

The biodiversity that we want to maintain: the government perspective

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Abstract

The Victorian Government's policy framework for biodiversity is clearly set out through a series of statements, most recently *Growing Victoria Together* (2003) and a comprehensive statement in the *Victorian Biodiversity Strategy* (1997).

The historical sequence of relevant legislation provides a perspective on how Governments have viewed biodiversity on private land. Before 1988, legislation sought mainly to provide recreational, aesthetic and commercial outcomes. Then the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act* (1988) introduced a 'guarantee' to all species and ecological communities — not an ironclad guarantee, but an aspirational one.

Victoria's Biodiversity Strategy is the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Strategy. It provides many reasons for conserving biodiversity, including conserving natural wealth, maintaining biological processes, providing resources and market advantage, recreation, community awareness, quality of life and 'for its own sake'.

Through the strategy, the Victorian government recognises that biodiversity can be integrated into normal business operations and planning activities. Future economic development does not have to come at the cost of further biodiversity losses. There are potentially adverse impacts on particular businesses and groups, but our society is now wealthy enough to support biodiversity conservation while also ensuring that people are better off rather than worse off.

The Department of Sustainability and Environment is developing partnership frameworks with Catchment Management Authorities, local government and other State government departments to put this into practice. It is through this raft of institutions that broad community engagement will be effective.

Keywords

agriculture, biodiversity conservation, conservation strategies, environmental policy, land use change

Introduction

This conference brings together people interested in exploring the impacts of land use change on biodiversity, what causes those land use changes, and how policy might address those causes or drivers.

A starting point is to understand the biodiversity that we are trying to protect, enhance and restore. The government has a very clear view on this, expressed primarily through Victoria's Biodiversity Strategy. However, it is important to recognise that there is a range of different perspectives on the meaning of biodiversity. These divergences call for effective dialogue about the problem and its solutions by all stakeholders.

Gaining insight into the drivers of land use change that have significant impacts on biodiversity is crucial to the project 'Achieving biodiversity gains in conjunction with land use change'. An understanding of the drivers of land use change will help to reveal opportunities for developing policy and strengthening institutional arrangements that contribute to our biodiversity conservation goals.

Some of these drivers are those that influence governments to take action in regard to biodiversity. Various government documents give reasons for conserving and maintaining

biodiversity, and set out how the government intends to do so. Understanding these reasons helps to identify the drivers behind government action in regard to biodiversity. In this paper, I want to set out those drivers.

First, I will present the policy framework of the Victorian Government because it helps to situate everything we do in relation to biodiversity and agriculture. Second, I will look briefly at the history of developing biodiversity conservation strategies in Victoria, in order to reveal how the reasons behind government action have changed. Then I will outline the reasons given in the Victorian Biodiversity Strategy for biodiversity conservation and maintenance. Finally, I will briefly illustrate how the Strategy is being implemented in rural landscapes, especially on private land. This will help us focus on those really critical reasons — the ones that drive the actions we take.

I want to emphasise that the Victorian government is not tackling biodiversity conservation issues alone. This is a partnership initiative in which catchment management authorities, local government, Greening Australia, Trust for Nature, and many others also play an important role.

The government's policy framework

Earlier this year, the Victorian government released a policy document entitled *Growing Victoria Together: Innovative State, Caring Communities*, which outlines the government's priorities and how they are to be achieved over the next decade.

Growing Victoria Together seeks to balance economic, social and environmental goals and actions. It states: 'We need a broader measure of progress and common prosperity than economic growth alone. That is the heart of our balanced approach — a way of thinking, a way of working and a way of governing which starts by valuing equally our economic, social and environmental goals.'

The document presents a vision of Victoria in 2010. As part of the vision, it states that 'protecting the environment for future generations is built into everything we do'. Sustainable development and environmental protection are two of the issues identified as being of most importance to Victoria over this period. The key issues are:

- valuing and investing in lifelong education
- high-quality, accessible health and community services
- sound financial management
- safe streets, homes and workplaces
- growing and linking all of Victoria
- promoting sustainable development
- more jobs and thriving, innovative industries across Victoria
- building cohesive communities and reducing inequalities
- protecting the environment for future generations
- promoting rights and respecting diversity
- government that listens and leads.

In the section on promoting sustainable development, a priority action is to improve the productivity and sustainability of natural resource industries such as fisheries, farming, forestry and mining. It is stated that 'We have to ensure our timber, energy, mining and food production industries are sustainable into the future and continue to create jobs across Victoria.'

The section on protecting the environment for future generations lists priorities to:

- improve the health of our rivers and waterways and take effective action to reduce salinity
- increase and provide greater protection for areas of high conservation value, including the establishment of a comprehensive system of marine national parks
- ensure that water authorities continue to supply affordable good quality drinking water
- encourage increased use of public transport

Progress will be demonstrated by, among other things:

- improvement in the health of Victoria's catchments, rivers and bays
- expansion of the area covered by native vegetation.

A brief history of conservation strategies in Victoria

Before the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988

In Victoria, the effort to integrate environmental concerns with economic development began many years earlier with the establishment of the Land Conservation Council in 1970 and the passing of the *Wildlife Act* in 1975. The Land Conservation Council (LCC) was established in the aftermath of a major political controversy about further clearing of the Little Desert. However, the LCC focused on public land, and only considered agricultural activities to the extent of recommending land purchase and management of agricultural activities on Crown leases.

Prior to the passage of the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988*, protection of flora and fauna was covered by the *Wildlife Act 1975* and the *Wildflowers and Native Plants Protection Act 1958*. Only some vertebrate animals and some vascular plants were legally protected (Sutton 1988). Ecological communities, invertebrates and non-vascular plants were ignored.

Apart from the LCC processes, a coordinated approach to conserving both flora and fauna was lacking. The emphasis was on control of direct taking of wildlife and the management of reserves. Generally, flora and fauna conservation issues were dealt with on a species-by-species basis as particular issues arose, rather than as part of a coordinated, forward-looking conservation strategy that took threats and habitat protection as a central theme. Sutton (1987) argued that existing legislation focused mainly on 'management of recreational, commercial and aesthetic resources, rather than on ecological conservation'.

The Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act, which changed all this, was enacted in 1988. It was introduced in the context of other attempts to better integrate conservation and land management activities in Victoria. Administrative changes led in 1984 to a new department with responsibility for national parks, public land management, land protection on private land, forestry, fisheries, and wildlife and flora conservation. (This department and the Department of Agriculture merged in 1992). In 1987 the state government published an all-embracing State Conservation Strategy.

The Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988

The primary objective of the Act is to 'ensure that all species survive, flourish and retain their evolutionary potential in the wild'. The meaning of 'guarantee' is important; in a paper published during the early development of the legislation, Sutton (1987) stated:

Guarantee can mean 'to make a specified outcome certain'. It can also mean 'to meet specified standards'. In both cases it carries the sense of a significant promise. Thus the aim or aspiration of the Guarantee is to make the survival and abundance of native species certain. At the same time, we know that the task is so difficult that probably we cannot ever hope to fully achieve this aim. It is at this point that the second meaning of Guarantee comes into play. This is the notion that a promise has been made to achieve the highest practical standards in flora and fauna protection. This of course is an achievable goal.

Features of this legislation included provision for:

- the preparation of a Flora and Fauna Guarantee Strategy
- public nomination of species, ecological communities and threatening processes, their independent scientific assessment and listing, and the preparation of an action statement once listing has occurred
- declaration of critical habitat for any threatened species or ecological community
- consideration of social and economic matters in action statements, management plans and interim conservation orders
- Public Authority Management Agreements
- controls over protected flora (with exemptions relating to private land that is not part of critical habitat).

This Victorian Act led the development of similar legislation across Australia.

The Act has specific things to say about the Strategy, which later evolved into Victoria's Biodiversity Strategy. It must include proposals for, among other things, 'guaranteeing the survival, abundance and evolutionary development in the wild of all taxa and communities of flora and fauna'. This is subject to a requirement that the strategy have regard to 'the need for efficiency and effectiveness and . . . to minimum adverse social and economic impact and to the rights and interests of landholders.' Proposals for proper management of potentially threatening processes must also be included. An education program is required, as are proposals for 'improving the ability of all relevant people to meet the . . . objectives'.

The interpretation of 'guarantee' mentioned above, and the requirement to consider social and economic matters, indicates that biodiversity was not elevated above other concerns. However, biodiversity conservation had not been well addressed in the past, and it was time to change the balance — except where the social costs were too great. Note that the Act talks of flora and fauna, rather than biodiversity — the latter is a relatively new term.

National and international developments

A major reason for conserving and maintaining biodiversity within Australia has stemmed from earlier initiatives such as the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Environment, which all three levels of Australian governments signed in 1992. The Agreement committed governments to integrating economic and environmental considerations into decision-making to achieve ecologically sustainable development. It stated that '. . . conservation of biological diversity and ecological integrity should be a fundamental consideration of policymaking and program implementation' (NRE 1997b).

In that same year Australia committed itself to the National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development. Within this strategy, biological diversity is one of three core objectives.

In 1992 the Rio Conference on Environment and Development produced *Agenda 21*, which in turn led to the 1994 International Convention on Biological Diversity. These international and national debates led to an agreement between the governments of all Australian states and territories on the 1996 National Strategy for the Conservation of Australia's Biological Diversity, under which each state and territory was to produce a biodiversity strategy. In Victoria, this strategy and the strategy required under the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* became one and the same thing. A draft was released for public comment in 1992 (DCE 1992). Many iterations later, a final set of strategy documents were released in 1997.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the reasons behind these national and international developments, suffice to say that Victoria was an active participant in these processes.

The Victorian Biodiversity Strategy

The Victorian Biodiversity Strategy consists of three documents: *Our Living Wealth*, *Sustaining Our Living Wealth*, and *Directions in Management* (1997a,b,c).

What biodiversity?

The Strategy defines biodiversity as 'the natural diversity of all life: the sum of all our native species of flora and fauna, the genetic variation within them, their habitats, and the ecosystems of which they are an integral part' (NRE 1997a). It encompasses a large range of living things and ecosystems that are constantly evolving and adapting to environmental change (NRE 1997b).

In the introduction to the strategy it is stated that 'Victoria's land area supports a wider range of broad ecosystems than any area of a similar size in Australia: alpine, mallee, grasslands and grassy woodlands, forests, heathlands and heathy woodlands, inland waters and estuaries, and coasts' (NRE 1997a), and that 'Victoria's natural ecosystems support at least 3140 native species of vascular plants, 900 lichens, 750 mosses and liverworts, 111 mammals, 447 birds, 46

freshwater and 600 marine fish, 133 reptiles, 33 amphibians, and an untold number of invertebrates, fungi and algae' (NRE 1997a).

The Strategy is primarily concerned with this large variety of native indigenous biodiversity. This is a viewpoint of conservation significance; it focuses on the intrinsic value of biodiversity or 'what we need to do for biodiversity'. Another viewpoint is that of biophysical process, which focuses on the services that a balanced, viable and stable ecosystem provides, or 'how we benefit from biodiversity'. This second view is recognised in the state and national biodiversity strategies, but is not a central theme. The policy agenda is clearly being driven by the first view; that is, by a concern for the protection, enhancement and restoration of native biodiversity.

The problem that the Strategy seeks to address

The introduction to the Strategy (NRE 1997a, page 4), recognises the achievements in biodiversity conservation while also stating that more needs to be done. Four specific areas are mentioned as requiring further work. Each has a private land dimension:

- The first is that 'many species and communities are still in severe danger of extinction, and many processes continue to put species and communities at risk. Land degradation continues to be a major problem, especially in our rural areas' .
- The second is the 'protection of streams and their catchments', which 'has been recognised as being of critical importance for the protection of water quality and the maintenance of our aquatic plants and animals'.
- The third area is further action to expand on how biodiversity conservation is included as 'a key component of the integrated approach to natural resource management'.
- The fourth area is the need for research to gain a better understanding of our ecosystems.

In order to address these issues, the Strategy outlines a number of conservation initiatives, many of which relate to rural landscapes. In further support of conservation initiatives on private land, it is noted that around 63% of the ecological vegetation classes — formally defined classes or types of native vegetation communities (CoA & NRE 1996) — that occur on private land in Victoria are classified as 'threatened with extinction'; that is, more than 70% of their former extent has been lost. Others have noted that the destruction and modification of habitat, particularly through the clearance of native vegetation, is the most significant cause of biodiversity decline (SEAC 1996, Industry Commission 1998).

About 30% of the populations of threatened species are found on private rural lands, and some species are almost entirely dependent on habitat on private land. In-stream biodiversity is significantly affected by water quality: only 5% of streams are in good or excellent condition, and 65% are poor or very poor.

The loss of biodiversity is widely recognised as one of the most significant environmental problems facing Australia. It is now a core issue within major national programs — the Natural Heritage Trust and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality. In a review of Australia's environmental performance, the OECD (1998) commented:

Outside of protected areas, while there has been progress in conservation of natural resources (land, soil and water), progress in conservation of biodiversity (habitats and species) has been extremely limited. Much remains to be done to translate Australia's broader strategic approach and commitment to sustainability to actual management of natural resources that integrates ecosystem and biodiversity protection concerns in decision making and actual practice.

As will be clear when I outline what the Biodiversity Strategy says about the reasons for biodiversity conservation, many individuals and organisations have a proud record of activity in nature conservation on private land. We just have a long way to go.

Reasons given for biodiversity conservation

The following points summarise the reasons for conserving biodiversity that are given in the three Strategy documents: *Our Living Wealth* (OLW) *Sustaining Our Living Wealth* (SOLW),

and *Directions in Management* (DM). *Directions in Management* has an introduction titled ‘Victorian Biodiversity in the Year 2020: A History of the Future’; many factors are also listed in this speculative look at the future.

The reasons can be broadly interpreted as economic (including processes that human life depends on), human values, and ‘for its own sake’.

Natural wealth

- Australians are the custodians of some of the most diverse ecosystems on the planet. The Australian continent has a high proportion of endemic species, and a wide range of broad ecosystems such as alpine, mallee, grasslands, and grassy woodlands, forests, heathlands and heathy woodlands, inland waters, estuaries and coasts (OLW, p. 3)

Biological processes

- Biodiversity provides for basic needs such as processing wastes (OLW, p. 2).
- Maintenance of beneficial natural processes such as nutrient cycling (DM).
- Improving quality and quantity of water that is otherwise a limiting factor ‘in the environment and for some sectors of the economy’ (DM).
- Biodiversity underpins human well-being in many ways. We depend on the environment to supply clean air to breathe and clean water to drink, produce and maintain fertile soils, and break down our wastes. Biological resources provide all of our foods, many of our medicines and many of our industrial products. Moreover, they provide us with recreation, inspiration and a cultural identity (SOLW, page 7).
- Agriculture also depends on biodiversity — for watershed protection, climate regulation, soil fertility, nutrient storage and cycling, and so on. Without it this sector, with an economic value of \$5000 million per year, would be threatened (SOLW, p. 7).

Resources

- Biodiversity encompasses a huge range of living entities and ecosystems that are constantly evolving and adapting to environmental change. Biodiversity is important in sustaining resource-based industries such as agriculture, fisheries and forestry (OLW, p. 2).
- New pharmaceutical discoveries (DM).
- Establishment of alternative industries on cleared land: native timber trees, wildflowers and bush tucker species (DM).

Risk management

- Drought management strategies on grazing properties (DM).

Market advantage

- Strategic market advantage through environmental quality assurance (DM).
- Victoria’s ‘clean and green reputation, assisting all Victorian export industries and attracting international tourism’. (Note that the second involves an indirect spin-off for all export industry.) (DM).
- Potential for economic gain if the Victorian government plays a role in the early development of biodiversity utilisation as a basis for capturing international markets, through the adoption of environmental management systems that incorporate biodiversity (DM).

Recreation

- Biodiversity is vital in our everyday lives for recreation and a sense of place (OLW, p. 2).

Community awareness

- These innovations have been driven by grass-roots community initiative and energy. In some cases, they have developed into government-funded programs such as Landcare, Waterwatch and Land for Wildlife, which have sought to support community activities (SOLW p. 7).

- The recognition of catchment management issues, such as salinisation and algal blooms, has brought a new awareness of the need for a balance between resource development and biodiversity conservation (OLW page 34).
- The resolution of many ‘conservation’ issues has been enhanced because of an ‘increased awareness of what each component added to the health of the environment’ (DM).

Quality of life and a sense of who we are

- Biodiversity is essential for our economic, cultural, social and spiritual well-being. Our quality of life depends on biodiversity conservation and management in rural areas, regional towns and metropolitan areas (OLW p. 5). Some outcomes of an increased attention to biodiversity are:
 - world-wide recognition as a leader in biodiversity conservation (DM)
 - the high value that the local community and tourists will place on the ‘jewels in Victoria’s crown’ that our ecosystems represent (DM)
 - ‘deeper insights into the nature of living in Victoria’ (DM)
 - ‘deeper appreciation of and empathy for the landscape, its biodiversity and its place in . . . quality of life’ (DM)
 - ‘biodiversity-friendly’ as a ‘shared part of our quality of life’, and a ‘deeper sense of place and quality of life’ (DM).

For its own sake

- Many Victorians simply wish to know such diversity exists and that it is protected (SOLW, p. 7).
- Beyond all this, the environment is something more than a commodity for our benefit. We share the Earth with many other life-forms that have their own intrinsic value. They warrant our respect, whether or not they are of immediate benefit to us (SOLW, p. 7).

Implementation of the Strategy

Directions in management

The Biodiversity Strategy sets out five management objectives, which in turn provide the framework within which key management approaches and directions are identified for each of four landscapes across Victoria. It is rural landscapes that are most relevant here; others are largely natural landscapes and seascapes, and urban and urban fringe areas.

The five key management objectives for biodiversity management in Victoria are as follows:

- There is a reversal, across the entire landscape, of the long-term decline in the extent and quality of native vegetation, leading to a net gain, with the first target being no net loss by the year 2001.
- The ecological processes and biodiversity that depend upon terrestrial, freshwater and marine environments are maintained and, where necessary, restored.
- The present diversity of species and ecological communities and their viability is maintained or improved across each bioregion.
- There is no further preventable decline in the viability of any rare species or of any rare ecological community.
- There is an increase in the viability of threatened species and ecological communities. (NRE 1997b)

These management objectives are independent of any reference to quality of life or utilisation. There is an implicit recognition that biodiversity as a natural resource is now scarce in comparison to capital and labour. Moreover, society is wealthy and ingenious enough to protect, enhance and restore biodiversity without compromising the quality of life of Victorians.

The key management approaches in rural landscapes are as follows:

- Integrate catchment management into the planning framework to achieve the sustainable development of natural resource-based industries and the conservation of biodiversity.

- Protect environmental values as part of the reform of water management and the development of bulk water entitlements.
- Maintain and enhance the viable remnants of native vegetation and habitats through a combination of public land reserve management, planning processes and cooperative agreements on private land in the context of regional vegetation plans.
- Ensure that public agencies managing land or water incorporate biodiversity goals in their work programs, and ensure that they have the necessary skills and access to tools to achieve continuing improvements in their performance.
- Support the participation of rural landholders and communities in conserving biodiversity through initiatives such as Landcare and Land for Wildlife. (NRE 1997b)

Lowe et al. (in these proceedings) expand on biodiversity initiatives that are specific to rural landscapes.

The thrust here is to integrate biodiversity conservation as part of the normal way of doing things. This can be done with a sound information base about Victorian biodiversity, and once priorities have been established. The expectation is that this can be done without significant overall cost to society. I leave aside here the fact that there will be thorny distributional issues to resolve, where actions to protect biodiversity do have significant impacts on individuals and communities.

Relationship to other government strategies

I emphasised earlier that the Victorian government has provided an overall framework, through *Growing Victoria Together*, within which specific policy initiatives relating to biodiversity and agriculture are taken. Within the broader policy framework, environmental and conservation considerations will be incorporated into all aspects of planning and government program delivery. The government has committed itself to the conservation of native vegetation on private land. The Biodiversity Strategy (NRE 1997b) states that:

Significantly, the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* set the framework and policies for the use, development and protection of land throughout Victoria, and is a critical element in an integrated approach to biodiversity in the State.

The Victorian government's agriculture policy *World Class And Green*, in part, aims to restore the health of rivers and catchments. While the policy acknowledges that issues relating to native vegetation retention are complex and difficult and that farmers should have the flexibility to manage their land in the optimum way, the policy states that this must be balanced against the broader public interest in conserving remnant native vegetation.

Discussion

The reasons for governments taking action on biodiversity conservation are varied. The objectives of legislation prior to the passage of the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act primarily related to recreation, utilisation and aesthetics. The new Act ushered in an era in which the magnitude of past losses are acknowledged and it is accepted that the advancement of Victoria no longer requires any significant losses. The emphasis shifted to 'guaranteeing', in its widest sense, positive biodiversity outcomes. The Biodiversity Strategy emphasises the quality of life for Victorians, deepening experiences, gaining market advantage and protection of biodiversity for its own sake. In its implementation, these different reasons are evident – extension work to enrich the understanding of landholders and other Victorians, incorporating biodiversity into environmental management systems for market advantage (Anderson et al. 2001), and establishment of the Bush Tender trial (Stoneham et al., in these proceedings).

More broadly, though work on priority setting and integration of biodiversity into planning suggests a perspective of 'enough is enough' – the destruction and loss of biodiversity has been excessive and future economic development does not have to come at the cost of further biodiversity losses. This is the message in Barlass and van Rees in the paper on A Vision for

Agriculture and Biodiversity to 2020 (these proceedings). It is also consistent with the Victorian government's position as expressed in *Growing Victoria Together*.

What are the implications of this interpretation?

Different reasons would lead to different drivers, and hence different strategies, programs, actions, etc., which would in turn lead to different outcomes for biodiversity.

It is the clear intent of legislation and policy that biodiversity be protected, enhanced and maintained. Change in land use presents a challenge because it involves dynamic processes — macro-level, economy-wide changes through to farm-level initiatives. We are also still learning about how changes in land use affect biodiversity. NRE is developing the shared objectives and frameworks to get it right in the future. These fall under the umbrella of: sustainable growth, smaller footprint, confident and capable communities, improved ecosystem understanding, and delivery of services through one department.

We can get it right if we stick to the guiding principles — ecological, risk management and development — that are outlined in the Strategy (NRE 1997b). These principles cover important issues such as applying ecological principles, handling uncertainty, looking forward, sharing responsibility and using smart tools.

The land use change project that has spawned this conference will be a great help in getting there.

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