

# **A Strategic Framework**

For the future of Western Port Bay



PROTECTING VICTORIA'S  
WETLAND BIODIVERSITY AND  
SUSTAINABLE MARINE AND  
TOURISM INDUSTRIES

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*We acknowledge that Western Port is on the traditional land and water of the Bunurong people from the BoonWurrung language group.*

The Western Port Framework has been developed by a Western Port community steering group including the Western Port Biosphere Reserve Foundation, Save Westernport, Phillip Island Conservation Society and the Victorian National Parks Association. The Framework has also sought input and support from a wide range of stakeholders, groups and individuals including:

- Phillip Island Nature Parks (technical input specifically)
- Bass Coast Shire Council
- Environment Victoria
- Westernport and Peninsula Protection Council Inc
- Crib Point Action Group
- Blue Wedges Inc.
- Port Phillip Conservation Council Inc.
- Crib Point Stony Point Foreshore Committee of Management Inc
- Southern Peninsula Indigenous Flora & Fauna Association
- The Waterline Area

Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation have been consulted regarding this project and there is general support for it.



Photo credit: SOMERS BEACH JANE CARENGIE  
Cover photo credit: FRENCH ISLAND, JARROD BOORD

Authorised by Matt Ruchel,  
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## WHY WESTERN PORT BAY IS SO SPECIAL

- Culturally important – for the Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation, who say that: All of our Country is highly significant, every square inch, every rock, every leaf, every dune, every artefact. If we could attribute the cause of this blanket high significance rating of our Country to any one thing, it would be that in Melbourne especially, so much has been destroyed and lost as the city grew, and so quickly. If you lose enough of something, what little you have left becomes so much more important.
- Recognised on the world stage – the only wetland in Victoria important enough to be recognised by both the United Nations as a Biosphere Reserve and the International Ramsar Convention for wetland conservation.
- Thriving economy - the foundation of a thriving tourist economy - \$619 million annually, 5,000 direct jobs and 193,256 jobs in the local government areas surrounding the bay.
- Home to marine protected areas – including Churchill Island, French Island, and Yaringa Marine National Parks.
- Rich in marine biodiversity – habitat for 1,350 identified marine species (3-4 times more than Port Phillip Bay<sup>1</sup>), with Phillip Island (and Seal Rocks) home to the largest colonies of Little Penguins, Short-tailed Shearwaters and Australian Fur Seals in the world.
- A bird sanctuary for 65% of Victoria's threatened bird species<sup>2</sup>
- A blue carbon hotspot – an opportunity to protect and restore mangrove, saltmarsh and seagrass ecosystems, that capture carbon 30-50 times faster than forests
- A recreational nature playground for many to enjoy fishing, boating, diving, snorkelling, kayaking, sightseeing, and bird watching, which contribute to the local economies of the region

## Introduction

Western Port Bay and its islands, Phillip, Churchill and French, are popular tourist destinations and one of Victoria's most significant wetland and wildlife sanctuaries. But despite its environmental, social, and economic significance, Western Port's environmental health is declining.

This vital wetland and biodiversity hotspot is at risk from urban growth, unsuitable industrial development, climate disruption and poor water quality. Planning siloes and gaps, compounded by an overall lack of coordination and management, pose further risk to the future of this important Victorian region and its remarkable biodiversity and ecosystems.

Over the years, opposition to unsuitable development proposals threatening the Bay has grown significantly. There is now a community movement keen to introduce more collaborative and integrated planning and protections that honour Western Port Bay's diverse values.

## Our Ask

For all political parties and candidates to publicly commit to the new Framework for Western Port Bay, as an election policy, and its implementation in the next term of government.

The Framework consists of three pillars:

- **A new Strategic Plan for Western Port Bay**
- **A new collaborative management partnership**
- **A dedicated Western Port fund to deliver the plan**

## The Vision

*To effectively manage, restore, and legally protect the marine and coastal environment of Western Port Bay and establish an ecologically sustainable economy for the future.*

1. Understanding the Western Port Environment, 2018. Melbourne Water  
2. <https://www.biosphere.org.au/our-biosphere/western-port-biosphere>

# The Problem



Photo credit: COASTKIT

**AS POPULATION GROWTH AND INAPPROPRIATE DEVELOPMENT CONTINUES, THE HEALTH OF WESTERN PORT BAY DECLINES.**

Western Port Bay has the highest number of deteriorating environmental health indicators of anywhere in Victoria according to the State of Marine and Coastal Environments Report<sup>3</sup>. Examples include declining populations of snapper and waterbirds.

The Cranbourne-Pakenham area is experiencing the fastest urban expansion in the state, with the population of the Western Port catchment expected to double over the next 20 years<sup>4</sup>.

Substantial land use changes are altering the quantity and quality of river discharges into the bay<sup>4</sup>. In 2021, the State of the Marine and Coastal Environment Report identifies Western Port as having a serious water quality problem, with five of the nine estuaries flowing into Western Port rated as very poor<sup>4</sup>.

These biodiversity and environmental health indicators and projections are urgent signals that action and collaborative management are needed.

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3. <https://www.biosphere.org.au/our-biosphere/western-port-biosphere/>

4. State of the Marine and Coastal Environment Report. 2021. <https://www.ces.vic.gov.au/state-of-reports/state-marine-and-coastal-environment-2021-report>

## CURRENT PLANNING, PROTECTION AND MANAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS FOR WESTERN PORT ARE INADEQUATE.

Management of Western Port Bay is siloed and fragmented, with no cohesive or overarching guiding framework that prioritises management of water quality and the impacts of coastal land usage over the whole Bay. Over time, various pieces of legislation, policies, and frameworks have been developed, sometimes in isolation, all with individual visions and goals. Furthermore, community voice, experience and knowledge are often not involved (or valued) in decision-making.

As a result, Western Port Bay has been subjected to inconsistent decisions, uncoordinated planning and management, inadequate oversight and monitoring, poor accountability and governance, and delegation to other authorities.

While various management and other relevant plans may be well intentioned, Western Port Bay cannot be effectively environmentally protected and well-managed if their objectives and approaches remain uncoordinated. Now is the time to create a more comprehensive and coordinated strategic approach, with ecology at the forefront of planning & management\*.



Photo credit: BOATING ON WESTERN PORT BAY BY JULIAN MEEHAN

## HISTORICAL AND RECENT INDUSTRIAL THREATS

Western Port has long been under pressure from heavy industrial development.

Local communities are fed up with continual proposals of inappropriate projects for Western Port Bay. Recent opposition to AGL's gas import terminal demonstrates the groundswell of care and passion to protect Western Port Bay from risky industrial threats. Over 10,000 submissions were made during the Environmental Effects Statement (EES) process for the proposed AGL project – the largest number received in history.

Local communities have demonstrated their ambitions for future industrial projects in Western Port and its hinterlands to be aligned with the principles of ecologically sustainable development and ecosystem-based management.

The community want projects that benefit a local green economy creating sustainable jobs in industries that support and value the Western Port environment. These include tourism and hospitality, recreation, viticulture, renewable energy (wind and solar) and ecological restoration projects.

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\* We recognise the role of the current management plans and strategies, including, catchment management plans and programs, marine national park management plans, industry and port strategies, and fishery and Ramsar management plans. This document is proposing to bring together all of these interests in a more coordinated way with ecology at the forefront.

# The Solution

## A new ‘whole bay’ approach

After seeking guidance from community, Traditional Custodians, land managers and tourism, fishing and other recreational bodies, we propose a ‘whole of bay’ integrated management framework that promotes environmental protection and economic sustainability for Western Port Bay, its coastlines and hinterland.

This Management Framework, comprises three core pillars:

- 1. A new Strategic Plan for Western Port Bay** – bringing together objectives, actions and programs into a coordinated planning and management tool that recognises the natural values of the Western Port and the future economic prosperity of the region.
- 2. A new collaborative management Partnership** – bringing together Traditional Custodians, community representatives, government agencies, councils, local business and industries, fishing and recreational groups, to develop the plan and oversee implementation.
- 3. A dedicated Western Port fund to deliver the plan** – with annual funding to deliver its objectives (at least equivalent to the Port Phillip Bay Fund)

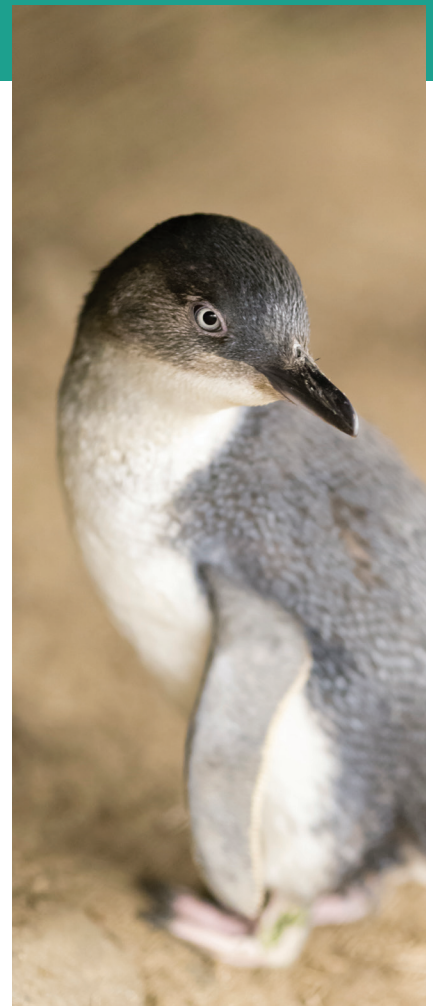


Photo credit: SUPPLIED

## THE HOW: USING THE EXISTING MARINE AND COASTAL ACT & OTHER RELEVANT PLANS/LEGISLATION

In our view, no single tool under existing legislation will achieve the whole-of-bay environmental care and sustainable development we are advocating. But utilising a combination of different and complementary tools within a coordinated and structured framework could deliver such a vision.

Primacy should be given to existing marine and coastal legislation that supports a number of relevant processes. The Strategic Plan component of the Framework should include the development of a comprehensive Environmental Management Plan (EMP), with marine spatial planning as a major component, along with other relevant tools. This could be overseen by a regional and strategic partnership to co-design the Plan and oversee the funding and implementation of defined projects in the EMP.

Other tools and elements relevant to the Framework include Council planning, Plan Melbourne, Melbourne Water models and projects, the Western Port Ramsar Management Plan and catchment plans, Port of Hastings plans and others to be identified in the developing the Strategic Plan.

## Objectives of the proposal

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|---|--|---|
| <p>1. Perspectives and values of Traditional Custodians are at the forefront of the framework and its implementation</p> <p>2. Collaborative management systems across water and land bring together all stakeholders (Traditional Custodians, community groups, and government agencies)</p> <p>3. Future industrial project proposals are assessed through an open and transparent processes with genuine opportunity for community feedback, in alignment with the principles of the Marine and Coastal Policy and the Federal EPBC Act (1999) to protect matters of National and International significance (including ecological sustainable development and the precautionary principle).</p> <p>4. Permanent legal protections against detrimental or degrading uses of the Bay and its coastlines</p> | <p>5. Recognition and inclusion of Western Port Bay's cultural, recreational and conservation significance in the well-being and economic prosperity of the region</p> <p>6. Integrated modelling of the catchment and the Bay to inform integrated land and sea conservation</p> <p>7. Restoration of degraded marine and wetland habitats to create:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intrinsic resilience against climate change and other impacts, by conserving the coastline and ecosystems that protect communities and environments</li> <li>• Revitalised habitats for important and threatened species</li> <li>• Improved blue carbon capacity and climate mitigation through the protection and enhancement of seagrasses, mangroves and saltmarsh.</li> </ul> | <p>Improved sustainability of the economy that depends on these ecosystems</p> <p>8. A comprehensive marine and coastal survey of the ecological values of Western Port is undertaken, building on the recent scientific review lead by Melbourne Water</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To identify, assess and prioritise management of high conservation value areas, migratory birds, threatened species, and threatening processes</li> <li>• With ongoing monitoring and reporting of the baseline and outcomes that are directly attributable to the Framework.</li> </ul> |
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## Benefits

- Comprehensive environmental management, biodiversity conservation, research and monitoring of the Western Port environment
- Strengthened Traditional Custodians and community stewardship and governance
- Improved transparency to industry and government in understanding the parameters of appropriate sustainable development and economic benefits from not proposing inappropriate development projects
- A more cost-effective approach to managing Western Port, as funding can be targeted on high priority actions that will have tangible outcomes
- Strengthened environmental values and climate resilience by protecting biodiversity
- Improved tourism and recreational opportunities, especially where initiatives such as habitat restoration occur

# Next Steps

This proposal is being put in front of state government, local government, community and recreational groups, government agencies and industry.

We are asking for all political parties and candidates to commit to the Framework as an election policy, and its implementation in the next term of government.



Photo credit: WEEDY SEADRAGON BY SHANNON HURLEY

**For more information on the proposal,  
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