

Living beside a National Park

This information sheet has been put together by the small community of Licola, in the mountains of Gippsland, beside the Alpine National Park. It is to expose the myth that National Parks protect the environment, benefit tourism and local communities.

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 in autumn and a great tourist destination. The business sector was healthy, the people who came with their produce spent their money in town. 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 fat 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 ha of regrowth (young timber), the Heyfield saw mills, 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 at times have dropped off alarmingly, with up to 70% drop in takings by the Licola Store after the fire. Around 98% of all visitors to our area are now prepared to sign letters critical of park management.

The fire

This was a tax-payer funded \$11,000,000 bushfire (it was probably more), brought about by the inability to control fuel levels in the park, and fight a fire. The fuel build-up from the lack of cool burning and reduction of cattle grazing was enormous. When the fire went through much of the alpine area, it was very intense. At the beginning on Dec 31, 1997, Park Rangers were in charge. Fire fighters complained about the lack of food and water for up to 15 hours, in some cases longer. A bulldozer was not allowed into the Caledonia Valley for hours, because it might cause environmental damage. The fire got away.

Parks Victoria came in and took over Licola. The CFA, Police and residents were complaining they were not being told anything. The Licola community was to see first hand the lack of cooperation from Parks with local people and emergency services. During attempts to cover-up, a serious fire out of control in the Wonnangatta National Park. Power was denied to the CFA communications caravan. The Licola fire truck, with almost no communications, was to enter a frightening inferno with flames over the roof, that Parks/DNRE were evacuating from. The crew on board considered themselves lucky to have survived. The police, broadcast a message in early afternoon on New Years Day, that the Park should be evacuated of campers and bushwalkers immediately. As the Police had to have permission from Parks\DNRE to evacuate, it was the following day, with a raging bushfire going, that evacuations started. It was only the outstanding work of the Police and helicopter pilots that stopped people from being burnt.

Small land holders on the Bennison Plains, surrounded by the park, were burnt out on Jan. 2, without warning from Parks/DNRE. The properties were burning as messages broadcast over ABC Radio advised they expected to contain the fire in the Caledonia Valley and private land was not being threatened. The fire was over 16 kilometres outside the Caledonia Valley the previous day.

Bulldozer drivers complained about lost bulldozers (at least 7) and poor supervision from Parks (one dozer spent several days needlessly bulldozing ancient snow gums along the side of the main road). Hoards of people (fire fighters) stood around for hours on end, day after day, in the fire area. Local people found it difficult to find anyone who had the experience, who understood, or cared that spot fires going outside control lines were serious and needed to be addressed.

In a crucial area near Tali Karng at 4-00am on Jan. 6, there was no patrolling, no blackening out and no foot prints along a bulldozed control line. Fires burnt in logs, trees and stumps, on the edge of the burn. A break-out escaping to the ridiculous fuel build-up in the Avon Wilderness, under the right conditions

to threaten East Gippsland, would have been a certainty. Of approx 600 people who came into Licola for tea on Jan. 6, only approx 30 were counted as dirty. Fighting fires is usually a dirty business.

Land-holders at Licola were horrified to find that if control lines failed, the fall back position was to the west of Licola, when the fire was in the park to the north east. None of us had been advised of this by Parks/DNRE. With what we knew about the control lines, a break-out was a certainty if the right weather conditions came along. It would be hard to imagine a more stupid or ridiculous position to try and stop a fire.

When Land holders confronted Parks/DNRE, they were told that a computer in Melbourne had selected the fall-back position. The locals said the CFA should be in control, as this involved private property. A representative from Parks advised, that as this fire had started in a park, Parks were in charge and Parks if they wished could burn out private property for a break. The land-holders complained further that there were 5 safer and better fall-back positions, one being the Macalister River (bordering the park). This saved private property and probably Licola as well, it also had a far better chance of working. They were told that someone has to suffer, so as others can benefit. When a local person went to the media he was gagged.

It was cool weather and rain that put this fire out. Had this fire started two or three weeks earlier, it would have burnt into N.S.W., consuming all in its path. The Regional Officer for the CFA was to find out in May, from the Licola community about the fall-back position.

During the fire, 1,000 ha of control lines and helipads were cleared by bulldozing. This is as much area disturbed in one fire, in one Park area, as has been in all mining activities in Victoria since settlement. The Tali Karng track, which was just starting to grow back, was bulldozed, spoiling the environment for bushwalkers. Ancient single trunk snow gums of enormous historical and scientific importance, protected by years of cool burning and grazing, were burnt and bulldozed. Ian Christie, Parks Victoria Executive responsible for fire liaison, in a letter dated 9 Sep 98, described the fire fighting as an "outstanding effort".

Areas burnt out, like Charlies Country, 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. Parks themselves admitted whole eco systems were destroyed. The fire burnt to near Tali Karng, killing much of a magnificent woolly butt stand that should have been preserved at all costs. 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.

Erosion and river pollution

Massive erosion from a thunder storm (this put the fire out) in the Caledonia Valley on January 12, deposited alluvial boulder fans the likes of which none from our community has seen before. These will be around for hundreds possibly thousands of years. The Geology text book "Holmes" describes boulder fans as a product of new mountain chains such as the Andes and Himolayas. Ours is the oldest surviving mountain chain in the world. If these were natural, there would be more of them. Kilometres of deep channels were gouged with unstable banks falling in and landslides developing. Over 50,000 tonnes of mud washed out of the park in the first mud-flow. It is unlikely even the youngest members of our community will live long enough to see this stabilise and the Macalister River run clean after summer thunderstorms in the park. Parks described this as an entirely natural process. The Government is showing no concern for a similar disaster in the Melbourne water catchments with over 60 years fuel build-up managed by Parks Victoria.

The environmental movement, who only a few years ago were saying fire was not part of the ecology, are now saying after the failure of their policies, that this is a natural process. Mr Ian Harris President of the Victorian National Parks Assn has said: *"Australian Forests will always be susceptible to fire - that's*

their nature. No amount of preventative work including preventative cool burns, will change that. Before the fire, a Park Ranger was telling local people snowgrass would not even burn.

Harry Lewis Treasure from the Dargo High Plains told the Stretton Royal Commission inquiring into the 1939 fires: *"I have been there for 60 year, practically all my life....We have been burnt out in 1918, in 1926, and in these fires. Prior to that we never had a bad fire....Prior to 1918, before there was much restriction on the lighting of fires, that country was populated with miners, diggers, fossicking along the rivers for gold. There were up to 100 diggers working along the Dargo River and each man had his hut. They had no fear of ever being burnt out and they never were burnt out. If they had been there during the recent fires, not only would their houses would have been burnt but men themselves would have been burnt to death....The country was burned regularly whenever it would burn and that stopped any fires from getting hold and going a long way."*

William Francis Lovick, of Mansfield, who held a Crown Forest Lease from 1910 had the following to say to the Royal Commission: *"We burned for 25 to 30 years. We were told by the Forests Commission that we were ruining the forests, but this year three mills have been put into the country that was said to be ruined, and they have 50 years timber to cut....The fires that have gone through the forests this year have ruined more timber in two hours than all the cattle men of the east ruined in 50 years."*

The 1939 fire caused a relocation of the timber industry to areas not controlled by the Forests Commission where traditional burning and grazing had continued to be practised.

Water pollution

The water that came out of the park after the fire was very toxic. Over 50 tonnes of Phos-Chek, a highly corrosive phosphorous based fire retardant, was used in the Caledonia Valley. This was the first time in living memory, the Macalister River was undrinkable. A thick, smelly, black oily sludge that reacted with plastic containers it was sampled in, was left on the bottom and banks of the river. Trout, Carp, eels yabbies and tortoises died along the full length of the river from the Caledonia Junction to Lake Glenmaggie. Hundreds of dollars in veterinary fees were spent on dogs burnt from just wading in the river. Blue-green algae grew for the first time in Lake Glenmaggie, a trail followed fire debris from the Mitchell River through the Gippsland Lakes. On Jan 16, 1998, in the Macalister, iron was measured at 2333 times over WHO guidelines for drinking water, with Manganese 350 times over and lead 15 times over. There is every reason to believe that considerably higher results were recorded, but not released. No testing was released on organophosphate contamination from fire retardant breakdown products, or the black greasy mud.

All the relevant government agencies worked together to cover-up the problems. Over 9,000 people using fire tainted water were assured it was safe by government people who refused to drink it themselves. The people at Licola and along the Macalister and the towns of Glenmaggie and Coongulla, complained bitterly about health problems and the safety of run-off from the park. Pregnant women along the river were particularly badly effected with miscarriages and serious complications late in the pregnancy. Things were so bad, then Shadow Minister Garbutt asked that material containing health problems of people using this water stopped being sent to her, as it was running her fax machine out of paper. When she became Minister, she claimed land managers and water authorities over the last three decades, in relation to retardant use, had recorded no demonstrable impacts on water quality or the environment.

Caledonia Track

Tracks to the Caledonia Valley did not reopen after the fire. Huge excavations were dug to stop vehicle access, Parks stated: *"The Caledonia River track was partly washed away by the Caledonia River and adjacent creeks, i.e. Stirrup Iron Creek, following the heavy rain after the fire. At this stage it is uncertain whether it is feasible to rebuild it."*

While Parks were telling people at Licola we had not supplied any evidence mud was coming from erosion in the Park, they were telling 4WD users the track could not be reopened because of erosion and turbidity (dirty water) problems. Parks were concerned 4WD's might stir up mud at river crossings.

In November 1998 the Licola community visited the area to see where all the mud contaminating water supplies was coming from. There were minor problems with the track along the river, but massive erosion to creeks and gullies on the sides of the valley. Stirrup Iron Ck. was not washed away, just covered by a boulder fan. The erosion to the track Parks were claiming may not be feasible to repair, was made safe and useable with 10 minutes pick and shovel work and an hour and a half throwing rocks into holes.

The Dingo hill track remains closed, but at this point in time the barricades have been dug through. Nobody has been able to find the serious erosion claimed to be along it. The Link and Caledonia tracks have now been reopened with needless environmentally damaging bulldozing, much of which will end up washing down to further pollute Licola's water supply (many from the community suspect this work was done as a tail covering exercise to try and justify the closure). Much of this work has been carried out nearby to where the Caledonia fire escaped because Parks would not allow the dozer to cut a fire break.

Kevin Higgins

Kevin Higgins along with other small land holders on the Bennison Plains, was burnt out on Friday January 2, 1998. No warning was given to Kevin, that the fire was out of control, to allow him to evacuate valuable animals from his trail riding business, or the 10 people on his property.

At no stage did any person from Parks/DNRE visit Kevin's property to see if they had survived, or needed help. As Kevin and his helpers searched for burnt animals to destroy, hordes of people from Parks/DNRE stood around idle, for hours on end, day after day, near his boundary fence.

Three days after the fire went through, without any warning, the sky crane (Elvis) came to Kevin's creek, to collect water. His animals were terrified of this and as the fences were burnt, made off into the National Park.

The first contact Kevin had with Parks Victoria was on Sat Jan 17. The second was the following day. He had his rifle (legally registered) - used for putting down injured and dying stock - confiscated by Rangers. He was in their Park. Kevin was told to take his dogs home. He was faced with the impossible task of trying to muster scattered cattle in the mountains without dogs. It subsequently took 10 shots from a worn out .22 rifle to put down a mobile beast with septicemia, as he no longer had a good firearm.

Kevin's problems with Parks have not ended with the fire. A reporter unwittingly advised Parks she was going into the Caledonia Valley to look at the erosion and dead trees killed by chemical contamination, that were hidden by the track closures. Kevin's place was raided the day after her visit on horses he had loaned to her. He was prosecuted for stock outside his fence. A track near Bryces Gorge where he makes over 20% of his income from was closed off to horses. Signs were just put up with no consultation or warning.

Cattle Grazing

Parks Victoria started to use this disaster, of their own creation, as an excuse to push agendas to frustrate groups they disliked as early as Jan. 4. Cattle grazing was targeted before the fire was even out, as Parks were worried they may cause damage to sphagnum bogs.

An "expert" panel was set up by Parks Victoria to advise on grazing. This was made up of the same sort of people who gave the type of advice that lead to the environment that caused the disaster in the first place.

Plots were fenced off around rocky outcrops, dead limbs, fallen bark and places where grass never grew in the first place, then monitored to see how they would grow. Bench marks were set from vegetation surveys on Bogong, a granite monolith, with loose soils and applied to vegetation on soils derived from rhyolite and shales at a considerably lower altitude on Bennison. As the vegetation returned, the benchmarks were changed insuring cattle did not return.

Decisions on grazing in burnt areas were made with vegetation surveys consisting of two drafts and a summary, all unsigned. A "Draft Internal Working Paper" was passed off as "scientifically credible information needed to determine management options for the area." This had no finding or conclusion, no indication of who did the work, or their qualifications, and no references from approved text books on the methodology used which in some places could have been little more than guess work.

Grazing was banned for the first season after the fire by a group of three (two were from Parks). One had already said on ABC radio that grazing would not go ahead, this was before both sides of the argument were in. Another was a recent arrival to Australia who denied there was a problem flowing from the Park (like the 50,000 tonnes of mud). This same fellow expressed a worry that cattle might cause erosion problems.

When the grazing dispute went to an "independent" disputes panel, Minister Garbutt tried to have a former president of the National Parks Association on the panel.

The closure of a 140 year old historical stock route, that lead from Licola to Bennison, was stopped by local people (none were cattlemen) blockading the park until it was reopened. There had been no consultation or warning of this closure from Parks Victoria.

Confusion Rally

A respected and well organised motorbike rally that had been held with strong local support for years in the park near Licola, was told after the fire that all roads were closed along the Wellington River. When this was challenged by local people, the organisers were told the Wellington was unfit for human consumption. This was found to be untrue, it caused serious concern to the local people trying to truck water from the Wellington, as Licola had no other water supply.

The rally went ahead, but the following year Parks banned the "Confusion Rally" blaming them for not using toilets, littering, impacts to the soil, illegal as well as large campfires with excessive use of fire wood.

Statutory declarations from local people subsequently described the campsite in the park before most of the bikes arrived, "as being heavily littered and like walking through a minefield of human excrement." There was no indication of excessive fires, and an abundance of wood two minutes walk away, that needed burning to clean up the Park. Local CFA members attending, were not aware of illegal fires. Soil impacts were minimal, doing little more than flattening weeds like St. Johns wort. When Statutory declarations were presented to Parks, they said they were only opinions and accusations that were completely irrelevant, as the decision had already been made. This rally was bringing in thousands of tourist dollars annually to local businesses.

Weed and dingo problems

To compliment the demise of the cattle and much of the timber industry, the park is now producing a different kind of produce. Blackberries and cape broom are completely out of control and choke large areas of Wonnangatta. The Dargo area is now at risk of broom spreading down the river. The DNRE Strategic Planner Pests and Weeds has told our Licola community that broom seeds will spread by vehicles. This weed is not growing around Licola at present and has the potential to decimate our valley.

St. Johns wort believed to have come to Wonnangatta with Chinese gold diggers and controlled for years by grazing, has run wild in the Wonnangatta Moroka National Park since the removal of grazing

and spread by vehicles to 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 but one farm here have had to stop running sheep to control weeds. At Dargo, St. Johns wort is so bad that cattle are falling in the river and drowning after eating it. As things stand, it is just a matter of time before areas around Licola are similarly effected. The Government is trying to implement a weeds and dingo strategy that brings the problems back to the land holders with only the margins of park & DNRE land as part of the plan. There has been little or no spraying this year of St. Johns wort around campsites in the park along the Wellington River, or road reserves.

One of the reasons given to exclude cattle after the fire was they might cause the spread of dandelion, sorrel and white clover in the National Park.

Tip closure

The Licola tip was taken over by Parks Victoria. This was then closed, as Parks would not allow trees to be cleared for a new pit. The area bulldozed to stop access to the Caledonia Valley would have kept the land fill going for between 400 to 500 years. Parks refused to annex the area, or help the community in any way. Residents and businesses were faced with a round trip of 108km to dispose of rubbish. The Wellington Shire Council helped by providing a trailer and cartage expenses for local people, but not park users. Previously much of the rubbish around campsites was cleaned up by visitors. This has stopped as they have nowhere to dispose of it, the park is becoming a health hazard accumulating rubbish in many areas.

Little improvement

Grass fuel, on areas burnt by the Caledonia fire of 1998, has built up to ridiculous and dangerous levels around sphagnum bogs, and ancient single trunk snow gums. The very environment Parks are supposed to be protecting is at serious risk.

Parks have actively encouraged the fuel build-up again that caused the problems in the first place. Retired people from the timber industry have told the Licola community that there has been so much grass growing after the fire in the Carey State Park (surrounded by the National Park) that it has choked out large areas of regrowth woolly butt and wrecked a substantial area for timber production for the Heyfield saw mills for the next sixty years (cattle could not be put in there, as there was no boundary fence to stop them wandering into the National Park).

Kevin Higgins and the other small land holders now face an even more dangerous situation after the fire with the uncontrolled grass build-up and dead trees around them in the park (Parks were well warned that this would happen). Kevin has been advised that it would be too dangerous for the Licola fire brigade bringing in a crew, or the fire truck, if there is a fire with a wind behind it, coming in from the Park. These people have done everything reasonably expected to protect their properties, they also fought the Caledonia fire to save many of their assets.

Minister Garbutt has said that the "Fire Protection Plan" balances the need for protection of life and property with the need to protect the natural features of the park. She was pleased to note the land holders in question had carried out everything reasonably expected of them.

While Parks have spent around \$500,000 to try and remove cattle grazing from the fire effected area, because it might cause problems, and anywhere up to \$100,000 on needless earthworks in the Caledonia valley, grossly inadequate money has been spent on clearing fuel from around fire places and campsites along the Wellington River. Parks have not been able to list one thing they have learnt from the Caledonia fire, or any policy changes they have made to stop the same, or worse, from happening again. Old timers now consider the mountains to be at far more risk than before the devastating 1939 fires.

It is ironic that environmentalists are concerned trees wont be left long enough for hollows, when the environment Parks Victoria is creating, has trees at risk of not surviving long enough to even seed.

The Hon Keith Hamilton, as acting Minister for Environment and Conservation has said *"The new parks and reserves will not have a detrimental effect on fire prevention or increase the threat of wildfire. All areas are subject to robust fire prevention activities by the DNRE and this will not change."*

On Kevin Higgins property, grazing has continued after the fire with no apparent erosion or damage to the numerous sphagnum bogs. Parks have claimed bog skinks are an endangered species in the park, yet these small lizards can be easily caught just through the fence on Kevin's land.

Craig Ingram

Gippsland East independent, Craig Ingram, has said he will oppose legislation to create more National Parks until the Government demonstrates it is serious about looking after those already established. He said there is ample evidence that the forests were open and park-like, not choked with undergrowth and weeds as they are today.

The Government

Our community is not opposed to national parks, it is just the management. It should not be necessary for any small community like Licola to have to blockade or picket a National Park to try and stop environmental mismanagement that threatens the very existence of the environment it is supposed to protect.

Our caring sharing Premier, who is "here for all Victorians," really does have to explain just how far his government is prepared to go sacrificing the environment, the safety and well being of small communities, land holders and visitors, in implementing Labour Party policies. Unfortunately the Liberals do not seem to be much better with their policies of supporting new parks that have a detrimental effect on small rural communities. The Hon Peter Hall is an exception. Peter has been an outstanding politician representing his constituents, and showing genuine concern for the environment.

From approx. 6,000 signatures collected at Licola, on various letters, only approx. 20 people have expressed support for park management. None of these had any answers for the serious problems that caused more environmental damage than all groups combined (including wood chipping). Yet this minority is supported by the Labour and Liberal Parties and they are planning to give them yet more land to manage. If there are so many supporters for National Parks, when will we see them coming to Licola?

During Easter 2001, over 600 people signed a letter to the Premier and independents with a sentence stating: *"Many from the Licola community and visitors to the area, expect to be mislead, frustrated and lied to, when dealing with Parks Victoria."* The Premier forwarded this to Minister Garbutt. There has been no further reply. It would have to be asked if this is now government policy?

Judge Stretton made the comment in his report after the 1939 fires:---*"to expose and scotch the foolish enmities which mar the management of the forests by public departments who being our servants, have become so much our masters that in some respects they loose sight of our interests in the promotion of their mutual animosities."*

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This information sheet has been put together and paid for by the Licola community and people along the Macalister River.