

**21.02**

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**FRENCH ISLAND, SANDSTONE ISLAND AND ELIZABETH ISLAND**

**PROFILE**

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**Planning and structure**

The day-to-day administration of the planning scheme and assessment of planning permit applications made to the responsible authority are undertaken by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning.

Parks Victoria is the land manager of the French Island National Park and their views or comments may be sought by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning in responding to referrals of planning applications, particularly use and development proposals abutting the National Park.

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**Population and settlement**

**Permanent and visitor population**

French Island has an estimated permanent population of 90 people and an additional part-time population of 90 people. While the Island's permanent population has fluctuated over the years, it has changed little since 1975 when the McLeod Prison Farm closed.

The Island is likely to continue to attract mainlander interest as a location for 'weekender' or hobby farm activities. This level of interest should maintain the Island's part-time population.

**Settlement**

The settlement pattern on French Island is scattered due to the nature of the holdings, but dwellings are predominantly located on the western side of the Island. The Island contains approximately 60 dwellings. French Island has no reticulated services or facilities, which restricts residential development opportunities.

Settlement on Sandstone Island consists of a single dwelling and a shed. There is no opportunity for further development, given its environmental setting and land constraints.

Elizabeth Island has a tourism accommodation facility which sleeps up to 8 people, a caretaker's residence and a shed.

**Restructure Overlays**

Located on French Island, Tankerton Estate comprises 700 lots, however the Tankerton Estate Restructure Overlay allows for a maximum of 19 dwellings to be developed on restructured lots within the Estate. These lots are to be developed in accordance with environmental and land capabilities and infrastructure constraints. The restructured subdivision will preserve and enhance the amenity of the area and reduce environmental impacts.

A Restructure Overlay also applies to an area in the north-west of French Island known as the Bullock and Decoy Swamp. A total of 13 dwellings are permitted in the restructure plan, which reflects the environmental constraints and sensitivity, poor level of access and relative isolation in this part of the Island.

The whole of Sandstone Island is also subject to a Restructure Overlay to address an old and inappropriate subdivision of 142 lots created in the 1960s. The restructure plan allows for one dwelling on the island, in accordance with its environmental setting and land constraints.

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**Land use**

French Island's main industry is agriculture, with approximately 5500 to 6000 hectares of freehold rural land on the Island. This land is characterised by farming activities with cattle grazing being most common. However, land owners are diversifying into value added practices including horticulture, biodynamics, viticulture and free range poultry farming.

A number of French Islanders are self-employed through their farm holdings or through the provision of a visitor service (or a combination of both). The limited number of commercial and community activities on the Island is reflective of both low population and low visitor levels.

French Island has one general store and post office, a primary school (which is exempt from the State's minimum pupil regulations due to its unusual circumstances), the Parks Victoria office, a public hall, jetty, sports ground and a cemetery. The Environment Protection Authority monitors the Island's small community tip. The Island, like other Victorian country areas, has a voluntary Country Fire Authority service. Most of the Island's extensive areas of native vegetation are highly flammable and there is a high risk of wildfire.

Sandstone Island is predominantly used for private agricultural purposes.

Elizabeth Island is predominantly used as a tourism accommodation retreat with caretaker's facilities. There are no provisions for agriculture or other farming activities.

### **Tourism**

The number of tourists visiting French Island is relatively small in comparison with tourists visiting adjacent Phillip Island and Mornington Peninsula. This is primarily due to the access constraints to and around the Island, together with limited recreational opportunities and facilities. It is anticipated that tourism numbers for the Island will remain relatively low. However, there are opportunities for further facilities and possible nature-based attractions to be provided within the Island's environmental context, including retreats and group camps.

Tourism on French Island is based on passive recreational activities. Attractions, in addition to the National Park, include the Island's flora and fauna, in particular the koala population. Bus tours of the Island are offered by local operators.

French Island has several types of accommodation on offer to visitors including private lodges and the former prison farm offering group accommodation. Private camping grounds are available in addition to the designated National Park camping locations.

There are currently no tourism or commercial uses on Sandstone Island.

Elizabeth Island caters for tourists and is promoted as a relaxation retreat for individuals or small groups. The tourism activities focus on bird watching, walking, swimming and boating.

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### **Heritage and culture**

The traditional owners of French Island are the Bunurong tribe who hunted on French Island long before European settlement, collecting swan eggs and shellfish from the Island. The Island has several registered archaeological areas identified for shell middens, surface scatter or an isolated artefact. Preservation of these areas is important to the Island's historic and cultural values.

French Island was named as such in 1802, after the French crew on the ship 'Le Naturaliste' were the first to establish that Isle des Francais was an island, and not joined to the mainland. Pastoralists James and William Gairdner were the first legal settlers on the Island in about 1847, taking up a pastoral license for 320 hectares on the south coast. The main activities around the time of settlement included cattle grazing, dairy farming and cropping. Salt works were prevalent in the 1870s with chicory growing and processing introduced later in the 1890s. The chicory industry became the main industry for the Island until around the 1940s when it ceased due to unstable markets with the introduction of instant coffee and the Island's isolation (cost factors). McLeod Prison Farm was established on the Island in 1916 and operated until 1975.

Sandstone Island has national and state heritage value in demonstrating patterns of agricultural land use and pioneering settlement of an island system as identified by its registration on the Victorian Heritage Database.

Elizabeth Island has no current identified areas of heritage significance.

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**Access and movement**

Access services to French Island include:

- A passenger ferry, which operates daily between Stony Point and Tankerton jetty.
- A passenger ferry, which operates daily between Tankerton Jetty and Cowes (Philip Island).
- A barge, which operates on an as-needs basis, offering an irregular service between Corinella on the mainland and the barge landing, Barge Access Road, on French Island. The barge can be used for the transportation of vehicles, fuel, cattle and other goods.
- Private aircraft or boat.

All of French Island's roads are unsealed and, although graded up to three times a year, at times become impassable after heavy rain. Other than roads and the jetty, the Island's infrastructure is limited to a radio link to the mainland for telephone services. There is no reticulated service for electricity, gas, water or sewage. Electricity is provided by generators (diesel, solar or wind) and domestic water is provided from rainfall or bores.

Movement around the Island is primarily by car (or other motorised vehicles) although some visitors walk, ride bicycles or see the Island by bus tour. Visitors must obtain a permit from Parks Victoria or the French Island Community Association to bring a vehicle onto the Island. Horses may be transported by barge, however are not encouraged on the Island because of the impact on the road infrastructure and the potential introduction of weed species and Cinnamon Fungus.

Access to Sandstone Island is by private aircraft or boat only.

Access to Elizabeth Island includes:

- A barge service which operates on an as-needs basis, offering an irregular service to Elizabeth Island from Corinella on the mainland and from the barge landing, Barge Access Road, on French Island. The barge can be used for the transportation of vehicles, fuel, cattle and other goods.
- Private aircraft or boat.

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**The natural environment**

The natural environment of French Island is attributed to its isolation and relatively undisturbed ecosystems of national and international value. It is sanctioned as a place of highly significant flora and fauna which should be protected, conserved and, where possible, enhanced.

These levels of significance are defined (by *Sites of Zoological Significance in the Westernport Region*, Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands, Andrew et al, 1984; and *Sites of Botanical Significance in the Westernport Region*, Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands, Opie et al, 1984) as follows:

- National zoological — a site is of national significance '(a) if a species which is rare or restricted or both on the Australian mainland or throughout its range regularly occurs in the area; (b) if it is a primary foraging or roosting area for international migrants; or (c) if it is a major breeding area of a species within Australia'.
- State botanical — a site is of State significance if 'the site supports high quality vegetation which is rare or of restricted distribution in the State; represents a wide range of vegetation types; is particularly diverse; contains a number of significant species or is of importance because of the scientific research being carried out there'.

French Island has a high number of rare or threatened animal species and is particularly rich in ground orchids. In addition, French Island supports a large population of the Long-nosed Potoroo, as well as containing a significant population of koalas in Victoria.

Sandstone Island is mostly cleared with some old Moonahs (*Melaluca Lancelota*) and introduced plants.

Elizabeth Island has a low vegetation bluff in front of low tide platform cuts in basalts and Mesozoic sediments. A small pocket of mangroves and salt marsh occurs in a sheltered site on the eastern coast of the Island.

All three islands are noted for their significance to the internationally acknowledged Ramsar wetlands located in Western Port Bay.

### **Environmental significance**

Items of environmental significance on French Island include:

- French Island National Park
- French Island Marine National Park
- Sites of National and State botanical and zoological significance
- Listed fauna species under the Japan-Australia Migratory Birds Agreement (JAMBA) and the China-Australia Migratory Birds Agreement (CAMBA)
- Coastal environs
- Wetlands nominated to the Ramsar Convention.

This list recognises the significant flora and fauna species on the Island, which includes over 260 fauna species, of which over 230 are indigenous bird species, and more than 580 species of flora including over 100 native orchid species. Identified flora and fauna species also extend beyond the National Park boundaries, contributing to the environmental significance of the Island as a whole. French Island is also recognised for its Chlamydia free koala population.

The road reserves play an important role by linking areas of significant vegetation. The *French Island Roadside Vegetation Management Plan (2005-2006)*, includes management strategies to provide protection to the numerous sections of the road reserves which contain significant areas of vegetation.

The coastline and abutting waters and land of French Island contain a number of significant environmental values including areas of saltmarsh, mangrove and melaleuca habitats and mud banks which support seagrass meadows and form a major part of plant life in the bay. Some 960 hectares of the Island's inter-tidal area is included in the French Island National Park.

French Island, Sandstone Island and Elizabeth Island are inhabited by a vast number of migratory birds listed under the JAMBA and CAMBA. The majority of the waters of Western Port Bay, including the coastal environment of the Islands, was nominated and incorporated into the Ramsar 'Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat'. This international acknowledgement requires that the wetlands be designated and managed for conservation and compatible uses.

### **French Island National Park**

French Island is known for its environmental qualities which support vegetation that is floristically rich, free of introduced species and, in places, relatively unchanged since pre-European times.

Conservation of French Island became important in the late 1960s to counter force proposed industrial development. In 1979, less than half of the land area of the Island was reserved as State Park. In 1997, French Island National Park was proclaimed, covering an area of 11,050 hectares or approximately two thirds of the Island.

### **French Island Marine National Park**

French Island Marine National Park is adjacent to the northern shoreline of the French Island National Park and extends 150 metres offshore, in Western Port Bay. The Marine National Park covers approximately 2800 hectares.

The Marine National Park has one of the most extensive areas of saltmarsh and mangrove communities in Victoria and is listed under the 'Convention on Wetlands of International Importance 1971' (Ramsar). The mudflats are of State geomorphological significance.

The Marine National Park is especially significant as a feeding habitat for the 32 species of migratory waders found in Western Port Bay. The waters around Barralier Island, one of the Bay's 13 high tide roost sites, are particularly sensitive to disturbance.

### **The impacts of climate change on French Island, Sandstone Island and Elizabeth Island**

The global climate is projected to undergo significant change in the 21st Century, with the potential to create many risks as well as opportunities. The report *Adapting to the Impacts of Climate Change in the Western Port Region* (Westernport Greenhouse Alliance, 2006) predicts that a number of climatic changes will take place within the Western Port Region, including a rise in temperature and an increase in the intensity and frequency of extreme rainfall events. Droughts are also likely to become more intense, winds are likely to intensify particularly in winter and sea level is predicted to rise.

The predicted climatic changes will place pressure on the islands' water storages, agricultural industries, natural systems and emergency response services. It is therefore essential to develop capacity to cope with climate change. This will require the distribution of easily accessible information to the public and readily available data to assist with the decision making processes necessary to adapt to climate change. The scale of the issue will require improved research and information exchange between local and regional governments and agencies on climate change impacts and response options.