

**PHOENIX FOUR WHEEL**  
**DRIVE CLUB.**

**G.P.O. Box 653. Sale 3850.**

**Submission to the Federal**  
**Inquiry into National Parks.**

2.

### **Who are we?**

Phoenix Four Wheel Drive Club is a small group of 4WD recreationists, including two retired people who, in the late 1980's were on the Executive of the Conservation Council of Victoria, now renamed Environment Victoria, one retired Accountant, a legal Secretary who as husband and wife started the Toyota 4WD Club of Victoria, a farmer who is a member of the CFA, a Rural Fire Brigade Captain and a forestry worker. We have a wide range of experiences.

We hold no meetings, we have no corporate structure . The writer of this submission is the spokesman for the group, all of whom have contributed to this submission. We have a divergence of views on some environmental issues. Some of us didn't like cattle grazing, some of us did and some of us recognise that, regardless of our views, while grass burning in autumn and spring has now been totally abandoned, cattle are the only hope of reducing grasses so that other plants will flourish.

All of us observe the management of our remote environs with total abhorrence. When appropriate, we lobby for changes to take place that will improve the environment. Phoenix is not attached to any formal 'Peak Body" organisation as its only objective is for environmental conditions to improve in remote regions.

Phoenix members also work as a bush audit team and are quite prepared to report on bad management, if any authority is prepared to listen. We would be prepared to applaud good management in any remote area if there ever was such an event.

We are motivated by the lack of consideration for fire in the management of our environment. Because of the absence of enough cool burning in the cooler months, our native animals are decimated. We demand to know what has happened to our 'Duty of Care' to the native animals of Australia?

### **The writer?**

John Cribbes 'messed around' the area known now as the Thomson Catchment in Victoria for many years in a VW before purchasing a 4WD in 1981. Concerned that the Melbourne & Metropolitan Board of Works was closing the Thomson Catchment he joined a 4WD club.

Finding there was a 'Peak Body' representing the interests of all 4WD clubs, he volunteered to be a delegate. From there, with the intention of "building bridges" with the conservation movement, he formed the Phoenix 4WD Club Incorporated and joined the Conservation Council of Victoria. On the Executive of CCV for a year, he then undertook the duties of Treasurer.

### 3.

Upon the drawing of the boundaries of the Avon Wilderness, he was instrumental in persuading CCV to take part in a field trip to survey a major obstacle to accessing the wilderness. The field trip had to be abandoned due to pressure from other, more powerful conservation organisations who refused to set a precedent of changes to wilderness, even though a mistake was very obvious.

On moving to Sale in 1989, he represented 4WD recreation on the Central Gippsland Forests Area Advisory Committee of the Department of Conservation & Natural Resources. At the installation of the Regional Forests Agreements, this former CGFAAC became the RFA Committee, meeting until the signing of the RFA.

In recent times, to protest the lack of management in remote areas, a lack of management that invariably leads to the extermination of whole populations in 'feral fires', he reformed the Phoenix Four Wheel Drive Club so that some of us can take our protest to any investigation or inquiry.

### **We recognise the environmental works of the past.**

Phoenix recognises that in the late 19th and the 20th Centuries, National Parks were a warranted reaction to over use of public remote lands for commercial purposes. We recognise the work of conservationists, lead by the late Mr Miles Dunphy, in their bid to protect a unique environment. In such a large country with such a small population and in the twentieth Century, it was right that restrictions had to be put in place regarding land use.

Phoenix maintains that, in the twenty first Century, we have learned. the mistakes of the past. We are aware of the correct management techniques. The suggest that future management will need to work land here, rest it there and allow some extractive industries to operate in areas that will naturally restore themselves. We maintain that the 'lock it up and leave it' mentality of some groups is counter productive to good environmental management in Australia.

Australia is not a European environment, it never will be. It is a robust environment that will regenerate, managed properly. To illustrate this point, our fathers and grand fathers grazed sheep in many areas of what is now the Alpine

National Park (ANP). Sheep grazing was vilified because, it was alleged, the animals grazed so close to the ground that plants were destroyed. If this was so, there would be areas of the ANP, today, that are barren. There are no such areas. Our resilient environment, used to being grazed recovers quite nicely.

### **Where do we live?**

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We live in a land that for 80,000 years (it is suggested, we don't know for sure) was reshaped by the hand of man. Recognising the part that fire played in the environmental make up, our indigenous forebears introduced it when it didn't happen naturally. While none of us are old enough to have experienced life in Australia before 1788, there are numerous written records of the observations of the earliest explorers.

### **What sort of fire history and geography have we inherited?**

Abel Tasman in 1642 reported smoke and flame along the coast. Following in 1697, with the same observations, was Hooker DeNyptang. In 1773, Tobias Furneaux recorded that there was "continual fire along the shore ... Tasmanians habitually carried firesticks ... and applied fire beyond their windbreaks and throughout the interior". *Recommended reading. 'Burning Bush - A fire history of Australia. Prof Stephen J Pyne ISBN 0 295 97677 2 Chap 8, Island cameo Tasmania.* We feel it is important to point out that before Captain James Cook ever sighted the mainland shore of Australia there were many observations written in the log books of earlier explorers. Nevertheless, can we dispute that Cook and Joseph Banks wrote in such glowing terms about Australia? Cook described the scene at Botany Bay as being like an 'English Park' with 'green meadows interspersed with trees'. He describes a landscape that, under the regime of regular cool burns is illustrated by cool inviting glades with room to move about quite freely. Isn't this the scene that ought to greet us as we access the Alpine National Park in Victoria today? *Recommended reading. National Geographic Magazine September 1996. Pages starting 116, Fire.p.p. 122 to 123. Illustrations regarding correct forest management. The principles for Ponderosa and Eucalypt are exactly the same.*

### **How do we access our heritage today?**

Cook and many others describe the ease with which a horse and rider could access the land. What do we find today? The 'English Park' scenery that Cook saw has been replaced by an impenetrable jungle of neglected trees and undergrowth. It is now difficult to walk across country, much less ride a horse. Is it any wonder that, regarding the recreation spectrum, bushwalkers are so annoyed that their peace and quiet is disturbed by motorised recreation? How can bushwalkers walk across the bush when it has a heavy coating of leaves,

twigs and branches as well as immature trees that will never grow to full size because of their dense proximity to other young trees. When bushwalkers are unable to walk freely because of the obvious lack of any management, it is no wonder that disputes can occur.

We are restricted to driving our vehicles on formed roads ' built for the passage of vehicles having four wheels or more.' We are admonished to keep to the tracks, an admonishment that is totally unnecessary given the state of the natural environment. It is not unusual to drive a vehicle along a fire access track that has had no management for many years. A track with the appearance of a khaki coloured channel with forest fuels over one meter, possibly two meters, in depth and only kept clear of the track by the action of four wheel drive vehicles ploughing through.

5.

### **Is fire really important to us?**

We submit it is. In a summer feral fire, the amount of forest fuel on the floor of the forest, when ignited in a strong wind, will perform a number of dramatic actions.

- Fire, almost immediately will leap into the crowns of the trees. Within a short time, given low humidity and strong, hot winds, the fire is feral. It totally consumes small, younger trees, even to their roots. It incinerates a lot of seeds that were waiting for a cool fire. It is just devastating and of no benefit to the majority of the environment.
- Very quickly it heats, then burns (as deep down as one metre) the floor of the forest - where whole colonies of small indigenous animals, built to withstand 'cool "carpet" fires', will be incinerated as they burrow to escape the feral fire. *Again, National Geographic Magazine September 1996.*
- Chemicals used as fire retardants, dropped by aircraft, will pollute our water systems.
- The vast quantity of forest detritus will, when ignited and urged by the wind, start an ember attack, sometimes many kilometers down wind of the source of the fire. *Recommended reading. Ordeal by Fire. The Week a State Burned Up. by W.S.Noble ISBN 0 7256 0202 3 Hawthorn Press. Page 13*
- The ember attack will cause fires on private properties. Fire authorities will break down private fencing and maybe burn off the pasture to form a fire break. We note with dismay that fire authorities can burn a farmers pasture to form a firebreak but cannot access a National Park to perform a similar task. Mr Tom Napier of Victoria Valley, Victoria has a property that backs on to the Grampians National Park and fire fighters burned his property to make a firebreak rather than disturb the National Park.
- At the end of the feral fire, the dust that used to be earth will be blown by wind or flushed by rain into streams, rivers and eventually into dams and reservoirs. It can be expected that within our lifetime, Canberra's reservoirs will be so full of the remains of the 2003 bush fires that the capacity to hold drinking water will be severely diminished.

- We deplore the denial of natural justice for property owners burned out by fires that started on the public's land. The Victorian Government refuses to compensate farmers for fencing even though fire fighters destroyed them to access fires that originated on public land.

### **Preliminary summary.**

Phoenix has recognised the value of fire in the many different types of management for public lands. We wonder if it would be better if land management planning should refer to the exact location of an environment rather than a general area with a title that really means so little. When we talk of the Bogong High Plains, for instance, we wonder that one management plan is drawn up for the whole region that encompasses so many ecosystems.

### 6.

In Victoria there are eight Scheduled titles of 'land' under the National Parks Act 1975. 'National Park', 'Wilderness', 'State Parks', 'Other Parks', 'Other Parks and reserves' before we come to Marine Parks, Marine Sanctuaries and finally, other areas. Land Managed by Parks Victoria under the National Parks Act of 1975 total, in 2004, before the Otways National Park was declared a National Park, is 3,235,249 hectares. It is approximately 16% of the State of Victoria.

This array of titles brings aspects to bear that are not immediately obvious.

- National Parks receive attention to roading and Parks Victoria, despite having few Rangers in the field, have a Department that dutifully records the number of visitors to National Parks. There can be little doubt that the public will be interested in the number of visitors to National Parks, indeed, we can assume that there are many Melburnians having a vicarious excitement as the number of visitors climbs. Might one be so bold as to ask where their statistics, other than Wilsons Promontory National Park, are obtained?
- Where are the observation points that record the number of visitors for all the entry points to the Alpine National Park? Is there one at Licola? Benambra? Omeo? Are visitors recorded when visiting the Lind National Park? How can Parks Victoria justify a section devoted to visitor statistics when just one National Park, Wilson's Promontory, has one entrance gate which on a winter weekday is unmanned? Being mainly a Gippsland club, we are not totally familiar with the northern slopes of the Great Dividing range, but we query the need for statistics based upon such minimalist information collection sites.
- In this area, a huge part of remote Victoria, there are two field staff devoted to weed eradication between Sale and the NSW border. There are three Rangers in Orbost, one in Cann River, one in Bendoc and very few elsewhere in the eastern section of the Victorian high country.

- Wilderness areas were introduced in 1988 with the Avon Wilderness. More have been designated since then. Because vehicular recreation is forbidden, the Land Managers, operating with inadequate funding for their job criteria will put no land management funds into these areas. I am reliably informed from contacts in the Rural Fire Brigade that the excess fuel load carried by the Avon Wilderness is such that the area is a vast tinder box. Indeed, at least one fireman of our acquaintance (not our member) assures us that he 'went on leave the day before the next fire starts'. To put it politely, he is so worried for his safety if the Avon ignites, he will not turn out at the call for volunteers.
- State Parks receive little management apart from roading for the availability of logging coupes. There is no fuel reduction whatsoever and cattle can only eat 10 kgs of vegetable matter a day, when they can reach it through the fuel overload.. Government expenditure on State Parks, apart from controlling logging coupes is negligible.
- Schedule 3 'Other Parks' are only 55,300 hectares in total but they will receive negligible management unless a feral fire starts in summer and private property is endangered.

#### 7.

Perhaps in the future, Public Land could be the Public's Land with adequate well funded Management Plans for the many environments. We believe that Management Plans should be simpler, more specific to an ecology and adequately funded by new funds, not existing budgets shuffled and redesignated.

#### **Statistics.**

1983 is our chosen start date. It was a time when National Parks became the subject of desirability in Victoria. There were 685808 hectares of National Park, 298.080 ha of State Park and 1,575 ha of Other Reserves. Because the Department of Conservation Forests and Lands (CFL) had a mission that encompassed so much land throughout Victoria, it is difficult to identify the exact amount that management of this public land cost. Likewise, the number of staff is vague as is the number of Management Plans written and other criteria that would allow us to confirm our belief that the management of all public land in 2005 is severely underfunded. The problem we have encountered today is that the gross budget of CFL cannot be compared with the Department of Sustainability & Environment (DSE) today, because Parks Victoria was formed in 1999. However, this was not a clean break, because there are responsibilities including fire fighting across all publicly owned land that is still the responsibility of DSE. In their 2005 Annual Report, the work done by them for National Parks is vague, at best. We recommend the Federal Committee examines the CFL accounts of 1983 and determines the cost of managing the almost 1 million ha of publicly owned land. Determine the management cost per hectare. To account for inflation, multiply this figure by 2.26 and the result is the cost of management per hectare in today's money.

Does that figure multiplied by three bear any relation to the amount spent today? If it does, then PV and DSE staff have become overburdened with too much top heavy management indulging in their favourite passtime of having 'meetings' and providing statistics and reports. Phoenix believes that there are too few field workers on the ground.

Our members look at the neglected state of the, especially, Alpine National Park and have become quite cynical whenever an announcement is made by Government that so many millions of dollars are to be spent on such and such a project. It is our belief that this is management for a Public Relations benefit rather than an environmental benefit.

How else could they announce, subsequent to the demise of MCAV cattle grazing that they are going to spend over \$1 million rectifying the alleged damage done by cattle when they have not carried out fuel reduction burning on the Bennison High Plains? It is said that the Alpine Marsh Marigold is in danger of extinction in the National Park because of damage caused by cattle grazing. On private property on the Bennison High Plains that is managed by competent farming families, regular burning off encourages the growth of this flower. It is not affected by cattle grazing nor steel shod horses hooves! Regular winter burning of Alpine grasses does encourage it to flower!

8.

### **Final conclusions.**

- In the twenty first century, Phoenix Four Wheel Drive Club resolves that all public land should receive a level of management that is commensurate with the needs of that environment - rather than man's use of it. It is important that we, mankind, restores a pristine environment, for only then will balanced use ensure a sustainable future. We believe this to be a truth, not only for recreation, but extractive industries of all sorts.
- The incorrect attitude of management of remote regions is further accentuated by Non Government Organisations where the requirements of recreation are given priority. To be precise, the needs of physical activities are considered paramount. The instance of the Australian Conservation Foundation's Policy No 26, Motorised Vehicles In Natural Areas (MORVINA) (unless recently changed) shows that the concern of the ACF is that walkers should receive priority over motorised recreation. Phoenix insists that the ACF should have, as their policy for MORVINA, an instruction in regards to the behaviour expected (courtesy counts in the bush as well), vehicle use (keep to the maintained track, clear obstacles rather than drive around them) and respect for the environment (take photographs, not plants, leave only foot prints, not rubbish). Finally, ACF should encourage all 4WD users to abide by the 4WD Code of Ethics. Refer to [www.fwdvictoria.org.au/codeofethics.htm](http://www.fwdvictoria.org.au/codeofethics.htm)
- Our visits to the bush bring complaints of a lack of weed eradication. There is no visible work to remove or contain the vast areas where blackberry, St John's Wort, Patterson's Curse, Dogwood and others



- flourish. There is clear evidence of animals such as horses, deer, pigs and of course, unseen, but hidden in the bush, are wild cats and dogs that prey upon Australian fauna.
- Our journeys to enjoy the vistas and solitude are very often spoiled by the build up of forest fuels on the forest floor, often to a depth of maybe 1.5 metres in depth. The lack of fuel reduction measures have contributed to a position where native animal habitat is destroyed by any feral fire in summer. We note with abhorrence that, after a 'feral fire' has decimated whole populations of native animals, it is now the custom of feral dogs to attack domestic animals.
  - We applaud the Department of Sustainability and Environment Fire Management Plan's and wonder why fuel reduction burning is restricted to 100,000 hectares a year when, in the 1980's the usual average was 350,000 hectares?
  - We note the removal of workers from Victorian forests with dismay. Timber workers, in addition to cattle graziers, are lost at a time when work is needed to reduce fuel loads by any means available. 1,000 head of cattle each consuming 10 kgs of vegetable matter each day for 200 days a year will reduce the fuel load by a considerable amount? Maybe 2,000 tonnes of inflammable material?
  - In this regard, we wonder at the 'Evaluation of Bushfire Prevention and Suppression in Victoria', published in June 1997 (ISBN 0 7306 6711 1) where the Abstract informs the reader that this plan is so good that it is calculated to yield a high benefit cost ratio of 22 to one for the people of Victoria. For every dollar spent on fuel reduction measures, there will be a gain of \$22 saved in infrastructure. Further prevention. We wonder why this excellent plan was never funded and brought into effect so that we would be saved from the 2003 fires.
  - We note the report of the Victorian Auditor General in May 2003 with great interest.

In relation to the 2003 Bush fires, our attention was taken by the Esplin Preliminary Report. Mr Esplin adds to his report at 5.5 that a vast area of Victoria is being used as a water catchment by Melbourne Water and it contains an extensive network of well maintained fire access tracks. This is so that fires are not allowed to spread and contaminate Melbourne's water. The possibility of contamination is described by Esplin as a disaster scenario that would have very long term affects for Melbourne.

Considering that the residue of the remote area of Victoria is a water catchment for the rest of Victoria, we are led to wonder why country Victoria does not enjoy the same high standard of road care and by implication, does not receive the consideration for its long term water supply. After the 1998 Caledonia Valley Fire, it is on record that the inhabitants of that area, Licola especially, didn't have pure fresh water to drink, the river being so contaminated with burned earth, chemicals from fire retardants and ash from burned timber.

We live in an age when we can calculate the exact amount of the cost of space exploration. Our motor racing industry can call a car from the track to refuel at the most advantageous moment. We ought to be able to find a cost of management, per hectare, of the Public's Land and insist that protected areas are provided with an adequate budget, increased annually in accordance with inflation. This might address the slide of country folk to the city.

Environmental care in Australia can only come about by sensible environmental management.