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In-House Memorandum

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Ecological Vegetation Classes

“Thank God, men cannot yet fly, and lay waste to the sky as well as the earth!” – Thoreau¹

As Henry Thoreau [1817-1862] witnessed the gradual clearing of woods around his village in 1850s Concord, U.S.A., he pondered the consequences of ‘maltreating the face of nature’ and asked whether one day the forests would be planted again². Today, in Victoria, conservation groups, ecologists, governments and citizens are together involved in projects to restore native vegetation to the landscape.

The management and conservation of native vegetation is reliant upon a sound understanding of its extent and character. One significant method in its protection is ‘vegetation classification’, a system by which vegetation is grouped together based on characteristic features. Victoria’s Ecological Vegetation Classes (EVCs), a result of this classification, are critical to the assessment, management and conservation of native vegetation.

EVCs are vegetation groupings based on the type of plants, plant species, vegetation structures and ecological features found in a particular geographical area³. They have been mapped throughout Victoria by using known floristic⁴ records which demonstrate where different plants have grown based on climate, soil, water and topography. Victoria has around three hundred different EVC’s, containing different plants and supporting different animals. The EVCs are grouped together to form 28 ‘Bioregions’.

EVCs have been classified for both current day vegetation and pre-1750 vegetation (before the broad scale clearing of European settlement). It is possible to predict, based on knowledge of the pre-1750 landscape, how much of each type of vegetation has been cleared and, consequently, to assign each EVC a particular conservation status: ‘least concern’, ‘rare’, ‘depleted’, ‘vulnerable’, ‘endangered’ and ‘presumed extinct’.

DEPI has established a ‘benchmark’ for each EVC, which outlines the types of plants (including weeds) and plant species likely to be present in each EVC, along with the expected canopy cover, shrub layers and groundcover, the likely regeneration pattern and, in some cases, the expected organic litter and log density characteristics of the EVC.

EVC benchmarks assist the government in standardized assessment of clearing under the *Biodiversity Assessment Guidelines*. EVC benchmarks also link with habitat hectare assessment and the regulation of native vegetation clearing.

EVCs allow Victorians to chart changes to regional environments and develop an overall image of vegetation throughout the state. They are perhaps not an answer to Thoreau’s hope for a resurgent, irrepressible wilderness, but do show the measures Victoria uses to monitor and manage the clearing of its native vegetation.

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8 September 2014

¹ Quoted in *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* Worstep, D. (ed.), (1998, Cambridge University Press, New York), p.73

² Ibid, pp.73-74

³ For example, ‘Ecological Vegetation Classes: Mallee Catchment Facts’, 2008, Mallee Catchment Management Authority, p.1

⁴ ‘floristic’, *adj.* pertaining to flowers or a flora: Macquarie Dictionary (2nd Revised Edition), 1990

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