



# River Red Gum Community Engagement Panel Report

28 November 2008



# Introduction

On 7 August 2008 the Minister for the Environment and Climate Change, the Hon. Gavin Jennings announced the establishment of a Community Engagement Panel to work through the recommendations made by the Victorian Environment Assessment Council (VEAC) on protecting River Red Gums in Northern Victoria.

The appointed Panel members were:



**Craig Cook**

Chair, Currently Deputy Chair of  
Goulburn- Murray Water



**Joan Burns**

Chair of the Mallee Catchment  
Management Authority and  
dryland farmer



**John McQuilten**

retired Member for Ballarat Province  
in the Victorian Legislative Council



**Bob Smith**

Vic Forests Board Member

## **The terms of reference for the Panel were:**

The Minister for Environment and Climate Change will establish a Community Engagement Panel to consider VEAC's recommendations and to assist the Government as it works through implementation. The Panel's work will focus in particular on community, social, economic factors in the regions associated with the recommendations.

Specifically the Panel will investigate how the Government can address the recommendations while ameliorating any potential adverse impacts on regional economic activity and employment opportunities. The Panel will be asked to address the particular needs of specific groups such as recreational users of public land and those holding riverfront grazing licences.

The Panel will provide further advice to the Minister for Environment and Climate Change in order to ensure that the Government's formal response to the VEAC report on the River Red Gums investigation is consistent with Victorian Government policy and regional commitments (including election commitments).

The primary task of the Panel is to meet with relevant community and other stakeholder groups in order to bridge the gap between community impact, concerns and the essential characteristics of the VEAC recommendations.

The Panel will also meet with relevant departments and ministers, to ensure the eventual implementation process is integrated with Government policies and supported through relevant programs.

The Panel may provide advice on transition strategies to achieve objectives proposed by VEAC including timing and phasing in of relevant recommendations.

The Panel will have four members, including the Chair and will be supported by a small Department of Sustainability and Environment secretariat.

It will report back to the Minister within four months.

The Panel has undertaken meetings with key stakeholder groups and visited a range of sites covered in the VEAC investigation. The Panel has considered the impact that the implementation of the VEAC recommendations may have on the community and in doing so has prepared the following report. The Panel has fulfilled its terms of reference.

## Key Stakeholder Groups the Panel Met

4WD Victoria  
Australian Conservation Foundation  
Australian Deer Association  
Barmah Forest Preservation League  
Bird Observers Club  
Birds Australia  
Coalition Against Duck Shooting  
Environment Victoria Inc.  
Environmental Farmers Network  
Field and Game Australia (Victoria)  
Friends of the Earth  
Goulburn Valley Environment Group  
Gunnawarra Shire Council  
Mildura City Council  
Moirra Shire Council  
Murray River Action Group  
Nyah Frontage Action Group  
Sporting Shooters Association Australia (Vic) Ltd.  
Swan Hill Shire Council  
River and Red Gum Environment Alliance  
Wilderness Society Inc.  
Timber Communities Australia  
Trail Bike Riders Association of Victoria  
Trust for Nature (Victoria)  
Victorian Apiarists Association  
Victorian Farmers Federation  
Victorian National Parks Association  
VR Fish  
Yorta Yorta Joint Body  
Victorian Association of Forest Industries (VAFI)  
Barmah Forest Cattlemen's Association  
Mallee Catchment Management Authority  
Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority  
North East Catchment Management Authority  
Victorian Catchment Management Council  
Firewood and Harvesting Supplies Pty Ltd  
Ryan & McNulty Sawmills  
Arbuthnott Sawmill  
And individual stakeholders

## Sites Visited by the Panel during Community Consultation

Echuca

Barmah Forest

Kerang

Gunbower Forest

Swan Hill

Mildura

Howlong, Rutherglen – River Frontages

The Panel would specifically like to thank the organisations and individuals who took valuable time and travelled considerable distances to meet with the Panel and provide important community input into this report.



Craig Cook



Joan Burns



John McQuilten



Bob Smith

28 November 2008

## River Red Gum Key Outcomes – Summary

The Red Gum forests face a number of challenges from their continued use over the past hundred years. The current mix and intensity of uses can not be maintained.

This mix of continued uses needs to change to enable it to address the challenges facing the region, particularly climate change and water.

The Red Gum region needs to be managed holistically. The focus now should be on integrating uses of the Red Gum region to enhance ecological outcomes to strengthen the health of the Red Gum forests, and continue community uses consistent with ecological health.

The Panel looked at the VEAC recommendations within this context.

In making its recommendations, the Panel recognises that there will be structural changes to some industries, particularly timber and grazing. It is expected that the Government will take action to manage the transition to these industries.

This is the first step in focussing future management of the Red Gum Region on enhancing ecological and recreational management.

The Panel members recognised throughout their consultation that the key challenges facing the River Red Gum region are lack of water and the impacts of climate change. The Panel supports the comprehensive work being undertaken by the Department of Sustainability and Environment on the Northern Region Sustainable Water Strategy and believes that this comprehensive policy framework is the appropriate mechanism for addressing water challenges for the Red Gum areas.

The Panel found that River Red Gum forests and wetlands of the Murray River are characterised by a diversity of natural values and attributes. These values include biodiversity, ecosystems and services, aesthetic, as well as many other qualities. These areas are highly valued by the community for a range of activities which include cultural, recreation, grazing, forestry and tourism.

In completing its role the Panel recognised the continued active recreation and community use of the River Red Gum region over the past 150 years and considered that new National Parks would need to recognise community and recreation uses.

The Panel believes that new National Parks should be created, and they must be actively managed and created as specific

Red Gum National Parks that embrace broad community and recreational use. The legislation and regulations that establish these parks must recognise their social and community uses are equal consideration alongside the imperative for ecological protection. Restrictions on recreational activity should only occur as an exception and in areas where rehabilitation is required, or for specific environmental outcomes. Once rehabilitation is completed these areas should again be made available for the community to enjoy for their recreational and environmental values.

The Panel has reviewed the VEAC report and conducted community consultation with a broad range of key stakeholder groups.

In considering its consultations, the following outcomes are recommended by the Panel:

- The Panel supports appropriate resourcing for the River Red Gum area to ensure it can overcome its biggest future challenge, that of climate change and drought.
- The recently released Northern Region Sustainable Water Strategy states:  
*“The region’s rivers and wetlands are in poor condition as a result of water regulation and extraction, combined with the low inflows experienced in the past 11 years. Climate change means that rivers and wetlands may need to persist through more frequent and longer droughts with much longer dry spells and less frequent floods” (pg 14 NRSWS)*
- The Panel supports the creation of four new Red Gum National Parks, Barmah, Gunbower, Warby Range/Ovens River and Lower Goulburn and the expansion of two existing National Parks’, Murray Sunset and Terrick Terrick. A number of the Parks boundaries should vary from those recommended by VEAC. Map 1 shows the Panels proposed boundaries for the new National Parks and other status of existing public land as recommended by the Community Engagement Panel.

The new Red Gum National Park legislation should permit the following activities which have strong community and social support to continue in the new Red Gum National Parks in much the same manner as they currently occur:

- Dispersed (self select) camping
- Campfires all year round (with new penalties for failing to obey regulations)
- Hunting for feral animals (under strict new management arrangements)
- Camping over night with horses
- Bio mass reduction (controlled by the land manager)
- 4WD and trail bike riding on existing roads

In recognising the key environmental values of the National Parks a number of commercial activities should be excluded:

- Cattle grazing licences should be removed
- Timber licences for the new National Parks should be removed.
- Hunting of ducks within the new National Parks should not be permitted.
- Camping with dogs should not be permitted.

The community and social values of the new Red Gum National Parks should be reflected in the legislation and regulations that establish the new National Parks. It should be explicit in the legislation and regulations that dispersed camping (self selected), campfires (year round), hunting for feral animals, overnight camping with horses and bio mass reduction for environmental purposes should be allowed to occur across the Parks as the default position and any restriction on these activities will be as an exception in the new Red Gum National Parks.

- To assist industry in making a transition from commercial timber harvesting in the National Parks, structural adjustment funding should be provided by Government to timber mills and timber workers.
- Displaced workers should be prioritised for employment to assist in biomass control within the new National Parks.
- To achieve environmental watering over the coming years, 'works' will be required on land areas to be included in the National Parks. These works will be vital to allow water to be delivered to key threatened flora. These works should not be impeded in any way by the re-categorisation of the land from the Crown Land Reserves Act to the National Parks Act.



*Murray River at Barmah Forest 2008*

The commercial Red Gum timber industry should be able to continue in the Gunbower, Benwell and Guttram State Forests.

- To further enhance the environmental values of the new Barmah National Park and surrounds, wild horses should be captured and removed.

In addition to the new National Parks:

- Government should provide funding for the fencing of high priority Crown land river grazing frontages in cooperation with landholders. Infrastructure such as troughs and pumps should be provided to landholders who volunteer for the program, to ensure that cattle can be watered. The program should follow on from similar work completed on the Broken Boosey Creek working cooperatively with local landholders. It should also link up with riparian habitat and river protection work being undertaken by land managers in the area.
- Government should actively support the development of dry land, mixed species agro-forestry in the River Red Gum region to assist in providing local firewood. This may include incentives to land holders to invest in agro- forestry. The incentives may be linked to existing programs and achieve a dual purpose in tackling salinity, improving biodiversity or storing carbon. This should be sympathetic to local indigenous bird life and provide improved habitat options for local birds.
- New Murray River and other Parks should be created. Camping with dogs should be permitted to occur in all these new Parks as well as all the recreational activities that the Panel proposes to be allowed in the new Red Gum National Parks.
- A number of new Nature Conservation Reserves recommended by the Panel should be established (as indicated on Map 1).
- Kings Billabong should remain reserved as State Forest under the Crown Land Reserves Act to enable crucial environmental watering works to be conducted as a matter of priority.
- Kerang Regional Park should be established with amended borders to that recommended by VEAC to allow for greater recreational use.
- Boards of management should be established for Barmah and Nyah-Vinifera National Parks that will result in majority Indigenous management, in conjunction with training and resources to facilitate this new role.
- Government should provide funding towards growing the tourism potential of the River Red Gum region. This investment should be directed towards new infrastructure that will create jobs and should be provided in partnership with Local Government. The Panel supports steps by Tourism Victoria to have an overarching advisory committee to the Minister on the whole of the Murray.
- Funding of \$800 000 over four years should be provided to assist in the training and registration of accredited feral animal hunters for the new Parks to help control feral animals in the Parks. The DSE game management unit working together with the Sporting Shooters Association (Victoria) should administer this program.
- The Panel supports the further review of existing Melbourne based Government departments and agencies to examine options for moving them to regional Victoria, providing further employment opportunities in regional centres.
- Implementation of these recommendations should be a high priority for the Government. Those implementing these recommendations must take account of the whole of Parks approach adopted by the Panel.
- The Secretary to the Department of Innovation Industry and Regional Development (DIIRD) should oversee assistance to displaced timber workers.
- The Secretary to DSE and Chief Executive of Parks Victoria should work together to roll out the new Parks and Reserves.

# Panel Findings

## Recommendations for Red Gum National Parks

The Panel recommends that the new National Parks, with boundaries as indicated in Map 1, be established at:

### New Red Gum National Parks

- Barmah National Park
- Gunbower National Park
- Lower Goulburn River National Park
- Warby Range-Ovens River National Park

### Expanded Existing National Parks

- Murray-Sunset National Park
- Terrick Terrick National Park.

### Red Gum National Park Legislation

The Panel believes that the Red Gum National Parks have a unique set of social, community and economic interests that need to be actively managed.

To ensure that these interests are recognised and protected once these new National Parks have been established, the Panel recommends that specific legislation and regulations be created to protect these activities in Parks now and into the future. The legislation should cover such things as ongoing dispersed (self select) camping, year round camp fires, hunting for feral animals in the new National Parks and biomass reduction under strict management and coordination.

The Red Gum National Park legislation must be explicit in its intent that recreational and community values are enshrined values in these Parks alongside ecological and environmental benefits.

In protecting these new Parks into the future, some uses will be excluded. The following management principles should be adopted in the new Red Gum National Parks:

- Cattle grazing licences to be removed.
- Timber licences in National Parks to be paid out with structural adjustment.

- Dispersed camping and campfires should be permitted year round on non total fire ban days. The Panel supports VEAC's recommendation that '*dispersed camping, along the river frontages at sites of their choosing and with few amenities*' (pg 100 VEAC Report) should remain the predominant form of camping across all the new Parks. However new penalties should be introduced, including 'on the spot' fines for campers not following campfire regulations. Firewood lots and permanent campfire sites should also be put in place in high visitation areas.
- Biomass reduction for environmental purposes should occur in the new Red Gum National parks and State Parks where required for environmental values and biomass by products produced should be made available for community benefit.
- Hunting for feral animals should be allowed in the Parks, outside of the peak visitation times, including school and public holidays, and under new licensing arrangements to ensure a high level of ethical behaviour and public safety. Hunters should be required to be members of accredited hunting organisations and there should be strict limits on how many hunters can be in the Parks at any one time. Allowing hunting for feral animals in the new Red Gum National Parks would be consistent with hunting that currently occurs in the Lake Eildon, Mitchell River, Baw Baw and Alpine National parks, except it should be more tightly controlled and coordinated.
- Overnight camping with horses should be permitted within the National Parks under strict management of Parks Victoria.
- Boards of management should be established for Barmah National Parks and Nyah-Vinifera Red Gum National Park with majority Indigenous representation and this should be supported by training and resources.

## **Murray River and other Parks**

- Murray River Park
- Nyah-Vinifera Park
- Gadsen Bend Park
- Kerang Regional Park
- Shepparton Regional Park
- Murray-Kulkyne Park.

*(Note boundaries for Parks are included in Map 1. The boundaries for a number of the Parks vary from those recommended by VEAC)*

# Management of New National Parks

## Commercial Timber Harvesting

The Panel recognises the strong regional community and social connection to timber harvesting in the River Red Gum forests. However the Panel has seen first hand that the Red Gum forests are facing severe challenges from climate change and drought. Put simply, the trees aren't growing as they once did.

The Panel supports the removal of commercial timber harvesting from the newly created Red Gum National Parks. This position was strongly advocated by environment groups, including the Victorian National Parks Association, Friends of the Earth, the Bird Observers Club and the Wilderness Society.

The Red Gum Forests are suffering from a lack of water, there is strong competition in many areas from thick clumps of small trees that would not have survived regular flood events. These small trees have continued to grow, choking up creek beds and Moira grass plains. In other areas, the regrowth of Red Gums from fire events requires active management.

The Panel recommends that Parks Victoria actively manages biomass reduction in the future. This recommendation is consistent with VEAC's findings.

In the areas the Panel visited that had been available for timber harvesting the panel did not see a significant amount of older red gum trees. These trees were more evident in areas where commercial harvesting had not occurred or had been phased out.

The Panel understands that removing timber harvesting will have a direct impact on local jobs and supports structural adjustment being provided together with the option of timber workers taking on new roles assisting with bio mass reduction. The Panel supports displaced timber workers actively being engaged as a first step by Government in managing the new Red Gum National Parks and Murray River parks

The Panel believes that timber licences should cease within 12 months of this report being received by Government.

### Recommendation

Commercial timber licences should be removed from the new National Parks.

Structural adjustment assistance, based on previous timber industry restructure packages should be provided to the timber mills and workers affected by this change.

Additionally, affected workers should be prioritised for employment by Parks Victoria for ecological thinning in programs to be undertaken over the next two years.

The funding for the employment of these timber workers for at least three years should be set aside from all other establishment and running costs of the new Parks and be made available specifically for timber workers.

Timber that is produced through biomass reduction work by timber workers contracted by Parks Victoria should be made available for sale with funds returned to the new National Parks.

Residual timber that has resulted from timber harvesting operations in the Red Gum areas up until the cessation of commercial harvesting and which is currently lying on the ground should be made available to meet firewood supply requirements in the local community in the Red Gum Region.

## Cattle Grazing

The Panel has considered the strong connection that graziers in the region have to the Barmah forest, however the Panel supports VEAC's decision and that of environment groups to remove ongoing cease grazing from the Barmah forest.

The Panel met with River and Red Gum Environment Alliance which includes members of the Barmah Forest Preservation League. The Panel considered the social and community arguments put forward to allow grazing in the Barmah Forest.

However, the Panel considered that the impact of cattle within the new Red Gum National Parks is not consistent with the ecological and recreational values that the new Red Gum National Parks will be managed for.

The Panel recognises the strong community and social connection to the annual 'Barmah Muster' gathering and supports this event continuing in a revised form.

The Panel supports the collaborative approach being undertaken by Catchment Management Authorities and the Murray Darling Basin Authority in working with land holders to remove cattle grazing from high value river frontages.

The Panel met with a number of key stakeholder groups to discuss fencing off of crown land river frontages. These included, The Murray River Action Group, which represents affected land holders in some of the investigation area, the Victorian Farmers Federation, Catchment Management Authorities and Parks Victoria. Issues that were raised with the Panel included the threat of fences to stock in flood events, the potential lack of access for stock watering, the possible impediments of thick forest to fencing, the reduction in value to property abutting rivers and the risk of theft of material. The Panel visited areas where fences had been established to remove cattle from sensitive riparian areas. This included the Broken Boosey Creek and the Murray River Frontage near Howlong. These programs have proved a great success in cooperation with local land holders. This approach should continue.

### Recommendation

The Panel supports the immediate removal of cattle grazing from the Barmah forest. Cattle have not grazed the forest for the past two seasons due to the current drought condition and the Panel believes that they should not be returned. The forest should be managed into the future for ecological and recreational values.

The Panel believes that funding should be allocated for high priority Crown land river grazing frontages to continue existing fencing programs in cooperation with landholders.

## Camping and Campfires

The Panel has met with many key stakeholders who, in the main, have strongly supported VEAC's submission that 'dispersed camping and campfires remain the predominant camping style throughout the investigation area'. These stakeholders have included local government, VR Fish – Victoria's peak recreational fishing body, 4WD Victoria, Field and Game Victoria, Sporting Shooters Association of Australia (Vic), Trail Bike Riders Association of Victoria and local Government representatives.

VEAC's recommendation in relation to restricting campfires is aimed at improving woody habitat rather than addressing fire danger.

*"To help reduce the environmental impacts of camping, a ban on solid fuel fires and firewood collection is recommended"*  
(VEAC Report pg xvi)

The Panel believes that there are measures that can be taken to achieving improved woody habitat for biodiversity purposes and a reduction in fire risk whilst allowing people to continue to have a campfire. The Panel recognises the importance of retaining this fundamental camping experience for visitors to the region.

The Panel notes that there are strict existing fire regulations that pertain to campfire use in the Red Gum area. Fires are only permitted on non total fire ban days.

The *Forests (Fire Protection) Regulations 2004, Part 3 – Campfires and Barbeques*, set requirements for people to follow if they are to have a campfire. Campfires are permitted if:

- (a) The fire is lit in a properly constructed fireplace or in a trench at least 30 cm's deep; and
- (b) The ground and airspace within a distance of three metres from the outer perimeter and uppermost point of the fire are clear of flammable material; and
- (c) The fire does not occupy an area exceeding one square metre and the dimensions of the solid fuel used are the minimum necessary for the purpose.

The Panel believes that these camp fire rules and regulations should be augmented by including a further provision that:

- (d) The fire is the responsibility of the person who has ignited it and that person is responsible for ensuring that it is not left unattended by a distance of greater than 100metres.

This further provision should work to ensure that people who start campfires and then leave them unattended to go water skiing, fishing or undertake other activities act more responsibly or face a hefty penalty. The fine should be determined by Government and should be significant enough to act as a strong deterrent from irresponsible camp fire use and behaviour.

If adhered to, the Panel believes the above provisions provide a valuable tool for fire managers to limit the risk of camp fires on non total fire ban days across Victoria.

The Panel further suggests that to give fire managers even greater capacity to manage fire threat, a new Penalty Infringement Notice (PIN) capacity be introduced so that land and fire managers have the capacity to give 'on the spot' fines across Victoria for the inappropriate use of campfires.

On the spot fines would only apply to people who are not doing the right thing with camp fires on non-total fire ban days. Anybody lighting a campfire on a total fire ban day would still go straight to Court.

The Panel has found that there needs to be improved signage and education in place to remind campers of the requirements to adhere to strict campfire safety across Victoria.

The Panel supports the principle of increasing the availability of woody habitat and recommends that in high visitor use areas 'woodlots' be established at the entrances to Parks and campers be required to take their firewood from these areas.

There were concerns also raised with the Panel in relation to toilet facilities in areas of the investigation, particularly along the Murray in areas that receive high visitation rates. The Panel recognised that these areas require more intensive management to ensure that a build up in camper activity does not cause long term environmental damage to these areas.

The Panel heard concerns about waste at high visitation camping areas.

## Recommendation

That campfires be permitted year round in the investigation area on 'non total fire ban days'.

In recognising that camp fire behaviour needs to be properly managed in fire risk areas across the State, tough new penalties should be introduced that would involve campers receiving 'on the spot' fines for failing to follow the Forests (Fire Protection) Regulations 2004.

That the Regulations be expanded to include a further requirement that:

(d) The fire is the responsibility of the person who has ignited it and that person is responsible for ensuring that it is not left unattended by a distance of greater than 100metres.

In order to restrict the circumference of fires so that they do not use more fuel than required for heating or cooking, the land manager is to install permanent fire places in some areas of high visitation.

To ensure that areas which have been denuded of woody habitat have the opportunity to recover, wood lots should be established in some high visitation areas to provide alternative wood supplies to campers and to ensure that on ground woody habitat remain.

In remote areas that have significant ground cover it should be at the land manager's discretion if wood lots are required or if campfire wood can be collected directly from the forest floor.

To improve the awareness of camp fire responsibility with campers in the River Red Gum Region, the Panel recommends improved signage and education in camping areas.

In high visitation camping areas the Panel recommends that the land manager provides improved waste transfer facilities to reduce the impact of waste at these areas.

Additionally in high camper visitation areas the Panel recommends that the land manager provides eco friendly permanent or transferable toilet facilities that can be utilised during peak periods.



*Waste disposal at Gunbower Forest 2008*

## Recreational hunting

Recreational hunting drew a significant amount of interest in the VEAC investigation and in the Panel meetings.

Hunting groups have worked, and continue to work, collaboratively with land managers to reduce the impacts of feral animals on public land, including in National Parks across Victoria.

Foxes, feral cats and wild dogs pose a significant threat to ground dwelling marsupials and birds. Wild pigs and goats cause significant damage to sensitive riparian areas and spread noxious weeds. Controlling these pests will be a real challenge within the newly created National Parks.

Hunting is a legitimate and economic way of controlling some of the biggest threats to biodiversity in National Parks.

The Panel recognises the threat that feral animals such as foxes, feral cats, pigs and goats pose to the environmental values that are intended to be protected through the establishment of the new River Red Gum Parks.

The Department of Sustainability and Environment and Parks Victoria currently work with the Sporting Shooters Association of Victoria to control feral animals in many National and State Parks, including the Barmah State Park.

Hunters are currently permitted to hunt in a number of existing National Parks across Victoria without significant restriction. These include the Mitchell River National Park, Lake Eildon State Park, Baw Baw National Park and Alpine National Park.

The Panel supports the continuation of hunting in the areas to become new Red Gum National Parks. Hunting has occurred in these areas in conjunction with camping and fishing over the past one hundred years. This position was strongly supported by the Sporting Shooters Association of Australia (Victoria), Field and Game Victoria, the Australian Deer Association, VR Fish, and some members of local Government.

The Panel proposes that moving forward, hunters should be required to be members of authorised hunting associations and fully accredited to hunt in the new River Red Gum parks.

The Panel recognises that safety is an important issue in relation to hunting. There is a very low incidence of people being injured by hunters, however the Panel believes that continued hunting in the newly created Red Gum National parks would need to occur in non peak visitation times, outside of school holiday periods, to ensure this risk continues to remain low.

The Panel recommends that signage should be displayed at all major entrances to the Park's advising visitors and campers that hunting for feral animals is permitted within the Parks, in accordance with the strict licensing program for hunting in the new Red Gum National and State Parks.

The Panel further recognised the importance of duck hunting to community groups and as a regional tourism economic driver. Whilst there were some who opposed duck hunting, they did so on ethical grounds.

The Victorian Government supports an on going sustainable duck hunting season. Currently the numbers of wetlands in Victoria specified for duck hunting represent approximately 1% of the estimated 20,000 wetlands greater than one hectare in size in Victoria.

The Panel has recommended a number of boundary and land classification changes to the VEAC recommendations to ensure that duck hunters continue to be able to access suitable areas to hunt ducks.

The Panel believes that these new recommendations should apply to both Indigenous and non Indigenous hunters.

## Recommendation

The Panel supports the continuation of hunting for feral animals in the new River Red Gum National Parks, Murray Parks and other categories of new Parks.

The Panel supports the establishment of a special *Feral Animal Control Hunter Program* similar to that used in New South Wales for hunting on 'Declared Public Land' with funding to be provided to establish a new database system and employ on going new staff.

Only licensed and accredited hunters with a '*Feral Animal Control Hunter Program*' accreditation should be permitted to hunt feral animals within the new Red Gum National and State Parks. The hunters should also be members of recognised and accredited hunting clubs. The hunters would need to demonstrate knowledge of safe, ethical hunting practice and firearms use, legislation, conservation and animal welfare. Restricted accredited hunters should be required to gain written permission through a tightly controlled booking system prior to hunting on declared public lands.

Parks Victoria, Victoria Police and DSE should all have access to this database.

The DSE Game Management Unit should oversee the establishment of the new *Feral Animal Control Hunter Program* booking system, working together with Parks Victoria. The Sporting Shooters Association of Victoria should assist in providing training expertise and coordinating the management of the system as well as it's on going work of assisting in organised volunteer hunting programs with Parks Victoria. The association should be provided funding to assist in this role, \$400,000 over 4 years.

The Panel further recommends that hunting should not be permitted within the new Red Gum National Parks during peak visitation times such as Christmas, Easter and school holidays.

Outside of the new Red Gum, National, Murray and other new Parks, duck hunting should continue in line with seasonal conditions in all areas as identified in Map 1.

## Camping with Horses

The Panel further acknowledges that VEAC has allowed for horse riding within the new National Parks. VEAC has suggested *'Camping with horses is permitted in recommended state forests and regional parks, including the recommended Murray River Park. Horse riding is permitted in National Parks, regional parks and state forests on formed roads and tracks'*. (VEAC pg 101)

The Panel supports on going recreational activity continuing in the Parks and considered that to attract tourists it would not be practical to have them drive long distances to the National Parks to ride their horses on the tracks and then leave the Parks over night. The Panel noted that horse riding and overnight camping with trail riding groups is permitted in other National Parks such as the Alpine National Park.

The Panel recommends that overnight camping with horses be permitted in the new National Parks under strict management control of Parks Victoria in identified areas.

This received strong support from local government.

## Indigenous Management

The Panel supports greater Indigenous management moving forward within the Red Gum area. There are a number of Indigenous groups throughout the area who have strong long standing connections with the forests.

The Panel received a range of suggestions from stakeholders in relation to majority indigenous management. Some stakeholders, such as the Yorta Yorta and the Victorian National Parks Association and Friends of the Earth felt that it would recognise Indigenous connection to the land and provide capacity building and economic opportunities for the future. There were other stakeholders however who felt that giving exclusive management to Indigenous groups would create a wedge in local communities and be seen to be favouring a minority group above the rest of the community.

The Panel recognises the disadvantage that Indigenous people in the region have faced. Indigenous representatives who met with the Panel discussed the importance of working together with the local community in a collaborative fashion and the Panel believes that majority indigenous management will not result in exclusivity of access to these important new River Red Gum National Parks.

The Panel also noted that in most other parts of Australia there are currently National Parks being run with majority Indigenous management boards and they are being run very successfully.

The Panel believes that hunting within the new National Parks should be strictly controlled, and that this should apply equally to both Indigenous and non Indigenous hunters.

### Recommendation

The Panel supports VEAC's principle of 'increased involvement' in management of Red Gum areas by Aboriginal people. The Panel further supports the establishment of boards of management for Barmah and Nyah-Vinifera Red Gum National Parks which should result in majority Indigenous management supported by training and resources.

## Tourism and Economic Development

The Panel supports on-going economic development of the Red Gum Region. This area has suffered considerable economic challenges due to the impacts of drought over recent years.

The Panel recognises the importance of dispersed camping and campfires to regional tourism and supports the existing camping arrangements continuing into the future, with improved resources for eco toilets, wood lots and camp fire safety.

The Panel further recognises the on going value of hunting and specifically duck hunting to the region and as such has recommended larger areas of public land remain available for duck hunting now and into the future.

The Panel is aware of the goals established within the 'Victorian Nature-Based Tourism Strategy 2008-2012'. The Panel specifically noted that within the Strategy, nature based tourism trends indicated that 'Consumers are seeking more experiences in unique locations, that are more memorable, engaging, intimate and highly personal.' (pg 24 'Victorian Nature-Based Tourism Strategy 2008-2012')

The Panel believes that dispersed (self select) camping with campfires in the River Red Gum National Parks currently provide these experiences and will continue to do so into the future.

The Panel noted the priorities for the Murray region as identified through the 'Draft Regional Tourism Action Plan, 2008-2011'. These included 'Realising new and refreshed infrastructure along the Murray River' and developing 'Nature Based infrastructure and investment products along the Murray River, including

*consideration of a river trail' (pg 27 Draft Regional Tourism Action Plan 2008-11).*

The Panel supports further development and promotion of the Murray River region for tourism purposes.

The Panel notes VEAC's recommendation 16, which relates to a Barmah Forest Community Use Area, 'Approximately 22 hectares around the Dharnya Centre and muster yards is recommended as a new community use area to accommodate a broad range of activities and uses.... Such a node might also include some commercial activities' (Pg 89 VEAC).

This area around the Dharnya centre (22 ha), which will be in the heart of the new Barmah Red Gum National Park, but will not be included as part of the Park under the Act should be made available for economic development opportunities for the board of management to explore. It should not be restricted to general community use principles but instead should be seen as an area that could be actively developed with public and private investment for its tourism potential. Eco-tourist lodges, cafes, and icon infrastructure could be developed to bring wealth into the area and provide local jobs for both Indigenous and non Indigenous workers.

The Panel recognised that to drive investment in the region funding specific to the River Red Gum area would need to be provided. This funding could then be accessed by Local Government to stimulate job creating opportunities. The funding should be administered through Tourism Victoria or Regional Development Victoria.

### Recommendation

That funding towards a 'River Red Gum Infrastructure Fund' be established for capital works on the Murray to increase local employment opportunities and further develop 'icon' visitation sites for tourists. The fund should be administered by Regional Development Victoria or Tourism Victoria, with its purpose being to drive investment by local government and the private sector in the tourist capacity of the region.

The Panel also supports the development of further marketing opportunities for the River Red Gum Region, in line with its unique natural attributes and recreational and camping opportunities.

# General Recommendations for:

## Regional Parks and Other Parks

The Panel supports the following principles being adopted beyond the recommendations VEAC has made:

- Dispersed camping and campfires should be permitted year round on non total fire ban days.
- Firewood lots and new arrangements for campfires should be put in place including fixed campfire sites in high visitation areas and on the spot fines introduced for not following camp fire regulations.
- Toilet facilities should be provided for campers in high visitation areas.
- Bio mass reduction for environmental purposes should occur in Parks where required for environmental values and that timber being made available for community benefit.
- Hunting should be permitted for feral animals in line with new *Feral Animal Control Hunter Licence* program.

## Reserves

The Panel supports VEAC recommendations to establish a number of new conservation reserves, however believes the following areas identified by VEAC as nature conservation reserves should remain under their existing land tenure arrangements or change to Wildlife reserves. This will allow a broader range of recreational activity, including duck hunting, to continue in these areas. See land tenure recommendations on Map 1: D4 (to change to Murray River Park), D17, D20, D22, D24, D28, D33, D34, D44.

Additionally, the following general management reserves should also remain available for hunting: G11, G12, G16 (Lake Boort).

## Domestic Stock Grazing on Public Land outside of the National Parks

The Panel recognises the strong connection that many landholders have with river frontage areas that they have leased over time to allow stock grazing. The Panel met with the Murray River Action Group, Parks Victoria, Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority, North East Catchment Management Authority, North Central Catchment Management Authority, Mallee Catchment Management Authority, New South Wales Department of Water and Energy, Environmental Farmers Network, and local land owners to look at ways to address this issue.

The Panel supports land holders and natural resource agencies working together in a cooperative partnership. This should involve a common sense approach and practical solutions being identified for fencing issues.

## Firewood Collection and Supply

The Panel supports regional towns and communities still being able to access firewood from the Red Gum region. The Panel supports the areas of firewood collection identified by VEAC across the investigation area, however the land managers should not be restricted to utilising only these areas. The Panel also supports residual timber that has resulted from timber harvesting operations in the red gum areas and is now lying on the ground, including Barmah and Gunbower Forests being made available to meet firewood supply requirements in the local community in the Red Gum region.

The Panel believes that the land manager should have flexibility in providing firewood from bio mass reduction to the local community, with any funds being returned for the benefit of the Park. The Panel recommends that Parks Victoria and DSE having

flexibility to source firewood from traditional areas to ensure local communities in the Red Gum Region are not left without firewood for heating purposes, and that local residents are not forced to drive long distances to get firewood – placing a further financial burden upon them. Parks Victoria and DSE should have discretion and flexibility for firewood collection areas across all the Murray Parks and from bio mass reduction from within the National Parks to provide easily accessible small firewood collection points for local communities.

## Course Woody Debris

The Panel recognises the value in leaving debris to provide habitat for environmental values. However the Panel does not support a figure of 50 tonnes per hectare being prescribed. It does not leave adequate flexibility for the new land managers to manage the Parks for multiple values.

The Panel notes that this requirement has not been made in previous VEAC studies that related to the establishment of the Otway's National Park or the Box Iron Bark National Parks.

Parks managers will be the best placed to determine the appropriate amount of woody debris in areas across the Park. The 50t level should not be mandated.

## Implementation

In its report VEAC suggested that:

*“To facilitate implementation of approved recommendations, VEAC recommends that Government establish an implementation team to engage with industry, local government, stakeholder groups, licence holders, and communities” (VEAC Report Pg 24)*

Key stakeholder groups that the Panel met with expressed concern that once new Parks were established planning processes would be ‘hijacked’ by special interest groups and the commitments provided by Government to allow on going community use and recreation would be watered down.

To overcome this issue the Panel supports legislation and regulations being created that are specific in their language allowing on going recreational activities to continue in much the same manner as they currently occur.

Implementation of these recommendations should be a high priority for the Government. Those implementing these recommendations must take account of the whole of Parks approach adopted by the Panel.

The Secretary to the Department of Innovation Industry and Regional Development should oversee assistance to displaced timber workers.

The Secretary to DSE and Chief Executive of Parks Victoria should work together to roll out the new Parks and Reserves.

Further more, the Panel believes that implementation of the Panel's recommendations do not require a further process of community consultation. This has been extensively covered through both the VEAC report and the Community Engagement Panel process.





