

Before you buy or build:

a guide to
native vegetation
and planning



**KOALA
CONNECT**



Introduction

Thinking of buying a bush block? Building a dream home for your tree change? Maybe extending your home or shed area? This process may require the removal of native vegetation.

We all know that a building permit is a necessary part of the process, however, did you know that you might need a planning permit to remove native vegetation?

In some cases, people are unaware that a permit may be required and may not consider impacts on native vegetation when buying their block or designing their building. This may mean a lot of back and forth with the council to discuss how the design might better minimise



Incentives for the community to protect native vegetation

There are many different programs that support and encourage landowners to protect native vegetation on their land.

Some Councils give their ratepayers a rate rebate for being part of the Trust for Nature program, or taking part in other environmental initiatives.

The State Government has two programs, called Bush Tender and BushBroker. The Victorian BushTender program is auction-based. Landholders tender for contracts to improve their native vegetation. Successful landholders receive periodic payments under signed agreements for management actions above those required by their current obligations and legislation.

Landholders may also enter the Victorian BushBroker program. BushBroker puts landholders who are protecting and managing native vegetation on their properties into contact with permit holders who require offsets. The permit holders then negotiate a price with the landholder to pay for the management and protection of the native vegetation.

Give your Council or local DSE office a call to find out more...

About this brochure:



As more Victorians take the tree change and live outside our metropolitan areas, there is a pressing need to care for our native wildlife such as koalas, and their habitat. One of the best ways we can do this is to improve our planning processes around native vegetation.

The Koala Connect project is funded by Victorian Sustainability Accord and is a partnership between the City of Ballarat, Moorabool, Hepburn and Pyrenees

impacts. Your application will be assessed more quickly if native vegetation issues are considered at the outset of your application: that is, before you buy or build, and *before* you apply for your building permit!

This brochure has been written especially for those with no prior knowledge of the topic, and covers a few key concepts and basic tools to assist you and your local council with the speedy processing of native vegetation applications and enquiries.

BELOW: A River Red Gum spreads its branches over a paddock *Photography: Alison Pouliot*
FRONT COVER: Koala *Photography: Alison Pouliot*



Victorian Local Sustainability Accord

Sustainability Fund
Managed by Sustainability Victoria



Native vegetation: what is it?

Native vegetation is not just trees! Native vegetation includes trees, shrubs, herbs and grasses. An area of land that looks like a paddock could actually be one of the rarest types of vegetation in the state – grassland.

The word “native” is also referred to as indigenous. Native or indigenous vegetation is vegetation which naturally occurs in that region and has not been introduced since settlement.

Characteristics of native vegetation to keep in mind:

- 1. SEASONAL:** You may not realise you have native vegetation on your property! What appears to be a bare patch of clay soil with a few grasses could be a wildflower and orchid wonderland in spring – and a highly endangered plant community.
- 2. UNCULTIVATED:** Rocky areas which have not been ploughed, or paddocks which have not had superphosphate applied are likely candidates for native vegetation being present.
- 3. MESSY LOOKING:** Fallen logs, broken branches and hollows in trees, leaf litter, rocks, huge cracks in the soil – these untidy looking features are characteristic of our unique Australian habitats, and form homes for the wildlife that live in the native vegetation.

Native vegetation is classified into units known as Ecological Vegetation Classes, or EVCs. These are based upon the structure of the vegetation, eg woodland or forest; and the types of plants that live in that vegetation. For example, Shrubby Foothill Forest is a mixed species eucalypt forest with a thick and diverse shrub layer. EVCs tend to be found on certain soils, slopes and aspects, and this is often in the EVC name. The Western Plains Basalt Grassland community is found on the basalt plains.

TIP: you can find out what kind of native vegetation or EVC is on your property by going to DSE's website dse.vic.gov.au, and to the Biodiversity Interactive Maps. Use the "find" function at the top of the map, and enter your property details. Then select "Layers" and select the "Vegetation" folder. Next, select "2005 EVC groups", and make sure the "i" layer is clicked. Click Refresh, then click on the approximate location of your property, and the EVC information will come up on the right.



How do people decide what vegetation is rare?

The conservation of native vegetation and fauna is similar in some ways to the economic system; if there is not much left, its value is higher.

Let's break off momentarily and look at some history – what happened to native vegetation when Victoria was settled? The rich and fertile grasslands and woodlands were ideal natural paddocks for literally millions of sheep, and early white settlers had a golden era of sheep droving. The government paid farmers to clear native vegetation on their land. The fertile parts of the state were used for grazing and cropping and continue to be used so in the present day. The parts of Victoria that are on infertile soils or steep sites were not good farming land and remained clothed in vegetation. Many of these areas form our national parks and reserves today.

Most of the native vegetation we have left remains through a series of happy accidents – the land was too steep for machinery, the soil too poor for grazing, a landowner long ago “liked the look of the trees”, or kept the old paddock trees to provide shelter for stock.

TIP: you can find out the conservation status of the vegetation on your property by repeating the process detailed earlier: go into Biodiversity Interactive Maps. Use the “find” function at the top of the map, and enter your property details. Then select “Layers” and select the “Vegetation” folder. Next, select “Bioregional conservation status of EVC’s”, and make sure the “i” layer is clicked. Click Refresh, and the map will be colour coded according to conservation status. Click on the approximate location of your property, and the information will come up on the right.



The plains of the Moorabool Shire and the Clunes region in Hepburn Shire, the dry open forests in Avoca, the towering moist forests of the Wombat Forest around Trentham – these areas are very different from one another. They are known as bioregions, or natural areas that are grouped together by their geology and landscape character.

A bioregion is a handy way to group areas of land for conservation purposes, because the land use across the bioregion is usually the same. The bioregions that are the flat fertile plains and valleys have been cleared extensively for agriculture – eg the Victorian Volcanic Plain. In this area, most of the native vegetation is regarded as rare and endangered.

The rarity of vegetation on your property is important because it's one of the main factors that your Council or the DSE will use to make decisions on your planning application.

BELOW: Iconic old gum in a largely cleared agricultural landscape. Many types of vegetation remaining in this habitat are classified as endangered as there is so little left. *Photography: Alison Pouliot*



The Native Vegetation Framework

Now that we have defined native vegetation, and whether you have it on your property, let's look at the legislation that drives the need for you to obtain a planning permit to remove native vegetation.

In 2002, the State Government of Victoria released *Victoria's Native Vegetation Management – A Framework for Action*. The Framework is a step by step process that aims to guide local councils, permit applicants and consultants regarding the removal of native vegetation in Victoria. The Framework's main goal is ***to achieve a reversal, across the entire landscape of the long-term decline in the extent and quality of native vegetation, leading to a net gain.***

The Framework requires the local council to apply what is known as “the three step approach”:

- 1) AVOID:** Through careful planning, avoid removing native vegetation altogether.
- 2) MINIMISE:** Through careful planning, avoid removing vegetation as much as possible, or the elements with the highest conservation value.
- 3) OFFSET:** if native vegetation must be removed, then the applicant has to carry out appropriate plantings or land management actions to make up for the loss.

Remember the old saying “reduce, re-use, recycle”? This was a key message in the 1980's and most of us enthusiastically recycle, while forgetting that reducing our consumption, or re-using things was actually the most important part of the message. The Native Vegetation

TIP: An on-site pre-application meeting with your Council planner or environment officer will help with the all important pre-planning design stage. Careful site design which avoids high value areas such as rarer vegetation or large old trees on your property minimises the need for offsets.

TIP: If your property is in a bushfire prone area, contact the CFA (Country Fire Authority). Arrange an on-site meeting to include CFA and the local council so that fire and vegetation issues can be addressed at the same time.

Framework has been interpreted by many in a similar way – people immediately want to know what offsets they need to do, while forgetting that avoiding and minimising the removal of native vegetation is actually much more important.

Some people may assume that the offset process is no big deal: ‘Oh - I can just plant some trees over there’. However it is not that simple! Tree planting or revegetation as an offset is not an option for really rare types of vegetation. If the vegetation is of high conservation significance, an offset involves protecting an existing area of vegetation, securing it on title in perpetuity, and actively managing it for at least a 10-year period OR if this is not a valid option, the applicant needs to find an offset credit on a government program called Bush Broker.

We think it is important to let you know that there are real costs associated with native vegetation removal and offsetting, especially if the vegetation is of high conservation value. However, the good news is that if your planning process emphasises the “Avoid and Minimise” aspects of the Framework, then your need to remove native vegetation will be reduced markedly, or even avoided!

BELOW: Hepburn Shire Planning staff examine a seed head of native grass, next to a property that is one of the best examples of endangered grassy woodland in the Western Victorian region.



An overview of the native vegetation application process

This table is designed to outline the steps involved in the native vegetation application process. Note how much more involved the scoping or design stage is; good design in the early stages may save time and expense later on.

Step ONE: Design stage	<p>Initial concept of house site, works to be done. Initial enquiry to Council.</p> <p>Have I got native vegetation on my property? How rare is it? Have I got large old trees?</p> <p>Can I avoid the removal of native vegetation completely? Can I minimise the need for removal? If I must remove it, can I minimise the removal of the highest value vegetation?</p>
Step TWO: Redesign stage	<p>Redesign initial concept, site plans to ensure that the site conditions guide the development.</p>
Step THREE: Submit application(s)	<p>Download the DSE Applicants Kit. www.dse.vic.gov.au</p> <p>Decide if you would like to complete the applicants kit yourself or hire a consultant to prepare a detailed report.</p>
Step FOUR	<p>Council, and DSE if required, assess your application.</p>
Step FIVE	<p>Once you have been issued a planning permit, you are required to meet all of its conditions. If native vegetation removal cannot be avoided, and offsets are required, suitable vegetation will need to be located and protected as an offset. This part of the process can involve lengthy delays, which is why the removal of endangered vegetation is best avoided.</p>

Pre-application site meeting with Council.

Your Council can advise about whether the Country Fire Authority or Department of Sustainability and Environment should also be involved. For some applications, the council may recommend you hire an environmental consultant or fire expert.

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Further resources and contacts

Local Council

Meet with your **Council planner, environment officer or environmental planner** for initial site design and pre-application meetings.

Catchment Management Authority

Contact your local **Catchment Management Authority** or CMA, refer to their **Regional Native Vegetation Plans** for information on local vegetation.

Department of Sustainability and Environment DSE Biodiversity Interactive Maps

at www.dse.vic.gov.au

Department of Planning & Community Development

<http://www.dpcd.vic.gov.au/planning/>

Land Channel

Find out about zones and possible overlays for your property.

Visit **Land Channel interactive maps**. Reports will show: Parcel details, Utilities, Planning zone summary zones and overlays. <http://services.land.vic.gov.au/landchannel/jsp/reports/ReportsIntro.jsp>

Record the information relevant to your property or print off the report. There is also a basic locality map highlighting your property.

Department of Primary Industries

DPI's New Rural Landholders has produced a summary of issues to consider when purchasing a rural property, including legal compliance obligations.

www.dpi.vic.gov.au



Why do we need to protect native vegetation?

1. Native vegetation is part of our heritage

There are some lovely heritage places in the gold rush era towns of Ballarat, Bendigo and the surrounding regional areas. Most of these places are owned privately, and are protected by a planning overlay known as the Heritage Overlay. Under this overlay, landowners adhere to certain principles when renovating and maintaining their properties. Result: a town or streetscape that preserves our history, helps us connect with our past, is visually pleasing and attractive for all Victorians, including future generations, to experience and enjoy.

In the same way, native vegetation forms the character of the areas that we live and work in, for example, big old paddock trees add to the look of the landscape, the feel of being home.

BELOW LEFT: Heritage housing in Ballarat.

BELOW: Largely cleared agricultural landscape - the paddock trees really add to the beauty of the area. *Photography: Alison Pouliot*



Why do we need to protect native vegetation?

2. Native vegetation is home for much loved Aussie wildlife icons

Animals such as such as kookaburras and koalas need native vegetation to forage for food, raise their young and shelter from predators.

Studies have shown that if the amount of native vegetation in the landscape falls below 10 – 30%, birds

Kookaburra. Photography: Alison Pouliot



such as blue wrens and kookaburras disappear from the area. Protecting native vegetation by law can prevent this from happening.

We would all like to think that future generations will be able to see koalas in the wild – a healthy koala population relies upon large connected areas of forest and woodland. Native vegetation laws can ensure that koalas and other animals are here for the long run.

Sleeping koala. Photography: Erik K Veland



Why do we need to protect native vegetation?

3. Native vegetation does all sorts of useful things for us

A native grassland requires less slashing and weed control and presents less of a fire risk than weedy pasture.

Paddock trees provide homes for little bats (microbats) which control insect species that are crop pests. Native vegetation is deeper rooted than non-native vegetation, preventing run off and salinity by keeping the water table low.



Native vegetation provides habitat for the birds and insects that pollinate our crops. The native vegetation in wetlands purifies our water. These things are known as ecosystem services. Finally, spending time in nature and native vegetation reduces stress and enhance our mental health and wellbeing.

BELOW LEFT: Healthy native vegetation growing on the banks of the Coliban River. *Photography: Alison Pouliot*

BELOW: River red gum paddock tree, home for numerous animals such as microbats. *Photography: Alison Pouliot*



Shires, and the Australian Koala Foundation.

The Project uses the koala as an iconic species to engage with the community around planning, biodiversity and native vegetation.

Another publication in this series is:

“Threatened species of the Ballarat region: a guide for kids” (pictured below left).

Koalas and planning



In 2009, the City of Ballarat became the first Victorian council to incorporate koalas

and their habitat into their planning scheme. Known as the Koala Overlay, this innovative Overlay sets out directions for the protection of koala feed trees and for the safe movement of koalas around Ballarat, via the use of koala friendly fencing.

For more information on koalas in Ballarat, visit the City of Ballarat website www.ballarat.vic.gov.au

Koala Conservation



The Australian Koala Foundation (AKF) is the principal non-profit, non-governmental organisation dedicated to the conservation and effective management of the wild koala and its habitat. The long-term survival of the koala depends on the retention and effective management of suitable habitat to support koalas in the wild. The future of this species will not be sustainable in captivity.

The AKF has several ongoing projects dedicated to saving the wild koala through conserving its habitat and raising funds to enable the AKF to continue running despite its not-for-profit policy. For more information on koalas and their conservation go to www.savethekoala.com



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