

Victorian Environment Friends Network

<http://vnpa.org.au/page/volunteer/victorian-environment-friends-network>

Submission on Victoria's new biodiversity strategy: Protecting Victoria's Environment – Biodiversity 2036

May 2016

Who are we?

The Victorian Environment Friends Network (VEFN) has been operating for over 25 years with a goal of supporting Friends groups to network and better achieve their aims. It is comprised of environmental volunteer groups (EVGs) across Victoria that provide practical assistance to support scenic, historic, cultural, and nature reserves and many different types of ecosystems and flora and fauna.

Friends groups operate in conjunction with the relevant management authority, for example Parks Victoria, a municipal Council, or Melbourne Water. Every group is independent and autonomous. Some are incorporated and have a formal constitution and membership structure, while others operate informally, with no membership fee.

VEFN has 321 affiliated Friends groups, with 191 groups working across greater Melbourne, 118 across regional Victoria, and 12 supporting specific flora and/or fauna. Almost 11,000 constituents receive our FriendsNet newsletter.

We welcome the opportunity to provide a submission on the consultation draft of Victoria's new biodiversity strategy: *Protecting Victoria's Environment – Biodiversity 2036* (the Strategy). The Strategy is to be commended for its ambition to reverse the continued loss of biodiversity in Victoria, as well as for recognising the historic and contemporary actions that are the cause.

General Comments

We particularly applaud the Strategy's overarching conclusion that in the face of growing losses of indigenous biodiversity we need to radically increase our conservation efforts, to try new approaches alongside traditional ones, and to engage all Victorians in caring about and taking care of nature, **valuing and encouraging voluntary community contributions** (p33).

We are concerned however, at the **interchangeability and lack of precision with which words like nature, biodiversity, natural environments, etc are used**. On page 5 of the Strategy Biodiversity and Indigenous biodiversity are defined. **What is lacking are clear descriptions of which of these, or specific subsets of them (e.g. species or vegetation communities) the Strategy is trying to address with particular mechanisms and objectives in the strategy. In most cases it is indigenous biodiversity that should be the focus, or preserving indigenous species and communities within a transformed and changing landscape, not simply 'anything green'**. Here is an example where lack of precision or continuity results in excluding an important mechanism for conserving indigenous species. Chapter 6, Priority 7 (p22) is to *“Drive the expansion of green infrastructure and the use of native species (native could be Western Australian), to help create liveable and climate-adapted communities...”*. When we turn to the text relevant to Priority 7 (p51) there is no discussion of how green infrastructure might be designed to include/help conserve/support indigenous species. Indeed, the statement is made *“While*

green infrastructure in the urban context may often have limited biodiversity value per se (do you mean indigenous biodiversity? Communities? Single species?), it can still be a useful way to connect people to nature”, without any discussion of how the “biodiversity value” (we presume indigenous) might be improved.

Another concern is that the document does not include a précis of current mechanisms, performance indicators, and spending used to assess progress on environment, biodiversity and climate change, how they are used (for example at pp49-50 of the DELWP 2014-15 Annual Report and at pp198-199 in the 2016/17 Service Delivery Budget Paper #3) along with potential changes forecast by the Strategy. This would support more informed consultation responses than on the basis of the few suggested measures in the Strategy, for example “Increase number of Victorians acting to protect nature”.

Below we provide observations and recommendations that pertain particularly to our environmental volunteer constituency. In March this year VEFN undertook an online survey (powered by Survey Monkey), to find out what our constituency think our priorities should be, identify what activities they undertake, and which agencies they engage with. The survey responses helped to inform our response, as explained below.

We feel there are key opportunities and challenges involved with valuing and supporting community environmental volunteering (Strategy Priorities 1, 2, 3), not contained in the Strategy, that we wish to draw your attention to. While we have set these out separately, they are clearly interlinked, for example, gaining support for volunteering relies on the provider understanding the benefits volunteering provides.

Supporting Environmental Volunteering

We commend the recognition of importance of environmental volunteers. Support takes many forms. Our survey respondents clearly conveyed 5 key needs from public agencies that they wished the VEFN to facilitate (Appendix 1, Table 1):

- **To provide more financial support for parks, reserves, and nature conservation.**
- **To provide financial support, in particular for administrative requirements of volunteering.** Volunteers want to help, but potential on-ground manpower is being diverted to administrative tasks. These costs are only minimally able to be recognised in many current granting mechanisms as overheads.
- **To streamline and provide consistency across agencies in administrative requirements for volunteering.** There are examples where volunteers are working on one agency’s land (eg Parks Victoria) but receive funds from another agency (eg Melbourne Water) for assets that will be used on that land and retained by that other agency. Confusion and inconsistency in what is required to deal with scenarios like this are resource intensive and cost-inefficient.
- **To facilitate partnering between agencies and sharing of best practice in facilitating environmental volunteering through an agencies forum.** Our constituency interacts regularly with a number of agencies (refer Appendix 1 Chart 1). They feel that the quality of support for volunteering varies widely. The VEFN sees its role as assisting in this process.
- **To lead by example, with a visible presence in the field.** While not captured in the quantitative elements of the survey, there were comments made by some volunteers that they were simply being used to do basic maintenance work that agency field staff had previously performed. Long term volunteers on Parks Victoria sites have expressed major concern at the loss of field

staff and the consequent lack of jointly working to a shared purpose, and developing shared and intimate knowledge of a site, restoration techniques, and maintenance issues.

Valuing Environmental Volunteering – Quantitatively and Qualitatively

While the value of Landcare is quantified and lauded, we feel that **the contributions of ‘Friends of’ groups are poorly understood and need to be recognised and documented.** Recording the number of people and hours worked in volunteer-based projects is proposed in the Strategy on p27. While Parks Victoria collates records for volunteering on its land, and some ‘Friends of’ groups operate within the Landcare stream that is monitored by DELWP, there is a large body of VEFN constituents whose activities are not captured by these means. Appendix 1 Chart 2 sets out the wide breadth of activities our constituents are engaged in. VEFN is in a position to assist with the task of quantifying volunteer efforts.

We are disappointed by the focus on numerical metrics alone and strongly urge that other types of metrics are included in assessing the value of environmental volunteering.

- **The breadth of activities, and the environments in which they are carried out,** needs to be recognised, not simply the number of volunteer hours worked (Appendix 1 Chart 2).
- Similarly, **the strategic value of the volunteering work, how it contributes to conserving biodiversity, and where it is carried out, should be identified.** For example, a remnant indigenous species community may be highly significant within the context of its location and community, as would the associated volunteers and their volunteering. **We note that a number of our constituents place a high emphasis on their interactions with members of the community as part of their volunteering, supporting them to care more deeply for and get actively involved in protecting nature. This contribution needs to be understood and recognised.**
- **Having a register of the skills and expertise available in the environmental volunteer community, by place and type, allows it to be shared and deployed.** The VEFN believes it can help facilitate this work.
- The Strategy proposes a target-setting approach (Page 31) that focuses work on the most beneficial actions and places. The same should be applied in documenting and recognising volunteering initiatives. Nonetheless, we point out that a portfolio approach would be wise. Only investing efforts in what appears to be ‘cost-effective’ may rule out unanticipated gains from small investments in higher-risk initiatives and approaches.
- **Increasingly, the contribution of environmental volunteering to personal and community wellbeing, forging of social linkages, pride and connection to place, and building of community capacity to care for its biodiversity,** is being recognised. Methods and measures to record these contributions are also being developed and **we strongly recommend that these be incorporated into the progress measures for implementation of the Strategy.**

Appendix 1

In March this year the VEFN Committee undertook an online survey to: find out what our constituency think our priorities should be; identify what activities they undertake and which agencies they engage with. An email link to the survey, powered by Survey Monkey, was sent to our FriendsNet mailing list which includes approximately 10,900 active email addresses. 350 responses were received, and between 326 to 350 members responded to each of the 9 questions, which included opportunity for comments. 326 responded to the Question “which of the following activities [does] *your* group participates in”, suggesting that the overwhelming majority of survey respondents have been in, are in, or intend to be in or support, an environmental volunteer group. A more detailed report on the survey is available by emailing friendsvic@hotmail.com.

Table 1: The importance of activities identified by respondents for VEFN

Answer option	Not important	Neutral	Somewhat important	Important	Very important	Important or Very Important
Lobby government to improve funding and support for public parks and reserves.	1	12	25	96	206	302
Lobby government to provide basic funding to EVGs to support activities such as incorporation; formal training in workplace safety; insurance; maintenance of formal records etc.	6	25	57	118	139	257
Quantify volunteer hours and funding provided by EVGs to demonstrate the valuable contribution made.	6	21	63	135	116	251
Provide a mentoring service to match EVGs and people with experience and a good track record to assist groups starting out or needing specific assistance.	0	26	90	158	72	230
Initiate a regular agencies forum, to bring together representatives of councils and government agencies who interact with EVGs.	7	50	84	121	79	200

Chart 1: Survey respondents identified an impressive span of agencies and organisations (not mutually exclusive) that they engage with, from local councils to statutory agencies, federal agencies, as well as other associations and networks, highlighting the important work our volunteers do on both public and private land. The impressive gamut of agencies our respondents work with also reflects the wide range of environmental contributions our environmental volunteer groups provide to their communities.

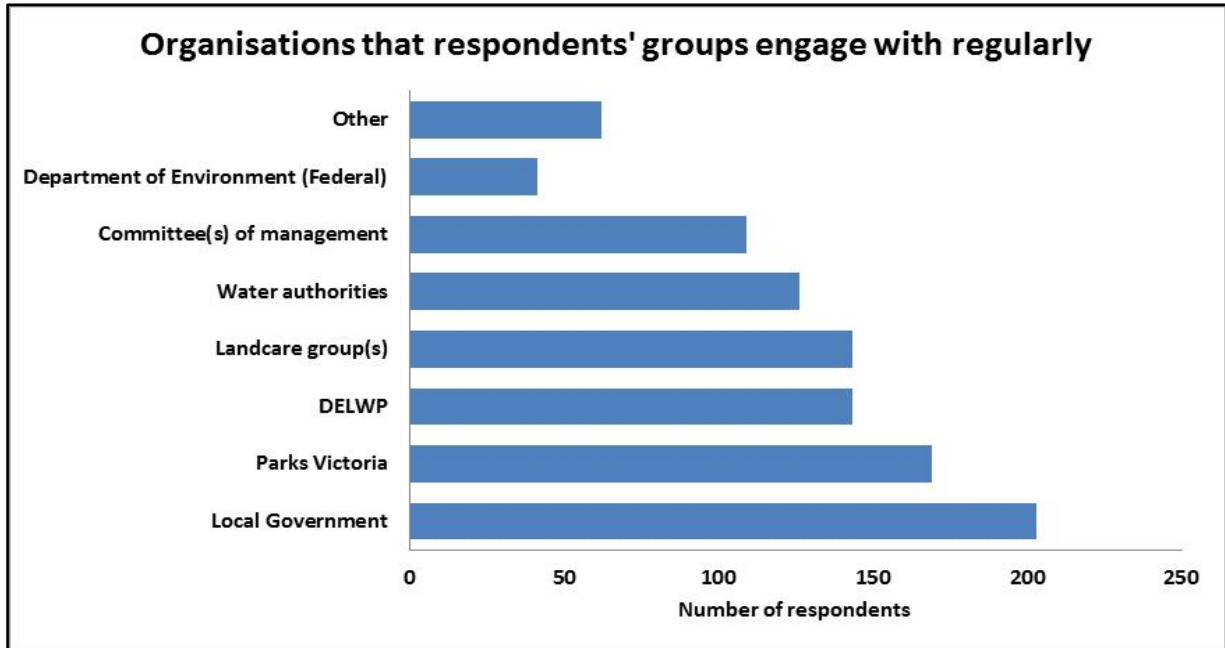


Chart 2: The survey showed that VEFN constituents are involved in an impressive span of activities, as shown in the chart below. Other Activities are activities described by respondents under 'Other', a choice additional to specific activities listed in the survey. The 'other activities' included various types of community education and recruitment; park maintenance; waterway, coastal, and marine monitoring and rehabilitation; environmental advocacy; feral animal monitoring and control; and sustainable land management.

