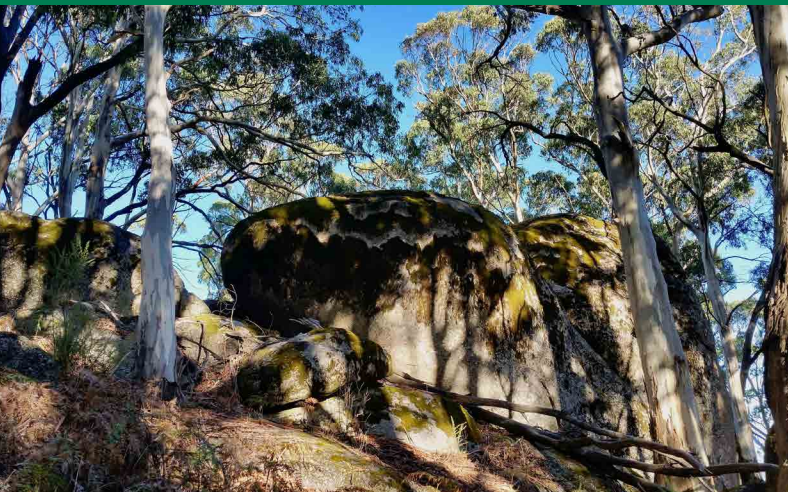




# PROTECTING THE STRATHBOGIE FOREST

A COMMUNITY, BIODIVERSITY & POLICY IMPERATIVE



# SAVE OUR STRATHBOGIE FOREST

AUGUST 2018

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to members of the Save Our Strathbogie Forest Campaign (formerly the Strathbogie Sustainable Forest Group) Committee for their contributions to this report and five years of campaigning to bring us to this point.

Protecting the Strathbogie Forest

A community, biodiversity and policy imperative

Produced by: Bertram Lobert for the Save Our Strathbogie Forest Campaign.

Report design: Flying Pig Design

All images © Bertram Lobert, unless otherwise noted.

Front cover Greater Glider image: Lance Williams

Printed on recycled paper.

**find us on** **facebook** Our Strathbogie Forest

[www.strathbogiesustainableforests.wordpress.com](http://www.strathbogiesustainableforests.wordpress.com)

Supported by:



Victorian National Parks Association  
Level 3, 60 Leicester Street, Carlton, Victoria, 3053  
t. 03 9347 5188 e. [vnpa@vnpa.org](mailto:vnpa@vnpa.org) w. [www.vnpa.org.au](http://www.vnpa.org.au)

Endorsed by:



# CONTENTS

---

Summary	2
Proposed Strathbogie Forest Conservation Reserve	4
Why protect the Strathbogie Forest?	5
1. Overview	6
2. Threatened and iconic species of the Strathbogie Forest	8
3. Current forest values and protection	11
4. Future forest protection	14
5. Climate change adaptation	19
6. Nature-based tourism and regional development	20
7. Threats to the Strathbogie Forest	21
8. Community advocacy and support	23
9. Final word	24

---

## Acknowledgement of Country

The Strathbogie Forest is part of the traditional lands of the Taungurung people and we wish to acknowledge them as Traditional Owners of the forest and surrounding ranges. We also pay our respects to their Elders, past and present.

# SUMMARY

## A vision for the future

The Strathbogrie Forest has been ignored for too long. The Victorian Government has the opportunity to capitalize on the strong community support and compelling weight of policy, which underpin the significant benefits of protecting the Strathbogrie Forest.

Though modest in size, the statewide significance of this forest is now beyond argument. Its protection in a conservation reserve is urgently required for meeting National Reserve System targets, Victorian Government protection commitments and for the survival of iconic national and state endangered fauna species.

Forest protection will provide, not only significant biodiversity outcomes, but demonstrable support for regional communities, a genuine commitment to people caring about nature, improved visitor experience, and increased tourism opportunity. Regional communities and businesses want protection of the natural environment and the benefits of sustainable economic development, particularly the burgeoning economies around nature-based tourism - these will return real benefits to regional Victoria.

Save Our Strathbogrie Forest recommends that the Victorian Government enable the formal protection of the Strathbogrie Forest under the National Parks Act, encompassing all of the existing State Forest and other associated public land, as part of its election commitments in 2018.

The Strathbogrie Forest has statewide significance for meeting National Reserve System targets, Victorian Government protection commitments and for the future survival of the endangered Greater Glider possum.

## Delivering on Government commitments

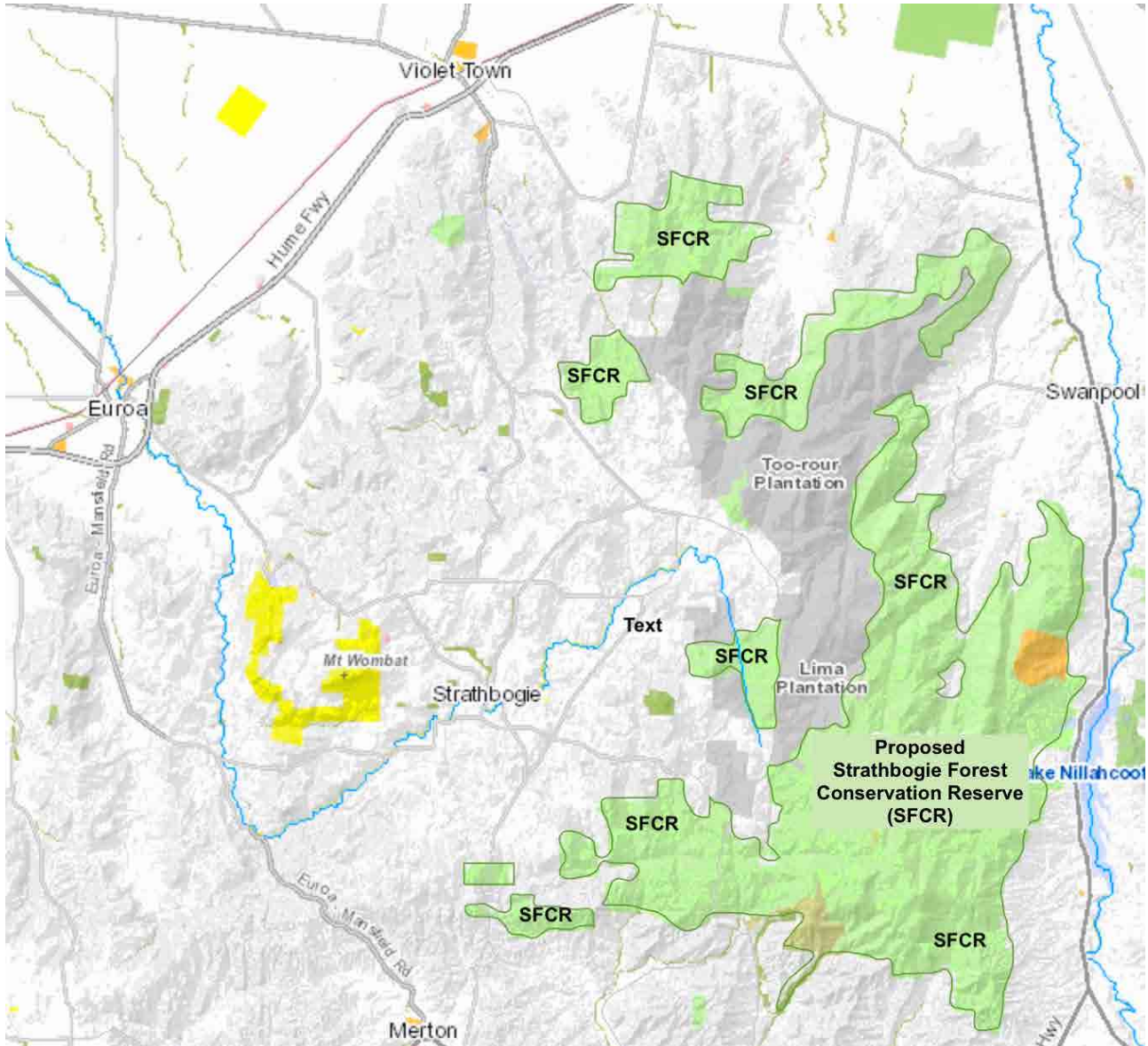
The establishment of a Strathbogrie Forest conservation area as part of the government's 2018 election platform helps achieve many government commitments:

- It will show that the Victorian Government is listening to regional Victorians and that it recognizes the passion of the local community to see these forests protected.
- It will provide a platform on which to announce new jobs and opportunities in regional Victoria.
- It will demonstrate government leadership in the protection of forests and threatened species by delivering on national and international biodiversity protection commitments.
- It will demonstrate genuine implementation of Biodiversity 2037 under both Goal 1 and Goal 2, and under Priorities 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 17 and 18.
- It will deliver on the commitment to implement the relevant VEAC recommendation relating to the investigation of these areas for strategic additions to the state and national reserve system.
- It will help deliver on commitments under the *Climate Change Act 2017*, by reducing emissions from timber harvesting and enabling increased carbon sequestration.
- It will match and beat an election promise made by the Victorian Liberal Party ahead of the 2014 Election.

## Strathbogie Forest Values

1. 74% (177,600 ha) of native forest in the Strathbogie Ranges has been cleared. Less than 2% of the Strathbogie Ranges is permanently protected in reserves. The 24,000 ha Strathbogie Forest is the largest block of public land in the Strathbogies, but only 870 ha (3.5%) has permanent protection.
2. The Strathbogie Forest is of statewide significance for the Greater Glider possum, listed as a threatened species under the federal *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act* and the *Victorian Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act*. The forest has one of the healthiest Greater Glider populations known in all Victoria. The forest is also a regional stronghold for several other threatened and iconic species.
3. Improved protection of the Strathbogie Forest will contribute significantly to the reserve shortfall in the Central Victorian Uplands Bioregion, identified by the Victorian Government's own analysis.
4. The Victorian Government's Biodiversity Response Planning and Strategic Management Prospects identify the Strathbogie Forest as one of the state's highest priorities in relation to investment and planning.
5. The Strathbogie Forest has the highest climate change adaptation 'values' of any part of the Strathbogie Ranges. It has been classified as a 'semi-autonomous' region in the Goulburn Broken CMA's Climate Adaptation Plan. This assessment is made on the basis that (a) the high values of remnant native vegetation are maintained and (b) logging and changed fire regimes (planned burning) are a key pressures.
6. The Strathbogie Forest is the last and only stronghold for the hundreds of forest-dependent plant and animal species that once occurred across the entire Strathbogie Ranges. The forest is now cut off from similar forest types to the east and south, yet still contains significant natural values that are highly valued by local and regional communities.
7. The higher altitude and rainfall 'core' of the forest currently has the highest conservation value of any land in the Strathbogie Ranges, yet, it has the poorest level of protection of any public land in the Strathbogie Ranges.
8. Victorian Government analyses shows that the Strathbogie Forest has a variety of significant biodiversity values (old-growth trees, forest-dependent species). This is largely because the area has avoided the devastating impacts of clear-fell logging and wildfire.
9. Local communities are committed to improving management of the Strathbogie Forest and ensuring that the broader and long-term economic and environmental benefits of the forest are shared by all Victorians.
10. Local communities and many local businesses see an opportunity to benefit from these forests if they are protected and can be showcased regionally as part of a tourism drawcard.

# PROPOSED STRATHBOGIE FOREST CONSERVATION RESERVE



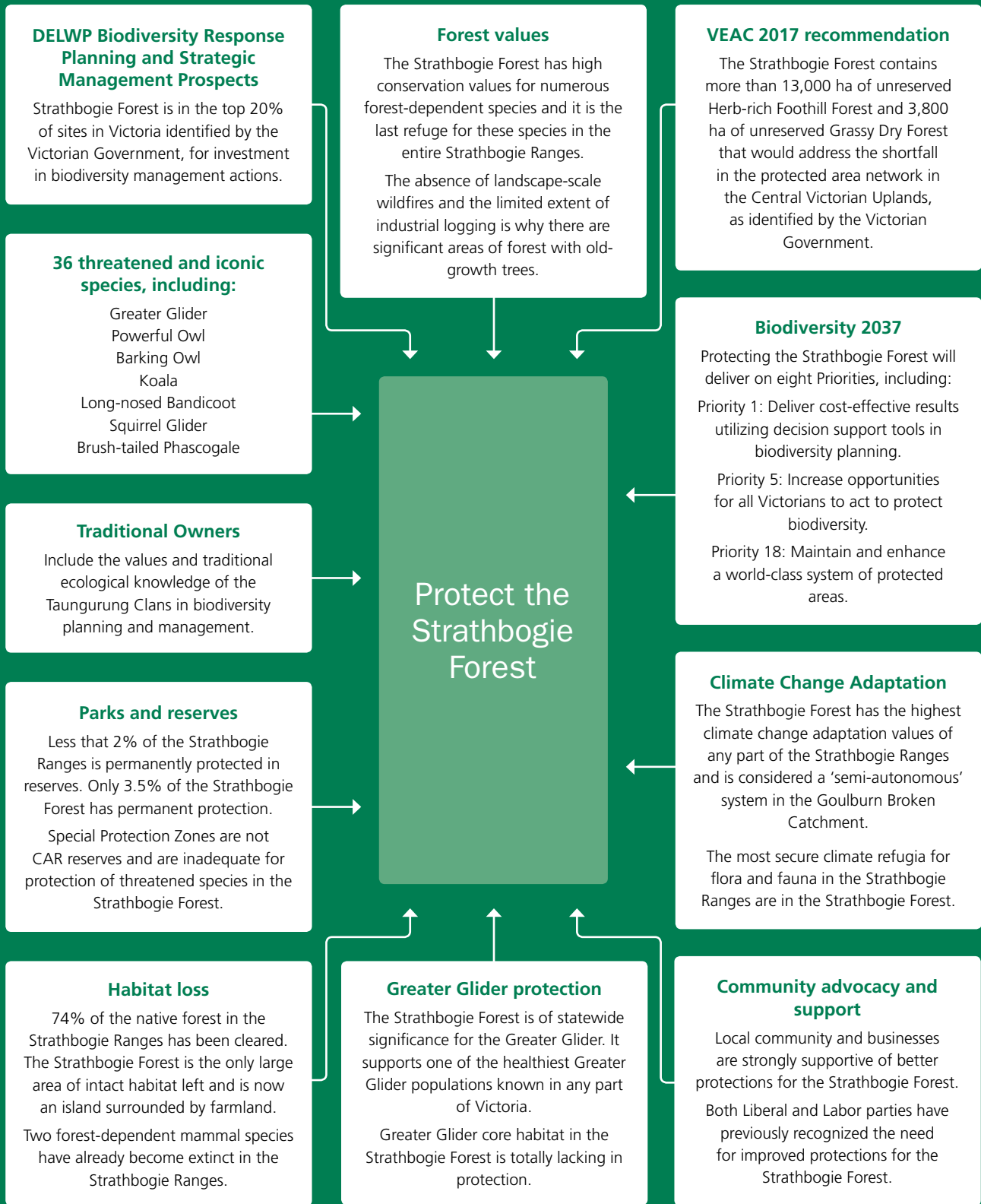
The proposed Strathbogie Forest Conservation Reserve (SFCR), in the far east of the Strathbogie Ranges, would encompass all of the existing State Forest and other associated public land (in green, above; map base - NatureKit web portal).

The proposed reserve comprises the last extensive areas of native forest, the highest conservation value forest and the last secure habitat for all forest-dependent fauna species in the entire Strathbogie Ranges.

A total of 34 flora and fauna threatened species are known from the Strathbogie Forest including: Greater Glider possum, Squirrel Glider possum, Eastern Pygmy Possum, Brush-tailed Phascogale, Powerful Owl and Barking Owl.

Creating this reserve is in line with the principles and targets of the National Reserve System, the National Forest Policy, Biodiversity 2037, DELWP's Biodiversity Response Planning and multiple threatened species management goals.

# WHY PROTECT THE STRATHBOGIE FOREST?



# 1. OVERVIEW

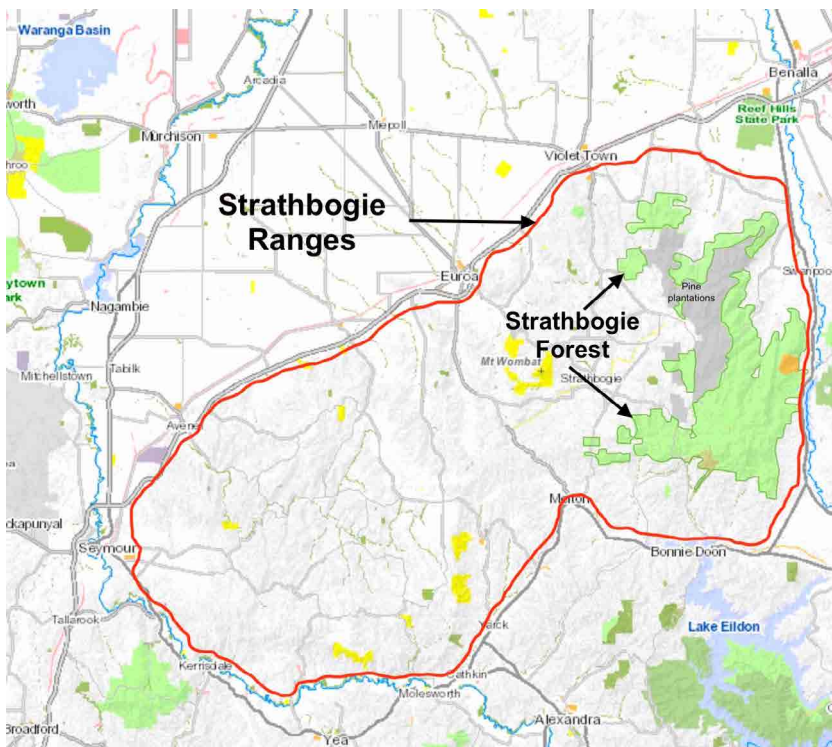
The Strathbogrie Ranges in northeast Victoria cover an area of 240,000 ha and are separated from the main part of the Great Dividing Range by the Goulburn and Broken Rivers. Their isolation from the main range, their geology and topography, together with their proximity to arid, inland Australia, have combined to develop a unique combination of landforms; a characteristic biota that is notably different to the adjacent ranges to the east and south has evolved as a result.

In the last 150 years, the Strathbogrie Ranges have lost 74% of their native forest cover and at least three local species are known to have become locally extinct.

The 24,000 ha Strathbogrie Forest\* is by far the largest remnant of native forest remaining in the Strathbogrie Ranges and the last ecologically intact refuge for forest-dependent species. The northern sections of the forest are now substantially fragmented, whilst the southern sections comprise a relatively large core of high conservation value native forest.

The forest and its unique cargo of flora, fauna and fungi is now an island separated by river valleys and farm land from similar forests in the Great Dividing Ranges to the east and south.

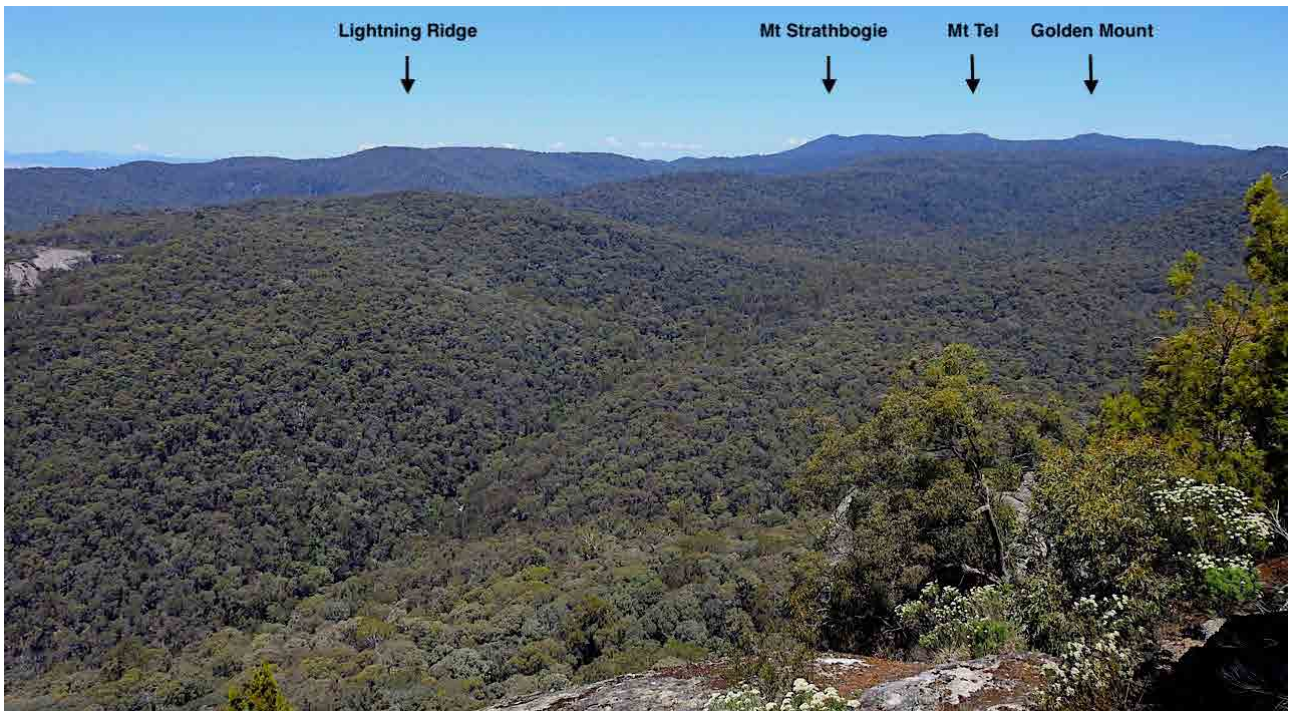
The Strathbogrie Forest represents the only secure habitat in the entire Strathbogrie Ranges, for the long-term survival of hundreds, perhaps thousands of forest-dependent species.



Public land (green and yellow) in the Strathbogrie Ranges  
Map source: NatureKit web portal

\* Strathbogrie Forest = forested, largely contiguous Public Land in the mountainous eastern part of the Strathbogrie Ranges, comprising the Strathbogrie State Forest and several small conservation reserves.





View across the Strathbogie Forest from Rocky Ned Lookout.



View across the Strathbogie Tableland ca.1890 (Image: J.R. Donald). The tall forests of the Strathbogie Ranges were once extensive and rich in timber resources. The comprehensive clearing of this forest, by ring-barking and burning, created valuable, productive farmland, but it also changed the nature of these ranges forever. The Strathbogie Forest (on the distant horizon) is the last intact remnant of this forest type in the entire Strathbogie Ranges.

## 2. THREATENED AND ICONIC SPECIES OF THE STRATHBOGIE FOREST

Two mammal species, the Spot-tailed Quoll and Yellow-bellied Glider possum, are thought to have become extinct in the Strathbogie Ranges in the last 20 years. Both are hollow-dependent species that require large areas of healthy forest. The extinction of these species indicates that the Strathbogie Forest is already under stress and that logging is likely to have directly contributed to the Yellow-bellied Glider's demise.

A total of 34 flora and fauna threatened species are known from the Strathbogie Forest including: Greater Glider possum, Squirrel Glider possum, Eastern Pygmy Possum, Brush-tailed Phascogale, Powerful Owl, Barking Owl. The plights of several threatened and iconic species are described below.

### Greater Glider



Photo: Lance Williams

The Greater Glider possum was recently listed as a threatened species under the federal *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act* and the *Victorian Flora and Fauna Guarantee (FFG) Act*. Populations of this species have collapsed across much of its entire eastern Australian range (from Victoria to Queensland), with Victorian populations decreasing by up to 87% between 1997 and 2010 (EPBC Conservation Advice 2016); former strongholds no longer provide assured survival for the species.



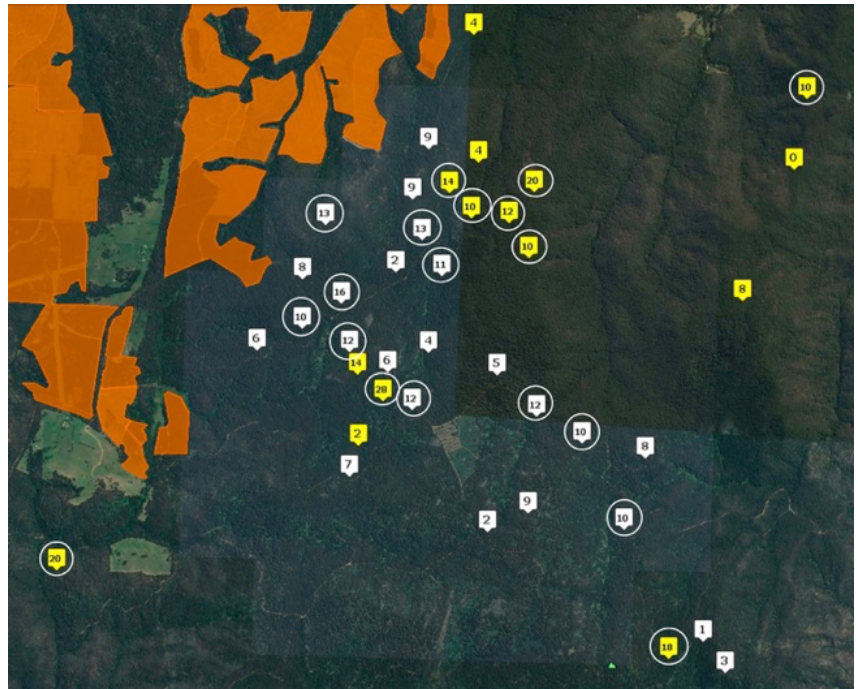
Photo: Lance Williams

The Strathbogie Forest supports one of the healthiest Greater Glider populations known in any part of Victoria.

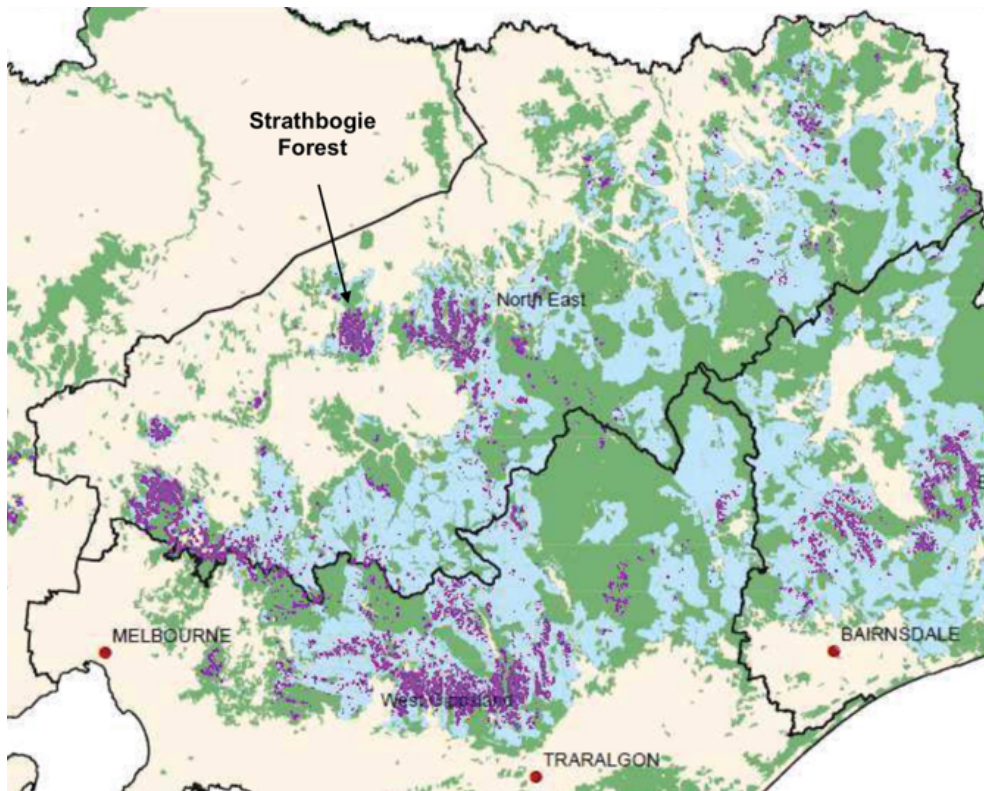
Native forest logging and too-frequent planned burns are two of the main drivers of this collapse. The Victorian Scientific Advisory Committee recently requested that the Environment Minister suspend timber harvesting in the Strathbogie State Forest because the Greater Glider population had not suffered the declines so common in other parts of the state (Greater Glider FOI documents 2017). Government and citizen science surveys in 2016-17 found parts of the Strathbogie forest contained the highest densities of Greater Gliders (up to 28 animals per km transect), ever recorded in Victoria, perhaps Australia. Densities of 11 Great Gliders per km or greater are protected by 100 ha logging exclusion zones in other parts of Victoria.

The Strathbogie Forest in northeast Victoria supports one of the healthiest known populations of the Greater Glider in Victoria. Most of the Strathbogie Forest's Greater Glider population is found in the vegetation type Herb-rich Foothill Forest, in State Forest, where its highest-quality habitat is being progressively degraded by a combination of timber harvesting and planned fuel-reduction burning.

The sites surveyed for Greater Gliders in core habitat, 2016-17. Numbers shown are detections/km (equivalent) from citizen science surveys (white) and Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning surveys (yellow). Circles indicate sites with densities of 10 Greater Gliders/km or above. (Orange = pine plantations)



Vicforests' Interim Greater Glider Conservation Strategy (2017) provides no mandatory protections for the species, and allows logging of Greater Glider habitat in the Strathbogie Ranges, even in forest where high densities of the glider have been documented (as occurred in Barjarg Flat coupe).



This map shows the distribution of high quality Greater Glider habitat in NE Victoria, indicating the importance of the Strathbogie Forest for Greater Glider conservation. Purple = High Quality Greater Glider habitat, blue = forest available for logging, green = forest (source: Vicforests interim Greater Glider conservation strategy (2017)).

## Powerful Owl

The Powerful Owl, protected under the *Victorian Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act*, is an apex predator in forest ecosystems, with the Greater Glider among its preferred prey items. The Strathbogie Forest is a known stronghold for the species in the northeast and there have been several recent, repeat detections of the species at several sites in the Strathbogie Forest.

As with the Greater Glider, the Powerful Owl depends, for nesting and survival, on the very large trees with large hollows that are still relatively abundant in the Strathbogie Forest. Repeated forest disturbance and the incremental loss of old growth trees spells disaster for the species.

Whilst there are protections for this species in State Forest, their application by Vicforests and government departments is inconsistent. The Special Protection Zones currently in place for this species in the Strathbogie Forest are each based on a single detection of the species 20 years ago, and have not been reviewed since then.



Photo: Duncan Fraser

## Long-nosed Bandicoot

The Long-nosed Bandicoot was once common in forests and wetlands across the Strathbogie Ranges. As more and more vegetation on private land has been degraded (through human activity and drought/climate change), the dense ground-layer habitat necessary for bandicoot survival has disappeared. Now, like the other forest-dependent species, the wetter, higher altitude areas of the Strathbogie Forest constitute the stronghold for bandicoots.

In spite of increasing awareness among the general population, reporting rates for the species have plummeted. Most sites that support bandicoots on private property are in the agricultural zone and have an unpredictable future, given climate change projections.

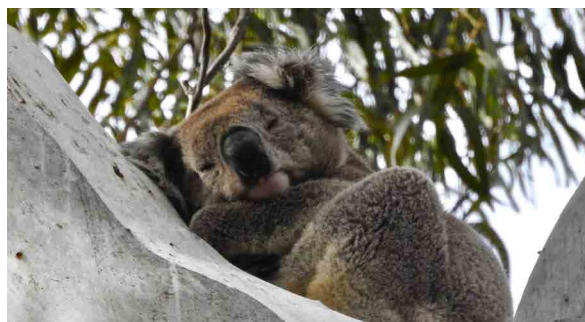
The last secure refuge for this species in the entire Strathbogie Ranges is the Strathbogie Forest. Even within the forest, where extensive areas of suitable habitat remain, the species appears to be rare.



Photo: Joseph C. Boone

## Koala

The Strathbogie State Forest is a regional stronghold for the Koala and there have been numerous recent detections of this species within the forest. As with the Greater Glider, there are no special protections for Koalas in the Strathbogie Forest. Vicforests' voluntary Koala protection protocol (2015) relies on the logging contractor to assess Koala residency in the forest and locate Koalas in trees prior to felling. This represents a considerable conflict of interest and expects the contractor to perform the role of an ecologist. The instruction is entirely inadequate for the management of Koalas in this forest.



# 3. CURRENT FOREST VALUES AND PROTECTION

## 3.1 Old growth trees and Herb-rich Foothill Forest

The Strathbogie Forest comprises diverse vegetation types, including Grassy Dry Forest, Heathy Dry Forest, Shrubby Dry Forest, Rocky Outcrop Shrubland, Swampy Riparian Woodland and Damp Forest, but by far the most extensive vegetation type is Herb-rich Foothill Forest. Commonly known as 'peppermint-gum forest', this is the most extensive forest type in the Strathbogie Forest. It is dominated by several tree species, particularly Manna Gum, Narrow-leaf Peppermint, Mountain Gum, Messmate and Victorian Blue Gum.

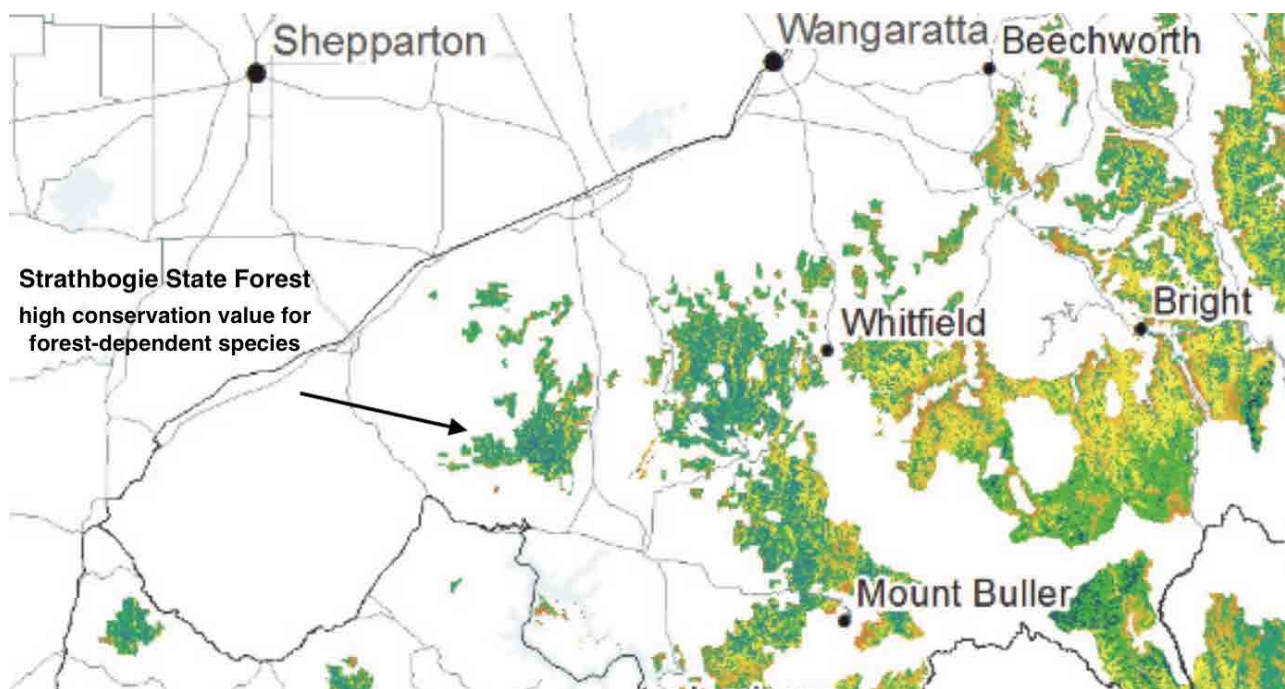
Less than 2% of the original extent of Herb-rich Foothill Forest in the Strathbogie Ranges is permanently protected, and only 6% of what has not been cleared, is permanently protected.

The higher altitude zone of the forest (700-1000 m) is dominated by Mountain Gum (*Eucalyptus dalrympleana*) and Messmate (*E. obliqua*), which grow to significant height, girth and age. Mountain Gum has a wide geographic distribution in Victoria, but the great size and age of trees in the Strathbogie Forest, is unusual. Individual Mountain Gums reach heights of up to 60 m and diameters of up to 4 m. Determining the age of eucalypts is difficult, but we estimate that many of the older Mountain Gum specimens in the Strathbogie Forest are in excess of 300 yo.

The Herb-rich Foothill Forest occurring at these higher altitudes in the forest represents a special variant of this vegetation type, because of these extensive, near-pure stands of Mountain Gum.



*Mountain Gum (Eucalyptus dalrympleana), Strathbogie Forest.*



*Forest-dependent species analysis – State Forest: blue polygon = Strathbogie Ranges, dark green/blue shading = high quality (Conservation Values of State Forests, VEAC 2017. Fig 2.11 p. 27)*

### 3.2 Forest values

A recent Victorian Government report (Conservation Values of State Forests, VEAC 2017) confirmed that the Strathbogie Forest has ‘High’ values for the biodiversity categories ‘broad forest species’, ‘tree age’, ‘focused forest species’ and ‘forest-dependent species’, among others. These values are in large part due to the relatively high density of big, old trees (particularly gums) in the forest (see 3.1, above).

These analyses support the scientific and community arguments that the Strathbogie Forest has significant forest values that underpin the forests’ key biodiversity assets, including – large, old trees, Greater Glider and Powerful Owl.

That the Strathbogie Forest still has such significant biodiversity values results largely from the absence of industrial logging and the complete absence of landscape-scale wildfires in the last 200 years.

### 3.3 Current forest protection

The Strathbogie Forest contains a variety of ‘reserves’ established between 1986 and 2000 (Land Conservation Council 1986, Department of Natural Resources and Environment 2001). Most of these sites occur in the lower elevation and drier forest-types and around the margins of the forest; there are no protected areas in the highest conservation value forest - the higher altitude and rainfall ‘core’ habitat.

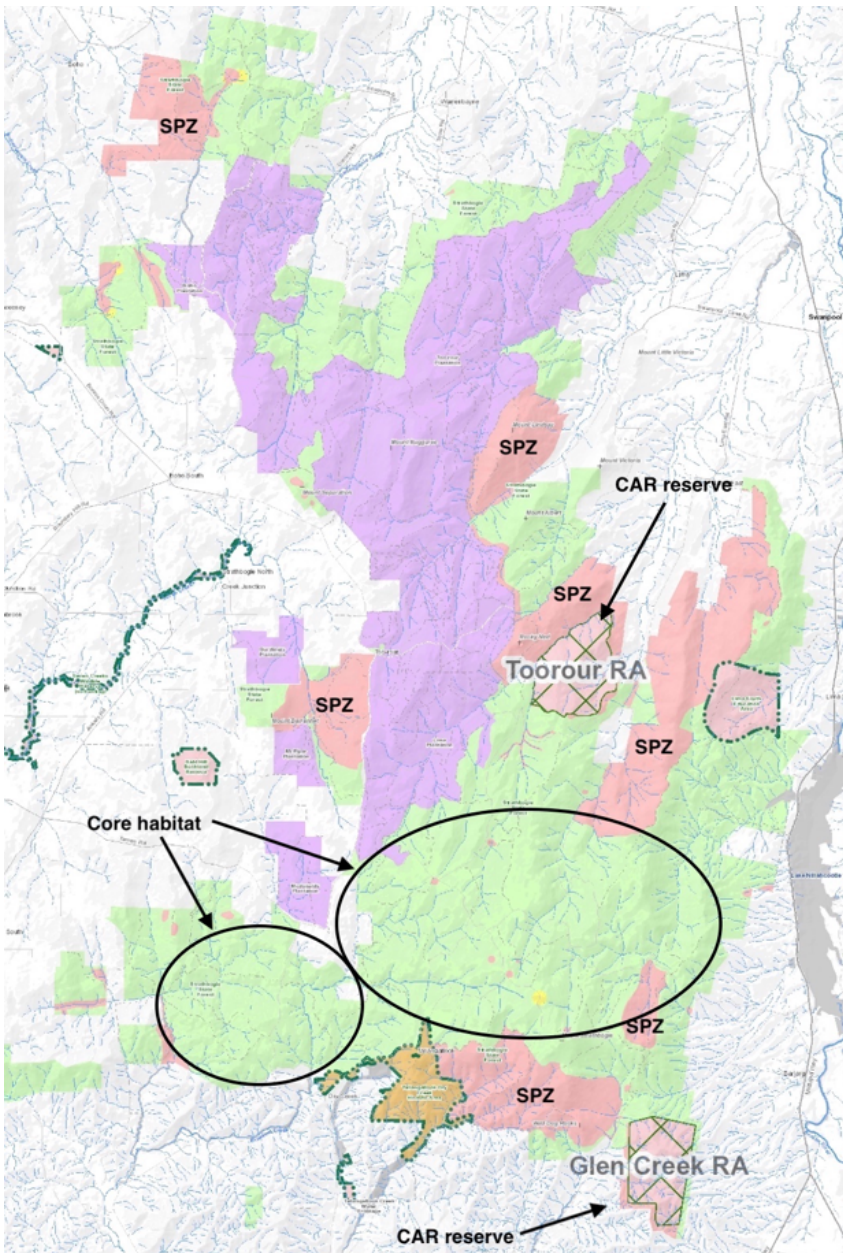
The recent VEAC assessment of public land emphasized that Special Protection Zones do not meet Victoria’s obligation under the Australian Government National Reserve System categories as ‘protected areas’ and are not part of the Comprehensive Adequate and Representative (CAR) reserve system (Statewide Assessment of Public Land, Discussion Paper, 2017a). In addition, none of the Strathbogie Forest Special Protection Zones have ever been reviewed for their suitability to protect the values they were created to protect in 1999.

It is clear that DELWP has the authority and the responsibility to update the Forest Management Plan for North East Victoria (2001) (Statewide Assessment of Public Land 2017a, p 50), yet has failed to do so, despite repeated community requests based on the increasing importance of the forest for threatened species protection.

Less than 2% (3997 ha) of the Strathbogrie Ranges is permanently protected in CAR reserves and only 3.5% (870 ha) of the Strathbogrie Forest has permanent protection (Toorour and Glen Creek Reference Areas – see map).

The highest conservation value forest remaining in the entire Strathbogrie Ranges ('core habitat') is without any formal protection, let alone permanent protection.

The two small CAR reserves in the Strathbogrie Forest (map below) are wholly inadequate for protecting the Greater Glider and its apex predator, the Powerful Owl, whose long-term survival rely on the forest's core habitat. All the other 'protected areas' (Special Protection Zones, Historic reserves and Education reserves) do not qualify as permanent protection and are not CAR reserves (see also 4.2)



*Land tenure in the Strathbogrie Forest. Green = state forest 'general management zone', pink = 'special protection zone', pink with green border = education zone, pink with cross-hatch = reference area, brown = historic area, purple = pine plantation (map source - NatureKit web portal).*

# 4. FUTURE FOREST PROTECTION

## 4.1 Representativeness of the protected area system

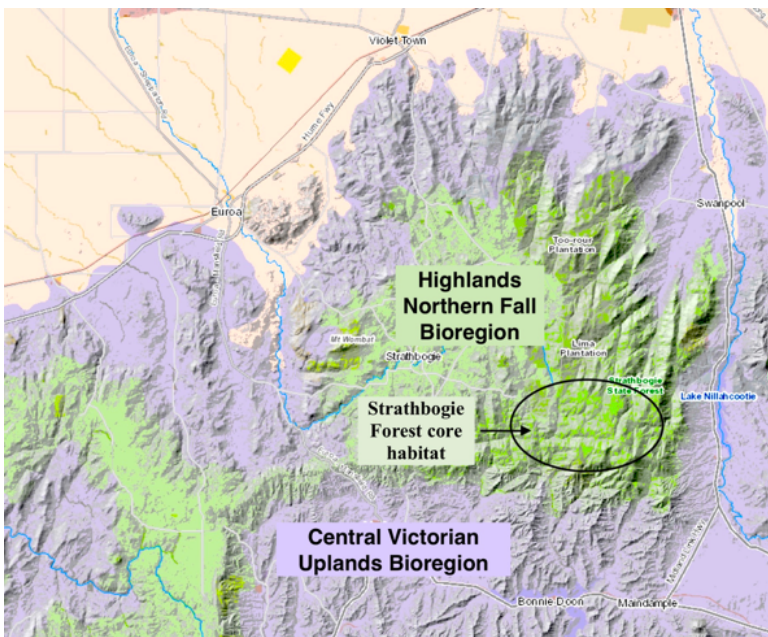
Recommendation R20 in VEAC’s Final Report states that public land in the Central Victorian Uplands (CVU) and adjoining bioregions “be assessed for their potential to improve the representativeness of the protected area system” (Statewide Assessment of Public Land, VEAC 2017, p 38).

The Strathbogie State Forest is predominantly in the Highlands Northern Fall Bioregion (HNF, adjoining the CVU), with the forest’s margins in the CVU. The Statewide Assessment of Public Land Discussion Paper (p. 70 & 71) notes that several vegetation types are significantly under-represented in the CVU. Two of these – Herb-rich Foothill Forest and Grassy Dry Forest – occur extensively as unreserved Public Land within the Strathbogie Forest. The predominant forest type in the Strathbogie Forest (Herb-rich Foothill Forest) is under-represented in the adjoining Central Victorian Uplands Bioregion by more than 15,000 ha. Also under-represented, and by a similar amount, is Grassy Dry Forest.

EVC name	CVU shortfall (ha)	HNF Pre-1750 extent (ha), Strathbogie Ranges	HNF State Forest current extent (ha), Strathbogie Ranges
Herb-rich Foothill Forest	-15,422	91,609	13,083
Grassy Dry Forest	-14,752	40,363	3,800

The Strathbogie Forest contains more than 13,000 ha of unreserved Herb-rich Foothill Forest and 3,800 ha of unreserved Grassy Dry Forest.

Giving permanent protection to all Public Land in the Strathbogie Forest would make a significant contribution to addressing the shortfalls described above.



*Bioregions in the Strathbogie Ranges: Central Victorian Uplands and adjacent Highlands Northern Fall, indicating core habitat of the Strathbogie Forest.*



## 4.2 National Reserve System

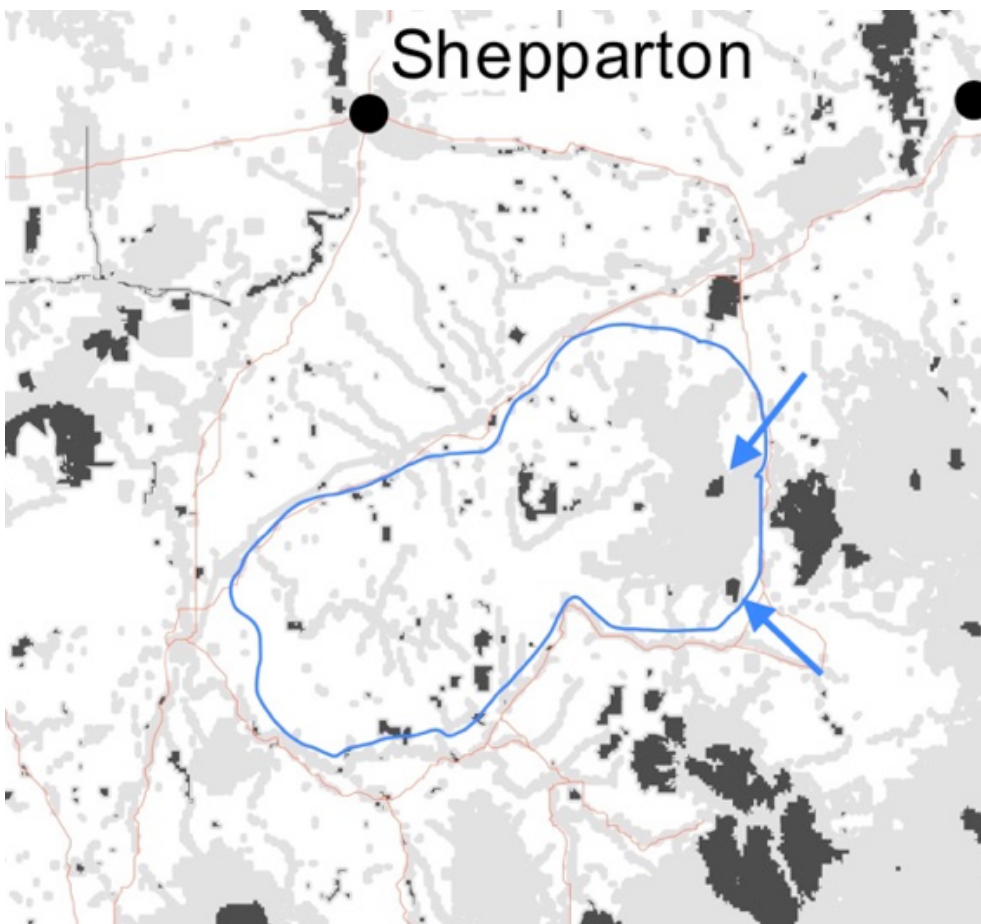
Permanent protection for the Strathbogie Forest makes even more sense when we consider that the Strathbogie Ranges as a whole have lost 74% of their original tree cover (Ecological Vegetation Class extent data), and that the only unreserved crown land remaining in the entire Strathbogie Ranges is in the Strathbogie Forest.

The only permanently protected areas in the Strathbogie Ranges are small and isolated from each other and, collectively, account for less than 2% (3997 ha) of a forest system that once spanned 240,000 ha. On their own, these protected areas fall far short of National Reserve System targets for a Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative (CAR) reserve system.

Improving protections based on the vegetation type shortfall identified in Section 4.1 is clearly warranted and that argument is strengthened by two additional protection targets:

- Protect Core Areas of habitat for the long-term survival of threatened ecosystems and threatened species habitats by 2030
- Protect Critical Areas for Climate Change Resilience, such as refugia, to act as core lands for broader, whole-of-landscape approaches to biodiversity conservation by 2030. (Statewide Assessment of Public Land Discussion Paper, VEAC 2017, p 68)

The targets of the National Reserve System are a compelling reason for substantially increased protections of remaining native vegetation on public land in the Strathbogie Ranges, including the Strathbogie Forest.



*Permanently protected areas (black polygons) within the Strathbogie Ranges (blue polygon) are small, isolated and widely dispersed. Blue arrows indicate the two CAR reserves in the Strathbogie Forest; grey shading indicates tree cover. (Source: Statewide Assessment of Public Land, VEAC 2017, Fig 2, p 12).*

## 4.3 Biodiversity 2037

The Victorian Government's 20 year Biodiversity Plan lists 20 priority initiatives to improve protection and management of Victoria's biodiversity. The Plan promises much for threatened species, better public land management and government leading by example. Improved protections for the Strathbogie State Forest will help deliver nine of the Plan's priorities:

- **Priority 1: Deliver cost-effective results utilising decision support tools in biodiversity planning processes to help achieve and measure the targets.** The Victorian Government's Strategic Management Prospects decision-support tool has identified the Strathbogie Forest as being in the top 20% of sites across the entire state for investment in biodiversity conservation (see 4.4, below).
- **Priority 2: Increase the collection of targeted data for evidence-based decision-making and make all data more accessible.** The identification of the Strathbogie Ranges as critical Greater Glider habitat is a direct result of this priority. The Victorian Government, via a DELWP Biodiversity On-ground Action Grant, funded the Strathbogie Ranges Conservation Management Network's 'Strathbogie Citizen Science Project'; aimed, specifically, at increasing knowledge of threatened and iconic species, including the Greater Glider and Powerful Owl.
- **Priority 3: Raise the awareness of all Victorians about the importance of the state's natural environment.** Protecting the Strathbogie Forest provides an opportunity to raise awareness of the natural environment in a region where nature-based tourism occurs but is under-performing. Research to better understand the community's awareness of biodiversity and its relevance to them, would add significantly to current tourism promotion initiatives (see Priority 8).
- **Priority 4: Increase opportunities for all Victorians to have daily connections with nature.** The Strathbogie Forest is one of the more accessible areas of native forest to several of the major regional centres in northeast Victoria – e.g. Benalla, Seymour, Shepparton, Mansfield. Visitor usage on weekends and during public and school holidays is high. This forest offers exceptional opportunities to Victorians wanting to connect with nature.
- **Priority 5: Increase opportunities for all Victorians to act to protect biodiversity.** This is exactly what communities around the Strathbogie Forest have been championing for several years. If this priority is an honest goal of this policy and of government, then action to support the community's endeavors should also be a high priority.
- **Priority 7: Help to create more liveable and climate-adapted communities.** The importance of the Strathbogie Forest as a watershed area for the Broken and Goulburn River systems is only likely to increase under projected climate change scenarios. The forest is classified by the GBCMA's Climate change adaptation plan (2017), as being capable of 'semi-autonomous adaptation'; this is in contrast to the remainder of the Strathbogie Ranges, now cleared of native vegetation, which will require resource-intensive 'planned climate change adaptation' (see section 5, below).
- **Priority 8: Better care for and showcase Victoria's environmental assets as world-class natural and cultural tourism attractions.** The Strathbogie Forest is a significant environmental and community asset in the heart of the Goulburn Broken catchment. Through local government 'tracks and trails' policies, a variety of tourism activities and attractions are being developed to showcase the region.

- **Priority 17: Deliver excellence in management of all land and waters.**

Protecting the Strathbogie Forest is an opportunity to respond to key threats, such as the impact of logging and too frequent fire on old-growth trees, forest health and protection of several national and state-threatened species.

- **Priority 18: Maintain and enhance a world-class system of protected areas.** With 74% of the Strathbogie Ranges cleared, and only 3% of the former extent of native vegetation currently under permanent protection, a substantial increase in protected land is urgently required to meet 'comprehensive, adequate and representative' protected area targets. Additional protections would address the shortfalls in the reserve system, as identified by the Victorian Government's Statewide Assessment of Public Land (VEAC 2017), and would deliver on this priority.



Spectacular hidden waterfalls are among of the many visitor attractions in the Strathbogie Forest.

## 4.4 Biodiversity Response Planning

A key component of the Andrews' Government's Biodiversity 2037 plan is Biodiversity Response Planning, an area-based planning approach to biodiversity conservation that will "...deliver the Biodiversity Plan's goals and targets and to try to prevent more species from becoming threatened." <https://www.environment.vic.gov.au/biodiversity/natureprint>

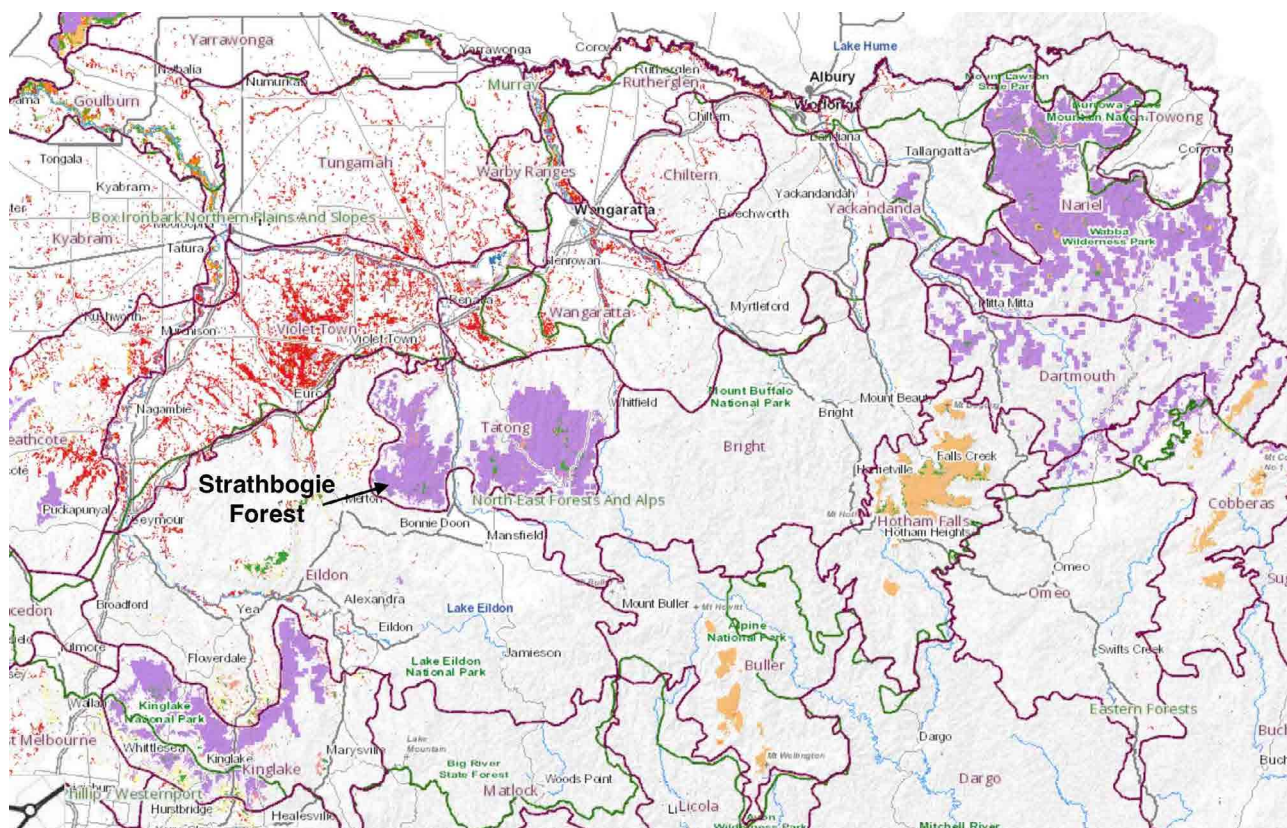
As part of this planning process, the Victorian Government has identified the Strathbogie Forest as being in the top 20% of sites across the entire state for investment in biodiversity conservation (see map, below).

As we now know, the Strathbogie Forest contains the healthiest populations of Greater Gliders known from any part of the state (see Section 2)

and, coupled with the focus of the Strategic Management Prospect, this emphasizes the regional importance of the Strathbogie Forest for biodiversity conservation.

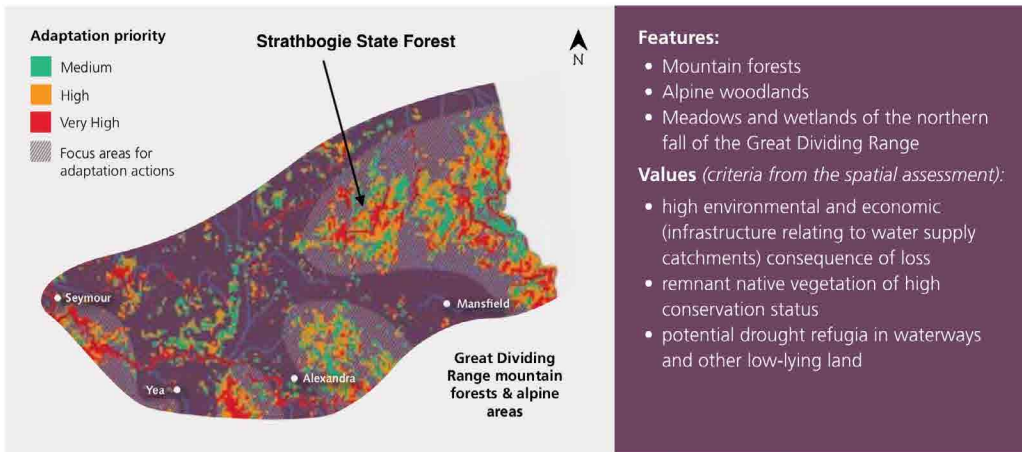
According to DELWP's Strategic Management Prospects Interactive Report for the Tatong landscape (which includes the Strathbogie Forest), improved management, including cessation of native forest logging, "...should deliver relatively large benefits to multiple species, or to species of particular conservation concern..." <https://delwp.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html?appid=e0289e3fe12f436490ef63d4444a05dff#>

Improved protection of the Strathbogie Forest would clearly underpin and secure the management gains envisaged for the Strathbogie Forest.



Strathbogie Forest is a high-priority site for Strategic Management Prospects in Biodiversity Response Planning (Map source: NatureKit web portal).

# 5. CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION



Semi-autonomous adaptation focus areas: Great Dividing Range mountain forests and alpine areas (Climate Change Adaptation Plan, Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority 2016)

In prioritizing actions for climate change adaptation in the Goulburn Broken Catchment, the Strathbogie State Forest has been identified as having high asset values, high adaptive capacity and low vulnerability in its current state. As such, it has been classified as ‘semi-autonomous’, i.e. having medium to very high values and requiring minimal adaptation intervention under climate change projections (Climate change adaptation plan, Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority 2016).

The report recognizes that the Strathbogie Forest has the highest climate change adaptation ‘values’ of any part of the Strathbogie Ranges.

It is noteworthy that ‘timber harvesting’ is regarded as a ‘key pressure’ on vulnerability to climate change (p. 36). Degrading or compromising the ecological integrity of the Strathbogie forest risks “... high environmental and economic consequences of loss.” (p. 36). This may in turn result in a reduction in its ‘semi-autonomous’ capacity, hence requiring greater intervention (resources) to maintain its adaptive capacity.

Approximately 1300 ha of the Strathbogie Forest are recognized as an important climate refuge site in the Strathbogie Ranges. These areas (green

shaded polygons) are located within the core habitat of the Strathbogie Forest (National Estate Identification and Assessment in the North East Region of Victoria, 1999, Values Map 13). Indeed, the Strathbogie Forest represents the only identified climate refuge for flora and fauna in the entire Strathbogie Ranges.

More recently, the National Reserve System identified national targets for protected areas, including “critical areas for climate change resilience, such as refugia, to act as core lands for broader, whole-of-landscape approaches to biodiversity conservation by 2030.” (Statewide Assessment of Public Land Discussion Paper p. 68).



# 6. NATURE-BASED TOURISM AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Protecting the Strathbogie Forest will have the additional benefit of kick-starting nature-based tourism and economic development.

The community is working with local government, traditional owners and other stakeholders to expand nature-based tourism opportunities in and around the Strathbogie Forest. The Great Strathbogie Trail concept builds on existing infrastructure (eg. forest tracks, access points, picnic areas, camping sites) and visitor attractions (eg. waterfalls, lookouts, giant trees), to become an important draw card for tourism to the region.

Victorians spend in excess of \$7B annually on nature-based outdoor activities (Victoria's nature-based outdoor economy, 2016). The traditional pursuits of bushwalking, camping and car touring, which are popular, now share public land with multiple other outdoor pursuits including: trail running, mountain biking, eco-trail (horse) riding and orienteering, all of which are growing in popularity.

This vision for the Strathbogie Forest perfectly complements forest protection and is underpinned by Regional Development Victoria's 'Regional Statement' (2015).

A recent survey of local businesses found strong support for protecting the Strathbogie Forest among 31 local businesses (Letter of support, local business - to Minister D'Ambrosio, 28.2.2018).

"Governments shouldn't try to tell you precisely what you need. They should listen to what you want, because you know best."

- Premier of Victoria  
(Victoria's Regional Statement 2015, p 4)

**The Great Strathbogie Ranges Tracks & Trails**

**A proposal for the promotion of cultural & nature-based recreational activities within the Strathbogie Ranges**

**RECREATIONAL ACTIVITY VALUES**

- TOURING
- PICNICING
- CYCLING
- TRAIL RUNNING
- HIKING
- WALKING

**NATURAL & CULTURAL HERITAGE VALUES**

- GOLD MINING HERITAGE
- TIMBER HERITAGE
- ABORIGINAL HERITAGE
- FAUNA
- FLORA
- LANDSCAPE

**Vision; Make the Strathbogie forest a nature-based tourism destination by establishing a network of tracks and trails linking visitor facilities and the region's spectacular scenery. Connect the tracks and trails network to the broader tourism opportunities and economy in the region.**

The Strathbogie Forest straddles two of Regional Development Victoria's Partnership districts – Goulburn and Ovens Murray, where priorities include:

- Managing structural adjustment impacts arising from industry changes, international competition, slowing economic growth and environmental change (ibid. p. 36)
- A triple-bottom-line approach to growth that encompasses economic, social and environmental initiatives (ibid. p. 44)
- Attracting international visitors to the area's natural attractions, particularly in the alpine and north east food and wine areas (ibid. p. 44)

Nature-based tourism represents an economic development opportunity that will involve the local community and deliver for the local economy.

# 7. THREATS TO THE STRATHBOGIE FOREST

Whilst wildfire, too-frequent planned burning, invasive species and climate change are significant threats to the Strathbogie Forest, the most serious, immediate and manageable threat, is native forest logging.

Although the forest has a long history of logging, most historic logging was selective and left behind a mixed-age forest. The impact of logging in the last two to three decades has significantly eroded the forest's natural capital. Significant areas of the forest have not recovered from logging and the subsequent forest regeneration attempts. These areas are now scrub-thickets, or have been converted into de facto plantations. Although the forest has relatively 'high' values for hollow-bearing trees, most are old-growth (150-300 yo) trees. Those trees that will become hollow-bearing in the next 50 to 70 years are missing due to logging.

The greatest threat is the deliberate logging of the highest conservation value areas remaining in the entire Strathbogie Ranges. The logging of both Parlours' Creek and Barjarg Flat coupes, in 2016/17 and 2018, respectively, and the plan to log another 360 ha in core Greater Glider habitat in the coming years, demonstrates that native forest logging in this forest is incompatible with biodiversity and threatened species conservation.

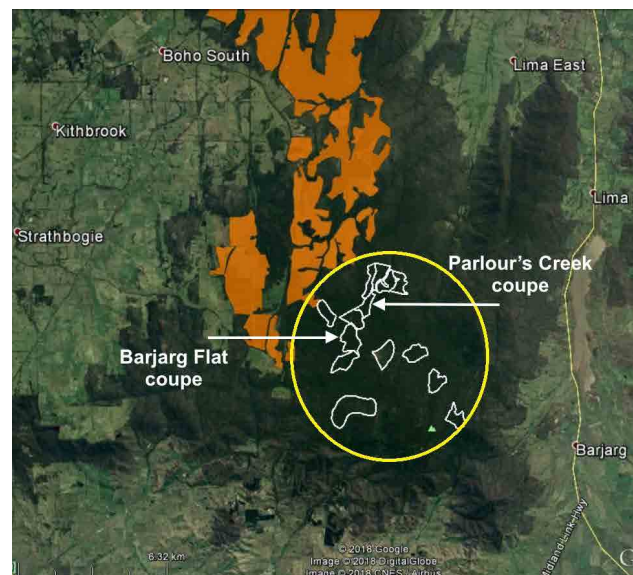
The logging of Parlour's Creek coupe occurred in spite of:

- repeat detections of Powerful Owl in the coupe.
- high densities of the Greater Glider in and adjacent to the coupe.
- detections of Koalas in the coupe.
- the Environment Minister's Scientific Advisory committee requesting that logging of this coupe be suspended.

The logging of Barjarg Flat coupe was done with full knowledge that:

- the coupe contained the highest density of Greater Gliders known in any forest in Victoria.
- Greater Glider populations have crashed by up to 87% in parts of Victoria where they were once common.
- logging and forest disturbance are known to be major factors in Greater Glider population collapse.
- other coupes with lesser biodiversity values were on the Timber Release Plan.

It's clear that both logging and the mindset behind logging are incompatible with management of the Strathbogie Forest's increasingly valuable cargo of natural values.



Greater Glider core forest habitat – yellow circle. Vicforests' current coupes – white polygons.



**Parlour's Creek coupe** – this forest used to be high-quality Greater Glider, Powerful Owl and Koala habitat; all three species were recorded in this coupe before logging.



**Barjarg Flat coupe** – was one of the highest conservation value areas remaining in the Strathbogie Forest. It had the highest Greater Glider densities recorded anywhere in Victoria.



# 8. COMMUNITY ADVOCACY AND SUPPORT

For the last four and a half years, the local community has campaigned for better management of the Strathbogie Forest. We have written many hundreds of postcards, letters and emails to the government and to the Department of Environment, Land, Water & Planning. We have taken local and state politicians on tours of the forest. We have made petitions, carried out citizen science, taken many hundreds of people into this magical forest and put it on the local and political map. In 2014-15, both the Liberal party (former Environment Minister, Ryan Smith) and the Labor Party (former Environment Minister, Lisa Neville) recognized the need for improved management of the Strathbogie Forest.

We have used evidence-based arguments to show that forest management policy in the Strathbogie Forest is delivering poor outcomes for the broader health of the forest, for threatened species such as the Greater Glider and Powerful Owl and for local communities.

Nationally, faith in politics and politicians is at an all-time low and the direct experience of communities around the Strathbogie Forest is evidence of this fact.



An election commitment to protect the Strathbogie Forest is an opportunity for the Victorian Government to show that it is listening to regional communities and is keen to deliver on its biodiversity policy targets.



# 9. FINAL WORD

According to the North East Forest Management Plan (DNRE 2001), the ‘rule book’ for managing the Strathbogie Forest:

**“Forest management will be flexible and responsive to new information.”**

New information is now available and in the face of ongoing challenges (including land use, threatened species and climate change), management must be responsive and decisive in order to protect the values of the Strathbogie Forest.

Of the 240,000 ha of forest that once covered the entire Strathbogie Ranges, 74% has been cleared, The current level of permanently protected forest in the entire ranges (3%, just 7,355 ha) is amongst the lowest levels of protection of any landscape in Victoria and is a major failing of the Victorian Government’s aim to have a ‘world class protected area network’.

Current management of the Strathbogie Forest’s ecological cargo and ecosystem services is ad hoc and high risk. Multiple layers of land-use policy and ecological evidence point unequivocally to the need for vastly improved nature conservation measures for the Strathbogie Forest.

**Protection of the Strathbogie Forest, in line with the principles and targets of the National Reserve System, the National Forest Policy, Biodiversity 2037 and multiple threatened species management goals, must be implemented before further irreparable degradation occurs.**



## Sources mentioned in this report

- North Eastern Area (Benalla-Upper Murray) Review, Final Recommendations (1986). Land Conservation Council, Victoria.
- Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act (1988). Victorian Government.
- National Estate Identification and Assessment in the North East Region of Victoria (1999) Published by the joint Commonwealth and Victorian Regional Forest Agreement Steering Committee. Commonwealth of Australia.
- North East Regional Forests Agreement (1999). Department of Natural Resources and Environment, Victorian Government.
- Forest management plan for the North East. (2001) Department of Natural Resources and Environment, Victorian Government.
- Koala management instruction (2015). Vicforests.
- Climate change adaptation plan (2016). Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority.
- Conservation Advice, *Petauroides volans*, greater glider (2016). Threatened Species Scientific Committee. Department of Environment and Energy
- Conservation Advice, *Petauroides volans* Greater Glider (2016) Threatened Species Scientific Committee, *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*
- Conservation values of State Forests (2017). Victorian Environment Assessment Council.
- Freedom of information request, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Victorian Government, ef: FI/03/4297 (2017) Greater Glider web link- <https://strathbogiesustainableforests.files.wordpress.com/2017/07/foi-delwp-protect-of-the-greater-glider-markup.pdf>
- Greater Glider survey of the Strathbogie forest – preliminary results (2017, unpublished). Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Victorian Government.
- Interim Greater Glider Conservation Strategy (2017). Vicforests.
- Protecting Victoria's Environment - Biodiversity 2037 (2017). Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Victorian Government.
- Victoria's nature-based outdoor economy (2016). A Marsden Jacob report prepared for Outdoors Victoria and Sport and Recreation Victoria.
- Victoria's Regional Statement – your voice, your region, your state (2015). Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources, Victorian Government.

