

Submission

SENATE INQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL PARKS, CONSERVATION RESERVES AND MARINE PROTECTED AREAS

"If you set out to deliberately develop an environment designed to kill people you could not do better." (David Packham a bushfire scientist of over 40 years commenting on the fire risk after a visit to the Wonnangatta Valley in the Alpine National Park in March 7 & 8, 2006).

Our brigade has private assets and landholdings to protect in and around the Alpine National Park. The management of the Alpine National Park is arrogant, uncaring and dangerous, it reeks of incompetence. There are huge areas where fire risks can only be measured in how many times the fuel could carry a fire the extreme intensity. The only areas safe in the park is the small private landholdings on the Bennison High Plains, local people are not aware of one other solitary safe place apart from the middle of Lake Tali Kang. There is little prospect of the serious fire risks being addressed from increasing fuel that threatens the safety of surrounding landholders, park visitors, water supplies and the timber industry. If this continues it will bring this state to its knees from lack of water and cause more destruction than any terrorist group is ever likely to do.

Political agendas pandering for green preferences are taking priority over the safety of life and property with no improvement in site until body bags start leaving the area.

Wonnangatta

Parks Victoria has stopped grazing and allowed grass fuel on Wonnangatta Station to build up way past dangerous levels. There is a real risk to the safety of visitors to the area being trapped with little chance of escape in a fast moving fire down the valley.

On Tuesday and Wednesday 7 - 8 March 2006, two bushfire experts visited Wonnangatta at the request of Mountain Cattleman and members of the Licola Fire Brigade. David Packham has been a bushfire scientist for over 40 years including 8 years as Supervising Meteorologist for bushfire weather with the Bureau of Meteorology. Rod Incoll was the states former Chief Fire Officer.

Fuel levels on the river flats and surrounding valley were assessed and the potential of a fire breaking out with loads of over 10 tonnes/ha of dead dry grass on the flats was estimated. The results were frightening.

With the 40 kilometre per hour wind gusts and 39 degree temperatures, as well as 10% humidity that came in on Sunday 12 March, a long weekend (Labour Day) that usually has hundreds of visitors in Wonnangatta, a fire on the flats could have raced down the valley with a flame height of more than 30 metres travelling at 3 metres a second. The fire that killed the 5 fire fighters at Linton in 1998 on a CFA tanker was

estimated to have an intensity of 10 megawatts per meter (MW/meter). A fire on the Wonnangatta flats could produce an intensity of 54 MW/meter. This would have been totally un survivable to anyone trapped in the fire front, even in vehicles. The sides of the valley around the flats has maximum fuel accumulations which is around 30 tonnes/ha which could cause a full crown fire (burning above treetops) with an intensity of 100 MW/meter travelling at 2.2 metres per second making escape for many from the area along the rough 4WD tracks near on impossible.

The north - south direction of the valley greatly increases the fire risk. A hot northerly wind, would roar down this valley. The many river gums have a huge accumulation of candle bark which is the very worst material to produce spot fires. A fire starting at the head of the valley would rapidly throw spots with the potential to light up the whole area in a very short time, filling the place with smoke and blocking all escape. David Packham said the thing that most amazed him was that nobody had already been killed there.

Up until Parks Victoria took over Wonnangatta it had always been a safe place. The 1939 and 1965 fires did not get into the valley. Because of this little is known about localised fire behaviour, it could be far worse than outlined.

The only place in the area with any hope of survival from a hot fire is under woollen blankets inside vehicles in the elm forest just south of the homestead, though survival even there could not be guaranteed. This wont be for much longer as the trees are infested with elm beetles and it is unlikely Parks Victoria will care enough to address the issue.

For a long time Parks Victoria have not been answering letters from the Licola CFA Captain on the risk to lives in campsites in the Alpine National Park along the Wellington River and to bushwalkers on the Wellington Plains. Parks have not returned phone calls on the Wonnangatta fire risks. Parks put in patrols during the Labour Day weekend. This would have caused some improvement stopping campfires escaping. If a fire had broken out, all the Park Rangers would have done is increased the number of body bags needing to be carried out. The question of where OH&S stands with Parks employees put into such a situation needs to be addressed.

There appears no prospect of any of the relevant Government agencies involved addressing these issues. It is unfortunate our very responsible and competent Police have no power to close the park, as this solely rests with Parks Victoria who created the problem in the first place. Parks Victoria have an appalling record of placing political agendas far ahead of human safety and exercising a duty of care.

On a visit to the area on January 10, 2006 to observe the cattleman's protest as Captain of the Licola Fire Brigade I was not able to get answers from Park Rangers as to how they would address the fire risk. Rangers were also not able to give any evacuation plans for the hundreds of people who frequent the area. Rangers even

refused to witness measurements of the extreme fuel build up beside where their own vehicle was parked. I told Parks people would die with the fire risk there.

Investigations fail

Investigations into fire deaths on Crown and public land is of serious concern. Victoria appears no longer able to organise a proper inquiry into fires in National Parks and Crown and public land.

On June 20, 2003, during an interview on Radio 3GG, the then Minister for Police and emergency services, the Hon Andre Haermeyer, made the following comments relating to the Coroner investigating the 2003 fires in the Alpine National Park:

"The Coroner has the right to intervene in any fire that he sees fit and investigate what in fact occurred and he has been kept very closely informed by the Emergency Services Commissioner right throughout the fires this summer and is keeping a very close eye on the inquiry that is taking place by the Emergency Services Commissioner. If the Coroner deems fit at any stage to intervene - he's entitled to do so, but by all accounts he seems pretty happy with the way this inquiry is being conducted and has had no major issues in the way the fires or the emergency back in January and February was dealt with."

It was of great concern to know that the Coroner was being informed by the Emergency Services Commissioner, essentially investigating his own performance and the performance of his department with almost none of the accepted criteria for a proper inquiry. The Esplin Report was little more than a pathetic public relations exercise to give uncaring politicians something to hide behind. The Esplin "Report" has been thoroughly discredited by Alan Myers QC and described by David Packham as the "worst bushfire report ever written." The Minister also said that the Federal Inquiry with much of the criteria for a proper public inquiry that delivered an excellent report was *"a political Star Chamber exercise."*

Coronial enquires into fire fighters deaths at Upper Beaconsfield in 1994 and Linton in 1998, as well as the loss of the Glen Park tanker in a burnover at Creswick in 1997 have left serious doubts about the ability of the Coronial enquires system to expose the truth and make recommendations that address serious problems. The Linton inquiry placed a heavy emphasis on blaming the volunteers but did not hear evidence from the Coroners own expert assisting the inquiry and suppressed his report which would have made it difficult for the Coroner to avoid recommending criminal charges for manslaughter on personnel from the agencies involved. The Coroner's failure to take the advice of his own expert has likely led to the death of the Campbells Ck Captain from using totally unsuited equipment. This is the type of equipment in the environment that our brigade has to use for putting out campfires along the Wellington River in the Alpine National Park. Our brigade has repeatedly tried without success to be issued with safer and more suitable equipment that would be far cheaper to supply.

There is suspicions there are snouts in the trough at a high level, with serious anomalies in the supply of large tankers that are not available with the supply of

smaller safer and more suited tankers for the dangerous environment off made roads that volunteer fire fighters have to work in (like National Parks). Volunteer fire fighters are not suicide bombers and need to be protected. The combination of dangerous equipment in a dangerous environment is totally unacceptable especially with the record of enquires covering up safety issues such as the unsuitability of large tankers for fighting fires off made roads and the flammability of fibreglass fire trucks after people had been killed on them. The CFA would appear to operating more along the lines of the old National Safety Council than what should be expected from a fire fighting organisation and more deaths can be expected if nothing is done about it.

Caledonia fire

There is suspicions the Caledonia fire of 1998 in the Alpine National Park was deliberately started by a person from Parks Victoria late in Dec 1997 to push political agendas of removing groups like cattlemen and four wheel drives from sections of the park. It is common knowledge Parks Victoria were in charge of the initial fire fighting effort and not trying to put it out. Serious questions need to be asked as to what lengths Parks Victoria will go to lock up large areas of public land.

On Jan 2 1998 during attempts to cover up a serious fire out of control in the Alpine National Park, Parks Victoria took over Licola and refused to cooperate with, or tell the CFA, Police (we adore our police) and residents what was going on. Parkes stopped power going to the CFA communications caravan at Licola. The Licola fire truck with no warnings of the flammability of fibreglass tankers (this is nearly 12 months after the loss of the Glen Park tanker but before the 5 deaths at Linton) and almost no communications, entered a frightening inferno with flames over the roof, that Parks/Department of Natural Resources and Environment (DNRE now DSE) were evacuating from. Our crew on board considered themselves lucky to have survived. There is serious concerns that while almost endless money flows during fires with little apparent accountability, and fires in National Parkes can be used as excuses to push political agendas, there will be more out of control fires covered up. This will once again put the lives of brigade members, local people and visitors in serious danger.

With the Caledonia fire coming at Licola from the north east, Parks/DNRE placed the fall back position to the west of Licola insuring large tracts of farmland would be burnt out if the fire came in. None of the residents were advised, it was horrified ground crew who tipped off local people.

When confronted with the fall back positions Parks advised, that as this fire started in a park, Parks were in charge and Parks if they wished could burn out private property for a break. The land-holders complained further that there were 5 safer and better fall-back positions than Cobb Spur, one being the Macalister River bordering the park. This saved private property and probably Licola as well, it also had a far better chance of working. They were told that someone has to suffer, so as others can benefit. People from our community now know that farms are burnt out with fire breaks placed on them instead of the public land. If the communities become part of changing plans they become part of the fire plan, making litigation very difficult or impossible.

It has also become apparent that just by the fire brigade discussing the fuel reduction plans with DSE makes the community part of the fire plan. This reduces the risk of litigation from a program failing to protect the area. The so called consultations with the community is mostly a sinister step to avoid litigation with little apparent concerns for the people effected.

Landholder harassment

Kevin Higgins along with other small land holders on the Bennison Plains, surrounded by the Alpine National Park was burnt out by the Caledonia fire on Friday January 2, 1998, as ABC Radio broadcast messages from Parks/DNRE that private land was not being threatened. No warning was given to Kevin that the fire was out of control, to allow him to evacuate the 10 people on his property or any of his valuable animals from his trail riding business.

At no stage did any person from Parks/DNRE visit Kevin's property to see if they had survived, or needed help. As Kevin and his helpers searched for burnt animals to destroy, hordes of people (fire fighters) from Parks/DNRE stood around idle day after day, not far away.

Three days after the fire went through, the sky crane (Elvis) came to Kevin's creek, without any warning to collect water. There had been plenty of opportunity to have warned Kevin, they could have also got the water elsewhere. His frightened animals were more terrified of this than the fire and as the fences were burnt, they made off into the Park.

The first contact Kevin had with Parks Victoria was on Sat Jan 17. The second was the following day. He had his rifle (legally registered) - used for putting down injured and dying stock - confiscated by Rangers. He was in their Park. Kevin was told to take his dogs home. He was faced with the impossible task of trying to muster scattered cattle in the mountains without dogs. As Kevin no longer had a good firearm, it subsequently took 10 shots from a worn out .22 rifle to put down a mobile beast with septicemia. Septicemia around hooves is a problem in burnt livestock that requires animals to be put down for up to two months after a fire. Parks Victoria continue to have few if any principals and remain the neighbours from hell.

Grampians fire

The organisation of the Grampians fire was not a great deal better. The Wimmera Mail Times of 1 Feb 1999, carried residents concerns how the two brigades, CFA and Parks Victoria, had not operated Harmoniously. The residents advised that communities living on the periphery of a National Park needed to insure they had two dams as the two bodies had difficulty sharing one pump. When this was queried with the residents they related how Parks Victoria had set up a quick-fill pump on a farm dam then refused to fill CFA tankers operating to protect private landholdings. Serious questions need to be asked about the motives in denying CFA tankers water to fight fires on private land with a fire coming in from an adjoining National Park. Serious questions also need to be asked about the recent Grampians fires. Parks

Victoria refused to allow efforts to stop the fire in the park, the fire had to be halted on farmland with heavy losses of livestock and fencing.

2003 fire

The great Alpine Park fire of 2003 was every bit as bad as experienced with the previous National Park fires. The overall management had similar problems to what was seen at Licola five years before. Information blackouts, not trying to put the fire out, inadequate protection of farmland, lack of coordination, long periods between Parks/DSE shifts when they were not on the fire line, lack of cooperation, out of touch control centers and most of all lack of local knowledge. Once the fire built up size amongst the mess in the Alpine National Park the only thing that would put it out was rain.

It was not long before reports were filtering down to Licola of gaps being left in rake-hoe lines and the failure of back burning on areas later used to push political agendas to remove cattle grazing from. There was also suspicions from a number of areas in the North East that fires had been deliberately lit.

On the request of a Captain from the North East, Licola despatched an under cover crew and equipment to secretly slip in after dark to protect strategic areas on Mt Bogong. This is where the fire was not being put out and deliberately left to burn. As it eventuated the crew did very little as these were grazed areas and would not have burnt unless there was extreme conditions which fortunately never eventuated. It would be hard to imagine a more ridiculous scenario than an under cover fire fighting crew, this could only happen in a national park. This was probably requested from Licola because it would not have taken a week to convince brigade members of what was going on as we had been through a fire in the park five years before. The Captain was also aware of an email despatched by myself on January 11, 2003, to an ex-captain in the North East warning them to be aware of deliberate attempts to burn out private land adjoining national parks.

Big Dessert fire

If the above sounds like fantasy lets have a look at just what happened in the Big Dessert National Park fire of December 2002.

The landholders were subjected to the all too familiar information blackouts, these went to the extent of trying to ground their own private plane advising local ground crews on farms where they needed to be to protect private land. Just before a fire "suddenly" developed around farmland, their tankers (with outside relief crews) including their own brigade unit, were removed to an unknown location. This left the landholders to fight a ferocious fire coming in from the Big Dessert National Park, with private appliances. So short of equipment were they it included farm utilities with water tanks dumped on the back.

A search was mounted over the countryside to try and get at least their own brigade tanker back. This was eventually located, it had originally been placed miles away on

an area that took 3 days before the fire came out of the park. The unit was then secretly slipped back into their own fire shed without telling them and remained there while they frantically searched the countryside.

Things got worse with this fire. On, or about Dec 20, CFA fire fighters at around 10-00 pm on a small rise on farmland put out all lights to see where the fires glow was coming from. As they observed this (private land) the lights of a vehicle came into the foreground and stopped not far in front of them. The vehicle then drove away as a fire sprang up. Personnel at the scene split in two, one group went for the fire while the other gave chase to the vehicle. There is suspicions of other fires starting or getting away involving Parks personnel, but here these were caught red handed. The vehicle was from Parks Victoria, with a Park Ranger and grader driver as passenger (pyromaniacs rarely work in pairs). When the Police arrived they refused to lay charges. I put two journalists onto this, the ABC got their story to air for a short time but the journalist from the major newspaper did not get their story past the editor.

People are at serious risks from being burnt out from more than the fires n a national parks. At a hastily organised fire brigade meeting at Licola 28 Jan 2003 the following is recorded in the minutes:

Captain asked the following:

(1) That all Government vehicles be monitored and suspicious activity be reported to Police and Captain.

(2) That if our truck went out with relief crews we had to endeavour to have at least one of our blokes on it to make sure we got it back.

This message will likely be repeated to brigade members with any fire threatening Licola from the Alpine National Park.

Grazing ban

Cattle grazing was targeted before the Caledonia fire was even out, as Parks were worried they may cause damage to burnt sphagnum bogs. This was part of an amazingly well oiled plan that suddenly materialised and included 4WD's and other groups Parks wanted to remove. It was hard to see at the time how a plan of this nature could have been put together in the short time and the confusion of the fire. There is strong suspicions that this plan was well thought out before this fire was even lit.

On Jan 4, 98, I returned from a visit to the Wellington Plains in the Alpine National Park and saw a person who said he was responsible for planning in the Licola fire control room. I asked if they could take care to preserve grassed areas not burnt on the Wellington Plains where cattle had survived as grazing had stopped the fire. I was told it was policy for all unburnt areas within the fire perimeter to be burnt out. The planner seemed to care little about the plight of the cattlemen and I subsequently

found that the fire perimeter had been drawn to take in un-burnt grazing areas so as cattle could be excluded from the park. One would have to question these motives.

Two days later I was told by David Tainsh, the Fire Manager who was Incident Controller, and a Parks official with him, that they had no idea about the galaxias (native fish) in Nigothoruk Ck. or their significance, or the risks they were exposed to from erosion if a storm hit the grazing areas planned to be burnt out. I was appalled to see they seemed to have little understanding of erosion problems that can follow a hot fire in the mountains (this was before the storm of Jan 12, in the Caledonia Valley). Parks Victoria in the pursuit of political agendas has almost totally lost sight of the very environment they are supposed to be protecting.

An "expert" panel was set up by Parks Victoria to advise on grazing. This was mostly a collection of people with known views who hated alpine grazing. Overall it was made up of many of the same sort of people who gave the type of advice that led to the environment that caused the disaster in the first place.

Monitoring plots were fenced off around rocky outcrops, dead limbs, fallen bark and places where grass never grew in the first place, then monitored to see how they would grow. From what I have seen and from what brigade members have told me, many of these were deliberately placed to give deceptive results.

Bench marks were set from vegetation surveys on Bogong, a granite monolith, with loose soils and applied to vegetation on soils derived from rhyolite and shales at a considerably lower altitude on Bennison. As the vegetation returned, the benchmarks were changed assuring cattle did not return. "Expertise" was also bought in from the NSW National Parks and Wildlife service - who had been repeatedly burnt out.

Decisions on grazing in burnt areas were made with vegetation surveys consisting of two drafts and a summary, all unsigned. A "Draft Internal Working Paper" was passed off as "scientifically credible information needed to determine management options for the area." This had no finding or conclusion, no indication of who did the work, or their qualifications, and no references from approved text books on the methodology used which in some places could have been little more than guess work.

The science was so shonky and dishonest that even their own people on the "Expert" panel were critical *"is the PV draft proposal a joke? Its appalling! I have read both drafts of the proposed methodology and, in their current state, neither would pass as first year biology assignments"*

(An extract from an e-mail 26 Sep 2000 from Dr Henrik Wahren to Sally Troy Convenor "Alpine Ecology Scientific Review Panel" obtained under FOI).

Parks did not warm well to a Captain of a fire brigade wanting to observe their vegetation recovery monitoring, I stated my concerns to Mr Murray Rankin, Acting Regional Manager, Parks Victoria, on 15 October 2002. I advised Mr Rankin that my brigade covers private landholdings surrounded by the Alpine National Park. I was

extremely concerned about the safety of landholders and visitors to this area from a hot fast moving fire fuelled by the massive grass fuel build up after the Caledonia fire (all before the 2003 fire). I told him I held grave concerns about the quality of the scientific work said to be taking place up there, and would like to observe and talk to the people doing this the following day. I advised I would be filing my concerns with the State Coroners Office.

The following are extracts from Mr Rankin's faxed reply of 15 October:

"The measurements are solely concerned with the recovery of the licence area in regard to the re-introduction of cattle grazing. The assessment is not concerned with fuel loads. None of the measurements relate to fuel loads.....Please note that some of the access tracks are closed except for management vehicles. You may have to proceed to some of the sites on foot."

This was for a Captain of a fire Brigade in a Captain's Vehicle collecting evidence to go to the State Coroner concerning serious risks to life and property from the management practices. My vehicle was also equipped with a trunking radio as I operate in a remote area of the State where I am called on to do first aid for such things as vehicle accidents. I was warned I would be left outside locked gates while Parks vehicles went through. Fortunately this never happened as none of the monitoring areas I wanted to observe were behind locked gates.

So incompetent were Parks Botanists doing this monitoring that I witnessed and photographed a number of areas where they were assessing vegetation recovery that had been missed by the Caledonia fire and not burnt out for decades. I observed transect lines beside active wombat and rabbit burrows. I saw little that was in any way scientific.

The burnt alpine areas of the park from the Caledonia fire have become so dangerous from the snow grass build up as to be un survivable for most people trapped in them even in vehicles. The walking track into Tali Karng over the Wellington Plains is now so dangerous this should be closed during the summer fire danger period until common sense prevails and the fuel build up is addressed by people less irresponsible than those managing it now. So incompetent was Parks Victoria, a Park Ranger was telling local people before the Caledonia fire that snowgrass would not even burn. The politics are so bad and Parks Victoria appear to be such slow learners it is likely there will be casualties, possibly hundreds, before they are forced to get the message the management is dangerous.

Flash flooding and erosion

Massive erosion followed the Caledonia fire. A thunder storm hit the Caledonia Valley on January 12, 1998 (this put the fire out). Kilometres of deep channels were gouged from erosion with unstable banks falling in and landslides developing. Over 50,000 tonnes of mud and filth was calculated by the West Gippsland Catchment and Management Authority to have washed out of the park past Licola in the first mud-flow in January alone. This deposited alluvial boulder fans in the Caledonia Valley

with rocks in excess of a tone, the likes of which none from our community has seen before. These fans will be around for hundreds possibly thousands of years. The Geology text book "Holmes" describes boulder fans as a product of new mountain chains such as the Andes and Himalayas. Ours is the oldest surviving mountain chain in the world. If these were natural, there would be more of them. Local people are not aware of any erosion or boulder fans in our area outside the Caledonia Valley.

The following is an extract from a statement, nearly two years after the fire, from the late William Harper who had land at Glencairn north of Licola adjoining the Alpine National Park:

In all the time I have been associated with Glencairn, I have enjoyed fishing in and walking along the Macalister River. Nothing compares to what I witnessed in the river on December 9 & 10, 1999.

What I saw was like a river of melted chocolate. When this water hit rocks it never broke the surface, or even produced a ripple. I have never seen anything like this before. This is obviously a mudflow coming from somewhere. It was thick mud. I walked through there on Sunday 12th, the evidence is still on the bank.

The serious problems of mud and filth coming down rivers from the 2003 fires was predicted if this management continued. The Government has shown little concern for a similar disaster in the Melbourne water catchments (or elsewhere) with over 60 years fuel build-up managed by Parks Victoria.

A FOI request to Parks Victoria dated 30-10-02 asking for information on what action they were taking to address the Caledonia erosion and prevent a similar occurrence. This search revealed they had no documents! Much of the Alpine National Park is now at risk of similar erosion and if common sense fails to prevail a disaster of higher magnitude is inevitable.

Instead of trying to protect other water catchments from a similar disaster, Parks described the mess in the Caledonia Valley as an entirely natural process and tried to hide this by track closures. I was told on December 9, 1999, by Mr David Young, General Manager Conservation at the time, that we had not provided a shred of evidence of the mud (like 50,000 tonnes in the first mud flow) polluting the river or erosion in the Park, and that statutory declarations and community letters were nothing more than opinions and accusations. Parks would not be taking any action until we came up with proper scientific proof.

The Government and Parks Victoria has been repeatedly made fully aware of the serious erosion problems from the Caledonia fire and the potential for this to happen elsewhere with national park management.

The Catchment and Land Protection Act of 1994 states:

"In relation to his or her land a landowner must take all reasonable steps to conserve soil; and protect water resources;" (section 20.b & c). Parks Victoria was a landowner under this act.

Ancient vegetation

When the first explorers and settlers came into Gippsland, they described an open grassy forest with large old trees. There were frequent references to the annual aboriginal burning (little of which is carried out now). This is supported by a paper from 1890, by Alfred Howitt. While forests were open, the watercourses and damp gullies, were almost impenetrable thickets of middle canopy vegetation that was not burnt by aborigines. Explorers and settlers had great difficulty crossing these. Big hot fires, are clearly not natural. It is essential thickets along watercourses be spared from hot fires. This protects the streams and gullies from erosion and preserves fire intolerant species.

Because of the management, we now have an environment with thick small timber, where middle canopy vegetation is growing on much of what was once open grassy forest with large old trees. Howitt was complaining about this very thing in 1890 when it was far less a problem, than it is today. The lack of cool burning has resulted in a massive build-up of ground litter.

The ancient single trunk snow-gum trees from Howitt's time have survived on the Howitt Plains, in areas grazed and burnt in the past, by cattlemen. Many younger trees are multi trunked, as they have grown from suckers after the tops have been killed in fires like 1939, 1964 and 1998. If hot fires were natural pre European settlement there would be ancient multi trunk trees, so far we have not been able to find even one similar to the hundreds of multi trunked trees with in excess of eight trunks now growing on the Wellington Plains.

Fuel has accumulated to a ridiculous level around the ancient trees, as grazing and burning are no longer practiced. Ancient single trunk snow gums of enormous antiquity were killed by the Caledonia fire on the top of Riggalls Spur on the western side of the Wellington planes and in other places in the park. These trees are of enormous scientific and historical value and the remainder will all be lost in the first hot fire that comes along. There is a serious risk it will all happen in just a few hours of one day. A National Park should be there to protect ancient vegetation not guaranteed to destroy it.

Biodiversity

Parks have admitted whole eco systems were wiped out in the Caledonia fire (2003 was even worse). There is already problems with bio-diversity. Bog skinks are listed as an endangered species in the Park, yet these small lizards can be easily caught just through the fence on Kevin Higgins property, with low fuel, because of grazing and cool burning.

The very pretty, very tough Alpine Marsh Marigold survives cool burning, howling gales, blasting sun, intense grazing, the trampling of cattle and horses with steel shoes in Victoria's high country. It even flowers under melting snow but it cannot survive Alpine Park management. This iconic alpine flower along with ancient single trunk snow gums are a number of park effected plants threatened under the type of management now in place in the Alpine National Park. The Alpine Marsh Marigold survives very well, (we have photos) there are hundreds and hundreds of flowers on Kevin Higgins Bennison Plains property with heavy grazing and cool burning. A second crop even came up in spring after cool burns. Few would dispute that it is a threatened species in the thick matt of snow grass in the Alpine National Park where grazing and cool burning has stopped.

The plight of the Alpine Marsh Marigold has been used in a very dishonest campaign by the Victorian National Parks Assn as reasons to remove cattle grazing. Organisations such as this have a lot of influence on park policy but there is little indication they have much concern for the environment. The main motivating force would appear to be power and a stake in the tens of millions of dollars going annually to environmental groups. The government allowing its strings to be pulled by groups like the VNPA has been a major contributing factor in the Alpine National Park not being environmentally sustainable.

Visitor warnings

Because the Alpine National Park is now so dangerous, with little prospect of improvement under the present management, there needs to be improved warnings going out to park users of even the possibility of severe fire weather developing.

Severe fire weather can be hard to accurately forecast in the mountains. Such a system came in on March 12, 2006, on a long weekend with hundreds of people in the Alpine National Park with the most dangerous fuel conditions local people at Licola can ever remember. The weather that developed in the mountains averaged 20 km winds, with gusts up to 50 km, 40 degree temperatures and a frightening 10% humidity. This would have had potential to fan a fire capable of trapping and killing hundreds of people in parts of the park. There was no total fire ban. The coastal sea breeze on the Gippsland planes put the bushfire indices just below the point where total fire ban days are proclaimed. The only warnings for many park users came from leaflets organised by the people of Licola when they became aware of the situation developing and handed out at the Licola Store. While practically all recipients of this information were very grateful this should not be left up to a small fire brigade or community.

With an appallingly dangerous environment in National Parks and Crown and public land the proclamation of total fire ban days needs to be removed from the CFA. The CFA have an appalling record of protecting even their own volunteers safety, there is a lack of competence in most areas of CFA management. CFA management is not in any way suitable to be put in charge of any area involving public safety in or around a National Park.

The Weather Bureau needs to be encouraged to deviate from their policy of forecasting on probabilities and issuing warnings that may happen. The weather system in question on March 12 was identified by the Severe Weather section 7 days before it came in. The Bureau is a competent and caring organisation with an impressive record of assisting at all hours of the day and night at Licola. All that is necessary is a small change so as policy can catch up to the dangers that have developed from the environmental mismanagement from an uncaring Victorian government selling public safety down the drain for perceived political gain.

The welfare of people in the Alpine National park needs, as a matter of urgency, to be taken from an arrogant, uncaring, incompetent and irresponsible group like Parks Victoria and handed to the Victoria Police who have an impeccable record of taking public safety seriously in the mountains. The local Police should have the power to be able to close sections of the Alpine National Park to the public if it is considered too dangerous.

Fuel reduction

Fuel reduction in national parks is grossly inadequate to protect, the environment, water supplies, stop massive erosion and stop the risk of hundreds of people being killed. Fires escaping from this mess will eventually destroy the timber industry and continue to threaten surrounding communities, visitors, and water supplies. Parks Victoria has said fuel reduction responsibilities rests with the DSE, yet Park Rangers have the right of veto and there appears little accountability. The right of veto needs as a priority to be removed from Parks Victoria.

The more restrictions put in place with fuel reduction burns the more escapes of fires onto private land from more fuel building up. There needs to be a return to the days when people from the old Forests Commission waited for the right weather conditions and simply flew around throwing incendiaries out wherever they were needed. I am unable to remember one solitary fire that got away in our area or caused a problem. This method made the place safe at a fraction of the cost of what is not working now.

The only people benefiting from the present system is those on the end of the almost endless money flow with little apparent accountability at times of fires. The problems with the lack of fuel reduction is not the lack of money, it is the regulations for prescribed burns and where the money ends up when fires escape. With the exception of incendiary bombs generally the more technology that arrives on the scene the worse the problem has become, in the days when the community had little more than matches to protect themselves they were far safer than now. The aborigines did it all without even having matches.

National Park danger

The whole park could only be described as dangerous. A prescribed burn in 2005 failed to include campsites along the Wellington River. Where they should have burnt back from the river they used the road and where they should have used the road they burnt from the river. This left most campsites with extreme amounts of fuel. The

Licola fire brigade has been extinguishing camp fires on total fire ban days, abandoned fires left burning, excessively large fires, unattended fires, fires lit and abandoned against box logs which could smoulder for days and many fires with insufficient clearances to surrounding fine fuels. The fuel levels are so high and the country so steep and rough that an escaping fire could be uncontrollable within minutes with the potential to trap hundreds of park users.

So fearful is our Brigade of the Alpine National Park and especially the Wellington Valley, it is unlikely we could get a crew into the area and if we did it would be at considerable risk to ourselves, unless there were mild conditions. There have been repeated complaints about the ongoing disregard for safety from campfires in this area for years and threats to have those responsible from Parks Victoria held accountable for manslaughter in the event of casualties. A fire escaping from the Wellington is very likely to end up in the appalling mess in the Avon Wilderness where it would be uncontrollable and threaten East Gippsland.

The worst part of the Alpine National Park threatening Licola is the area adjacent with campsites around the Barkly Bridge north of Licola. A fire that got away from this area in 1938 raced into where the Licola Village is now with such ferocity that all the old people believed few would survive if it happened again and the village should never have been put there. The Licola Village is a camp for school and under privileged children, the handicapped and aged as well as other groups. This houses up to 250 people with a fire refuge our brigade considers a death trap.

The Licola fire brigade has let its concerns be well and truly known about the threat the Barkly Bridge poses to the lives of hundreds of people. On the DSE controlled side a magnificent job has been done to clean the area up to reduce the risk of campfires escaping (DSE ground crew and ground crew officers are caring decent people well respected in the Licola area). On the Parks Victoria side the place is an appalling mess and an escaping campfire is likely to happen. I have seen almost no indication that Parks Victoria, or the present Victorian Government, could care in the slightest as to how many people their dangerous management is likely kill.

Background of writer

L.Ralph Barraclough (56) grew up at Licola. His late father was a rabbit trapper, Mountain Cattleman and Captain of the then Licola North Fire Brigade. Ralph travelled much of Australia during 11 years in the Mining Exploration industry. He has been a shop steward for the Liquor and Allied Trades Union and the Amalgamated Metal Workers Union. He was heavily involved with the campaign to save the Franklin River. Through much of this period he has been involved mostly part time, with the bushwalking industry (since 1973). Ralph has lived back at Licola since November 1987.

**L.Ralph Barraclough
Captain Licola Fire Brigade. 18 March 2006**

Appendages

(1) The leaflet "Living Beside a National Park." Over 100,000 copies of this have been run off and distributed in hard copy by various groups.

(2) The email sent 11 Jan 03 to an ex-Captain in the North East warning they needed to be prepared for deliberate attempts to burn out private land adjacent to National Parks.

(3) A paper presented to the Royal Society of Victoria in 1890 on the Eucalypts of Gippsland by Alfred Howitt.

(4) A leaflet distributed from the Licola Store to park users warning of the serious fire risks for the Labour Day weekend 2006.

(5) Minutes of the Licola Fire Brigade meeting of 28 Jan 2003 to discuss the threat to Licola from the fire heading in our direction from the Alpine National Park. Names of brigade members have been removed for privacy reasons.