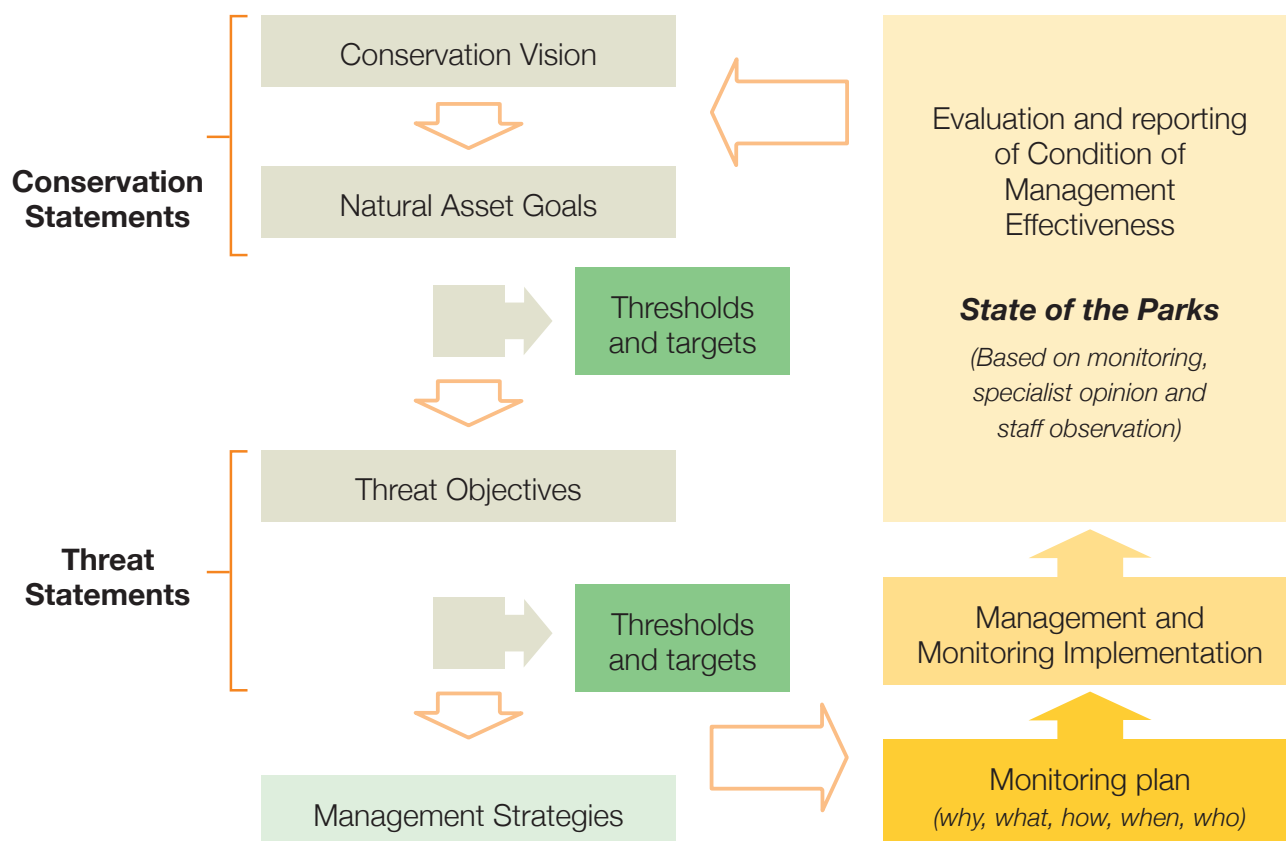


Figure 1. Parks Victoria's conservation outcomes hierarchy.

The process involves setting measurable objectives for our priority values and threatening processes based on:

- Current and desired condition of priority values and severity of threats
- Predictions of future conditions
- Realistic expectations of what can be achieved
- Social and political objectives.

A key component of the hierarchy is the State of the Parks (SoP) evaluation program, which reviews the effectiveness of management in meeting its core objectives for natural values, heritage values, visitor experiences, community involvement, and fire and emergency management. Evaluation of management effectiveness is a key component of responsive proactive park management and these assessments are now being undertaken by many park agencies around the world using the accepted best practice guidelines by the IUCN (Hockings et al. 2006).

Parks Victoria was the first parks agency in Australia to develop a SoP report. While previous SoP programs (2000 and 2007) have focussed primarily on reporting

the status of park values and their threats, the purpose of the current program is to apply SoP as an adaptive management and knowledge tool to inform management priorities and decisions at a range of scales, from statewide to local.

Using a broad range of available information from corporate datasets to monitoring data to park manager experience, detailed assessments are now being systematically undertaken every three years and fed into planning and priority setting. Different communication products for different users have already been developed or are in their final stage of development. These include an online reporting system, statewide report cards, maps, park profiles, and Web-based products for community engagement.

Consistent with its aim to making evaluation 'normal business' at Parks Victoria, staff and managers will increasingly realise the value of the SoP evaluation tool, and the quality of information will improve over time.

Conclusion

This chapter provides a summary of a range of innovative approaches adopted across Parks Victoria to increase resilience and be adaptive to change. Recognising that parks are the critical cornerstone of conserving nature and in providing a suite of benefits to the community, our focus remains on ensuring parks are effectively managed in a landscape context and are equitably governed. As this chapter demonstrates, applying resilience thinking – including the acquisition and application research and information to support decision making, leadership, advocacy and establishing a ‘coalition of the willing’ – provides us with a new framework for enhancing the values of parks across Victoria.

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Biography

Ian Walker is General Manager for Environment and Heritage, Parks Victoria, and has 20 years experience working in the conservation sector in Victoria and Western Australia in both operational delivery and corporate roles within the government sector. An ecologist by training, Ian has collaboratively progressed landscape scale conservation at a national level supporting the establishment of the wildlife corridors plan and currently chairs Habitat 141°. Ian is also a member of the IUCN WCPA Taskforce that prepared the IUCN Ecological Restoration Guidelines for Protected Areas. Developing and supporting conservation partnerships has been a feature of Ian’s career along with supporting education, health and employment outcomes by enabling Aboriginal people to care for Country.