

action 7: flourishing biodiversity in healthy ecosystems

Victorians are the custodians of some of the most diverse ecosystems in the world. Our biodiversity encompasses a huge range of living things and ecosystems, which are constantly evolving and adapting to environmental changes. The importance of understanding and sustaining our biodiversity for resource-based industries such as agriculture, fishing, forestry and tourism cannot be underestimated. There are already many policies which aim to protect or enhance our biodiversity. However, we need a clear long-term vision to manage our biodiversity at the broad scale.

What we will do

7.1 Land health and biodiversity white paper

We will develop a White Paper for land and biodiversity by 2008 – similar to the White Paper for water reform – to bring together all our current and future programs to protect and restore our land and biodiversity.

Victoria's Environmental Sustainability Framework identified land degradation, salinity and threats to our biodiversity as among Victoria's most significant environmental challenges. To help us meet our targets to reverse the decline in native vegetation, water quality and land productivity, we need to start identifying obstacles to healthy land and flourishing biodiversity. This must involve expert knowledge, local know-how and community and industry partnerships to devise innovative new strategies to achieve our aims.

A White Paper for land and biodiversity will provide a comprehensive view of the biodiversity, catchment and land assets so that together we can plan for sustainable landscapes for future generations which will include:

- developing a land health index to provide a consistent set of indicators and measures to communicate progress in land management and land protection;
- preparing a detailed map of the extent and condition of our native vegetation across the State;
- developing a system to monitor and report on the state and trends of key biodiversity assets – such as threatened species and threatened ecological communities;
- renewing the *Victorian Biodiversity Strategy* and regional catchment strategies to take account of current priorities such as climate change, and new policy thinking in relation to ecosystem services;
- implementing our new approach to native vegetation policy through a broader application of market-based policy approaches;
- improving our understanding of the contribution the public land estate provides to our natural assets;
- giving explicit consideration to marine, estuarine and freshwater biodiversity and ecosystems in our policies, regional strategies and investment in on-ground programs;
- exploring the use of biolink zones to assist biodiversity's adaptation to climate change and broad-scale land use change;

- cutting administrative red tape and streamlining decision-making processes for landholders; and
- preparing a land health and biodiversity investment strategy to set Victoria's future priorities for a range of Commonwealth and State Government funding programs.

Win-win for biodiversity and farm production

Working with farmers to incorporate biodiversity considerations into agricultural systems can result in win-win solutions, increasing both farm productivity and biodiversity. Research undertaken with landholders in hill country in central and north-east Victoria has identified practical strategies that achieve both business and biodiversity goals. The Government is working with landholders to extend this approach more broadly to achieve wide-scale adoption across the landscape. Practical strategies include targeted vegetation management, correcting nutrient deficiencies, intensive rotational grazing, deferred grazing of hill country and establishing shelter trees (in different combinations). On some of the trial farms, application of different combinations of these strategies resulted in up to 15 per cent of farm area being managed primarily for biodiversity.

7.2 Native Vegetation Trust

We will invest \$4.4 million to design and establish a Native Vegetation Trust to enable offsets for urban and other developments that remove native vegetation.

This will allow developers to pay into a pooled fund for investment in native vegetation where it is needed. For example, native vegetation cleared on expensive land in Melbourne could be offset by planting and restoring more environmentally sensitive land elsewhere. An auction process would invite landowners to bid for the developers' money to be spent on their land to plant the 'offset'. These offsets will be calculated through the BushBroker system.

7.3 Foxes and rabbits

We will expand the approach taken in the successful Southern Ark project to control foxes and rabbits in the Mallee, Grampians, Wilsons Promontory, the Otways and other parts of Victoria.

To achieve control of fox and rabbit populations on a landscape scale, an integrated and on-going control program in priority areas is needed to help recover and restore native wildlife and vegetation.

The Southern Ark project is using continued monitoring and a long-term approach across large areas in far East Gippsland to reduce fox populations and to increase the numbers of native wildlife such as Long-nosed Potoroos. Adopting a landscape scale approach means that gains are more sustainable and re-invasion risk is reduced. By expanding the approach to other regions and including rabbit control where appropriate, we will aim to protect a wider range of native animals and vegetation, thus enriching our unique biodiversity.