

FROM: Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation RNTBC (GMTOAC)

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To whom it may concern,

Gunditjmarra Mirring (Country) is bounded by Bochara (Glenelg River) in the west, Nyamat (Sothern Ocean) in the south, the Wannon River across to Bunong (Mustons Creek) in the north and Tooram (The Hopkins River) in the East.

The 59 Clans that made up the Gunditjmarra Nation sustainably managed Mirring for thousands of years. During this time there were major events that changed Mirring, such as, volcanoes erupting, sea levels rising and falling, floods, droughts and bushfires. These major events had huge impacts on our ancestors, but they always found a way to not only survive, but thrive.

Our ancestors understood the connection between all living things on Mirring and knew that to maintain the delicate balance all species needed to be looked after.

Since colonisation, Gunditjmarra people have been systematically dispossessed of Mirring and Mirring has been dispossessed of us. Our obligation to care for Mirring was denied to us and colonisation brought with it strange plants and animals, it also brought with it the notion of changing Mirring to suit the colonisers, a way of living with the environment that was at the other end of the spectrum to Gunditjmarra, adapting ourselves to suit Mirring.

The degradation and continual desecration of Mirring over the last 186 years has been devastating to Mirring, and to Gunditjmarra.

The intimate knowledge of Mirring and its cycles was honed over thousands of years. Mirring and its cycles have been changed forever by colonisation; but our obligations and responsibility to Mirring remain.

On 30 March 2007 the Federal Court of Australia delivered a consent determination over almost 140,000 hectares across the south west of Victoria, recognising Gunditjmarra's native title rights and interests across our traditional homelands and waters.

The Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation (GMTOAC) was established as a result of the Native Title process to ensure that our cultural obligations and responsibilities which arise from Gunditjmarra country and under Gunditjmarra law, custom and beliefs are upheld and recognised for the protection and benefit of our traditional lands and waters and for our respect to our Gunditjmarra ancestors and for our Elders.

Gunditjmarra recognise four distinct types of Mirring, Tungatt Mirring (Stone Country), Nyamat Mirring (Sea Country), Bochara Woorowarook Mirring (River Forest Country) and Woorowarook Mirring (Forest Country). All of these types of Mirring have suffered and need various levels of attention. Impacts from agriculture, plantations, climate change and water allotments, to mention a few, have significant effects on Mirring and have upset the delicate balance.

Our Native Title area includes large areas of parks and reserves managed under the Ngootyoong Gunditj, Ngootyoong Mara (South West Plan, Parks Victoria, 2015). Our planning area covers over 116 000 hectares of public land and freehold Gunditjmarra land in south-west Victoria comprising:

- nine National, State and Coastal Parks: Lower Glenelg, Mount Richmond and Cobboboonee national parks, Cape Nelson, Dergholm and Mount Napier state parks, Discovery Bay Marine National Park and Discovery Bay Coastal Park, which are managed by Parks Victoria, and Mount Eccles National Park, which is cooperatively managed by Parks Victoria and the Gunditjmarra Traditional Owners through the Budj Bim Council
- Cobboboonee Forest Park managed by DELWP
- 132 reserves and a regional park managed by Parks Victoria
- six Gunditjmarra community owned properties, including three Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs).

Native Title held by the Gunditjmarra covers most of the public land in the southern part of the planning area including Lower Glenelg, Cobboboonee, Mount Richmond and Mount Eccles national parks and Cobboboonee Forest Park.

**(a) the extent of the decline of Victoria's biodiversity and the likely impact on people, particularly First Peoples, and ecosystems, if more is not done to address this, including consideration of climate change impacts;**

The decline in biodiversity is noticeable on many levels. There is increased pressure on space with invasive plant species that seem to thrive in our rich soils. Pest species such as feral goats, pigs and cats decimate native fauna and flora. Aquatic pests such as redfin, tench and carp are feeding on our native species, in some cases the native species are already listed as vulnerable, endangered or listed on the under the EPBC Act.

Our traditional resources, whether they be food, fibre, medicine are becoming increasingly scarce, both flora and fauna, to the point where we often don't take our catch home, were just happy to see those animals or plants on Mirring. In some case particular plants or animals have disappeared altogether.

Large trees with hollows are important nesting sites for various birds and mammals, conservation areas that contain these important trees need constant monitoring and the introduction of Cultural burn regimes that will control the severity of the impact from bushfires, by reducing fuel levels and cleaning Mirring and allowing the sunlight to reach the ground. The majority of our Culturally important species are key indicator species for the overall health of the ecosystem to which they belong. So the fact that they are becoming a rare sight isn't just a bad sign for us, but for all people who reside on Mirring. Some of these species are recognised by legislation as rare or threatened, but most of them are provided with no additional protection or resources in western planning or actions.

The effects that this has on our people is profound and is as complex and interconnected as the ecosystems we're trying to protect. We consider our totem as family, so when we can't hear or see them in the landscape its felt as a great loss. The species we hold in high regard all have needs in regards to food, shelter and safety. Gunditjmarra see Mirring as an extension of ourselves, so if it's not healthy, neither are we. We belong to Mirring and as such have a role to play in the various ecosystems, just like any of the other species that reside within.

The decline in ecosystems and associated biodiversity has numerous effects on Gunditjmarra people.

As mentioned our hunting and agriculture and aquaculture practices are significantly affected. The associated activities regarding these all play an important role in our ability to practice Culture, continue connection to Mirring and each other through kinship. It impacts on ability to use our

Dhauwurd Wurrung language that we are currently rematriating. Some of the species that we have our own language for no longer appear in our landscape. Our Elders, who have witnessed this decline over long period of time feel great loss. Our children are unable to build connection with culturally significant species that will shape who they will become and how they will fulfil their obligations to Mirring. Our people who live off Mirring also feel the sense of loss through the noticeable changes with each visit home.

Climate change has and will continue to have devastating impacts on Mirring. As the sea level rises, our coastal hunting grounds will become inaccessible and important cultural heritage sites will be lost like shell middens, camping grounds, dreaming places and other important places that make up who we are, are now under real threat. Many of the coastal species are already feeling the effects and we fear the ongoing results will be catastrophic if action isn't taken now.

The ongoing pressure from agricultural water allocations, blue gum and pine plantations on our underground water, through aquifers, and Karst rising springs is already apparent and the water vital for Mirring and needs to be protected.

As other parts of the Country become drier, our Mirring is fertile and has good rainfall. This has equated to increased pressure for agriculture and other industries conducive to these conditions. Mirring cannot support these industries that tend only to take, but not give back.

The forests require connectivity to allow animals to move safely between feeding grounds and to find water as both are becoming harder to find due to climate change. If the conditions aren't supportive for reproduction, numbers will decline rapidly in the coming years.

The increased pressure on the water as mentioned above and the drainage that has been implemented on Mirring has had severe effects on our wetlands. Large tracts of Mirring were covered by wetlands prior to colonisation and the decline on these very important ecosystems has had dire effects on species and Gunditjmarra.

**(b) the adequacy of the legislative framework protecting Victoria's environment, including grasslands, forests and the marine and coastal environment, and native species;**

The current legislative framework is clearly inadequate to protect Gunditjmarra Mirring because the health of Mirring continues to decline. Recent examples include:

- Crawford River and Budj Bim fires
- Clearing of roadside vegetation
- Agricultural water allocations and run off from livestock and chemicals
- Increasing blue gum and pine plantation pressures and associated impacts to Mirring ie pine wildlings and chemicals used.
- Inadequate research and data on species to pinpoint areas of concern that need immediate attention (Funding and resource deficiencies)
- Commercial pipi licenses
- Increased visitation

The list could go on

**(c) the adequacy and effectiveness of government programs and funding protecting and restoring Victoria's ecosystems;**

GMTOAC has developed collaborative partnerships with DELWP, PV and Glenelg Hopkins CMA amongst other organisations to help protect Mirring. These are helping us to restore our Cultural fire practices, water regimes, control weeds and feral animals. There is a huge amount of work to be done for Mirring to be healthy. For this to happen we need to be properly resourced so we can respond to requests for collaboration, and do the work on the ground.

We want all Gunditjmarra Country to be healthy, regardless of land tenure, fences, or change in political parties. This is a huge challenge, and may take a long time. But healthy Mirring is the only right choice. To achieve this, we need to be proactive rather than reactive. For Mirring to be healthy we must restore areas. We can never take Mirring back to what it was, but it can still be healthy.

**(d) legislative, policy, program, governance and funding solutions to facilitate ecosystem and species protection, restoration and recovery in Victoria, in the context of climate change impacts;**

Increased research into the effects on the water table needs to be undertaken. Allocations need to be in line with rainfall, and all of the other associated pressures like plantations and climate change. Waterway health is also an important aspect that needs to be addressed, in regards to the overall health of the water itself and the ecosystems and species it supports. The findings of this research and the data collated will provide a clearer picture in regards to what is sustainable for the industries it supports, but more importantly the native species that rely on it.

Sustainable Forest management can only be achieved when the elements that make up the forests are cared for. The soil, water and plants animals and fungus are all intrinsically linked. It only takes one of these elements to suffer and all the other elements suffer too. A holistic approach to managing Mirring needs to be adopted. This will need to have adequate resourcing to attempt to change the trends and will need to be done collaboratively between CMA's, DELWP, Parks Vic , plantations, private landowners and Traditional Owners.

**(e) opportunities to restore Victoria's environment while upholding First Peoples' connection to country, and increasing and diversifying employment opportunities in Victoria; and**

GMTOAC has a long history of land management of it's own properties and as a result of native title determination, the Budj Bim National park is now co-managed between GMTOAC, DELWP and Parks Victoria, through the Budj Bim Council. The Newly inscribed Budj Bim World Heritage landscape is also managed exclusively by GMTOAC.

All of these properties have land management plans in place with a view to restoring the natural balance by dealing with pest species, revegetation, water management regimes and re-introducing fire into the landscape. Various projects have and will continue to take place on Mirring. These include but are not limited to:

- Post bushfire key waterway health indicator species surveys
- Invasive aquatic species surveys
- Koala over population strategies
- Weed identification and removal

- Waterway rehabilitation projects
- Habitat restoration for threatened species
- Cultural burning

In 2015, GMTOAC worked in collaboration with Parks Victoria to develop and implement the Ngootyoong Gunditj, Ngootyoong Mara, South Westland management plan. The plan covers over 114400 hectares of over 130 Parks and Reserves.

The plan reflects the four types of Mirring within our boundaries:

Tungatt Mirring (Stone Country)

Bochara Woorowarook Mirring (River forest Country)

Woorowarook Mirring (Forest Country)

Nyamat Mirring (Sea Country)

The reflection of Gunditjmara ways of seeing Mirring has enabled Parks Vic to implement some Gunditjmara land management techniques, as well as offered the opportunity for GMTOAC and it's members to have an active role in regards to prioritising, planning and carrying out works on Mirring that are significant to Traditional Owners. Many of these activities also involve the Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority, this allows the management of Mirring to be more holistic, by managing forests and water collaboratively.

As part of the Modernisation of the Regional Forest Agreements (RFA's), GMTOAC was engaged by DELWP on behalf of the Commonwealth to provide input from it's members in regards to the future of land management.

GMTOAC conducted trips on Mirring with it's members to identify priorities and subsequently developed a program logic to enable traditional owners to identify the key elements that provide the optimal conditions for forests to sustain current conditions and also improve them. The program logic also assist with the identification of opportunities to implement traditional land management techniques that align with DELWP and Parks Vic.

Through the RFA modernisation process, a forest management plan and strategy will be developed and implemented by DELWP. GMTOAC will be advocating for this plan to introduce the four types of Mirring as outlined in the Ngootyoong Gunditj Ngootyoong Mara plan. The Ngootyoong Gunditj Ngootyoong Mara plan is Parks Vic land Management plan and has recently released it's draft implementation strategy.

A cultural Landscape Strategy is also currently being developed. This strategy is specifically to assist with the implementation of traditional owner's values and priorities in regards to forest management.

In the coming months it will become clear as to the level of involvement Traditional owners will have in planning and carry out works on Mirring. DELWP has also recently launched it's traditional owner self-determination strategy.

The shift in ways of working with traditional owners in recent years is moving out of the consultation way of doing things and into giving traditional owners the lead. Western approaches to land management has some merit, but through the effective engagement of traditional owner's and

applying traditional knowledge and land management techniques will have better outcomes for Mirring and all the species that depend on it.

**(f)**

**On behalf of the Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation and the Gunditjmara people, I'd like to thank you for carrying out this important work.**

**It is imperative that ongoing reflection and monitoring of Mirring takes place. One of the key aspects to our people's survival over millennia was due to the ability to adapt to change and find the balance that not only sustains the environment, but improves it.**

**Thank you for your consideration.**

**Shea Rotumah**

**Gunditjmara Forestry and Engagement Coordinator**

**Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation**