

# Friends of the Box-Ironbark Forests

## November 2008 News

### Connecting Country Launch

This will take place at Buda in Castlemaine from 5pm to 7pm on Friday November 7. All members are invited. See the enclosed brochure.

### Proposed burning operations in the Diggings Park

DSE plans to do a management burn in the CDNHP in the area bounded by Porcupine Ridge Road, Loop Track and Wewak Track.

FOBIF organized a visit to this site in August with PV Ranger Noel Muller. We have submitted the following letter to DSE as a result of the visit:

'The proposed burn covers an area of unusual botanical interest.

'The area abutting Wewak Track, for some distance both north and south, is covered by probably the most extensive patch of Matted Bush Pea (*Pultenea pedunculata*) anywhere in Central Victoria. This area also contains other plants of interest. It is quite spectacular in Spring, and is a significant attractor of visitors to this section of the Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park, both by car and via the nearby Great Dividing Trail.

'Examining it recently, we found that it seemed to have a very low fuel load. In fact, in the categories of surface fine fuels, bark fuels and elevated fuels, this patch must be assessed as low or very low.

'The effect of a management burn on this particular environment is uncertain, especially given the extended drought. Already many of the trees in the proposed burn area look extremely stressed, and it should probably be assumed that the understorey is also vulnerable. Recovery of burned species, especially if the burn is followed by a warm dry Spring and a hot Summer, could be in doubt.

**'Given all this, we would strongly urge that the area in question [that is, adjacent to the Wewak Track and the north section of the Loop track], be largely excluded from the burn.** For scientific reasons it would be justifiable to burn an isolated patch of the pea, in order to monitor its recovery for future reference. Careful attention should also be paid to the situation of such rare species as Fryerstown Grevillea (*Grevillea obtecta*) and Scented Bush Pea (*Pultenea graveolens*).

'Given that the fire protection strategy for this type of burn allows for 65% only of the proposed area to be covered [*Bendigo Fire Protection Plan* page 35], we do not think this is an unreasonable request.

'We note that it is proposed to burn the adjacent Limestone Track area in 2009. In the light of the uncertainty surrounding the botanical effects of the Wewak Track burn in

the context of the drought, we would like DSE to consider postponing this proposed burn for at least two years, to allow proper monitoring and followup of the 2008 burn.'

At this stage it is uncertain when the proposed burn will take place.

As we go to press, we have received a letter from Les Vearing, Bendigo Fire Management Officer, stating that 'an area along Weewak (sic) track is to be excluded from burning...Monitoring and surveys of this site will continue to be part of the ongoing management of this area.' The Limestone Track area is scheduled for a management burn in 2010/2011.

The area under discussion is currently in flower (October 27). Members are urged to take a trip down to see it. A photo is on the Fobif website. We will continue to take a close interest in the matter.

### **FOBIF Website**

This is up and running, and though we expect a few glitches, we are hoping it will be in full use soon. The site contains a rundown on current activities, photos, and current newsletters. Have a look at [www.fobif.org.au](http://www.fobif.org.au), and let us know what you think. Any help in the maintenance of the site is most welcome.

### **Ecological Thinnings Trial Field Day**

Before white settlement box ironbark woodlands are believed to have carried between 2 and 30 trees per hectare: that is, they were less like what we think of as forests, and more park like environments, with large old trees whose crowns did not touch.

In the aftermath of the rampant clearing of the nineteenth century, what we are left with are regrowth forests, with relatively large numbers of smaller trees, growing close together. These forests are very slowly returning to a pre European structure. You can see this by observing the number of smaller trees which have died off: the forest is slowly thinning itself.

This is the background to Parks Victoria's *Ecological Management Strategy*, which aims to develop a 'best-practice management to support a sustainable network of Box-Ironbark forests and woodlands with an objective to more closely resemble pre-European forests.'

The Strategy has produced the Ecological Thinning trials, presently taking place in three locations in the Box Ironbark region, one of them in the Castlemaine Diggings NHP, in the area of Morgan's Track, Chewton.

The idea is to accelerate the natural process, by taking out up to 50% of the trees in the trial plots, and monitoring the effects on those remaining: the hope is that with less competition these will grow more quickly into sizes which will support more hollows, and sustain a richer, more open understorey.

Some of the felled trees were left on the forest floor as habitat, and some were removed and sold, the proceeds being given to Mount Alexander hospital nursing home.

As a side issue, this latter exercise seems to have been a valuable community bridge building exercise by Parks, and is to be applauded.

On Saturday October 11, FOBIF members and others attended a field day and briefing organised by Parks Victoria at Morgan's Track, to hear Ballarat University ecologist Patrick Piggott discuss the trials.

It is important to note that FOBIF has never opposed the trials, although we have been sceptical about their necessity, and inclined to think that the resources put into them could be better used—on dealing with the weeds problem, for example.

However, we have hoped that the program, properly done, might produce badly needed information on the nature of these precious woodlands, about which we are really seriously ignorant.

It is fair to say that reactions to the briefing were mixed.

The most serious problem with the trial is that it is clear that the location of the trial plots in our district was a mistake. The Morgan's Track plots are roughly on an east west ridge quite untypical of the bush in this region, which mainly is spread along the Fryers and Porcupine Ridges running north south. Therefore, any conclusions which might be drawn about the trial plots are not likely to be applicable to other parts of public land in the area.

More seriously, it is unlikely that the Morgan's Track area ever carried large trees, or ever could: in early European settlement times it was observed that the typical box ironbark open woodland existed on the flat country, most of which was cleared for farming. The ridges, where the soil was not as good, had more trees of lesser size. Thinning, therefore, is unlikely to achieve an ideal open forest structure.

The inappropriate location of the plots suggests hasty planning, and certainly a lack of research into environmental history: not a good thing in conducting scientific experiments like this. It is a mistake which in any case could have been avoided if there had been some community consultation before the project began: but it appears that the government was in a hurry to implement the recommendations of the Environment Assessment Council's report on the Box Ironbark forests.

The monitoring of the trial plots is relatively limited—fungi and white ants are not being monitored for example. These latter are vital in turning forest litter into soil, and lack of attention to them is a pity.

Nevertheless, some valuable information could come out of the continuing program. For example, 90 species of ants were found in the plot, and although the early surveys are as yet extremely unreliable [the first was taken at the end of summer, the second at the end of spring—two periods which are not comparable], it seems that we can tentatively speculate that some species do prefer the more open forest structure which has been created.

We will watch the future of this project with interest. We have heard that Parks Victoria is under some pressure to draw conclusions from the trial, to enable them to conduct similar actions elsewhere in the state. We believe that we are nowhere near being in a position to draw any conclusions at all, and that interventionist policies cannot be justified without the strongest possible knowledge base.

[A description of the thinning trials can be found on [www.parkweb.vic.gov.au](http://www.parkweb.vic.gov.au)]

### **Using Planning to bring people and the bush into a better relationship**

FOBIF accepted Mount Alexander Shire's invitation to be on two of its consultative committees working on land use planning.

#### ***Diamond Gully***

The proposal here is for a large housing development (many hundreds of houses) in a 182 hectare area centred on Diamond Gully Road in West Castlemaine. The development has gained some publicity because many people would like it to be a low-energy, sustainable development.

In this 182 hectare area there is about 120 hectare of bush including the Lushington Bushland Reserve. Because of the prospective impacts of this housing on the biodiversity of the bush, FOBIF and other environment groups have been monitoring the flora and fauna investigation associated with this proposal.

Because the flora and fauna study is under the control of the Council in this instance, environment groups have been able to have a meaningful input into the study. Previously flora and fauna studies for these developments are financed and controlled by the developer and the community has no avenue for input into how they are carried out. In the Diamond Gully exercise, the Council has insisted on commissioning the flora and fauna study even though the developer largely finances this study and the other strategic studies. This model could be used for future development proposals.

At Diamond Gully, local residents have known that the surrounding bush is home to the threatened Brush-tailed Phascogale (Tuan) and four active nests have been found by residents in the area. By persistently pointing this out, the studies now acknowledge this bush is of High Conservation Significance. The Developer Group is challenging this assessment but has conceded that High Conservation Significant bush shouldn't be developed.

The other issue that hasn't been worked out yet is how you design a housing estate in such a bushfire prone area. The whole area has been mapped by the CFA as being Bushfire Prone. Residents have to be safe in a new housing estate but also the biodiversity of the surrounding bush can't be wrecked in the process.

The Diamond Gully strategic studies are scheduled to be finished soon. The Council will then consult with the Diamond Gully community and other residents on what they want from the development.

### ***Urban Forest Interface Study***

This study is in its early stages. The Council has formed a reference group (advisory only) consisting of a Councillor, council staff, government agencies, two landowner reps, a rep from Castlemaine Action and a rep from FOBIF. A consultant firm (ARUP) has been appointed to do the study.

The reason for this study comes from an unsuccessful attempt by the Council in 2005 to propose the residential rezoning of hundreds of acres of bush and buffer areas next to the National Heritage Park around Castlemaine. A Planning Panel (the C24 Panel) in 2005 heard the arguments on this issue from the Council, Environment Groups and the DSE and decided that before this proposal went any further there had to be an Urban Forest Interface Study, Flora and Fauna Studies and a Structure Plan.

The C24 Panel identified the following areas for this Interface Study:

1. The Ross Drive area in South Castlemaine.
2. The Vanstan Road area in North Castlemaine.
3. The Richards Road area in North Castlemaine.
4. McKenzie Hill / Diamond Gully area
5. Stephen Street area in East Campbells Creek.
6. Happy Valley.

The brief of this study is to collect data on the impacts on the biodiversity of the bush caused by increased housing adjacent to it and how these impacts can be alleviated by planning controls.

Shortly the Council will be contacting residents who live in these areas and the community generally in order to begin community consultation.

If you would like more information on either of these projects, contact Frank Panter from FOBIF on 5470 5072.

### **Victoria's Nature Based Tourism Strategy 2008-12**

This document, just released by Tourism Victoria, has implications for national parks.

Much of it is unobjectionable, even praiseworthy, though some has been dated by recent events: the confident prediction of growth in overseas visitors to Victoria, for example, looks a little shaky as we go to press, though the document does cover itself by noting that 'international disruptions' can affect 'travel behaviour and industry viability.'

The crux of the strategy is in the fact that Victoria's National Parks are the most visited in Australia, with 28.6 million visitors in the 2004-5 financial year. [This figure makes a

mockery of the claim that Parks ‘lock up’ the country]. The problem, however, as Tourism Victoria sees it, is that the Parks fail to ‘capture yield.’ This strange phrase is another way of saying that people don’t spend enough money when they go to Parks.

This way of seeing things is understandable when you consider the point of view of the writers, but it is fraught with potential problems.

For example, one of the proposals put up by the document is for the provision of more accommodation inside Parks. Elsewhere we are told of a successful tourism initiative at Phillip Island: the provision of the ‘premium penguin viewing products’ consisting of people getting faked photos of themselves with penguins. And one of the priorities listed in developing ‘authentic, memorable experiences’ is ‘merchandising, food and beverages.’

Of course, ‘environmental impacts for all projects in parks will be assessed with rigour.’

There’s nothing wrong with beverages or accommodation, or even penguin products, if you like that sort of thing—though opening parks to commercial exploitation is an idea full of dangers.

And it is occasionally worth recalling the purposes of national parks, as listed in the National Parks Act passed by a Liberal government in 1975: to ‘preserve and protect the park in its natural condition for the use, enjoyment and education of the public.’

The Goldfields has a low priority in the document. The only two ‘nature based tourism’ activities listed are ‘gold panning and fossicking’, although the Great Dividing Trail gets a mention. The beauties of the box ironbark forests remain one of Victoria’s best kept secrets.

One point worth noting, however: the document notes that ‘sea change/tree change migration out of urban centres putting pressure on Victoria’s natural environment outside existing centres’ could be a threat to nature based tourism. That is, unwise planning decisions in areas close to bushland could have a damaging effect on regional economies.

### **Parks/DSE Move to Matheson St**

Members may have noticed that the local Parks/DSE office in Hargreaves St is about to close, and all operations moved to the location of the depot in Matheson St.

This was an internal decision made by the Ranger in Charge, and does not involve FOBIF, though we regret the removal of the Parks office from the centre of town.

### **It’s Subs Time Again!**

Membership subscriptions are due at the beginning of the new year. Your support is the whole strength of FOBIF: a renewal form can be downloaded from the website.