

## **2/ The need to manage the impacts of prospecting**

We support the restrictions placed on prospecting, as shown in the maps attached to the draft strategy.

In May 2013 The Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) published its 2014 report on its Investigation into Additional Prospecting Areas in Parks. It identified a number of significant ways prospecting adversely affected, or could affect, the natural values of parks and Indigenous cultural heritage: <http://www.veac.vic.gov.au/investigation/investigation-into-additional-prospectingareas-in-parks> While that investigation was not directly concerned with the Dja Dja Wurrung parks, many of its findings were of a general nature, and support the idea that prospecting is not consistent with Victoria's National Parks Act, in that activities can have a serious impact on fauna (especially in waterways), flora and cultural sites. The information below is taken from that VEAC report, and page numbers refer to the report.

The report defined recreational prospecting (sometimes called fossicking) as "the search for minerals, gemstones or mineral-bearing material using non-mechanical hand tools only". It added that "Prospecting for gold involves the use of metal detectors, hand tools (such as picks and shovels), pans, cradles and sluices".

### **Where is prospecting currently allowed?**

Recreational prospecting is not allowed in national parks in: Western Australia, South Australia, Tasmania, New South Wales, Queensland, or in those parks co-managed by the Australian government (eg Kakadu and Uluru-Kata Tjuta). It is also not allowed in national parks in a number of countries, including the USA (VEAC p. 21). Victoria is the only state that allows prospecting in national parks. The activity is allowed in approximately 4.81 million hectares of Victoria's public land, including 52,370 hectares within parks. Within the Dja Dja Wurrung parks, the following areas are currently available for prospecting (VEAC p. 23).

- Greater Bendigo National Park: 11,967 hectares (69% of the park)
  - Kara Kara National Park: 7,600 hectares (55% of the park)
  - Kooyoora State Park: 8,040 hectares (71% of the park)
  - Paddys Ranges State Park: 600 hectares (30% of the park)
- Environmental impacts of prospecting: The VEAC investigation highlighted a number of ways in which prospecting can adversely affect the natural environment:

#### **• Ground disturbance and impacts on plants**

While some plants may benefit from soil disturbance, many do not. In the Dja Dja Wurrung region, some ground orchids are fairly common, but some species are rare and/or endangered. In the dormant period, when the orchid only exists as a small tuber under the ground, a prospector can easily dig up an orchid without being aware of it (VEAC p. 28).

#### **• Weed invasion**

Most weeds benefit from soil disturbance, so prospecting can significantly increase the spread of weeds (VEAC p. 29).

#### **• Impacts on waterways**

VEAC commissioned a scientific review of the impacts of prospecting on waterways (VEAC p.30). It found that:

- o Disturbance or removal of streambed stones disrupts the natural protective 'armouring' of the

stream bed. While streambeds have probably been disturbed for many years in the parks in question, continuation of this practice doesn't allow streambeds to recover. o Disturbance also builds up silt in the current, allowing it to spread downstream, potentially affecting a range of living things in the stream. 5 o Tailings (rocks and chemically treated soil) remaining from the days of extensive gold mining are likely to contain contaminants like arsenic and mercury. Disturbance of areas where tailings still lie can contaminate rivers, poisoning stream life.

- **Spread of soil diseases**

Spores of diseases like phytophthora (which affects many native plants), chytrid fungus (which affects frogs) and myrtle rust (which potentially affects eucalypts and many other native plants) are easily spread by activities that disturb soil. Spores can be spread widely by even small amounts of earth on shovels, footwear and vehicles etc. (VEAC p. 31).

- **Off-road access for cars and and illegal track construction.**

### **Cultural impacts of prospecting**

While the VEAC investigation made no assessment of the Dja Dja Wurrung parks, it quoted the Office of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria as saying prospecting has 'a high potential to harm Aboriginal heritage', including through the potential removal of artefacts (p.35).

Culturally significant plants and animals can also be affected. Park management and compliance VEAC noted that while most prospectors behave well, others don't, and repairing damaged sites puts a considerable burden on park management. Monitoring the activity, and enforcing regulations, is difficult for managers (VEAC p. 41).

VEAC recommendations for improved regulation of prospecting. Among the recommendations arising from the Investigation into Additional Prospecting Areas in Parks were a number of recommendations aimed at limiting the impact of prospecting. These recommendations were accepted by the Victorian Government, but they have not yet been implemented, or put into law. The recommendations include additional restrictions on the way prospecting is conducted, including (VEAC p.45):

- Only using non-mechanical hand tools
- Any excavation should not be bigger than one cubic metre
- Sluices and motorised equipment must not be used to process excavated material
- No trees or shrubs can be damaged or removed
- Repairs (eg replacing soil, rocks, debris and leaf litter) must be done on the same day they are removed
- Any Aboriginal place or object must not be damaged, defaced, disturbed or otherwise interfered with.
- The discovery of any Aboriginal site or object must be notified to the Office of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria
- These conditions should be added to the National Parks Act
- Before these recommendations are implemented, consultation should be conducted with relevant traditional owner groups.

### **VNPA comment re prospecting:**

While all of the recommendations in the report were accepted by government, none have yet been implemented – not even the need for further supervision and monitoring. We believe it is time to implement those recommendations, restricting many ways prospecting happens. It is also sensible to further restrict areas where the activity takes place, given the knowledge we have of the damage it can do, and the clear evidence of illegal behaviour by some prospectors.

For these reasons we support reduced areas for prospecting. We also believe the VEAC report's proposal to restrict excavation to a maximum of one cubic metre is far too generous – that is a seriously big hole to be repeatedly digging in a national park.

We note that prospecting is not allowed in national parks in other Australian states, and that prospectors in Victoria have access to large areas of public land outside parks.