

Another proposal for housing near Kalimna Park

The Mount Alexander Council is considering a proposal for a 39 lot housing subdivision on the mainly cleared land on the eastern side of Kalimna Park. The developer is Mr Ron Rice who has made many development proposals for Happy Valley over the last 15 years. The current proposal is for the Hundredweight Hill area which is situated in the northern part of Happy Valley and takes in 25 ha of land adjoining the National Heritage Park.

FOBIF has previously expressed its concern about the damage that would be done to Kalimna Park by introducing such a large number of new residents next

to the park (more roaming dogs and cats, trail bikes, dumping of rubbish, garden plant escapes, etc.). Following the experiences of Black Saturday and because the housing estate is in such a dangerous position there could also be pressure for a large Asset Protection Zone in Kalimna Park which could be subject to frequent burning to protect the new residents.

The application was referred from the local council to DSE and it appears that DSE will not accept the proposal as it stands. We will continue to monitor proposals for development in Happy Valley.

Parks Victoria photo comp

Parks Victoria is offering a prize of \$2000 for the best photo taken in a Victorian National Park. To enter you have to go into Facebook — a radical step for many of our members, and certainly for the editors of this newsletter — but for those brave and motivated enough to have a go, the contact is www.facebook.com/ParksVictoria

Moss and fungi field guides

A working group under the leadership of Cassia Read has been meeting to prepare a guide to the mosses of the Mount Alexander region, and plans are well advanced to have the guide ready for launch early in 2013. A similar guide is proposed for local fungi. Any member interested in participating in these projects should ring Bernard Slattery on 5470 5161.



Photo: Damian Kelly

Owlet Nightjar

Getting a shot like this is part luck and part knowing where to look. Owlet Nightjars are very hard to see, although you can sometimes hear their call around dusk. I have also seen them being mobbed by honeyeaters at times. They prefer hollows in old eucalypts, which is why keeping old trees is critical to the long-term survival of the species. I always look closely at any hollows and now and then can be rewarded with a thrill like this, a sighting in the Kalimna area.



A happy Christmas and New Year from the FOBIF Committee

This is the last mailed FOBIF newsletter for 2011. We will continue to post news items and nature observations on our website, www.fobif.org.au, as appropriate, and members who have provided us with their email address will receive fortnightly reminders about recent posts. We welcome member contributions to the site, and have been particularly grateful to Damian Kelly for his brilliant bird photos.

We are entirely dependent on your support!

If there is a sub reminder with this newsletter, your subscription is due.

Want to know more?

Extended versions of most of the material in this newsletter can be found at www.fobif.org.au, together with numerous nature observations on everything from red back spiders to peaceful doves. And, though it's maybe not a good idea to spend huge amounts of time gazing at computer screens, we also strongly recommend that members regularly check our blogroll of local sites recording interesting features in our region.

FOBIF Website Updates

FOBIF sends occasional emails about its latest website posts. If you are not receiving these and would like to, contact us at info@fobif.net.au.

Walks program

The next newsletter will appear in February, and will contain our 2012 walks program. This year's walks program continued the success of previous years, with numbers of participants ranging from the mid twenties to the high fifties. Members interested in running a walk next year are invited to contact Bronwyn Silver on 5475 1089 or Julie Hurley on 5472 5082.

Put it on the wall

FOBIF and Connecting Country have produced a good quality colourful A2 poster containing 63 photos highlighting the beauty of our local bushlands. The price for members is \$15 from Connecting Country at The Hub, 14/233b Barker Street (entry through glass door on Templeton Street – please bring exact money). Non-members can buy it for \$25 at Stonemans Bookroom or the Castlemaine Visitor Information Centre (Market Building).



Photo: Damian Kelly

Boobooks calling

Recently one night I could hear the distinctive call of the Boobook Owl coming from the Kalimna forest at my place in Lyttleton street. Next morning I went exploring, checking typical shaded spots that owls prefer. After a while I was rewarded with this view of a Boobook, watching me warily. This one was being mobbed by some New Holland Honeyeaters, so I left quickly to avoid disturbing it any further. Often it is the sound of mobbing honeyeaters that can lead you to roosting nocturnal birds.

Fire Zones Briefing

FOBIF representatives attended a DSE briefing on new fire management zones on 24 August.

The briefing was a sobering experience, since it was made plain to us that the entire fire management system was governed by a government directive that 5% of the public land estate be burned each year.

In other words, the management burning program is based, not on an assessment of what the land in question needs (or, if it comes to that, on specific issues of public safety), but on a blanket figure which must be achieved come what may. If that figure is not achieved in a given year, then the deficit must be added on to the following year's target. Further, the target will stay the same regardless of how much country has been burned by bushfires in any given year. This system is the one recommended by the Bushfires Royal Commission. DSE has set up four zones of public land for management burning purposes:

Zone 1: Asset protection zones (APZ). These total in all 2.7% of public land. They are usually close to settlements, and will be burned severely: 90% of the declared area will be burned, and it will be burned relatively frequently. DSE concedes that, ecologically speaking, these are 'sacrifice zones.'

Zone 2: Strategic wildfire moderation zones (to be renamed Strategic bushfire moderation zone). These total 17.5% of public land. They will be burned somewhat less severely than zone 1 [80% coverage].

Zone 3: Environmental management zones (EMZ) (to be renamed Ecological management zone). These total 63% of public land. They will be burned more moderately than the other two (DSE will aim to burn one third of the land in these zones) and less frequently.

Zone 4: Planned burning exclusion (PBZ). These zones total 16.5% of public land.

Mount Alexander Shire Fire Plan

Along with other northern Victorian councils, Mount Alexander is currently in the process of getting together a Municipal fire management plan. These plans are part of the State's integrated fire management policy. A draft plan is slated for completion for consultation by March 2012, and it is expected that the final plan will be finished by October.

From FOBIF's point of view, the compilation of this plan is interesting in that it is intended to contain an overview of fire risk in the area, including the Moonlight Flat Pine plantations. In 2010 we wrote to the plantation managers, Hancock Plantations, enquiring after their fire prevention strategy and how it relates to the surrounding bushland, but have not been favoured with an answer. Although we have been assured by DSE fire planning manager Ben Matthews that 'managers of these plantations must adhere to strict fire prevention guidelines' we haven't found anyone who knows what exactly the guidelines are, and in particular we don't know how they relate to the management of adjoining public and private land, some of which is infested with flammable feral pines. We look forward to being enlightened when the draft plan emerges in March.

Fire theories

DSE conduct in fire management is, in theory, governed by its *Code of Practice for fire management on public land* (2006). This Code is now under revision, and a draft was released for consultation mid year. FOBIF believes that the old Code was widely flouted, but that such a guide to good practice is still important as a way of holding the Department to account.

We have concerns about the new Code. Its authors told a Bendigo briefing attended by FOBIF representatives that there was widespread discontent about the old Code's lack of clarity. Our impression is that the new version has achieved greater clarity by eliminating some of the ecological guidelines for fire managers. Specifically, Zone 2 burns no longer have a requirement for managers to respect ecological values in their burns; and the Compliance requirements in the new Code are significantly weaker. The old code required regular audits of DSE practices. The new one simply requires that the Department 'report' on what it has done.

There is still a requirement, however, that 'actions [will be] modified to minimise impacts on the environment' should scientific evidence show that 'environmental risk thresholds' have been reached. We are not terribly optimistic that this requirement will be observed, given that DSE is obliged to burn 5% of the public land estate regardless of any damage it might do – but we will continue to lobby on this matter case by case.

FOBIF's submission to DSE on the draft code can be found on www.fobif.org.au

Fire practice

FOBIF has been concerned about DSE's conduct of the Smutta's Track management burn early this year. Specifically we were concerned by the destruction of a very large tree near Hunter's Track, and by the sloppiness of a control line which we believed could easily become yet another unnecessary and erosion-prone track in the area, likely to be used by trail bikes and other vehicles.

DSE was apologetic about the tree destruction, and we were assured by DSE District Manager Steve Nicholson in June that 'DSE is committed to rehabilitating the control line as soon as possible after a burn is completed to minimise erosion and access by vehicles.'

FOBIF members visited the area on 1 November, and discovered that nothing had been done to rehabilitate the track in question, and that it had indeed been taken up for vehicle use. This track is completely pointless – it goes from nowhere to nowhere else, and is duplicated by other tracks in the area. We will take up the matter again with DSE.

The destruction of old trees is a theme in DSE fire operations, and is connected to the enormous complexity of these exercises, together with the fact that the department is under-resourced for the tasks it has been set. Its major anxiety with these jobs seems to be to prevent the fire escaping – a natural enough concern, given that a significant number do escape, some of them with disastrous results, as witness the fire at Margaret River in WA in November.

One of the consequences of old tree destruction, however, can be the regeneration of enormous numbers of seedlings – in other words, a medium to long term increase in fuel loads in forests. We believe that this has been the result of the autumn 2010 burn at the Wewak Track in the Diggings Park. For more details see www.fobif.org.au

Muckleford forest management burning proposals

Under draft new fire zoning proposals released this year a large (576 ha) area of the Muckleford forest north and south of the Pyrenees Highway was zoned 'Asset Protection'. FOBIF, together with residents from Green Gully, Muckleford, Muckleford South, and groups including Newstead Landcare, argued that this zoning was unnecessarily destructive of forest values without doing anything for fire safety. As a result the zoning of this area has been significantly altered: South of the Pyrenees Highway, Zone 1 will be changed to Zone 3. To the immediate north of the highway the Zone 1 Asset Protection will remain, but be reduced

to a band of around 500 metres, with a 1000m Zone 2 Strategic Wildfire Moderation Zone to the immediate north, with the balance further north changed to Zone 3.

Local submissions also advocated a whole of landscape approach to our area, suggesting that many of the highest fuel loads were in fact on roadsides and neglected private land, and that by considering both private and public land together we could all feel safer without our forests having to be sacrificed. This is a longstanding theme in our communications with DSE.

Forest Creek Plan

A draft management plan for Forest Creek, prepared by Max Schlachter for Connecting Country, in consultation with various community groups (including FOBIF), residents and agencies, is now in circulation. It can be found at <http://connectingcountry.org.au>.

The informative and interesting plan divides the creek into four sections: from Expedition Pass to the Monster meeting site; from the Monster meeting site to Colles Road bridge; from Colles Road bridge to the Pyrenees highway; and from there to the confluence with Barkers Creek. It acknowledges that it is impossible – and probably undesirable – to restore the creek to a pre-1850s state, but sets out ways this area can be improved. In doing this, it clearly canvasses the many challenges facing creek managers, in particular reconciling flood control, ecological health and fire issues.