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Save Our Local Forests for Our Kids!

Comments on Draft Bunyip Recreation Framework

by Bob Thompson, President, Upper Bunyip Action Group (UBAG)

The UBAG is appreciative of the efforts of the Bunyip Community Advisory Group in attempting to establish management guidelines aimed at resolving current conflicts between users of the study area. It is a pity, however, that the UBAG was never invited to participate in the work of this group, given its well-known and well-documented interest in having the declared 'Bunyip River' Special Water Supply Catchment (SWSC) appended to the Bunyip State Park as a special reserve for environmental conservation and *non-motorised* passive recreation. (Declaration of this catchment is made under the Catchment & Land Protection Act 1994, and its veracity is easily verified by reference to Appendix R of the *Central Highlands Forest Management Plan* (1998). As such, this SWSC is subject to a 'Special Area Plan' that lays down a set of conditions for land-use in the catchment, and these are designed to protect the water quality of all of the streams that collectively drain into the Bunyip Weir.)

Many statements in the Draft convey an impression of ignorance or disregard (or both) by the Advisory Group of/for the long-standing campaign by the UBAG to achieve its goal, and some of these statements are addressed here (with reference to the Draft's relevant section and page denoted by e.g [s. 2.1-p. 11]).

The UBAG is very concerned about statements in the Draft that make clear the Advisory Group's intention that there should be a shifting of 4W driving and trail bike riding activities into the more northern parts of the Bunyip State Park and adjoining State forest areas such as the Bunyip State Forest, north of the Blue Range. This intention is made abundantly clear by statements such as:

- [s. 3.3-p.17] "Investigate the option of providing an additional camp site at Blue range for use by 4WD visitors." and "Investigate the option of providing camping and trail bike unloading facilities at Jim's Track in Kurth Kiln Regional Park."
- [s. 3.8-p. 25] "Were such a system of one way tracks to be introduced in the Bunyip area, its purpose would be to encourage trail bike riders to move out of the southern part of the Bunyip State Park where the greatest conflict is taking place *and into the northern part of the Park and State forest.*"
- [s. 3.8-p. 25] "The advantage of Option Two over Option One is seen to be the fact that bikes can unload *and immediately access the north of the Park and State forest via Lyrebird Track.*"
- [s. 3.8-p. 26] "*Tracks leading to the north of the Park and State forest need to be identified and developed as a matter of urgency* to enable this route system to work and to limit disturbance to residents and other users."

Any decisions/actions that will encourage a shift of 4WD and trail bike activity into the Bunyip River SWSC, such as the creation of a trail bike unloading and camping facility at Jim's Track (not far from Basan Corner), or the creation of any additional tracks in the Catchment itself, will cause a detrimental impact upon the fabric, integrity and value of this highly sensitive *town-water supply* catchment. Such decisions/actions should not be entertained, because serious ramifications will almost certainly result. Some of the reasons for this assertion are presented in the following numbered sections of this submission.

1. On Recreation and Tourism [s 2.1] - the UBAG's position is clearly stated at its web site, at <http://www.nex.net.au/users/ubag/> . In particular, the value of the aforementioned SWSC (or, in DSE's eyes, the '350 Upper Bunyip' Forestry Block) for recreation and tourism is spelled out in section 3.3 of our 2004 Coupe Objections Document, which may be downloaded at <http://www.nex.net.au/users/ubag/docs/CoupeObjections.pdf> .

This catchment's enclosed valley, lying to the north of Blue Range, offers immense potential for foot-based passive recreation and the kinds of "nature appreciation" that are mentioned in s. 3.17- p. 35 of the Draft. The Draft recognises that "ESD requires that the natural and cultural values of public land must be conserved to ensure that the benefits of outdoor recreation and nature-based tourism areas remain available in the long term." [s. 2.1-p.11]. This makes absolute sense, and the UBAG supports this statement. Motorised recreation in the Upper Bunyip Catchment poses an obvious threat to the natural and cultural values of this area, and would clearly be at odds with the kinds of limited passive recreation that would be compatible with the preservation of these values.

2. On Biodiversity [s. 2.2] - the Draft contains a range of indisputable truths about the need and appropriateness of biodiversity conservation, including observance of the 'precautionary principle' [p. 12] in non-CAR parts of the forest estate. There is a wealth of information available at the UBAG's website about the botanical and zoological significance of the Bunyip River Catchment. In particular, there are extracts there from two seminal reports, written in 1984 by scientists of the Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands, that make absolutely clear the importance of protecting this area from impacts that will damage its biodiversity. According to Andrew et al. (1984), the Bunyip River Catchment is a Site of National Zoological Significance, and the reasons for this are summarised in a UBAG document at <http://www.nex.net.au/users/ubag/docs/NationalZoolSignificance.pdf> .

3. On Indigenous Community Involvement [s.2.4] - the Draft refers to an Indigenous Partnership Strategy and associated Action Plan developed by Parks Victoria that "will enhance the protection of cultural sites as required under legislation *by removing inappropriate recreational activities.*" [s. 2.4-p. 12] In contrast, the corresponding statement regarding DSE's attention to the protection of indigenous values appears very pale indeed. A close parallel can be found when examining DSE's attention to the protection of indigenous values that *may* be threatened by forestry activities on public land. With respect to the Bunyip River Catchment, this area of concern is well known to DSE, and the UBAG expects that there will be full and complete dialogue with the Wurundjeri Council about the issue of what is and *what is not* "appropriate recreation" in this catchment, *as seen from the aboriginal perspective.*

4. On Bushwalking [s. 3.2] - there are some highly significant statements in the Draft that warrant close examination because, while true, they do not present the whole truth! For example [p. 14] the Draft says: "In the State forests adjoining the study area there is approximately 50 km of purpose built walking tracks including old timber tramway lines. The walking tracks proposed below are intended to link Bunyip State Park, through the forest, into this broader set of walking tracks." ✓ True! But what the Draft fails to say is that to reach this network of 'Walk Into History' walks in the Ada/La Trobe River area requires a Pakenham family to drive for at least an hour on none too friendly roads to get to a starting point such as Starling Gap.

Let's dig at the real truth about this. The south eastern growth corridor lies in Cardinia Shire. At its meeting of 19 August 2002, the Cardinia Council passed a resolution that there should be no further logging in the 350 Upper Bunyip forestry block (i.e. the Bunyip River SWSC). A relevant extract from council's minutes can be read at <http://www.nex.net.au/users.ubag/pages/CardiniaMinutes-19Aug2002.html>

In arriving at its decision, council, in discussion, considered the following reference to the need for passive recreational outlets in its immediate area: "**Cardinia's Open Space Recreation Strategy shows that there is a strong need for passive recreation spaces in the municipality.** Even though Cardinia technically has the area for passive open space, the areas have not been developed i.e. do not have walking paths, shade trees etc. As well, *the areas that Cardinia has set aside are very different than the Bunyip State Forest and State Park. They are not the large, wild, natural area of the Upper Bunyip.* It is expected that the need will also increase as the urban growth corridor and surrounding areas develop."

This is a clear statement from the Cardinia Shire which expresses the need for large, wild, natural areas, as found in the Upper Bunyip forest, *to satisfy the shire's growing need for accessible places in the shire for this kind of passive recreation.* As indicated to council, the Bunyip State Park cannot satisfy the needs of those people who wish to visit wild, natural places that are forested with stands of tall trees and the associated biodiversity that characterises wet sclerophyll forest and cool temperate rainforest. This is exactly what the Bunyip River SWSC offers for passive recreation, and it is available within a comfortable 35 minute drive from Pakenham on well-maintained 2WD roads!

The Draft says [p. 14] "Demand for short walks in the Bunyip public lands can be expected to increase as the surrounding population increases and the overall population ages." and "Bushwalkers prefer trails (! - was this drafted by an American?) away from vehicle tracks and would like some circuit walking opportunities to be created." ✓ True!

But what it fails to make clear is that, under its proposals, these short walks will be provided in the southern parts of the Bunyip State Park, using the increased network of tracks that will become available IF motorised recreation is excluded in that zone. There is no provision planned for short circuit walks "on the wild side" in tall-treed areas.

What it also fails to mention is that this kind of circuit walking is already available in the Bunyip River SWSC via the well-documented 'Fishers Loop Walking Track' in the western end of this catchment. And it fails to mention that this delightful walking circuit has been endorsed by the Cardinia Shire, which would like to see this circuit become an 'official' walking track in this area. This was made clear by the (then) mayor of Cardinia Shire, Keith Ewenson, when he opened the Fishers Loop on 27 October 2002 at a ceremony at Tomahawk Gap, attended by around 180 people!

In opening this walk, Keith said:

"Cardinia Council would like to think this was a Walking Track to appreciate this magnificent area. In reality it is an unmaintained and semi-overgrown vehicle route which NRE have not endorsed for walking purposes. Let's not kid ourselves - me cutting a ribbon and declaring the track open does not make it a legal walking track. I'm not authorised to do something that is not legal, but what it does show is Cardinia's preference for it to be a declared walking track. It highlights the opportunities today. It gives you greater time to negotiate a permanent change."

(A full transcript of his speech can be seen at

<http://www.nex.net.au/users/ubag/pages/mayorspeech.html>)

And isn't what the mayor said directly related to what this Bunyip Recreation Strategy process is all about? Isn't it about negotiating with the community its requirements for changes to the status quo regarding recreational opportunities throughout the expanded regional study area? And if so, why should suggested changes be confined to narrow opportunities within the Bunyip State Park itself?

If this Strategy process fails to consider opportunities for the whole gamut of recreational pursuits throughout the whole of the study area, then, in my opinion, it will have failed its basic purpose.

With respect to the Fishers Loop (at least), other agents are at work to lift the profile of this existing walking circuit. I am pleased to notify that the 'Fishers Loop Walking Track' will be included in a revised version of a popular book that details day-walks in the vicinity of Melbourne. The author has advised me that he walked the circuit recently, and that he was delighted by the progressive revelation of the Bunyip River valley to the walker's eye during the 250 metre descent to the river via the Bunyip Valley Road. He went so far as to say that, in his opinion, *this Fishers Loop walk represents the best forest walk of its type among those that will be detailed in his new edition.*

To gain maximum value from this walk, it is essential that DSE maintain the closure of the Bunyip Valley Road to vehicles at Tomahawk Gap, which, incidentally, was instituted in 2003 by DSE following a direct appeal to Minister Thwaites by the UBAG. The closure was effected only weeks after the road was opened up by a bulldozer for fire-fighting purposes on 19 March 2003. (The installed gate has been vandalised twice - but this should not deter DSE from going even further to maintain this closure.)

Among the Management Guidelines for Bushwalking, the Draft [p. 15] says - “Develop a range of short, medium and long walk options *across the Bunyip public land area* for completion as funds become available either through grants or community fund raising and - as much as possible seek to connect current routes rather than create new walking tracks.”

This is exactly what the UBAG has been proposing since its inception in January 2002. The Fishers Loop already exists, and we applaud the proposal for the long-distance connecting route from the Bunyip State Park, via the Bunyip Weir and Seven Acre Rock to Powelltown, to connect into the Walk Into History network and the Upper Yarra Track. **But there is an important omission that should be included in the “immediate” list**, and this is a connecting *walkers-only* track along the Bunyip River valley itself, from the foot of the Fishers Loop to the Bunyip Weir - a distance of approximately six kilometres. This proposal was under serious consideration by DSE (Powelltown) in August-September 2002, and a group of people, including Megan Clinton (Wilderness Society), Paul Pearson (Forest Manager - DSE), Wally Notman (Acting Senior Forester - DSE), Dave Rimmer (VicWalk) and I met on site in September and walked down to the Bunyip River to begin a survey for a possible route for this track. At that time, a vision was present in DSE that this connecting route could establish a walkers-only link between extremities of the Bunyip State Park and the Kurth Kiln Park, via the Bunyip Weir and Aqueduct Road. Indeed, a personal email communication from Paul Pearson to me (of 14 August 2002) makes clear his excitement about this possibility. Unfortunately, no further action was taken by DSE to advance this.

At long last, with proposals now under way to create the link from the BSP via the old Freemans Mill exit tramway to the weir, and the new track to Seven Acre Rock, there is at last a real opportunity to link in also to the Kurth Kiln Park via this proposed Bunyip River route and the Fishers Loop. I suggest that this could become a logical alternative walking route for connecting Gembrook to Powelltown, via Ship Rock Falls, Kurth Kiln, and Gilwell Park. With a little imagination and cooperation, everything is possible!

5. On the vexed issue of Trail Bike Use [s. 3.8], the question of the closure of tracks to motorised recreation, and the three options proposed for dealing with the trail bike problem, the UBAG wishes to make the following points about possible consequences:

As indicated above, any management action that has the effect of encouraging riders to use the northern parts of the Park and the State forest will be opposed by the UBAG unless determined actions are taken to exclude motorised recreation from the Bunyip River SWSC.

This catchment is far too sensitive an area to allow the certain environmental damage that would result from high intensity motorised recreation within its boundaries. As far back as 1984, Andrew et al. wrote: “Monitoring and some control over the numbers of trail bikes may be required to limit damage caused by extensive use of tracks and disturbance from excessive noise. ***Trail bikes should be excluded from some areas, such as the Upper Bunyip River, to allow for more passive forms of recreation such as bushwalking and studying the natural environment (refer 7.2 (N1), p. 163).***” And please remember - this was written by CFL’s own scientists more than 20 years ago!!!

If motorised recreation were permitted in the Bunyip River SWSC, there would be an unacceptably high level of sedimentation into the Bunyip River from this activity. As noted above, this has been accepted by the Minister and DSE and there have already been two attempts by DSE to close off the Bunyip Valley Road at Tomahawk Gap, by means of a solidly anchored gate. Vandals have ripped this out on each occasion., and the river is again exposed to sedimentation run-off *from illegal entry* by vehicles.

Sedimentation into the river poses a serious threat to biodiversity values, and not only in the immediate area. The Bunyip River drains into Western Port, an international Ramsar area, and there is in place a scientifically established connection between ‘uncultivated upland’ Bunyip Catchment sedimentation and turbidity in Western Port. (Wallbrink, P. et al) This turbidity, in turn, threatens endangered seagrass communities in the East Arm of Western Port.

Any action that threatens a Ramsar area renders it subject to scrutiny under the Federal EPBC Act 1999, and, if an 'action' is deemed proven by the Federal Minister for Environment & Heritage, renders the perpetrator liable to substantial fines and possible imprisonment. It would be a sad indictment of the Victorian Minister and DSE Victoria if, *by allowing actions that contribute to heightened sedimentation in the Bunyip River SWSC*, they could be shown to be the perpetrators of an action that causes damage to this Western Port Ramsar area.

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on behalf of the Upper Bunyip Action Group Inc. (UBAG)
13 June, 2005

References

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