

Adverse Impacts of Works at Wannon Falls Scenic Reserve in June 2013

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This is a brief report on an inspection made of the damaged area with Skott Stark, Shire of Southern Grampians, on 25 July 2013, together with background information.

In June the Shire of Southern Grampians arranged for a local contractor to heap up and burn light branches of the many exotic wattles that had been cut down, as per the current Management Plan. This action had been arranged by Skott Stark, after the Wannon Committee (a group of local activists) had urged him to remove what they considered tube fire hazards. I understand that he did not agree with their wishes to clean out all of the dead material (including logs), stating that neither the CFA, DSE nor the Shire considered the logs to be a fire hazard. However, he did agree to a compromise and arranged the removal, by heaping up and burning, of the light material left by the cutting down of the exotic vegetation.

The environmental damage occurred in the area west of the camp ground near the oval. The damage was done by a heavy machine that heaped up logs and trashed standing native vegetation in the process. Ruts and scalped ground was another result. Luckily, the large, tracked machine used by the contractor failed after a day or two of work, otherwise more extensive damage would have occurred. Large piles of logs and branches were burned, leaving burned areas up to 15 m long and 5 m wide in a couple of places. Photographs of the damage have been taken by Liz Fenton, most some time after work by Conservation Volunteers Australia to cover the scalped areas with branches and to fill in ruts. After the work had been stopped, when a protester contacted the Shire, fires were burning on the reserve. That evening more fires were lit, by persons unknown, in an obvious attempt to further the damage. Some of the fires failed but a couple of the larger heaps of logs were partially burned. The fires were later extinguished by the CFA.

I was told that locals who saw the damaging work in the early stages did not immediately report it, since they were reluctant to incur repercussions from one or two local men who supported the action.

A contractor had been told to heap up the light material but perhaps no instruction was given about the logs or standing dead trees. Machinery should have been banned from the site, since the soil was wet and damage would also be done to the vegetation. The works should also have been monitored at the start.

It seems that the contractor (he had fenced the camping ground at another time and had done a good job) had not fully understood his charter. He was perhaps also influenced by locals, Mr Ian White and Mr Malcolm Lemmy who, according to Skott, were present when much of this work was done. These men are on record as wanting to have the place 'cleaned up'. I believe they were involved in getting the Shire to inflict the original site disturbance in 2009 when similar damage resulted in the area immediately below the currently impacted area. That incident (which did not comply with the Shire's Management Plan for the DSE reserve) resulted in much heated discussion and ultimately in the revision of the official Management Plan in 2010-12. A Wannon Committee was formed in 2011 and I was a member for the first year, trying to put the cause for conservation to the other members, but it was a most unpleasant task and not welcomed by several of the members who advocated 'cleaning out' the reserve, burning it frequently, increasing the camping area, installing more tracks and clearing an area near the lower entrance for a huge playground and picnic area.

The Shire has arranged for the contractor who prepared the Management Plan to inspect the damage and to recommend action to restore the site. I concur with the recommendations, which are:

- To pull apart a large heap of logs that remains unburned and distribute the heavy wood across the area – this will be done manually by CVA workers.
- To burn any tops (exotic vegetation) on the site of the large burn areas, to minimise further damage
- Large limbs and logs are not to be burned
- To prevent any vehicles from entering the site.

I would suggest further that, over the next few years, HFNC monitor the area to ascertain what happens to the affected vegetation. It is possible that the fires will stimulate some species, as well as eliminating others. To my knowledge the reserve has not had a fire for at least 40 years. It is possible that many exotic wattles, product of ill-judged earlier plantings, might be the main colonizers, in which case some action would be needed to remove them. Conversely, there may be a flush of 'new' species, including orchids.