



# Wombat Forestcare Newsletter

**Welcome to our summer edition.** Why the Hepburn Shire Draft Biodiversity Strategy fails to meet expectations? Read about Powerful Owls and Sulphur-crested Cockatoos competing for hollows, Brush-tail Phascogales and more about the beautiful pea species of the Wombat Forest.

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## Rethinking Biodiversity

**Words and image by Alison Pouliot**

This article is a modified version of my submission to the Hepburn Shire Council Draft Biodiversity Strategy. I offer it as a way to reimagine a different sort of Biodiversity Strategy – one that considers the conservation of biodiversity as its central purpose.



Biodiversity is complex, messy and unpredictable and can outsmart 'management'.

Twenty-one years ago I came to the Hepburn Shire and climbed Jackson's Lookout. All around me, in every direction I could see bush. The air was thick with the scent of flowering eucalypts and birdcall. My decision to move here was cemented in that moment. During this time, I have been fortunate to work together with traditional owners and scientists; land managers, farmers and property owners; Landcarers and conservationists, specifically in the context of trying to understand and conserve biodiversity. It has been heartening to directly witness the great many people within the Shire who care deeply about its biodiversity.

Growth and subsequent developments in the Shire and the overarching issue of climate change exert new and ongoing pressures on its biodiversity. This amplifies the need for a Biodiversity Strategy, to maximise the best possibility for the Shire's biodiversity to flourish. Council's drafting of a long overdue Strategy is welcomed. However, as I read it, I became gravely concerned that the Strategy's underlying premise is fundamentally flawed.

Within the first pages of the Strategy it is apparent that Council does not have an insightful or even rudimentary concept of biodiversity. An explicit definition of biodiversity should be its starting point, yet nowhere within the Strategy is biodiversity defined. References to 'biodiversity' throughout the document suggest a very narrow conception of what biodiversity is, why it matters, and the interplay of

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ecosystem processes, function and resilience. Moreover, it does not demonstrate understanding of the link between biodiversity conservation and the influence of humans as part of the Shire's biodiversity.

The Shire's Biodiversity Strategy is a vitally important document. It should outline the direction of biodiversity conservation within the Shire, in short and long-term timeframes, across public and private land. It should clearly identify legitimate and realistic conservation objectives and detail how Council intends to achieve them. This requires measurable targets and timeframes, and how progress against targets will be measured. It should also provide a mechanism for regular review of Council's approach to biodiversity conservation, to analyse any failings and provide recommendations for improvement. Moreover, it should convincingly demonstrate Council's commitment to biodiversity conservation. I do not consider that the Strategy has even come close to achieving this.

Council's notion of biodiversity as something to be 'managed and controlled' is fraught. Rather than beginning with biodiversity in all its significances, number one on the list is 'weed management'. To begin with the 'invaders', rather than all the other species, interactions and processes that constitute the bigger picture of biodiversity reflects limited thinking. This is just one example of the discrepancy between Council's claims and its budget allocations. For example, Council has a role to inform landholders of their land management responsibilities, especially those living within close proximity to native bush, waterways and other areas of high biodiversity value. Council acknowledges this in the first sentence of the Executive Summary in saying it aims to 'strengthen the capacity of people in Hepburn Shire to protect, enhance and restore biodiversity'. Yet only 2K has been allocated for 'community knowledge and awareness building' while 192K is budgeted for weed management (plus 20K for 'pests'). I also question whether the 85K assigned to 'fire preparedness' and flood overlays/management considers biodiversity or just a single species (*Homo sapiens*). I believe Council needs an entirely different paradigm for how it understands and regards biodiversity.

The community can help Council understand that biodiversity is not a 'problem' or an 'issue' or a 'threat'; that it is not just 'weeds' and 'introduced animals'. Council's weed focus distracts from the bigger picture importance of conserving the very species and habitats that 'weed management' supposedly strives to protect. Nor is biodiversity just 'flora and fauna' (represented in the Strategy only by vascular plants and vertebrate animals that collectively represent only a small minority of species diversity). Furthermore, 'significance' should not be assigned only to those species deemed 'threatened' or 'endangered' (i.e. common species contribute greatly to the structure, biomass and dynamics of the Shire's ecosystems

and hence are also significant). Biodiversity is also not just 'resources'. It is more than something to just count, map and commodify. Biodiversity is not something to be tolerated so long as it does not interfere with Council's economic aspirations.

The Strategy identifies the importance of protecting the Shire's biodiversity and mentions some threats. However, to be convincing, this requires specifics. Generalised statements about climate change or habitat fragmentation serve to introduce ecological concepts, but are not sufficient for a Shire-scale Strategy. These need to be contextualised within local ecosystems and scenarios. Insufficient detail about specific initiatives prompts one to question whether Council has any real intention of enacting its aims. Replacing platitude statements with precise details would force Council to act responsibly. This means moving beyond lame 'management speak' to the real and everyday language of human life. The Strategy undermines itself with empty rhetoric such as 'the Appendices contains biodiversity maps that show high priority areas of focus which will inform decision makers to develop and implement projects and plans to deliver the strategic objectives and actions in the Biodiversity Strategy where they are most needed'. Did you find that convincing?

The Shire is fortunate to have dynamic and erudite residents concerned about biodiversity who could assist Council to become a leader in biodiversity conservation. However, Council needs to move beyond limited thinking and language to a broader concept of biodiversity that recognises all species; reflects a deep understanding of processes, functions and connectivities; promotes the importance of building ecosystem resilience; and acknowledges biodiversity as fundamental to our wellbeing and existence. This requires a judicious and conceptually sophisticated understanding of biodiversity science that reflects current thinking in conservation.

I urge Council to take the issue of biodiversity seriously and appoint a suitably expert person or team to reformulate a genuine strategy with community guidance. I encourage readers to pressure Council to do so. It is not a matter of 'patching up' and making amendments to a conceptually deficient Strategy, but starting again, with a commitment to conserving the Shire's biodiversity as its FIRST priority.

Ultimately, biodiversity cannot be 'managed'. We can only manage our own behaviours and whether we choose to care, or not to care about the very fabric of biodiversity that sustains us. ■

Alison Pouliot is an ecologist with a strong interest in the conservation of the Wombat Forest.