

2 May 2024

Eminent Panel for Community Engagement
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Submission to Eminent Panel on Central Highlands state forests

Bushwalking Victoria is eager to lend its voice to the ongoing consultative process shaping the future of the pristine landscapes of Victoria's Central Highlands forests. A significant opportunity exists to protect existing trails and create new pathways for bushwalking and hiking. This proposal presents a strategic solution to relieve traffic on parks close to Melbourne while fostering a sustainable outdoor recreation environment.

Bushwalking Victoria advocates for the preservation and expansion of bushwalking opportunities across our state. As an organisation representing a diverse community of outdoor enthusiasts, we recognise the pressing need to diversify and decentralise recreational activities to safeguard our natural landscapes, biodiversity and enhance visitor experiences.

Outlined below are key points supporting our proposal:

- 1. Conservation of Existing Trails:** The Central Highlands forests hosts a network of trails that showcase the region's unique biodiversity and natural beauty. These trails are not only vital for recreation but also serve as corridors for wildlife and contribute to ecosystem health. Protecting and maintaining these existing trails is paramount to preserving the integrity of the forest and ensuring continued access for generations to come.
- 2. Creation of New Trails:** With Victoria experiencing rapid population growth, it is imperative to expand opportunities for responsible recreation to meet the needs of our growing community. By strategically developing new trails within the Central Highlands Forests, we can disperse visitation and alleviate pressure on parks closer to Melbourne, such as the Dandenong Ranges and Yarra Ranges. New trails will open up undiscovered areas of the forest, providing diverse experiences for bushwalkers and hikers regardless of their skill level.
- 3. Relieving Pressure on Urban Parks:** Overcrowding in popular parks near Melbourne has become a pressing issue, impacting visitor enjoyment and environmental sustainability. By promoting the Central Highlands Forests as alternative destinations, we can encourage a more balanced distribution of outdoor enthusiasts and reduce congestion in urban parklands and well-loved parks such as Wilsons Prom.

4. **Community Engagement and Well-being:** A growing body of empirical evidence is revealing the value of nature experience for improved mental health. Accessible bushwalking and hiking trails not only enhance physical health but also nurture mental wellness. Encouraging outdoor activities in less crowded environments fosters a deeper connection with nature and promotes community well-being.
5. **Environmental Stewardship:** Any trail development must be carried out in accordance with best practices in environmental stewardship. This includes conducting thorough impact assessments, implementing sustainable trail design, and engaging in ongoing monitoring and maintenance to minimise ecological disruption and impacts on water supplies critical for Victorians.
6. **Preservation Benefits:** These lands provide an opportunity to preserve them to allow recovery of impacted areas through rewilding, improving biodiversity and stream flow over time. Preservation and recovery of these areas benefit bushwalkers and the whole community.
7. **Ongoing preservation:** Bushwalking Victoria supports the creation of the Great Forest National Park in line with the VEAC Assessment (2024) & Leadbeater's Possum Recovery Plan that highlight the potential of a national park as a long-term solution for habitat protection. This would link the existing Yarra Ranges, Kinglake, Lake Eildon national parks and the Cathedral, Bunyip and Moondarra state parks and provide protection and preservation of remote and natural areas of the Central Highlands.

In conclusion, Bushwalking Victoria strongly supports the expansion and protection of bushwalking and hiking trails in the Central Highlands forests. This initiative not only addresses immediate challenges related to overcrowding but also contributes to the long-term conservation and enjoyment of our natural landscapes.

We urge the Eminent Panel to consider our proposal and collaborate with stakeholders to realise the full potential of the Central Highlands forests as a premier destination for outdoor recreation.

Thank you for considering our submission. We look forward to contributing to the consultative process and working together towards a sustainable and vibrant future for bushwalking in Victoria.

Regards



Robyn Shingles
President
Bushwalking Victoria Inc