

A Tribute to Doug Phillips, Portland Field Naturalists Club

28 March 2019

Some Hamilton Field Naturalist Club members have known Doug and his parents, Lois and Max, over many years. The Phillips family have been great advocates for conservation in SW Victoria.

I had some 25 years acquaintance with Doug. We met regularly at many workshops and meetings and, over the years, had many phone conversations (mostly at night) concerning conservation issues. I reflected today that we talked mostly of matters other than of particular flora and fauna, which we were both vitally interested in. Other members of HFNC, including John & Glenys Cayley and Dave & Lyn Munro had similar contact with Doug. Members of the Portland Field Naturalists Club, especially Ruth and Ivor Graney, had much more social contact with Doug and his family and so I will concentrate here on matters relating to Doug, and his concern for the environment.

Doug had useful contacts in many places. In discussing with Doug actions that he planned I was impressed by his persistence in trying to influence politicians and managers of our natural resources. Doug was greatly concerned about the loss of wildlife as a result of clear-falling forestry practice, felling of roadside trees in preparation for prescribed burns and the fire practice itself. Like us, he was very concerned about the attitude of senior staff in the Forestry area and their environmentally damaging practices of forest and fire operations. Doug once remarked that it seemed almost official policy to remove critical habitat for threatened species in order to give the Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) assessors no reason to exclude timber extraction from the forests of SW Victoria.

Sometimes Doug (and many of us) was constrained because we worked with organisations that took a dim view of public criticism by their staff of government policies. On one occasion, in 2002, Doug asked Dave Munro to attend a public Rally For The Forests in Melbourne to deliver a message critical of the RFA proposals. However, Doug was always able to meet with politicians and government officials and conduct cordial correspondence with those who did not share his views. That is an ability that most of us do not possess!

One HFNC action with Doug, with regard to fire, was to help to provide photos and commentary for a video that displayed horrific images of burned fauna. That was an attempt to awaken folks to the reality of poorly conducted prescribed burns. He hoped it would ‘go viral’ on the internet. While that did not happen, it produced a strong reaction from DELWP and I think the message was effective in drawing attention to the problems associated with the then current fire practices.

I will mention briefly some campaigns that we were involved with, in which Doug and the PFNC were most often the chief architects:

1. **Management of the Portland forests** – issues from the late 1990s and early 2000s regarding clear-falling, loss of old habitat trees by ‘ring-culling’ and prescribed burns that killed many threatened species.
2. **Portland-Horsham Forests Management Plan** (DSE Community Consultative Committee 2003-06) – participation and persuasive argument with representatives from many groups and organisations resulted in an agreement that biodiversity (not forestry or recreation) be declared the highest priority for the forests.
3. **Campaign to have Cobboboonee State Forest declared a National Park** – achieved in 2008, largely due to Doug’s persistent lobbying of politicians and their staff.
4. **Production of a video in 2014 (*Victoria – what are we burning?*)** – images of burned fauna highlighting losses of threatened species of fauna in prescribed burns were uploaded (along with a short message) to the internet.

5. **Lobbying against the destructive annual 5% burn policy of 2010** – and supporting a change in 2015 to a risk-based burn strategy rather than the area-based target that was so destructive to wildlife and flora because it resulted in huge tracts of dryland parks being totally burned, much of it unsuitable hot and dry weather, in order to chase the ‘area to be burned’ target. The ill-conceived approach was also ineffective because it did not concentrate on the areas at most risk.
6. **RFA review in 2015-17 of West RFA Victorian Region** – objections to attempts to revive forestry operations on Crown Lands in the region.
7. **Lobbying in 2018 for VEAC to investigate a Karak Protected Area Network in the west**, for public lands now lying outside the Parks system. Doug enthusiastically launched into this project which included production of a glossy brochure outlining that worthy objective. We gave him our support and he presented that to government in some haste, in an effort to prevent some within the DELWP from pre-emptive action to sink the proposal. I believe there has been no response yet on that mission. That was the last time I talked with Doug.

Doug was a passionate advocate for the environment and he, along with Ruth Graney and fellow naturalists, achieved a great deal. For example, without his persistence is there anyone who imagines that the **Cobboboonee National Park** would have that protective status now? For that alone, present and future Victorians owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Doug Phillips (07 Sep 1957 – 07 Mar 2019).

We remember Doug as a fine individual and a dedicated environmentalist who had a long-term concern for the health of the natural world and devoted much of his life to that end. We will miss him greatly.

Rod Bird

Hamilton Field Naturalist Club

