

Biodiversity conservation and fire management in State Forests and Reserves

Hamilton Field Naturalists Club, May 2005

The community consultation process in 2004/05 in the Portland-Horsham State Forests region resulted in all parties agreeing that conservation of biodiversity is the most important principle for future management of the State Forests. It follows that all activities that affect the current and future biodiversity values need to be examined and, if necessary, modified to ensure that there are no long-term adverse consequences of their implementation. If that is not done then this community consultative process would be an empty exercise.

One practice that has a profound impact on the future conservation value of our forest and woodland reserves is the loss of mature/old hollow-bearing trees that have caught fire during control burns or wildfires – and the falling of many of these by the bulldozers and chainsaw of fire protection crews in the aftermath of the fire. Hollows are critical for the survival of many bird and mammal species in an area, including Powerful Owl and other species of owl, Red-tailed Black Cockatoo and other parrots, Brown Treecreepers, Yellow-bellied and Sugar Gliders, Brush-tailed Phascogales, Ring-tailed and other Possums. The loss of hollows is a loss of habitat.

Habitat is always lost due to fire, and lost due to measures taken to contain it or prevent a relight. The February 2005 fire in the Fulham Reserve-Black Range area is a recent testament to long-lasting damage – dozens of large, old, hollow-bearing trees were bulldozed or cut down in the wake of the fire. If fire management is not modified there will be few hollow-bearing trees left in that area, or other areas such as Cobobboonee. The photos presented here show the fate of one hollow-bearing but otherwise sound, very large Yellow Gum in the Black Range. There are few other trees there of that dimension and age, yet it was cut down as “standard practice”. All around had been burned and the nearest patch of unburned, open farmland is 300 m distant.



Key questions that relate to action taken over large trees that have caught fire:

- Assuming that there is a written protocol for assessing whether a particular tree is likely to be a danger in subsequent days (i.e. will possibly cause cinders to start a new fire distant from itself), is there also a written protocol for assessing the conservation significance of that tree? What procedures are followed to ensure that this is a factor that must be considered in any decision taken to extinguish the perceived fire hazard?
- If action is deemed to be necessary, what are the options that could be considered? Apart from using a bulldozer or chainsaw to drop the tree, what other means are there for dealing with the problem, yet protecting a valuable biological resource? For example, in these follow-up operations, can a fire unit extinguish the fire from the ground? If not, could a cherrypicker unit be used in conjunction with the tanker to gain the necessary access to the seat of the fire? Is there any reason why such units could not be available as “standard equipment”, in the same way as bulldozers are used by DSE fire crews?

Key questions that relate to protection of mature hollow-bearing trees before prescribed burning occurs:

- Is there a policy for protecting such trees that are likely to be vulnerable to fire?
- Does this include removing bulky material from around the bole of such trees before the fire is lit?