



The future of the Wombat Forest:

The aspirations of co-managers

*Working together to restore and safeguard the
proposed Wombat-Lerderderg national park*



Energy,
Environment
and Climate Action

A new national park



The Wombat State Forest, between Daylesford and Bacchus Marsh, is set to become a new National Park; **Wombat-Lerderderg National Park**.

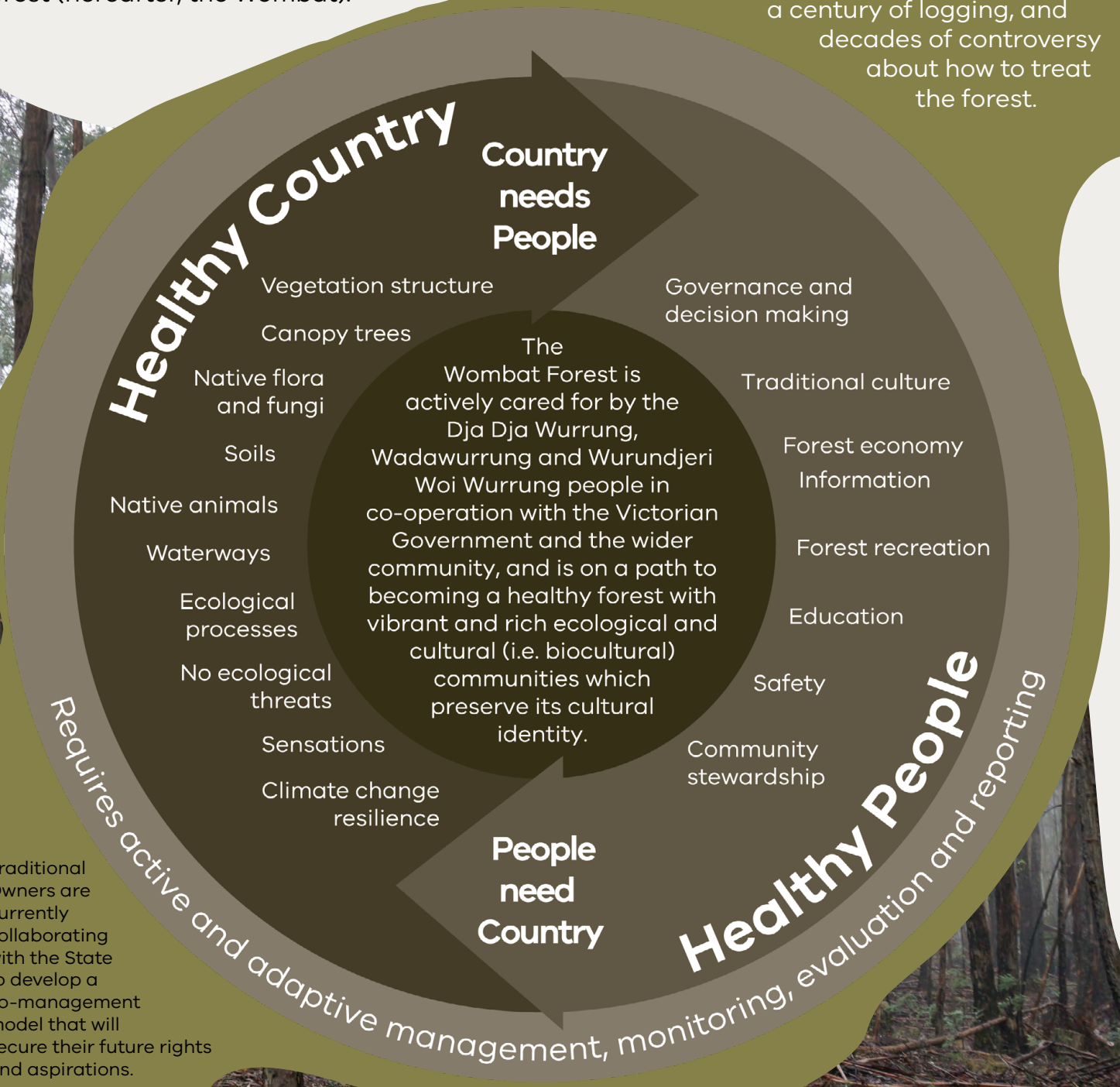
The area will be **co-managed**¹ by Parks Victoria and three Registered Aboriginal Parties (Dja Dja Wurrung, Wadawurrung and Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung).

This document outlines our vision and management priorities for the Wombat Forest (hereafter, the Wombat).

A shared vision

The Wombat is entering a new stage of management. Logging has ended, many areas are within a new National Park, and management is now formally shared between First Nations groups and government agencies.

Change brings opportunity, and a chance to re-imagine the future of the Wombat. It also brings a chance to repair past damage. The past saw the exclusion of First Nations people from the forest and an end to their management and care. It also brought the upheaval of gold mining, over a century of logging, and decades of controversy about how to treat the forest.



¹Traditional Owners are currently collaborating with the State to develop a co-management model that will secure their future rights and aspirations.

Managing the forest together

Recent decades also saw many in the community come to know and love the Wombat, to study it in detail, and strengthen the bonds that connect human communities to the forest itself. Now is the time to make sure we set up forest management in a way that makes a bright future.

In 2023, we met to talk about the future. We visited the forest. We discussed our aspirations, and documented ways in which we could make these aspirations real. Together, we created a vision for the forest, which looks towards a healthy ecology, and healthy human communities:

First Nations People

For the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung, the Wadawurrung and the Dja Dja Wurrung people, the protection and continuation of First Nations knowledge and culture is paramount. This goes hand in hand with the stewardship of the forest, its important species, and the resources it can provide. These groups carry a responsibility for Country and their people.

Government Agencies

For government agencies, there is a responsibility to manage land according to relevant legislation. This brings a strong focus on the ecological aspects of the forest, such as safeguarding native vegetation and threatened species, reducing weeds, managing fire, and protecting water quality. There is also a responsibility to ensure that the forest, as a whole, is accessible and safe for the community, to enjoy, learn from and use.

The co-managers share a common toolkit for managing the forest. These tools include:

- Controlled fire, which can be used for many purposes, and has a deep cultural significance when used by First Nations people on Country
- Ecological or cultural thinning of timber to encourage a desirable forest structure
- Control of feral animals
- Weed control
- Active restoration
- Reintroduction of key native species

The toolkit also extends to the establishment of good governance, appropriate land access and use permissions, and education programs that connect people to the forest.

Our knowledge about management is incomplete. There is much to learn from the forest. All managers are committed to monitoring what happens in response to management, and to learning and improving over time. New technologies offer good prospects for monitoring change in different ways - from the recorded sounds of birdsong and insects as a way to track changes in animal life, to the detection of platypus in streams from their DNA. But the best way to understand the forest is to be there: there is no substitute for having people in the forest to learn its ways.

Together, we will manage actively, with ambition and respect, learning as we go, and sharing our knowledge wherever appropriate.



The connected forest

The landscape surrounding the Wombat plays a crucial role in its health. The waterways, reserves and private land surrounding (and sometimes intersecting) the Wombat can serve as buffers from disturbance, promote connectivity and provide essential resources (water, nutrients). Changes beyond the borders of the Wombat (e.g. flooding regimes, tree cover, pests and diseases) can affect management outcomes within the forest, so it is crucial to also consider the broader landscape when decisions are made to improve the health of the Wombat.

Site specific management

The challenges we face in managing the Wombat-Lerderderg National Park can be best understood when on Country together. We visited the forest to talk about how our vision applied to specific sites across the forest. We visited some of the most special and intact places in the forest, and some places which have suffered severe degradation.

We offer examples of the places we visited, to show the breadth of the management challenge we face.

Case study 1

Maintaining remnant Country

There are some key areas within the Wombat that are incredibly unique and retain some of the values that have been lost elsewhere.

The forest springs at Korweinguboorra are one such place. This small area protects a patchwork of shady, spring-fed wetlands within a forest of gum trees that still has a rich understorey of native plants. This vegetation provides important resources for First Nations and critical habitat for rare species. This is a calm and interesting place which welcomes people to congregate.

The co-managers agreed that this area should be managed with a focus on safeguarding what it still holds. However, simply leaving the site alone will be insufficient to safeguard it from weeds and pests, and the possible impacts of changing rainfall patterns on the springs.

Active intervention is required to protect this area – including weed control, and possibly sensitive thinning of some tree growth and patch burning to protect the springs from drought and hot fire. Monitoring is needed to track changes and guide learning.



Sphagnum moss, a regionally rare plant growing in a spring



Transect line monitoring the herbaceous forest understorey



an old tree surrounded by a dense stand of younger trees

Case study 2

Restoring upside down Country

There are many sites within the Wombat that have been severely degraded. Mining has scarred the land, compacting and turning the soil. Past forestry has produced dense stands of small trees that are competing for the available resources and restricting forest growth. To First Nations people, these places are 'upside down Country'.

These places are not healthy. The high density of small trees means that the needs of native animals are not being met: there are insufficient hollows, large logs, flowers or small prey. Likewise, the conditions for understorey plants are harsh, and most are now absent. These areas are uninviting to visitors as they are dark and often silent.

Looking forward

These places should be carefully managed with a focus on restoration. Delicate thinning of tree stems may encourage the growth of remaining trees and assist in habitat creation. Any management decisions should also consider the complexities of the ecosystem (e.g. possibilities of weed invasion).

At the same time, it is important that we recognise past damage. We believe that the evidence of former mining and forestry should be acknowledged as part of the story of the Wombat and considered in future endeavours.



Dense tree regeneration with litter understorey

Case study 3

Managing storm affected Country

In 2021, a windstorm toppled thousands of trees in patches across the Wombat. This has left piles of logs and foliage, exposed large areas of soil to erosion, and allowed the rapid growth of smaller plants, both native and weedy. As new growth competes for space, these places are changing very fast.

Complexities of change

This rapid change confronts managers, who must decide how the forest should be allowed to develop:

- Is this an opportunity, accelerating the development of a more open, mature forest structure with more resources for a multitude of species?
- Is this a chance to harvest wood?
- Must the excess branches be removed to manage fire risk and allow access?
- Do we just wait and see what happens?

As co-managers, we are now tasked with considering these options. This patchwork of change encourages us to see the forest as a connected whole, offering unique opportunities across different sites.



Vegetation structure following high severity windstorm damage

Ground cover following removal of excess fallen trees

Evidence of past forestry activities

Dense tree regeneration with species-poor native grass cover

Case study 4

Restoring waterways on Country

Waterways are the arteries of the forest. They promote connectivity across the landscape, shifting water and nutrients. They provide pathways for many animals to move, and their moist shady valleys provide refuge for animals in times of drought. Waterways also hold profound significance for First Nations people serving as vital sources of sustenance, spirituality and cultural connection.

The waterways in the Wombat flow outwards to the surrounding agricultural and urban landscape. Some of Victoria's iconic rivers rise in the Wombat, including the Loddon, the Campaspe, the Coliban and the Werribee. For this reason, land management in the Wombat has effects that travel far out across the landscape.

Waterways in the Wombat have been degraded by historical land use (e.g. mining and forestry) and the creation of infrastructure which restrict water flow. In addition, the windstorm in 2021 uprooted thousands of trees, leading to significant erosion and sedimentation of waterways.

Co-managers fear the windstorm has weakened the persistence of riparian vegetation and freshwater animals.

Understanding change

Co-managers are working together to understand the condition of the waterways in the Wombat. Monitoring changes in response to disturbance and restoration will help inform future management decisions.

Kangaroo Creek after heavy rainfall

Further information

We came together to discuss the Wombat Forest as part of a project supported by DEECA, with workshops and forest visits facilitated by DEECA's Arthur Rylah Institute. Detailed description, analysis and discussion of this work is presented in:

Farmilo, B., Batpurev, K., Moore, J. and Sinclair, S. (2024). [Partner aspirations for a healthy Wombat Forest: an exploration of management stakeholders' values and objectives.](#) Arthur Rylah Institute for Environmental Research Technical Report Series No. 381. Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, Heidelberg, Victoria.



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