



Response to draft Kororoit Regional Park Strategic Plan Grassy Plains Network and VNPA

23 May 2022

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1 The Grassy Plains Network

The Grassy Plains Network is an independent organisation representing land management professionals, academics, ecologists and community members concerned about the ongoing decline of grassy ecosystems across Melbourne and its surrounds. We advocate for improved grassland protection and management.

Many of our members and supporters are acknowledged experts in the management and restoration of grassy ecosystems. Many have led long-term efforts to preserve grasslands across the Victorian Volcanic Plain. Some have been crucial to the establishment of the native seed industry, others to the development of best-practice monitoring methods for grasslands. We have members and supporters who have been working for decades with community to raise awareness of the importance of grassland conservation. Collectively, we have worked at every level of government, across all of Melbourne's north and west, and across much of Victoria, in Landcare, CMAs and in dozens of community and environmental organisations.

2 The Victorian National Parks Association

The Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA) has been at the forefront of nature conservation campaigns for 70 years. It is one of Victoria's leading nature conservation organisations. It is an independent, non-profit, membership-based group, which exists to protect Victoria's unique natural environment and biodiversity through the establishment and effective management of national parks, conservation reserves and other measures.

Its activities include strategic campaigns, education programs and developing policies, through to hands-on conservation work, as well as programs to promote the care and enjoyment of Victoria's natural heritage.

3 Intro

We welcome the speed at which this park is developing and look forward to its future as a special regional park showcasing grassy values.

We understand the purpose of the strategic plan is broad in scope and in a 10-15 year timeframe. Nevertheless, the plan would benefit from increased detail and some further emphasis.

We have significant concerns regarding the level of conservation significance suggested in the current text and visualisations. While we recognise that no survey has been undertaken since the 2010 report by Biosis, we nevertheless consider it important to emphasise the potential presence of high-quality patches of grassland outside the Clarke Road Nature Conservation Reserve.

Potential high visitation rates and status as a Regional Park mean that it is important to recognise the considerable challenges that will follow with maintaining quality grassland values. To that end we believe a greater emphasis needs to be made on the conservation aspects of the park and the mechanisms for achieving that conservation. This concern and emphasis flows through to targets, tenure, restoration and positioning around ecological connectivity and Biodiversity Sensitive Urban Design.

The main regional visitor's centre north of Neale Rd and close to Kororoit Creek escarpment is supported in principle, provided its final location avoids remnant grassland – as informed by further ecological surveys.

The intention to have regular burning regimes for the grasslands is supported. They need to be implemented by experienced grassland managers, based on up-to-date on-site data and inspection, and an effective monitoring program and post –burn weed control.

4 Importance of land acquisition

We welcome the rapid acquisition of the Kororoit Regional Park land. If not all land is to be acquired prior to the release of the final version of this Strategy, then it would be helpful to include a map showing potential and actual acquisition and some discussion of the consequent staging. Priority should be made in acquiring areas with the highest conservation value and bringing them into immediate pest plant and animal management as a matter of priority.

5 Need clarity of tenure

We do not agree with the current suggestion that the only area designated as a Nature Conservation Reserve is the Clarke Road Grassland BCS 3.

Tenure classification will be very important to ensuring appropriate protections for the better areas of grassland across the site. It is not the case that Regional Parks and Nature Conservation Reserves offer the same protections. Nature Conservation Reserves will move over to be under the National Parks Act when the new land classification scheme comes into effect.

We are concerned that areas not given this higher status will have their conservation priority downgraded in practice. We would like to see an active approach to expanding existing Nature Conservation Reserves in the area and adding new high conservation value areas into Nature Conservation Reserves or other recognised Protected Areas Statuses. With Natural Temperate Grassland being one of the lowest protected vegetation types in the country, there is a strong need to expand the protected areas estate to protect high conservation value sites under the law and tenure.

6 FFG Act emphasises conservation

The natural values of Kororoit Regional Park need to be maintained and enhanced despite the pressures of being a regional park. The FFG Act places a duty of care on government authorities in this regard, and it is important to recognise that that duty of care is greater now than prior to 2021 when the Act came into force and when the Park was first envisaged. As a consequence, the regional park now must become more conservation focused and actively protect and manage the habitat and habitat requirements of FFG Act listed species in the area.

7 Importance of survey

Without up to date ecological and fauna survey work, no substantive design can occur. Anecdotal evidence suggests some degradation of grassland; however, the extent and

distribution is unknown. Ecological and fauna survey work should begin as early as practicable. Survey work on surrounding public land such as roadsides should occur as soon as possible.

8 Protect conservation values south of Neale Road

The Grassy Plains Network and the VNPA cannot yet support the location of a visitor's centre south of Neale Rd. This is an area that has previously been mapped as being of high conservation significance. The loss of any native grasslands for development is unacceptable and will not meet community expectations.

The north-south road and visitor infrastructure will introduce roads, traffic, buildings, lights and other disturbance between what must be assumed to be two main high quality grassland blocks (until evidence to the contrary) – a site which instead should be revegetated to link these blocks.

South of Neale Rd should be shown as a conservation zone with only low key walking tracks/board walks, interpretative signage and nature observation hides.

Connecting Neale Road to the Western Highway with a road through the Park is a recipe for traffic management disaster.

9 Potential to mislead

It may be sensible to not raise visitor expectations too much regarding proposed infrastructure. We believe the current visual presentation of the park in the Strategy may be misleading, for two reasons. Firstly, it shows substantial visitor infrastructure located south of Neale Road, which should not be assumed. Secondly, it suggests the only area of high conservation importance south of Kororoit Creek is the Clarke Road Grassland Nature Conservation Reserve, which is unlikely to be the case; other high-quality patches are likely to be present north of Neale Road as well

10 Need greater emphasis on BSUD principles

Given the high degree of urbanisation that will occur around the park, it is important for Parks Victoria to actively promote a broad set of Biodiversity Sensitive Urban Design principles. This commitment needs to be stated clearly within the Strategy, and examples given, such as reduced lighting, noise walls for fauna not just humans, use of native vegetation in street plantings, species-specific connectivity measures across the broader landscape for terrestrial and aquatic species, and the effects of overshadowing on grassland values.

Adjacent development should be limited to low density, low impact development – preferably including local open space or sports fields as buffers to areas of conservation significance. Neale Rd should preferably be 2 lane instead of 4 lane, it should avoid artificial light pollution into the park, and incorporate fauna underpasses or overpasses.

Parks Victoria needs to lead this conversation with agencies such as Melbourne water and the VPA, and that leadership role needs articulation within the Strategy.

11 Ecological connectivity

The Strategy could be improved by including further discussion of matters of connectivity. For instance, visually showing a walking trail extending to BCS 1, and for sketching out other regional connections, such as to BCS 5 on the other side of the Western Highway. In addition, specific reference to mechanism for improving connectivity, such as road crossing infrastructure for fauna, should be clearly referenced. Articulating these provides a greater sense of vision.

12 Restoration

The Strategy needs a strong statement about the significance of restoration and further articulation about the pathways through which large-scale restoration might be achieved. Much of the Park is degraded grassland. Using the word “regeneration” (as occurs throughout the Strategy) suggests a naturalistic, passive approach to enhancing conservation values. This is likely to be completely insufficient, though the extent to which the grasslands are degraded is yet to be formalised through an up-to-date survey.

It is important to state in this Strategic Plan that it is likely that a large-scale restoration program will be required. This will need to be coordinated with the MSA team because of the substantial restoration effort required across the Western Grassland Reserves. This is a program that will require years to establish and scale-up, and it is important to recognise the challenge and plan for it.

The word “restoration” should be included within the Vision for the park: “protected and restored expanses...”

13 Managing biodiversity alongside high visitor load

High visitor loads can constitute a threatening process for the biodiversity values of Kororoit Regional Park. This will need to be carefully managed. It would be useful to have this tension foregrounded in the Strategy lest visitor experience become more important than conservation.

Creating strong community and friends groups will be one important tool for conservation here, and appropriate emphasis should be placed on establishing and nurturing such groups from the very outset and be clearly articulated within the strategy.

The Start with the grasslands publication should be used to plan infrastructure surrounding existing grasslands, this document is endorsed by the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects, See document here- <https://vnpa.org.au/publications/start-with-the-grasslands/>.

Hard copies of the Start with the Grasslands document can be provided to Parks Victoria and planner, please contact Jordan at jordan@vnpa.org.au.

14 Management targets for native vegetation types

Targets need to be included in the Strategic Plan. We recognise that these cannot be fully articulated until survey work is undertaken. Nevertheless, there is enough prior survey information to set out interim targets, which can then be refined following further ecological surveys. At the very least, if up-dated surveys are done over the next year or two, management targets should be set out in the park masterplans or other documentation immediately following that. Waiting five or ten years to implement targets will only invite further loss of conservation values.

15 Funding of active conservation management

Implementation of this regional park needs to include an adequate budget for managing native vegetation and revegetation. It is of great concern that at present there seems to be a reliance on Melbourne Strategic Assessment funding – yet this only covers measures for Growling Grass Frog and management of the Clarke Road Grassland Nature Conservation Reserve.

The majority of the high quality grassland (let alone the modified grassland) we understand is not covered by MSA funding. Given Parks Victoria's general lack of management of urban grassland reserves in recent decades, this situation needs to be addressed. Hence there is a need for conservation management targets as discussed above, which go beyond the narrow scope of the MSA, and an adequate dedicated State budget to ensure their implementation.

16 Conservation Zoning of the park

The delineation of the park into two zones: Conservation Management Zone and Conservation and Recreation Management Zone is supported in principle – however the latter zone implies that active conservation management may or may not occur depending on recreation priorities and funding constraints. Hence the Conservation Management Zone, and formal nature conservation zoning status, needs to be expanded to include other known high quality remnant vegetation, to ensure its protection and management.

17 Legislative framework

The Melbourne strategic Assessment Act 2020 needs to be added to the list of relevant legislation.

18 Growling Grass Frog Conservation Plans

The MSA GGF conservation plans, including GGF Areas of Strategic Importance, and more detailed species conservation planning for specific river reaches and wetlands, needs to be clearly integrated into the Strategic Directions documents and subsequent park masterplans.

19 Research opportunities can advance conservation goals

Parks Victoria should actively pursue the kinds of research partnerships that could promote the conservation goals of Kororoit Regional Park. As one example, the University of Melbourne is seeking to progress research on the use of clean fill as a substrate for large-scale grassland seeding activities.

20 Existing infrastructure

We welcome the recognition in the Strategy that buildings may be repurposed. Consider retention of existing infrastructure where possible. Fenceposts can be retained, tanks can become “silo art”, buildings repurposed, sheds stripped to their frames, all of which serve to speak to the history of the site, to inject a richness of place, and become elements that future design can work with.

21 In conclusion

We welcome the opportunity to engage further on what is an exciting project. Emphasis needs to be clearly kept on conservation lest it be overwhelmed by the visitor experience offer.

Parks Victoria is encouraged to think beyond the confines of the park boundary, beyond conventional practice, to embrace best practice conservation approaches and actively look to expand the protected areas estate.