

LATROBE CITY SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE ENQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL PARKS

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1 The relevance of National Parks to Latrobe City

Latrobe City includes the Morwell National Park and provides the main access to the Tarra Bulga National Park, which lies immediately adjacent to its southern boundary.

These National Parks make an important contribution to Latrobe City's tourist industry, the conservation of its natural assets, and its public image.

In recent years, Latrobe City has undertaken various surveys to ascertain the views of its community, commissioned consultants' reports, participated in regional initiatives, and resolved positions on issues related to native vegetation, flora and fauna, reservation and use. While not specifically on National Parks, these are relevant to any consideration of the objectives of National Parks and their resourcing.

Important considerations arising from this are

- The maintenance of the natural values National Parks were established to protect, along with the opportunities they provide for public enjoyment.
- Current policies which provide some balance between economic, social and environmental values
- The scientific basis for biodiversity conservation
- Community views

2 Issues for Latrobe City

Both the Tarra Bulga National Park and Morwell National Park are extremely small by National Park standards, and occur in a context where the extent of reserved land in the Bioregion is well below the 15% national forest agreement criteria.

Latrobe City has a strong commitment both to sustainable forestry and to the protection of biodiversity and native vegetation (e.g. Latrobe City 2002 *A Position of local Ecologically Sustainable Development*). However, the relationship between timber harvesting and biodiversity conservation can be problematic and a source of contention. The Victorian *Code of Forest Practices for Timber Production Revision No.22 November 1996* makes only brief reference to goals for the protection of flora, fauna and rainforest and offers no guidelines.

3 Policy background

Current policies provide some balance between social, economic and environmental values. National Parks play an important role in conserving environmental values.

Parks Victoria states on their website that "*Victoria's national parks, like those in other states and countries, are areas of land permanently set aside from sale or development to protect their natural and cultural values for the benefit of people now and in the future*".

Latrobe City lies within the area covered by the *Gippsland Regional Forest Agreement*. Current policy provides some balance between economic, social and environmental values. The *National Forest Policy Statement* (Commonwealth of Australia 1992) aims to manage Australia's native forests to conserve biological diversity, heritage, and cultural values, and develop a dynamic, internationally-competitive forest products industry. This statement led to the development of the *Regional Forest Agreements* and the establishment of a *Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative* (CAR) forest reserve system to protect the environmental and heritage values of forests through national parks and other reserves. The CAR reserve system is an integral part and one of the three main objectives of the Regional Forest Agreement Process.

4 Timber harvesting in National Parks

Latrobe City has a significant interest in both the timber industry and the environment. Latrobe City has formally recognized the value of the timber

industry in council resolutions: a significant part of Latrobe City's economy is based on the timber industry and timber products, including paper production, and these are substantial employers. Latrobe City also has a policy commitment to sustainability and the environment, and has many active community environmental groups.

The native forest harvesting issue is highly controversial and tends to polarize the community. Extremist views often dominate the debate and inhibit any consensus from developing. On the one hand, some green groups argue for the cessation of all native forest harvesting, while on the other, some timber industry interests argue for the harvesting of all forests including protected areas such as national parks.

The current situation in Australia represents an intermediate position that allows some value to all interests, rather than allowing one interest group to override all the others.

Timber harvesting in National Parks has implications for the tourism industry. Many visitors value national parks for their 'naturalness', and these values are negatively affected by harvesting. The Gippsland Regional Forest Agreement studies show that the visitor numbers recorded at the Tarra Bulga National Park on the edge of Latrobe City were drastically reduced during the period that intensive timber harvesting was undertaken around the Park and along the Grand Ridge Road. The reliability of the figures has been questioned but it indicates the need for further research.

5 Latrobe City's representative community surveys

Latrobe City has previously commissioned a series of community-wide surveys to gain an accurate view of community views on sustainability issues. The surveys are designed to reflect the views of the whole community rather than just particular interest groups. These surveys have been undertaken on Latrobe City's behalf by the Gippsland Research and Information Service at Monash University, Gippsland. A number of Latrobe City's community survey results have a bearing on National Parks and the values they were established to protect.

Views on the amount of native vegetation

The overwhelming majority want no reduction in native vegetation

- The vast majority of the community are in favour of maintaining or increasing the extent of native vegetation in Latrobe City - 5% of respondents felt there was too much native vegetation, 40% thought the current amount was about right, and 46% thought there was too little (Sustainability & Environment Community Survey 2002).

Views on the relative value of native vegetation and forestry

Good forestry and the protection of native vegetation are considered equally valuable but with significant scope for improvement in performance.

- The community places high and equal value on good farming and forestry practices on the one hand, and plenty of native vegetation and wildlife on the other (score 4.1 out of 5) but rated performance on both as average (3 out of 5 – Sustainability & Environment Community Survey 2004).

Views on harvesting native vegetation

The community is split roughly 50:50 on the harvesting of native vegetation:

- 54% oppose or strongly oppose further native forest harvesting, while 43% support or strongly support further harvesting, and 3% don't know (Sustainability & Environment Community Survey 2003)
- 43% oppose any harvesting of native vegetation, 11% support unlimited harvesting and 46% support moderate harvesting (Sustainability & Environment Community Survey 2005).

Views on protecting native vegetation

There is overwhelming support for protecting more native vegetation in reserves

- 73% want more bushland reserves in rural areas, 20% want less, and 7% don't know (Sustainability & Environment Community Survey 2002)
- 94% support or strongly support (63% strongly support) protecting native vegetation and bushland, with only 5% opposing or strongly opposing protection (Sustainability & Environment Community Survey 2003).
- 82% support establishing additional parks and reserves to protect remaining native forest, while 18% oppose (Sustainability & Environment Community Survey 2005)

Views on the appropriate responsible authority to manage crown land

The community tends to favour more local control of crown land

- 50% of respondents thought management of crown land should be the joint responsibility of local and state government; 35% thought local government should have the responsibility; and only 15% thought state government should have the responsibility.

6 Reports commissioned and adopted by Council

In 2001, the Strzelecki Working Party, including Latrobe City, South Gippsland Shire, Wellington Shire and Hancock Victorian Plantations, engaged Biosis research Pty Ltd to conduct an assessment of biodiversity in the Strzelecki Ranges, including the Tarra Bulga National Park.

The report identified the need to conserve linking corridors and core areas for biodiversity in the higher elevations of the Strzelecki Ranges. These core areas

included the Tarra Bulga National Park, but also other areas that were rated of higher value for biodiversity but have no formal protection.

The Report contends that direct and indirect threats to biodiversity in the core areas and linking corridors include:

- inappropriate timber harvesting
- short-term habitat removal,
- habitat fragmentation and creation of edge effects,
- loss of threatened (and non-threatened) flora, fauna and vegetation communities,
- simplification of forest structure in the medium and longer-term by producing even-aged regrowth forests that are less suitable for some species than older forests.
- conversion of mature stands to young regrowth stands, and a loss of old growth/hollow-bearing trees,
- the spread of plant pathogens such as Myrtle Wilt and Root-rot Fungus,
- soil disturbance resulting in compaction and increased erosion,
- weed invasion,
- alteration of fire regimes,
- siltation of aquatic environments.

It concluded that timber harvesting and the maintenance of biodiversity are not compatible within the core areas for biodiversity.

7 Council resolutions

Past resolutions of Council support the reservation or setting aside of forest areas for biodiversity and community use, the exclusion of timber harvesting from those areas, and state government recommendations for the protection of native vegetation:

- “That in the opinion of Council commercial timber harvesting is inappropriate in the remaining state forests in Latrobe City and they should be managed for biodiversity and community use”. [1 OCTOBER 2001 (CM97)]
- “That Council send a letter to the Minister requesting state government support to set aside the core areas and links identified in the Biosis Report on the Strzeleckis.” [1 JULY 2002 (CM113)]
- “That Council endorse the State Native Vegetation Management Framework.” [7 OCTOBER 2002 (CM119)]

8 The scientific basis for managing national parks for their biodiversity values

Latrobe City was an active participant in its development of the Victorian Biodiversity Action Plans. The key ecological principles underpinning conservation management, and full references to the supporting scientific literature, are summarized in *Biodiversity Action Plan Strategic Overview for the Gippsland Plain: Part 2 - Principles and Methodology* (Department of Sustainability and Environment 2003), available on the Department's website.

The principles include

- Species will increasingly disappear as habitat is reduced and fragmented
- There are critical thresholds for habitat cover and patch size
- Damaging "edge effects" increase as patch size decreases
- Connectivity reduces local extinctions
- Habitat disturbance reduces biodiversity
- Natural processes and native species result in higher biodiversity
- Species have further problems due to natural succession
- Species are unable to adapt to human changes to the landscape.

The scientific literature on this topic is very extensive. There are a large number of overseas studies that show reserves protect species in proportion to reserve size (*Australian State of the Environment Committee, 2001. Coasts and Oceans Theme Report. Australia State of the Environment Report 2001 (Theme Report). CSIRO Publishing on behalf of the Department of the Environment and Heritage*), and the smaller the reserve, the higher the rate of extinction (*Soule, M E, Wilcox, B A and Holtby, C, 1979. Benign Neglect: A Model Of Faunal Collapse In The Game Reserves Of East Africa. Biol. Conserv. 15:259-272*). Size is critical for the persistence of large-scale ecosystem processes (*Berliner, D. 2004. A Systematic Conservation Planning Approach to IUCN Protected Area Categorization. The 3rd IUCN World Conservation Congress*). Further, small sites with small populations are more vulnerable to environmental change because they have less genetic variation (*Soule, M E and Simberloff D 1986 What Do Genetics and Ecology Tell Us About the Design of Nature Reserves? Biological Conservation 35:19-40*). They also suffer more severely from 'edge effects', extinction rates are higher where direct human influences put added pressure on species in remnant habitat patches (*Brashares J S, Arcese P & Sam M K, 2001. Human demography and reserve size predict wildlife extinction in West Africa. Proc. R. Soc. Lond. B, 268:2473-2478*) and for example conflict with people on reserve borders is a major source of species loss (*Woodroffe R & Ginsberg J R 1998. Edge effects and the extinction of populations inside protected areas. Science 280 2126-2128*).

9 Conclusion

It is evident from scientific research that (a) small National Parks are particularly vulnerable, (b) National parks cannot be managed as though they are isolated from their surroundings, and (c) inappropriate disturbance or management in

National Parks can seriously damage the natural values they were established to protect.

Adequate resources are therefore required both for management within the parks and also for research and actions outside such small parks, to ensure that threatening processes are effectively controlled and there is sufficient habitat to maintain viable populations.