

Environment and Heritage

Human activity has made a significant impact on the environmental values of the West RFA region of Victoria. Eighty three per cent of the region is private land, mainly cleared for agriculture or other pursuits. The native forests that cover most of the public land in the Midlands, Otways, South West and Wimmera host a diverse range of flora and fauna.

The RFA provides a major boost to conservation in the region, with significant additions to reserves, improved protection for threatened species, and by building on Victoria's sustainable management policies and practices to ensure continuous improvement on both public and private land.

The CAR Reserve system

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

- The RFA adds about 194,000 hectares to existing reserves – an increase of 44 per cent.
- This brings the total area of the Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative (CAR) reserve system to approximately 633,500 hectares, comprising 457,000 in formal reserves and 176,500 in the Special Protection Zone. It means that 65 per cent of all public land in the West region is now set aside for conservation.
- Significant additions to reserves include: additions to the Mount Eccles National Park, Arapiles-Tooan State Park and Lerderderg State Park, and the establishment of the Tallageira Nature Conservation Reserve.

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

The RFA has highlighted the diverse nature of the ecosystems of Western Victoria. More than 350 Ecological Vegetation Classes (EVCs) have been identified in the West region, many of which are considered endangered, vulnerable or rare. The 20 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. Some however, are found in Special Management Zones – areas outside the CAR Reserve system but where special management conditions apply in order to protect biodiversity and other values.

Limited low-impact harvesting will continue in some endangered EVCs, mainly those with River Red Gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*). This will occur within stringent guidelines to ensure protection of biodiversity values.

Rare and threatened species

The RFA improves protection for many of the 49 fauna species considered rare or threatened in the West region, including the Red-tailed Black Cockatoo, Spot-tailed Quoll, Heath Mouse, Barking Owl, Anglesea Mountain Dragon and Warty Bell Frog.

About 2,900 species of plants have been recorded in the West region including 519 species of conservation significance. One hundred and one flora species were considered as priority flora, which means that management action within the Region will be critical to their survival. The reserve system has been designed to include these species where they occur on public land.

Old-growth

About 13 per cent (123,000 hectares) of the region's forested public land has been identified as old-growth forest, occurring in 111 EVCs. The RFA protects 60 per cent or more of old growth in EVCs not considered rare or depleted, and all viable examples, where practicable, of the EVCs in which old-growth is rare or depleted.

World Heritage

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

- areas with outstanding examples of *Eucalyptus*-dominated vegetation associated with the Eastern Forests of Australia;
- fossils associated with sites such as the Otway coast; and
- records of past climates, for example, lakes with climatic sequences in their sediments which include a number of western Victorian volcanic lakes.

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 West region if required will come from within the CAR Reserve system.

Wilderness Values

An assessment of wilderness values in the National Estate Assessment identified the Victoria Range section of the Grampians National Park as having the largest area of high wilderness quality within the West region.

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 125 sites and areas identified as indicative national estate areas of social, aesthetic, and historic value. The RFA includes specifications for both the listing of places, including a review 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.