



Connecting Country (Mount Alexander Region) Inc

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Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning
PO Box 500
Melbourne VIC 8002

Dear Sir / Madam,

RE: Submission on the draft Biodiversity 2036 strategy

Connecting Country appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback on the Biodiversity 2036 document. Strategic documents such as this are very important as they can significantly influence where governments and their employees direct their energies and efforts over many years. With support and encouragement from the community, state governments are the driver of positive change leading to a healthier landscape for both people and biodiversity. We see this document as a positive step in the right direction.

Connecting Country is a local not-for-profit community organisation. Since 2007, we have been implementing landscape restoration programs across the Mount Alexander Shire and immediate surrounds in central Victoria. We have a dedicated team of paid staff, a committee of management and many other people who contribute through their membership and by volunteering their time, effort and expertise. As we identified during the development of our own 10-year strategic plan (2014-2024), Connecting Country achieves its objectives through a mix of on-ground works, education and engagement, and through supporting local Landcare and other similar community-based land management groups.

Members of Connecting Country's staff and committee of management have carefully considered the draft Biodiversity 2036 document. We have confined our comments to the aspects of the strategy where we can make relevant contributions based on our experience and organisational aims and objectives. We have the following feedback about the Biodiversity 2036 plan:

- The concepts and objectives introduced within this document are worthwhile. In the final version we would like to see clear statewide targets developed with SMART goals (i.e., specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound). This would both allow the success of the document to be monitored and measured, and it would also enable community groups such as Connecting Country to have a better understanding of how our works fit into the bigger picture.
- Mainstreaming biodiversity and connecting people with nature is a worthy goal. Connecting Country's mix of on-ground action, education, monitoring and landcare support offers a successful model for engaging local community. For example, through our work promoting woodland birds across the region, the 'feathered five' have become well known which has in turn led to an increased number of landholders wanting to undertake on-ground habitat improvement works. However, we also believe that there is an immediate need to enhance and manage biodiversity directly with on-ground action using existing science (e.g. implementing existing Action Plans and Action Statement for threatened species) – and we feel this should be the highest priority for the biodiversity strategy.

- From all across the state, we are hearing reports that the effects of climate change are causing significantly reduced successes of revegetation projects. Our own revegetation projects have required more regular repeat visits for watering of young plants than has been required in past years, and also over a longer number of months each year. Some community groups have abandoned undertaking any new revegetation projects entirely for this reason. Therefore, we increasingly consider that a better approach in the face of climate change is to protect existing habitat and to facilitate natural regeneration of new habitat. Permanent protection and stewardship programs like those offered through Trust for Nature and Connecting Country respectfully are successful, cost-effective and need to be properly supported.
- Collecting baseline biodiversity data is important for monitoring changes over time, and there are many existing community groups that have been collecting data for many years throughout Victoria. At present, many people and organisations are losing faith in the Victorian Biodiversity Database as the best and most reliable central source of state-wide flora and fauna data. Due to years of underfunding, there is a growing lag between the time at which data is submitted and the time that it is loaded and available on the Atlas for important decision-making (e.g. fire management plans). There are also many new tools for citizen science data collection that are not yet utilised by the Atlas (e.g. Smartphone apps). We would also expect that this biodiversity Atlas data would feed into the strategic decision support tools being developed to manage species across the state – both threatened and non-threatened, introduced and native – and it is therefore essential that the Atlas is current and reliable.
- With 70% of land in Victoria under private ownership, we feel that the plan should place greater emphasis on the important role of private land in protecting and connecting biodiversity. There are many groups and networks operating at a landscape scale across Victoria that are well-equipped to work with landholders to improve habitat management on their properties.
- Organisations like Connecting Country implement cost-effective biodiversity and habitat restoration programs. However, they need a sustainable funding model to continue to engage and support landholders and Landcare groups to undertake biodiversity conservation projects. We would like to see incentives provided for permanent private protection and a mechanism developed to secure long-term funding for biodiversity conservation across the state.
- Connecting Country expresses some concern on the reliance on computer based modelling. While this approach is appropriate for assessment at a state-wide scale, we consider that local input and knowledge, and ground-truthing, is essential to complement and improve the computer-generated data for the purposes of regional and local landscape-scale decision-making. For example, we generally find that DELWP's EVC mapping provides a reasonable-to-good prediction of the vegetation types likely to be present at a property or other location, but in more than 95% of situations our botanist needs to make adjustments to the extent or types of EVCs to reflect the current on-ground conditions.

Please feel free to contact us to discuss any aspect of our submission.

Yours,



Chris Timewell
Director, Connecting Country



Brendan Sydes
President, Connecting Country