

COMMENT | DR MICHELLE FREEMAN AND DAVID DORE

Declaring a national park is easy, now to the real work

The Victorian Government's decision to announce more National Parks in western Victoria last week dodges the real challenges of managing and conserving these forests. The Mt Cole - Pyrenees, Wombat, and Wellsford forests have all been reassigned after an investigation by the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) completed in June 2019.

Declaring National Parks is easy, but managing them - to maintain biodiversity, mitigate catastrophic fire and ensure that visitors respect them - is not. Western Victoria's forests need a new vision that includes more holistic, integrated approaches based on active and adaptive management that is informed by science, practical experience and traditional ecolog-

ical knowledge.

The shift to National Park will not, in itself, reduce threats to biodiversity like feral animals, weeds, diseases or climate change.

To genuinely support conservation, the Victorian Government needs to substantially increase base funding of Parks Victoria to ensure they have the resources to manage these new areas. Great work is currently being done by community groups and organisations who volunteer and fundraise, but we can't rely solely on their endeavours.

Leadership of Traditional Owners is vital. Traditional Owners have a deep understanding of country and how it can be better managed, particularly through use of cultural burning and other cultural lore. Funding is required to develop the skills of all future forest managers to interpret

forests and share knowledge through management experience, like past generations of foresters.

Creating parks potentially removes management options, to reduce fire risk, improve habitat and produce firewood, an important heating source for many local people.

It is therefore appropriate that a phased transition of land tenure occurs over several years to ensure that genuine strategy, long-term planning and resourcing is developed to support active and adaptive management to meet community and conservation needs.

VEAC recommended active ecological restoration, including thinning forest regrowth, but in response the government has given only lukewarm support and committed no resources. In these vegeta-

tion types, shifting to passive conservation is likely to increase bushfire threats and miss the opportunity for active management to improve and maintain conservation value.

The amazing vision of the legislators and foresters created the public forest estate that Victorians now enjoy. Forests need ongoing management by people with intimate knowledge of their complex needs. We need to empower and equip these people with budgets and the authority to protect and maintain them. Simply declaring Park status for our forests is not enough.

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