Foreshore and Bushland Reserves Vegetation Protection Policy

Preamble

Our beaches and unspoiled bushland are a cherished community asset. They form a key part of the natural beauty that residents and visitors love here in Bass Coast.

The native vegetation communities lining our foreshores are diverse and resilient. They include complex and interdependent communities of plants, animals, insects, birds and fungi that have adapted to local conditions over millions of years. Today, 86% of these communities have been lost through land clearing since European settlement. Much of what remains is held in conservation reserves that provide a refuge for native wildlife and form crucial biolinks connecting habitat across the landscape.

These reserves also make a profound contribution to community wellbeing, the character of our neighbourhoods, and the regional landscape. For all these reasons and more, Council takes its role and responsibilities as a manager of bushland and foreshore reserves seriously.

Native vegetation in conservation reserves must be allowed to flourish, adapt and evolve according to its own natural processes, wherever possible. Repeated human intervention, even if considered minor, can prevent a nature reserve from thriving by undermining its diversity, structure and resilience. This degrades the character of our neighbourhoods and region, leaving our bushland and foreshores more vulnerable to damage from storms and erosion, invasion by weeds and pest animals.

Context

Bass Coast Shire Council has been appointed by the Minister for Environment under the *Crown Land (Reserves) Act 1978* as the land manager responsible for just over 40 kilometres of Crown Land Foreshore Reserve. Council also manages over 160 hectares of inland bushland reserves across Bass Coast.

Foreshore reserves managed by Council include Ventnor, Red Rocks, Cowes, Silverleaves, Rhyll, Newhaven, Cape Woolamai (Safety Beach), Grantville, Tenby Point, Coronet Bay, Kilcunda, Cape Paterson and Inverloch. Council is responsible for the care and management of these foreshore reserves in accordance with relevant policy and strategic plans developed for these areas.

Inland bushland reserves managed by Council include Ventnor Common, Saltwater Creek Reserve, Scenic Estate Conservation Reserve, Smiths Beach Drainage Reserve, Thompson

Reserve, Screw Creek Conservation Reserve and Ayr Creek Reserve. These reserves consist of a mix of Crown Land and Council-owned land.

As the land manager for these foreshore and bushland reserves, Council is responsible for maintaining and enhancing the indigenous vegetation, including protecting it from unauthorized damage. This damage typically takes the form of felling and trimming, or poisoning vegetation with herbicide. The main driver for vegetation damage in coastal settings is understood to be a desire to improve sea views from nearby private property.

The unauthorized removal or damage of vegetation gives rise to several risks and negative impacts including:

- Loss of biodiversity and wildlife habitat
- Loss of protection for soils and coastal dunes against erosion
- Impact on the community values of natural spaces
- Increased fire risk, through modification of fuel loads
- Increased opportunities for invasive weeds and pest animals to proliferate

Policy objective

The objective of this policy is to ensure that natural vegetation in Council-managed conservation reserves has every opportunity to survive and flourish, free from unauthorized human intervention.

The policy provides clear direction for officers responding to incidents of vegetation damage in Council-managed coastal and bushland reserves.

Policy statement

Managing Vegetation Damage

Council will not tolerate acts of deliberate and unauthorized damage to vegetation on public land. Public land is for the enjoyment and benefit of the whole community. Much of this land has been reserved specifically for the purpose of conservation, acknowledging that 86% of the original vegetation has already been cleared across Bass Coast since European settlement. What little indigenous vegetation remains now provides essential habitat for our iconic local species.

Council will investigate all reported incidents of vegetation damage. This will include documenting in detail the type and quantity of damaged plant species, method of damage and identification of properties that may benefit from the damage. These records will be maintained to inform ongoing investigations, where damage is incremental or ongoing.

Council will respond to incidents of vegetation damage under relevant enforcement legislation. This may include:

- Interviewing persons who have notified Council of damage
- Contacting owners of property potentially gaining a benefit from the damage

- Contacting a broad group of nearby property owners
- Other compliance and investigation actions, as necessary

Council will rehabilitate sites of vegetation damage, including revegetation with indigenous plant species.

Council may, at its discretion, fill the space and/or view-lines created by unauthorised vegetation damage. This may include erecting signage that contains messaging about the incident and the importance of indigenous vegetation. Such signage may remain in place until the vegetation (whether replanted or naturally regenerated) recovers to the height and/or width of the previous damaged vegetation.

Council will undertake proactive surveillance or monitoring of "hot spots" to gather information which may support enforcement activities.

Works to exclude or limit public access, including fencing, may be undertaken where required, including to protect significant species.

Through ongoing communication, education and engagement, Council will actively promote the importance of indigenous vegetation, encourage the community to take an active role in monitoring and reporting suspicious activity, and highlight the penalties that can be applied to unauthorized vegetation damage.

Council will advocate for increases in the penalties that can be applied to illegal damage to vegetation. This includes potential increases in penalties under the Local Law and State Government legislation.

Additional Documents

Vegetation damage investigations and responses will be conducted in accordance with the relevant Vegetation Damage in Reserves - Procedure for Action.

Relevant Strategy, Policy and Legislation

Council's responsibilities, and our community's aspirations, are set out in a range of related documents at the local, state and federal level; including, but not limited to:

Bass Coast Shire Council

- *Community Vision 2041*
    - *Theme 1 – Climate Emergency and Climate preparedness*
        - *Priority 1.5 – We protect our shorelines, estuaries and waterways through tighter planning controls and by restoring or enhancing natural buffers.*
    - *Theme 2 – Protect and Enhance Natural Environment*
        - *Priority 2.2 – We will restore our landscape and enhance our biodiversity through careful management of land, planting, water and ecosystems.*
- *Council Plan 2021 – 2025*

    - *Objective 1 – Protecting our natural environment*
        - *1.4 Improve biodiversity through careful management of land, water and ecosystems that protect and enhance our native flora, fauna and biolinks.*
    - *Objective 3 – Our Places*
        - *3.4 Create attractive and accessible public open spaces that complement and enhance our visitor economy.*
- *Bass Coast Climate Action Plan 2020 – 2030*
    - *Action 8a.13 – Partner to deliver whole of municipality coastal management*
    - *Acton 8a.23 – Improve vegetation cover in urban centres*
    - *Action 8a.30 – Deliver the Biolinks project*
- *Natural Environment Strategy 2016 – 2026*
- *Integrated Water Management Plan 2020 – Strategy Document*
- *Bass Coast Planning Scheme*
- *Bass Coast Shire Council Local Law No.1 Neighbourhood Amenity 2012*

State

- *Protecting Victoria's Environment – Biodiversity 2037*
- *Victorian Coastal Strategy 2017*
- *Marine and Coastal Act 2018*
- *Marine and Coastal Policy 2020*

Commonwealth

- *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*
- *National Framework for the Management and Monitoring of Australia's Native Vegetation 2001*
- *Crown Land (Reserves) Act 1978*

Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting

The Manager Sustainable Environment will be responsible for ensuring that application of the Foreshore and Bushland Reserves Vegetation Protection Policy is monitored consistently, and evaluated at least every two years. Reporting to Council will be delivered by the Manager Sustainable Environment (or department delegate), at least once per year, via dedicated reports and/or progress reports on any of the Council plans or strategies listed above.

Review Process

This Policy will be reviewed by Council no later than four years from the date it is adopted, or as needed in response to a change in relevant legislation, policy or best practice.

Approval

Adopted at the Ordinary Meeting of Council on