

The Mornington Peninsula and Western Port Biosphere Foundation strongly recommends the long-term protection of the HMAS Cerberus land proposed for divestment as a significant conservation asset. The Australian Department of Defence's Cerberus site represents a rare opportunity to secure more than 1,100 hectares of largely intact natural habitat located adjacent to internationally significant Western Port Ramsar wetlands within the UNESCO-designated Western Port Biosphere Reserve.

As a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, this region is recognised not only for its biodiversity values, but also as a landscape where people and nature can thrive together through sustainable stewardship and community connection. Consistent with this, we believe that future planning for the site can include appropriate opportunities for community access and connection with nature. However, this will need to be carefully designed to protect and enhance the site's outstanding environmental values.

Meaningful engagement with Traditional Owners will be essential, recognising the site's enduring cultural significance and the important role of Indigenous knowledge, custodianship and connection to Country.

At a time when native habitat across the region continues to be fragmented, the protection of large, connected landscapes is becoming increasingly important. Failure to protect natural habitat within the Cerberus site would substantially diminish the region's capacity to support the Australian Government's aspirations for protecting the nation's biodiversity, as well as its international commitment to protect 30% of Australia's land and sea by 2030. Across the Western Port Biosphere's 2,100 square kilometres, terrestrial habitat protection remains well short of the 30x30 target, despite the region's international recognition for its biodiversity values.

The proposed divestment presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity for this region to make a meaningful contribution towards the 30x30 objective by securing one of the largest remaining parcels of remnant bushland on the Mornington Peninsula for conservation, community benefit and future generations.

Resilient ecosystems capable of supporting native wildlife into the future are vital to mitigating the multiple impacts of climate change, urbanisation and emergencies such as avian influenza. Protecting and reconnecting habitat at scale is one of the most effective ways to improve ecological resilience and species recovery, while also safeguarding the natural assets that underpin the region's identity, liveability and visitor economy.

Natural and community resilience and wellbeing are the basis of the Foundation's advocacy for conservation as the primary future use of the HMAS Cerberus site. We encourage the Commonwealth to work collaboratively with Traditional Owners, conservation organisations, local

communities and other levels of government to secure its long-term protection and management. By doing so, this nationally significant landscape can contribute to Australia's 30x30 ambitions while demonstrating the core Biosphere Reserve principle that healthy ecosystems, thriving communities and a strong connection to Country are mutually reinforcing outcomes.