



Submission - Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations

Presenter: Dr. Gillian Sparkes, Commissioner
Date: 20 April 2021



Background

The Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability provides independent reports on the health of Victoria's environment and advises government. Many statutory reports are tabled in the Victorian Parliament and include recommendations to Government which require a formal response.

This submission centres on insights and recommendations from the Victorian State of the Environment (SoE 2018) and other 'state-of' reports produced by the Commissioner.

Response to Inquiry Terms of Reference

The Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability's submission had a focus on four key terms of reference for this Inquiry:

1. The benefits of accessing and using different types of environmental infrastructure;
2. The impact of population growth in Melbourne and regional centres on the provision and preservation of environmental infrastructure;
3. Examples of best-practice infrastructure and innovative approaches to securing environmental infrastructure in other jurisdictions; and
4. The impacts of COVID-19 on the importance, use and design of environmental infrastructure.

An objective of the Commissioner's work is to encourage decision making that facilitates ecologically sustainable development (ESD).



Reporting on Victoria's environment to enable practical action.

Co-design and collaboration

Partners

Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP)

Arthur Rylah Institute (ARI)

Environment Protection Authority Victoria (EPA)

Museums Victoria

Parks Victoria

Sustainability Victoria

Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions (DJPR)

Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)

Aboriginal Victoria (AV)

Victorian Fisheries Authority

Melbourne Water Corporation

Trust for Nature

VicForests

Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council

Victorian Catchment Management Council

VicCatchments

Victorian Marine and Coastal Council

Victorian Environmental Assessment Council

Local Government

Australian Bureau of Meteorology (BOM)

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)

Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO)

Geoscience Australia

19 of 20 recommendations from the 2018 Victorian State of the Environment Report were accepted in full, part or in principle by the Victorian Government, addressing issues such as:



- Biodiversity decline – the status of 75% of the 35 indicators assessed for Victoria were in decline or status unknown
- Climate Change impacts – links to energy policy and need to improve localised climate projections
- Waste and resource recovery – importance of transitioning to a circular economy model
- Adapting to Megatrends: Enhanced technology and data sources including use of earth observation, spatial and real time data
- Applying International Frameworks: UN System of Environmental Economic Accounts and UN Sustainable Development Goals

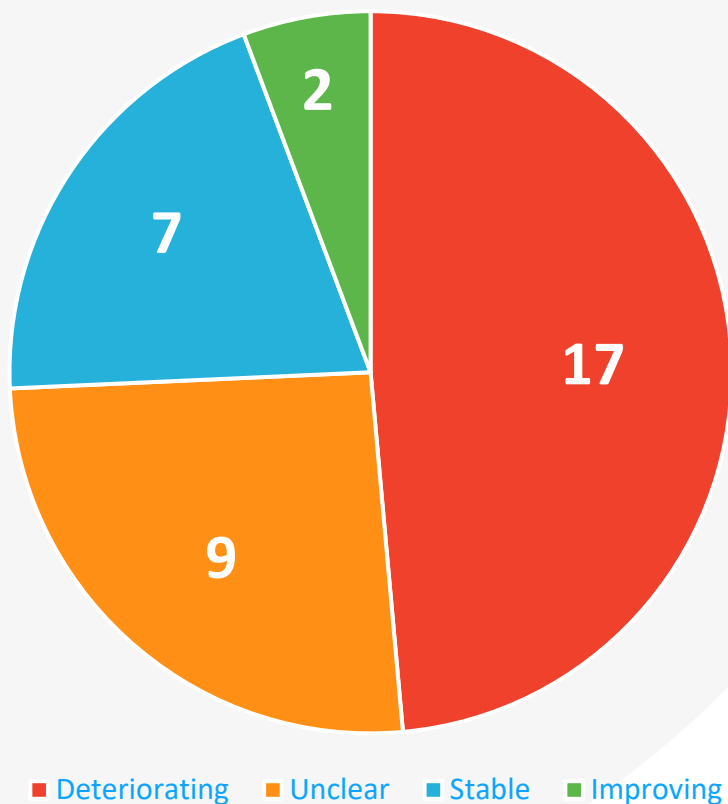
1. The benefits of accessing and using different types of environmental infrastructure

The SoE 2018 Report included a set of 170 baseline indicators for monitoring environmental condition across Victoria. Many of these have relevance to environmental infrastructure (parks and open space, forest and bushland, wildlife corridors and waterways).

Table 1 from the SoE 2018 Report comparing status, trend and data quality of the 170 indicators assessed.

| Status | Indicators% | Trend | Indicators% | Data Quality | Indicators% |
|---------|-------------|---------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|
| Good | 1 | Improving | 10 | Good | 47 |
| Fair | 7 | Stable | 30 | Fair | 31 |
| Poor | 18 | Deteriorating | 30 | Poor | 22 |
| Unknown | 9 | Unclear | 30 | | |

Source: SoE 2018 Report



The State of the Yarra and its Parklands (SoY) 2018 Report assessed the health of the river through 36 indicators including tourism, litter, pollution, invasive freshwater plants, streamflow and water quality.

Data compiled for the SoY 2018 Report showed a deteriorating trend in areas including litter, pollution, sewage and stormwater. Only two indicators (6%) were assessed as 'improving'. 17 indicators have been assessed as 'deteriorating'. Significantly, 16 of the 25 environmental health indicators (64%) have been assessed as in a 'poor' state with a deteriorating trend.

Source: SoY 2018 Report



2. The impact of population growth in Melbourne and regional centres on the provision and preservation of environmental infrastructure

In December 2020, the Victorian Government accepted in full, part or in principle 30 of 31 recommendations from the 2018 State of the Environment, Yarra and its Parklands and Forests reports.

To better understand the impact of population growth in Melbourne and regional centres, those reports recommended Victoria develop strategic capabilities in:

- Science impact
- Coordination and governance
- Delivery
- Data, monitoring, spatial information and analytics
- Citizen science and education



3. Examples of best-practice infrastructure and innovative approaches

The Commissioner reports on the health of the environment and evidence base and progress towards ESD in Victoria in statutory reports including the five-yearly SoE report.

The submission lists, for the Inquiry's consideration, examples of better practice in Victoria that could lead to innovation in other regions of the State or at different scales including:

- Urban forestry strategy;
- Creating nature's corridors;
- Citizen science and the rise of volunteering; and
- Biodiversity 2037

The Panel is referred to the SoE reports for other jurisdictions including NSW, QLD, SA and the ACT as well as the national SoE report (next due in 2021).



4. The impact of COVID-19 on the importance, use and design of environmental infrastructure

Environmental infrastructure is critical to enable access to quality open spaces for the wellbeing of people of all ages and abilities, especially as Melbourne's population continues to increase.

Anecdotally, this infrastructure has been particularly important and well-utilised during the COVID-19 pandemic to provide access to nature and outdoor physical exercise in a socially distanced, COVID-safe and responsible manner.



Science for Sustainable Development

Framework for the 2023 SoE reporting cycle, it:

- applies the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as an operating framework
- incorporates social science perspectives
- emphasises the role of science, data and community in decision-making
- will frame recommendations for Government in the reports that target critical issues and systemic improvements post COVID 19 through the 2023 suite of reports

Commissioner's 'State of' reporting program to 2024

| Report | Current edition | Next edition |
|---|-----------------|--------------|
| State of the Environment ¹ | 2018 | 2023 |
| State of the Yarra and its Parklands | 2018 | 2023 |
| State of the Bays ² | 2016 | - |
| State of the Marine and Coastal Environment | - | 2021 |
| State of the Forests | 2018 | 2023 |
| State of the Ocean Road | - | TBD |

The reports listed above provide recommendations to the Victorian Government.

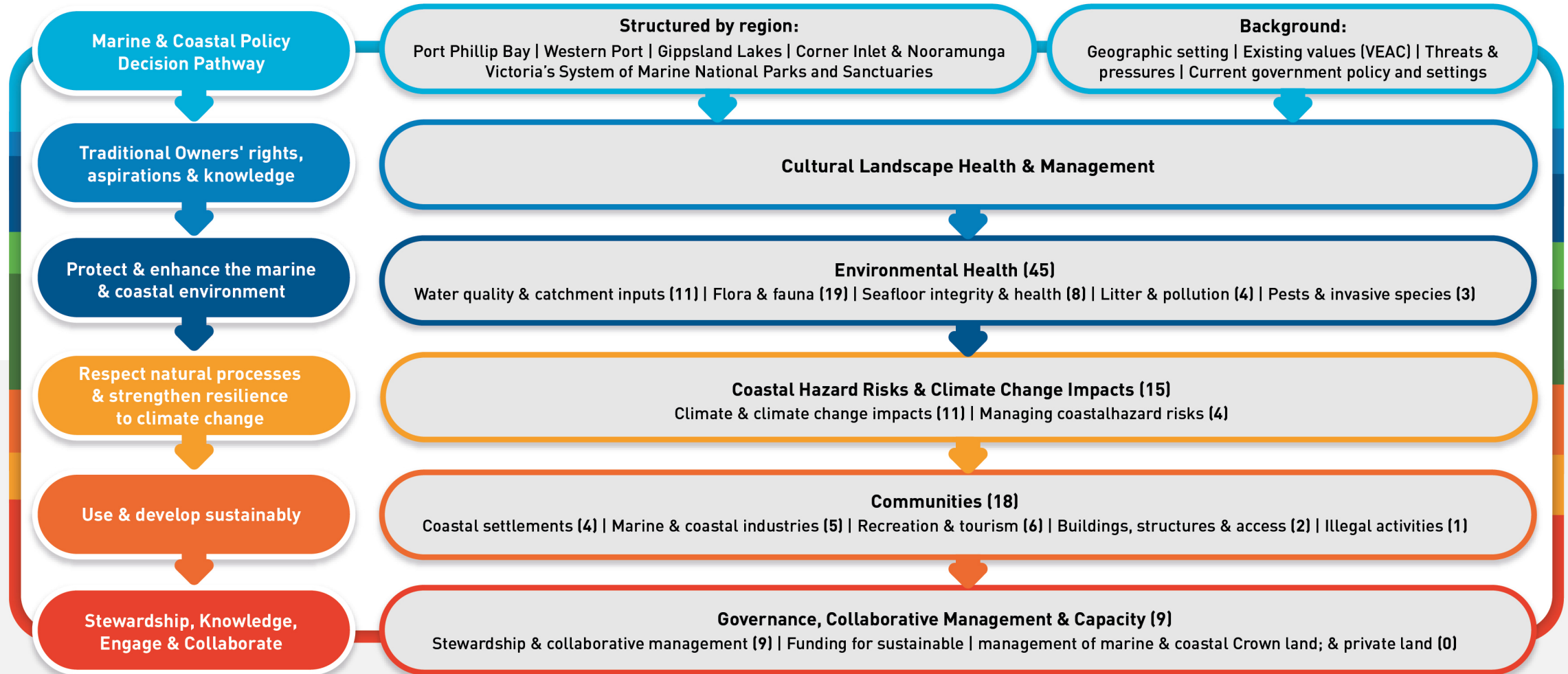
The State of the Environment Report and State of the Yarra and its Parklands Report were tabled in the Parliament of Victoria as per statutory requirements.

Notes:

1. The 2023 State of the Environment Report will report on the outcomes of environmental watering (Action 3.6, Water Plan) and Biodiversity 2037 targets.
2. State of the Bays to be superseded by the State of the Marine and Coastal Environment Report.

Working with coastal stakeholders to identify local priorities for reporting in the Victorian State of the Marine and Coastal Environment 2021 Report

SMCE 2021 structure to report on 87 indicators



Numbers in parentheses refer to indicators in that chapter / sub-section. 87 indicators in total.

Submission

Closing comment

This Inquiry provides a ‘point-in-time’ review of issues, however its recommendations regarding the future provision, management and monitoring of environmental infrastructure can be supported through the monitoring and reporting frameworks developed by the Victorian Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability.

These subsequent reports, refreshed periodically, provide an ongoing evidence base that will enable monitoring and performance of outcomes linked to the implementation of the Inquiry’s objectives and findings.

THANK YOU



[Linkedin.com/in/gillian-sparkes](https://www.linkedin.com/in/gillian-sparkes)



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