

HEALTHY RIVERS, HEALTHY COMMUNITIES & REGIONAL GROWTH VICTORIAN RIVER HEALTH STRATEGY

PROTECTING RIVERS AND STREAMS OF HIGH COMMUNITY VALUE

Special protection for rivers and river systems of very high community value

There are a small number of rivers that are particularly important to all Victorians because of their high conservation, recreation or cultural values.

In 1991, Victoria reviewed the values of all its rivers and put in place a system of Heritage Rivers. Eighteen river reaches were designated as Heritage Rivers and 26 Natural Catchment Areas were identified. These rivers and catchments are protected under legislation and will be preserved as part of our heritage.

In addition, 11 wetlands of very high conservation value have been listed as Ramsar wetlands and are consequently subject to special protection mechanisms under the Commonwealth's *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*. Most of these wetlands are strongly influenced by river health.

Of the 18 river reaches designated as Heritage Rivers, the Ovens and Mitchell Rivers stand out because of their high conservation value, highly natural flows, the relative intactness of the entire river system and their significance for larger systems. Both rivers provide vital inputs to larger scale systems – the Mitchell River to the Gippsland Lakes and the Ovens River to the Murray-Darling system. Deterioration of these river systems is likely to have major detrimental impacts on these larger scale systems.

The Ovens and the Mitchell Rivers are river systems of very high value and will be managed to protect these values whilst recognising their importance to regional communities.

Other rivers of high value

There are a number of rivers, which whilst not designated Heritage Rivers or linked with Ramsar wetlands, still do have high community values. These rivers have statewide and regional environmental, social and economic value. Within the regional planning process, regional communities will identify their rivers or river reaches of high value and set priorities for protection and/or restoration.

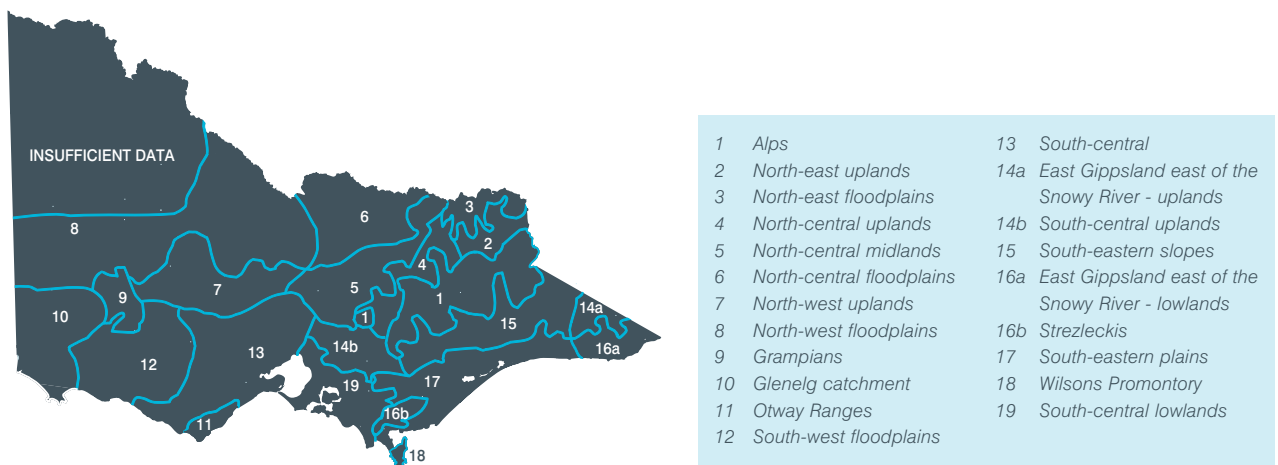
To determine the rivers or river reaches of high value, the assets associated with the river and their relative value will be identified. The major classes of river-related assets to be considered include:

- environmental assets including:
 - the presence of rare species and/or communities and geomorphological features;
 - sites of significance;
 - areas with high levels of naturalness of components of the river system including whether the river or a major river reach meets the criteria for ecologically healthy; and
 - representative rivers (this is discussed in more detail below);
- economic assets including:
 - important regional industries that depend on river health;
 - town water supplies that depend on river health; and
 - public infrastructure associated with rivers; and
- social assets including important recreation sites and sites that are significant for Indigenous and European culture.

Representative rivers

One of the major environmental values to be considered in the regional planning is representative rivers. These are rivers in an ecologically healthy condition that can be used to represent the major river classes that once occurred naturally across Victoria. Maintaining a network of representative rivers will ensure that the natural diversity of river systems in Victoria is maintained for future generations.

A preliminary classification of rivers in Victoria was undertaken to determine the major types of rivers in the State based on river ecology. Rivers were classified on the basis of their land type and systems, fish and aquatic invertebrate communities and terrestrial biodiversity. The figure below shows the preliminary classification of river regions in Victoria. In the VRHS possible representative rivers have been suggested and these will be reviewed by the Victorian Environment Assessment Council.



Establishing regional targets for river protection and restoration

Five and ten year regional targets will be set for river protection and restoration through community-driven regional planning processes. These processes will reflect a balance between regional economic, environmental and social imperatives, and will deal with all the issues affecting rivers. The regional planning process will set targets for the protection and restoration of rivers using a priority setting process which is risk-based and designed to:

- protect existing high value areas or areas in good environmental condition; and
- restore those areas where there are:
 - the highest environmental and/or community gain for the resources invested; and
 - real community commitment towards long term improvement of river health.

The VRHS provides protection for rivers and streams of high community value through:

- the establishment of Heritage Rivers and Ramsar wetlands;
- the recognition of the Ovens and Mitchell Rivers as 'icon' rivers for Victoria and the development of appropriate regional arrangements for these rivers; and
- establishment of regional targets for river protection and restoration through the regional river health planning process.