

It takes much more than a national park title to protect state forests

Park status no panacea



National park declaration is easy – real management needs long-term thinking, people and budgets, write **MICHELLE FREEMAN** and **DAVID DORE**

THE Victorian Government's recent decision to announce more national parks in the Mt Cole-Pyrenees, Wombat, and Wellsford forests of western Victoria dodges the real challenges of managing and conserving these forests.

Declaring national parks is easy, but managing them – to maintain biodiversity, mitigate catastrophic fire and ensure visitors respect them – is not.

A new vision is needed, that includes holistic approaches based on active and adaptive management, informed by science, practical experience and traditional ecological knowledge.

The shift to park will not, in itself, reduce threats to biodiversity like invasive species or climate change. To genuinely support conservation, the Victorian Government needs to increase base funding of Parks Victoria to ensure they can manage these new areas. Great work is being done by community groups who volunteer and fundraise, but we can't rely solely on them.

Leadership of traditional owners is also vital. Traditional owners understand how country can be better managed. Funding is required to develop skills, experience and knowledge sharing of all future forest managers.

Creating parks removes management options to reduce fire risk, improve habitat and produce firewood, an important heating source for many locals. It is therefore appropriate that a transition of tenure occurs over several years to ensure that genuine strategy, long-term planning and resourcing is developed.

La Gerche recognised the importance of forest thinning as an active management approach after mining, conducting an experiment in 1887 to remove crooked trees, keeping the healthy straight saplings.

In 2010, Parks Victoria repeated this work, showing the benefits for habitat and plant diversity. This has since discontinued due to lack of resources and political commitment. VEAC recommended active ecological restoration, including thinning, but in response the government has



Big risks: Declaration of national parks removes options to reduce fire risk.

given only lukewarm support with no resources.

Running through the Wellsford forest is an experience hundreds of orienteers regularly enjoy. After many years of timber harvesting and management, VEAC says it is "one of the biggest and in best condition Box-Ironbark forests in Victoria".

Communities nearby understand that eco-tourism, recreation and multiple-use management have successfully coexisted for decades.

Whatever their tenure, forests need management by people who

understand 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 is not enough. Trained foresters, rangers, traditional owners, bush users and community members who respect and interact with this country can help protect and improve these forests for generations to come.

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