

LCC SW, District 2 – comment on draft recommendations

HAMILTON FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB

Second Submission to the Land Conservation Council on the Grampians Area : October 1981

The Hamilton Field Naturalists Club strongly supports the concept of a major national park in the Grampians, and welcomes the L.C.C.'s partial recognition of the national park values of the Grampians area. However, the Club is very concerned that the Council has only recommended a very inadequate national park. In our first submission we urged the Council to primarily make an *objective* recommendation, not a political one. However, reading the proposed recommendations makes it clear that there is an extraordinarily large gap between the hypothetical Grampians National Park eulogized so well in the preface (pp. 12 to 13) and the disappointingly small park actually proposed. This gap is basically a political one, and in our view is misconceived and most disappointing.

The Club believes that the L.C.C. should recommend as National Park, the great bulk of the Grampians block. Exclusion of some fringe areas from the Park, at least in the short term, could objectively accommodate any other demands on the area that either cannot be accommodated within a National Park or that cannot be supplied from elsewhere.

The following arguments are advanced in support of this proposal:

I. Omission of Significant Areas

Many areas of great scientific, scenic and recreational value have been omitted from the proposed park. These exclusions are so widespread and serious that they greatly diminish the value of the National Park proposed by the L.C.C.

- (a) *Immediately to the north of Rocklands Reservoir and south of the proposed park:* This area contains gum/box woodlands (predominantly yellow gum/yellow box) which are the largest remnant of this plant community in western Victoria. Omission of this area from the proposed park seriously diminishes the variety of habitats and plant communities available for conservation of fauna, and also seriously diminishes the proposed park's scenic values. (There is more to a National Park than rocks and scrub!).

Further, timber values in this area are very low, and the area is virtually surrounded by Rocklands Reservoir - hence fire hazard to freehold land is virtually negligible. (N.B.-The case for grazing these woodlands to reduce fire hazard is not realistic, apart from the value of Rocklands Reservoir as a fire break, the high density of kangaroos in the area is an effective source of grazing).

- (b) *The Cherrypool Corridor (both sides of the Henty Highway) :* Omission of this section divides the park into two, and effectively cuts a vital corridor linking the two areas. Cherrypool is an important tourist access point to the Black Range, bringing that part of the park to the highway improves visitor access. This area also contains highly significant areas of yellow gum - yellow box woodland, which are poorly represented in the proposed park. Much of this has not been grazed for at least 12 months.

- (c) *Rocklands-Cherrypool Tourist Road :* This attractive forest road passes through the areas mentioned above. Inclusion of all public land surrounding this road within the National Park will greatly increase the park's scenic values and tourist appeal. As we mentioned in our previous submission, this is one area where wildlife can be viewed easily - it is in fact ideal habitat for kangaroos, wallabies and a wide range of wildlife!

- (d) *South Victoria Range (south of the Victoria Valley)* : At its narrowest point the park here is only a little over 2 km wide. (Narrowness is a also a problem elsewhere). There is no reason why the areas east of Mooralla and south of the Chimney Pots at present excluded should not be included in the park. The proposed eastern boundary here along the ridge of the Victoria Range is absurd; the proposed State Forest to the east has no timber values and therefore should not be managed by the Forests Commission.
- (e) *Billywing Area* : It is not clear from the map if the Buandik Camping Area to the east of the pine plantation is outside the Park, nor the Glenisla shelter nearby. These areas should be included in the park.
- (f) *North Victoria Range (north of the Victoria Valley Road)* : As elsewhere, virtually all wet sclerophyll forest and open forest II has been excluded from the proposed park. The mill at Hamilton draws timber from this area, as well as from the Heywood/Hotspur area. As the Heywood/Hotspur area is as close to Hamilton as this part of the Grampians, it is very difficult to see why this part of the Grampians is considered important for hardwood production. We consider that all of this area should be included in the park, but if some timber production is required we strongly suggest that the northerly protrusion of State Forest into the park east of the Victoria Range Track should be included in the proposed park, while the proposed area of State Forest south of where the Victoria Range Track runs down to Red Hill Road could be retained for timber production (excluding the one wet sclerophyll fern gully in this section).
- (g) *Asses Ears - Zumpsteins Area - McKenzies Falls* : These valuable scenic and recreational areas have been omitted from the park, thereby diminishing its values considerably.
- (h) *Lake Wartook* : We believe that logging and water production are competing land uses, and that logging diminishes water quality and quantity. Furthermore, to the east of Lake Wartook the proposed park is absurdly narrow. From the vegetation map it is apparent that there is little open forest II in this area; hence addition of this area to the park surely does not pose any problems.
- (i) *Mt Zero-Halls Gap Road* : The woodland on the eastern side of this road, stretching to Dadswell's Bridge, is a superb wildflower area with a density of plant species equalled nowhere else in the Grampians. It has no timber values. The squirrel glider, uncommon in Victoria, occurs near Dadswell's Bridge, and significant plant species also occur in this area. An extension of the park to the Western Highway would also provide a vital direct link of the park with a major interstate and tourist highway.
- (j) *Mafeking* : The significant gold mining area has been omitted.
- (k) *South-west of the Major Mitchell Plateau* : Vital areas of the wet sclerophyll forest have been omitted from the park, as has too much open forest II.
- (l) *Mt Victory and north of Jimmys Creek* : The inclusion of this logging enclave within the park seriously diminishes park values. The narrowness of the park at the northern point is absurd, the cohesiveness of the park as a whole is seriously fragmented. Important

recreational and tourist values are excluded from the park (much of the tourist road, Borough Huts camping area). Logging in this area threatens water catchment to Lake Bellfield, walking tracks dart from one management body to another, and logging would also seriously affect scenic values.

- (m) *Serra Range* : Exclusion of buffer areas of doubtful use and no timber value needlessly narrows the National Park.
- (n) *Wet Schlerophyll forest and fern gullies* : As the study report emphasises, in these most sheltered sites messmate and mountain grey gum form a very tall forest with typical wet schlerophyll understory. Tree ferns are prominent. This plant community is very restricted in the Grampians and most of the sites (i.e. east of the Victoria Range, SW fall of the Major Mitchell Plateau) are excluded from the park! The occurrence of *Rough* tree fern, uncommon so far west, adds to the value of these areas. Subjection of these areas to permanent logging is not protection in any sense; national park status is the only adequate answer. Opening up of such areas by logging also increases the danger of vandalism, or theft of tree ferns by the unscrupulous.
- (o) *Dunkeld-Halls Gap Tourist Road* : The major importance of this road is scenic, and it therefore should be included in the park for all its length.
- (p) *Boundaries* : The proposed park looks rather like a distorted and under-fed octopus. Its long perimeter in relation to area, its narrowness at many points and its confusing boundaries all detract from its value. It is widely recognized that important conservation areas must be as cohesive as possible, and the boundaries will cause great confusion to walkers, car tourists and management authorities alike.

The concept of 'buffer zones' between the proposed park and farmers poses problems. How will the Commission actually manage these small areas? How will the public know the difference between National Park and State Forest? As a political ploy the concept does not appear to have won over the fringe dwellers. Surely it would be far better to stress that the F.C.V. will have a continuous role in fire prevention and control, and that for this purpose its staff in the area will not be downgraded in number.

2. *Other Criticisms of the L.C.C. Proposal*

- (a) *Permanent logging* : The inclusion of permanent logging areas as part of a National Park is totally unacceptable. The L.C.C. is to be congratulated on the many sound decisions it has made in the past, and our Club readily acknowledges that in most areas and decisions to date the L.C.C. has made wise provision for the whole spectrum of uses of public land. However, this current proposal is totally different. If accepted, it will degrade the whole concept of National Parks, and place all of the gains that have been made so far for future generations in jeopardy.
- (b) *Gravel extraction* : The extraction of gravel from National Parks is not compatible with National Park values. All organizations, including the National Parks Service, should obtain gravel from other sources. Acceptance of the concept of balanced land use - which the L.C.C. advocates - surely implies that some areas - National and State Parks, Flora Reserves, Reference Areas - are so significant and important that extractive type industries such as timber removal and

gravel extraction are incompatible. To allow gravel and timber extraction in an area of such prime scientific, conservation and scenic importance is to allow the principle that this type of use can be made of all reserve types that the L.C.C. recommends. The concept of balanced land use is thus lost.

3. *Is the Grampians One Unit, or Two?*

The criticisms listed above of the proposed National Park design demonstrate the impossibility of creating a significant National Park by attempting to divide the one land unit between two different bodies. As we will show below, the timber and political interests which the L.C.C. is so apparently concerned to placate are not that significant, and in attempting a political solution the L.C.C. is losing objective credibility.

4. *A comment on hostile local attitudes towards National Park proposals*

It is important to keep in perspective the orchestrated opposition by a noisy few to a National Park in the Grampians. There are several reasons for this opposition:

(i) *Vested interests* - Many fringe dwellers have been accustomed over a lifetime to exploiting the Grampians as if they were their own property. Grazing controls were lax (present on paper but not in practice) and rentals peppercorn. Timber could be obtained without question.

We have at least 20 farmer members of the Club and 6 have properties on the Grampians fringes. We are, therefore, well informed on farmer attitudes and practices. We find that most opposition to the National Park proposal stems from a few individuals who see a threat to their continued free access to the grazing and timber resources. These people put up the 'fire threat' as a smoke-screen to their real objections. (A few face the prospect of having to fence their properties too!).

(ii) *Misrepresentation of the facts* - We have several farmer members on the Grampians fringes and they report that certain officers of the F.C.V. have cultivated the idea that if they lose the Grampians then wildfires will go unchecked. It was not until the Forum at Halls Gap in 1975 that, under questioning in public, F.C.V. officers admitted their role in fire prevention and suppression in National Parks.

After that the regional forester, Mr. Gillespie, was reported in the Spectator (23 June 1979) and elsewhere to have said that "declaration of the Grampians as a National Park would seriously reduce the fire fighting ability of the F.C.V. over a large part of western Victoria". In this headline article he went on to infer that without F.C.V. presence in the Grampians a holocaust could envelop local residents.

In the light of that sort of statement there is little wonder that farmers have opposed a National Park!

(iii) *Ignorance of the facts* - Most farmers, local businesses and Shire councillors have had no personal experience of N.P.S. management, nor of National Parks, since there are no parks in the immediate area. Evidence of such ignorance can be seen in extracts from the Hamilton Spectator (16 June 1979):

(a) *Wannon Shire* - With one exception (Cr. Brumby), Council voted for continued management of the Grampians by the F.C.V. but, in putting the vote, the President (Cr. Templeton) was reported to say "he supposed councillors did not really know what they were talking about or voting for".

- (b) *Mt Rouse Shire* - Cr. Myers stated that "control by the N.P.S. would mean an increase in the fire danger".
- (c) *Dundas Shire submission to L.C.C.* - "Parks are generally restricted in the main to interest groups and scientific naturalists, and the public is allowed only in special areas".
- (d) Despite fairly consistent publicity in recent years to the F.C.V. role in fire prevention and control in National and State Parks, at a recent fire brigade meeting at Gazette (near Hamilton) not one of 20 members present knew of that F.C.V. role! We suggest that this is the norm, not the exception.
- (iv) *Lack of leadership from local M.P's* - Despite a constant stream of inaccurate anti-N.P. propaganda from the Shires and some farmers over many years it was not until recently that our local M.P's issued a one sentence statement disclaiming fire threat as a reason for opposing a National Park presence in the Grampians. In the same statement the M.P's pre-empted the L.C.C. proposals by coming out in favour of the F.C.V. months before the L.C.C. report was published.

Since the M.P's, in particular Mr. Chamberlain (M.L.C.), have actively campaigned against the N.P. proposal and have fed the regional press, municipalities and farmer groups with their submissions opposing the N.P., it is little wonder that opposition has been whipped up.

In the light of the above points we ask Council to consider the Grampians N.P. issue on its merits, to disregard the vested interests of a tiny minority and the emotive nonsense of a somewhat larger minority. *If the Grampians are worthy of permanent reservation by act of parliament then it should be done.* Without such guarantee we can not be sure that they will withstand the economic and other pressures that have emerged in recent years.

5. *Comments on F.C.V. Management of the Grampians*

While our Club considers that F.C.V. management of the Grampians has been adequate in some ways and deficient in others, we consider it quite inappropriate that a government body whose principal charter is timber production should continue to manage an area that so clearly has National Park status. Besides the criticisms of the Forests Commission's management that we listed in our original submission, and still stand, we draw Council's attention to the following points:

- (a) There is a lack of F.C.V. management personnel during weekend periods. No rangers are present to meet the public.
- (b) The walking track up Mt Sturgeon, the track to Glenisla Shelter, and the Chimney Pot Track are only three examples of numerous tracks that are not managed properly. Increased use has caused erosion in many places, and there is no evidence that the Commission is tackling this problem.
- (c) Uncontrolled camping at peak periods is of considerable concern, especially near streams where camps and unsanitary practices cause water pollution year after year. The Commission should have exerted tighter controls over camping years ago.
- (d) Fires are allowed to burn from private land into State Forest without either control or serious follow up from the F.C.V. Members of our Club who live adjacent to the southern Grampians are aware that illegal fires have been lit in recent years, and it appears that the Commission is not greatly concerned about this practice.

- (e) The recent change from selective logging to clearfelling of 20 ha areas in the Grampians (e.g. east Victoria Range) is of considerable concern. The practice inevitably means that rotations are too fast to allow the development of old trees with hollows, and habitat values are therefore under threat. In addition, because the Grampians have so many scenic viewpoints, this practice clearly puts the superb scenic values of the Grampians under threat. Clearfelling also poses threats to water production.
- (f) There is, with a minor exception at Halls Gap, a complete absence of interpretative effort for tourists and visitors.
- (g) The F.C.V. finds it expedient to allow forest grazing but has never made any study of the long term deleterious effects on the vegetation or the native fauna.

6. What are the Real Values of the Grampians?

The L.C.C. gives no evidence to support its contention that virtually all of the timber producing areas in the park should continue. The allocation of timber resources to continued use is far higher than the allocation made in the Alpine area, and no figures are given on the potential production capability of the Grampians regrowth forests. Present production capability is very low compared with the forest areas near Heywood and Mt Cole, and the two relatively minute softwood areas in the Grampians have a production capability at present twice that of all the remaining timber in the Grampians. Softwood is becoming more popular than hardwood for many construction purposes, and we therefore put it to the L.C.C. that there is no significant evidence that the timber resources of the Grampians are of more than minor significance.

We believe that the minor need for timber production from the Grampians area could be accommodated by the following strategies;

- (a) Allow continued production of timber from selected fringe areas of durable species, principally redgum (e.g. Woolpooer area).
- (b) Allocate sufficient hardwood (mixed species) resources from the adjacent SW-1 (Hotspur, Heywood) and Ballarat (e.g. Mt Cole) areas to make up for the small loss of the Grampians forests.
- (c) If objective evaluation shows that some production of hardwoods (mixed species) from the Grampians area is still necessary in the short term, accommodate this by
 - (i) retaining hardwood production areas near Mafeking (on the east side of the Mafeking Road), and NE of the Chimney Pots (all the area south of where the Victoria Range Track meets the Red Hill Road, excluding the fern gully).
 - (ii) incorporating the proposed logging enclave of State Forest south of Mt Victory into the National Park, but allowing selective logging (not clear felling) for a period of up to 10 years after the National Park is declared.
- (d) Allowing the two pine plantations at Mt Difficult and Billywing to reach maturity, then including them both in the park after logging and regeneration with native species.
- (e) Encourage the continued use of marginal freehold for pine production (this is current Forests Commission policy) in the general SW AREA.

Clearly though, timber is not a major resource of the Grampians, nor is it a very significant one. The real resources are its *superb and-out-standing natural features*, which give it its great tourist attraction, and its *critical importance in water production*. These values can only be further enhanced and protected by National Park status, and we urge the Land Conservation Council most sincerely to recognize the fact that the Grampians are the most outstanding natural area in western Victoria (perhaps in the whole of Victoria), that they are an indivisible whole, and that they deserve, in the best interests of present and future generations, the high level of protection and stewardship that only National Park status and National Parks Service management can provide.

We must stress again that if the Grampians continue under F.C.V. management - and despite their best intentions - this affords little long term protection against the political/economic pressure that will inevitably arise for their exploitation in the future.