

# FLAMIN' PARKS

## THE NEIGHBOURS FROM HELL

The case for an inquiry into biodiversity management and bushfire control in National Parks



Can Australia's taxpayers afford to fund environmental monitoring, ecological burning, feral animal and exotic weed control in a total area 52% larger than Tasmania and simultaneously rehabilitate the Murray Darling Basin? Until this question is answered, there is no case for increasing the size of the problem through additions to existing parks or the creation of new parks.

August 2002

## ABOUT BUG

*Bush Users Group Victoria Inc is a voluntary organization formed by groups with an interest in access for recreational and commercial use of public land throughout Victoria.*

*Our intention is to ensure continued access to public land in Victoria for sustainable recreational and commercial activities for current and future generations.*

*Our intention is also to ensure that all groups using the public land for recreational and commercial purposes respect and enhance the environmental, historical and cultural significance of the public lands that they are enjoying.*

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*(COVER: PHOTOGRAPH COLO HEIGHTS NSW DURING THE 2001-02 BUSHFIRES)*

*Photo: Annette Pollard.*

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document sets out in two parts the case against extending national parks or reserves beyond their current boundaries, or creating new national parks, until an inquiry is held into whether they are meeting their biodiversity objectives.

## PART 1

### BOX-IRONBARK FORESTS – CAN'T SEE

#### THE BIODIVERSITY FOR THE TREES

Part 1 deals with the proposal soon to be before the Victorian Parliament to increase the area of Box-Ironbark forests within parks or reserves. It shows how the Environment Minister's proposal actually works against biodiversity by making park management much more expensive for the taxpayer - thus making it almost certain that whatever environmental remedies the forest requires will be administered too little, too late and too slowly. We show, with some simple examples, how the environment in the box-ironbark region can be better and less expensively managed, by retaining state forest status and enlisting the co-operation of current commercial and recreational forest users.

#### Example 1

Even prior to the current fox bounty trials, farmers adjacent to state forests played a vital role as environmental managers by controlling foxes on their own land and within state forests. Some farmers organized massive shooting drives which bagged hundreds of foxes that would otherwise be preying on native animals. When these areas become national parks hunting will require a permit and the dogs and horses used to drive the foxes to the shooters will be forbidden.

At best the control of foxes in parks will be far more difficult, at worst it will pass to Parks Victoria and is unlikely to be carried out as well if at all.

#### Example 2

The Environment Conservation Council Report recommends that the forest in the parks be thinned to enable the remaining trees to grow to maturity more quickly and allow the growth of shrubs and grasses. In the state forests this thinning has been proceeding for decades and some parts of the forest appear to be more healthy than parks only the width of a dirt road away. The thinning in state forests has not been at a cost to the taxpayer – sawlog, post and firewood

cutters perform the task, sell the timber and pay royalties and road levies to the Department of Natural Resources and Environment. They are required to leave certain marked trees to continue to mature and remain for their natural life span.

Now the Victorian Government is proposing to give compulsory exit packages to 70 timber harvesters. A further 60 (approximately) will lose all or part of their livelihood without compensation. A tiny number may be re-employed if they successfully tender for a harvesting licence. Many of these people could remain in employment if the government would take the sensible step of merely allowing the necessary thinning to take place on a commercial basis by those who are performing the work now. No unemployment, no exit packages paid by the taxpayer, instead royalties would be paid to the taxpayer.

Also in Part 1 we show that the budget allocated for the new Box-Ironbark parks (approximately \$20 million over 4 years) while appearing generous, will be spread so thinly that it is unlikely to significantly improve biodiversity outcomes.

## PART 2

### CLAYTONS BIODIVERSITY

In Part 2 we show how the Australian forest parks and reserves system is a claytons environmental measure based on the outmoded idea that protecting forests from disturbance equals environmental protection. In this section we show how aboriginals managed forests for their own benefit by 50,000 years of 'fire-stick farming.' This produced open grassy forests that supported more wildlife and were less prone to the virtually uncontrollable bushfires seen recently in NSW. We also discuss how aboriginal hunting practices were vital in keeping the ecological balance.

Additionally we show how feral animals and crossbred dingoes are out of control in many parks and are placing intolerable burdens on adjacent farmers.

We question whether society has the resources to properly manage our vast parks system and suggest that the economic opportunities foregone to create parks diminish our capacity to respond to save the Murray Darling Basin.

Finally we suggest that partial solutions may be found by utilizing commercial and recreational interests to help manage forest environments under strict regulation. For example, using hunters to assist in feral control and the timber industry for regulated forest thinning. This follows the theme introduced in Part 1 – wherever possible it is a smart use of resources to have individuals or industry pay to manage the environment or provide the services for free.

**PART 1**  
**BOX-IRONBARK FORESTS – CAN'T SEE**  
**THE BIODIVERSITY FOR THE TREES**

An additional 121,000 hectares of the Box-Ironbark forests of inland Victoria are soon to be (if legislation passes state parliament) transferred from state forest to park or reserve status. The Box-Ironbark reserves will then total 190,490 hectares. The legislation is the product of recommendations from the Victorian Government's Environment Conservation Council (ECC).

These forests give us the most current example of many politicians being rather more interested in being seen to "save the forests" than doing the hard yards and taking risks to save biodiversity. This seemingly harsh statement is sadly true.

**Bush Users Group (BUG) members engaged in lobbying have often been frankly told that it is the perceptions of green voters in city electorates that are important, not the facts. The more thoughtful parliamentarians, while often admitting that BUG was correct, said that ECC recommendations have always received bipartisan support and they were reluctant to break that tradition.**

**However, a minority of politicians are listening and we wait to see if one of them will be the first to say, "The Emperor has no clothes on!"**

The crude approach of the majority is dangerous for the people, families and communities who lose jobs, recreation and generations of traditional bush culture. It is likely to be at least as dangerous for species on the brink of extinction, as most of the political energy and finance is directed to producing a national park or reserve – rarely identifying clearly the precise cause of the decline of particular species and the specific steps necessary for their rescue.

The ECC Box-Ironbark study took six years to complete. Various management plans for the parks will take several more years to be formulated and trialled. It will be almost a

decade from the distress call to the rescue mission. As most of the endangered species identified in the ECC investigation are woodland species, the rescue mission will be off course in the forests.

**There was no comparative study of parks and state forests to assess which management regime is better for biodiversity. If parks do live up to their environmental objectives it should be able to be proved. If it can't be proved, parks are a lotto with taxpayer funds and regional communities are the big losers.**

**No attempt was made to rank environmental threats in some order of significance. Hence we now have the State Government, with scant knowledge of the significance of the alleged threat, developing a firewood strategy that will disadvantage Victorians who use wood as a cheap, renewable heating source.**

Similarly, there has been no serious cost-benefit analysis of directing financial resources into extending the forest rather than increasing the parks area. It may have been more effective to spend the extra funds allocated for park management on tree planting, in cooperation with farmers.

*continued next page*

**HOMELESS IS THE HUNTSMAN**

In June of 2002 Victorian Environment Minister Cheryl Garbutt issued a discussion paper aimed at developing a policy to balance firewood collection "with some conservation considerations". Understandably, many country people read this as the beginning of a softening-up process that would lead to more restrictions on winter wood collection, even on private land, and bigger gas or electricity bills.

With boring predictability the document used scary figures of the quantity of firewood collected, conjuring up visions of forest floors as bare as the moon - perhaps so that we would have sleepless nights worrying about homeless huntsman spiders without a log to live in.

The pictures below show that precious little wood remains following a fire. So how much wood was there on the forest



*Taken following a fire on the Tooborac-Seymour road, these pictures show that very little wood remains after a fire in comparison with the adjoining unburned section. Larger branches sometimes survive because fire crews extinguish them in the mopping up to prevent new outbreaks.*



Photos supplied by: Kathy Beattie

floor during the 50,000 years of regular aboriginal burning described by settlers and explorers? The squatter Edward Curr who lived at Tongala in Victoria and travelled the Box-Ironbark regions spoke of aboriginal fire occurring "once in every five years..." A.W Howitt explorer and anthropologist, speaking of the Gippsland region described how aboriginal burning "consumed much of the standing and fallen timber..."

It is entirely possible that there are now more fallen branches and therefore habitat, remaining in forests than there were during the millennia of aboriginal stewardship. So why are we, once again, on a quest that must predictably lead to expense and inconvenience for those who collect their own firewood as a cheap, renewable heating source.

**As we discuss later in this section, the inflexible approach that comes with creating parks immediately removes or constrains two activities that are vital for biodiversity – tree thinning and fox control.**

Recreational forest users have also been unnecessarily affected. For instance, it is difficult to see how recreational prospectors using metal detectors to find the occasional nugget would constitute a significant environmental threat.

As we demonstrate in Part 2 aboriginal tribes moved constantly through these areas burning off the leaf litter, grass and scrub to expose burrows and dig up edible wildlife. Why then, is a prospector digging up a nugget so threatening?

Even so, our purpose here is not so much to discuss those failings as to outline the ways in which biodiversity protection will become more cumbersome and expensive from the moment each hectare becomes "protected" in a park or reserve.

Removing human management becomes a problem not a solution.

## OUTFOXED

One of the most significant threats to biodiversity in these regions is the wide culinary taste of the introduced fox. Foresters observe that there are areas where numerous tree hollows - desirable residences for wildlife, are unoccupied because their previous tenants have joined the food chain via a fox intestine. Ground dwelling species such as the Malleefowl are particularly vulnerable. So without fox control the fauna protection objective of the proposed parks cannot be delivered.



## VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT TO CREATE FOX SANCTUARY

In a sane world the people who shot the foxes pictured above would be the heroes of wildlife documentaries along with David Attenborough and David Bellamy. Especially so as the area in which the foxes were shot is also a habitat for the rare Brolga.

No the world isn't sane. The Lake Rowan Swamp is soon to be part of the Box-Ironbark parks and shooting drives will require a permit (which may not be granted). Local farmers have been organizing shooting drives for many years both for sheep protection and for the sake of the Brolgas. Now, if they see a fox outside their boundary they will have ask it to hang around while they get a permit from Parks Victoria. Also the use of horses or dogs to drive the foxes to the shooters will be forbidden.

Which species will the park make safer – the Brolga or the fox.

NOTE: As this was being written the government introduced a trial fox bounty system to encourage licensed shooters to control foxes. Shooters who deliver fox tails are paid at \$10 per tail. The government did not seem to see the irony in paying for fox control at the same time they were restraining people who had been doing it for free.

POSTSCRIPT: As this booklet went to press we were notified that there was a possibility that the government would grant flexible arrangements which would allow fox hunting. If so, it is to be hoped that the new approach will apply generally. Should we hold our breath?

While the fox is prolific on both private land and state forest, private landholders take action to bait and shoot foxes on their land and organize shooting drives in adjoining state forests. In some instances this is done as much for wildlife protection as for stock protection. (see pictures and story) Once parks are declared these shooting drives will be forbidden or severely restricted.

It is possible that a system of permits may allow fox (and rabbit) shooting but permits may not always be granted and as farmer Kathie Beattie says, "you can't make an appointment with a fox."

Grazing, burning and spraying formerly done by farmers to control weeds and fire hazard will also be restricted.

If the park proposals succeed, most of these responsibilities will pass through Parks Victoria to Taxpayer Victoria. We will discuss later whether or not there is likely to be sufficient funds for the task.

### UNDER THE MISTLETOE

Mistletoe may be fun for kissing under but it is also a parasitic growth that often kills the trees it grows on. Foresters used to control the spread of mistletoe by sawing it off the trees it had invaded. That is until someone got the idea that leaving the mistletoe would benefit the Mistletoe Bird that feeds on the parasite's berries.

Unfortunately for trees, the berries have a seed cunningly designed to pass through the bird's gut within 25 minutes and stick onto the branches the bird alights on<sup>1</sup>. More berries equals more birds equals more mistletoe equals less trees. So now workers in the Box-Ironbark forests are seeing more dead and dying trees every year.

Who controlled the mistletoe before the foresters? Aboriginals harvested the sweet berries so fewer seeds got to hitch a lift with mistletoe birds. Brilliant!

### LOGGING ON FOR LARGER TREES

One of the ECC recommendations for the future parks was "that dense eucalypt regrowth be thinned to enhance the growth of retained trees;" This recommendation is intended to speed the return of the forest structure to its supposed pre-European state - larger trees with fewer trees per hectare allowing the development of understory shrubs and grasses. That is, it is necessary to log the forest for a quicker biodiversity outcome.

This process was already underway in the state forests and the thinning function was performed by post cutters, firewood cutters and those harvesting logs for sawn timber. Parts of the state forest immediately adjacent to existing parks are already more advanced toward the larger trees objective than the parks. The state forests have had the



advantage of timber harvesters paying royalties and roading fees to cut timber for sale and create jobs. Almost like having someone pay to prune the fruit trees.

A further ECC recommendation is that the thinnings from parks should be able to be sold. Sensible, but why not go one step further and say "timber harvesting should continue so that we can manage the forest while receiving income rather than paying someone (perhaps the same person) to perform the work."

Will the government implement these recommendations and will they foot the bill or will they take the logical course and charge for the privilege of harvesting timber? Also what will the conservation movement say?

And what of saving the trees? If it is necessary to harvest the forest for improved management, why more parks? Why the political hype about saving the forests?

The Box-Ironbark forests almost ceased to exist through over-exploitation in the nineteenth century. In the 1880's the Forestry Commission began the resurrection of the forest through new regulations and planting programs and thinning. As the trees grew they were selectively harvested for firewood, posts and sawn timber in a process designed to be sustainable in perpetuity and provide timber for future generations. In recent years one intention of this thinning program has been to leave a proportion of the trees to grow on to provide large old habitat trees.

The photograph below left shows the forest as it is without thinning. The extraction of posts and firewood and sawlogs over decades produces the forest structure pictured on the right. This speeding of the return of a sort of "old growth" is partly financed by royalty payments received from the timber harvesters.

Will this work be carried on under a parks regime or will good sense give way to political correctness?

And may we ask how forestry is a threatening process, when it is foresters who pulled the forest back from the brink of extinction?



## ECC A SOLUTION-FREE ZONE?

It is common ground that increasing the number of hollow-bearing trees in the Box-Ironbark forests is vital to provide habitat for birds and possums<sup>2</sup>. The younger pole-like trees will usually take a century to develop these hollows. Post cutters offered to trial a quick solution to this accommodation crisis by cutting hollows in trees while they were working in the forest – many trees, Box and Mallee in particular, develop hollow interiors well before their hundredth year but the hollows aren't accessible unless wind breaks a branch off or fire burns a hole in the trunk. A few swift cuts with a chain saw would solve this problem and tree dwelling wildlife could move in and start breeding decades earlier. The ECC did not even trial the idea. The symbolism of removing humans from the forest seems more important than practical solutions.

## COUNTING THE COST

The 2002 Victorian Government Budget has allocated approximately \$5 million per annum for 4 years for management of the Box-Ironbark parks. Rather better than the ECC recommendation of \$400,000. Even so it's not nearly enough!

Spread over 190,500 hectares it means that \$26 per hectare per year is available for administration, infrastructure, control of weeds, foxes, cats, rabbits, fire risk, tree thinning, scientific monitoring and species recovery programs. Can one hectare of land anywhere be managed for a year for \$26? (Even assuming some of the funds are not absorbed in administration.)

Some have observed that an average domestic garden could not be maintained for \$26 per year. Once we abandon the notion that forests will look after themselves and accept that they need tending, the comparison is valid.

We had a Box-Ironbark post cutter calculate the cost of thinning alone. For \$26, a little under one hour of thinning work could be done. In areas with thin stems (20cm) the post cutter could cut approximately 25 trees in one hour. It would therefore take a minimum of ten years merely to halve the current number of trees (500 average) per hectare.

This is an optimistic estimate, as most of the cut trees would re-grow from the stumps unless ring-barked or poisoned. And of course the money is only allocated for four years and some of it will be used for park infrastructure, consultative committees and scientific studies<sup>3</sup>. In this light \$5 million per annum begins to look far short of the mark and questions government capacity to properly cost park management.

Hence the imperative to find the maximum commercial use for the timber and have the post cutter pay royalties to perform the work - in addition to retaining other sources of forest income such as beekeeping and eucalyptus distilling.

**The Victorian Government is moving towards increasing timber royalty costs to industry. The conservation movement has long been arguing for the application of competition policy to wood prices – accusing governments of subsidizing the timber industry. It is fair then to ask government to first calculate accurately (as against guesstimating) the cost of maintaining forest biodiversity in the absence of**

**commercial activity. We think that the figure would be so galactic that any income that could be derived from royalties and licenses would be seen as a heavenly bonus.**

## PART 2

### CLAYTONS BIODIVERSITY

#### INTRODUCTION

The member organizations of the Bush Users Group (BUG) commissioned the production of this document with the intention of stimulating a wide public discussion leading to a scientific inquiry regarding the environmental management of Australia's system of national parks and reserves.

BUG is not opposed to parks and positively supports conservation of the natural environment, despite efforts by the conservation movement to cast BUG and its members/supporters as anti-conservationists. BUG members, however, are deeply concerned about the following issues:

- Governments have ignored the full biodiversity management and associated cost implications of 50,000 years of aboriginal firestick farming. Catastrophic wildfire (as in NSW Christmas 2001) that destroys life, property and biodiversity, is a result.
- For many farmers, parks are the neighbours from hell. They have become notorious for providing refuge for wild dogs, feral cats, pigs, foxes, rabbits, goats and introduced plant species (weeds). Insufficient control measures within parks unfairly leave the management of these problems to farmers and communities adjacent to park borders. There is considerable evidence that feral animals and exotic weeds are a serious threat to biodiversity within parks.
- Many commercial and recreational activities are excluded from parks even where the evidence used to justify exclusion is scant or even absent, or when those activities cause miniscule disturbance in comparison to so-called natural events such as bushfires. Beekeepers are also being excluded from state forests.
- The true economic costs of excluding all commercial and most recreational activities from parks are ignored by governments, along with the incapacity of parks to provide sufficient taxation revenue for environmental management. Excluding people also excludes potential environmental managers.  
So far, these issues have been publicly debated and dealt with as more or less separate, unconnected problems. Bushfire is debated as a fire protection problem, wild dogs as a stock loss issue and feral cats rarely even rate a mention. To see them as a combined biodiversity threat which is out of control questions the very basis for the existence of parks. It also threatens one of the primary political motives for establishing them: the kudos that politicians get in metropolitan electorates for "saving the forests."

Of course governments are adept at the appearance of managing these threats. This is done through the development of management plans at great expense, while under these plans only relatively small amounts of money are allocated for programs to control fox and dog numbers<sup>4</sup>.

An eagle's view shows the true size of the task is far greater than governments are prepared to admit to or can fund. Australia's forest parks system is more than 10.4 million hectares<sup>5</sup>. Can Australia's taxpayers afford to fund environmental monitoring, ecological burning, feral animal and exotic weed control in an area 52% larger than Tasmania?

Until this question is answered there is no case, based on biodiversity protection, either for increasing the size of existing parks or the creation of new ones. And if, as some authorities believe, this management problem is insoluble, then management plans for national parks are little more than costly window dressing. Continued expansion of the parks system may turn out to be self-defeating.

The declared objective of the conservation movement is to exclude logging from all native forests<sup>6</sup> despite the lack of evidence from any of the numerous scientific inquiries into forest management to support such an objective. Unless politicians are prepared to say enough is enough, Australia's taxpayers will eventually be required to fund (or neglect) the environmental management of a total of more than 17 million hectares – about equivalent to the area of New Zealand's South Island.

Experience shows that the public face of forest disputes is the removal of timber harvesting. However, the exclusion of logging is invariably followed, sometimes immediately, sometimes gradually, by the exclusion of most human activity other than hiking and camping. Four-wheel drivers and horse riders are all too aware of the continuing closures of former log roads and tracks that have provided access to remote places that many people could not reach on foot. So, many Australians are losing recreational access to (and enjoyment of) the forests they own and which their taxes fund.

**ACCESS DENIED – AN EXAMPLE OF WHAT IS HAPPENING ALL OVER AUSTRALIA. RECREATIONAL USERS OF FORESTS BEING FORCED INTO EVER SHRINKING AREAS.**

Residents of Chiltern and Barnawartha in North East Victoria were incensed to find that many of the trails in the Chiltern National Park had been blocked with branches or ripped up. Parks Victoria instituted the closure of 63km of tracks without consultation. The closures have forced walkers and horse riders onto a few kilometres of vehicle tracks. As local Bill Petzke put it:

"Before you could take some tracks and get right into the bush and feel like you were the only one there. Now that has all but been taken away, with cars, horses and foot traffic all forced to use the same space." (Wangaratta Chronicle, 22/4/02)



*Photo supplied by: Catherine Muir*

The prospect of further additions to the park concerns locals as it is clear that the freedoms of state forests will soon be replaced with further track closures. Heathcote residents are aware that Parks Victoria has already planned track closures in proposed new parks without consultation and prior to legislation being passed by parliament.

**BACKGROUND**

Since 1995 federal and state governments, supposedly to protect biodiversity, have established a parks system comprising at least 15% of all pre-1750 forest types. The widely accepted world standard set by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature is 10%. Therefore, we have a forest reserve system 50% larger than is needed to meet the IUCN's standard.

Old growth forests were protected to a minimum standard of 60%. In many cases this was extended to 90%. Rare old growth types were 100% protected. Therefore any contemporary claims by the conservation movement of destruction of old growth forests are substantially false. Almost all current timber harvesting is occurring in re-growth from bushfire or regeneration from past logging.

In establishing this reserve system for our forests, have governments increased environmental protection by 50%? Or have they merely created a larger and more costly problem? The once widely-held assumption that biodiversity is protected by the simple act of creating a disturbance-free zone has taken a battering as conservation biologists have learned more about the important role of disturbance in increasing diversity.

**DISTURBING NEWS**

Much of the public concern about the state of our environment translates into a dangerously simplistic approach to ecosystem management: simply remove most human activity, especially commercial activity, leave the place well alone.... and nature will look after itself! Unfortunately this is not correct in many, many instances, particularly in Australian forest environments, which have evolved in the presence of fire.

Scientist Tim Flannery, in his book "The Future Eaters" first brought to popular attention the knowledge that when we removed aboriginals from the land we removed both a predator and a land manager. Humankind was an integral part of the ecology, continually interacting with it, not separate from it. To ignore perhaps 50,000 years of dynamic human interaction with the environment was, according to Flannery, another form of "terra nullius."

Indigenous people managed the bush by regular and extensive burning of grasses and undergrowth. (Appendix 1) The evidence from early explorers' diaries and settler's

## AMERICA BURNED BY THE PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE

Australian aboriginals were not the only native peoples to use fire as a management tool. Nor is Australia the only country debating the consequences of removing native practices and assuming national parks give environmental protection. As this document was being written, America was experiencing a summer of catastrophic wildfires and looking to forest thinning as a future risk reduction measure.

The extracts below were prophetic for America and could have been written about Australia with only a few name changes.

"Yellowstone. In 1967, National Park Service authorities introduced a management scheme called 'Natural Regulation.' The intention, based on a version of the Precautionary Principle, was not to 'Play God' but to practice 'benign neglect.' Nature, it was assumed, 'knows best.' We don't know enough to justify intervention in biotic processes. And if we let nature take its course, the ecosystem will take care of itself.

This decision ignored the fact that aboriginal Americans had been evicted from the park in 1876, and these peoples had played a critical role in keeping ungulate populations in check and in modifying the landscape through burning. So natural regulation was historically unprecedented.

And by erring on the side of caution, the service invited calamity. Protected from predation, the elk and bison multiplied tenfold in twenty years. Bison overgrazing destroyed natural grasses. Browsing elk virtually eliminated aspen willow and alder – plant species critical to the survival of mammals that use riparian areas, such as beaver, otter, white tail and mule deer and grizzly bear. As streams became denuded of the cottonwood trees whose roots had provided structural strength to banks, these shores collapsed and erosion became pandemic.

Thanks to the absence of aboriginal burning, the build up of combustibles continued, until, in 1988, a giant conflagration erupted. A million acres burned. Crown fires, burning too hot, sterilized soils and further accelerated soil erosion."

(From Some cautionary remarks about the Precautionary Principle, Dr Alston Chase 1997.)

letters is that this created forests generally more open and grassy than those we see today.

These forests, in Flannery's terms were more biodiverse. In indigenous terms, they supported greater populations of edible wildlife (the important kind) which fed on the grasses created by deliberate manipulation of the environment. There is almost no grass on the floor of a dense forest where shade, competition for nutrients and a thick litter of fallen leaves, bark and branches inhibits growth.

These practices, known as "fire-stick farming," also lessened the frequency and intensity of wildfire by limiting the amount of flammable litter (fire fuel) able to accumulate on the forest floor. Flames were less likely to reach the canopy (and incinerate tree dwelling wildlife) or develop into extremely hot crown fires able to rage uncontrollably through great tracts of forest. As well, the widely spaced trees of these managed forests did not facilitate the transmission of fire from one tree to another. A large, hollow tree, burning as a result of lightning strike or an unextinguished aboriginal

cooking fire, could burn for days in such an environment without spreading. In a dense forest, that is impossible.

Even though aborigines did not have houses etc that would be at risk from fire they did put protective burns up to a kilometre wide around habitat or food sources that were fire sensitive<sup>7</sup>. So why are we still debating the value of regular fuel reduction burning?

In many cases settlers, on occasion assisted and taught by aboriginals, carried on the indigenous practices. They were a cost effective method of holding back dense scrub and forest and renewing sweet pasture<sup>8</sup>. In fact it is still possible to find older farmers who practiced fire-stick farming in their youth and who "can remember cantering a horse through forests that are now so thick a dog couldn't bark."<sup>9</sup> Mountain cattlemen were particularly adept at fire-stick farming and for years kept their runs free of wildfire<sup>10</sup>.

However, sometimes the aboriginal fire-stick was dropped in the passing. The inevitable misuse of fire by some and ever closer settlement led to progressive abandonment of fire-stick farming. This was later followed by removal of most forest cattle grazing which has in turn led to denser, more flammable forests. Those who paid leases and grazing fees to manage the land were removed (along with generations of bush knowledge) – once again leaving the responsibility on the taxpayer.

*Australia's forests are not untouched, pristine, etc. Prior to 1788 they were manipulated by man for his own benefit for 50,000 years. Since 1788 Australia's forests have been modified by neglect. Much of this neglect is the consequence of well meaning but ill-informed environmentalism.*

If aborigines had not hunted the more prolific wildlife, the species for which optimal conditions had been created, through use of fire, would have built up to unsustainable numbers. Just as Koalas and Grey Kangaroos do today where good habitat is available and efficient hunters are absent. (The fossil record confirms that, before the first humans came here, there was a range of carnivorous predators, including tree-climbing marsupials, that preyed on the plant eaters.)

## ARMIES OF KANGAROOS

As this document was being written a public furore arose about the need to cull tens of thousands of kangaroos on the Puckapunyal Military Area in Victoria. We thought that it made an excellent case study on humankind's capacity to change the environment in ways that benefited some species – and the need to stop denying our ancient role in maintaining the ecological balance.

In the seemingly endless hours of talkback radio the issue generated, it was rare to hear the obvious point made: that on the army base and the surrounding farmland exceptionally favourable habitat -- open grassland, stock dams for water -- had been created but humankind's role as top predator had been eliminated.

It was this combination of circumstances that allowed Grey Kangaroo numbers to increase rapidly to pest proportions in good times only to starve in prolonged

droughts. One section of the animal welfare lobby actually advocated emergency feeding (with hay), an action certain to result in a continuing increase in the 'roo population.

Victoria's Labor Premier Steve Bracks, predictably, reacted with horror and an emphatic 'no' to proposals that it would be sensible to create an industry to use the skins and meat. Predictably? Yes: In the 1980s, the previous Labor government was faced with a similar Grey Kangaroo population explosion, but in a national park, not on an Army base. Despite pleas from an established pet food processor to be allowed to buy the carcasses, they were bulldozed into a pit. The opportunity to offset the costs of the cull and create jobs and taxation revenue was thrown away simply through fear of a backlash by elements of the animal welfare movement who saw the cull as a necessary evil, but the making of a profit from that an unnecessary obscenity.

Perhaps just as remarkable in the Puckapunyal case, was the fact that professional shooters were paid to carry out the cull. This took place on a military base populated with well-armed soldiers who hone their skills shooting at targets!

Imagine this scene two centuries ago: Aboriginal elders have called a gathering of their mob to propose a new way of hunting the kangaroos whose numbers have grown due to abundant grass produced by diligent firestick farming. They announce that another mob will be invited to hunt while the local fellas throw spears at targets. After the wild acclamation has died away, they announce that the contracted hunters will require payment in meat and skins. And no, they can't take their prey as payment: those carcasses are to be buried or left to rot; eating or skinning will be taboo. The hunters will be fed from the home mob's resources.

Would the elders themselves have been speared, or would there have been ceremonies to drive out the evil spirits that had so obviously possessed them?

While there is understandable scientific disagreement on the detail, burning for ecological purposes is becoming more widely accepted. It is relatively easy to find internet sites carrying scientific papers discussing existing eco-burning programs and experimental burns in various Australian national parks (and elsewhere in the world). There is also growing acceptance that wildfire reduces biodiversity by selecting for those species which can regenerate following extremely hot fires.

This is not to say that there aren't those who question the frequency and extent of aboriginal burning – disputing for instance whether indigenous people frequented and burned the alpine regions of Victoria. The historical records do not support this particular form of alpine "terra nullius." A.W. Howitt in a lecture to The Royal Society of Victoria in 1890 paid tribute to past aboriginal land management and described his personal observations of high country changing from "open and park like" to dense forest<sup>41</sup>. He also said "The mountains were, as a whole, according to accounts given me by surviving aborigines, much more open than they are now" and further observed that "fires which swept the country *more or less annually*" (our emphasis) were important in controlling insects that at times infested both trees and pasture.

The implications of all this are that to restore the forest environment that existed for more than 40,000 years and minimize catastrophic bushfire, it will be necessary to adapt and reinstate (or find substitutes for) aboriginal burning and hunting practices. It would be possible of course to merely accept the forest environment created over the last two hundred years. But this would throw doubt on the "pre 1750" principles underpinning the Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) process and pose a question: Why have such a large reserve system if we concede we can't maintain it.

## RESOURCES

Several obvious questions arise. What is required in the way of park rangers, scientists, equipment, etc... how many of each do we need? How much money is required each year to implement an appropriate thoroughly researched (and presumably field-tested) regime of eco-burning? How much to monitor the results in each park? What resources are to be actually allocated to (as distinct from required for) an effective broad scale program of eco-burning? How to educate a public that views all bushfire as destructive, that eco-burning is a renovator not a demolisher?

We decided to ask these questions of park managers in relation to the Kosciuszko and Alpine national parks as they are contiguous and their combined area -- at 1.321 million hectares -- is larger than many of the world's sovereign nations! How many eco-gardeners do you need for a garden that size?

The answer for Kosciusko (675,000 hectares) was<sup>42</sup>:

- Fire is used as a tool primarily for fire mitigation to protect life and property but with fire frequency being regulated so as not to significantly modify biodiversity. Fire is excluded from sensitive areas.
- Two staff are employed for fire management programs and they can call on other resources when required.
- An average of between 1500 to 5000 hectares is burned annually in the Kosciuszko region.
- On occasions naturally occurring fires are allowed to burn under suitable weather conditions.
- The fire management budget is \$200,000 per annum.

Are the resources allocated sufficient for community fire protection and biodiversity protection? On the face of it, the words "woefully inadequate" spring to mind but this could be crude and simplistic. How are we to make a judgment that is fair and practical?

## A CAKE STALL FOR BIODIVERSITY

Fortunately for this discussion (unfortunately for the citizens and wildlife of NSW) we have the experience of the Christmas 2001 bushfires to draw on.

Evidence given to the inquiry into the Christmas 2001 bushfires indicates that in the previous year the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NSWNPWS) conducted hazard reduction burns in only 19,000 hectares of the 5.3 million it manages. State Forests hazard-reduced 100,000 of the 2.8 million hectares it manages.

The NPWS saw 750,000 of its hectares burnt, State Forests a mere 2000. That is, in the areas supposedly set aside for environmental protection, intense wildfire swept through 375 times the area burnt in state forests. Yet it is state forests, not national parks, that the conservation movement insists are most at risk of environmental destruction.

The NSW fires cost a \$100 million to fight and destroyed more than a 100 homes. The environmental effects were on a nuclear scale. Millions of animals perished – burned alive. Many animals that survived were not savable and were put down.

But a NPWS appeal for donations to "Help bring back the bush for wildlife" says it all:

*"In many areas, bushfires have destroyed the habitat that provides food and shelter for wildlife. Unless habitat is restored quickly, there is a risk that some species will become extinct in places where they formerly thrived<sup>13</sup>."*

Would it not be better to institute controlled burning regimes which leave refuge areas and allow animals to escape?

## **WILDFIRE DESTROYS HABITAT – UNNATURAL DISASTER**

Colo Heights volunteer fire brigade had been requesting permission from the NSW National Parks and Wild Life Service to conduct fuel reduction burns for more than a decade – to no avail. So when wildfires roared out of the Wollemi National Park during Christmas 2001 the flames were so intense that power poles burned through in ten minutes. Most of the local Koalas were roasted alive. The fires were followed by heavy rain that caused widespread erosion.

For Annette and Hilton Pollard there was an extra dimension to their anger - extracts from their circular letter to friends letting them know that they had survived, say it all:

"I resent the fact that we are said to have been through a 'natural disaster' or have faced the wrath of 'mother nature'. In actual fact the only natural part of it all is the fact that nature just took advantage of man's mismanagement of his own dominion."

"....Hilton and I have had the pleasure of working with Aboriginal people in Arnhem Land and I observed their little fires that crept over the land permanently. The result was many fold: easier to walk through, plants and flowers were happy as many of our native species need fire to propagate, animals and birds were able to get out of the way as the fires were never 'wild'. The aboriginal people certainly have the fire dominion correct."

" .... Councils, National Parks and Wildlife Service, radical Greenies and various other bodies have adopted policies that do not allow proper management of our parks, properties, wilderness etc. They lock away vast tracts of land and it accumulates into the furnaces... People don't want fires because they don't like smoke pollution and burnt bush because they say it takes away habitat.

WELL – I invite them and all of us to look around us now – what sickening devastation – what horror awaited the animals as the fire roared through the gullies, up ridges and across mountain tops absolutely annihilating everything in its path."



Colo Heights NSW, near Wollemi National Park following 2001-2002 bushfires. Photos supplied by: Annette Pollard.

## **SOUTH OF THE BORDER**

The problems do not stop at the NSW border. The 2002-3 budget for ecological burns for Victoria's Alpine Park (646,000 hectares) is \$8,200 – enough to do no more than a few hectares<sup>14</sup>. This seems to reflect the fact that most Victorian ecological burning takes place in native grasslands not forests.

So much for environmental protection – what about community protection? The past figures for state wide hazard reduction burns look more satisfactory - in some years NRE has been able to burn up to 106,000 hectares.

However, more recently, field staff reductions, (by all governments) increased bureaucracy and inadequate budgets have led to hazard reduction burns over much smaller areas – only 66,000 hectares were burned in 2000-01<sup>15</sup>. Since Victoria is at least as fire prone as NSW this is likely to be a story with the same fiery sequel – with repeat episodes indefinitely. (see extracts from Living Beside a National Park)

## **LIVING BESIDE A NATIONAL PARK – THE LICOLA EXPERIENCE**

The community of Licola is situated close to the southern edge of Victoria's Alpine National Park. Here we summarize their experiences with quotes from a local publication "Living Beside a National Park" by L. Ralph Barraclough. The full text is available at <http://communities.msn.com/LicolaCommunity>

"Before the park was proclaimed our nearby town of Heyfield had built up a reputation as the biggest timber town in the State, the best place in Victoria to find fat bullocks and a great tourist destination. .... When the park was proclaimed, it was promised to protect the environment and bring even more visitors and prosperity to our area.

What used to be thousands of cattle coming to town from the mountains dropped to just a few hundred. This has been reduced further by a ban on grazing after the Caledonia fire, because they "might" cause problems. 7,000 hectares of regrowth the Heyfield sawmills and Heyfield itself, was dependant on, was burnt, this will now be on top of the 40-50% cut in quotas from DNRE miscalculations. Visitor numbers have dropped off alarmingly, with up to 70% drop in takings by the Licola store after the fire."

"St Johns Wort believed to have come to Wonnangatta with Chinese gold diggers and controlled by grazing, has run wild in the Wonnangatta Moroka National Park since the removal



*Pictures supplied by: L. Ralph Barraclough*

of grazing and spread by vehicles as far as the freeways of Melbourne. One farmer on just one location at Licola is up for \$10,000 annually for spray. There have been so many dingos coming out of the park that all bar one farm here have had to stop running sheep to control weeds."

The pictures above show the devastation from the 1997 Caledonia fires and the boulders washed from the mountains following the fires. 50,000 tonnes of mud was washed into streams by the thunderstorm that extinguished the fire. Erosion continues to this day. Such are the consequences of management by benign neglect. No amount of well regulated commercial or recreational activity could cause environmental problems on this scale.

"Areas burnt out,.....had so much fuel they produced a fire so hot much of the seed stock was lost and is not regenerating properly. Sphagnum bogs were destroyed, large rocks cracked, vegetation along creeks that should never be burnt was lost. .... The decimation with dead trees in the park, can be seen to stop at the boundary fence of Kevin Higgins property that practiced traditional cool burning and grazing. Only a few weeks after the fire you had to look to see what had been burnt on his land."

Confidential interviews with Parks Victoria staff paint a depressing picture. They quietly admit to managing introduced weeds only in limited areas and not being able to control feral animal populations away from the few accessible tracks.

We wish to emphasise that this not the fault of the NRE/Parks Victoria staff nor a reflection on their professionalism. With average base field staff ratios of one person to somewhere between 35,000 and 40,000 hectares, how could they manage adequately? Why would anyone reasonably expect them to?

## **DON'T COUNT THE COST**

When these 'cost of management' issues were raised with Environment and Conservation Council staff during the recent review of Victoria's Box Ironbark forest regions they answered that it was not their task to consider those issues. Their statutory task was merely to recommend what land uses should be permitted, but it was the government's responsibility to determine management budgets. Do

governments know the true future costs of their decisions?

There is little incentive for governments to nail down those costs. They have been presented, formally, with a suite of recommendations produced by people who bear no responsibility for the financial outcomes. The recommendations are announced publicly even as they are handed over from recommending body to responsible politician in front of the cameras. They get a wonderful reception in the metropolitan media. Rarely is the word money mentioned. The focus is on all things warm and wonderful. The politician wants to get re-elected. He or she knows that by the time the true costs of these decisions filter through the community – perhaps five or 10 years down the track – another politician will have inherited the problem. Perfect! All care and no responsibility.

## **FERALS**

Along with the danger from bushfire, farmers and others who live adjacent to parks would rate predation by dingoes, wild dogs and foxes high on any list of "problems with the neighbour." The issue is widely publicised through farmer complaints to the media and makes the news through gory pictures of injured or partly eaten sheep.

There have been disturbing reports recently of dingo/dog crossbreeds aggressive enough to menace humans. The question must be asked: will it take someone's death (as on Fraser Island where a child was killed by a dingo) before governments provide the needed resources on a scale commensurate with the scale of the problem?

Almost as disturbing but less publicised is the fact that some farming areas adjacent to parks are being abandoned as dog numbers grow to the point where stock losses are economically unsustainable.

Some of the farmers we interviewed have been on the land for many generations and are able to testify that dingo/dog numbers are not static but are increasing every year<sup>16</sup>. What is behind this trend?

It is possible that the growing hybridization of the dingo is shortening the breeding cycle – once a year for a purebred dingo, toward the more frequent cycle of dogs introduced by Europeans. Also their refuge areas (parks) are growing while control measures do not keep pace.

Once again we find a pointer through examining indigenous hunting. Aborigines took dingo pups from their lairs for training as hunting dogs. They also took pups for food and speared adult dogs for roasting in ground ovens<sup>17</sup>. Again their need to eat to survive also kept the ecological balance. Not that many in our society would wish to eat wild dogs but the need for controls which include lifting hunting and baiting restrictions is plain.

It is unusual to hear a public discussion, let alone substantive debate, about the consequences for biodiversity of a suite of introduced carnivores breakfasting on native animals before dining on lamb. And what of the effects of deer, pigs, rabbits and cats? These species are firmly established in parks and are known to have significant adverse impacts on native animal and plant species. Yet the "cat problem" is clearly understood by most of the media as something to do with pet moggies killing birds in suburban gardens.

A recent court win by a Victorian farmer who suffered financially crippling stock losses through dogs coming on to his property from a nearby reserve suggests the issue may prove costly to the taxpayer<sup>18</sup>. A court held that the relevant department in charge of public land was responsible. It had not taken adequate action to control dog populations on the land it managed. The State was ordered to pay compensation of \$60,000 to the farmer for stock losses and meet his legal costs.

Imagine the cost, then, if this precedent also held for bushfire damage, where neglect of hazard reduction burning had been found by a court to be responsible for loss of life and/or property. After the fires of 2001 that destroyed 121 homes, ran up a \$70 million insurance bill and cost \$100 million to fight, the NSW Government should be worried.

Of course, these ferals would be (and are) present in any bushland, be it park, state forest or farmland. But they become a much greater problem in parks than in non-park areas because in a park they cannot be effectively hunted, even though eradication or effective control is manifestly required to ensure the survival of native animals. All types of land managers have environmental problems. But given that parks have icon status and many people have lost their livelihoods and recreation for them, we are entitled to expect much more.

## COMMERCIAL REALITY

It is not difficult to figure out why governments do not have the resources to fund park management or minimize bushfire risk. The process of calculating financial losses flowing from the removal of commercial activity appears to be as rough as the process for estimating the cost of protecting biodiversity. For many years governments have been increasing the management costs of national parks whilst reducing forest income and the tax base.

The moment an area previously classified as state forest is designated as a park, commercial activities such as logging

cease. This means that access road networks, (sometimes thousands of kilometres) financed by levies on timber production, are passed over to taxpayers for maintenance funding. In many cases the continued use of these roads is stopped because of insufficient maintenance funds, or to re-create wilderness.

The ability to control fire and feral animals and monitor biodiversity is thus compromised not only through lack of park managers but also through lack of physical access.

Another consequence is the loss of machinery to fight bushfires, as the contractors who own and operate this equipment are put out of business. According to Barry Johnston, chief of the fire protection branch of the (then) Victorian Department of Conservation and Environment, logging industry machinery such as bulldozers is "vital" to his department's fire control effort:

"For example in the Orbost region in January 1988, the industry provided 12 out of 15 machines on the Byadbo Wilderness fire (which started in the Kosciusko National Park, in New South Wales, and extended into the Snowy-Tingaringy National Park in Victoria); and in October 1988, 11 out of 13 machines on the Bemm River fire. Industry machines worked in excess of 750 hours on each of these fires."

The financial losses to taxpayers from excluding logging are compounded as cattle grazers, gold prospectors, beekeepers and miners are also excluded, and the flow of money from various licence fees, royalties and taxes dries up.

Here are some more specific and horrific examples of losses never calculated In any cost benefit analysis:

- The Victorian Government recently allocated \$80m to restructure the timber industry following years of overestimation of the amount of timber available on a perpetually sustainable basis. The industry calculates that the loss of timber royalties alone will be \$10m annually in perpetuity. The mistake is widely held to have occurred through a succession of governments giving clear signals to public servants that they did not want to hear bad employment news when they were considering new parks. Clearly the "precautionary principle" was not applied to the economic and employment effects of the Regional Forest Agreements. In the same period the State Government was engaged in an argument with the Federal Government over which government would top up by \$77.5m a fund for the installation of a Wimmera irrigation pipeline. The pipeline would keep more water in the Murray River through reduced seepage and evaporation. A more diligent RFA process could have made more funds available for arresting the decline of Australia's most important river system whichever government paid.
- East Gippsland and South-East NSW have no prospect of ever having a pulp and paper mill to add value to woodchips now exported unprocessed<sup>19</sup>. Successive governments since the late 1980s -- Federal, State, Labor, Liberal -- have knowingly reduced the area available for timber harvesting below that required for a sustainable supply of a sufficient volume of pulpwood to a mill. A pulp mill would create 1600 jobs (direct and indirect) and a larger tax and royalty base for forest management<sup>20</sup>.

- During the RFA process the Queensland government decided to completely phase out its native forest timber industry in favour of plantations. This involved, effectively, 'buying out' timber businesses using Queensland's own financial resources. Premier Beattie had apparently assumed that the Commonwealth would pick up the tab using funds available to it for RFA purposes. But since the RFA process did not envisage or

## DOES THIS FERAL DESERVE A MEDAL?

Another example of the incapacity of public land managers to properly assess the economic consequences of their decisions is the gradual exclusion of commercial honey bee hives first from parks and then from state forests. As with all the pursuits we discuss in this publication, total eviction is not an overnight event but apiarists seriously believe it is coming.

Purists regard honeybees as a feral animal that has no place in our native forests and thus apiarists are finding (NSW and Victoria in particular) that the places available for hive sites are less each year. The economic effects of these policies will eventually decimate the \$60 million per annum Australian beekeeping industry. As we see below, many other industries will follow.

Managed honey bees are a species that does not survive long in the wild and the managed hives are shifted regularly to sites where food is abundant. Therefore they are unlikely to cause any serious problems in competition with native honeyeaters. The true feral bee came to Australia with the first settlers and is a tougher breed that will probably continue to exist in the bush, for the foreseeable future. However these feral populations are being controlled by fire, drought, rainfall and disease.

Both commercial honeybees and ferals provide vital pollination services to agriculture. Almond trees for example, would not set without pollination from honeybees. Other crops such as cotton, and fruit would survive but suffer substantial production losses.

Apiarists often provide paid pollination services to agriculture. However, most pollination work is done for free by feral or managed bees ranging from managed hive sites or feral hives in bush adjacent to crops.

As many food crops provide little nectar to the bees they cannot survive without periodic access to areas of native forests where they find a healthy diet in flowering eucalypts and shrubs. Therefore, no forest access, eventually no pollination services. No pollination services, agriculture diminishes and we import more food – not just more honey.

**A lot is riding on the wings of the humble bee.**

**A conservative estimate of the potential losses in Australian food and agriculture if bee pollination services are lost is more than \$1.2 billion per annum!**

**The paradox here is that if managed hives are eventually excluded from native forests, we will be dependent on feral bees for the pollination services that underpin much of our food production.**

**Why is this so difficult for policy makers and governments to understand?**

*(Summarized from The Economic Value and Environmental Impact of The Australian Beekeeping Industry, Diana Gibbs and Ian Muirhead 1998)*

require effectively closing down an entire state industry, the commonwealth justifiably refused to pay. Faced with a bill of this magnitude, Premier Beattie was unable to find the funds needed to compensate farmers were he to introduce significant controls (let alone a ban) on land clearing in the Murray Darling Basin. Thus a sustainable timber industry is to be banished from Queensland's forests, while the permanent clearing of native vegetation in the nation's most important and most environmentally stressed catchment continues. The Murray Darling basin is dying. The forests are not.

- **Tasmania has 40% of its land area within parks, world heritage areas etc.** Could 40% of any state be placed in parks without serious economic consequences? The effect of this on population levels, employment and crime is rarely discussed in forums examining Tasmania's poor social indicators. Tasmanian Government sources frankly admit that the economic consequences of the large reserves (mostly forced on them by the Commonwealth) have never been fully calculated. **Tasmania consistently reports the worst unemployment rates in the Commonwealth and is the only state to report population decline.**
- Under pressure from the conservation movement, WA governments have extended their reserve system well beyond the 15% standard. The estimated cost to government is \$500 million annually. Around 3000 people in regional towns are losing their jobs. A wilderness area was incinerated by wildfire in 2001, causing local extinctions of some endangered species. The area had been under a "no burn" management regime for decades so the fire was hot enough to sterilize the soil and scorch boulders in some instances. Reductions in staff and absence of logging crews hampered firefighting. Recommendations have been made for the introduction of a mosaic pattern of eco-burning.
- **Every year Australia generally imports paper and timber products worth around \$2.02 billion more than it exports.** Some of these imports are probably sourced from unsustainably managed forests. An environmentally sustainable plan to address this trade deficit and create more than 100,000 jobs was presented to the Hawke government in 1987 by unions and industry<sup>21</sup>. The plan was not implemented, as it would have involved a moratorium on the creation of new national parks, and an end, at last, to the seemingly endless reviews of native forests. There was no attempt to assess how increased national wealth – achieved through a lower timber products trade deficit and more jobs -- could provide more taxation revenue able to be spent on salinity and land degradation.

## SPOT THE TOURIST

The picture on the next page shows a lunchtime street scene in Manjimup - set in the south west of WA. Not a tourist (or anyone else) in sight to create employment for the minimum 3000 people in the region who are losing their jobs due to State Liberals and Labor bidding to expand the parks system past the Regional Forest Agreement areas. Hundreds of families are selling up and leaving the area and increased counselling services have been required even for school children. The scary thing is the Forest Products Commission calls it "A Vision For A new Industry."



Photo supplied by: Timber Communities Australia, W.A.

## TOURISM NO PANACEA

Whenever the conservation movement runs up against economic arguments against the creation of new parks it trots out the argument that increased tourism will more than offset the cost of lost jobs and economic activity foregone. There are many substantial flaws in this argument. Tourism is obviously valuable, but cannot provide all the jobs needed in regional Australia or the necessary revenue for park management, for reasons which we set out in brief:

- Why, for instance, should East Gippsland expect to attract more tourists were the region's parks to be increased from their current area of over half a million hectares (more than half the forested land in the area) to around one million hectares? The extensive network of forest roads currently financed by levies on timber would be closed or fall into disrepair. Tourist access would actually diminish.
- In some places, such as the previously mentioned Box-Ironbark forest regions of Victoria, the common forms of tourism are car rallies, gold detecting, trail bike riding, four-wheel driving, horse riding etc. These activities will be banned from extensive areas of proposed new parks, so those forms of tourism will immediately cease upon the declaration of parks.
- There is no reason why tourism and other commercial activities cannot co-exist so that local communities -- and the taxman -- can reap the benefits of economic diversity along with environmental diversity. One of Tasmania's most popular tourist venues is an elevated walk through state forest managed for timber harvesting.
- Tasmania also provides another case study on the 'tourism creates jobs' mantra. It has some of Australia's most spectacular scenery and as previously mentioned 40% of the state is in some form of reservation. Why then does Tasmania have consistently high unemployment? The tourist industry, on its own admission, cannot make up for job losses in other industries. Tourism has also become the new environmental battleground between those who want "high yield" tourism with lots of up-market facilities, helicopter landing strips and lodges and those who want to hold the line at so-called low impact back-packing and camping<sup>22</sup>.
- At the other end of Australia, World Heritage listed Fraser Island provides a similar lesson. Environmental

websites now lament the unstoppable flood of tourism that is allegedly causing massive sand erosion. Sweet irony: in the first campaign (in the 1970s) to 'save' Fraser Island, the big issue was.... sand mining! The Queensland government is also accused of not returning a sufficient portion of the tourist dollars to maintain the island's environment. Paradise found is paradise lost<sup>23</sup>!

- In recent years, environmental activists in Victoria's Otway Ranges have made the alleged incompatibility of tourism and other forms of economic activity in the forest environment a central theme in their campaign. If this was intended to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, it has failed. Despite several years of angry declarations that ugliness was unavoidable, that forests were shrinking, that all about was the sound of chainsaw and bulldozer, tourist visits to the Otways over this period have increased markedly. If the incompatibility theory had any validity, by now there would not be an increase in tourist visits but a dramatic decline.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear that contemporary policies for protecting forest environments are not working. They are misdirected, under-funded and waste scarce resources that should be used on more urgent environmental or social problems. They are also alienating hundreds of thousands of people whose traditional recreational and cultural pursuits are threatened.

It is time for a national discussion that focuses on realistic environmental outcomes and respects the generations of environmental knowledge that bush workers and farmers in particular possess.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

There should be a national moratorium on the creation of new parks pending the outcome of a federal inquiry to determine what is required -- what actually has to be done on the ground -- to manage, protect and enhance biodiversity in parks, and the level of funding required to meet these objectives. The inquiry should also investigate the means for protecting property owners affected by parks, from bushfire and wild dogs.

The inquiry should also investigate the current state of biodiversity in a small number of parks to ascertain whether their legislated environmental objectives are being met.

There should be carefully regulated trials in parks -- outside core areas -- to integrate previously banned commercial and recreational activities into overall park management. For example:

- Light grazing could be reintroduced under license to some areas to reduce undergrowth and control weeds such as St Johns Wort.
- Where tree thinning programs would be useful for biodiversity or fire safety purposes, commercial contractors should be engaged and where possible royalties should be paid and the timber sold into appropriate markets for timber, posts, firewood, paper etc.
- Feral animal control should be assisted through regulated arrangements with recreational shooters. Farmers adjacent to parks should be licensed to shoot or

bait feral animals within parks without seeking permission on each occasion. Farmers should be assisted to purchase specialist stock protection dogs such as the maremma and the pyrenean mountain dog.

- Other recreational pastimes such as gold detecting, four-wheel driving, horse riding and trail bike riding cause miniscule temporary effects and should be reintroduced under regulations negotiated with the respective associations.

While some of these solutions may seem radical, it should be noted that NSWNPWS, to their credit, have introduced brumby management into Kosciusko Park involving families with a history of mustering brumbies from horseback. The program avoids the controversy of shooting while respecting and maintaining local culture.

Similarly, a deer-culling program is planned for the Royal National Park in NSW. But because of the proximity of the park to urban areas, the NSWNPWS believes that professional shooters are required. For most parks however, this would not be necessary due to their relative remoteness from populous areas.

South Australia has been using sporting shooters for feral animal control programs for around a decade. In some cases parks are closed for several days while shooters target foxes, wild pigs and rabbits<sup>24</sup>. A goat control program in the Flinders Ranges has reduced goat numbers from an average of 20 per square kilometre down to five.

# APPENDIX

## RED STEER AT NIGHT

In answer to authors such as David Horton (The Pure State Of Nature) who dispute the shaping of the Australian environment by fire-stick farming we submit the following quotations from the book Burning Bush by Stephen Pyne. Pyne published (first edition) in 1991 before Flannery's Future Eaters. Burning Bush is a rich source of first hand accounts of aboriginal use of fire for encouraging sweet grazing, for hunting large and small fauna, clearing campsites of snakes and spiders, clearing trails and for resisting Europeans.

## CANBERRA – EARLY 1820s

Allan Cunningham comments on land near present day Canberra saying portions that had been "burnt in patches two months since" (by aborigines) had greened brilliantly while those areas that had escaped burning had a "deadened appearance." He also observed that fire was used as a hunting technique to flush out kangaroos and emus as well as to provide fresh new grass.

## CENTRAL AUSTRALIA – EARLY 1930s

Hedley Herbert Finlayson participated in an aboriginal hunting burn and described how the group scavenged the cleared area for lizard snakes and rodents – finding it easier to travel over the burnt country and detect tracks and burrows.

## SYDNEY - SURVEYOR GENERAL MITCHELL

"But for this simple process, (burning) the Australia woods had probably contained as thick a jungle as those of New Zealand or America instead of the open forests in which the white men now find grass for their cattle..." He also observed in later years "Kangaroos are no longer to be seen....the grass is choked by underwood; neither are there natives to burn the grass..." Mitchell also wrote "On the highest mountains, and in places the most remote and desolate, I have always found on every trunk on the ground, and living tree of any magnitude also, the marks of fire; and

thus it appeared that these annual conflagrations extend to every place."

## TASMANIA – 1820 EXPLORER

### FRANCIOS PERON

"Wherever we turned our eyes, we beheld the forests on fire."

## ARNHEM LAND

"the natives set fire to the grass which is abundant everywhere , and at that time was quite dry... The conflagration spreads until the whole country as far as far as the eye can reach, is in a grand and brilliant illumination."

## QUEENSLAND – JOSEPH BANKS

"...the fires which we saw so frequently as we passed alongshore, extending over a large tract of country...were intended in some way or other for the taking of the animal called by them Kangaru..."

## VICTORIA – EDWARD CURR

"... Understood the blacks to say that they set fire to a portion of the mallee every year and gather the manna the next season from the young growth."

## SOUTH AUSTRALIA - 1839

In an incident which illustrated the clash of cultures an aborigine was arrested outside Adelaide for "willfully and maliciously setting fire to the grass," and was publicly flogged.

## WESTERN AUSTRALIA –PERTH GAZETTE

"the origins of these fires is not at all to be attributed to any malicious intent at all on the

part of the natives; they resort to their accustomed practice of lighting a fire in the bush, for the purpose of cooking and from the bush being highly flammable at this season, it extends with resistless violence."

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- <sup>1</sup> Wild Food Plants of Australia, Tim Low Angus & Robertson 2000 page 126.
- <sup>2</sup> Large Old Trees in Box-Ironbark Forests, Arthur Rylah Institute information sheet 1999.
- <sup>3</sup> Government's Response To The Box-Ironbark Implementation Panel Report.
- <sup>4</sup> Professor David Farrier A Role for Private Landholders in Conserving Biological Diversity.
- <sup>5</sup> Australia's Forests – the Path for Sustainability. Commonwealth of Australia 2001. Other statistics on forest types also derived from this information kit and other publicly available statistics produced under the Regional Forest Agreement process.
- <sup>6</sup> Australian Conservation Foundation Forest Policy.
- <sup>7</sup> *BURNING BUSH* A Fire History of Australia Stephen J. Pyne 1998 Weyerhaeuser page 95.
- <sup>8</sup> *BURNING BUSH* A Fire History of Australia page 211.
- <sup>9</sup> Personal experience with farmers in the area now contained in the Deua National Park NSW and personal interview with East Gippsland farmer.
- <sup>10</sup> Lovick and Treasure testimony to the Stretton Commission following the 1939 fires.
- <sup>11</sup> THE EUCALYPTS OF GIPPSLAND INFLUENCE OF SETTLEMENT ON THE EUCALYPTUS FORESTS A. W. Howitt 1890. Howitt was the explorer who led the successful expedition that rescued the last survivor of the Burke and Wills expedition at Cooper's Creek. He was employed by the Victorian government to explore for gold in Eastern Victoria. He was also an anthropologist, geologist and a president of the Australian Association for the Advancement of Science.
- <sup>12</sup> Summary of letter from Ian Dicker Fire Management Officer Snowy Mountains Region NSWNPWS.
- <sup>13</sup> NSWNPWS Web Page May 2002.
- <sup>14</sup> C. Pascoe Parks Victoria.
- <sup>15</sup> NRE Annual Report and personal conversations with NRE staff.
- <sup>16</sup> Personal communication with Noeline Franklin BSc (Hons) PTC M.MEDSc and 7th generation Brindabella farmer with 160 years of family history in the area including aboriginal fire-stick farming.
- <sup>17</sup> The Aborigines of Victoria, R Brough Smyth – Secretary to The Board for Protection of Aborigines 1876 – published 1878 by Government Printer. Gives details of aboriginal life, hunting etc in two volumes. References to hunting and eating native dogs pages 147, 148, 191. With thanks to Janice Franklin for directing us to this valuable source.
- <sup>18</sup> Supreme Court of Victoria, Stockwell v State of Victoria (2001) VSC 497 (17 December 2001) Judge: Gillard J.
- <sup>19</sup> Industry Development Options for The Southern NSW Forest Industry, Margules Poyry Pty Ltd 1997 page 32. This report was prepared for the NSW RFA Steering Committee. Although principally dealing with the resource in South Eastern NSW the report logically considered the adjacent East Gippsland resource in examining the feasibility of a pulp/paper mill. The report concluded that such a mill was not a likely option as there was insufficient resource for a world scale internationally competitive mill. Unions and industry had been warning governments of this likelihood as successive processes over the years increased the area of parks and reduced the timber available for industry.
- <sup>20</sup> Proposed East Gippsland Pulp Mill Report 1987, Australian Paper Manufacturers.
- <sup>21</sup> Forest and Forest Products Industry Growth Plan 1987.
- <sup>22</sup> Tourism Council of Australia (Tasmania) 2000. Government Land Management Impediments To The Achievement Of The Tourism 21 Strategy.
- <sup>24</sup> Fraser Island Defenders Organization Home Page May 2001.
- <sup>25</sup> ABC Riverland SA Radio Transcript.