

25 August 2015

Plenty Gorge Park Development Team
Parks Victoria
PO Box 500
East Melbourne Vic 8002

Dear Sir/Madam

Plenty Gorge Park Draft Concept Plan

Bushwalking Victoria (BWV) thanks you for the opportunity to comment on this paper.

BWV 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 organisations pressing for legislation to create a comprehensive system of national parks in Victoria as early as the 1940s.

Having viewed various background documents relating to the conception presented, of what would be best for the Park, BWV would make the following comments.

At present the Park is served by various minor internal access roads which deposit visitors at places like Red Gum Picnic Area, Hawkstowe Picnic Area and the restricted access (bookings only) Nioka Bush Camp. There is a walking track between Red Gum and Hawkstowe Picnic Areas, but it is too short (about 500 metres) to offer more than a picnic stroll; even adding in the loop around the Le Page Historic Farmhouse area only adds about a further 500 metres, with the whole return trip only amounting to a couple of kilometres. Likewise Yellow Gum Park Picnic Area, several kilometres to the south, may be reached by road, but once there, the walks are again less than extensive, with the one that loops around Blue Lake about 1.5km and the walk from the picnic area to the lookout only a few hundred metres. The Yarrambat Picnic Area, a few kilometres to the east of the Red Gums/Hawkstowe part of the Park, is served by no discrete walking trails at all.

What is lacking in the Plenty Gorge Park, apart from lengthier walks near the picnic areas, is dedicated walking tracks linking the various segments of the Park, so as to provide genuine hiking outcomes for visitors and the “health benefits for the community” which are referred to in the call for comment.

We recognise that there is a difficulty in that the Yarrambat and Yellow Gum Picnic Areas are on the east side of the Plenty River, while Red gum, Hawkstowe and Nioka are on its west, and there are no pedestrian bridges across the River which would offer access from one set of picnic areas to the others. While we see that there is interest in both enhancing access to the Park from outside it and around the Park itself (first dot point, Guiding Principles), we would stress the need for purpose-built walking trails linking all segments of the Park, and that

would necessitate at least one pedestrian bridge over the Plenty River (this is not an unfeasible concept: there are many that cross the Yarra).

We therefore urge that this should be unequivocally comprehended within the eventual Master Plan for the Plenty Gorge Park. While the River is bridged by Bridge Inn Road to the north, Kurrak Road in the centre and the Greensborough Highway (and Booyan Crescent) to the south, these are scarcely appropriate in terms of safety (last dot point, Guiding Principles) or ease of access for walkers, for whom the Park, as it is currently configured, does not seriously cater.

The River itself is not reached by many access roads, and while there is nothing in the way of walking paths that exploit the beauty of its meanderings (unlike the Yarra which is festooned with walking cum bicycle trails), there is much that could be done in this light, and we would recommend that you explore the possibilities fully.

The Plenty River Gorge is geologically interesting. The original Plenty River was diverted from its traditional streambed by a lava flow which filled its valley, and it consequently spilled over into the valley of another stream, which it adopted as its new course, in the process cutting a deep gorge through the Upper Silurian sedimentary bedrock of the district. The Gorge is rugged, and impressive from both geomorphological and aesthetic viewpoints, and needs to be preserved intact for future generations, while at the same time being made accessible to visitors so that they can enjoy its beauty and appreciate, through appropriate interpretive signage, its physiographical evolution and significance.

With regard to the reference to “equitable opportunity” for visitors (Guiding Principles, second dot point) we would caution against providing equitable access to potential users like four-wheel drivers and trailbike riders whose activities can, unless appropriately regulated and located, be inimical to the kind of conservation objectives (second dot point, *Conserving Victoria’s special places*, Guiding Principles) espoused. Less intrusive users like walkers, photographers, bird-watchers and picnickers are far less likely to cause significant ecological disturbance, and we have no difficulty in their being accorded “equitable opportunity”. We are also cautious about the proposal to “facilitate appropriate commercial activity ...” (Guiding Principles, penultimate dot point).

There will no doubt be walkers amongst the volunteers that are envisaging helping with the care of the Park (Guiding Principles, third dot point). BWV walkers have a proud (but typically publicly unacknowledged) history of assisting Parks Victoria to care for parks across the State, from willow control in the Victorian Alps to track maintenance in the Grampians.

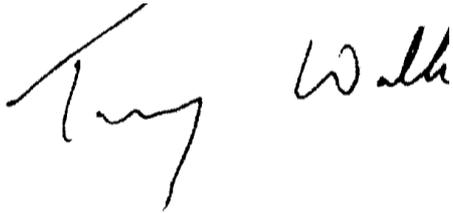
We thoroughly endorse the objectives of “active conservation of flora and fauna, and ongoing management of ... weeds, pests or inappropriate activities” (second dot point, *Conserving Victoria’s special places*, Guiding Principles), although it has frequently been our experience that much lip service is paid to weed management in urban parks, but little effective action has been seen on the ground. The reality has to match the rhetoric.

Regarding the Guiding Principles segment, *Providing benefits beyond park boundaries*, we agree that the Park, despite its over 170,000 visitors each year, is little known outside its surrounding suburban communities, and that it requires much more publicity than it presently enjoys. This is a big area of unquestionable natural beauty only 20km from Melbourne CBD, yet even some BWV walkers who have hiked most of the State, have never heard of it. Clearly much more needs to be done by Parks Victoria in promoting the Park’s attractions.

Effective fire management is, of course, of paramount importance in the preservation of the cultural and ecological values the Park contains, and we would urge that all appropriate measures are put in place to prevent the occurrence of wildfire within the Park.

We trust that you will carefully take into account our comments in your development of a Master Plan for the Park.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tony Walker'. The signature is written in a cursive style with a large 'T' and 'W'.

Tony Walker
President