



FriendsNET

Newsletter of the Victorian Environment Friends Network

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See our web site at <http://friendsvic.org/>

Oxfam changes course: Volunteers succeed in protecting Sassafras Creek Nature Conservation Reserve from large Trailwalker event

As reported in FriendsNET 105 in December 2018, the March 2019 OXFAM Trailwalker route was planned to go through a Nature Conservation Reserve in contravention of VEAC (Victorian Environmental Assessment Committee) recommendations. The walk was to begin in Emerald at Emerald Lake Park and continue along the Menzies, Woori Yallock and Sassafras Creek tracks through the Sassafras Creek Nature Conservation Reserve (SCNCR). This is a fragile landscape with high environmental values. A number of environmental volunteer groups successfully lobbied to have the route changed to exclude the sensitive SNCR.

On 14th February, Oxfam [announced](#) that the route would be changed. Pam Anders, Oxfam Australia's Director of Public Engagement said "Oxfam takes seriously its commitment to listening to the communities with whom we work and we thank the Friends groups for bringing this issue to our attention..."

Local environment groups Meander, a group caring for the Menzies Creek and Emerald Tourist Track, Friends of Sassafras Creek, Monbulk Landcare and Johns Hill Landcare welcomed this outcome. Representatives of these groups had made extensive appeals to Environment Minister D'Ambrosio, Parks Victoria, DELWP and Oxfam for 5 months, attempting to gain recognition of the potential for significant damage to sections of the track in the SCNCR. The groups finally met with Oxfam Australia CEO, Helen Szoke onsite at Menzies Creek on Friday 1st February. Oxfam then agreed to change the Trailwalker route to exclude the SCNCR.

The environmental groups have been very frustrated throughout this process as there are already protections for this area, in the form of the VEAC recommendations for management of the SCNCR. Parks Victoria and other land managers are obliged to follow these recommendations. It is not clear why Parks Victoria felt these could be ignored in this case.. *Continued page 2*

Fail: Biodiversity report card

The Victorian Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability recently released three important reports about the natural environment in Victoria this week. The Victorian State of the Environment: 2018 Report (SoE) updates and extends the last assessment published in 2013. This report uses a traffic light system of 170 indicators to summarise the status of wide range of indicators covering 12 areas such as air and water quality, climate change marine and coast environments; biodiversity and forests. Also recently released were: State of the Yarra and its Parklands: 2018 Report (SoY) and State of the Forests; 2018 Report (SoF).

SoE 2018 paints a very poor picture of Victoria's record on biodiversity. Of the 35 indicators, 21 are rated poor, 7 unknown (meaning not enough information is available to develop an assessment) and the remaining 7 are rated fair. No indicators are rated good. In terms of trends, 18 of the indicators and shown as deteriorating, 7 are stable and only one is improving (for private land conservation). For the remaining 9 indicators, the trend is unclear. In an [article](#) about the report published on The Conversation, Geoffrey Westcott of Deakin University described this as "Victoria's shocking biodiversity record". The Victorian National Parks Association [commented](#) "Two-thirds of the state's indicators for land-based biodiversity were assessed as poor. This is a terrible indictment of Victoria's capacity to hand our precious natural heritage on to the next generation." *Continued next page*

In this edition

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- Community activities at Paddock Creek Reserve, Gordon.
- Community Climate Adaptation grants closing soon.
- Have your say on future of Victoria's forests.
- Volunteering Australia budget proposals.

Suggestions for articles for FriendsNET are welcome. Please email to ecosystems@bigpond.com . If you want to include photos, please send as separate files in jpeg format, preferably in landscape.

Fail: Biodiversity report card - *continued*

While SoE 2018 includes, for the first time, 20 recommendations to the Victorian Government, the two relating to biodiversity are quite loosely worded and seem to focus on data collection and processes, for example, “That DELWP improve biodiversity outcomes on public land by streamlining and coordinating governance arrangements” (p74 of Summary Report). One potentially positive recommendation is that DELWP establish the position of a Chief Biodiversity Scientist, who would “provide esteemed counsel to the DELWP Secretary and the Minister for Environment”. Such an appointment may help raise the profile and importance of biodiversity.

A major weakness of all of these reports is a lack of clear baselines by which the indicators are assessed. Most of the baselines are relatively recent and do not reflect the major declines in environmental quality in Victoria. For example, in relation to biodiversity, SoE 2018 acknowledges that “Victoria has experienced extensive biodiversity over the past two centuries...” (p.111 of Scientific Assessments report), but there is no serious attempt to assess the implications in terms of the indicators. In relation to forests, the indicators used are all based on the recent past. Yet, it is estimated that forest cover in Victoria has been reduced to around 30% or 40% of what it was in past Aboriginal times. This reduction in forest cover has impacted adversely on most elements of biodiversity and the environment.

The SoY 2018 report also includes 7 recommendations, which are aligned with the SoE 2018 recommendations. The SoY recommendations suffer from the same weakness about defining relevant baselines. Andrew Kelly, the Yarra Riverkeeper commented:

“The SoY report is a beginning in the culture change we need to have if we are to address the threats the environment faces with growing populations and a drying climate. We need to work out what the health of our environment that reflects people’s sense of place. People know and understand the Yarra in this state. They understand when we talk about the threats to the river. That understanding can translate into action when we can measure what we are doing. A key part of this report is establishing a baseline we can now measure the work we do against. Now we have to implement the Commissioner of Environmental Sustainability’s recommendations and ensure that the report informs the Yarra Strategic Plan due out later this year.”

The reports listed below can be downloaded from the web site of the [Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability](#), (NB. Some of the reports are large file sizes).

- [Victorian State of the Environment: 2018](#) Report. Summary report. (112pp; ~20MB); Scientific

assessments. (659pp; ~82MB); Summary of recommendations. (22pp; ~9MB).

- [State of the Yarra and its Parklands: 2018](#) Report. (117pp; ~39MB).
- [State of the Forests: 2018](#) Report. (244pp; ~25MB).

Stephen Derrick,
Editor, FriendsNET

Oxfam changes course - *continued*

The VEAC recommendation relevant to activities in nature conservation reserves is reproduced below – with two important stipulations highlighted

Recommendation A – General recommendations for nature conservation reserves

- *That the nature conservation reserves numbered*
- *A1 to A3, as shown on map A:*
- *be used to:*
- *conserve and protect species, communities or habitats of indigenous flora and fauna.*
- *provide for educational and scientific study, where consistent with (i) above.*
- *provide for recreation by small numbers of people, at the discretion of the land manager and where consistent with (i) above.*

Source: Victorian Government Response to the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council’s Yellingbo Investigation Final Report (2014; p7)

With over 3,000 people expected to participate in the 2019 Oxfam Trailwalk, this event clearly does not qualify as “small numbers of people”. It is highly unlikely that an event of such a large size could possibly be consistent with the overriding objective to “conserve and protect species...”

So why did Parks Victoria approve the route? The environmental groups were frustrated and surprised that Parks Victoria even contemplated approving the Oxfam walk in such a fragile area. Parks Victoria gave approval to Oxfam without any prior consultation with local environment groups working in the reserve prior to the walk being advertised. In its media release referred to earlier, Oxfam states that it held appropriate permissions for the walk from Parks Victoria. This raises important issues about processes for management of public lands by Parks Victoria, including on what basis they acted in contravention of the 2014 VEAC recommendations.

The environmental groups intend to continue discussions with Parks Victoria, DELWP, Environment Minister Lily D’Ambrosio, and local MP and Deputy Premier James Merlino. While an important battle has been won, the war for the institution of proper processes mandating fulsome and timely engagement with relevant stakeholders remains ongoing.

Stephen Derrick,
Editor, FriendsNET

Tourism trumps Environment in National Park: How a Commercial/Tourism Decision ruined the tranquility of a National Park and local community



Cockatoo and damaged tree ferns



Feeding Cockatoos

Note from the Editor: This article was written in early-mid March. On 15th March Parks Victoria [announced](#) that bird feeding at Grants Picnic ground would be “discontinued from February 2020 following conservation best practice, National Park guidelines and community feedback”

In the 1987 Management Plan for the Dandenong Ranges National Park (DRNP), which included the Sherbrooke Forest Unit, there were a number of significant actions. One of the most contentious was “Discontinue the operation of the Kiosk at Grants Picnic Ground (GPG) and remove the building. This is to be done in conjunction with the phasing in of the proposed changes to the siting and design of major picnic facilities”. The furore resulting from this proposed action enabled the lessee at the time to gather over 10,000 signatures on a petition to retain the Kiosk at GPG near Kallista. In the June 1991 DRNP Management Plan, the action was reworded to relocate, rather than remove the Kiosk.

A great deal of effort went into designing a building with a major emphasis on an Information Centre. To reflect the impact of the huge numbers that signed the petition a Kiosk was also included in the design. It was to be much smaller and the building would have been an opportunity to have a much needed state of the art Information Centre. Plans were on display at GPG for several weekends, with staff to explain the process and answer questions. The estimated cost was in the vicinity of \$600,000 but during this time the State Government was very short of funds; the State Cabinet having to approve any project over \$100,000. Consequently, the new building did not go ahead.

It was about this time in the early 1990s, that the lessee at the time started putting bird seed on the northern window sills of the Kiosk to entertain the customers while they were seated at the internal tables. The birds were, in the main, Crimson Rosellas, and the gradual increase in the population was a concern for some local Departmental staff. Advice was sought from a fauna expert who suggested some population counts comparing the picnic area with a location in nearby natural forest. As would be expected, there were many more birds where they were being artificially fed. The increase in population also had a mildly noticeable impact on the understory vegetation and tree-ferns. It was about this time the lessee also started to sell bird seed and concern was raised that the bird population was increasing because of the food supplied by tourists. In the gaps between bus arrivals, the increased bird population would heavily impact on the surrounding natural vegetation. The response to these concerns was that if the bird feeding was prohibited the tourist buses would go elsewhere or the bus drivers would bring their own seed.

In 1997 or 1998, Expressions of Interest were advertised for a 20 year lease for the Kiosk, with the successful applicant having to provide funds to extend the building. This public/private partnership should never have been considered in a National Park. Well before the 20 year lease was signed off, the numbers of Sulphur-crested Cockatoos were gradually increasing. An unnatural food source, combined with a ten year drought, had driven large numbers of birds from north of the Great Dividing Range to southern areas of the State. The implications of this bad decision have had a devastating impact on the National Park surrounding area ever since – the tranquillity of this unique National Park and the little township of Kallista has gone, destroyed by large flocks of Sulphur-crested Cockatoos.

During the negotiations for the 20 year lease the National Parks Advisory Council (NPAC) opposed the bird feeding provision, but were overruled by the Minister. The lessee has publicly stated in later years that they would not sign the lease unless the feeding of birds was allowed to continue. This intrusion of commercial and tourist influence in these

critical decisions is an example of how environmental issues, which should be the first consideration, is usually the last. This matter also illustrates how powerless Advisory Committees are, despite the skills and experience they make available to managers.

As the Cockatoo population increased in the Dandenongs, the damage to resident's homes, facilities, street trees and the vegetation in the GPG increased and more complaints ensued. The furore became so intense that a public meeting was organised in June 2008. There were over 150 people at the meeting with various speakers and most residents were desperate for positive action to alleviate the problem. Three Yarra Ranges Councillors (YRC) and Ian Temby from the then Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) were on the stage and listened to many angry residents. Not a great deal was achieved, although it was obvious to the Councillors that many ratepayers were far from happy, and they called for a ban on the feeding of cockatoos.

In 2009 Cr Dunn of Yarra Ranges Council produced a 14 page blog on the issue which described Cockatoo damage at various Council and other facilities. Kallista, being the closest township to GPG, had incurred a great deal of damage. The English Oaks in the main street, Kallista Community House, Kallista Mechanics Hall, Kallista Kindergarten and many residents' houses were heavily damaged, along with other shrubs and trees. Due to this continued destruction, a Community Meeting was held in August 2009, attended by about 50 people. A working group was organised with meetings at the Kallista Community House, although it failed to continue after a couple of meetings.

In March 2013, after YRC had advertised for submissions on this issue, a Local Law was proposed to prohibit the feeding of cockatoos. Unfortunately, enactment of this Law was made almost impossible because the public would still be permitted to feed birds at GPG. But several Councillors kept the issue in the public arena, in particular Cr Samantha Dunn, who was regularly contacted by local citizens regarding the problem and continued to pressure Council to resolve the issue. The Law was never proceeded with, but a joint information flyer with DSE was produced trying to educate residents about responsible bird feeding.

For over 20 years, the Friends of Sherbrooke Forest and the Sherbrooke Lyrebird Survey Group have been writing letters to the local member and the Environment Minister on both sides of Government with absolutely no satisfactory outcome. Once again an indication of the "sacred cow" - tourism, reigning supreme over the environment.

During the past ten years, at least, close watchers of this situation have been looking forward to 14 Feb 2019, when that fatal 20 year lease was to end. But in November 2018, without any public announcement, the lease was

extended for another year to Feb 2020. The reason was supposed to be to give the Tourist Industry time to adjust to the change when bird feeding was to cease. Although local Parks Victoria staff and the Chief Executive Officer have supported the banning of bird feeding at GPG in any new lease, this condition has yet to be signed off by the Minister. A further concern is that the upcoming lease to be advertised will probably include a clause which will require private funding and some sort of commercial attraction to replace the bird feeding. How unfortunate that in twenty plus years, that the managing agency has not learnt a single lesson.

There has been a huge gap in scientific research about the impact of the Sulphur-crested Cockatoo in Mountain Ash forests. In 2008, Michelle Plant (then a researcher at University of Queensland), who had studied bird feeding at O'Reilly's in Queensland adjoining the Lamington National Park, undertook a study of the birds at GPG. Many of the birds tested there had been exposed to Psittacosis, a serious pneumonia-like disease in humans, contracted from birds. Management's response was to spend \$400,000 (from public funding) on a dedicated feeding area with warning signs and hand washing facilities. The lessee was allowed to charge \$4.00 per person to feed birds within this facility. It should be noted that the incidence of humans contracting Psittacosis is higher in the Dandenongs than any other area in Victoria. Another indication that Tourism reigns supreme over the public's health, as well as the environment.

Environment groups in the Dandenongs will continue to lobby against bird feeding at GPG and against other commercial intrusion into our priceless environmental assets.

**John Lloyd,
Friends of Sherbrooke Forest**

Community activities in Paddock Creek Reserve, Gordon

Community members in the Gordon district participated in activities to promote health and wellbeing during February. The Friends of Paddock Creek Gordon (FoPC) (auspiced through the Moorabool Catchment Landcare Group - MCLG) are keen to see the community making more use of the Paddock Creek Reserve. Working together, FoPC and MCLG developed some ideas about providing local community activities to get the community more involved in the Paddock Creek Reserve. Local presenters were used for the events which were free to the community.

The first community event ran on Sunday 10th February, focused on Cultural Stories, poems and songs about the Aboriginal history of Gordon. Around 50 people attended this family friendly event, which aimed to assist people to feel a stronger connection to the Gordon district and its history and appreciate the unique environment

surrounding the community. Barry Gilson, local Wadawurrung man led the session.



Barry Gilson presenting cultural stories

The second community event ran on Sunday 17th February and focused on mental and physical wellbeing through an outdoor Tai Chi and yoga class within a natural setting. Around 20 people attended this session, which provided an opportunity for people to step into the environment, switch off from modern day devices, listen to the birds and connect to those around them. Huey Tran, owner of the Gordon Store and Martial Arts coach, put people through their paces.



Huey Tran leading Tai Chi session

Further events are being planned to get families and local people out into the environment so that they will feel connected to their landscape and to the community and improve their mental and physical health as part of the experience.

Future events may include: star gazing, night time photography class, local cultural walks and other family friendly activities.

If you are interested in getting involved as a volunteer with Friends of Paddock Creek or the Moorabool

Catchment Landcare Group, please contact: Stephen Derrick on: 0417 326 860 or email ecosystems@bigpond.com or contact Jennifer Johnson (Landcare Coordinator) on: 0497 770 075 or email: moorabool.landcare@gmail.com

Community Climate Change Adaptation (3CA) Grants

The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) is offering grants to build resilience to climate change impacts through community-driven adaptation activities that address identified gaps and priorities in Victoria's regions. The 3CA Grants program will:

- identify and support practical projects focused on adaptation activities with clear community benefit;
- foster partnerships between communities, local governments and regional stakeholders on adaptation; and
- generate and share lessons on good practice approaches to community adaptation.

Applications close this Sunday 31st March 2019. For more information and how to apply see

<https://www.climatechange.vic.gov.au/adapting-to-climate-change-impacts/community-climate-change-adaptation-3ca-grants-program>

In total, the available funding for the 3CA Grants program is \$1,000,000.

- Grants between \$25,000 to \$75,000 will be awarded.
- Projects must be completed no later than 31st December 2020.

Who can apply?

The 3CA Grants program provides funding for local communities to adapt to climate change impacts in their region of Victoria.

Eligible projects must either be led by, or implemented in partnership with, a local council, traditional owner corporation, community group, or not-for-profit organisation.

The program will fund two categories of projects:

Building Adaptive Capacity

These projects will aim to build the capacity of communities or regions to better plan for, coordinate and deliver actions that support communities to adapt to current or future climate change impacts.

Delivering Adaptation Action

Delivering Adaptation Action projects will implement practical actions that will support communities and

regions to adapt to current or future climate change impacts.

ResourceSmart schools awards now open

Victoria's largest sustainability awards program for schools, ResourceSmart Schools Awards for 2019 are now open.

ResourceSmart Schools is a free program offered by Sustainability Victoria that supports Victorian schools to embed sustainability across school facilities, community and curriculum, while saving resources and money for schools.

Entries close on Monday 1st April. More details and how to enter can be found on the web site of [Sustainability Victoria](#).

ResourceSmart Schools Awards:

- Recognise and celebrate Victorian schools' community, curriculum and campus improvements towards environmental sustainability
- Highlight their contributions to embedding sustainability and taking action on climate change.

Eligibility:

- Entries are open to all Victorian schools, including government, independent and Catholic schools
- Entries need to comply with the eligibility requirements of the selected category, and the Awards terms and conditions of entry.

2019 Award Categories are:

- Resource Smart School Teacher of the Year
- Teacher of the Year
- Student Action Tea of the Year (Primary and Secondary)
- Community Sustainability Leadership School of the Year (Primary and Secondary)
- Sustainability in the curriculum leadership school of the year (primary and secondary)
- Sustainable Campus of the Year (primary and secondary)

Get your local school involved and entries close: 1 April 2019.

Have your say on Future of Victoria's Forests

The Department of Environment, Land, Water & Planning (DELWP) is running a consultation program to gain community views about the future of Victoria's forests and how they should be managed.

An online [survey](#) is available and closes this Sunday 31st March.

You can find out more about the processes and sign up to receive a newsletter [here](#).

Volunteering Australia 2019-20 pre-Budget submission

It's budget time again. The Federal Budget is due to be handed down on Tuesday 2nd April and the Victorian budget on Tuesday 30th April.

Volunteering Australia developed 8 key proposals in its pre-budget submission provided to the Federal Treasury in February 2019. The proposals are:

1. A restoration of the Volunteer Grants funding to 2010 levels at \$21 million p.a. (currently \$10 million p.a.).
2. Five-year funding contracts for community sector funding (with the application of indexation) to ensure fiscal certainty for volunteer programs.
3. Designated funding for Volunteering Support Services post-2021, with assurances that the funding will include indexation.
4. Allocation of \$250,000 to support Volunteering Australia to acknowledge and celebrate the contributions of Australia's volunteers through National Volunteer Week.
5. Investment of \$450,000 in the national online volunteering recruitment platform GoVolunteer and \$100,000 p.a. for ongoing maintenance. Funding of \$35,000 to develop an 'API' to automatically connect the Volunteer Management Database VIKTOR to DEX and remove duplicate reporting and improve sector efficiencies.
6. Allocation of \$5 million toward Volunteering Support Services and digital solutions as part of pre-employment programs.
7. Invest in schools and Volunteer Involving Organisations to create and manage structured volunteering programs for young people.
8. Invest \$3 million in a national campaign to support and boost volunteer numbers, particularly in the high-demand community services.

Volunteering Australia's full pre-budget submission can be found [here](#).