

National Parks Advisory Council

Annual Report

2006-07



A Victorian Government initiative



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Front cover: Chalka Creek, Hattah-Kulkyne National Park (Photo: Ian Harris)

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INTRODUCTION

This report highlights the issues facing Victoria's park estate that were examined by the National Parks Advisory Council during the year ending on 30 June 2007. These issues included fire management, and pest plant and animal management.

The Council is responsible for advising the Minister on the administration of the *National Parks Act 1975*. The combination of the Council's regionally orientated membership together with its broad expertise and experience placed the Council in an ideal position to provide this advice.

Pest plant and animal management was a major theme that Council considered during the year as it is one of the most significant threats to the park estate. Council was pleased to see that this threat was being tackled by several innovative programs, however managing this issue will continue to be an enormous challenge which will require ongoing sustained resource commitment and major funding.

Council in general agreed with the approach to fire management it observed in the Mallee and Otway parks. In particular Council supported the ecologically sensitive fuel reduction program in the Mallee parks. In the Otways, Council supported the concept of Assets Protection Zones as a way to spread the responsibility across both public and private land. Council recognised the requirement for the protection of built assets from wildfire however Council considered that additional emphasis should also be placed on the protection of the natural values of the parks.

The Mornington Peninsula, French Island, Great Otway and Grampians National Parks were all increased in size with additions of high value conservation land acquired through the Government's land purchase program. Legislation that extended the parks system in 2006–07, supported by Council was *The National Parks and Crown Land (Reserves) Acts (Amendment) Act 2006* which added 969 hectares to the parks system and improved the provisions relating to offences in marine national parks and marine sanctuaries.

During the year the Victorian State Government commenced the development of the *Land and Biodiversity White Paper*. Council was one of more than 350 organisations and individuals that made submissions. Council supports the process and looks forward to the positive outcomes that it believes will flow from the White Paper including a review of all aspects of species protection in Victoria and the role of parks under the **National Parks Act**.

The 132 parks and other areas managed under provisions of the **National Parks Act** form a magnificent parks system covering more than 3.3 million hectares. The parks system provides the cornerstone for biodiversity conservation in Victoria, protecting areas that are substantially representative of the natural environments occurring on public land. In addition, it provides a diverse range of outdoor recreation opportunities, focusing on environmental appreciation, enjoyed by millions of visitors annually.

Council considers that the care and management of these areas for the current and future generations must continue to be a key priority of government.



Ian Harris
Convenor
 September 2007

ROLE OF COUNCIL

Under section 11 of the **National Parks Act** the functions of Council are to:

- ◆ advise the Minister generally in relation to the administration of the Act and on particular matters in relation to that administration on which the Minister seeks its advice
- ◆ advise the Minister on any proposed excision from a park referred to it by the Minister
- ◆ submit to the Minister within three months after each year ending on 30 June a report on the performance of its functions during that year.

In addition to these functions the Minister is required to seek advice from Council on certain leases, licences and consents for particular activities within parks.

The Act governs the protection and management of Victoria's parks system. It provides a strong framework for ensuring that the use and management of the parks are compatible with the long-term maintenance of their natural and cultural values.

The Secretary to the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) is responsible under the Act for ensuring the appropriate management of parks in accordance with the Act. Parks Victoria, established under the *Parks Victoria Act 1998*, manages the parks under a management agreement with the Secretary.

MEMBERSHIP

Council consists of ten members of whom –

- ◆ one is a nominee of the Secretary to DSE
- ◆ one is the Director of National Parks (defined under the Act as the Chief Executive Officer, Parks Victoria)
- ◆ eight are appointed by the Governor in Council of whom –
 - a) two must be persons with skills or experience relating to the preservation and the protection of parks
 - b) one must be a person who is a professor or teacher of ecology, biology or earth science at a university in Victoria
 - c) one must be a person with experience in local government who resides in a municipality in which there is a park
 - d) four must be persons with experience in matters affecting the interests of the community.

The member categories are described in full in the **National Parks Act**.

Changes in membership during 2006-07

Council members are appointed for a period of up to three years, and may be re-appointed. The terms of office of two members, Mr Tim Allen and Dr Ruth Lawrence, expired on 30 November 2006. Another member, Mr Damein Bell resigned in April 2007. The nominee of the Secretary to DSE, Mr John Burley, was replaced by Ms Nina Cullen during the year.

Council would like to express its appreciation of the significant contributions made by Mr Allen, Mr Bell, Mr Burley and Dr Lawrence.

On 20 February 2007 the Governor in Council made the following appointments: Ms Kate Glenie (until 30 September 2009) and Dr John Sherwood (until 30 September 2009) as new members: Mr Ian Harris was re-appointed as Convenor (until 30 September 2009) and Mrs Deirdre Slattery was re-appointed as a member (until 30 September 2009). The expiry of appointments is aligned in two groups – the terms of four members expire in 2007 and the terms of another four in 2009.

Current members

The members of Council as at 30 June 2007 were:

- ◆ Mr Ian Harris (Convenor), person with skills or experience relating to the preservation and protection of parks
- ◆ Mrs Debra Bray, community representative – rural
- ◆ Ms Nina Cullen, Director, Public Land Policy, DSE (nominee of the Secretary, DSE)
- ◆ Mrs Heather Gee, person with experience in local government who resides in a municipality in which there is a park
- ◆ Ms Kate Glenie, community representative – metropolitan
- ◆ Mr Brian Martin, person with skills or experience relating to the preservation and protection of parks
- ◆ Dr John Sherwood, university professor or teacher of ecology, biology or earth science
- ◆ Mrs Deirdre Slattery, community representative – rural
- ◆ Mr Mark Stone, Director of National Parks (Chief Executive Officer of Parks Victoria).

During the year Council held four meetings, conducted two inspections of parks and met with the Board of Parks Victoria (on 27 April 2007).

Meeting numbers and dates were:

2006-07

Meeting 231	4 August 2006
Meeting 232	24 November 2006
Meeting 233	23 March 2007
Meeting 234	15 June 2007

The parks inspected and dates of inspection were:

- ◆ 31 August & 1 September 2006

Murray-Sunset, Wyperfeld and Hattah-Kulkyne National Parks

- ◆ 10 & 11 May 2007

Great Otway National Park and coastal reserves between Aireys Inlet and the Aire River.

Through its meetings and inspections, Council is able to provide its views on a range of issues. These views form the basis of this report. Council acknowledges that there are many other aspects of park management that the report does not cover. Further information on management of the parks system is available in the *National Parks Act Annual Report 2007* and in *Parks Victoria's 2006-07 Annual Report*.

Statutory responsibilities and other submissions

During the year Council advised the Minister on matters as required under the **National Parks Act** as follows:

Section 19(2)(b) of the National Parks Act

- ◆ proposed seven year lease to East Coast Cinemas Pty Ltd for the operation and management of the open air cinema at Tidal River, Wilsons Promontory National Park – *Council supported the proposed lease as it represents the continuation of a longstanding use in the park. As a general principle, Council did not consider this type of facility appropriate in other national parks. Council also suggested this was an excellent opportunity to include short screenings providing information on the park.*

Section 40 of the National Parks Act

- ◆ application by Mr John Harris for consent to the issue of mining licences for the mining of gold from the Red Robin Mine and gold mining associated activities at the Red Robin Battery in the Alpine National Park – *Council gave conditional support with recommendations on phasing out the operation within seven years, maintaining the current standard of management, monitoring, rehabilitation and access to and from the mine site.*

Program for 2006-07

Overview

Council considered that a thematic approach was an effective way of focusing its deliberations. In previous years Council has considered the following issues:

2005–06 – Community engagement in parks

2004–05 – The parks system/implementation programs for Box-Ironbark parks/park management issues in the South-west parks

2003–04 – Post-fire recovery in the Alpine National Park/additions to the parks system/implementation programs for the new Box-Ironbark and marine parks.

Many aspects of implementation of the Act were considered in meetings and park inspections during the year but the theme of pest plant and animal management was given particular attention as Council recognised that this is a significant threat to the park estate, is of significant interest to rural communities and is an issue which consumes much staff time and resources.

Council received briefings at each meeting from the Parks Victoria representative and the nominee of the Secretary, DSE, on many aspects of park management in Victoria. This is a very important mechanism for keeping Council members up to date on policy and operational issues, particularly when Council may be involved in providing formal advice at a later time.

Council also received briefings from DSE and Parks Victoria staff at Council meetings on weed and pest management and current issues such as the publication of the *Victoria's State of the Parks Report* and the future of the Mount Buffalo Chalet. Detailed presentations were made to Council on park management on the field inspections of the Mallee and Otway parks.

Council:

- ◆ thanked Parks Victoria and DSE staff for providing briefings during the year.

With respect to pest plant and animal management, Council considered that:

- ◆ a whole of public land approach should be taken to pest plant and animal control
- ◆ programs should be resourced on an ongoing basis
- ◆ additional resources are required
- ◆ the community should be involved in the development and implementation of the programs
- ◆ a 'priority species' approach should be adopted as observed in the Otway parks
- ◆ emphasis should be given to increasing public awareness of this issue.

Field inspections

Two field inspections were undertaken during the year – to Murray-Sunset, Wyperfeld and Hattah-Kulkyne National Parks in the Mallee, and to Great Otway National Park. Both visits provided valuable insights into current management and planning activities and to significant threats to the park estate.

The visit to the Mallee parks included Lindsay Island, Pink Lakes and tracks along the western border of Murray-Sunset National Park, Pine Plains in Wyperfeld National Park and Hattah Lakes/Mournpall in Hattah-Kulkyne National Park. Field and regional staff provided presentations on total grazing management, weed management, the Living Murray program, fire management, biodiversity conservation, Indigenous and cultural heritage, visitor facilities and the interaction with community groups.

At the time of the visit the region had been in severe drought for some years and the effects were evident with a severe decline in the condition of native vegetation. Parks Victoria has initiated a number of programs aimed at ecological restoration – some of them are discussed below. Unfortunately, despite years of control work, rabbit numbers in Hattah-Kulkyne National Park have begun to increase and this has impacted significantly on vegetation recovery.

Later in the year Council visited the recently proclaimed Great Otway National Park and several coastal reserves between Aireys Inlet and the Aire River. Field and regional staff briefed Council on the fire management and asset protection program, various aspects of weed and feral animal programs, recreation management and planning for the parks. Council was also pleased to meet with representatives of the Anglesea & Aireys Inlet Society for the Protection of Flora and Fauna (ANGAIR) which has a long history of effective environmental programs.

The park is still in the establishment phase and has benefited from an injection of government funding for urgent capital works and operations. Planning for the park is well advanced with the draft management plan due in August 2007 and the final in mid 2008.

Council:

- ◆ was impressed with Parks Victoria's work in the regions, particularly the extent of staff dedication and their application to management of environmental issues
- ◆ commended ANGAIR on its contribution to conservation programs.

Meeting with the Parks Victoria Board

Council met with the Parks Victoria Board on 27 April 2007. The intention was to maintain communication between the two bodies and explore avenues for cooperation. Council explained its current work program and possible directions for our future activities were discussed. It was agreed that the two bodies would continue to meet on a regular basis.

Victoria's State of the Parks Report

Parks Victoria released its second *Victoria's State of the Parks Report* in June 2007. This is an important milestone in park management in Victoria – it analyses the condition of the parks network and focuses on the effectiveness of management programs, identifies key challenges and makes recommendations for improvements. Regular evaluations of the condition of the park estate and assessments of the effectiveness of management actions are essential to ensure good outcomes with the resources available.

The report found that the parks network makes a major contribution to biodiversity conservation and is vital to protecting Victoria's clean water supply. Parks also contribute significantly to the Victorian economy – about \$960 million annually – through tourism, management expenditure and employment. New partnerships are being formed with community groups, including Indigenous communities.

Council:

- ◆ commended Parks Victoria on the production of this report and recommended that it continue to be developed as a reporting mechanism.

Biodiversity conservation

In July 2006 the Victorian Government released a *Sustainability Action Statement* – an action plan directed at implementing Victoria's environmental sustainability framework. This foreshadowed the development of a White Paper – *Land and Biodiversity at a time of Climate Change* – on managing land and protecting our terrestrial and aquatic biodiversity. Later in the year there was a call for submissions to help define the scope and direction of the process. There will be an initial Green Paper followed by further community consultation, and a White Paper will be finalised late in 2008.

Council considers that the parks estate makes a major contribution to biodiversity conservation and responded with an initial submission detailing some issues that should be considered. Council intends to maintain an active involvement with the process as it develops.

In its submission, Council noted that maintenance of biodiversity is a critical priority for government in view of the likely impact of climate change and that the contribution made by the parks and reserves system should be maintained by providing adequate funding for management and research. The submission argued that areas of high conservation value on public land should be included, wherever possible, in parks and reserves and that areas of high conservation value on private land should be conserved through strong land use planning controls.

Council recommended further that there should be a cooperative approach between government agencies and the community to develop links on private land between parks and reserves and that funding should be provided for this purpose. Projects based on carbon trading schemes may also be relevant. Similar programs are needed to protect roadside and streamside vegetation.

Council recognised the serious threat to the park estate from introduced plants and animals and recommended an 'early warning' program be developed to enable early detection of emerging threats and action to be taken where there is still time to eradicate the threat. Council noted that current integrated pest control programs such as Glenelg Ark and Southern Ark require continuing funding and that they should be expanded to include a wider range of pest species.

Council supported current initiatives by Parks Victoria to engage with the Indigenous community and recommended that all opportunities should be explored to actively involve Indigenous people in park and reserve management.

Council:

- ◆ recognised the importance of the Biodiversity White Paper and resolved to continue to input to the process.

Pest plants and animals

Council had the opportunity during its field trips to the Mallee and Otway parks to observe at first hand the extent and nature of the threats posed by pest plants and animals. Council noted that pest plants and animals are one of the most significant threats to the park estate and that, although control programs have been developed, the task of restoring large areas of park and reducing these threats is still an enormous challenge which will require continuing commitment and major funding.

There are about 200,000 hectares of semi-arid and riverine woodlands in the Mallee District, all of which would have been grazed prior to the areas being designated as parks. This has left a legacy of severely degraded native vegetation, weed infestation and a range of feral animals including rabbits, goats, cattle and foxes. Unfortunately, grazing pressure from native animals such as kangaroos also impacts on restoration of native vegetation. Parks Victoria has responded to this situation with a program of 'total grazing management' with a combination of de-stocking, effective rabbit and kangaroo control aided by the arrival of Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease (RHD) virus. Much of the area is now exhibiting regrowth for the first time in 150 years but in some areas this is not the case. This has been attributed to a combination of prolonged drought, competition from weeds, locally high grazing pressure, lack of seed in the soil and the particular requirements of some plant species.

Council was shown examples of rabbit control work at Hattah-Kulkyne National Park where ripping and fumigation control works have been undertaken since 1980. The RHD virus arrived in 1996 and kangaroo management commenced in the 1990s, all of which resulted in widespread recovery of the native woodland. Unfortunately, in the last two years rabbit numbers have started to increase again and this has had a significant impact on the revegetation program. The increase in rabbit numbers is thought to be due to an evolving resistance to the RHD virus. Scientific advice has recommended reintroduction of baiting with 1080 to supplement other control measures.

Feral goats cause considerable damage to the Mallee parks and control programs are being undertaken in partnership with the Sporting Shooters Association of Australia. Council discussed this program with Parks Victoria field staff who indicated that the arrangement has been successful and might provide a model for other areas.

Foxes are a major threat to wildlife and Parks Victoria initiated an Adaptive Experimental Management (AEM) control program in 2001 in partnership with the Arthur Rylah Research Institute. The program is being conducted in six parks and is intended to measure the costs and benefits of a range of fox control strategies. The program in Hattah-Kulkyne National park has resulted in a significant reduction in fox activity within both the baited and non-baited sections of the park.

In the far south-west a similar project, Glenelg Ark, has been undertaken since 2004. It is currently applying baits to over 69 000 hectares of park and forest areas and has 562 bait stations established. The project is aimed at protecting wildlife in the parks and forests of far south-west Victoria through broad scale, continuous fox control. It involves a rigorous monitoring and evaluation program to measure the impact on both fox numbers and wildlife recovery. The program is still in its early stages but shows considerable promise.

While in the Otways, Council was shown a number of examples of programs designed to combat new weeds and deal with existing weed infestations. Council inspected elimination of pine trees at the Anglesea heathlands and new and emerging weed problems such as the Bronze Hakea. Council noted the focus on environmental weeds and the cooperation between agencies in control programs.

The programs described above are part of the *Weeds and Pests on Public Land* initiative which is a major government program to undertake extensive weed and pest control across public land. It complements the Tackling Weeds on Private Land initiative.

Council:

- ◆ encouraged continued monitoring and research as the basis for rabbit control programs in the Mallee parks
- ◆ recognised that kangaroo management has had to be undertaken in the Mallee parks and commends a comprehensive approach to this issue
- ◆ supported the partnership with the Sporting Shooters to help cull goats in the Mallee parks
- ◆ strongly recommended removal of cattle from Lindsay Island and Toupnein Creek Reference Area
- ◆ expressed concern with the level of resources available for weed management in the Mallee parks
- ◆ was impressed by the whole of land approach involving DSE, Parks Victoria, Community Groups, local Shires and adjoining landholders in implementing weed control in the Otways and recommended the educational aspect of the program be enhanced
- ◆ supported continued funding of the Glenelg Ark pilot program and recommended that the momentum of the project be maintained.

In the Otways the fire protection policy is also directed at preventing landscape scale fires with their environmental, social and economic impacts. A north-south strategic fuel break is proposed to contain the spread of wildfire, supplemented by a network of 50 metres wide cleared fire breaks along existing roads and tracks. In areas adjoining private land an Asset Protection Zone will be created by mulching the understorey up to 100 metres from the boundary. Council inspected one such site at O'Donohues Land near Anglesea.

Fire management

The summer of 2006–07 experienced extensive bushfires with large areas of park in various parts of the State being affected by wildfire. Council is conscious that major emergencies such as this divert many Parks Victoria and DSE staff from their normal duties not only during the fires but also during the post-fire recovery and rehabilitation phase. This means that many important environmental and visitor services programs are delayed or deferred until staff and other resources become available.

The fire history of the Mallee parks has been characterised by very large, intense fires on about a 20 year cycle. This has resulted in very large areas of vegetation being of about the same age. This is considered to both affect biodiversity conservation and increase the ongoing risk of wildfire. Two large strategic prescribed burns were undertaken in the last two to three years to provide buffers against the spread of wildfires and to provide protection to long unburnt vegetation. The longer term strategy is to discontinue artificial barriers to fire and replace them with a mosaic of wildfire scars and ecological burns which would achieve a similar result.

Until recently fire protection programs also included clearing the perimeter of the major parks to a width of 100 metres followed by burning. This caused considerable damage to park values. Council inspected one such site on the western boundary of Murray-Sunset National Park. It is expected that this practice will be abandoned in the future in favour of a mosaic of smaller areas of burnt and unburnt patches that will reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire and support a diverse flora and fauna.

Council:

- ◆ strongly supported Parks Victoria's approach in adopting more ecologically sensitive fuel reduction programs in the Mallee parks rather than the 100 metres cleared fire break
- ◆ emphasised the importance of informing the community on proposed changes to fire management practices.
- ◆ supported the concept of Asset Protection Zones – as inspected in the Otways – as it spreads the responsibility across both public and private land
- ◆ supported the engagement process that encourages the community to take responsibility for protection from fire
- ◆ recognised the requirement for the protection of built assets from wildfire however considered that there should be more emphasis on protection of the natural values of the parks.

The Living Murray program

Parks Victoria, DSE and the Mallee Catchment Management Authority are cooperating on the Living Murray program at Lindsay Island, Murray-Sunset National Park and at Hattah Lakes, Hattah-Kulkyne National Park. The key objectives of the program for these sites are to restore aquatic vegetation and allow waterbird breeding at Hattah Lakes and to water high value wetlands and maintain Red Gum trees at Lindsay Island. Both programs involve substantial capital works as well as pumping water to re-fill wetlands.

Council had the opportunity to observe the 'emergency' watering at both sites and was pleased to note the significant improvements to the health of the tree canopies, the emergence of new growth and the return of waterbirds and native fish.

Council:

- ◆ emphasised the need to continue the 'Living Murray' program even though current funds (and water availability) only permit it being undertaken at icon sites
- ◆ recommended that this program should not be suspended to meet other water needs should they arise in the current drought conditions
- ◆ commended the partnership approach between DSE, PV and the CMA on the Living Murray program
- ◆ emphasised the need for continued funding to support this program.

THE PARKS SYSTEM

As at 30 June 2007, there were 132 areas, with a total area of approximately 3.3 million hectares, managed under various provisions of the **National Parks Act**. These areas comprised 40 national parks, 3 wilderness parks, 27 State parks, 13 marine national parks, 11 marine sanctuaries, 11 marine and/or coastal parks or reserves, 11 other parks and reserves, and 16 non-scheduled areas. In addition, there are 19 wilderness zones and 22 remote and natural areas within 13 national parks, and 4 designated water supply catchment areas within 3 national parks.

Areas totalling 969 hectares were added to six parks during the year: French Island, Grampians, Great Otway and Mornington Peninsula national parks, Broken-Boosey State Park and Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park. Small areas totalling 8 hectares were excised from the Grampians National Park, Steiglitz Historic Park and Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park.

The **National Parks and Crown Land (Reserves) Acts (Amendment) Act** was passed during the year. The main amendments to the **National Parks Act** added more than 400 hectares (of the 969 hectares) to the six parks listed above and improved the offence provisions relating to marine national parks and marine sanctuaries.

Land acquisitions

Properties that were purchased or donated in 2006–07 for addition to parks were:

- ◆ 560.17 hectares transferred from Wannon Water for addition to Great Otway National Park
- ◆ 163.33 hectares at Ironbark Basin transferred from Surf Coast Shire for addition to Great Otway National Park
- ◆ 27.31 hectares on Coast Road for addition to French Island National Park
- ◆ 172.6 hectares in the northern Grampians for addition to Grampians National Park
- ◆ 0.3 hectares at Johanna for addition to Great Otway National Park
- ◆ 178.48 hectares Ben Winch Swamp for addition to Holey Plains State Park
- ◆ 9.2 hectares at Golden Point for addition to Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park
- ◆ 0.36 hectares on Boys Road for addition to Warrandyte State Park

These areas are being progressively added to the parks system, some being included as a result of the **National Parks and Crown Land (Reserves) Acts (Amendment) Act**.

EXPENDITURE

DSE staff provided administrative support to Council. Council complied with DSE policies in performing its functions throughout the reporting period. Financial and other information relating to the *Financial Management Act 1994* is included in DSE's Annual Report for 2006–07.

Expenditure incurred by Council in undertaking its responsibilities during the year was:

	2005–06	2006–07
Meeting fees	\$7,950	\$6,146
Other operating expenses	\$22,119	\$22,281
Total	\$30,069	\$28,427

WHISTLEBLOWERS PROTECTION ACT

The *Whistleblowers Protection Act 2001* is designed to protect people who disclose information about serious wrongdoing within the Victorian Public Sector and to provide a framework for the investigation of these matters.

The Protected Disclosure Coordinator for the Department of Sustainability and Environment acts as an agent for Council to receive disclosures under the **Whistleblowers Protection Act**, and applies departmental procedures in managing disclosures. Disclosures may also be made directly to the Ombudsman.

The contact details for the Protected Disclosure Coordinator and Ombudsman are:

Deidre Egan, Protected Disclosure Coordinator
Department of Sustainability and Environment
PO Box 500, East Melbourne Vic 3002.

Telephone: (03) 9637 8575

Facsimile: (03) 9637 8128

Email: Deidre.Egan@dse.vic.gov.au

Ombudsman Victoria

Level 9, 459 Collins Street (North Tower)
Melbourne Victoria 3000

Telephone: (03) 9613 6222

Toll Free: 1800 806 314

Facsimile: (03) 9614 0246

Email: ombudvic@ombudsman.vic.gov.au

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Council wishes to thank the staff of the Public Land Division of DSE for their assistance throughout the year.

The Executive Officer, Ms Annette Hatten, was replaced by Ms Yvette Baker during the year. Council would like to thank Ms Hatten for her enthusiastic support and looks forward to working with Ms Baker.

Council also thanks staff of Parks Victoria and DSE for providing information at Council meetings and field inspections.

Further copies of this report and information on Council can be obtained from:
Yvette Baker, Executive Officer
National Parks Advisory Council
Level 2, 8 Nicholson Street
East Melbourne Vic 3002.

NPAC members (from left to right):
Brian Martin, Ian Harris (Convenor), Deirdre Slattery, Yvette Baker (Executive Officer),
Heather Gee, Debra Bray, Kate Glenie and Nina Cullen.
(Absent Mark Stone and John Sherwood) (Photo: Brian Martin and Allan Rampal)



