

14 February 2012

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Dear Sir/Madam,

**BUSHWALKING VICTORIA (BWV) SUBMISSION IN RESPONSE TO THE OFFICIAL NOTICE  
OF THE VEAC YELLINGBO INVESTIGATION**

Thank you for your 6 December 2011 call for submissions on the subject investigation.

Bushwalking Victoria represents the common interests of over 70 Victorian bushwalking clubs, with in excess of 8,000 members. BWV also aims to proactively represent the interests of all recreational walkers in Victoria as well as walkers visiting from interstate and overseas. One of the common interests of BWV clubs and their members is the conservation of the ecosystems and natural landscapes through which they walk, so that they can enjoy the maximum variety of native flora and fauna and unspoilt scenery and ensure their preservation for future generations. Founded in 1934, BWV has a long history of active interest in conservation, including being one of a group of like-minded organizations pressing for legislation to create a comprehensive system of national parks in Victoria as early as the 1940s.

BWV appreciates your having provided a list of possible discussion points in the investigation documentation, and has followed your suggested items seriatim in the dissertation which follows.

**A rich biodiversity**

*What do you think are the major threats to the area's biodiversity and why? What are the highest priority actions to address these threats?*

BWV sees the major threats to the area's biodiversity as

- Predation
- The perilously small populations of the endangered species that inhabit the study area
- Habitat threats from pathogens like Eucalypt Dieback and the encroachment of pest plants
- Desiccation arising from global warming.

**Bushwalking: At a natural pace in a natural place**

## **Predation**

While native predators like hawks, goannas and snakes have deleterious effects on endangered species' numbers, there is little that can be done (or perhaps *should* be done) about them. However, domestic and non-native feral animals are quite another matter, and every effort should be made to eradicate their depredations from the habitats of endangered species in the investigation area. The survival of the critically-endangered Helmeted Honeyeater may very well depend on expensive but necessary fencing off of selected areas to keep out foxes, dogs and cats. Such action should be complemented by more traditional methods like baiting, shooting and trapping. If predators of this type could be excluded from endangered species' habitats, the chances of the population numbers of those species advancing by natural increase would be significantly enhanced, making propagation less reliant on artificial strategies like captive breeding programs.

The fragility of the Healesville Sanctuary Helmeted Honeyeater captive breeding program was revealed some years ago when the entire Helmeted Honeyeater population there was suddenly wiped out by a mystery illness. Actions of the type described to address predation should be accorded a very high priority.

## **Small populations**

The Helmeted Honeyeater captive breeding program at Healesville Sanctuary and releases into the Yellingbo NCR and Bunyip State Park have been a very valuable response to this problem, but despite the best efforts of those involved, Helmeted Honeyeater numbers have been barely maintained, let alone significantly increased. An holistic approach which combines pest animal eradication and domestic animal exclusion with endangered species' captive breeding programs and habitat restoration is indicated, with all requiring beefing up to take species forward rather than seeing them merely marking time. Again, a very high priority should be accorded to all these activities.

## **Habitat threats**

The hygienic procedures by which the spread of *Phytophthora cinnamomi* may be stemmed are well known, and must be applied and enforced in those areas within the investigation precincts where habitat maintenance or extension is critical to the survival of endangered species. Degradation of habitat through the encroachment of pest plants, be they weeds or escaped garden varieties, must be halted if flora indigenous to the area (including endangered native plant species) and their dependent native fauna are to survive.

These matters must also receive priority attention.

## **Desiccation**

There is nothing that we can do about the natural cycle of global warming and cooling, although much could be done regarding the human contribution to accelerated increases in worldwide temperatures. In the latter connection, much is being done, albeit patently not enough. However, this issue does not fall within the scope of VEAC's investigation, which must, perforce, focus on more micro-level considerations. Here, ensuring that natural floral and faunal refuges are not compromised by agricultural, horticultural or infrastructural inroads is crucial, along with the maintenance or enhancement of habitat corridors along which species may move from one environmental haven to another. Such areas, be they on private or public land, need to be immediately identified and their future assured through such avenues as zoning or specific protective legislation. Relevant action here must also take a high priority.

## **A changing landscape**

*What changes are likely in the future? What implications do recent and future changes have for biodiversity and other public land values?*

BWV agrees with VEAC's opinion that climate change has potentially the most serious implications for the future of the biodiversity in the investigation area, and we have briefly addressed this subject in the previous section under the rubric of "Desiccation". There are, however, serious side-effects of global warming that require separate mention such as increased severe weather, with incrementally more powerful storms causing more widespread and more frequent vegetative damage, higher temperatures and more numerous lightning strikes engendering more frequent, more widespread and hotter and more damaging wildfires. Nothing can be done about storm activity, but a lot can be done about wildfires. Bushfire prevention should be the highest priority activity for the investigation area, not only to protect its biodiversity (including people), but to defend other public land values within its boundaries. A single bushfire in the Yellingbo NCR could wipe out the entire Helmeted Honeyeater population there within a matter of hours! The importance of adequate and appropriate wildfire prevention to the investigation area cannot be overemphasized.

The future impacts of population pressure on the investigation area are likely to be significant, and it is consequently most important, as has been alluded to above, that bio-refuges and corridors be protected in perpetuity from all forms of degradation (including by humans) as a bulwark against the effects of global warming. Increasing tourism within the study area will be part of that population pressure, and could bring in its train greater disturbance of native animals and their habitats. Accordingly BWV, which usually pursues a policy of freedom to roam, would nevertheless endorse visitor exclusion zones in areas within the study's boundary where animals and plants are most vulnerable. (We do not believe that the Warramate Hills, which attract walkers because of their outstanding views, are one of those areas, and we would like to see our freedom to roam preserved in at least that part of the study region.) Such zoning would also have beneficial ramifications through reduction in the spread of soil borne pathogens like *Phytophthora cinnamomi*.

## **Public land use**

*What changes, if any, do you think would improve the current configuration of public land in the Yellingbo area? Is the management of public land and the public-private land interface more important than changes in public land categories? [BWV emphasis]*

It would be a pity to think that changes to the current configuration of public land categories in response to community expectations for access or economic benefits would reduce the present protection for native species afforded by conservation reserves, stream frontage buffer areas and road reserve habitat corridors. Public access and economic expectations cannot be accommodated to the point where endangered species are driven to extinction.

There is precious little in the way of protected areas in the region of the investigation already: nothing must be permitted to reduce this territory even further. The momentum should rather be in the opposite direction, with concerted efforts being made to increase rather than decrease the level of environmental defence provided by such reserves, bio-corridors and buffers. The purchasing of private land coming onto the market that has a clear potential to improve environmental interconnections would be one way of improving ecological defences. Others would be identification and appropriate zoning of areas of land vital to habitat survival so as to prohibit extractive, infrastructural and agricultural developments on those particular parcels of land. In this context, both the management of public and private land and changes in public land categories are both very important, with the latter issue adverted to further in the following section.

## **Parks and conservation reserves**

*Do you think the benefits of converting some of the area's nature conservation and natural features reserves to a park category would outweigh the risks? Would the fragmented nature of these areas be consistent with park status?*

Our answer to both these questions is an emphatic "Yes!" Without doubt the increased protection afforded by elevating NCRs and NFRs to national or state park status would outweigh the pressures then arising for greater access and recreation use. Once the land has been covered by appropriate parks legislation, it is up to park management to decide what areas can be safely opened to the public and what cannot, depending upon the fragility and specific locations of the species park management is then obliged to protect. Such areas already exist in the form of reference and conservation areas within existing national and state parks – there is nothing new or novel about the concept. Even some State Forests have specially protected areas. Neither is it unique for national and state parks to be geographically fragmented, eg Kooyoora State Park and Otway Ranges National Park. Logistically it is presumably more difficult to manage fragmented parks, but evidently not impossible.

There is also the possibility that with judicious purchase of private land coming on the market, and reclamation of public land along stream frontages (perhaps as NFRs like those along Woori Yallock and Hoddles Creeks, as NCRs like those along Sassafras and Sheep Station Creeks or as areas like those but upgraded to national or state park

status), desirable linkages can be achieved. Our suggestion for comprehensive linkages of this nature is contained in the later section entitled "To link or not to link".

### **Stream frontages**

*Do you think improving the management of stream frontages for biodiversity is a high priority? What would be the most cost-effective way to manage them? What would be the appropriate assistance to anyone adversely affected by such a change in management?*

Our answer to the first question is a resounding "Yes!" They represent the most obvious and effective bio-corridors between areas of protected land, and will be vital to the survival of endangered species in a scenario of global warming. It is up to the managers of these riparian areas (together with volunteer and contracted assistance where necessary) to ensure that weed and exotic feral animal infestations are controlled. These areas are typically less subject to drying out than the surrounding countryside, making them generally more suitable for nurturing ecological endurance than many other places.

Access to water for livestock is clearly crucial for graziers, but in a country where dry farming is a way of life, with dams and bores sustaining sheep and cattle all over the landscape, access to river and creek frontages is not invariably essential, so that riparian land can be reserved without sending landowners to economic ruin. The extension of compensation to affected farmers to enable them to build dams or sink bores is indicated, with fencing off of waterways eminently desirable for a myriad of environmental reasons despite the significant cost.

### **To link or not to link?**

*Which places in the investigation area, if any, are particularly suitable for improving habitat links?*

Stream frontage for one, and remnant and reforested native vegetation strips along roadways for another. The study area is criss-crossed by both. The Sheep Station Creek NCR could be extended the short distance down to Woori Yallock Creek NFR, and the Woori Yallock Creek frontages north of the Warburton Highway could be joined by NFR or NCR to the Warramate Hills Flora and Fauna Reserve, which in turn is currently joined by NFR to the Coranderrk Bushland Reserve. These links would effectively make the Yellingbo and Warramate NCRs and the Coranderrk BR a single unit, with commensurate improvements to habitat links.

Were the integrated Yellingbo-Warramate-Coranderrk NCR/NFR/BR area thus formed then upgraded to a national or state park, there would be improved chances of the parcels of land currently split between NCR, NFR, BR and private land being better managed, with more holistic and co-ordinated long-term strategies than possible for enhancing habitat and protecting its resident fauna, including the endangered Leadbeater Possum and Helmeted Honeyeater populations.

BWV recommends that these amalgamations and upgrades in status take place. There is relatively little resumption of private river and creek frontages involved as most of the waterways concerned currently enjoy NFR or NCR status. The government will need to allocate funding appropriate and resources adequate to protect Yellingbo and its associated corridors and pockets of land. At present only DSE provides relevant funding, directed solely towards the protection of the Helmeted Honeyeater.

It is noted that there is little distance between Coranderrk BR and the Yarra Ranges NP, and perhaps they could be linked in some way so as to make the integrated Yellingbo-Warramate-Coranderrk area described above an extension of that National Park. BWV believes, however, that it would be preferable to have them separately managed because of the need to concentrate resources on the survival of the critically-endangered and endangered species inhabiting the Yellingbo area, which the government itself has adjudged the most precious piece of land in Victoria.

BWV trusts that you will genuinely take its views into account and adopt its recommendation when formulating the Draft Proposals Paper.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris Towers". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Chris Towers  
President  
Bushwalking Victoria