

The Upper Bunyip is a Site of National Zoological Significance

This document includes extracts from Andrew et al. (1984) *Sites of Zoological Significance in the Westernport Region*, Dept of Conservation, Forests and Lands (Victoria) - (cited as Andrew (1984) - that support the UBAG's assertion that the '350 Upper Bunyip' forestry block is and remains a Site of National Zoological Significance.

Andrew (1984, pp. 86-88) assesses the “zoological significance” of a site against the following set of criteria:

(i) Rare Species

“The presence of rare species in an area significantly increases its conservation value” (Andrew 1984, p. 86) These species can be divided into two categories.

(a) Species of restricted distribution in the study area and the state - and never common anywhere in its range.

(b) Species of restricted distribution in the study area e.g. a species which is uncommon due to habitat destruction; a species which is virtually endemic to or reaches its greatest development in the area; or a species which is at the (geographic) edge of its environmental range

(ii) Areas used for breeding, feeding or roosting

“Areas used by large concentrations of animals for a purpose essential to the survival of a species are especially important.” (Ibid., p. 86) These might include specific breeding, feeding or roosting sites, and failure to conserve any one of these essential areas could lead to a decline (or perhaps total loss) of the species in the region.

(iii) Species Richness (Diversity)

“An area which supports a wide variety of species is generally of greater ecological importance than one which supports fewer species.” (Ibid., p. 87) High species diversity often indicates that many habitat types are present and in sufficiently large areas to support viable populations - or, in the case of a single habitat type, that the area has remained largely undisturbed.

(iv) Size

“The area required for the conservation of a community is dependent on the species present in the community. Species vary widely in the the area they need to support a viable (Successfully reproducing) population and thus no standard minimum area is applicable to all cases.” (Ibid., p. 87) In general, larger areas have higher conservation value because they often support more species and many more individuals - and this provides a valuable hedge against disastrous losses when a major disturbance (e.g. wildfire) occurs. The shape of the area is also important; areas tending towards the circular offer higher protection to species than narrow strips.

(v) Condition

“Areas which have been little disturbed since European settlement and are thought to still support the original faunal composition are extremely important.” (Ibid., p. 88) Such areas provide a benchmark for assessing degradation of habitat in other more disturbed areas, and they provide baseline data for rehabilitating these other areas.

(vi) Sensitivity

“Some communities display a lower tolerance to disturbance than others e.g. heathland regenerates after fire but rainforest may never regenerate.” (Ibid., p. 88) Such highly sensitive communities require special measures to ensure their conservation.

(vii) Potential

“Areas that have been degraded can provide valuable habitat if allowed to regenerate, or if they are artificially rehabilitated.” (Ibid., p. 88) This can apply to areas where little of the original native vegetation remains e.g. in areas affected by indiscriminate logging operations.

According to Andrew (1984), a site is of *National Significance* if

- a species which is rare or restricted or both on the Australian mainland, or throughout its range, occurs regularly in the area of the site; or
- it is a primary foraging or roosting area for international migrants; or
- it is a major breeding area of a species within Australia.

Based upon these criteria, Andrew (1984) designates the Upper Bunyip River as a Site of *National Zoological Significance*. (Sect. N1, pp. 160-163.) The site as delineated by Andrew includes the catchment of the upper reaches of the Bunyip River north of its confluence with the Black Snake Creek and the catchment of the Black Snake Creek (previously known as Back Creek). The reasons for this designation (in 1984) included the following:

- The area included the only locality in the Westernport catchment where Leadbeater's possum had been recorded in recent times, on the southern slopes of Mt Beenak (at a location within the present 350 Block).
- The Swamp antechinus (*Antechinus minimus*) was discovered in the valley of the Black Snake Creek, providing only the third inland record of this species in Victoria. The same valley was the only area in which the Broad-toothed rat (*Mastocomus fuscus*) was recorded in the catchment. A total of 28 species of mammals was recorded in the site.
- The Sooty Owl was (still is?) locally common in some areas and "probably breeds in the area". Over 90 species of birds had been observed in the area.
- Thirteen species of reptiles and seven species of amphibians were known from the area at the time of the Andrew 1984 report.

The management recommendations of Andrew 1984 for this site included that:

"All of the catchment of the Upper Bunyip River should be included in the (proposed) Bunyip State Park. *Logging should be excluded from this area.* (..)

In some areas e.g. the Upper Bunyip River, trail bikes should be excluded to allow for more passive forms of recreation, i.e. bushwalking, birdwatching."

More Recent Evidence

Since 1984, there have been a number of observations of Leadbeater's Possum in the area of the 350 Block, and these are recorded in the Atlas of Victorian Wildlife. And a recent study of large forest owls in the area has found that "Bunyip and Kurth Kiln owl habitat is shown to contain far more large owls than expected for the region in general. Indeed, these parks may contain some of the highest quality forest owl habitat in Victoria."¹ With both the Bunyip State Park and the Kurth Kiln Park abutting the 350 block, it can be assumed that this forestry block is likely to provide further valuable habitat for threatened forest owl species in the area (as suggested by Andrew et al. in 1984). Urgent research is required to establish the true zoological significance of the 350 Block today (2003).

[UBAG's Comments

Does the community need any plainer statement of the natural significance of this area, to justify an immediate cessation of logging in the 350 Upper Bunyip forestry block? Clearly the headwaters catchment area of the Upper Bunyip River was (in 1984) a site of National Zoological Significance. The recent evidence cited above makes it clear that this area is and should remain designated as such today!

It should be borne in mind by the reader that *the Andrews 1984 report was compiled by scientists of the Dept of Conservation, Forests and Lands*, the forerunner of the current Dept of Sustainability & Environment!

A large proportion of the upper reaches of the Bunyip River was recommended by the Land Conservation Council in 1977 to be part of a hardwood production zone, and the UBAG can point to the awful consequences of this decision. There are no prizes for guessing why this LCC decision fell this way!]

¹ McNabb, E. & McNabb, J. (2002) *Bunyip State Park and Kurth Kiln Regional Park Distribution and Habitat of Large Forest Owls*, Arthur Rylah Institute for Environmental Research (for Parks Victoria)