THE WESTERN PORT BAY FRAMEWORK



A whole-of-bay plan to protect Western Port Bay's wetlands, communities and manage competing pressures

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Our Mission

Our mission is to manage, restore and legally protect the marine and coastal habitats of Western Port Bay through a collaborative approach that champions both nature protection and economic sustainability for the bay and its coastlines.

The Western Port Bay Framework brings together three practical actions already within existing Victorian policy to achieve this. A whole-of-bay plan, a collaborative partnership to develop the plan, and a dedicated Western Port Fund to make sure all of the above is possible, and support practical projects that restore and protect the bay.



We acknowledge that Western Port Bay 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.

Cover photo: French Island (Jarrod Boord)

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The Problem

Western Port Bay is under increasing pressure from industry, development, climate impacts and other pressures – yet Victoria lacks a coordinated, bay-wide plan to manage these competing pressures and guide decisions about the bay's future.

Community concern is high. Western Port Bay is a place where people live, work and play, and there is a strong appetite for a coordinated solution, alongside a community already deeply involved in stewardship, restoration and protecting the bay.

Why does Western Port Bay need a plan?

Western Port Bay is Victoria's second-largest bay, an internationally significant wetland and UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, supporting exceptional biodiversity as well as important cultural, recreational and commercial values.

Yet it remains the only major Victorian bay without an overarching plan for its future.

The bay is already experiencing decline. Western Port Bay has the highest number of deteriorating environmental health indicators of any region in Victoria, with declining fish and waterbird populations and five of its nine estuaries rated in very poor condition.

At the same time, pressures are increasing – from population growth, urban expansion and new industry to climate change, changing land use, and increasing recreational and commercial use. Community concern about the bay's future is high, alongside a strong appetite for action.

With planning and management fragmented across agencies, jurisdictions and interests, Western Port Bay needs a coordinated, long-term, bay-wide plan to protect and manage its environmental, cultural, recreational and commercial values and guide its future.



Photo: VRET Terminal, Port of Hastings (renewableenergyterminal.com.au)

The Solution

There is broad community support for a clear pathway to help Western Port Bay survive and thrive – the Western Port Bay Framework.

Developed through consultation with a broad cross-section of the community, the Framework brings together three practical, interconnected tools to coordinate action, investment and decision-making for the future of the bay.

1. A whole-of-bay plan

Develop a coordinated plan for Western Port Bay – delivered through a Marine Spatial Planning process – that brings competing interests and pressures together, identifies appropriate areas for different uses, and puts the bay's wildlife, habitats and cultural values at the heart of decision-making.

2. A collaborative Western Port Bay Partnership

Bring together Traditional Custodians, government agencies, local councils, community representatives, businesses, industries, fishing and recreational groups to develop the plan, coordinate action and oversee its implementation.

3. A dedicated Western Port Fund

Provide ongoing investment to put the Framework into action, supporting practical projects such as habitat restoration, monitoring, citizen science, education and community stewardship. The Fund would be modelled on the Port Phillip Bay Fund, with resources sufficient to deliver meaningful outcomes for the bay.

Delivering on an existing government commitment

The Victorian Government has already committed, through the Marine and Coastal Strategy, to undertake Victoria's first Marine Spatial Planning process. Western Port Bay is an ideal place to deliver this commitment. It meets the criteria for Marine Spatial Planning and is highly valued and increasingly under pressure. It has significant environmental, cultural, recreational and commercial values, competing uses and a clear need for better coordination.

Marine Spatial Planning can provide the strategic framework Western Port Bay currently lacks, bringing together existing plans, knowledge, objectives and investment to better coordinate how the bay is managed, while complementing, rather than replacing, existing planning and management arrangements.

Together, these three elements would deliver on an existing Victorian Government commitment while providing Western Port Bay with the coordination, collaboration and investment needed to secure its future. They would help protect the bay's wildlife, habitats and cultural values alongside sustainable economic development and recreation, while giving the community greater confidence that decisions are being made with the health of the whole bay in mind.

What is Marine Spatial Planning?

Marine Spatial Planning is a collaborative process for understanding and planning how marine and coastal areas are used and managed.

It brings together Traditional Custodians, communities, government, industry and other interests to understand the values, activities and pressures across an area, and identify how different uses can work alongside each other.

Marine Spatial Planning can help coordinate competing interests, guide decisions about where activities are appropriate, reduce conflicts and protect wildlife, habitats and cultural values, while supporting sustainable social and economic opportunities.

For Western Port Bay, Marine Spatial Planning would provide the whole-of-bay framework that is currently missing, bringing together existing plans, knowledge, priorities and investment so that decisions are made with an understanding of their impacts across the bay as a whole.

It would not replace existing planning or management arrangements. Instead, it would provide a stronger overarching framework to coordinate them and guide the future of Western Port Bay.



Photo: Little Penguins, Phillip Island (M Kuhn/flickr)

Our Ask

The Framework has the people, knowledge and community support needed for success. It just needs government commitment to get started.

The Framework already has broad support from Traditional Custodians, all four Western Port councils, tourism operators, businesses, community organisations and nature conservation groups.

And the good news? This isn't a new proposal. The Western Port Bay Framework would deliver on existing Victorian Government commitments under the *Marine and Coastal Act* and Marine and Coastal Strategy – turning commitments already on the books into practical action for the bay.

We call on all candidates in the Western Port Bay area, and their parties, to support and commit to delivering the Western Port Bay Framework at the 2026 Victorian election, to work towards a healthy, thriving future for Western Port Bay.

Western Port Bay's values

- **Culturally important** – for the Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation.
- **Recognised on the world stage** – the only wetland in Victoria 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 different marine species (3-4 times more than Port Phillip Bay), 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.
- **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 place deeply valued by its community.** Western Port Bay is highly valued by the people who live, work, play and visit, with a strong and growing community committed to seeing the bay protected for future generations. It is a much-loved recreational nature playground, supporting fishing, boating, diving, snorkelling, kayaking, sightseeing and birdwatching, while contributing to the social, cultural and economic life of the region.

References: Understanding the Western Port Environment, 2018. Melbourne Water; https://www.biosphere.org.au/our-biosphere/western-port-biosphere

Historical and recent industrial threats

Western Port Bay has long been under pressure from heavy industrial development, and local communities are increasingly frustrated by proposals that risk the health and values of the bay.

The strong community response to AGL's proposed gas import terminal demonstrated the depth of local care and concern for Western Port Bay. More than 10,000 submissions were made during the Environmental Effects Statement (EES) process – the largest number received for a Victorian project at the time.

This community concern is not about stopping all development. It is about making sure projects proposed for Western Port Bay are appropriate for the place, guided by the best available science, and designed and assessed in ways that protect the bay's long-term health.

Western Port Bay needs a planning and decision-making approach that reflects the principles of ecologically sustainable development and ecosystem-based management under the *Marine and Coastal Act*, while considering the cumulative impacts of development across the whole bay.

The community wants to see investment and development that contributes to a sustainable local economy and supports jobs and industries that value and depend on a healthy Western Port Bay, including tourism and hospitality, recreation, viticulture, renewable energy and ecological restoration.

A whole-of-bay approach would help make sure future projects are considered in the context of the bay as a whole, with environmental, cultural, social and economic values at the heart of decision-making.

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.



Weedy Sea-dragon (Shannon Hurley)

Benefits

- Comprehensive environmental management, biodiversity conservation, research and monitoring of Western Port Bay.
- Identification of marine habitats and areas that can be protected, restored or enhanced.
- Strengthened environmental values and climate resilience through protecting and restoring wildlife and habitats.
- Improved climate change adaptation and resilience across marine sectors and communities.
- Strengthened Traditional Custodian and community stewardship, participation and governance.
- Improved tourism and recreational opportunities, particularly where initiatives such as habitat restoration create benefits for both nature and people.
- Support for sustainable growth of Victoria's blue economy, while protecting Western Port Bay's wildlife, habitats and cultural values.
- Greater certainty for industry and government about the parameters for appropriate and sustainable development, helping avoid inappropriate projects and supporting long-term planning for existing and emerging marine industries.
- A more cost-effective approach to managing Western Port Bay, with funding targeted towards high-priority actions that will deliver tangible outcomes.

Next steps

This proposal has been and continues to be put in front of state government, local government, community and recreational groups, government agencies and industry.

We are asking all candidates in the Bass, Hastings and Nepean electorates, and their parties, to commit to the Western Port Bay Framework at the 2026 Victorian election, and to make its implementation a first priority in the next term of government.

For more information on the Western Port Bay Framework, please contact Shannon Hurley, shannon@vnpa.org.au



Boating on Western Port Bay (Julian Meehan)