



28 September 2020

The Committee Manager
Legislative Assembly Environment and Planning Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Port Phillip EcoCentre submission

RE: Victorian Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations

Dear Committee Manager,

I write to commend the state government initiative to conduct stakeholder consultations in relation to parks, waterways and open space in Victoria. Victorians need equitable access to clean air and water, viable soil and natural places for recreation and wellbeing. This must be achieved within a changing climate, in which Victoria's natural heritage and many species are under threat, and the availability of ecological and economic essentials such as water are uncertain. Environmental infrastructure planning and management are therefore both a practical and ethical concern, requiring careful and comprehensive consultation.

Port Phillip EcoCentre is a not-for-profit organisation with a strong focus on empowering local communities to engage in environmental stewardship where they live. EcoCentre projects support people to mitigate and adapt to climate change, to reduce waste and pollution, to enhance biodiversity and to realign resource usage with our planet's ability to regenerate resources.

The EcoCentre works across Greater Melbourne, on the land and waters of the Kulin Nation. Our participant network demonstrates a tangible and increasing dedication to protecting our shared 'green and blue' spaces. Despite the global pandemic's abrupt disruption of programming for one-third of last year, the EcoCentre's environmental volunteering increased +4% in FY19-20 to more than 21,000 hours of citizen science, habitat building, community gardening and greening, and street and beach clean-ups.

We are conscious of the fact that three-quarters of Victorians live in catchments around Port Phillip Bay; that pollutants dropped in these catchments can ultimately make their way via the stormwater system to the Bay; and that many Melbourne residents are unaware of the ecological features of their neighbourhoods and the interconnection of human and environmental health. Consequently, pollutants, waterway health and local biodiversity have each been a major focus topic of our educational programs, citizen science, and cross sectorial project partnerships¹ over many years.

¹ EcoCentre partnerships and projects reach 119 suburbs and include programs with over 160 schools and early learning centres, and 574 teachers per year; advisory consultations and project work for local government and community groups such as Scouts Victoria and Melbourne Water; conducting fieldwork for original research with partners such as RMIT University and Monash University; co-designing citizen science methods with government including EPA Victoria and Sustainability Victoria; design and delivery of programs for youth services and health services; development of diversity and inclusion initiatives such as Multicultural Bay Ambassadors through Coastcare Victoria and DELWP's Port Phillip Bay Fund; and science communications, from scientific papers to documentaries and presenting on 3RRR, in order to ensure emerging knowledge is able to be applied by community and key decision-makers.

Environmental infrastructure is also a human health investment.

Healthy rivers and bays, old-growth forests, urban parklands with appropriate trees and understorey, flourishing fauna and fungi all play critical roles underpinning a functional economy, healthy human population and cool, clean cities. In 2017, our state formally recognised this interconnection in the *Victorian Memorandum for Health and Nature*:

‘Our clean air, healthy waterways and parks are some of Victoria’s most important assets that enhance the health and liveability of our communities... There are diverse benefits for all of being in the outdoors including physical, psychological, cultural and social health and wellbeing...’

‘This connection is one that has long been central to Aboriginal Victorians, whose cultural beliefs and practices in Caring for Country are at the core of a harmonious relationship between humans and the land, waterways and seas.’

‘... In addition, our health is heavily reliant on maintaining the living standards that make Victoria such an appealing place to be. The health of our natural assets underpins two of Victoria’s most significant drivers of jobs and economic growth – agriculture and tourism – that help to sustain our liveability and prosperity, particularly in regional areas.’²

The built infrastructure required for Victoria’s growing human population and associated economic activities inevitably modifies our natural environment. Recent ‘urban consolidation’ in order to house people in proximity to existing services has resulted in higher population density in metropolitan Melbourne and some peri urban areas. Higher density living can negatively impact on human health and wellbeing; and such impacts can be ameliorated through regular access to parks and waterways. Access to public natural spaces and residential exposure to nature can contribute to reducing *all-cause mortality* and promoting physical activity and happiness³ as well as preventative and recuperative mental health benefits^{4,5}.

However, Greater Melbourne has undergone a rapid loss of green space, and associated ecosystem services such as ground permeability and temperature control. This has occurred across public and private realms. Currently, environmental laws and planning protections are often complicated, inconsistent across jurisdictions within the same ecosystem, and challenging to enforce^{6, 7, 8}. Meanwhile, the loss of natural features (and associated benefits) occurs at an alarming pace that is unmatched by recovery ambitions. For example, tree cover in the City of Glen Eira has reduced -50% since 2002, yet at the time of writing their current draft *Urban Forest Strategy* sets a meek goal of a +1.5% increase by 2040.⁹

² <https://www.environment.vic.gov.au/biodiversity/victorian-memorandum-for-health-and-nature>

³ M.C. Kondo, J.M. Fluehr, T. McKeon, C.C. Branas, **Urban green space and its impact on human health**, International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 15 (3) (2018)

⁴ Ulrich 2007, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01426397908705892>

⁵ [Nature and Mental Health Promotion, South Australia](#)

⁶ Slide 10, https://www.stormwatervictoria.com.au/images/2019_Events/2019_Conference_Proceedings/Esther_Kay_-_VC154_A_Planners_Perspective_How_Diw_We_Get_Here_and_What_Does_it_Mean.pptx.pdf

⁷ Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act Interim Review, 2020. <https://epbcactreview.environment.gov.au/resources/interim-report/executive-summary>

⁸ *Making the Yarra Planning Controls permanent*. Yarra Riverkeeper Association, 2019. <https://yarrariver.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/41-191219-Stage-2-Report-lowres-single.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.gleneira.vic.gov.au/media/7288/urban-forrest-strategy-draft.pdf>

Experts argue that incremental adjustments are not enough¹⁰ and the post-COVID world is opportune for implementing both holistic redesigns and ‘connect-the-dot’ changes across private and public realms through partnership and community engagement.

Environmental infrastructure must become equitably beneficial.

The Port Phillip EcoCentre is actively investing in our cultural competencies and commitment to diverse, equitable, inclusive and just programming as we pursue our mission: ‘We build relationships to inspire, educate and demonstrate sustainable environmental practice and strengthen people’s connection to the natural world.’

However, the cultural diversity of Melbourne’s population, which speaks over 240 languages, remains not fully reflected in the environmental professional and volunteer communities. Exposure and access to natural spaces and nature play programs are not equally available in all regions^{11,12} as highlighted during the public safety during coronavirus measures, when it was estimated 340,000 Melburnians had little parkland within their 5km access radius¹³. The detrimental impacts of pollution events like toxic factory fires are also unequally located, and in Australia vulnerable subpopulations may be exposed to higher levels of outdoor air pollution¹⁴. Further, significant reports such as the *Assessment of the Values of Victoria’s Marine Environment 2019* omit investigating non-Indigenous cultural connections and opportunities.

We believe improving access to and benefit from environmental infrastructure will require a mix of inclusive, two-way education through community partnerships; supportive programming to assist residents all backgrounds and needs to access parklands and waterways (e.g. Operation Bluetongue¹⁵ in Sydney or Victoria’s Disabled Divers Association); participatory planning approaches; and better-resourced enforcement of existing environmental and health protections.

Planning since 2001 has been mismatched to the pace of population growth.

Retention of well-managed parks and open space is crucial to community wellbeing and biodiversity protection across Melbourne and regional Victoria. Clear and accurate demographic evidence is of fundamental importance to inform management of existing parks or support the need to create new parks, planning standards and infrastructure (whether wetlands, bike trails, protected forests, or gross pollutant traps) in specific areas.

The Victorian population growth rate, which in some instances can correlate to environmental threats¹⁶, has been significantly underestimated in the past two decades. In 2001, the projected Victorian population by

¹⁰ How cities can add accessible green space in a post coronavirus world, 2020. <https://theconversation.com/how-cities-can-add-accessible-green-space-in-a-post-coronavirus-world-139194>

¹¹ *The State of Nature Play, Outdoor Learning and Bush Kinders in Victoria Report*, Kids In Nature Network, 2018

¹² *Parks and green spaces are important for everyone’s health – but we need to make sure that everyone can benefit*, Masterson, Carver and Parkes, The Conversation, 2020

¹³ <https://theconversation.com/340-000-melburnians-have-little-or-no-parkland-within-5km-of-their-home-144069>

¹⁴ Inequalities in exposure to the air pollutants PM2.5 and NO2 in Australia. Cooper, Green and Knibbs, 2019. <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/ab486a/meta>

¹⁵ *Operation Blue Tongue: Immigrants, nature and belonging*. <https://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/index.php/TfC/article/view/1580>

¹⁶ The Port Phillip EcoCentre’s report *Clean Bay Blueprint: Plastics and Microplastics in Melbourne* (DRAFT at time of writing) river sampling and statistical analysis indicates riverine plastic pollution more than doubled in 5 years, and strongly correlated to population growth

2031 was 6.067 million.^{17,18} By June 2018, this expectation for 2031 was already 433,000 below the actual Victorian population (6.5 million).¹⁹

On June 30 2019, the Melbourne population reached 5,078,193²⁰ -- or nearly a million people more than planning considerations had expected *more than decade later*. In 2019, the projected Victorian population by 2031 was revised to 8 - 8.3 million people, around 30% more than the figure projected in 2001.²¹ Given multi-year timelines to implement any planning amendment, the above divergence highlights the need to ensure accurate population projections in any infrastructure planning process.

We note that *underestimation* of population will likely result in significantly more conflict among different open space uses than will an overestimation. Recreational activities on and around waterways such as camping, fishing, shooting, trail-biking and bush-walking all impact on environmental values to varying degrees. Impacts include:

- Litter and waste management/disposal;
- Noise impacting on other users and wildlife;
- Fire risk;
- Unwitting introduction of weeds;
- Decline in habitat and biodiversity values;
- Potential conflict with other users and neighbouring landholders.

Depending on their socio-economic, cultural and ecological context, different locations will be more (or less) vulnerable to adverse impacts of one or more of these activities. In addition to the above environmental considerations, some activities can also put property and livestock at risk.

Applying the principles of participatory democracy will prompt better outcomes, designed more inclusively, and explained to community in clear and compelling ways.

The diversity of social and environmental settings represented across Victoria indicates that applying a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to planning will inevitably fall short of achieving good outcomes for local communities and the environment. Recreational activities that impact substantially on environment quality and other uses should be restricted to clearly defined areas.

We submit that decision-making on which activities are approved or are not approved in any given region, would ideally be through a *local region infrastructure advisory group* representing local stakeholders including Traditional Owners, local industry, community Landcare and recreational groups. This view is reflects the approach adopted by the Victorian Government in 2013:

¹⁷ Regional Matters - An Atlas of Regional Victoria 2005. State of Victoria Department of Sustainability & Environment 2005. Population of regional Victoria was projected to grow from around 1.3 million people to 1.7 million by 2031

¹⁸ Melbourne Atlas. State of Victoria Department of Sustainability & Environment 2007. Melbourne's population of around 3.3 million in 2001 was projected to increase approximately 1,067,000 to 4.367 million by 2031

¹⁹ Victoria In Future population projections 2016 to 2056. July 2019. State of Victoria Department of Environment Land Water & Planning.

²⁰ Australian Bureau of Statistics. abs.gov.au

²¹ Victoria In Future population projections 2016 to 2056. July 2019. State of Victoria Department of Environment Land Water & Planning.

A framework focused on regional decision-making with community input to determine priority management activities in each region²².

Effective regional consultations and evidence-based research will inform strategies that invest in activities assessed as most beneficial to local communities and environment; and, provide a basis for developing regional tourism strategies and communicating why some activities are restricted.

Consultation panels and deliberative democracy can also make strides toward equitable access to, and benefit from, environmental infrastructure for all cultural and socioeconomic populations of a region. Lastly, it allows for independent expert bodies such as the Port Phillip EcoCentre to share scientific, social and policy knowledge toward more coherent, integrated and inclusive decision-making as such organisations are less bound by remits, specialisation silos or catchment boundaries.

Disruptive technology may provide new types of ‘open space’ in the coming decades.

Futurists predict that radical shifts may occur, for example the increase of ‘vertical schools’ and other civic spaces (resulting in potential public spaces on rooftops) or emergence of autonomous vehicle rideshare fleets (resulting in potential for acquisition of contemporary private carparks for return to open space). As such lateral opportunities emerge, planning must consider that open space atop a built structure may provide certain benefits, such as recreation and cooling urban heat islands, but cannot deliver as full of ecosystem functions as an open space on the ground.

In conclusion, Victoria must plan for climate change, using proper population projections, and must apply ecosystem-scale thinking and inclusive democratic consultations, to ensure equitable, fit-for-purpose infrastructure that delivers benefits for people and the planet.

Yours sincerely,



April Seymore
Executive Officer

²² *Victorian Waterway Management Strategy*, Victorian Department of Environment & Primary Industries, 2013