

# Victoria's National Park System: Can the Transition from Quantity of Parks to Quality of Management be Successful? <sup>1</sup>

*Historically the Victorian national park system developed sporadically between 1898 and 1970. Since then the area of national parks has increased well over tenfold through a combination of strong community support and the operation of the Land Conservation Council. This article examines Victoria's national park system in detail and describes the legislation, administration and resourcing of the Victorian park system over the period 1970-1993 in particular. The discussion centres on the question of Victoria's ability to make the transition from the phase of acquisition of substantial areas to the national park estate to the phase of high quality management of those areas. Such a transition would have to be against the background of the parlous state of the Victorian economy, the pressures of increased tourism and the need to rejuvenate an administrative organisation which has been subject to almost constant change over the last decade. The article concludes by considering what lessons the Victorian experience holds for other States and Territories.*

## Introduction

Australia's system of national parks and conservation reserves is distinctive, as most national parks and reserves are managed by State and Territory governments rather than the federal government.<sup>2</sup> This circumstance is a direct result of the Australian Constitution which is silent on land management in specifying the responsibilities of the federal government.<sup>3</sup> In a previous comparison between the Canadian, United States and Australian systems of national parks and conservation reserves, the consequences of this distinctive Australian approach showed that although the three systems had comparable percentages of land reserved in national parks (1.8 per cent, 2.3 per cent, 2.6 per cent respectively) Australia had ten times the number of national parks.<sup>4</sup> In addition, Australia spent less than half the amount Canada did on managing these parks (and less than a fifth of that spent by the United States). However, with such comparative data, the implications for the future management of Australian national parks could only be guessed at in this earlier paper.

In order to extend discussion on the future management of national parks, it was decided to analyse the parks system of one State in greater detail. Victoria was chosen not only because it was the home State of the

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author, but also because its land-based national park system is unlikely to be substantially augmented following the addition of the Yarra Ranges National Park in April 1995. A further factor in favour of analysing Victoria's system was that the earlier study had revealed that basic information on the Victorian system was more readily available over a substantial period of time than in other States. This article examines the Victorian park system in detail, starting with its history, followed by a description of the park estate and concluding with a discussion of its future.

## Historical background

From 1882 the Furness Gully reserve in the Dandenong Ranges, 25 km east of Melbourne, was known as the 'National Park', but the first officially proclaimed national park in Victoria was Tower Hill, near Port Fairy, reserved in 1892.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, this reserve was so poorly managed that it deteriorated rapidly after declaration and its national park status was removed earlier this century. The two longest continuously declared national parks in Victoria were both temporarily reserved in 1898—Wilson's Promontory and Mount Buffalo. Both declarations were for smaller areas than at present. These early declarations placed Victoria in the international vanguard of national park management.

In the first 70 years of this century, Victoria's national park system expanded sporadically. After the 1898 declarations Wyperfeld, Tarra Valley, Bulga, Mallacoota Inlet and Wigan Inlet were added in the first decade of this century with another series of additions in the 1920s (The Lakes, Kinglake, Churchill, Alfred and Lind). The formation of the Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA) in 1952 created the next impetus for change. The first *National Parks Act* was passed in 1956 listing 13 national parks totalling 125,262 ha (all are listed above). The first Director of the National Parks Authority was appointed in 1957. A series of additions of (small) national parks were added in the fifties and sixties,<sup>6</sup> but the 'watershed' for national park development in Victoria occurred in the late 1960s.

## The Little Desert Battle

In 1968 the Bolte Liberal government attempted to have sections of the Little Desert in western Victoria alienated, subdivided and sold off as farms. In many ways this was simply a continuation of more than 100 years of Crown Land alienation—the transfer of natural land in the public estate to freehold agriculture land. However, this time there was a public outcry on the potential destruction of this natural area. Without discussing the issue specifically, the outcomes included the declaration of a small area as a national park (later extended) and more significantly the establishment of the Land Conservation Council (LCC). National park development in Victoria accelerated from this time onward (Table 1).

The role of the LCC in this process was critical. Under the *Land Conservation Act 1970* the LCC is required to systematically describe and analyse Victoria's public land (outside cities) region by region. In each region a study report is produced followed by a period for public consultation. Then a set of 'proposed' recommendations are produced with a further statutory period for public input. The council then prepares final recommendations which are forwarded to the government.

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was first presented at the Institute of Australian Geographers' Annual Conference at Monash University in 1993.

<sup>2</sup> G.C. Wescott, 'Australia's Distinctive National Park System' (1991) 13 *Environmental Conservation* 331.

<sup>3</sup> The Australian Constitution, s 51.  
<sup>4</sup> Wescott, op cit n 2.

<sup>5</sup> National Parks Service, *Highlights of 100 Years of National Parks in Victoria* (Pamphlet of Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands, Melbourne, undated).  
<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

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**TABLE 1**  
Expansion of Area of National Parks in Victoria 1968-1993

Year	No of National Parks in Victoria	Area of National Parks in Victoria (million hectares)	Percentage of all land in Victoria in National Parks
1968	20	0.15	0.7
1978	26	0.26	1.1
1985	31	0.85	3.7
1990	31	2.28	10.0
1993	32	2.43	10.6

### The current Victorian national park system

If State parks (included with national parks, in management category 2 of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources)<sup>7</sup> and other conservation reserves are included, Victoria possessed in 1993, more than 100 parks and reserves covering 2.91 million ha or 12.8 per cent of the land area of the State. This is 33.1 per cent of all Victorian public land.<sup>1</sup>

Whilst it is beyond the scope of this article to give a detailed breakdown of each park, the largest parks are listed in Table 2. Parks with the highest visitation rates are listed in Table 3. Both tables highlight that Victoria, despite its size, has some large parks and a percentage of land area reserved in parks which is greater than in any other State except Tasmania. More predictably, given the density of the population of Victoria, some of these parks are very heavily used (Table 4).

**TABLE 2**  
Victoria's Largest Parks by Size

Park	Size (Hectares)
Alpine National Park NP	636,850
Murray-Sunset NP	633,000
Wyperfeld NP	356,800
Grampian/Garwud NP	167,000
Big Desert Wilderness	142,300
Little Desert NP	132,000
Snowy River NP	98,700
Croajingolong NP	87,500
Wilson's Promontory NP	49,000
Hattah-Kulkyne NP	48,000

<sup>7</sup> The World Conservation Union (IUCN) (1994), *Guidelines for Protected Area Management Categories*, Commission for National Parks and Protected Areas (CNPPA) with assistance of the World Conservation Monitoring Centre (WCMC) (IUCN, Gland Switzerland and Cambridge, UK, +261pp).  
<sup>1</sup> Land Conservation Council, *Parks and Forests Service Study Advice to Government* (LCC, Melbourne, 1993), 69 pp.

**TABLE 3**  
1993/94 Visitation to Victoria's Parks (No of Parks)—  
Estimates Only

	Visitor Days	Camper Nights	Day Visitors
National Parks and Wilderness (34)	7,952,500	595,200	7,357,300
State Parks (28)	1,342,100	176,600	1,165,500
Other Parks (20)	1,394,300	24,600	1,369,700
<b>Totals</b>	<b>10,688,900</b>	<b>796,400</b>	<b>9,892,500</b>

**TABLE 4**  
Parks with Major Visitation Rates: (Victorian parks with over 100,000 visitor days only are shown; these are estimates only from the department and the method of collection varies from accurate traffic counts to occasional surveys by staff members).

Point Nepean National Park (NP)	2,074,200
Grampians/Garwud NP	1,709,000
Port Campbell NP	1,054,000
Dandenong Ranges NP	743,000
Phillip Island Penguin Reserve	496,000
Anghook-Lorne State Park (SP)	426,000
Wilson's Promontory NP	400,800
Alpine NP	277,500
Warrandyte SP	185,000
Cippland Lakes Coastal Park (CP)	200,000
Mt Buffalo NP	190,200
Lysterfield Lake Park	184,500
Croajingolong NP	110,000
Kinglake NP	108,800
Hattah-Kulkyne NP	130,250
Gellibrand Hill Park	107,680
Brisbane Ranges NP	106,700
Discovery Bay CP	103,000
Tarr-Bulga NP	102,300

Notes

- 1 The four most visited parks contribute over 50% of all visitation rates.
- 2 In comparison Kakadu National Park's largest visitation rate was 238,000 in 1990.
- 3 1993/94 figures except for parks 15-19 which are 1991/92 figures.

Quantity and area of parks are clearly not the only concerns of a national park system. The conservation reserve system in Victoria has as its primary goal, the conservation of Victoria's landscape, flora and fauna.<sup>9</sup> After pioneering work on how this aim might be achieved,<sup>10</sup> the LCC attempted to place a representative example of every major terrestrial plant community in Victoria in a national park or other conservation reserve.<sup>11</sup> This concept of a "representative reserve system", assumes that by protecting all major plant communities, all animal habitats and hence all animal species will be protected. Frankenberg<sup>12</sup> first analysed the number of plant communities and animal species which were present in the 1971 park system, which then covered an area of 210,000 ha. As might be expected she concluded that there was poor representation of the communities at that time. In the late 1970s and early 1980s reports on the National Estate<sup>13</sup> revealed the following "representativeness" of plant communities in Victoria's reserves:

Year	1971	1979	1993
Percentage of All Major Plant Alliances in Reserve System (125 Alliances in all)	42.4	70.4	(approx 90 +)

Flood and Calder,<sup>14</sup> in an update of Frankenberg's work, discussed the adequacy of protection afforded by the reserve system and listed several communities not adequately reserved. The most recent assessment was provided by the Department of Conservation and Environment (unpublished) in 1990 to the Resource Assessment Commission inquiry into the Forests and Timber industry. The approximate figures from this study are given in brackets in Table 5. A protection figure of 90 per cent of plant communities is almost certainly very high for both Australia and internationally, although this is difficult to confirm as most states and countries do not have the data to accurately calculate such a percentage.

Deficiencies in the Victorian terrestrial reserve system include:

- grassy woodlands of lowland plains and fertile foothills;
- open forests, woodlands and grassland communities of lower altitude snowplains and cold montane plateaux;
- Mallee woodlands;
- other open forests and woodlands of relatively fertile soils in hilly areas and near the coast;
- forest and heath woodlands of ranges and coastal areas; and
- riparian communities.

The areas absent from the system are those which occur on more fertile soils and which have been extensively cleared for agricultural use. Most such areas have passed into private hands.

Despite this Victoria has a large, comprehensive and representative reserve system. This system is complemented by species protection across all land (public and private) through the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* and protection on private land through native plant clearance regulations giving, in theory at least, a comprehensive system for nature conservation. In practice the position has yet to be fully evaluated and, although this awaits further detailed review, an initial attempt has been made.<sup>15</sup>

Any flaws in the overall approach to nature conservation in Victoria place even greater pressure on the park and reserve system to be truly comprehensive and representative, and for the management of the system to be of the highest quality.

Before considering the administration of the system it will assist later discussion to consider the origins of the current park estate. The extent of the Victorian national park system is due to a combination of factors. The first is the existence of a strong conservation movement which has lobbied for the protection of significant areas (backed by broad community support). This is a significant factor shared with most Australian States. Reliance on political lobbying can result in the gain of high profile areas and plant communities, for example, rainforests, forests, mountains, waterfalls and islands (for example, Queensland<sup>16</sup>), but may not necessarily provide a representative system which would include low profile areas as well (for example, heaths, wetlands, grasslands, woodlands, etc). It would appear that the systematic region by region approach of the LCC in Victoria has meant that low profile areas have been consistently recommended for inclusion in parks and reserves. Yet even this is insufficient to explain the size and representativeness of the Victorian system. The final ingredient has been the bipartisan political support for the addition of new parks to the Victorian system over the past 20 years. Although the two major parties have disagreed at times about specific proposals, both have overwhelmingly supported increases in national park areas.

The quantifiable changes to Victoria's national park system over this period are given in Table 6. These changes, and their significance, are discussed under separate headings below.

## The administration of national parks in Victoria: The National Parks Act 1975

The *National Parks Act 1975* is a restrictive Act, that is, amendments to the Act are required for most changes to the management of the parks. This can prove cumbersome for administrative change, but ensures that parks cannot be deleted without amendments passed by both houses of parliament.

The "objects" of the Act are described under section 4 which states that parks on Schedule 2 of the Act are primarily reserved for nature conservation whilst those on Schedule 3 are reserved for conservation, recreation and education. Parks can only be added to (or removed from) these schedules by amendments to the Act.

**TABLE 6**  
**The Resourcing of Victorian Parks\* 1970-1993**  
 (Director's Annual Reports, Expenditure Excludes Greens Bush Purchase in 1989-90)

Year	Visitation (Million)	Staff in Parks ie Rangers and support staff (Head Office)	Park Area Mill ha, land areas only	Expenditure mill \$	
				Park Program: Actual (Adjusted to 80/81 figures)	Per ha of Park Area: Adjusted to 80/81 figures
1970-71	0.54	26	0.21	0.47 (1.29)	6.1
1971-72	NA	76 (15)	0.21	0.58 (1.49)	7.1
1972-73	NA	91 (30)	0.21	0.84 (2.03)	9.7
1974-75	NA	94 (50)	0.21	2.34 (4.30)	20.5
1975-76	NA	101 (50)	0.28	3.99 (6.50)	23.2
1976-77	NA	233 (59)	0.28	4.79 (6.85)	24.5
1977-78	3.4	212 (62)	0.29	5.93 (7.74)	26.7
1978-79	4.16	214 (75)	0.65	6.26 (7.55)	11.7
1979-80	4.37	307 (78)	0.78	7.16 (7.83)	10.0
1980-81	5.06	308 (69)	0.80	8.71 (8.71)	10.9
1981-82	6.49	281 (67)	0.99	9.76 (8.84)	8.9
1982-83	7.00	272 (70)	0.99	11.15 (9.06)	9.2
1983-84	6.35	290 (76)	1.15	11.63 (8.84)	7.7
1984-85	7.73	NP	1.15	12.41 (9.05)	7.9
1985-86	7.86	NP (42)	1.34	NP	-
1986-87	8.12	166 (30)	1.36	NP	-
1987-88	8.35	NP (37)	1.59	18.60 (10.66)	6.7
1988-89	8.80	204 (35)	1.74	21.15 (11.29)	6.5
1989-90	9.15	192	2.01	22.80 (11.27)	5.6
1990-91	9.70	158 (50)	2.78	24.31 (11.62)	4.2
1991-92	9.94	158 (87)	2.87	24.29 (11.49)	4.0
1992-93	10.26	180 (77)	2.89	28.13 (13.05)	4.5

Note: from 1988-89 onwards the head office staff sometimes includes those employed in public land or wildlife areas as well as in parks.  
 NP = Not published.  
 NA = Not available.  
 \* National Parks and Other Parks reserved under the *National Parks Act 1975* as defined in the Annual Report in the National Parks Act

Schedule 2 parks are listed under three groups: National Parks (Schedule 2); Wilderness Areas (Schedule 2A); and State Parks—usually smaller than national parks (Schedule 2B). The Act does not define the

word "national", a matter consistent with all Australian "national parks".<sup>17</sup>

The substantive Act has remained relatively unchanged since 1975 except for an amendment in 1989 which subdivided Schedule 2 (see above) and removed the mechanism by which a mining application could be considered in Schedule 2 parks—thus effectively banning mining in national parks, state parks and wilderness areas.

Responsibility for administering the Act rests with the Director of National Parks. The Act is silent on the administrative structure through which the Director carries out his or her responsibilities. In effect this has allowed constant changes in the organisational structure to occur since 1975. These are described below.

### The administration of national parks in Victoria: Implementation of the National Parks Act 1975

With the proclamation of the first *National Parks Act* in 1956, 125,262 ha of land became the responsibility of the National Parks Authority. The Authority possessed three staff in the directorate, nine full-time and part-time rangers and a modest budget.<sup>18</sup>

In 1970 a National Park Service was created and in 1972 this agency, under the authority of the Director of National Parks, became part of the new Ministry for Conservation. In 1975 a new National Parks Act was proclaimed and a new National Park Service was established. This Service continued as an integrated "line management" agency until 1984. It grew steadily during this period (Table 6) and was based on several districts with district superintendents reporting to the Director. From 1984 to the present there have been constant structural changes in the administration of Victorian national parks. These are outlined below:

#### *Name changes in national park management (1975–1993)*

1975–1983	National Park Service (within the Ministry for Conservation) Director of National Parks
1984	National Parks Division—as a policy arm in the Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands (DCFL)
1986/87	National Parks and Wildlife Division within DCFL (Director's title changed to Director of National Parks and Wildlife)
1991/92	National Parks and Public Lands Division within the Department of Conservation and Environment (DCE)
1993	National Parks Service within the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR)

The most dramatic of these changes was the establishment of the Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands in 1984 from the Ministry for Conservation, the Forest Commission and the Department of Crown Lands and Survey. Under this organisational model, the planning and policy aspects of park management were carried out by a head office secretariat (initially called the National Park Service) whilst the manage-

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<sup>17</sup> Wescott, *op cit* n 2.

<sup>18</sup> National Park Service, *op cit* n 5.

ment of all public land (including parks) was carried out by the Regional Management Division. This latter division comprised head office staff and 18 (later 16) regions covering the State. The staff were to be deployed flexibly and to be able to be moved from one land-use designation to another, at the Regional Manager's discretion. The Director of National Parks, whilst still theoretically and statutorily responsible for delivering park management, had no authority to direct any person working in any park in the State!

The park budget was a separate programme within the department's budget and so in theory one could tell how much money was being spent by regional managers on parks (Table 6). The section on "resourcing" below, illustrates issues arising from this administrative arrangement. From 1984 to 1990/91 various head office branches were added to National Parks (Wildlife, Public Land), and later removed, but in essence the management of the parks was as described above.

In 1991/92 a further change was announced by the then Minister, Hon Steve Crabbe. The department name was changed to Conservation and Environment and responsibility for water resources was added. More significantly the Directors of head office divisions were also made the heads of five "super" regions across the State which superseded the original 16 regions. In essence, the Directors now had responsibility for a policy area and for a specific geographic area. This structure was only partially introduced when the Labor Government (elected 1982) was replaced by a Liberal-National Party Coalition (LNPC) Government in October 1992. The department's name was changed to the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) in 1993.

The Coalition's policy was to re-establish the National Park Service<sup>19</sup> in a similar form to that existing in 1982. The Minister for Conservation and Environment (the Hon Mark Birrell) instructed the LLC to advise him on how to introduce these changes.<sup>20</sup> The central National Park Service was reintroduced and the five "super" regions became areas under the control of an area manager—hence freeing the Director from direct area management responsibility (although theoretically one area manager reports through the Director of National Parks to the Secretary of DCNR). Under each area manager are several managers including a Manager of Parks and Reserves. Under the latter are Chief Rangers, Rangers-in-Charge and Rangers, in each of the five Areas. This new arrangement is supposed to provide for integrated management of public land in each Area whilst recognising the significance of national parks by designating a specific Parks and Reserves manager in each area.

A key element for ensuring that statewide policy emanating from the central National Park Service (NPS) finds its way into the management of specific parks is through the production of management plans. The current state of preparation is shown in Table 7.

The above diversity of structures range from one extreme of a wholly separate insular National Park agency which plays no role in land not under the Act (NPS 1983 model) to a totally integrated land (and sea) management agency which makes little differentiation between land use designations (DCFL 1984 model).

TABLE 7  
Status of Management Plan Production for Victoria's Parks (1993)

Status of Planning	No	Percentage
Parks with approved plan/strategy	18	20.2
Parks with draft plan/strategy	23	25.8
Parks with plan/strategy in preparation	19	21.3
Parks with an "old" draft plan/strategy	9	10.1
Parks without plan/strategy	20	22.5

To the author, the difficulty appears to be that Victoria went from one unsatisfactory extreme (an insular, park boundary fixated agency) in 1983 to the other extreme (a department incapable of recognising any differences in land use designations) in 1984 and has suffered the consequences ever since. The need now is for an agency which, while strongly focused on park management for conservation purposes, effectively interacts across its park and reserve boundaries with other landholders (whether public or private) sharing the same catchment. In effect, an agency capable of adopting the Biosphere Reserve concept<sup>21</sup> of integrating conservation and sustainable land use management across major ecosystems irrespective of human imposed boundaries.

Whether the revised structure for the National Park Service established in 1993 meets these requirements is problematical—it certainly has a better chance of doing so than the extreme systems of 1983 and 1984.

#### The administration of national parks in Victoria: The resourcing of national parks

The constant changes to administrative structures described above owed a great deal to political responses to the resourcing of the national parks system, which in turn, has to be considered in light of the substantial increase in the area of land reserved during the past 25 years (Table 6).

The method of accounting used in the Director's Annual Reports from which Table 6 was extracted does not allow the funds spent on national parks to be separated from funds spent on other reserves. The data are nevertheless very revealing and have been the centre of considerable controversy.<sup>22</sup>

The resourcing of national parks in Victoria has been a major issue for at least the last 15 years. As the Land Conservation Council recommended land to be transferred over the past 20 years (predominantly from under the Forest Act 1958, Land Act 1958 and Crown Land (Reserves) Act 1978 to the National Parks Act 1975) there was an expectation that staff and financial resources would be transferred as well. Table 6 reveals that this has only partially been the case.

There have also been some doubts cast over whether expenditure under the National Parks sub-programme has actually been spent on park management. In the annual report of the National Parks Advisory Council (NPAC) in 1991/92<sup>23</sup> it was stated:

<sup>21</sup> B W Davis and G A Drake, *Australia's Biosphere Reserves: Conserving Ecological Diversity* (AGPS, Canberra, 1993).

<sup>22</sup> G C Wescott, *Fighting for the Park Dollar* (Parkwatch, Melbourne, 1991, Sept 14–15, 30).

<sup>23</sup> National Parks Advisory Council, *Annual Report to Parliament* (NPAC, Melbourne, 1992).

"Council is alarmed at the diminishing resources being allocated for the on-ground management of parks and reserves. Although the constant reorganising of the Department of Conservation and Environment makes it difficult to draw comparisons and to identify the actual resources allocated to on-ground management, some questions must be asked. For example, the Annual Reports on the *National Parks Act* reveal that in the five-year period between 1983-84 and 1988-89 the area of parks under the *National Parks Act* increased from 985,955 ha to 1,735,223 ha, an increase of 76%. The actual expenditure on National Parks in the same period increased from \$11.6M to \$21.1M, an increase of 82% and a real increase of around 28% in dollars adjusted to 1980/81 levels. According to the Annual Report the number of on-ground park staff decreased in this period from 290 to 204 (a 30% decrease) and the number of staff in the National Parks Head Office decreased from 76 to 35 (a 54% decrease)."

The Council's point may be best illustrated by the following figures for the period between 1983/84 and 1988/89:

Area:	+ 76%
Expenditure:	+ 82%
Expenditure (CPI adjusted):	+ 28%
Park staff:	- 30%
Head office staff:	- 54%

It appears that the regional offices, under the Crabbie department model, consumed a considerable proportion of the budget without sufficient funds flowing through to on-ground staffing. The new administrative arrangements instituted in 1993 may improve this situation and certainly the reduction of 16 regions to five areas will save considerable expenditure. However, will the savings be reflected in an increase in the number of on-ground managers?

This is essentially a political question. It will require the Minister to argue in Cabinet that at least some of the savings incurred in his department should be returned to the department. As the 1995/96 budget in Victoria is expected to be in surplus in the current account, and there will be an election between October 1995 and October 1996, there are some grounds for guarded optimism that this will occur. But it will require a change in attitude of the senior managers from the position highlighted by the NPAC in its annual report. The appointment of a new Director (in December 1994) and the outcome of an Auditor General's report on the NPS will be major influences on the outcome.

## Discussion

Historically there are a number of recurring themes in national park planning and management in Victoria.

Over the last century the reasons for establishing individual parks has changed from initially being about aesthetics to being primarily about nature conservation and to some extent recreation and tourism. The accumulation of parks throughout this period, at least until 1970, was spasmodic and "ad hoc" with public pressure being the recurring feature, along with a tendency for virtually all declarations to be of far lesser area

or lesser quality than initially sought by lobby groups. Declaration has often occurred against a backdrop of vehement local opposition which has usually turned, after declaration, to indifference, but also often to parochial pride on the realisation of the permanence of the reservation. This has been nowhere more evident than in the Grampians (western Victoria) where local shires opposed the declaration of the national park in the early 1980s, but now embrace it as the region's major economic asset.

Victoria has altered the administrative structure of the park system several times over the century—initially a committee of management structure, then a Park Authority (1956), a Park Service (1975) and then repeatedly in the last decade (see above). Most of these changes have been innovative and then copied elsewhere in Australia and overseas. But the constant changes of the last decade seem to have been demoralising to the staff<sup>24</sup> and there have been attempts to use restructuring to increase (or at least appear to increase) resources to parks without increasing overall funding for the department concerned.

The system, on land at least, is comprehensive in terms of the reservation of plant communities still existing on public land. This combined with the sheer extent of the area under reservation is the most positive feature of Victoria's national park system in 1995.

The administration of the system is confronted by two major issues:

- how to adequately resource a park system in a State with a massive public debt and decreasing government outlays; and
- how to rejuvenate an organisation which has been changed five times in ten years, has lost many senior staff and which currently resides in a Department virtually bereft of vision.

This can be summarised in terms of how to take a park system based on the quantity of land reserved, into a system where the quality of management is paramount.

The pressure which increased tourism will bring to bear on park managers is also a critical issue.<sup>25</sup> Whether the primary objective of national parks under the *National Parks Act* 1975 (that is, nature conservation) can be upheld against this pressure from within, and from without, is a major challenge for national park management in Victoria in the years leading up to the centenary of Victorian national parks in 1998. A lot will depend on the mechanisms established by the government to consider such conflicts and the community's view of the role of the park system. Some of these issues have been grappled with in the report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment, Recreation and the Arts on the role of protected areas in preserving biodiversity.<sup>26</sup>

All of these matters could perceptibly be related back to a lack of funding—a basic problem affecting the entire Australian national park system.<sup>27</sup> Under this scenario, the loss of staff and demoralisation of remaining staff could be seen as being related to constant preoccupation with cost cutting, whilst the increase in tourism could be seen as a means of providing an alternative source of funds.

The various options for altering the sources of funds have been discussed elsewhere.<sup>28</sup> The most sensible outcome would be for the State governments to approach the federal government arguing that funding of nationally significant parks should come from the National government

<sup>24</sup> Land Conservation Council, op cit n. 8.

<sup>25</sup> G. Westcott and J. Molinski, "Loving our Parks to Death? A Cautionary Tale" *Habitat* 13-19.

<sup>26</sup> House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment, Recreation and the Arts, *Biodiversity: The Role of Protected Areas* (AGPS, Canberra, 1993).

<sup>27</sup> Westcott, op cit n. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Westcott, op cit n. 2.



(using the concept of biodiversity through protected areas and its implementation through the Inter-Governmental Agreement on the Environment). The States would continue to manage these nationally significant parks, along with the rest of the reserve system, but be able to spread their limited funds across non-nationally significant areas. In this regard the detailed study on one State's park system reinforces the conclusions of the earlier more general study of the Australian park system,<sup>29</sup> that is, direct federal involvement is vital to a well-managed national park system in Australia.

Nevertheless, if the Victorian park system is to be improved it has to look beyond continual requests for more government funds—particularly as these are unlikely to be forthcoming in the short term. Therefore a second approach would be to prepare an overview, or master plan, for managing the entire park and reserve system as an integrated system. This would include matching visitation rates to the capacity (in ecological terms) of specific parks. A major requirement for constructing such a master plan would be to establish a "vision" of obtaining the best regional park system in the world by the time of the centenary of national parks in Victoria (1998). This will require considerably more leadership within the department than has been shown in recent years. Having an "outsider" draft the master plan would be a positive move.

Given the Victorian government's attitude to the public sector, a critical feature of the issue of any "vision" for the park system is for the department to ask itself what "core activities" of park management can best be performed by government employees (for example, ranger services, weed control, flora and fauna management) and those activities which could be performed better by being "contracted out". Amongst the activities which could be considered for external contracting are:

- preparation of management plans, by private consultants;
- some areas of research and monitoring, by universities, CSIRO, etc;
- the running of interpretation activities, including the production of publications and the running of visitor centres, possibly by non-government, non-profit organisations.

These alternatives would require careful monitoring to ensure that the primary objective of nature conservation was always maintained.

A more radical alternative also exists. A park and reserve system can be the cornerstone of biodiversity protection. In terms of public land management in Victoria, accepting the challenges above would represent a radical approach requiring a quantum shift in political philosophy (albeit phased in over many decades) may be necessary. If the primary role of all public land management in Victoria was to be habitat and water catchment protection then the objectives of management for all individual public land use designations could be re-examined. Timber production on public land could be phased out as native hardwood plantations and semi-natural forests were raised on private land by timber companies. Current State forests could then shift their objectives to habitat protection, water catchment protection and recreation only, with a consequent shift in park and reserve objectives from habitat protection with recreation to habitat protection alone. This "shift" in public land objectives and the eventual

removal of private destructive exploitation from public land would greatly enhance biodiversity protection in the medium to long term (30–100 years). Despite the outcry of timber companies at their loss of access to public land, in compensation they would gain control over their own resource and would not be subject to changes in political attitudes. The security of their resource supply would be thus ensured.

Victoria faces challenges in the short term but could improve its park and reserve system by couching its response to these challenges in a long-term vision of public land protection. As the timber industry costs more to administer in Victoria than it pays in royalties, such a move would also "free up" funds for public land management in the public interest, rather than for private profit, hence indirectly rectifying the issue of resourcing the park system.

The above discussion has highlighted some of the challenges facing the Victorian park system. But, what, if any, are the implications of this study for the future of the Australian park system as a whole?

Although it would be dangerous to extrapolate too much from the Victorian experience, there would appear to be some implications for States in similar economic and environmental circumstances to Victoria, for example, New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania. Amongst these lessons are that although increased resourcing is necessary there also needs to be attention paid to maximising the benefit brought to the system by substantial community support and involving the community more directly in park management. As well the whole range of public land use designations needs to be examined instead of placing all of the onus for nature conservation on one category: national and other parks.

Finally, the specific role of a representative reserve system in biodiversity protection needs to be more openly discussed—how does the biosphere reserve concept fit in? How does park management relate to integrated/total catchment management? Can we continue to publicly subsidise uses of public land (for example, wood production) which act against biodiversity protection when the management of the park system is inadequately funded?

These are the major questions confronting the Australian park system as it enters its second century of existence. The answers will require the involvement of all tiers of government and more importantly the whole Australian community.

In conclusion, as long as the challenge of financial restraint is seen as an opportunity for innovation, and possibly radical action by all concerned, Victoria should be able to move to quality management based on the superb existing park estate. To do so the State requires a far-sighted master plan for its park system, strong leadership and commitment from within the department, a government genuinely committed to the protection of biodiversity and a community which continues to see the valuable role national parks play in the protection of biodiversity. These requirements apply to the rest of Australia equally as strongly.