



Environment and heritage

The Gippsland region has great environmental diversity, ranging from alpine environments along its boundary with the North East RFA region, to extensive coastal areas along its southern edge. The region is known for its mountain landscapes, diverse range of flora and fauna, tourism and recreational opportunities and the high quality of water in its rivers and streams.

Fifty four per cent of the region is public land (1.4 million hectares), covered mostly by native forest. Private land covers 1.2 million hectares, or 46 per cent of the region, and is mostly cleared and used for a range of agricultural and industrial pursuits. There are extensive areas of plantations in the Strzelecki Ranges.

The CAR reserve system

The Gippsland RFA creates a Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative (CAR) Reserve system based on nationally agreed criteria. The criteria include reservation of at least 15 per cent of each forest type as existed before European arrival, at least 60 of old-growth forest and 90 per cent or more of high quality wilderness.

- The RFA satisfies these criteria as far as is practicable on public land.
- The RFA brings the total area of the Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative (CAR) reserve system to 780,600 hectares (comprising 533,000 hectares in conservation reserves and 247,600 hectares in Special Protection Zones) an increase of around 51 per cent. This means that about half of all public land in Gippsland is now set aside for conservation.
- Significant changes in tenure totalling 19,590 hectares will be implemented. These are: addition of an area of the Wongungarra catchment to the Alpine National Park (7,420 hectares), additions to Tarra-Bulga National Park (180 hectares) and Morwell National Park (120 hectares) and establishment of Nature Conservation Reserves for Mount Tambo-Marble Gully (6,000 hectares), Mount Elizabeth (5,200 hectares) and Glenmaggie (670 hectares).

The reserve system comprises:

dedicated reserves – reserves requiring a parliamentary decision to revoke their status. National Parks, State Parks and Flora and Fauna Reserves are examples of dedicated reserves;

informal reserves – areas reserved under other secure tenure or management arrangements. Special Protection Zones (SPZ) which have been set aside for specific and identified conservation purposes in State forest in accordance with the Forest Management Plan are examples of informal reserves; and

protection through prescription – for situations where protection of the conservation value within reserves is impracticable as a result of the nature of the value, for example protection by prescription afforded by the Code of Forest Practices for Timber Production.

Biodiversity

Of the 103 Ecological Vegetation Classes (EVCs) identified in the Gippsland region, 59 are considered endangered, vulnerable or rare. The 44 EVCs not falling into this category are represented in the CAR Reserve system at levels meeting or exceeding the criterion of 15 per cent of their pre-1750 extent.

Many of those that are vulnerable or rare are found mainly on private land. Inclusion of areas of two vulnerable EVCs, Plains Grassy Forest and Shrubby Foothill Forest in the CAR Reserve System, has increased the level of protection of these EVCs to 48 and 43 per cent respectively. Additional protection of Plains Grassy Forest and Shrubby Foothill Forest would have significant social and economic consequences.

Rare and endangered flora and fauna

About 2,500 species of vascular (higher order) plants have been recorded for the Gippsland region, of which 348 species are of conservation significance with at least 62 rated as critically endangered. The reserve system has been designed to include most of the significant populations of these species where they occur primarily on public land.

The RFA improves protection for many of the 34 species of rare or threatened mammals, reptiles, birds, frogs and fish in Gippsland. For example, the reserve system takes account of the breeding habitat of the Powerful Owl and the Sooty Owl, and protects habitat for species such as the Spotted Tree Frog and the Spot-tailed Quoll.

Old-growth

About 14 per cent (209,000 hectares) of the region's forested public land has been identified as old-growth forest, occurring in 39 EVCs with seven EVCs accounting for 75 per cent of the total area of old-growth.

The RFA protects 60 per cent or more of old growth in EVCs not considered rare or depleted, (with the exception of Damp Forest, where protection has been increased from 17 per cent to 54 per cent). All viable examples of the 22 EVCs in which old-growth is rare or depleted have been protected to the full extent practical taking into account social and economic considerations. Overall, more than 67 percent of all old growth forest in the region is now protected.

Wilderness

An assessment of wilderness for Eastern Victoria in 1996 identified four areas of high wilderness quality within the Gippsland region - Avon, Mount Darling/Snowy Bluff, Macalister and Wilsons Promontory. All are fully contained within the dedicated reserve system. Ninety-five per cent of the total area delineated in the assessment of Eastern Victorian Forests as significant for high wilderness quality is protected in the existing reserve system, thereby satisfying the national reserve criteria.

World Heritage

The World Heritage Assessment expert panel identified five potential sub-themes in Victoria which warrant further investigation. Three are potentially relevant to the Gippsland region:

- areas with outstanding examples of *Eucalyptus*-dominated vegetation associated with the Eastern Forests of Victoria;
- parts of the Australian marginal swells associated with the Eastern Highlands; and
- Cretaceous fossils (as exemplified by sites in the Leongatha region).

Both Governments have agreed to participate in the World Heritage assessment of the Australia-wide Eucalypt theme potentially leading to World Heritage nomination. Both Governments agreed that nomination involving areas in the Gippsland region if required will come from within the CAR Reserve system.

National Estate

The national estate component of the Comprehensive Regional Assessment has greatly increased our knowledge of national estate values in the region's forests, with more than 111 sites and areas identified as indicative national estate areas of social, aesthetic, and historic value. The RFA includes specifications for the listing of places, including the updating of places currently listed or interim-listed in the Register of the National Estate, and the long-term management of national estate values in forests.