



Victorian
**Environment
Friends
Network**

VICTORIAN ENVIRONMENT FRIENDS NETWORK

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Activities report for 2021-22

1. Committee Meetings

The VEFN Committee has met four times since the last AGM. Our committee has been generously served by Laura Mumaw, Convenor; Paul Strickland, Deputy Convenor; Margaret Hunter, Secretary; Roger Parker, Treasurer; Nadine Gaskell, Andrew Lucas, Judith Baldacchino, Anthony Bigelow, who are all also actively contributing to their own Friends group's work. At the commencement of the 2021-2022 year the Committee re-endorsed the VEFN Strategy Plan and nominated key priorities for action.

Subcommittees involved with the Best Friends Award, Parks Victoria, Grants Events (Regional, Urban and Webinars), Regional Network Development, and Website/Social Media carried out substantial work.

2. Governance

DGR (Deductible Gift Recipient) Status. DGR registration was completed and submitted late last year. The application review process can take a considerable period of time based on feedback received from other organisations.

3. Membership

Our Membership Recruitment Subcommittee reviewed the key areas of VEFN value and created an elevator pitch document outlining how the VEFN helps member groups.

Issues and possible solutions around membership were discussed such as keeping track of changing Friends Group structures and committee members, improving joining and renewal mechanisms, evolution of new groups and how to approach groups through the right channels.

The subcommittee agreed that redevelopment of the website with a Friends portal to enable members to promote and advocate for their causes and update their own contact information would assist in recruiting and servicing members.

Despite new Friend Groups joining the VEFN over the past year, there remains confusion about the distinction between receiving the VEFN newsletter and joining the organisation as a member. Several groups have not renewed or are unaware that they have become unfinancial. Anecdotally we have heard from a number of Friends groups that post-Covid it has been difficult to return to pre-Covid activity levels.

4. Parks Victoria

Volunteer Manual. Towards the end of 2021 **Laura Mumaw and Paul Strickland** met with **Tony Varcoe** and **Leesa Riley** from Parks Victoria to reiterate a request for regional workshops to resolve

issues to do with the manual, to include with regional Parks Victoria staff and park rangers, Friends and Landcare groups and stakeholders, led by an independent facilitator.

Together we developed a brief and selected Mosaic Lab to run 3 regional workshops with the following goals:

- build relationships between local Parks Victoria staff and environmental volunteer groups
- identify issues and potential solutions for the practical and progressive implementation of the Volunteering Manual
- develop a timetable and process for implementing and resolving (if not able to be agreed at the workshops) the issues raised.

As part of the process the VEFN invited 8 environmental volunteer colleagues to a workshop in April to design those regional workshops. There were mixed views as to how effective the workshop was in clarifying an effective process.

Three regional workshops were then scheduled in June – face-to-face meetings in Ballarat and Melbourne and an online workshop. Due to poor registration numbers the Ballarat workshop was cancelled and registrants invited to attend the online workshop.

Forty six attendees from amongst Parks Victoria staff and Friends groups across Victoria attended the two sessions. A large volume of raw material was documented from the workshops, demonstrating the wide range of concerns with the volunteer manual in a number of volunteer settings, and some possible solutions to some of these issues.

Tony and Leesa undertook to outline which solutions they believed they could implement either: quite soon, in the medium or long term, or what they believe is not achievable in the current circumstances. The intention was to discuss with Paul and Laura how the VEFN can participate in making and facilitating these changes. Following that, the VEFN would review its future strategy for addressing members' concerns with the Manual. We encouraged Parks Victoria to communicate as simply and broadly as possible their clarifications in the workshop, including:

- That casual volunteers / participants in activities will not be required to hold WWCC
- The 'policing' expectations of Friends groups for WWCC

After an initial email exchange about a follow-up discussion in late August, Parks Victoria was only able to seek a meeting to progress the matter in November due to heavy work commitments. It is now planned for the first meeting to progress the matter to take place in mid-late January 2023.

5. Land Management Strategy

As reported in the 2020-2021 Activity report, the VEFN made a submission to Parks Victoria's Land Management Strategy (September 2021 draft), calling for greater acknowledgement and focus on community caring for, not just 'connecting' to parks; fostering, not just recognizing connections to place; recognising and using knowledge held by environmental volunteers; partnering with Friends groups; and recognising and documenting that successful partnerships rely on trust and relationships, mutual respect, and shared learning.

6. Best Friend Awards

The Best Friend Award Subcommittee decided to not to conduct the Best Friends Award in 2022 to provide an opportunity to review the awards and processes. After consultation with the VEFN Awards Subcommittee and BFA Judges, two new awards have been added. These are the Habitat Connections Award and the Outstanding Friends Group Award.

The **Habitat Connections Award** celebrates and encourages connection of habitats for native flora and fauna across fragmented patches of land. It recognises initiatives that bring groups of volunteers together with a variety of agencies to improve habitat across fragmented landscapes while building and sharing the knowledge of how to do so, and maintaining commitment to continue.

The **Outstanding Friends Group Award**. The purpose of this award is to recognise that there are many people within a group who contribute to its environmental achievements and successes. It rewards groups who consistently demonstrate teamwork, inclusion, community engagement and social cohesion.

Early in the new year we will agree the 2023 Awards timetable and celebration details.

7. Partnerships

Landcare Victoria. The VEFN continues to partner closely with Landcare Victoria under a Memorandum of Understanding. **Laura Mumaw** and **Paul Strickland** met quarterly with their CEO, Board Chair and sometimes Board members. We have shared approaches to governance policies and mentoring our respective groups. We also discussed our shared concerns and opportunities to collaborate on aspects of agency approaches (e.g. Parks Victoria stance on working with children's checks, poor involvement of Friends and Landcare groups in development of DELWP priorities and approaches, reliance on 'experts' rather than local knowledge in DELWP modelling, and devaluation of urban and agricultural land and landholders in conservation efforts).

8. Regional Networks

Central West Environmental Volunteer and Agency Network (EVAN). The VEFN has been a foundational partner, with the active involvement of **Laura Mumaw**, in supporting environmental volunteer groups and agencies in Victoria's Central West to form a regional network, **EVAN** – the Environmental Volunteer & Agency Network (Central West). This initiative stemmed from a 2019 joint Ballarat Environment Network- VEFN networking event. EVAN's purpose is to sustainably enable volunteer group-group, community-group and agency-group action to achieve the shared goal of caring for nature. EVAN has offered various workshops and forums over 2021 and 2022, including a Meet the Land Manager Forum and Community Nature College.

9. Support for member groups.

We have received queries from some small and newly forming Friends groups and associations, working on council land, for support with suitable governance arrangements and policies, insurance options, and suitable models for Friends groups of different sizes and complexity. Committee members **Anthony Bigelow** and **Graham Ross** have taken the lead on reviewing how the VEFN can build a library of support and mentoring services for members. We have been in discussions with

BROLGA (Building Resilience of On Ground Local Groups for Action), on possible partnering opportunities to provide training support.

10. Grants for networking and capacity building

The VEFN delivered two webinars and one face-to-face networking event as part of the successful grant application to the DELWP Community Grants in 2021. These grants were part of the Capacity Building and Networking Stream with a strong focus on providing opportunities for the younger generation to get involved in environmental volunteering.

Caring for Nature Expo – Ballarat. Our face-to-face networking event was held in Ballarat on the 11th September focusing on providing volunteer groups in the Central West regional area with the chance to network and connect with other environmental organisations as well as showcase what was available to the wider community. The VEFN worked in partnership with EVAN (Environmental Volunteers and Agency Network – Central West) and met regularly via Zoom to plan, coordinate and promote the event. The event linked into the Victorian Nature Festival and was promoted widely in the area via social media and newspaper outlets.

The Caring for Nature Expo was held at the Earth Education Centre at Mount Clear which not only offered large indoor and outdoor spaces related to nature but also featured beautiful forest walks nearby in the Woookarung Regional Park. After an engaging Welcome to Country by (Wadawurrung Traditional Owners, a full program was offered featuring environmental career panel discussions, wattle identification, bird walk and nestbox construction. A range of 20 organisations provided displays including four Gardens for Wildlife groups; Friends of Bannockburn Bush, Canadian Corridor, and Kooyoora; Birdlife Ballarat; Field Naturalists Ballarat; Nature Stewards; Napoleon Enfield and Wattle-flat Pootilla Landcare groups; Seeding Victoria; several DELWP units; Parks Victoria, FishCare Victoria; BREAZE; Ballarat Dark Sky; and local Councils. In the order of 250 attendees came along on the day and enjoyed the program as well as food and music.

In addition, the VEFN with the support of EVAN developed and oversaw a research placement project by RMIT student, Lucinda Cameron, with a focus on youth engagement using the Expo as a case study. Her initial results showed that youth (secondary school to early career age group) were motivated and engaged by environmental causes but more work would be needed in how to reach out to the younger generation who have busy lives, with little time left for volunteering, communicate through social media, and feel inexperienced or unconnected with traditional forms of environmental volunteering.

Overall, feedback from the day was extremely positive with many expressing gratitude for being able to learn about and connect with local environmental issues and organisations. Many said they would like to attend similar events in future.

Grant Writing Webinar. On the 14th June 2022, we conducted a Grant Writing Webinar to provide practical hands-on skills for Friends Groups to improve their chances as obtaining grants. Facilitator, Deb Maziarz presented an engaging webinar to 34 attendees using an easy style and humour to make a dry subject very interesting. Feedback from the webinar was positive with some attendees notifying us that that the webinar had given them confidence in making their grant applications.

Finding Opportunities to Work for Nature Webinar. This action-packed and dynamic webinar, held by VEFN and EVAN Central West, explored various ways that younger people can engage in environmental volunteering. It was held on the 13th October 2022. Past committee member, Kylie Cohen, and DELWP representative, Laura Town-Hopkinson kept the webinar lively and engaging introducing topics including:

- research into volunteer engagement at the Caring for Nature Expo
- a new form of volunteering led by youth (The Urban Guerillas)
- coping with grief for environmental loss through personal action and collective care
- environmental career progression and the importance of volunteering and connecting with others in the field.
- a panel discussion around tips for engaging youth.

Sixty-three people attended on the evening. There was a strong demand to share the information and the webinar is being professionally edited to be a teaching resource for the future.

11. Website/social media

A website redevelopment proposal was developed following a review of the VEFN's website requirements by **Carol Challis, Ellie Walker, Anthony Bigelow, Roger Parker** and **Laura Mumaw**. A Scoping Document was prepared and preliminary quotes obtained. We have received indications that our grant application for funding for the website redevelopment will be successful and are confident that the work will assist the VEFN to streamline membership processes and expand community engagement.

In the meantime, our existing website has been kept up-to-date with new blog posts of our activities. We have also updated our Friend Finder page to capture extra information about our member groups ensuring their details are current for prospective environmental volunteers.

A media library is being continually developed to assist with content. VEFN members are encouraged to share their pages, news, and activities through our network.

12. FriendsNet newsletter / Mailchimp communiques

Stephen Derrick has continued to produce our newsletter as editor. The usefulness and appeal of the newsletter relies on the submission of interesting articles, so please consider taking up this challenge. Stephen has also regularly updated us via MailChimp on important grant opportunities, policy updates, and submission opportunities.

13. Administration/infrastructure

With a part-time Administration/Sustainability Officer, **Carol Challis**, on board for this year, we were able to make progress with our processes and offer a better service to members and stakeholders.

In her time with the VEFN, Carol has:

- Prepared and submitted the DGR Status application with Treasurer Roger Parker.
- Written articles and organised the production of the BFA 30th Anniversary Newsletter
- Updated the VEFN website including the updating of the Friend Finder
- Prepared blog articles for the VEFN website and assisted with social media content
- Helped coordinate events: Grant Writing Webinar (July), Regional event 'Caring for Nature Expo' in Ballarat (September) and Engaging Youth Webinar (October)
- Assisted the committee with administration work
- Contributed to subcommittees including Membership Recruitment and BFA Coordination