

# HAMILTON FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB

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## **Submission on Grampians (Gariwerd) National Park Draft Management Plan**

### **Timber harvesting (p 6)**

This section is totally inadequate. Harvesting activities are referred to in Ref. 1-4 – these should be cited in the final document.

What is meant by ... *“the extent and nature of harvesting is somewhat uncertain”*?

This is an extraordinary statement! The past activities are clearly indicated in the available historical records. Those records, incidentally, show that the hardwood reserves were severely depleted in the post-war era, leading to a dramatic slump in the supply from the forest post-1970 (Ref. 1-3). The FCV's management plan of 1938 was to establish a *“sustainable yield”* but all it did was to bow to market forces and optimise yields in the short term. Between 1945-1970 the timber cutting far exceeded the capacity of the forest and the annual yields dropped from as much as 15,000 m<sup>3</sup> to less than 6,000 m<sup>3</sup>. By the time the Park came into existence there was little accessible Messmate and Brown Stringybark of millable size.

Clearly, the historical effects of timber harvesting have profoundly affected the present Grampians National Park environment.

There is no mention of the pine plantations which occupied 400 ha at Mt Difficult (established from 1926) and 700 ha at Billywing (established from 1964-1976). These areas were excised from the National Park but the management still profoundly affects the ecology of surrounding areas. Why pretend they do not exist?

The Billywing Plantation has around 560 ha net of pine, some of which will be clear-felled within the next 10 years and the majority within 15 years. This land must be restored to the National Park. That was our understanding. A plan for this to happen must be spelled out now. We understand that negotiations are in hand for VPC-controlled plantations to be sold to private enterprise. This area should only be included in that deal if it is to concern only the harvesting of the pine in the Billywing. There must not be re-planting of pines there.

This plantation area should never have been established in such an ecologically sensitive spot and the sooner it is regenerated to the natural vegetation and reincorporated in the Park the better. Pines in the heart of the Park are a constant menace to the Park. The present fire management practice in the surrounds compromises the sensitive wet heath ecology, particularly of the Glenisla Flats heath. This area is burned frequently, whereas it ought not be burned more often than every 15-20 years. We note that aircraft were first used in the Grampians in 1977 to firebomb the Glenisla Flats area (Ref.2). This tactic enabled the FCV to burn areas that they had previously had difficulty burning. The aim was to burn *“strategic areas”* every 5-7 years in the autumn-winter-spring period (Ref. 1) – in this case to protect the Billywing pines. No thought was given to possible untoward consequences of altered frequency, season or intensity of the *“new”* fire regime on the ecology of the area.

### **Grazing (p 6)**

The report covering this activity is also totally inadequate. We are surprised at such sloppy treatment by the consultants or the Park authorities who issued this draft. Background is found in Refs. 1-4. For example, we do know that grazing was phased out in the centre of the Park in 1973! The *“areas of land around the current boundary...”* and those in the buffers (mostly State Forest) have been unmercifully flogged by sheep (and emus, wallabies and kangaroos) for 150 years!

## **Park boundaries and proper representation of vegetation communities**

This brings us to the most important question of adequacy of vegetation community representation in the present National Park. We commented on the poor representation of Yellow gum-Yellow Box woodlands/grasslands in the Black Range State Park, whereas there are suitable areas available which are currently regarded as only useful for grazing sheep!

It is with some concern that we note, in reading the Draft Management Plan in relation to our submissions in 1981, how little progress has been made in those 17 years towards better nature conservation management practice and in improving the representation of vegetation units in the Park! We will allude to specific points in our submission.

We believe that the Plan should indicate a plan for the incorporation of the entire Black Range State Park area – and much of the surrounding State Forest – into the Grampians National Park. There are many reasons for this, as discussed below.

The Black Range SP – supplemented by the adjacent "State Forest" area – contains the most extensive area of Yellow Box woodland/grassland in the State. The Grampians also contains some Yellow Box grassland but the major areas are River Red Gum. This is poorly represented in other National Parks or conservation reserves. This fact is not acknowledged in the Draft Plan and is a serious omission. Our club stressed this in 1981 and others (*e.g.* Lunt 1995) have noted the importance of these grassy woodland areas, but management still appears ignorant of the fact. Lunt makes the point that these areas are managed as "grazing ecosystems" with no burning. Most of these areas have been converted to agriculture. The fragments that remain have undergone "ecological segregation", with some species depleted or eliminated. Lunt states that "all remnant grassy forests and woodlands have been grazed by stock, so that at best the policy can only maintain the impoverished remnants of 150 years of stock grazing". This is, of course, true of the Black Range woodland which has been unmercifully flogged by sheep up to the present day. The Plan should make a major feature of the Yellow Box (*E. melliodora*) and River Red Gum woodlands. This can hardly be done whilst some of these areas continue to be treated as sheep grazing runs. The Draft Plan needs to address this vital issue - nowhere has the Draft indicated an awareness of the conservation significance of this issue.

Over 99% of the indigenous vegetation in the grassy forest and woodlands in SE Australia has been destroyed, primarily as a result of management practices that are detrimental to the species. Lunt contends that a program of regular burning and grazing by kangaroos (not stock) on parts of the grassy woodlands should be the long-term aim to restore the species diversity of these important relics. Archer (1997) reminds us that the way this is done is important to the result: the traditional aboriginal fire-stick methods created a mosaic of different aged vegetation which had great diversity.

The existing boundaries specifically exclude the Box-Gum woodlands from most of the Park, thereby diminishing their status! A glance at the Plan map, in association with a vegetation map, shows that the significant area south of the road from Cherry Pool to HGH Corner is not in the Park. Nor are the very substantial areas north of Rees Road and the Black Range Road. This is a major conservation concern that should be addressed in any future plan for this area. Fire control was once given as a reason for excluding these areas. That has never been a reasonable excuse because there are a multitude of kangaroos and wallabies in the area and sheep grazing is not required for vegetation control.

It is interesting to re-visit the HFNC submission to the LCC (1981), to see that no action has been taken to re-dress obvious deficiencies in the vegetation units represented in the Park ..."omission of the Yellow gum/Yellow Box woodland from the proposed park seriously diminishes the variety of habitats and plant communities available for conservation of fauna, and also seriously diminishes the proposed park's scenic values. There is more to a National Park than rocks and scrub".

The area between the present Grampians NP and the Black Range SP should be combined together to link the area into a single management zone – a corridor to preserve future biodiversity. This action was also proposed and justified by HFNC in 1981. It is time that some active and sensible planning was done to rectify the mistakes that were made in 1981 when this corridor was simply listed as State Forest and treated as a grazing run. This area contains a stand of Grey Box (*E. microcarpa*), Yellow Gum (*E.*

*leucoxyton*) and a few Bulloak (*Allocasuarina luehmanni*) – two of which are notable for their rarity in the area and Yellow Gum is also poorly represented in the Park. The area south of Cherrypool (Djarabul) is particularly important.

### **Phytophthora**

The Draft fails to mention fire as a possible cause of the phytophthora problem in the Grampians. The correlation between dieback occurrence and the new burning regimes established in the mid 1960's both here and in WA are interesting and alarming. In 1976, some 10 years after the systematic and frequent burning of the Grampians for fuel reduction and fire control began, the FCV maintained that there were no substantial areas in the Grampians which were not infected by phytophthora (and so road closures were not warranted!). The disease was not known before that time, although it may have been dormant there.

This possible connection between fuel reduction burning and phytophthora outbreak has been canvassed before but studiously ignored by managers who do not want to know whether their policy might be a cause of the problem. That is, fire creates the conditions where the organism can expand (Ref. 2 & 7). In brief, fire could destroy the important soil litter layer which harbours mycorrhizas antagonistic to phytophthora. Fires in spring could also open up the soil to warming while it is damp, thus encouraging the growth and spread of the oospores. It could also encourage plant species which harbour the disease.

As part of the management strategy, the Park Management should investigate a possible link between fire history and phytophthora incidence. This should not prove difficult since the data will have been collected for other purposes and stored on GIS. It is obviously important that such connections be investigated. There is far too little effort in the Draft to safeguard the conservation elements in the Park.

### **References**

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4. LCC Report (undated) "Report on the South Western Area, District 2"
5. Archer, W.R. (1997) "A variation on the view expressed in a manuscript published in the Victorian naturalist relating to fire and indigenous land management". *The Victorian Naturalist* **114**, 192-195.
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8. HFNC (1981) Second submission to the Land Conservation Council on the Grampians Area: October 1981 (Hamilton Field Naturalists Club).
9. *Ecos* (1976) No.7, p 3.