



# Upper Bunyip Action Group Inc.

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*Save Our Local Forests for Our Kids!*

## Media Release - 5 February 2004

### Covert Logging in the Bunyip starts again

**The Department of Sustainability and Environment has resumed logging in the ‘Southern Bunyip’ coupe where logging was suspended in March last year following strong combined action by the Upper Bunyip Action Group (UBAG) and local aboriginal communities. The resumption is completely unjustified, when balanced against the facts surrounding DSE’s failure to conduct a complete and proper indigenous cultural heritage survey. The new Bracks Government has again given only lip service to engaging in vigorous community consultation!**

In particular, this ‘new’ Bracks Government department failed to consult properly with the relevant Wurundjeri indigenous community, in stark contrast with the PR clap-trap that it promulgates about “community forest management”. What did DSE decide to do instead?

Bob Thompson, President of the Upper Bunyip Action Group said, “The Upper Bunyip Action Group (UBAG) learnt that, in a knee-jerk reaction, DSE hastily engaged an archaeologist (Ms Andrea Murphy) to survey the coupe for evidence of physical indigenous values. This preliminary survey was undertaken only five days after logging ceased, and Ms Murphy delivered her report to DSE on 19 March.”

“Given the amount of time necessary to perform adequate background research into the likelihood of aboriginal occupation and use of this area, and to engage in adequate community consultation with stakeholders, this timeframe for commissioning and receiving the results of an important consultative service is laughable - if the consequences were not so serious. This hasty action provides further evidence that DSE’s Forestry Victoria division has still not got the message about full community consultation. This department has continued to behave in its usual highly secretive and defensive manner. Instead of asking all stakeholders including indigenous communities (and the UBAG) for their comments on how best to proceed, it went straight into its ‘bunker mode’ and came up with a rushed and incorrect decision on what to do next. It apparently didn’t consult beyond DSE itself and Aboriginal Affairs Victoria (AAV). And it certainly didn’t consult at all with the UBAG. The silence was deafening.”

While Ms Murphy’s brief report was sent to the relevant indigenous community for scrutiny and comment, recent correspondence from Minister Thwaites makes it plain that the department has not yet received community feedback. **Yet logging has been allowed to start afresh**, reinforcing the growing community belief that DSE’s “Community Forest Management” initiatives are a complete and utter furbphy.

Senior Forester Nigel Brennan has written to the UBAG that “all timber harvesting activities undertaken in the Dandenong FMA comply with the Central Highlands Forest Management Plan and requirements to protect aboriginal cultural heritage. Timber harvesting operations in 350/512/05 (sic.) will continue until the coupe is completed.” [The Southern Bunyip is in fact 350/512/04! Accuracy does not appear to be Mr Brennan’s strongest point. **More importantly, this is a blatant “no responsibility” cop-out by DSE, and the UBAG believes that this set of circumstances, collectively, paints a highly damning image of DSE’s Forestry Victoria, and it smells of sheer bloody-mindedness on the part of certain members of the Powelltown team that supervises the Dandenong FMA.**

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**For background information on the Upper Bunyip issue: [www.nex.net.au/users/ubag/](http://www.nex.net.au/users/ubag/)**

## Accompanying Briefing

### Here is a summary of the history and where we stand at present:

1. In response to opposition organised by the UBAG, logging in the Southern Bunyip coupe (350/512/04) was suspended in March '03 on the grounds that its continuation had potential to impact Aboriginal cultural heritage values, if they exist in the coupe.
2. A consultant (Andrea Murphy) was called in to conduct a hasty and very limited survey of the coupe.
3. This consultant's report was not released for public scrutiny. It was recently obtained by the UBAG under FOI, and it makes clear that it provides no comment on the cultural-heritage significance of the coupe. **[But isn't that what was needed to resolve this situation?** At the very least, it seems reasonable to assume that this is why the report was sent to the "relevant indigenous communities", as stated in correspondence from Minister Thwaites.]
4. The report draws upon the consultant's Bunyip State Park model to draw inferences about the likelihood of there being physical Aboriginal cultural-heritage relics in this logging coupe. The BSP model specifies pre-disposing landforms for this likelihood (saddles etc), **and these landforms are present in the coupe.**
5. The report states that no relics were found on the sloping land where the surface had been made visible by the previous logging - predictably, in keeping with the BSP model.
6. **The report was sent to "relevant indigenous communities" for their comment, and every indication (including from the Minister) is that this comment has not yet been received.**
7. The report concluded that on ARCHAEOLOGICAL grounds only, there was no reason why logging should not continue.
8. **The report states clearly that a separate statement re the CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE of the coupe should be sought separately by DSE from the relevant indigenous communities! It is the UBAG's belief that this action has not been taken by DSE, and it has no intention of doing so.** [In itself, this failure by DSE reflects very badly upon DSE's 'Indigenous Partnership Facilitators'.]

**Despite all of this, logging has been resumed in the coupe!**

**The UBAG calls upon Minister Thwaites to consult with his Aboriginal Affairs counterpart, and step in and suspend this logging immediately until this mess is sorted and all reports completed. Clearly, "stakeholders" in this matter includes the "community" that DSE is supposedly engaging with in consultation these days - as an essential ingredient in the "Our Forests - Our Future" program!**

### Further Detail About The Circumstances Leading To The Present Situation

The UBAG was never informed by DSE about the existence of Ms Murphy's report, and only learnt of this at around the middle of the year. Attempts by both the UBAG and The Central Highlands Alliance to obtain a copy of the report from DSE were refused. The TCHA was refused the report by Mr Nigel Brennan (DSE's Senior Forester at Powelltown) on the grounds that "TCHA is not an indigenous body."

Enquiries to the Minister for Environment (John Thwaites), via Ms Tammy Lobato MLA (Member for Gembrook) led to the following response on 30 October 2003:

"I wish to advise that there are no comprehensive cultural surveys currently being undertaken across the Bunyip catchment. However, **there was a cultural survey carried out on an individual logging coupe in the Bunyip catchment earlier this year** and local indigenous communities are currently considering the results of this survey and are expected to release the findings in due course."

In response, the UBAG put it to the Minister that it would "break all bounds of logic" to allow logging to resume in the Southern Bunyip coupe until the findings of these communities were at hand. Recent advice from the Minister about this was reported back to the UBAG on 12 January 2004, via Ms Lobato's comments below:

"At your request I have made further representations on your behalf to the Minister for Environment and Water seeking advice as to the approximate date when the findings of the recent cultural survey may be released... I am advised that the decision to release information relating to cultural surveys is at the discretion of the relevant indigenous community and Aboriginal Affairs Victoria."

So there we have it. A report can be sent to an indigenous community with important information that can influence whether an area of possible indigenous significance should be logged - and this response from the Minister demonstrates clearly that no serious attempt will be made by DSE to press for outcomes from this action. The UBAG regards this as anomalous, and bordering upon a dereliction of its duty.

But what was in Andrea Murphy's report that made it so necessary for DSE to want to hide it? And perhaps, hide it without just cause? The UBAG decided to find out and launched an application for the release of her report under Freedom of Information (FOI). And... surprisingly - DSE's FOI Officer had no problem with its release! **This in itself is damning of DSE**, and it may be damning of Mr Nigel Brennan, their Senior Forester for the Dandenong FMA. If, as he contended, this report could only be released to indigenous bodies, then wouldn't DSE's FOI Officer be aware of this? Or was Mr Brennan simply being obstructionist?

The facts about this contentious coupe are presented above, as the UBAG interprets them before and from our own reading of Ms Murphy's report to DSE.

Now released under FOI, the UBAG will be happy to fax a copy of this report to all interested persons. We would be particularly interested to receive comment on its contents from the Wurundjeri Council.