



Upper Bunyip Action Group Inc.

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Save Our Local Forests for Our Kids!

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Combined Aboriginal Community and Local Group Action Stops Logging in Upper Bunyip River Catchment.

With strong support from the Bunurong and Wurrundjeri aboriginal communities, the Upper Bunyip Action Group Inc. (UBAG) has been instrumental in stopping logging in a coupe on the Chancellor Spur in the Upper Bunyip River catchment before total destruction of the contained forest has occurred. This “success” may well set an important and timely precedent for other environmental groups to build upon, and represents a milestone in the protection of Victoria’s forest areas that are deemed to be of high conservation value.

A chronology of events from last November, and mainly during the last ten days, paints a picture of total disregard by the Forests Services Division of the Department of Sustainability and Environment of the need to adhere to previous guarantees given to environmental groups such as the UBAG. While lengthy, the following account exposes this deficiency by DSE, and it points the way for new directions in dealing with the problem of logging in forests of high conservation value (HCV).

Via a return phone call from the previous Acting Senior Forester in the Powelltown office of the Dept of Sustainability and Environment, the UBAG learnt on Thursday 6th March that the department had reneged on performing an expected survey of the ‘Southern Bunyip’ logging coupe for Aboriginal and other cultural/historical values before commencing its harvesting of this coupe on the Chancellor Spur, approximately 14 kilometres from Gembrook. This turnaround prompted the UBAG’s president (Bob Thompson) to act immediately to contain the damage being inflicted in this coupe.

In late November 2002, following written advice from a respected archaeological and heritage consultant that logging of this coupe “would likely destroy Aboriginal and historic sites”, the UBAG was informed by phone by NRE’s Acting Senior Forester that harvesting would be delayed in the coupe because of the need to put in place a cultural/historical survey to establish whether any Aboriginal and other values would be threatened by planned forestry operations. Written advice was also received from Kulin Nation on 12 December that “funding has been allowed for this particular project to have a cultural heritage assessment”.

When the UBAG enquired by phone on Wednesday 5th March to learn of progress with this expected survey, it was informed (via the return phone call late on Thursday) that harvesting had already commenced in the coupe and that it had not been possible to organise the survey; staffing impacts of the recent bushfires were cited as the main reason.

Through a series of telephone calls on Friday (7th) to The Wilderness Society, Kulin Nation, the Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation, and Tammy Lobato (MLA for Gembrook), Bob Thompson set in train responses that he hoped would stop the logging in the coupe and revive moves to put the expected survey into place. Acting upon advice from The Wilderness Society, Mr Thompson sent an email to the current Senior Forester (Nigel Brennan), requesting an immediate moratorium on any further logging until the expected survey and assessment of the coupe had been performed. This was refused flatly by Mr Brennan in a phone call late on Friday, and, as a first step, it was deemed necessary to gather as much first-hand evidence of the destruction as possible.

In the company of a superb environmental photographer (Mr Ewen Bell), Mr Thompson visited the coupe on Saturday morning and collected images of the destruction. No logging was being done because of the long weekend, but the extent of destruction was appalling; at that stage about 20% of the 25ha coupe had already been felled, beginning with the oldest and biggest trees - in keeping with the usual practice of DSE.

It would appear that a range of negotiations got into full steam on Tuesday 11th, between representatives of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, Kulin Nation, the Bunurong and Wurrundjeri communities - and DSE. At the same time, the UBAG was assuaged by Mr Mike Green (of AAV) that the matter was in hand and that moves were afoot to institute the overdue survey. But in the meantime, the felling was continuing in the coupe at an alarming (and perhaps accelerating?) rate, and the UBAG issued a further email "ultimatum" to Mr Brennan to remove his contractors from the coupe by 4 pm on Wednesday, or the UBAG would unleash a highly damaging media campaign that would draw attention to DSE's renege on the expected cultural/historical survey.

The extent of the felling was further evidenced when Bob Thompson visited the coupe on Wednesday morning with the Mayor of Cardinia Shire (Keith Ewenson). Confronted by loggers, they were refused permission to enter the coupe while truck-loading operations were in progress. A decision was taken to ignore these directions and walk on anyway. It was plain to the visitors that felling and loading were in full swing. But what these loggers (and the UBAG) were totally unaware of was the backlash unleashed on Wednesday (12th) by Mr Stephen Compton, Spokesperson and Senior Cultural Officer for the Bunurong Land Council. As those who attended the "opening" of the Fishers Loop Walking Track on 27 October will attest, Stephen is a passionate defender of the need to rid the headwaters catchment of the Bunyip River from any further logging!

Nigel Brennan telephoned Bob Thompson on Wednesday evening to inform him that all felling had stopped at 4 pm. And late on Wednesday night, the UBAG learnt directly from Mr Compton that he had weighed in with the full weight of the 1984 Commonwealth Aboriginal Heritage Protection Act, informing DSE that he would call in a "Commonwealth Inspector" to stop the logging if DSE refused to halt ALL forestry operations in the 350 Upper Bunyip forestry block by close of work on that day. Clearly there was a need for further monitoring of activity in the coupe, and Mr Thompson agreed to visit the coupe early on Thursday morning... and while descending the Chancellor Spur track, at 7.30 in the morning, he was passed by a fully-loaded log truck hauling out timber. While parked and getting out immediate mobile-phone messages to Bunurong contacts, he was passed by another unloaded log-truck going down the track towards the coupe!

At the coupe, he was greeted by a worker called Joe (the "logging team leader") who confirmed that all *cutting* had ceased at 4 pm the previous day. But it was plain that machinery was in full swing loading a pile of 'residual logs' to be sent off, it was learned, to Australian Paper for pulping. Joe estimated that around 30% of the coupe had been logged before the instruction to cease felling had been implemented.

In an attempt to clarify this situation, Mr Thompson phoned Stephen Compton again on Thursday evening. He was told that the deal was that ALL use of machinery was to finish on Wednesday, and Mr Compton asserted that he would call in a Commonwealth Inspector today (Friday 14th) to step in and impose an immediate 30-day ban on any further forestry activity while steps are taken to institute a full cultural/historical survey of the whole of the 350 Upper Bunyip forestry block.

The logging has stopped in the Southern Bunyip coupe - for the time being. Clearly, there will be far-reaching repercussions from this attempt by DSE to ignore completely certain understandings imparted to the UBAG, and to ignore completely the advice provided by the UBAG that an Aboriginal cultural/historical survey was pending in a coupe that the department intended to impact by forestry operations.

From the UBAG's perspective, this signals in a new opportunity for environmental groups and those opposed to logging of our high-conservation-value forests to work closely with local Aboriginal communities *in partnerships* that have immense potential to result in win-win situations - not only for our cherished forests - but for greatly enhanced understanding between sometimes-divergent cultural communities.

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For background information on the Upper Bunyip issue: www.nex.net.au/users/ubag/