

Parliament of Victoria – Environment and Planning: Inquiry into ecosystem decline in Victoria

HFNC
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Hamilton Field Naturalists accept that the Biodiversity 2037 document developed by DELWP was forward-looking and showed the expertise and knowledge of members of that department. However, the commendable objectives proposed cannot be realised because there is a gap between the scientists and the administrators/politicians who decide on and develop/fund the policies. The lack of environmental knowledge possessed by the top administrators appears to be much to blame for that state of affairs. Or are they simply incapable – or too timid – to deal with and persuade politicians of the plight of the environment in Victoria, and what is required to stem the tide?

At the heart of the matter, too, is the woefully poor funding of DELWP and Parks Victoria's field staff that, with such low numbers, have no time to manage the many reserves that they are charged to manage. Unfortunately, for far SW Victoria, the 5 or 6 PV rangers have dozens of small reserves and State Parks to manage, as well as major areas such as the Grampians, Little Desert, Lower Glenelg National Parks. Some reserves never get visited. People do what they like, as at Fulham Streamside Reserve (an area adjacent to the Glenelg River with fantastic flora but burdened with Cape Tulip and other environmental weed invasion), where vandalism, off-track driving and illegal wood cutting proceeds almost at will. And no-one stops hooners with 4WDs cutting up fringes of other wetlands. Control of weeds and pest animals on any crown land is a rare phenomenon and is never sustained.

While there are many concerns, our submission will concentrate on one major issue – the problems associated with the way the State conducts its fire suppression and timber harvesting activities, and the impacts on native fauna and flora. It is clear that little or no account is taken of negative impacts on the native fauna and very little on the flora in the day-to-day practice.

Legislative issues – a ban on open fires in the fire season:

A major factor in Victoria that negatively affects fauna is fire. One major cause of unwanted fire is the escapes from farms and campsites in woodlands and forests. A critical legislative issue here is the need to restrict the lighting of fires in the open during the fire season. That should apply to private property as well as all public lands. Some States have restrictions, as in WA, where fires may not be lit in the open in many Shires from October to April. There is no such requirement in Victoria, which possibly has the highest danger. Reducing fire escapes from farms (burning of rubbish and animal carcasses, using angle grinders and welders in open paddocks, etc.) is something that could make a significant difference. Campers in reserves and parks also contribute to such events and should not have open fires in the fire season. Many of these people are tourists from the cities or overseas who have little understanding of the risks. One estimate some years ago put this cause at the same level as lightning strikes. It has been ignored by government yet is one of the easiest actions to take.

Operational criteria for prescribed burns:

Damaging fires, including escapes, are added to by adherence to weather and fuel condition criteria for prescribed burning that relate to a past era, before the drying of our climate. Thus, the standards applied regularly allow the burns to reach flame height of 10 m or more, severely damaging even Brown Stringybark forests in far SW Victoria. That would not have happened when Aborigines burned the dry country forests and woodlands. There is a need to re-calibrate the indicators that are followed today, to determine when a control burn may be safely conducted that will not create extensive damage to the forest and/or allow escapes onto private land.

Aboriginal burning practice as an alternative approach:

While it is popular to consider the case for historical Aboriginal fire control methods, unfortunately their methods are not likely to be followed by DELWP. The Aborigines approached the matter carefully, selecting days and weather conditions that did not allow escapes. Now, there are damaging fires every year started by fuel reduction burns by the authorities, who have limited time and a lot of work to do in a small window of time. That was especially true in the years when the ill-advised 5%

annual target for burning of the Crown Lands was applied. The damage done to woodlands, forests and heathland then was horrendous - all to satisfy a target of hectares burned.

‘Blacking Out’ practices with wildfires and prescribed burns:

The environmental damage done from the fire is made much worse when unburned remnants are deliberately torched after the fires have been controlled. This automatic, unthinking practice has to stop because it removes the habitat that many species of fauna need to recover. There have to be other ways developed for dealing with the perceived threat from such unburned patches that are so critical for the survival of fauna and re-colonisation of the burned areas.

The need for mosaic burning:

If fuel reduction burning is to continue on a large scale then attention has to be given to environmental impacts on fauna and flora. There is no doubt that unburned patches of sufficient size have to be preserved in every operation if we are not to lose many species. The so-called ‘landscape-scale’ of operation relied on such patches arising through accident but manifestly that did not happen, at least not to an adequate extent. For example, some areas of 5,000 or more ha in the dry country were deliberately burned in one operation in the last 10 years where nothing remained unburned in that burn area. That practice just has to stop if we are to preserve species such as the Mallee Emu-wren and Malleefowl. We are largely dealing now with ‘islands’ of vegetation in an agricultural or urban ‘sea’ – there is no prospect of re-colonisation from adjacent bushland areas that were there in Aboriginal times.

Retention of old, hollow trees:

Possibly 150 species of mammals and birds rely on hollows for shelter and/or breeding. That includes some endangered or rare species. Yet, when there is a fire, such trees are routinely cut down or bulldozed when they catch fire. There is no attempt to extinguish the fires. While there are always bulldozers available, and powerful chain-saws, never is there a ‘cherry-picker’ truck available to gain access to the seat of the fire in the upper trunk and to apply water to put out the fire. There is nothing in the operational fire manual to indicate the importance of preserving these trees. Only once have we seen a departure from the usual practice – at our urging, a fire in 2006 at Bryans Swamp (caused by a farmer burning carcasses in an adjacent paddock) some 100 old Red Gums that were going to be bulldozed were worked on to extinguish fires in their crown and 90 were saved. Most would otherwise have been lost. The DELWP officer-in-charge indicated that this salvage was a first in his long career. Over the last 50 years we have seen the progressive loss of hundreds of old trees that could have been saved, either from initial clearing away of debris around their butts before burning, or action to control fires in their crown after fire. In some areas, such as the Black Range woodlands, and Cobboboonee National Park, there are too few old trees remaining. If we are serious about conserving our wildlife then we ought to take this matter seriously and plan accordingly.

Overhaul the planning of prescribed burns:

One aspect of DELWP planning that comes to notice is their liking for planning a current year burn to back onto last year’s burn. No doubt that makes it easier to control, especially when the fire is lit under unfavourable hot/windy/dry conditions, but the consequence is that after 3 or 4 years doing that there is a huge swathe of landscape burned that cannot be occupied by many species. That is a particular problem where no mosaic of burned/unburned areas occurred.

Early attack capability:

Finally, the greatest single tool for controlling bushfires would be to vastly improve the early attack capability when lightning or arsonists strike. As we have all seen, the failure to attack the fire in the first hour makes it improbable that a fire that starts on a day of dangerous weather can be stopped before it does a great deal of damage. This capability will require much greater investment in people and aircraft. Yet, it really is the most effective way of dealing with future fires. Of course it has a high cost – but the cost of damage done by fires that escape, and the impact on people who lose their homes and property is, arguably, far greater.

Dr PR Bird, OAM
Secretary
Hamilton Field Naturalists Club

