

HAMILTON FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB

Private Bag 105, Hamilton 3300

Peter Novotney
Chief Ranger
Parks Victoria
Po Box 471
Portland 3305

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Submission on Dergholm State Park and Mt Arapiles-Tooan (Tooan Block) Draft Management Plan

Hamilton Field Naturalists are better acquainted with the Dergholm SP area than the Tooan Block of the Mt Arapiles-Tooan SP. Our group has visited the Dergholm blocks many times but the Tooan block only once. Consequently our specific comments will be directed to the Dergholm Draft Management Plan.

General comment

We did not think it wise to present a Draft Management Plan for both Parks in the one Draft document. However, we believe that the Draft has been well prepared and covers most of the management issues in a logical and knowledgeable fashion. Among many features, we particularly like the emphasis given to "regionally significant" flora and fauna and to the emphasis given to reform of the fire management practices which in the past have not been ecologically sensitive. We support the general plan for Tooan.

Specific comments

- (1) **Natural values** – Dergholm State Park (p.4) – Yellow Gum (*E. leucoxydon*) and Pink Gum (*E. fasciculosa*) woodlands should have been mentioned as major features. These are not well represented in any other Park, yet are one of the major features of the Bogalara Block (a small patch of Yellow Gum also occurs in State Forest on the SE edge of the Youpayang Block, near the south end of Farley's track).
- (2) **Strategic directions** (p.6-7)
Resource conservation – the Draft correctly identifies appropriate fire regime as a major objective, particularly for the Dergholm area. This Park, along with most other Crown Land in the SW, has been degraded by too frequent and poorly timed burns. The former Forests Commission justified it on the basis of "fire protection" and that fire was a "natural" part of the environment for which the plants were adapted. These half-truths appear to be the basis for action by present-day managers of Crown Land. The effect on some species, including the obvious ones like Desert Banksia (*B. ornata*) which depend on seed production for regeneration, is there to see. In the Dergholm SP there are only a few small remnant stands left – too frequent fire has prevented the species from re-establishing in areas where it should be prolific.

A worrying feature of these Draft statements is that, while the need for ecological planning is acknowledged, the Draft does not make it quite clear that the present inadequate Fire Protection Plans must be altered as a matter of urgency, rather than simply continuing to be applied until at some distant time the regime may be altered.

Park protection

Weed control (Dergholm SP) – pines are obviously the worst invader and too little is being done to control them. What is actually proposed? Who is going to make it their job to do it? Judging by one infestation on Googs Track in the middle of the Youpayang Block - one mature pine (since cut down) has left hundreds of off-spring behind – unless strong action is taken the future will be a nightmare, with pine the dominant species. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of feral pines through the Park now, and not just near the boundaries.

Wild carrot is another bad weed that is being carried along the tracks (particularly Glenmia Road). It has presently been carried (probably by seed transported on machinery) into Loop Track, near Smokey Swamp, and urgently requires removal. This will mean hand removal after flowering, with follow up for the next 5-10 years. One of our members has had success with this simple approach, removing an infestation from Nolan's Creek road.

Damage at Rocky Creek (Bailey's Rocks) – this is not due only to visitor use. The damage to most of the giant rocks was due to a mining attempt in the late 1960-early 1970s. The Mines Department were not helpful in stopping this. The rocks were drilled and filled with explosive. A local farmer (Mr Alistair Roper) heard the noise and investigated. The rock was for sale in Melbourne as "pink granite". The second problem here is the intrusion of grazing animals into the reserve. We have advised the Casterton Office on at least two occasions since 1995 about the poor state of fencing there, which allowed the local farmer's sheep and cattle to graze the area unchecked. An inspection over Easter 1998 shows that the fence at the creek is still in ruin, with animals still gaining entry there and possibly at other parts of the boundary. Cattle dung is present in the creek. Since nothing was done to correct this obvious problem (the reserve once had greenhoods and other wildflowers in profusion) then how are we to expect any action on other matters in the future?

The Park visit

The facilities (apart from the toilets) at Bailey's Rocks are a disgrace. There are no interpretative signs or information at all and no directions for visitors. Surely a mention of the geology of the granite tors, a history of the area and some information about the flora and fauna of the Park would not be too much to expect?

There is no clearly laid out camping area, no clear pattern for parking and the walkways need maintenance. It seems that Parks Victoria has given a fairly low priority to this Park. What is not clear is whether this situation will alter in the future. We believe that the Draft should advocate more input from Parks Victoria.

Scenic driving should be a major attraction for this Park. For that to happen:

- (a) There must be a well prepared route that will enable the visitor to see the broad range of natural features – in this case the vegetation associations. This is (or could be) the main attraction for most visitors.
- (b) The route should have a prepared educational trail guide. One extra option is to use an FM radio tuned to 100, as has been done at Dryandra Reserve in WA.
- (c) The track must be passable for vehicles in most circumstances.

There is no evidence, beyond vague statements about "opportunities for scenic driving", that any such plan is to be used at Dergholm. This is a pity, because the great diversity of vegetation is the principal beauty of the Park. The drive could feature the main tree species and associations, together with the heath types.

A scenic drive route is also needed at the Youpayang Block – with the drive taking in the Smokey and Green Swamps and other significant vegetation. Some tourists visit the area specifically to see Bilston's Tree, on Glenmia Rd. While impressive (we have measured it at 35 m tall and 2.45 m diameter at 1.3 m above ground), this tree is definitely not the largest river red gum in the world, despite the current tourist sign to that effect! A number of trees in South Australia are much larger and the giant near the old Forest Lodge in the Grampians is over 50 m tall and has a similar diameter to the Bilston's tree. Visitors to this area could also extend their drive by taking the route to the Glenelg River at the SW end of the block. That area has very impressive granite landscape and creeks which rival the Bailey's Rocks for visual impact.

The Park boundary near the Glenelg River must be resolved as a matter of urgency. A landholder has illegally fenced off part of the Park, all of the Park's river frontage, into his area. This access to the Glenelg River is one aspect of the Youpayang Block that should weigh greatly in favour of the Park. Moreover, Parks Victoria should endeavour to acquire the private land that separates the Crown

frontage blocks at this point. We place much importance to this linkage between river and bulk of the Park to the east. It greatly increases the biological diversity of the Park and the visitors appreciation and enjoyment. If nothing is done then the river frontage here will gradually assume the degraded character of the river upstream and downstream.

(3) **Fire management** (p.15)

We support the emphasis in the Draft. However, we question the relevance of 5,000 ha land unit for strategic burning in the Fire Protection Plan. Surely the requirements of the particular vegetation association is more relevant?.

We also point out that the Portland Region Fire Protection Plan (1989) needs to be modified before prescribed burning be continued (p.16).

The many new slashed breaks present in the Youpayang Block have the potential danger of greatly increasing the fragmentation of the Park, and possibly spreading *Phytophthora*. No doubt many of the other tracks started out in this way, only to be turned into vehicle tracks. There is nothing to stop this happening here. At the least, these trails should be blocked off with post and rails to prevent them becoming new roads to spread weeds (see also p.18).

(4) **Vehicle access**

We agree that the road situation needs rationalising in the Dergholm SP (both blocks). Many were timber tracks and the new *ad hoc* tracks are for fire protection. These should conform to appropriate floristic boundaries – few appear to do so. Comments in (3) above about slashed breaks becoming additional roads, with increased risk to vegetation communities, also apply.

Some roads are suggested for closure. We have reservations about one – Googs Track. This track actually shows one of very few communities of Desert Banksia, together with hakea and Smokebush. In fact, the presence of this track may be the reason for this clump to still exist, because it appears to have protected it from fire. If this is the case we suggest that this track not be closed but it be used to protect this banksia community in the future. Hopefully in the future a more sensitive fire management plan will see Desert Banksia gradually build up in this and other areas of the Park. We also note that feral pines in this area badly need removal.

(5) **Bee sites**

The Draft suggests that there are 10 bee sites in the Dergholm SP – and states that the positions are shown in Figure 2. The figure appears to show only 5 sites where are the other 5? We wonder whether these sites are actually monitored, because at least 3 are currently situated in areas not marked on the map. Two are on the eastern boundary of the Bogalara Block. Another is in the Youpayang Block on the Loop Track, alongside Smokey Swamp. The boxes are lined up both sides of the track, so that a walker would feel intimidated at trying to pass through. This also is the case at Green Swamp. Whilst we appreciate that this is convenient for the operator – and does not involve further disturbance to the Park – it is not an ideal arrangement for visitors.

(6) **Conservation of Red-tailed Black-cockatoo**

Our observations in the area since 1996 indicate that the Youpayang Block and adjacent State Forest is used extensively by these birds. For example, on 6 April 1998 approximately 140 birds were seen in the Brimboal State Forest. Part of that flock stayed in the general vicinity for at least a week, being seen or heard daily from 11-13 April while venturing west near the State Park and then returning in the evening. We first noted the birds in that area in 16 Nov 1996, 1 Jan 1997, 2 Feb 1997, 16 Feb 1997, 12 Jul 1997, 13 Sep 1997, 7 Oct 1997 and 30 Nov 1997.

There are a few comments on this theme:

- (a) The adequacy of the Youpayang Block for conservation – the Red-tailed Black-cockatoos may prefer larger trees, which appear to be in the Brimboal State Forest section.
- (b) Years of harvesting of Brown Stringybark appears to have left few large trees and very few with hollows for nesting. We have seen a Stringybark in the Wilkin area that is used as a nest tree so they do not just depend on River Red Gums or Yellow Gums. The later eucalypts are

now being cleared from the Edenhope-Dergholm-Casterton-Dartmoor area to plant Blue Gum and pine. Some of this clearing on farmland appears to have been without permit. However, there is actually nothing to prevent such clearing. In all cases such trees comprise less than 50% of the total vegetation, on a basal cover basis, with more than 50% of the remaining flora being exotic. The present regulations allow such areas to be cleared. A shortage of nest sites will be critical for future survival of the birds.

- (c) Timber cutting activities may also disrupt the birds feeding/breeding activity.

The boundaries of this block should be reviewed to include areas which would improve the long-term survival prospects of the Red-tailed Black-cockatoo.

The Park should, in any case, include the River Red Gum woodland near the Chetwynd-Casterton road and to the SE of the Farley's Rd. We fear that on-going timber harvesting, including mature River Red Gums, will compromise the future of the Red-tailed Black-cockatoo.

(7) **Park boundaries**

The Plan should indicate a review of the present Park boundaries, to see if they are satisfactory for long-term conservation needs. The case of the Red-tailed Black-cockatoo was given above. The present boundaries of the Youpayang block are very arbitrary indeed and should be widened to include part or all of the State Forest which is contiguous.

The Youpayang Block needs a public frontage – it presently has none. To the public it does not seem to exist! If it is a State Park then a sign should proclaim it as such. The best place would be Nolans Creek Road or Dergholm-Chetwynd Rd fronting Casterton-Chetwynd Road.

(8) **State Forest management**

Activities on the State Forest should, in any case, be examined to see whether actions there (fire plan and harvesting) are detrimental to conservation of rare species. The management of State Forest areas should ensure the retention of large old trees for the Red-tailed Black-cockatoos.

(9) **Plantations near the Park**

Invasion from pines is a present reality. How will "liaison with plantation managers to ensure plantation species do not spread into the Park" actually work? In our experience, pines often appear a few km into the Park – resulting from cones dropped by Yellow-tailed Black-cockatoos. Will plantation companies bear responsibility for this? We think not. Yet something must be done to control this menace (see also (2) above).

We also note that some (perhaps 6 year old) Blue Gum plantations in the NW of the Bogalara Block contravene the present regulations, in that they are 5 m from the Park boundary, instead of 20 m. Why was this permitted – why were the trees in that buffer area not pulled out?

(10) **Gravel pits in the Park**

The standard of restitution of such pits here (and in the State Park) seems to leave a lot to be desired. The topsoil in some does not appear to have been re-distributed, so that re-vegetation is inhibited. This was once a fault of Glenelg Shire, notably in the open woodland entrance area to the Baileys Rocks drive. Their practice in the 1970s was to push the topsoil into the creek! Trees were left on little "islands" of soil, with bare clay all around. Our club, with local farmers, were able to influence the Shire to change their approach.

Poor management practices, of which this is indicative, are also likely to see fungal disease spread through the Park from infected pits, as happened in the Grampians. What hygiene practices are in place?