



VICTORIAN ENVIRONMENT FRIENDS NETWORK

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VEFN Response to Strengthening Parks

VEFN is pleased that the Minister and Parks Victoria have undertaken this review and hope that the results will lead to substantial improvements to the operation and future of parks in this state, particularly those managed by Parks Victoria.

We have focused our response on issues and opportunities specific to Friends groups. The VEFN appreciates the close relationship the VEFN has with Parks Victoria through the ongoing support and involvement of staff like Leesa Riley and look forward to continuing and building on this relationship.

The discussion paper acknowledges the significant economic contribution that volunteers make, particularly through 104 Friends groups (p12) and placed a value of at least \$6.6 million on this for 2015-16. This is a significant contribution by any measure that needs to be better recognised by both Parks Victoria and the Victorian government. An important form of recognition is to ensure that volunteers, particularly those organised through groups like Friends have some ownership and control of what they contribute. This requires a much greater degree of ongoing consultation by Parks Victoria than is usually the case. While the discussion paper acknowledges these important contributions, the points raised on pp 24-25 fail to capture the value that both parks and volunteering in them create and the contribution this makes to strengthening communities. This includes the many health and well-being benefits (physical, mental, cultural and spiritual) that come from being in, and helping to care for nature.

In the remainder of our response we set out what we see are important issues for strengthening the contribution Friends groups can make to assist and strengthen Parks Victoria. We highlight here six recommendations on how to harness the potential for Friends groups and community volunteers to enhance and extend the work of Parks Victoria: 1) Strengthen the presence of staff in parks and in the community to develop effective partnerships and maximise their potential; 2) Develop a culture that fosters volunteers and understands and values the broad knowledge and skills they have; 3) Establish formal relationships and practices with Friends groups that set out objectives and expectations with equitable sharing of risk and responsibility; 4) Provide reliable sources of funding to parks with a minimum 3-5 year forward commitment to ensure good strategic planning; 5) Recognise and financially support the visitor engagement work of Parks Victoria and the contribution of Friends groups to this work; 6) Work interactively with Friends and local communities to develop ways to foster the many parks that are not iconic but yet provide access to our natural and cultural heritage and make significant contributions to community and personal health and wellbeing.

We hope this will become part of an ongoing, constructive dialogue between VEFN and Parks Victoria. The challenge is that while the vision and goals of the discussion paper are worthy, they are broad, and while we concur with many of the “opportunities to be better” (e.g. p28), the pragmatic implementation of these opportunities needs closer attention. Here we try to offer some of these from a Friends perspective.

Issue: Relationships with Friends groups and other volunteers.

There are large parts of the Parks Victoria bureaucracy that consider Friends groups ‘take a lot of time to manage’ and there can be a patronising attitude to Friends (and others).

It is not just for “many projects” that volunteers are essential. In fact several parks and many walking trails would not be open without Friends and other volunteers, and certainly would be in even poorer condition. This work is often hard physical work, which can include hours of brush-cutting, tree clearing, weed removal, bridge construction and more.

Recommendations:

Foster a culture that understands and effectively supports volunteers

Parks Victoria should undertake a cultural shift that recognises that they rely on volunteers in a similar way to the CFA and SES (if not quite as extensively).

Recognise, seek and harness the diversity of skills in the community

Parks Victoria should recognise and actively seek out the often high level skills and experience that can be found in many Friends groups. Friends often include people whose life experience is substantial. Many include experienced (albeit retired) policy, science, engineering, communications, human resources, governance, and educational professionals, as well as skilled trades operatives. Also engaged are people with many years local and other experience in practical environmental management. This is a resource that Parks Victoria is almost totally unaware of (as they have never asked!) and often the assumption seems to be that Friends are simply “out for some activity in the environment” and cannot be trusted to self-manage.

Involve Friends groups in strategic activities, use their local knowledge

Friends should be encouraged to be involved in management activities especially in developing 10 year plans for their parks. Many members of Friends groups have substantial local knowledge and specialist skills, developed through years of sustained volunteering effort. This can be harnessed by Parks Victoria to contribute to more effective management and development of parks.

Establish a formal relationship to set out obligations, expectations and opportunities

Many Friends groups believe that some form of formal relationship (such as contract or memorandum of agreement) is required to establish mutual obligations. Volunteers should not, for example, have to provide their own equipment and consumables but this is often the case. Even when such things as mowers and the like are in fact owned by Parks Victoria they are not necessarily made available to Friends. While formal contracts are an important part of volunteer and Friends groups’ engagement, they must be based on a fair and equitable sharing of risks and responsibilities. VEFN could work with Parks Victoria and DELWP to help develop and implement best practice approaches in this regard.

Friends should have more understanding about and access to ‘head office’ expertise eg it was information from an outside contractor that recently led one Friends group to the map making staff available. As another example, Friends groups often engage in substantial track re-construction and engineering advice would be of significant use. This is expertise we understand may be in head office but is not offered to us.

Provide training to reap benefits from effective volunteers

Parks Victoria should offer training across a wide range of activities and encourage volunteers to undertake a full range of roles within their area. Given the experience mentioned above, this should include a simple process of recognition of prior learning (again as does the CFA and SES).

Minimise unnecessary and repetitive paperwork

The discussion paper expresses the thought that volunteers “should be able to come into parks without being overburdened by paperwork”, but in recent years the paperwork has continued to increase. This includes such things as repetitive safety assessments works approvals for minor activities and the like.

Have an on-ground presence to develop relationships with community and get the most from volunteers

Building stronger relationships with local communities, diversifying volunteers, and promoting and supporting volunteers requires more on-ground activity. Recent decisions on weekend work mean Rangers are not available for most Friends activities and have very limited contact with other community groups. This situation should not continue if parks are to meet even basic requirements.

Issue: Funding for Parks

Despite some increased funding from public sources in 2015-16 and in prospect for 2016-17, Parks Victoria’s funding base remains significantly lower than it was five years ago (2011-12). The reduced level of Parks Victoria funding is obvious in the greatly reduced provision of on-ground staff (Rangers) and the deterioration of assets. Visitor numbers have risen steadily over the same period that funding has been reduced, placing increasing pressure on

both natural and built assets and human resources. The discussion paper points out that a **“Latest audit showed that only half of the built assets were “good” or “excellent”** (p 22). This is well known to Friends groups and in many cases would be considered a generous assessment. This is particularly so outside of the so-called ‘iconic’ parks where Friends groups have to find funds outside of the Parks Victoria budget to maintain facilities (including tracks and information/ interpretation signage) at an acceptable level.

Recommendations:

Provide a reliable source of funds with a minimum 3 to 5 year forward commitment

Parks need a reliable source of funds that allows for both a reasonable level of maintenance but also the ability to plan for improvements over time. This is essential if Parks Victoria is going to be able to service the increased demands for their services from an increased population. Management of such large and significant natural assets requires the ability to plan and make commitments that may extend over several years. Year to year budget variations are not consistent with this and the government needs to put in place medium to longer term plans for funding of parks.

Issue: Relationships with the community and strengthening visitors’ connections with nature

Building stronger relationships with local communities, diversifying volunteers, and promoting and supporting volunteers, requires more on-ground activity and relationships. Some of our groups feel they get little recognition or understanding of their work by way of someone coming into the field to see what is happening, discuss it, and together consider options for improvement.

Recommendations:

Invest in more on-ground involvement with Friends and other community groups

‘On ground’ Parks Victoria people are lacking and have been reduced significantly over the recent decade. The public facing staff should be given priority, and training increased for that role. Frankly it seems management numbers have increased and the number of public facing staff has decreased.

Strengthen resourcing on engaging with visitors

The provision of much of the public relations effort, especially in the smaller parks, is left to Friends groups and often using their own resources or grant funding. Volunteers could undertake many roles to involve visitors if properly supported and respected. These roles could include the provision of ‘greeters’ at parks to offer information and the sense of ‘supervision’ that minimised disruptive activity (c/f staff undertaking a similar role in retail outlets). Local volunteers who are knowledgeable and enthusiastic about their local environment are ideally placed to engage visitors in guided walks and the like. Provision of outreach activities in schools, community groups and to local government could also be successfully undertaken. Many Friends groups already do, but are often unsupported in doing so. Parks Victoria should be offering more training opportunities to expand the roles Friends can undertake with confidence.

Strengthen funding opportunities for public education and engagement

There are limited State grants available for Friends groups to improve the accessibility of their parks or their public education activities (in contrast with grants available for environmental improvement like removing weeds or planting). The previous ‘Communities for Nature’ grant scheme provided this opportunity; some of the public engagement work done by Friends groups under this scheme would not have occurred otherwise. To continue school education activity, basic funds for such things as busses, curriculum materials, training of volunteers, etc is required to encourage more schools to participate.

Issue: Broadening access to Parks

The use of parks for sporting and recreational events is suggested as one means of introducing new demographics to parks, but charges are a disincentive for compatible uses such as Orienteering which are often charged the same as more potentially destructive activities. At the same time uncontrolled activities (especially in parks easily accessible

from Melbourne) such as Mountain Biking, are often both destructive on and off trails, and incompatible with quieter activities (such as walking).

Have an increased and more publicly active on-ground presence

All of these opportunities need increased and more publicly active 'on-ground' staff. To be a 'good, cooperative neighbour' you need to be present, not just in the park but at events where the neighbourhood gathers. An important priority should be communication and education for the public about what is and is not allowable in particular parks.

Use Friends groups and community volunteers to improve access and to help plan and manage effective use of parks

Friends and community volunteers could be encouraged and supported to engage with communities that have limited access (due to economics, health or other issues) to assist them to enjoy and appreciate parks.

Friends could be involved and supported in assisting to manage new sports and recreational activities - on-ground enforcement of regulations is essential, and currently lacking. Friends could be engaged in the development of ten year plans for their parks, and the monitoring and reporting (including to senior management and/or government) on the delivery of such plans.

"Caring For Nature" and "Preserving History"

Parks Victoria is currently so limited in funds that it appears unable to focus on the full range of the estate. Many of these parks have great significance for local communities, and provide access to a wide population of the all too few, precious examples of our environment.

Heavy emphasis on a small number of areas of "greatest significance and facing the highest threat" (p 31), while understandable in the context of an inadequate funding model, means that other areas are allowed to potentially degrade, and certainly allows more risk of negative impacts such as weeds and illegal activities (because miscreants perceive that they will never be caught). Friends should be more engaged in monitoring work (eg "Caught on Camera", "Listening for Nature", "Supporting our environment").

The overwhelming emphasis on a few 'iconic' sites leaves no room (beyond occasional token words) for acknowledgment of the history embedded in smaller parks (eg indigenous living, logging, small settlers). Ongoing dialogue with Friends groups and community (regularly, and on site, not just in a periodic, high level review), may help point the way to local solutions.

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