

Catching up with Connecting Country

Connecting Country focuses on connecting people and restoring landscapes for a healthy, resilient and productive natural environment. It has obtained ongoing federal funds from Caring for Our Country and will provide \$330,000 to successful project applicants and invest a further \$40,000 in local monitoring, mapping and education. These funds will cover the Mount Alexander Shire and surrounds, with a focus on Yellow Box tree areas for 2010-2011.

CC will hold a **Reference Group Forum** so people can:

- be brought up to date on current and future project opportunities
- share recent experiences and information with everyone and
- provide feedback on how Connecting Country can best work in local areas to offer project support.

Forum details:

Monday 13 December, 5.00 pm for 5.30 start, until 7.30 pm

Faulder-Watson Hall, 180 Barker St, Castlemaine

1 spokesperson and 2 members from each group.

Drinks and supper from The Dove Cafe provided during the break.

RSVP for catering, Monday 6 December by email (including any dietary requirements): lmcdonald@connectingcountry.org.au

Box Ironbark Film Project

FOBIF has backed a proposal by Fryerstown filmmaker Stewart Carter to make a film about responses to the local forest. The proposal arose out of an idea of Doug Ralph's. Funding is being sought for the project.

Eltham Copper Butterfly

Elaine Bayes has been commissioned by DSE to conduct monitoring of the Copper Butterfly in the Botanical gardens through to February. The monitoring is a fascinating exercise in the early hours of evening darkness, searching by torchlight for butterfly larvae being guided up the stems of bursaria bushes by notoncus ants. The larvae pupate with the ants below ground and the adults fly in the summer. Elaine is looking for keen volunteers to assist. Contact her on 0428 480 225 or 5407 2968.

Inviting invaders

Members will have had no trouble noticing brilliant displays of 'wildflowers' along streets and intersections in towns of the Mount Alexander shire in recent weeks. These orange and yellow flowers are gazanias, the subject of a timely item in the Natural Newstead blog [geoffpark.wordpress.com]. The site contains a photo and useful information, including the fact that this plant is listed by the CSIRO publication *Jumping the fence* as one of the top ten weeds available for sale in nurseries

Weed clearance, biodiversity and fuel management

FOBIF has used a Parks Victoria grant to embark on a brush creeper clearance effort alongside the Great Dividing Trail near Forest Creek in Chewton. The site in question is north of the creek, north east of the small pine plantation, around a very large yellow box tree, the environs of which have become completely infested with the weed. This clearance project could become very long term, as the area is infested with a wide variety of environmental weeds. Pat Mansbridge, of Nativfocus, who conducted the works for FOBIF, has advised us that a careful burning of the area may be the best way to make inroads on the weed problem in this corner of the bush.

Though we are persisting with this type of project, as with our long term effort in Wattle Gully, we believe it is urgent to develop a long term strategy to tackle the growing weed problem. Parks Victoria has conducted some very valuable work on weeds, particularly in the grooming of gorse along Forest Creek, but the Auditor General's criticisms of Parks' inability to develop an overall, long term plan of attack on weeds remains valid.

In particular, it is important that more coherence be achieved in work along Forest Creek. The recent weed burn on the creek near Castlemaine town is a good example of this need: in spite of efforts by DSE workers, the fire managed to destroy some of the recent plantings put in by Castlemaine Landcare. This is a case of the right and left hands working against each other. In another example, DSE has been conducting experimental burns in the Fryers Flora reserve apparently in ignorance of the presence there of orchids seen this year for the first time in over 20 years.

FOBIF and Golden Point Landcare representatives have met with DSE officers to discuss this matter. We believe that a healthy riparian zone, good fuel management and public amenity in this important area are all possible' – if a clear management strategy is being observed.

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The FOBIF Committee wishes all members a happy Christmas, and another great year in our local bushlands



Brush-tailed Phascogale

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Mamunya Photo Exhibition and the State Festival

FOBIF's exhibition of photos of local flora and fauna, *Now Look Here*, concluded its season at the Castlemaine Market Building at the end of October. Alison Pouliot, well known nature photographer and environmentalist, launched the exhibition with an inspirational speech, part of which is reproduced here:

Exhibitions such as this are enormously important at many levels, particularly for the Box and Ironbark forests. Because let's face it, we don't exactly see busloads of tourists out there as we might in the Otways or Blue Mountains or the Grampians – the seemingly more charismatic forests. Much of the beauty of these forests is in the nuance, the subtleties. The restless visitor may be disappointed. These forests take time and patience. And for those prepared to wander, to listen, to ponder, to tune one's senses, to develop one's eye, to become heady on the scent of spring wildflowers, to recognise the nuance, the poetry, to celebrate the beauty – you will be richly rewarded...

The images here today are important not just because they inspire and inform, but because they offer a bridge to connection. As we become more affluent, with more gadgets to compete for our attention, many of us inevitably become more disconnected from the natural environment...

And that's why this exhibition matters. Conveying information on environmental issues to the wider population and encouraging them to engage is indeed challenging. We can become quickly overloaded with information and overwhelmed with the enormity and ubiquity of environmental issues. **We need to do more than simply acquire knowledge, we need to engage our hearts, our imaginations, our creativity – express feelings, make a connection, nurture a relationship, renew kinship.** This exhibition serves as an important bridge to that connectedness...

Another wonderful outcome of this exhibition is that it gives hope. Despite the near devastation of these forests over the last 160 years, these photos are evidence that through vision and effort and halting the processes of destruction, the forests can regenerate.

I read on your website that the aim of the exhibition is to celebrate the beauty of these forests. That is a wonderful aim as **I sometimes think we forget about the importance of beauty; beauty in the natural world – how it inspires the imagination, gives hope, enlivens the senses, enriches our lives. Writers and philosophers have written about this throughout history. The longing for beauty is a powerful force which is deeply entrenched in an ancient, primal need. Aesthetic appreciation of the natural world is not a petty activity; it is imprinted in our biological nature.**

Many people's impressions of environmentalism are formed by news-making issues, which are often negative, triggering a sense of powerlessness in the scope and magnitude of global environmental disasters. The message is often both pessimistic and moralistic, neglecting the very beauty of nature.

In an article in *The Age* entitled *Anatomy of Hope*, Tim Flannery, speaking of symbiotic cooperation in nature said: *'Our world is a web of interdependencies woven so tightly, it sometimes becomes love'*. And looking at these images today, I can see that love, love of the humble Box and Ironbark forests, is the uniting force that brought these people, you people, these images, together. **]**

The full text of Alison's speech can be found in the documents section of www.fobif.org.au

The exhibition will have a repeat showing, with a somewhat different selection of pictures, at the Bold Cafe in Wesley Hill during the State Festival next year.

A 'fire challenge'

FOBIF representatives attended a 'fire challenge' session run by the Victorian National Parks Association in Melbourne on 3 November. The evening was devoted to considering key recommendations of the recent Royal Commission on management burning, the VNPA's main objection being to recommendation 56:

The State fund and commit to implementing a long-term program of prescribed burning based on an annual rolling target of 5 per cent minimum of public land.

Up to now DSE has aimed at burning about 146,000 ha. per year of public land; the recommendation would increase this to 385,000 ha.

There are several problems with recommendation 56. The main one, from a biodiversity point of view, is that it treats widely divergent bioregions in the same way. The Big Desert, for example, would be treated exactly like East Gippsland. Further, among other things, it discourages highly strategic planning by encouraging a focus on hectares burned, and it encourages more burning in remote areas where large areas can be burned with relative ease.

The recommendation is seemingly at odds with the advice of the Commission's scientific panel, which

had pointed out that a burn conducted strategically (that is, with careful consideration to exactly what was being achieved) is many times more effective in improving bushfire control than one carried out with an eye only to area covered. The scientists had recommended a trial program in foothill forests.

There is a further, equally disturbing feature of the 5% target. It is obvious that if this target is achieved, then 100% of the public land estate will be burned every twenty years – and if there are bushfires (as there always will be), then many areas will be burned much more often.

This is a purely mechanical approach to burning, which takes account neither of safety nor of ecological values. Scientists dealing with the effects of fire on the environment use the concept of 'tolerable fire frequencies': these naturally vary in different ecosystems, but the Commission's recommendations would allow little flexibility on the matter.

By comparison, the current Bendigo fire protection plan is based on zones, and each zone is burned (in theory) on the basis of a survey of 'overall fuel hazard', and in the case of flora and fauna management zones, 'in accordance with ecological values'. The frequency of burning can vary from seven to fifty years.

One zone excludes management burning altogether. A 2002 report by DSE's Fire Ecology Working Group recommended a fire cycle of 30 years in Box Ironbark country.

The VNPA is planning to revisit this aspect of the Commission's recommendations over the next twelve months, via a series of workshop and seminar programs.

Conservation organisations have strongly supported the Commission's other four recommendations on management burning, which would greatly strengthen research activity related to fire management.

The full VNPA response to the Royal Commission findings can be found at www.vnpa.org.au

Wewak Track Photos



New Stringybark



Many-flowered Mat-lily



Epicormic regrowth



Underwater

Revisiting Wewak Track

FOBIF members have revisited the Wewak Track in Spring, to look over the area treated by DSE to a very severe management burn in Autumn. (See the News Archive in www.fobif.org.au)

Although it is too early to tell the full effects of this operation, we are still of the view that, in the northern section of the block, it was carelessly conducted, and far too destructive. The result has been the destruction of many trees, including some quite large ones. An inevitable consequence of this is the massive regeneration of wattle, stringybark and box, seedlings of which are all over the area. We can expect the area to be thickly covered with substantial thickets of these in a few years – surely an increase in fuel hazard over what was there before the 'reduction' burn. On the other hand, after an excellent year for rain, there has been impressive regrowth of many ground plants (see our photos). A visit to this area is recommended. It is one of the most interesting in the Diggings Park.

It is too early to tell the effect of the fire on populations of endangered *Pultenea graveolens* and *Grevillea obtecta*. We will continue to monitor progress in the area.

Burning Concerns

FOBIF has received a reply from DSE Bendigo Fire Manager Simon Brown to our concerns over the Bendigo Fire Operations Plan. We wrote to DSE expressing our continued support for the Fire Operations Plan, but frustration at what we perceived as slackness in implementing the findings of ecological monitoring of fire operations. In particular we were concerned that ecological recommendations for the Limestone Track burn had not made their way into the DSE working document for fire managers.

Limestone Track is on the western side of the Porcupine Ridge Road, adjacent to the area burned this year along the Wewak and Loop Tracks. The proposed area covers the beautiful and quite remote Tarilta Gorge.

Both FOBIF and the Castlemaine Field Naturalists talked to DSE and Parks Victoria in 2008 about this area. We raised the fact that two rare plants – *Grevillea obtecta* and *Pultenea graveolens* – were in the area, and suggested that careful monitoring of the Wewak Track burn be used to guide DSE in its approach to the follow up Limestone Track operation. We thought it was important to find out how these species responded to fire.

As far as we know, monitoring was done before the Wewak burn. Yet no information about this appears on the instruction sheet for DSE fire managers for the

Limestone Track area. Simon Brown has explained that the document in question was not complete because it had 'missed rollover burns from the previous FOP'. We're not quite sure what this means, but are assured that the matter has been rectified.

On the subject of the proposed burn of a section of Kalimna Park near Lawson Parade, Simon Brown points out that 'from a strategic perspective this burn would complete a barrier to the spread of wildfire into the adjoining private property by linking' previous burns. This is clear from DSE maps on the subject, and we have no objection to the principle involved, though we continue to be frustrated by the fact that the area in question is close to one of Castlemaine/Chewton's biggest fire risks – i.e. the Moonlight Flat Pine Plantations. Protective strategies for this plantation are quite unclear, and we've been completely unsuccessful in getting any information about them from Hancock Plantations.

In the meantime, volunteers from the Friends of Kalimna Park are engaged in mapping sweet bursaria plants in the Lawson Parade area in conjunction with DSE flora and fauna staff. The bursaria is host plant for the Eltham Copper butterfly. This burn has been deferred beyond the 2010-2013 Fire Operations planning process. However, DSE will be conducting a weed clearing burn in an area adjacent to the Doveton Street extension some time this year.