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Strategic public land use assessment and planning in Victoria: Over 30 years of trailblazing but where to from here?

Conflict over the appropriate uses and management of public land have been a feature of the Australian political landscape for at least the past 30 years. While various attempts have been made to establish land use assessment and planning institutions in various jurisdictions, the success of these often short lived attempts at institutional approaches for managing land use conflict have been patchy at best. The experience in the State of Victoria has been somewhat different, with public land use assessment and planning having been informed by a series of independent statutory bodies since 1970 (the Land Conservation, Environment Conservation, and Victorian Environmental Assessment Councils). To some degree at least the value of this approach is indicated by the extent to which Victoria's bioregions are now protected in conservation reserves. However, while there has always been a statutory body in operation, the roles and responsibilities of these bodies have been subject to significant legislative change, with existing bodies replaced by new bodies in 1997 and 2001. Justifications for these reforms included changing circumstances and new understandings about environmental management, as well as changing views about public administration. As a way of contributing to enhancing the design of institutions for mediating land use conflict and contributing to sustainable land use and management, this paper investigates the lessons that can be learnt from the Victorian experience by examining the implications of the changing roles and responsibilities of these institutions, and then discussing possible future directions for strategic land use planning.