Submission to VEAC regarding the Statewide assessment of public land

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From: Adrian Marshall, the University of Melbourne

I am PhD researcher at the University of Melbourne, investigating nature strips and their potential to contribute to urban biodiversity. I would like to submit that your assessment of public land should be expanded to include nature strips. A few points:

Nature strips are quite significant in urban areas, comprising perhaps 5% of Melbourne. In Caroline Springs, my back-of-envelope calculation suggests the combined area of nature strips is the equivalent of 70% of the size of the total unencumbered land set aside for public open space – quite significant.

Nature strips are the main location of the urban forest.

My working definition of a nature strip is any non-paved area within the road easement and between the kerb (or road edge) and the adjacent property. When I say “nature strip”, you probably immediately think of the grassed area between the kerb and the footpath, but in many suburbs streets often only have footpaths on one side of the road (or indeed no footpath at all), and on the other side of the road quite wide strips of public land are effectively treated as part of front gardens running all the way to the kerb.

Nature strips form a city-wide network of green space. They are the park that people step out into when they leave their home. They are a primary means by which people connect with nature on a day to day level.

Nature strips are public land. They need to be categorised separately to other forms of public land because they a different management structure. Management of nature strips is mostly by private citizens, but the street trees are council. The legal basis of this is unclear. Utilities are given the right to carry out works in the nature strip. On major roads, VicRoads manages both the groundcover and the street trees unless an agreement has been made otherwise.

No data exists on the extent, distribution or form of this public land. Of the ten councils I have contacted as part of my research, only one has GIS info on nature strips. Some have the width of nature strips collected as part of their urban forest data because width is relevant to tree species selection. As far as being considered the subject of research, nature strips have hidden in plain sight.

Nature strips often abut other forms of public open space, e.g. parks and reserves, and should be managed by the same authority that manages those reserves. For instance, Melbourne’s remnant grasslands would be strengthened by having dense plantings of similar species on the nature strips around them, but because that responsibility falls to councils, it never happens.

Roadsides, especially rural roadsides, which you may consider nature strips given the definition above, can be very significant areas for threated species conservation, and this is particularly true for the EPBC-protected grassland species and communities of the Victorian Volcanic Plain.