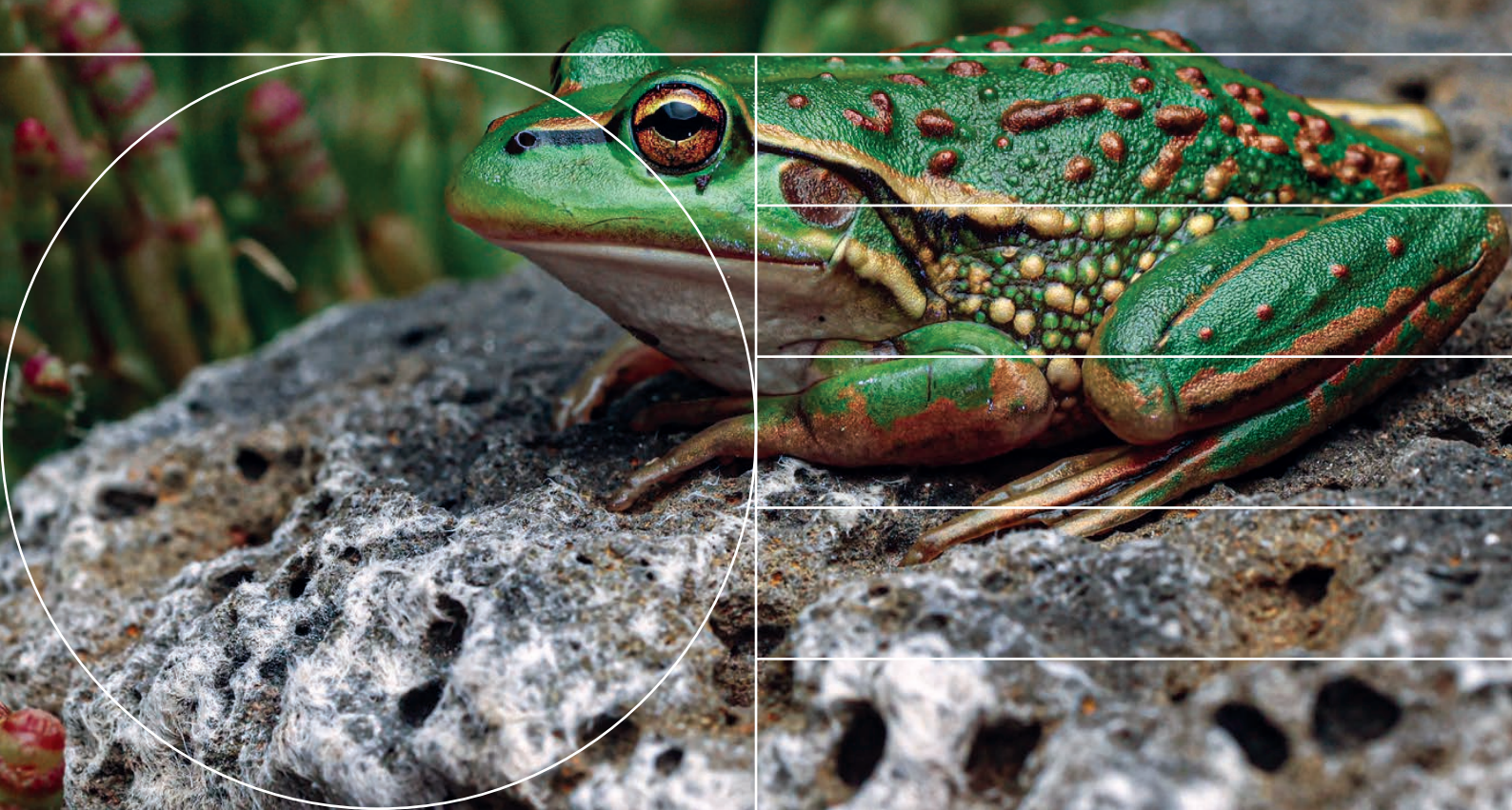
Biodiversity Council

Victoria: the nature-poorest state

Six priorities for the next Victorian Government to halt nature loss

Biodiversity Council

Nov 2026



Acknowledgement

The Biodiversity Council acknowledges the First Peoples of the lands and waters of Australia, and pays respect to their Elders, past, present and future and expresses gratitude for long and ongoing custodianship of Country.

Further information

For more information

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Biodiversity Council

The Biodiversity Council brings together leading experts including Indigenous Knowledge Holders to promote evidence-based solutions to Australia's biodiversity crisis. It was founded by 11 universities with support from The Ian Potter Foundation, The Ross Trust, Trawalla Foundation, The Rendere Trust, Isaacson Davis Foundation, Coniston Charitable Trust, Angela Whitbread and Nature Impact Collective.

Executive summary

Victoria was once a national leader in nature conservation, pioneering initiatives such as Landcare and Land for Wildlife. But decades of inadequate investment, weakened environmental protections and government inaction have left the state's biodiversity in serious decline.

Victoria is now the most intensively settled and cleared state in Australia, with half of the state's native ecosystems destroyed since European settlement, including 79% of native vegetation on private land (Victorian Auditor-General's Office, 2022).

People in Melbourne have the poorest access to national parks and other conservation areas of any Australian capital city (Taylor et al., 2026).

More than 2,000 species and subspecies are now threatened, and populations of threatened plants and animals have declined by almost 70% since 2000 (TSX, 2026). Once called the garden state, Victoria is now the 'nature-poorest' state.

It matters to every Victorian, as people who visit biodiverse natural areas and live surrounded by more nature are physically and mentally healthier, spend less on health services, and are less impacted by climate extremes such as heat waves.

Key findings

This report identifies significant failures in Victoria's environmental policies, investment and governance:

- **Biodiversity conservation is chronically underfunded.** The government's flagship Biodiversity 2037 strategy has consistently failed to meet its annual targets, while funding has declined in real terms. The government has not published a progress report since 2023, and Parks Victoria's staffing has fallen by more than 30% since 2020–21.
- **Native forest logging has not ended.** Despite the government's commitment to end native forest harvesting in 2024, logging continues through private forestry and other mechanisms. Legislative loopholes could allow commercial logging to resume in state forests.
- **Biodiversity offset schemes are failing to adequately compensate for habitat destruction.** Weaker alternative arrangements for clearing on Crown land and renewable energy developments lack fundamental safeguards to ensure genuine, measurable and lasting biodiversity gains.
- **Wildlife laws are outdated and fail to adequately respect First Peoples' rights.** The government has failed to implement key recommendations of the independent Wildlife Act Review, including reforms to strengthen Aboriginal self-determination and protections for native wildlife.
- **Melbourne has the poorest access to national parks and other publicly accessible protected areas of any Australian capital city.** Population growth has substantially outpaced the expansion of protected areas, while insufficient urban vegetation is limiting opportunities for biodiversity conservation, recreation, improved health and climate resilience.
- **Victoria's climate adaptation policies have weakened despite escalating risks.** Recent plans lack clear objectives, measurable outcomes, adequate funding and accountability. The state is poorly prepared to protect biodiversity, communities and infrastructure from worsening climate impacts.

Six priorities for the next Victorian Government

We set out six priorities to reverse these failures:

1. **Properly fund biodiversity action** to reverse declining investment and deliver existing conservation commitments.
2. **Close logging loopholes** to permanently protect native forests and prevent damaging clearing.
3. **Fix dodgy offset schemes** to ensure biodiversity losses are genuinely and permanently compensated.
4. **Respect First Peoples' rights in wildlife management** and modernise outdated wildlife laws.
5. **Improve community access to nature** by expanding national parks, urban tree cover and biodiverse green spaces.
6. **Get serious on climate resilience** through stronger adaptation planning, investment and accountability.

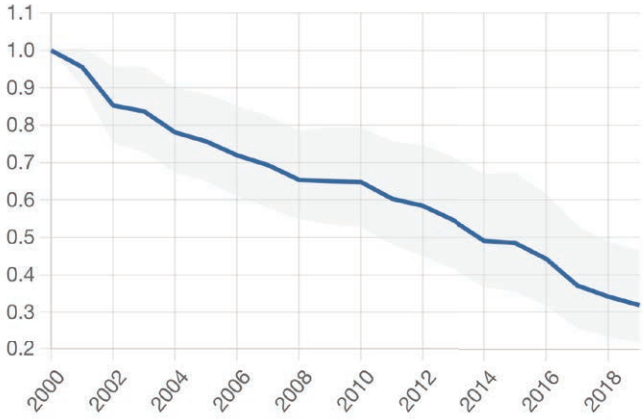
To restore Victoria's reputation as the garden state, the next government must commit to meaningful reforms, sustained investment and measurable improvements in the health of Victoria's nature.

Introduction

Victoria's diverse landscapes and species were sustainably managed by Aboriginal people for tens of thousands of years. European colonisation greatly disrupted this careful management, including the traditional management of fire, and brought many other highly degrading pressures to the state, including: rapid land clearing; the introduction of highly invasive species, including rabbits, foxes, cats, trout and blackberries; over-harvesting of native species, such as oysters that cleaned our coastal waters; trampling and over-browsing by hard-hooved livestock; and the modification and desnagging of rivers, which began extreme erosion.

Victoria is now the most intensively settled and cleared state in Australia, with half of the state's native vegetation cleared since European settlement, including 79% of native vegetation on private land (Victorian Auditor-General's Office, 2022). Victoria has the highest number of threatened species by subregion in Australia, with 2,018 species and sub-species listed as threatened under the Victorian Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988, including 53 classified as extinct (State of Victoria, 2026b). The problems described above have not been addressed, and the loss of Victoria's plants, animals and ecosystems is ongoing. The populations of Victoria's threatened plants and animals are, on average, less than one third (31.8%) of the size they were in 2000 (TSX, 2026).

Victorian Threatened Species population sizes



Change in population sizes of Victoria's EPBC Act listed threatened species on average since the year 2000, for which monitoring data is available. A score of 0.3 represents 30% of the size of populations in 2000. Source: TSX.org.

Climate change is one of four mega-threats driving the rapid decline of Australia's biodiversity (Legge et al., 2023). A 2021 study found 19 ecosystems in Australia or its territories were already collapsing due to a combination of climate change and localised pressures like habitat destruction and invasive species, including Victoria's mountain ash forests and sub-alpine forests (Bergstrom et al., 2021).

Victoria was once recognised as a pioneer in conservation and land management. The Land Conservation Council (the precursor to the Victoria Environment Assessment Council) was launched in Victoria in 1971 to guide balanced public land use and the establishment of reserves (Victorian Environmental Assessment Council, 2026), Land for Wildlife began in Victoria in 1981 (Trust for Nature, 2026), and Landcare began in Victoria in 1986 (Landcare Australia, 2026). However, Victoria is now falling behind with outdated legislation, funding cuts and dismantling of key institutions.



There are 291 monitoring data sets on the Endangered southern greater glider (above) in the Threatened Species Index (left). Image: Deb Oliver CC-BY-NC iNaturalist

For instance, after 55 years of providing independent advice to government about public land protection and management, the government replaced the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council with a new 'land access panel' without conservation expertise or independent oversight. The Victorian Government has not prioritised environmental issues and ignores the findings of independent reviews and inquiries. It took four years to respond to the 2021 Wildlife Act Review and its response was inadequate (Department of Energy, 2026b).

Notably, this was better than the 2021 Parliamentary Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline which it failed to respond to, and therefore took no position on any of its recommendations (Parliament of Victoria Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee, 2021). It is important to note that of the 16 inquiries undertaken by the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee between 2015 and 2025, this inquiry is the only one that is still awaiting a government response (Parliament of Victoria, 2026). The Victorian government has also substantially cut the land policy and biodiversity teams, who are responsible for making recommendations about how these reviews can be implemented, from 251 to 128 roles in 2025.

There are many issues with biodiversity management in Victoria. We have chosen the following to focus on:

1. Properly fund biodiversity action
2. Close logging loopholes
3. Fix dodgy offset schemes
4. Respect First Peoples' rights in wildlife management
5. Improve community access to nature
6. Get serious on climate resilience

Note that this report refers to actions taken by the government since 2017, particularly by the environment department. From 2015 to 2023 the environment department was called Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning and from 2023 to today it is called Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action. For simplicity, we use the 'environment department' in this report.



Victoria is the most intensively cleared state in Australia. Image: Molesworth Victoria. Benjamin Guy / Unsplash

1. Properly fund biodiversity action

The Victorian Government has persistently underfunded biodiversity conservation, leaving its flagship Biodiversity 2037 strategy well behind its targets. Funding has failed to keep pace with inflation or address known shortfalls, while declining staffing levels have further weakened the capacity to protect and restore Victoria's biodiversity.

The Victorian Government should:

1. Permanently increase baseline funding for the environment department to at least $26 million annually (adjusted for inflation since 2017), aligning directly with the environment department's original advice.
2. Allocate targeted, multi-year funding injections to cover the historical shortfall and support landscape-scale conservation programs.
3. Ensure future environment and biodiversity appropriations are automatically indexed to inflation.
4. Immediately mandate the reinstatement and public release of annual progress reports for Biodiversity 2037, which have been absent since 2023.
5. Differentiate between state-funded conservation outputs and third-party contributions (NGOs, private landholders, community groups) in progress tracking to ensure accurate evaluation of state investment impact.
6. Fund positions in Parks Victoria to address the over 30% reduction in staffing since 2020–21 to ensure adequate staff for land management, invasive species control, and habitat restoration across its 4.1+ million hectares.
7. Replace volatile funding with predictable, baseline funding to allow Parks Victoria to retain and attract expert personnel and implement long-term management plans.

Funding for biodiversity action is insufficient. In 2017, the Victorian Government released its 20–year plan to protect biodiversity and halt the decline of native flora and fauna, Protecting Victoria's Environment – Biodiversity 2037 (Biodiversity 2037) (Department of Energy, 2026a). It announced funding of $86.3 million over four years for the plan's measures, as well as $20 million per year on an ongoing basis for implementation. The environment department has stated that this 'represented the greatest ever single investment in biodiversity conservation by

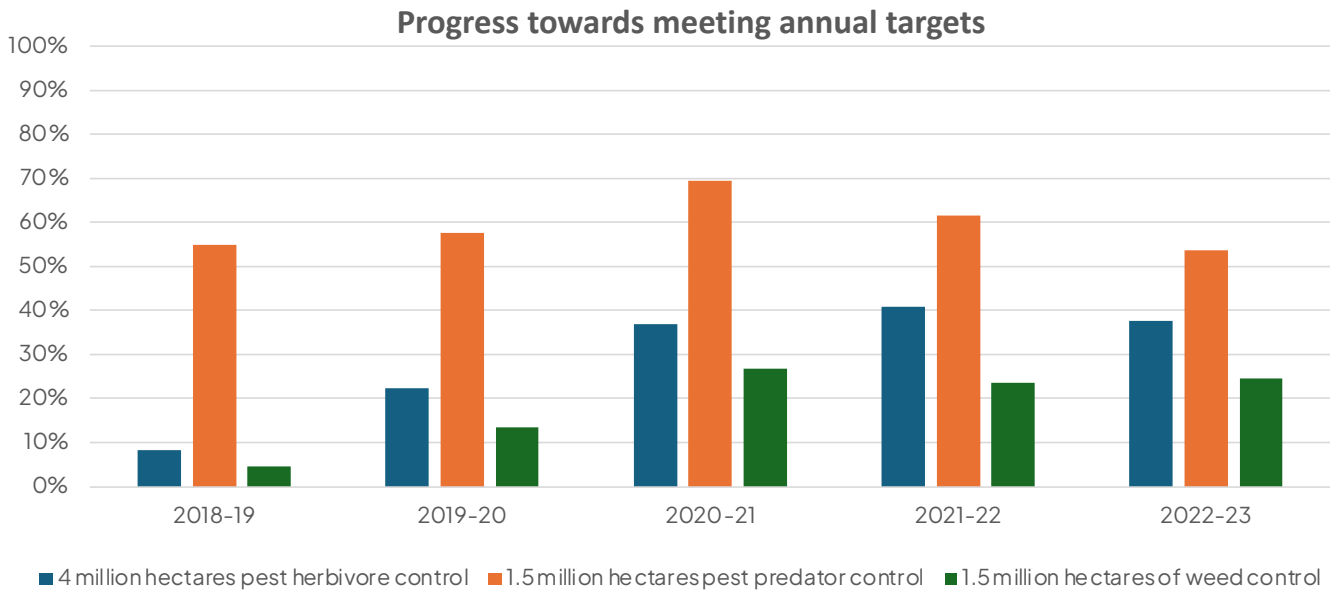


Figure 1: Progress towards meeting annual targets in Protecting Victoria's Environment – Biodiversity 2037 (Source: Progress reports, Department of Energy, 2026a).

a Victorian government' (Parliament of Victoria Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee, 2021). In 2021, the Victorian Auditor General investigated whether the funding was sufficient to protect threatened species (Victorian Auditor-General's Office, 2021). It found that while the environment department had developed tools to help it identify and prioritise more cost-effective landscape scale actions to protect the greatest number of species, total funding was a significant constraint to delivering these actions.

In 2017, when making the case to the government for funding Biodiversity 2037, the environment department advised the government that it required at least $196.4 million in government funding over four years to deliver Biodiversity 2037 priorities and to protect ten threatened iconic species. It also advised the government that it needed $58 million in ongoing annual funding after 2021 to improve the net outlook for all species by 2037.

This lack of funding has resulted in the year-on-year failure to meet the three annual targets in Biodiversity 2037 (Figure 1) and the slow progress in meeting the two longer-term targets of 200,000 hectares of revegetation and 200,000 hectares of permanent protection by 2037. As of 2022–23 16,000 hectares of revegetation and 11,194 hectares of permanent protection have been delivered. If there was steady progress towards these goals, then as a quarter of the time had elapsed to 2037, then these should have both been at least 50,000 hectares. The progress reports note that "while the Victorian Government is a major contributor to this work, many of the projects from which this data is derived are undertaken by others."

Note that there has been no progress reporting since 2023.

The funding shortfall demonstrated by both the 2021 Victorian Auditor General's inquiry and the environment department's 2018–2023 progress reports was not addressed by boosts to funding for implementation of Biodiversity 2037 (see bright green bars in Figure 2).

There hasn't been a material increase in funding for environment and biodiversity within the environment department to address shortfalls in initiative-specific funding for Biodiversity 2037.

Beyond the spike in funding in 2021–22, which correlates with COVID response and stimulus, nominal funding to environment and biodiversity

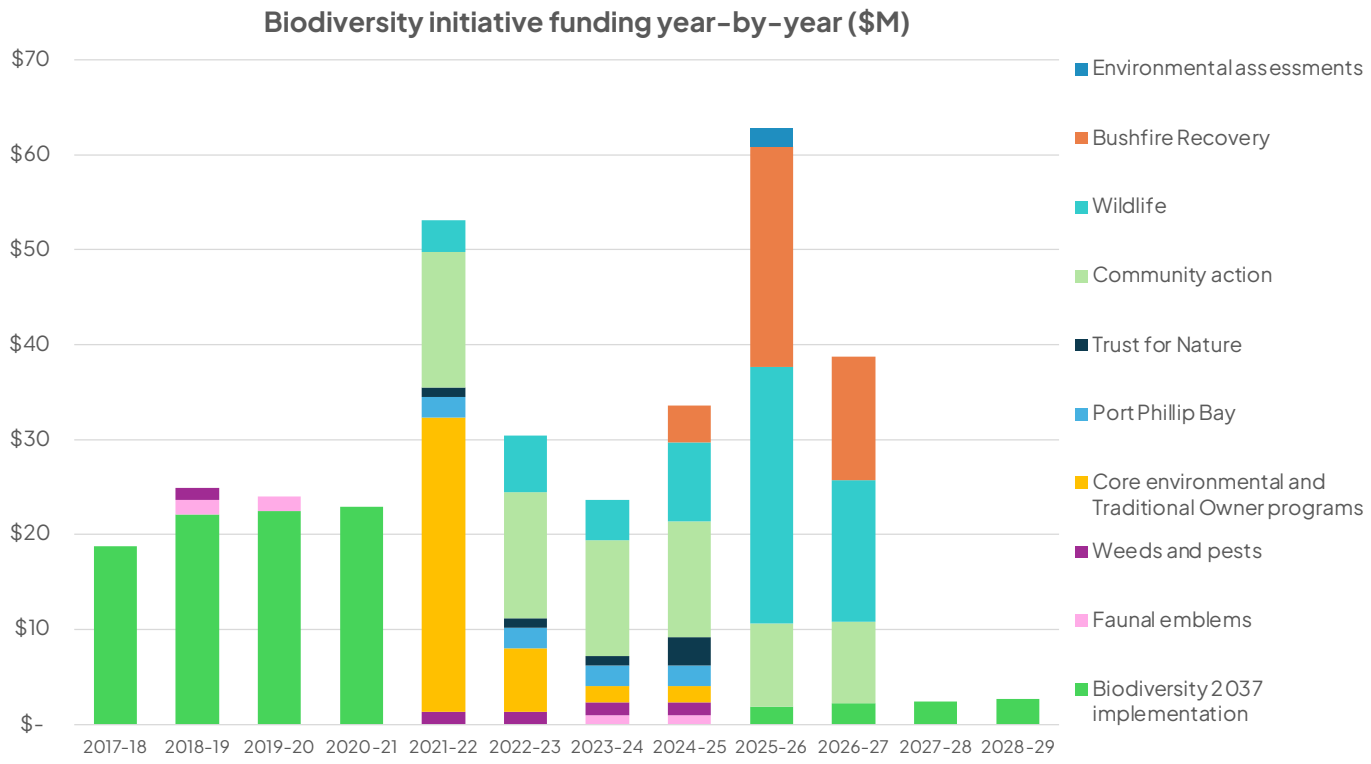


Figure 2: Funding for biodiversity initiatives from 2017–18 to 2028–29 in AUD millions (Source: Victorian Government Budget Paper 3: Service delivery, Parks Victoria, 2021, 2023, 2025, 2026b; State of Victoria, 2026a).

has been similar over the last 10 years and there have been declines in funding when adjusted for inflation (see Figure 3).

Parks Victoria's funding pattern differs from the environment department with both nominal and inflation-adjusted increases in funding from 2017–18 to 2019–2020 funding levels to 2022–23, then a decline in 2023–24 and 2024–25 (see Figure 4). However, the annual report shows there have been declines in staffing (see Figure 5). There are over 30% fewer staff in 2024–25 than 2020–21.

Some of this may be attributable to transfer of land management responsibilities for approximately 154,000 ha to the new Great Ocean Road Coast and Parks Authority from 2020. However, this only equates to 4% of the total area managed by Parks Victoria (4.1 million hectares). There are significant concerns regarding resourcing of Parks Victoria, particularly given that on 5 October 2026, 79,000 hectares of public land was transferred to Parks Victoria to manage (Parks Victoria, 2026a).

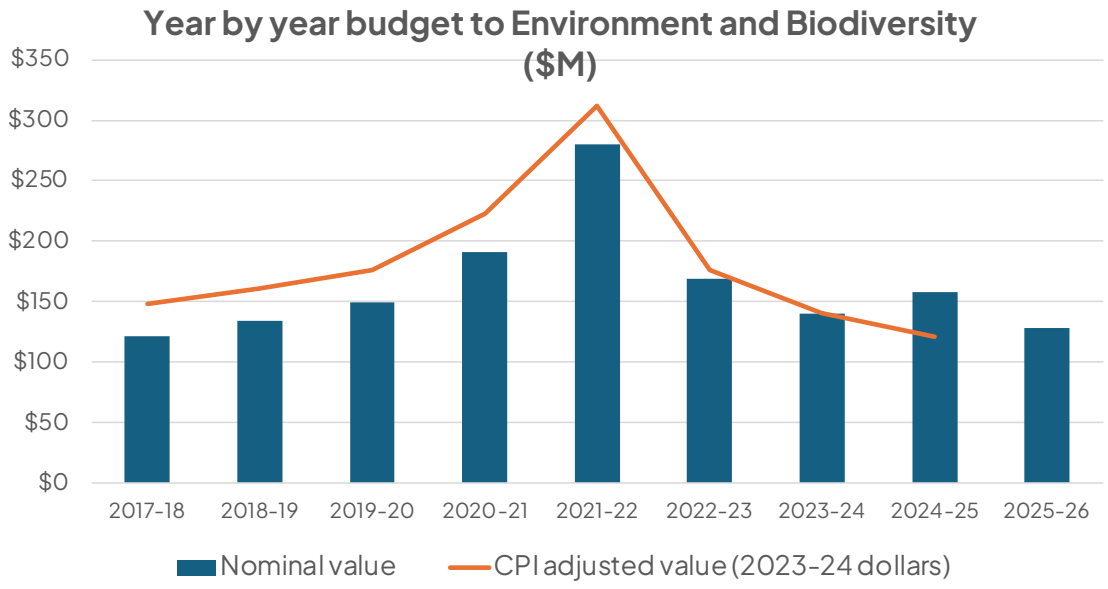


Figure 3: Year-by-year budget to environment and biodiversity from 2017–18 to 2025–26 ($M) with nominal and CPI-adjusted value (Source: Victorian Government Budget Paper 3: Service delivery State of Victoria, 2026a).

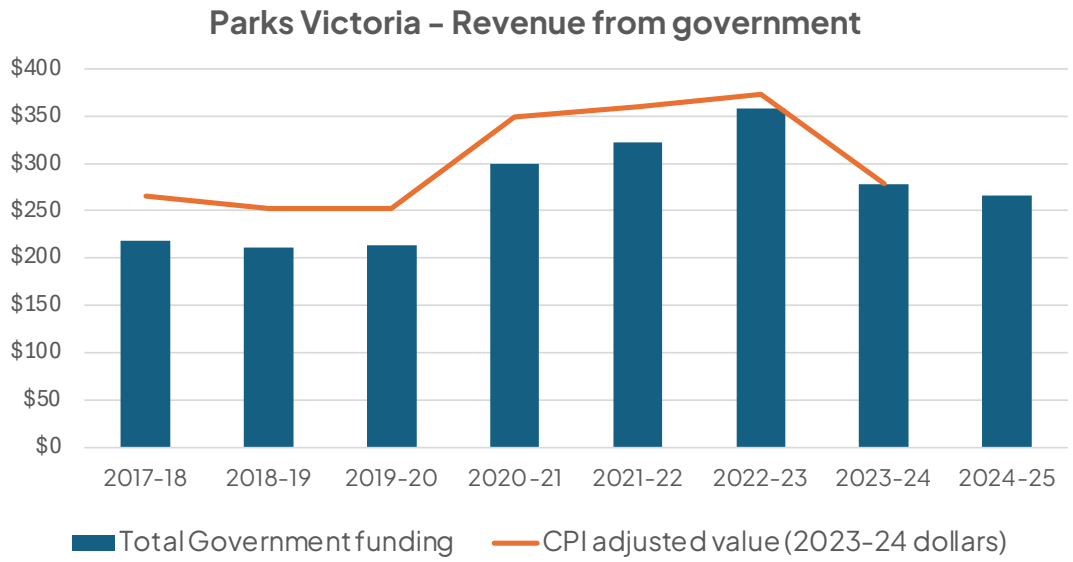


Figure 4: Parks Victoria revenue from the Victorian government 2017–18 to 2024–25 ($M) with nominal and CPI-adjusted value (Source: Parks Victoria annual reports, Parks Victoria, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025, 2026b).

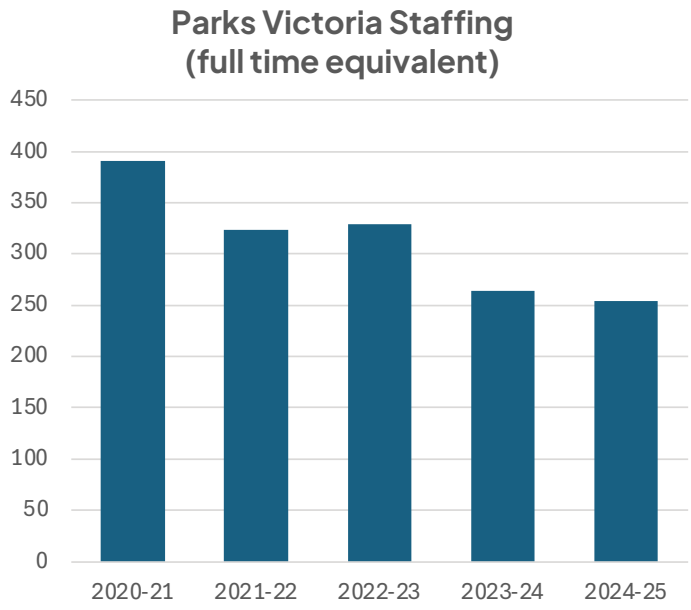


Figure 5: Parks Victoria full-time equivalent positions from 2020–21 to 2024–25 (Source: Parks Victoria annual reports, Parks Victoria, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025, 2026b).

Wilsons Promontory National Park
Image: Damien Tait / Unsplash

2. Close logging loopholes

Despite its commitment to end native forest logging, the Victorian Government has failed to establish enduring legal protections for state forests. Native forest harvesting continues through other mechanisms, including fuel break construction and private forestry, with inadequate safeguards for biodiversity and few structural barriers to the resumption of commercial logging.

The Victorian Government should:

1. Establish the Great Forest National Park to protect and connect significant areas of public forest north and east of Melbourne, including Mountain Ash forests that support threatened species and provide critical water catchment services.
2. Expand the Yarra Ranges and Mount Baw Baw National Parks as recommended in the Future use and management of state forests in the Central Highlands: Recommendations of Eminent Panel for Community Engagement report June 2025 (Eminent Panel for Community Engagement, 2024).
3. Amend the Forests Act 1958 to remove the Timber Utilisation Plan provisions and to prevent commercial timber extraction and industrial harvesting under Forest Produce Licences.
4. Require Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMVic) to undergo independent environmental assessments prior to high-impact land clearance and strategic fuel break construction and to avoid impacts on threatened species.
5. Require all public clearing undertaken for fuel breaks and infrastructure to be fully calculated, tracked, and offset to the same standard as vegetation removal on private land.
6. Amend the Victorian Planning Provisions to prohibit harvesting of native forests on private land.

Premier Daniel Andrews announced in May 2023 that "native timber harvesting in state forests will end in 2024" (Victorian Government, 2023) with $875 million to support forestry transition, later expanded to $1.5 billion (Environmental Justice Australia, 2026). The repeal of the 2004 Sustainable Forests Act should have signified a shift from destructive native timber logging to protection of Australia's unique biodiversity and a restoration of threatened ecosystems.



A logging coupe in Victoria smouldering after being burnt. Image: David Blair / ANU

While the Sustainable Forests (Timber) Act 2004 was repealed in May 2024 (Parliament of Victoria, 2024), native timber harvesting has not ended in Victoria. The repeal of the Act resulted in the end of VicForests and its Allocation Order that enabled commercial harvesting of timber in eastern Victoria (including the Central Highlands, the Northeast and East Gippsland). However, as noted in the bill to repeal the Act, the other tools and legislation for regulating and managing activities in State Forests were preserved. Additionally, the regulation of timber harvesting on private and leased land remains unchanged.

No action has been taken to provide greater protection to State Forests previously available for timber harvesting through public land reclassification or other legislative protection. This means that the commitment to ending timber harvesting exists as a high-level policy commitment that can be interpreted in various ways, and/or overturned by subsequent governments.

Environmental Justice Australia produced a report, explored by Four Corners, highlighting that the supply chain for native forest logging remains active despite the forestry transition. Many companies that received transition funding to exit native forest logging are still involved in harvesting timber (Environmental Justice Australia, 2026). For example, Fenning Timbers in Gippsland received c. $14 million in transition-related public funding and Powelltown mill received approximately c. $9.3 million, are are still conducting logging and timber processing including from private land and interstate (Environmental Justice Australia, 2026).

The retention of the policy and legislative architecture for timber harvesting, particularly the Forests Act 1958, along with the staff and infrastructure along the supply chain, means that there are few structural barriers to restarting commercial timber harvesting in Victoria.

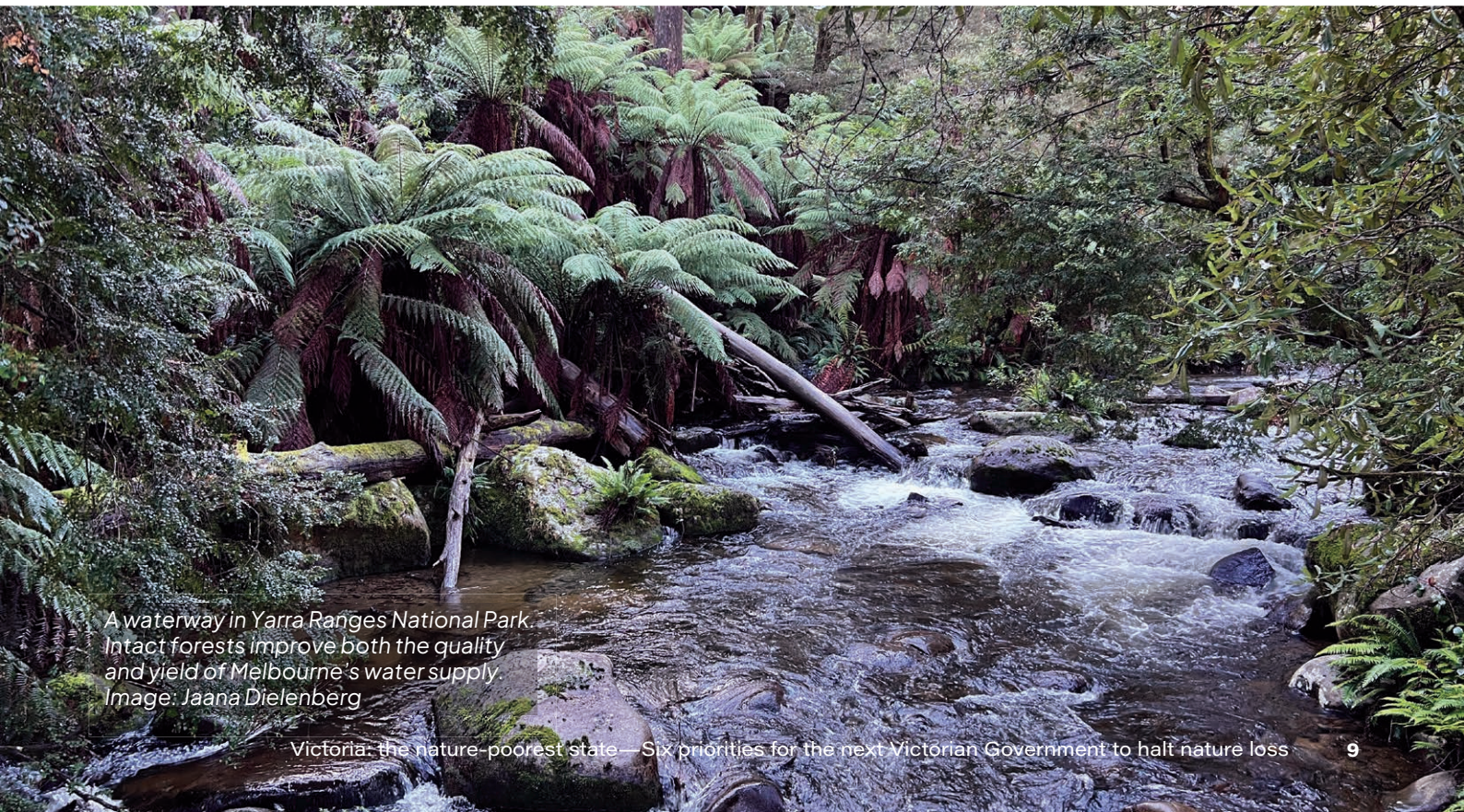
The key means by which harvesting of native forests is still occurring in Victoria are described below.

The Forests Act 1958 enables timber harvesting in State Forests

The Forests Act 1958 is the key piece of legislation that governs the management and use of State forests and 'forest produce' in Victoria. State forests cover 3.14 million hectares (14% of Victoria).

Under the Forests Act 1958, timber harvesting can occur under a Timber Utilisation Plan (TUP) or Forest Produce Licence.

Before the end of the Allocation Order for Eastern Victoria, VicForests regulated timber harvesting in western Victoria by TUPs. Despite the 'end of timber harvesting in Victoria', the mechanism for making a TUP remains in the Forests Act 1958. This means that the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (the environment department) could prepare a new TUP tomorrow if the Victorian Government directed them to.



A waterway in Yarra Ranges National Park. Intact forests improve both the quality and yield of Melbourne's water supply. Image: Jaana Dielenberg

The Conservation Regulator issues Forest Produce Licences for the harvesting of plants (including trees) from State Forests. Current licences listed on the environment department website all relate to harvest of eucalypts for oil distillation.

In April 2026, the environment department published a Forest Produce Licence Policy which does not include commercial harvesting. However, Environmental Justice Australia notes that over two decades ago Forest Produce Licences were the main mechanism facilitating logging in Victoria (Environmental Justice Australia, 2026). Section 21 of the Forests Act 1958 provides broad powers for the environment department to harvest and sell, or permit the harvest and sale of timber, from State Forests. The Forest Produce Licence Policy could easily be changed to enable the licences to be used for industrial logging.

Clearing for strategic fuel breaks on Crown land

Large amounts of forest are now being cleared and the timber processed under the guise of establishing, maintaining or upgrading strategic fuel breaks.

Under the Forests Act 1958, the environment department must carry out works in State forests, national parks and public land for the immediate prevention and suppression of fire and for the planned prevention of fire. It is Forest Fire Management Victoria's (FFMVic) view that strategic fuel breaks play an important role in meeting this requirement.

Strategic fuel breaks include:

- landscape protection breaks along roads or tracks where a 20–40 m strip (including the road) is cleared of all vegetation, and all "hazardous trees" are removed from within the 'fall line' of the break
- asset protection breaks closer to settlements where the understorey, all hazardous trees and up to 70% of the canopy is removed in a 40m modified zone from the asset.

From 2020–2023, the Victorian Government built and upgraded 1,489 kilometres of fuel breaks over 3 years. A further 1,548 km of new and upgraded fuel breaks were delivered in 2023–24 (Forest Fire Management Victoria, 2026). FFMVic reports that 2,236 km of fuel access roads were 'improved' and 1,072 km of fuel breaks were maintained in 2024–25 (Victorian Government, 2025).

By far the largest amount of clearing on Crown land is from strategic fuel breaks, making up 85% of the total in 2020/21, 61% in 2021/22 and 94% in 2022/23. The total vegetation removed is likely to be greater in 2023/24 and 2024/25 given the kilometres of strategic fuel breaks built or upgraded in these two years is three times greater than the preceding three years. It is likely that the area impacted is greater than the average area of forest harvested prior to the end of timber harvesting. These impacts are not being offset (see 'Fix dodgy offset schemes' p12).

Under section 4B of the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988, public authorities must give due consideration to the objectives of the Act in exercising their functions. These objectives include guaranteeing that all Victorian species can persist in the wild, preventing flora and fauna from becoming threatened, and protecting and restoring biodiversity. It is the environment department's view that there must be a 'balanced consideration' of potential impacts on biodiversity when managing fire risk, and that those impacts are managed to ensure that adverse impacts are to the minimum extent necessary to manage fire risk.

There are concerns that strategic fuel breaks do not sufficiently avoid and minimise impacts on threatened species. Kinglake Friends of the Forest have received information under FOI for fuel break construction. It shows that the mitigations recommended by the consultant for fuel breaks in the Port Phillip Region in FY 2024 were downgraded by the environment department. For example, retain hollow-bearing trees (consultant) compared with retain non-hazardous hollow-bearing trees (the environment department), establish exclusion zones around Crayfish burrows (consultant) compared with undertake works in Summer and Autumn and not when soil is saturated (the environment department), establish buffers around endangered plants (consultant) compared with avoiding large clusters (the environment department).

It has previously been the environment department's view that it is exempt from requirements under the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988 and Wildlife Act 1975 that would require it to get permits to damage or destroy threatened plants or wildlife habitat.

Timber harvesting on private land

Private native forest logging in Victoria is poorly regulated, monitored and enforced, leaving threatened species and their habitats inadequately protected.

Clearing of vegetation on private land, including timber harvesting, is regulated under the Planning and Environment Act 1987. Applications for a planning permit are made to the local Council.

Local Councils are not best placed to assess and manage impacts from timber harvesting on private land. An audit by the Victorian Auditor General found that local Councils do not effectively regulate native vegetation clearing in their municipalities, including that they do not effectively track permit data and do not effectively monitor and enforce compliance (Victorian Auditor-General's Office, 2022).

It is unclear how much private forestry is being undertaken because it is challenging to track the planning permits. The environment department undertakes planning permit activity reporting for all permits issued across the State, but the publicly available database does not distinguish between native vegetation permits issued for timber harvesting or for other reasons (Victorian Government, 2026b). The environment department staff have advised in confidence that there appears to have been an increase in private forestry following the public land timber harvesting 'ban' (Singh, 2025).

Damaging or destroying threatened plants on private land is allowable under the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* with the landowner's permission. Forestry operations do not need permission under the Wildlife Act 1975 to damage, disturb or destroy wildlife habitat if they have permission under any other Act, including a planning permit.

The role of plantations

Plantations can provide more reliable timber supplies, greater economic returns and lower greenhouse gas emissions than native forest logging. Victoria already has extensive hardwood and softwood plantations, with a majority of the timber exported to Asia. The Australian Government reported that hardwood plantations produced 78% of the volume of all hardwood logs produced in Australia in 2022–23, and 87% of the logs harvested from hardwood plantations were destined for export as woodchips (MIG and NIFSC, 2024).

There is an opportunity to make greater use of Victoria's existing plantation estate, redirecting plantation hardwood currently exported as low-value unprocessed logs into domestic manufacturing, and investing in local timber processing to support regional jobs. Further plantation development should occur outside high-conservation-value native forests, alongside stronger protection and restoration of native forest ecosystems (Lindenmayer and Taylor, 2022.)



Greater Sooty Owl. Image: Darren Bellerby CC BY 2.0 Flickr



Leadbeater's possum. Image: David Lindenmayer



Yellow-bellied glider. Image: David Cook CC BY-NC-2.0 / Flickr

Above: Three Victorian threatened species that require large areas of intact forest with old trees which have large hollows for roosting or nesting. They also have in common that the main threats to their survival are habitat loss and fragmentation caused by fire and logging.

3. Fix dodgy offset schemes

Over the past two decades, the Victorian Government has weakened biodiversity protections by introducing inadequate alternatives to its established native vegetation offset scheme. These arrangements lack fundamental safeguards to ensure biodiversity losses are compensated by genuine, measurable and lasting conservation gains, allowing significant vegetation clearing without adequate compensation.

The Victorian Government should:

1. Require all native vegetation clearing (regardless of what type of land it occurs on or why it is being cleared) to adhere strictly to the established Guidelines for the removal, destruction or lopping of native vegetation, including securing offset sites in perpetuity via legally binding covenants, meeting like-for-like requirements, and using project-level loss-and-gain accounting.

2. Ensure that any offsets on Crown land are strictly additional to land management funded for other purposes or to meet existing statutory obligations of Parks Victoria and the environment department.

3. Require all offset and mitigation actions across all tenures to be registered and tracked on the Native Vegetation Credit Register (NVCR) to maintain an auditable, transparent public record and guarantee credit retirement.

In 2002, the Victorian Government released Victoria's Native Vegetation Management - A framework for action, which established an offset requirement for native vegetation clearing (Department of Natural Resources and Environment, 2002). The first official offsets were developed in 2006, under the BushBroker program. The offsetting scheme applied robust principles, including: securing sites in perpetuity; requiring offsets to be 'additional' meaning that they would not have occurred without them; requiring losses at the impact site, and gains at the offset site to be calculated in the same units and for gains to exceed losses, and requiring the offset to deliver improvements for the same species or ecosystems that were impacted, which is often referred to as 'Like-for-Like'. These requirements were continued through to the Guidelines for the removal, destruction or lopping of native vegetation that replaced the Framework, but with an additional requirement that offsets be registered on the Native Vegetation Credit Register (Victorian Government, 2026a). The Register provides a centralised approach to ensure adequate oversight of native vegetation offsets. It ensures that credits used for offset purposes are retired, enables compliance monitoring to ensure management requirements are met, and provides a public, auditable record of credit transactions. This approach shares many similarities with New South Wales' Biodiversity Offsets Scheme.

Victoria's established framework for offsetting native vegetation clearing on private land stands in sharp contrast to its completely inadequate parallel systems: 'counterbalancing' mechanisms on Crown land and underdeveloped 'compensatory measures' for renewable energy projects, which are both offsets by another name.

Counterbalancing

Clearing on Crown land is not required to meet the Guidelines for the removal, destruction or lopping of native vegetation provided it is in accordance with the Procedure for the removal, destruction or lopping of native vegetation on Crown land (Department of Environment, 2018).

Under the procedure, instead of providing offsets, the environment department and Parks Victoria are required to 'counterbalance' impacts of native vegetation removal with activities that increase native vegetation extent, condition or security (known as 'counterbalancing activities'). Instead of project-by-project offsetting, the environment department tallies up losses and gains on a Statewide basis. Provided the gains outweigh the losses, then the counterbalancing requirement is met (Department of Energy, 2023, 2024; Department of Environment, 2021).

No consideration is given to ensuring that counterbalancing activities meet 'Like-for-Like' in terms of species or even vegetation type, so there is no guarantee that impacts on particular species are mitigated. In fact, from the maps in the counterbalancing reports, it is clear that removal activities are 'counterbalanced' by activities in quite different regions of the State. For instance,

in 2020/21, clearing was concentrated in the Grampians, Central Highlands and North-eastern Victoria, but there were also 'counterbalancing' activities in French Island, Wilsons Promontory and the Mallee. There are similar patterns for 2021/22 and 2022/23. Moreover, counterbalancing activities are likely to have occurred even without the counterbalancing requirements, so they are not 'additional'.

The scale of clearing is significant. New removal activities totalled 2,750.6 ha in 2020/21, 3,284.3 ha in 2021/22 and 594.4 ha in 2022/23. This is comparable to the average 3,000 ha of State Forest harvested each year prior to the 'end of timber harvesting' as reported by Forestry Australia (Forestry Australia, 2023). It is at least ten times the average amount of native vegetation permitted to be cleared under Clause 52.17 from 2008/09 to 2010/11 (Department of Sustainability and Environment, 2011).

Compensatory measures

Compensatory measures are a new approach being developed under the Handbook for the development of renewable energy in Victoria as outlined in a draft Advisory Note (Department of Energy, 2025b, 2026a).

Rather than building on establishing offsetting principles and administrative arrangements that currently operate in Victoria, the new approach is untested and poorly designed and fails to meet basic offsetting principles. The proposed approach provides no quantitative method or calculator to measure species-specific gains against impacts. Instead, it relies on a vague, highly discretionary process where the proponent sets their own goals and metrics. Without an objective accounting mechanism, there is no way to verify whether the compensatory actions meet or exceed the impact.

There is no additionality test, which means that proponents could utilise land management activities that they are already legally required or already funded to undertake. There is no requirement for permanent legal protection for sites where compensatory measures are undertaken, creating a risk that any environmental gains generated by a project could be degraded or overturned in the future. This is exacerbated by the lack of centralised oversight - the approach leaves it up to the proponent to outline their own governance arrangements to monitor the delivery of the actions; a huge conflict of interest.



The Critically Endangered southern bent-wing bat has roosting sites around Portland and has been recorded colliding with wind turbines. A new approach to offsetting bird and bat mortality from windfarms is proposed but fails to meet basic offsetting principles.

Portland windfarm image: Jeremy Buckingham CC BY 2.0 DEED / Flickr. Southern bent-wing bat image: Steve Bourne CC-BY-SA 4.0 / iNaturalist

4. Respect First Peoples' rights in wildlife

The Victorian Government has failed to adequately recognise the rights, knowledge and wishes of First Peoples in wildlife management. Despite commitments to Aboriginal self-determination, wildlife management decisions continue to be made without giving sufficient weight to the cultural obligations and wishes of Traditional Owners. The government's response to the review of the Wildlife Act 1975 was a missed opportunity to modernise wildlife protections and strengthen First Peoples' role in caring for Country.

The Victorian Government should:

1. Recognise and respect the rights, knowledge, cultural obligations and wishes of First Peoples in the management of wildlife, particularly species of cultural significance.

2. Reform the Wildlife Act 1975 to strengthen Aboriginal self-determination and give Traditional Owners meaningful authority in decisions about wildlife management on their Country.

3. Implement the recommendations of the independent Wildlife Act Review to modernise wildlife protections, including removing provisions that allow native species to be declared unprotected.

4. Prioritise evidence-based, non-lethal approaches to managing conflicts between wildlife and human activities, including agriculture, while recognising the ecological and cultural importance of native species.

Outdated wildlife laws and inadequate recognition of First Peoples

Victoria's Wildlife Act 1975 is more than 50 years old and has not kept pace with contemporary scientific understanding, community expectations or recognition of First Peoples' rights and responsibilities to care for Country.

An independent expert panel reviewed the Act in 2021 and recommended substantial reforms, including strengthening Aboriginal self-



A dingo in Victoria's alpine area. Image: Ray Turnbull CC-BY-NC / iNaturalist

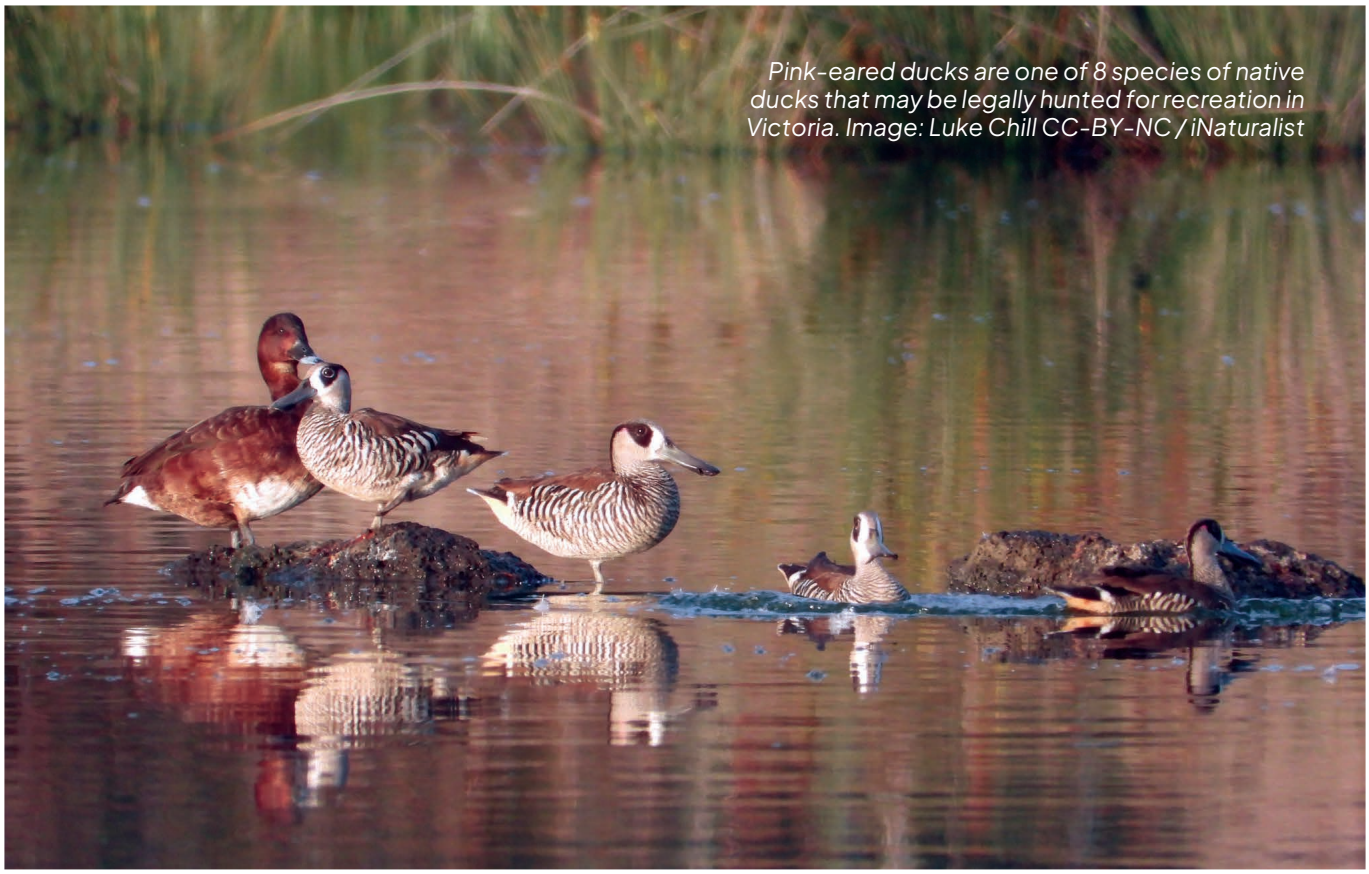
determination, improving wildlife protections and modernising the management of human–wildlife conflicts. However, the Victorian Government took four years to respond and, in October 2025, rejected or failed to fully commit to important reforms. Its response offered only in-principle support for recommendations relating to Traditional Owner rights, without clear commitments or timeframes for implementation.

The continued use of wildlife unprotection orders illustrates the shortcomings of Victoria's approach. These orders allow the government to remove legal protections from native species, enabling them to be killed in specified circumstances. The independent review recommended removing this mechanism, but the government chose to retain it.

The treatment of dingoes provides a particularly concerning example. Despite the expressed opposition of Traditional Custodians and scientific advice about declining dingo populations, the Victorian Government extended an order allowing dingoes to be killed in parts of eastern Victoria until 2028. Dingoes are culturally significant to many First Peoples and play important ecological roles as native apex predators.

This case highlights the broader need for wildlife management decisions to respect Traditional Owners' cultural obligations and incorporate Indigenous knowledge alongside contemporary conservation science. Consultation alone is insufficient if the wishes of Traditional Owners can be disregarded without meaningful consideration or accountability.

Modernising Victoria's wildlife laws is an opportunity to establish stronger protections for native species, improve the management of conflicts between people and wildlife, and give practical effect to Aboriginal self-determination in caring for Country. South Australia's Biodiversity Act 2025 should be used as a model. It establishes an Aboriginal Biodiversity Committee to provide advice to the Minister and provides a formal process for listing culturally significant biodiversity entities.



Pink-eared ducks are one of 8 species of native ducks that may be legally hunted for recreation in Victoria. Image: Luke Chill CC-BY-NC / iNaturalist

5. Improve community access to nature

Despite Melbourne's rapid population growth, the Victorian Government has failed to adequately expand national parks and other protected areas, leaving Melbourne with the poorest access of any Australian capital city. This limits opportunities for biodiversity conservation, recreation and public health benefits, while increasing pressure on existing parks.

The Victorian Government should:

1. Establish a minimum target of 30% tree canopy cover across Melbourne's urban neighbourhoods prioritising areas with the lowest existing cover and greatest heat exposure.
2. Protect existing mature trees and expand local parks and biodiverse green spaces as Melbourne grows.
3. Require new developments to retain and increase vegetation, including native trees, shrubs and habitat.
4. Invest in restoring biodiversity across public and private urban land, creating connected habitats that support wildlife and improve climate resilience.
5. Integrate park expansion into metropolitan growth planning. Establish measurable targets for accessible protected area per resident, with periodic reviews to ensure park provision keeps pace with population growth.
6. Invest in equitable access and visitor infrastructure. Expand maintained walking trails, public transport connections and accessible visitor facilities, particularly for communities with limited opportunities to visit natural areas.

Expanding Melbourne's national parks should be treated as essential long-term public infrastructure, delivering biodiversity conservation, recreation and public health benefits for a rapidly growing city.

Research also shows that visiting national parks is linked to better health and lower health system costs. Scaling the findings from a study of 19,674 people in Victoria and Queensland, research estimated the annual value of Australia's national parks to mental health services at ~$140 billion (about 7.5% of GDP), based on factors like reduced health service engagement and increased workplace attendance and productivity (Buckley et al., 2019). An Adelaide study found that visits to the 20 national parks and reserves around Adelaide by Adelaide residents saved the healthcare system an estimated $140 million annually, equivalent to around 4% of South Australia's healthcare budget, and the benefits were even greater for disadvantaged socio-economic groups (Loch et al., 2024).

Hence it is concerning that recent research demonstrates that Melbourne has the poorest access to national parks and other publicly accessible protected areas of any Australian capital city (Taylor et al., 2026). The study analysed access to protected areas across Australian cities between 2001 and 2024, accounting for population growth, protected area size and road travel distances of up to 60 km. Melbourne



Walkers at Hanging Rock, Woodend, Victoria. Exercising in biodiverse natural places improves physical and mental health more than exercise in other settings. The benefits to well-being and workplace productivity can last months. Image: Jaana Dielenberg

recorded the lowest accessibility among capital cities, with approximately 45 residents per hectare of accessible protected area in 2024, compared with nearly 16 in Adelaide. Between 2001 and 2024, Melbourne's population increased by 1.8 million people (53%), while the area of accessible protected land increased by just 13,061 hectares. This imbalance has substantially reduced access to nature and increased pressure on existing parks. The study also highlights the limitations of relying on state forests to meet recreational needs. Many lack maintained walking tracks and are primarily serviced by roads designed for forestry operations and four-wheel-drive vehicles. National parks provide stronger long-term biodiversity protection and more opportunities for accessible, nature-based recreation.

The findings provide compelling evidence that the Victorian Government should substantially expand the national park network around Melbourne to protect biodiversity and improve equitable access to nature. Expanding national parks must be complemented by protecting and restoring biodiversity within Melbourne's urban areas, including parks, streetscapes, waterways and private gardens. Firstly, the climate-resilience benefits of urban trees and shrubs are well established, and have been shown to help mitigate flooding and reduce extreme daytime temperatures by up to 12°C (Alonzo et al., 2025; Ferrario et al., 2024; Li et al., 2024), and reduce hospitalisation and deaths during heat waves. Secondly, a large and growing body of research demonstrates that trees, shrubs, gardens and parks woven through our cities significantly improve human health, wellbeing and longevity and reduce health system costs (Aerts et al., 2018; Connolly et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2022; Rojas-Rueda et al., 2019; Spotswood et al., 2025).

Australian research involving 46,786 adults found that people living in neighbourhoods with at least 30% tree canopy cover were less likely to experience psychological distress, report poor general health or develop cardiovascular disease (Astell-Burt & Feng, 2019, 2020). A subsequent analysis estimated that increasing tree canopy cover from less than 10% to at least 30% could save the Australian healthcare system $19.3 million per 100,000 residents through reduced cardiovascular hospital costs (Feng et al., 2024). When nature around us is biodiverse, it has significant additional benefits for human immune systems, reduces allergy and asthma rates and increases wellbeing (Flies et al., 2017; Houlden et al., 2021; Liddicoat et al., 2018; Mills et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2023). Cities are also important for conserving biodiversity; 47 nationally listed threatened species occur in Greater Melbourne, and of these seven occur only in Melbourne; Victoria's other towns are home to 35 listed threatened species (Ives et al., 2016).

Access to local parks also matters. A Brisbane study found that people who visited green spaces for at least 30 minutes weekly had lower rates of depression and high blood pressure. Modelling suggested this level of exposure could reduce population prevalence by up to 7% and 9%, respectively, if the associations are causal. More frequent visits were associated with stronger social cohesion (Shanahan et al., 2016).

By allowing little room for trees new housing developments can create a health burden. People who live in areas with less than 30% tree and shrub cover have poorer physical and mental health and use more healthcare services. Image: Jaana Dielenberg



6. Get serious on climate resilience

Despite escalating risks from climate change and associated extreme weather events, the Victorian Government has weakened its approach to climate change adaptation. There is inadequate funding, declining policy ambition and a lack of clear objectives, accountability and implementation measures. These failures leave Victoria's biodiversity, communities and infrastructure increasingly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

The Victorian Government should:

1. Move responsibility for Climate Action to the Department of Premier and Cabinet, to reflect the fact that climate change affects all parts of society and the economy, and that cross-system risks require a whole-of-government response.
2. Enact all measures described above that substantially protect and expand habitat and increase its connectivity, to reduce the risk of species extinction due to climate change and other pressures.
3. Undertake a vulnerability and risk assessment for Victoria's natural environment and use this to develop specific, adequately funded on-ground actions that address significant risks.
4. Evaluate the previous Regional Adaptation Strategies and use this to inform a new round of regional strategies.
5. Revise the draft system-based adaptation plans released in 2026 to include:
    a. clear, measurable strategic objectives and outcomes
    b. an assessment of progress towards meeting past objectives and effectiveness of previous actions
    c. a detailed set of actions with clear responsibilities, funding, and completion dates
    d. formal monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) mechanisms.
6. Provide sustained funding for climate adaptation comparable to the NSW Climate Fund.



A sponge garden at Beware Reef, Victoria. Many of Victoria's reefs are being hard hit by marine heat waves and the arrival of new species pushed south by ocean warming. Image: Scott Bennett courtesy Great Southern Reef Foundation.

The National Climate Risk Assessment rates the current climate risk to the natural environment as high to very high, rising to severe by 2050 and the natural environment as one of the most sensitive sectors, necessitating early adaptation (Australian Climate Service, 2025). The assessment also found that there is a shortfall in adaptation action across all systems and jurisdictions in Australia. This aligns with findings from the IPCC which noted that a step change is needed in Australasia to address climate risks (Lawrence et al., 2022).

Victoria's approach to building the resilience of the natural environment to climate change is outlined in its Natural Environment Climate Change Adaptation Plan 2022–2026 and in the Regional Adaptation Strategies (Department of Energy, 2026b; Victorian Government, 2026c). In 2022, Victoria was

considered to have a strong, comprehensive and complex climate policy package (Waters, 2022), with an overarching climate change strategy, seven system-based adaptation plans (including the natural environment climate change adaptation plan) and Regional Adaptation Strategies. However, the Regional Adaptation Strategies ended in 2025 and have not been revised, and the new system-based adaptation plans are severely lacking, with no vision, objectives or outcomes, insufficient detail on how adaptation efforts have progressed, no detail on responsibilities or timeframes for actions, and no reporting on implementation or effectiveness of previous plans (required under s.35 of the Climate Change Act 2017). Furthermore, climate risks remain siloed, ignoring complex cross-system impacts across natural, social, and infrastructure portfolios. The plans fail to address systemic issues.

Victoria's underinvestment in adaptation is problematic. According to the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Change Action's Corporate Plan 2025–29, of their total departmental funding of $2.6 billion, just $18.4 million or 0.7% is spent on 'Climate Action' despite being the department dedicated to it (Department of Energy, 2025a). It is important to note that Climate Action 'leads the whole-of-government delivery of Victoria's climate action', which includes 'net zero emissions, climate-ready economy and community', in other words, both mitigation and adaptation. The Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Climate Resilience found that stakeholders identified gaps in implementation and funding for resilience and adaptation initiatives (Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee, 2026). The Victorian Government's response notes that billions of dollars have been invested in 'climate change' (Victorian Government, 2026d). However, the Parliamentary Inquiry notes that only a very small amount goes to adaptation.

This stands in sharp contrast to New South Wales' Climate Change Fund, which spent almost $162 million in 2024–25 to 'increase community resilience and safeguard our communities from the effects of climate change' (with additional funds for mitigation and energy bills) (NSW Government, 2026).

Despite the escalating fiscal and environmental threats facing the state, the Victorian government's approach to climate adaptation has devolved into a case study of institutional neglect, chronic underfunding, and policy regression. The government is delivering a hollow framework that leaves the state unequipped for compounding climate shocks.



Dieback of snowgums is occurring in some Victorian alpine areas in response to climate change. Images: Heather Miles CC BY-NC / iNaturalist

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Biodiversity Council

The Biodiversity Council brings together leading experts including Indigenous Knowledge holders to promote evidence-based solutions to Australia's biodiversity crisis. It was founded by 11 universities: The University of Melbourne, The University of Western Australia, The Australian National University, The University of Adelaide, The University of Sydney, The University of Queensland, Deakin University, The University of Canberra, Monash University, Macquarie University, and The University of New South Wales. It receives support from The Ian Potter Foundation, The Ross Trust, Trawalla Foundation, The Rendere Trust, Isaacson Davis Foundation, Coniston Charitable Trust, Angela Whitbread and Nature Impact Collective.

Image: Walkers at Cape Schank, Victoria.
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