

LCC SW, District 2 – 1979 comment on base report

CROWN LAND IN THE REGION OF MT. NAPIER AND MT. ECCLES

INTRODUCTION

The specific areas are: Mt. Napier Reserve, Forest Commission land near Mt. Napier, unreserved land west of Mt. Napier including the Byaduk Caves, Mt. Eccles National Park, Stones State Faunal Reserve. These areas, together with freehold land in part of Harmans Valley, at Wallacedale and small portions near Mt. Napier and Mt. Eccles, include a complete volcanic complex that we believe has great scientific significance and to be unique in Australia. The flora and fauna of the area has ecological significance too, since these associations are still developing in a very young landscape.

The Byaduk Caves harbor many shrubs and trees (e.g. Cassinia, Tree Violet, Blackwood and Black Wattle) and a wealth of ferns, mosses and lichens, some of which occur nowhere else in Victoria (see plant list of Beauglehole and Elmore). These caves, and others in the middle of the forest towards Mt. Napier, contain 'sub-fossil' remnants of animals resident on the basalt plains since the eruption of Mt. Napier c. 7,300 years ago, but now mostly gone from this area.

The present flora and fauna is sufficient to merit preservation. The presence of the Tiger Cat and Yellow-bellied Glider in the Mt. Eccles area (and possibly around Mt. Napier), Bentwing bats at Byaduk Caves and more common mammalian species such as the Dusky phascogale, Tuan, Brown antechinus, Bush rat, Swamp rat, Echidna, Lesser long-eared bat, Little bat, Tasmanian Pipistrelle and Grey kangaroo is significant. Further, Potoroo were once present in the region of Mt. Napier according to a local farmer (Kirkwood) who caught them in rabbit traps about 20 years ago. These may not have survived the fires that have razed the area since then, nor the affect of foxes and competition from rabbits that abound in the area. However, the late Mrs. E. Elmore reported having seen an animal fitting the description of a potoroo just south of the E-W stone fence on the Warrabkook track in 1972.

Details of the geological features of the area have been given by E.D. Gill and L.K. Elmore (1976) Vic. Nat. Vol. 91, No.6. and also in the L.C.C. report.

Present Management and Condition

Over the years there has been a growing need for more adequate management of Mt. Napier Reserve, the adjacent forest and the Byaduk Caves. Thus, tourist access to Byaduk Caves has been improved by upgrading the access road and sign posting but without a corresponding increase in management of the Caves area. The result has been trampling and complete loss of ferns at the entrance to Harman's Cave, lighting of cooking fires in at least four other caves and isolated incidents of vandalism and littering. In the Byaduk Caves soft tree ferns once flourished in many caves - except for rotting stumps and trunks they have vanished from Harman's, Bridge, Church, Shepherd's and Flower Pot Caves and are now found only in the relatively inaccessible Fern Cave. The reasons for these losses may be attributed to vandalism, (particularly in caves near the entry road); collectors of ferns (said to have been responsible for early losses from the area); fire in the caves; rockfall; overhanging Blackwoods blocking off light; regeneration of Black wattles on the top surface following fire, with subsequent reduction in percolation of water down to the ferns in the cave entrances.

We have suggested to the Crown Land Management Division that planned access to certain caves (e.g. Harman's, Bridge, Turk) be considered and that public access to other caves be restricted. A walk-way above the fern covered floor entrance would stop most of the damage that has occurred (in Harman's for instance). The 'bridge' would only need to extend to the limit of light in the cave. No action has been taken to prevent further damage here, or in the Church Cave which contains the major bat-roost.

At Mt. Napier the increase in visitor pressure has been far in excess of that stated in the L.C.C. report. The presence of picnic facilities, a pleasant walk to the summit and publicity has resulted in many casual visitors to the reserve. Here it has been impossible to prevent some vehicles from driving up the steep track to the summit, creating erosion on the track.

Signs and barriers are ignored/removed. Because of the visitor-pressure - including groups from schools - there is an urgent need for appropriately sited and designed toilets at Mt. Napier and possibly also at Byaduk Caves.

Rubbish dumping - particularly near Murroa corner on the road reserve and in the F.C.V. block - continues to be a problem. Dead sheep and cattle, domestic rubbish, old fencing wire and recently an old disc mill have been dumped. Local farmers are apparently the chief offenders. The Byaduk caves were once used as a dumping ground too but that practice no longer occurs.

Timber continues to be taken from the forest - always the best trees from nearest the track. Along with the frequent fires this has degraded the picturesque track into the disused quarry ("Menzels"). Trees which have fallen across this track since 1977 have not been removed. Timber has been illegally removed from Mt. Napier Reserve - some very large stumps tell the tale.

A grazing licence still exists for the area south of Mt. Napier - ostensibly for the area south of Harman's Road (Millard's). There is no fence to prevent stock from wandering far afield and, in any case, this licence should not have been granted. Grazing on the Byaduk Caves area has severely degraded the vegetation - particularly in association with rabbit infestation - and should also be terminated. Grazing of the Mt. Napier Reserve was terminated by the C of M in 1975. The present condition of much of the ground cover on the lava forest is that of bracken dominance. This has arisen due to frequent burning (particularly by licencees), rabbit infestation and grazing by sheep and cattle. Old stone fences (at least 15 miles in length) can be found throughout the forest, in parts submerged by bracken, and these indicate that the grassy woodlands that encouraged settlement here have changed in character.

There have been two infringements on Crown land near Mt. Napier. Ley's quarry to the east of the Mt. resulted in scoria being removed from the Reserve - also about 10 acres of land had earlier been cleared and fenced out of the Reserve. This has now been returned to the Reserve but there needs to be some attention to control of weeds there. *Phalaris tuberosa*, in particular, should be eradicated before it takes a hold on the Mt. The quarry site was levelled, destroying the evidence of geological strata exposed by mining. That was unfortunate, and was done without consultation with any group other than the Lands Department and Soil Conservation Authority.

The other major infringement on Crown land has occurred north of the Mt. on the forest boundary near "Menzels". Here the "Devil's Hole", which properly lies astride the surveyed boundary, has been fenced into freehold land. The timber has been cleared between it and the forest and the fence line is now on Crown land at this point. Grazing by goats is rapidly affecting vegetation in this dry crater.

Weeds which urgently need attention are Cork Elm (near the picnic area at Mt. Napier), St. Johns wort (spread along Warrabkook track from Murroa corner) and *Phalaris* (along the fire track behind the Reserve). Several clumps have been removed from this track which was bulldozed in 1974. It is obvious that opening up the land, and any soil disturbance, encourages the ingress of farm weeds and thistles.

Scoria mining on Crown land ("Menzel's Pit") was terminated in about 1971 following the loss of a contract to Dundas Shire. This cone has largely been destroyed but there are interesting strata exposed. Several other smaller cones in the area were 'investigated' by means of a bulldozer cut into the apex but found too stony for use as scoria material. An old stone crusher once operated on the fringe of the lava field at Murroa corner. Surface gravel has recently been removed from an area just south of Harman's Road, off the Warrabkook track. Dundas Shire was apparently responsible for this.

Dundas was instrumental in putting in the Harman's Road east-west through the lava forest, and the north-south track from this road along the boundary of the Crown land to Menzel's Pit. Harman's Road was primarily intended to convey scoria laden trucks from Tonissen's Pit (near the "Punchbowl" S.E. of Mt. Napier) to Shire roads and works south and west of the area.

Similarly the southern end of the old Warrabkook track has been upgraded to allow easy and fast access to gravel deposits.

A fence was placed along the western boundary of Mt. Napier Reserve in 1977 to help control rabbits on the Mt. This fence follows the fire track and is pictured in the LCC report. Some aerial baiting and ground baiting by truck has helped to reduce the rabbit burden in the Reserve. It would be more practicable to control rabbits here by introduction of the rabbit flea to aid the spread of myxomatosis. In the absence of severe rabbit infestation and grazing by stock, regeneration of Manna gum and Blackwood here has been substantial following the fire in 1971 which devastated the Mt. and forest to the west.

Fire in the Mt. Napier - Byaduk region has taken a heavy toll of trees. In past times these were deliberately lit to encourage young growth of grasses. In recent times fires have occurred in October following a warm dry spell. In 1976 this resulted in much of the forest south of the Mt. being severely burned. In 1977 forest on both sides of Menzels track were lit up on a particularly windy day and that devastated some areas of forest that hadn't been burned for at least 15-20 years. Some epicormic shoots have established new growth but most badly affected trees will not survive. This sort of action happens despite the annual presence of a FCV man from Heywood doing strip-burning along the forest edges. It has been very apparent that, under the conditions in which these fires are lit, even areas burned in the previous spring carried a very hot fire which badly affected the forest. Manna gums here are very sensitive to fire, unlike most other Eucalypts.

Over the past 20 years we have not seen one firebreak - whether mown or cultivated - placed on freehold land adjoining the forest. Nor has there been any fire originating from lightning strike or any other cause that has escaped from the forest and burned farm land. Lightning strike is unknown in this forest. While a lot is talked about the fire hazard of this forest, the only efforts made by C.F.A. brigades and local farmers has been to periodically raze the forest with fire. We recommend that a basic re-education programme be applied by the future manager, with constant supervision to deter fire vandals.

We see a need for thorough investigation of fire control methods for this area - bearing in mind that prescriptions for other areas will probably not be directly applicable here. We see a need for a perimeter road around the entire Crown land area. This would give a limited protection from fires entering the area and would offer access to fire control vehicles and thus, hopefully, help in the suppression of fires. Vegetation on this road would need to be slashed periodically. There is a further need to create a fire track west from Menzel's Pit, following the stone fence to Warrabkook track and beyond to Byaduk Caves area. This would effectively break the area into six blocks (including the Reserve) and would mean a greater degree of control of wild-fire, with the possibility of confining such a fire to one block. The effectiveness of even a stone fence in curtailing the spread of fire was evident in the severe autumn fire of 1971.

Given time we believe that re-establishment of a dense forest of tall trees, and shrubs such as Tree Everlastings, will materially decrease bracken dominance in much of the forest. We do not see regular "cool burning" (at least as practised elsewhere) being the long term solution to the fire problem. Bracken regrowth following reduction of tree canopy in this area is phenomenal. Areas burned by the FCV in October carried dense bracken over 60 cm tall 3 months later. Some perimeter burning may be necessary to reinforce road-breaks but the presence of a ranger would be the best fire prevention remedy.

Adequate precautions against fire should be taken by adjoining land-owners. A fire-break (cultivated, mown or burned) on cleared and level freehold land would be much easier, and cheaper to make and more effective in controlling the spread of fire into or out of the forest.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend the establishment of a National Park in the region which *combines* the present Mt. Eccles National Park, the Stones State Faunal Reserve, Mt. Napier Reserve, Mt. Napier Forest (including all Crown land) and Byaduk Caves. We recommend also that Harman's Valley lava flow between Byaduk Caves and Condah (including Wallacedale lava), which is all freehold land should be given NP status too, since it is part of the volcanic complex. The only interference to present management by farmers would be a Development Order to prevent demolition of geological features such as the Wallacedale *tumuli*. This pattern of NP status is typical of National Parks in the United Kingdom and should prove workable here too.

Collectively these areas would be of a viable size for a National Park. This arrangement would give status and protection to the volcanic features - which are *not* all in any one of the areas listed. We think that each area, on its own, would not be large enough for a National Park. Certainly Mt. Eccles is too small for such designation and it lacks essential features which can be found at Mt. Napier and Byaduk Caves. The addition of the Stones Faunal area to Mt. Eccles would make that area of sufficient size for a National Park and would probably be a wise management move. That would, however, leave unresolved the problem of the Mt. Napier area. At the very least it should be a Fauna and Flora Reserve, possibly even a State Park.

An advantage in combining *all* of the volcanic features into one *Volcanic National Park* could be that the tourist pressure could be spread. We envisage that Mt. Eccles would continue to be the main camping site but that a camping area could also be sited on the perimeter of the Mt. Napier forest near Murroa corner. The latter site is near the old stone crusher on an area from which rocks have been harvested. It is extremely well drained and close to some of the best timber in the area - ideal surroundings also in that it is protected from prevailing winds, fires, and is readily accessible. School groups use the area now on occasion.

Access to Mt. Napier could be given via Menzel's track - running either as a *walking* path from Menzel's Pit (which could serve as a picnic area/parking area since it is completely bare) to the summit and for a track along the northern perimeter of the Reserve to meet the present access road.

Access to Byaduk Caves will have to be regulated - provision of easy access to one or two of the closest caves (by means of wooden ramps or steps) could be advantageous.

Proper *interpretative* facilities should be provided at Mt. Napier, Byaduk and Mt. Eccles. This should include a building, however simple, to give visitors protection from the weather and to display up-to-date information on landscape, geological and ecological features of the Park. This is not adequately provided at present, even at Mt. Eccles.

A good case can be made for the acquisition of small areas of freehold land in the following areas:

- (1) South of Harman's Road - an area of perhaps 50 hectares part of which was not covered by recent lava flow, forming an "island". Some 25% of this has been gravel-extracted but it is a significant feature, supporting Black wattles (not prominent on new lava), a number of native grasses and Quillwort which is rare in western Victoria. The land has minimal value for agriculture.
- (2) South of Mt. Napier Reserve - an area of c. 100 hectares that contains the "Punchbowl" (a big crater) and some of the best woodland in the entire area. This is uncleared and would add appreciably to the Park's value.
- (3) North of Mt. Napier on the edge of the forest near Murroa East - Crown forest here extends to within 200 metres of the only permanent surface water in the region. This waterhole was formed by flow of lava across an old water course. Purchase of the land containing the lava 'tongue' that extends from the Crown land would give valuable contact with the Park.
- (4) A very small area of land at "Devil's Hole" near Menzel's Pit, to enable the present fence to be sited east of the correct location (which theoretically goes through the centre of the crater).
- (5) Areas at Mt. Eccles which contain The Shaft and other features now on freehold.

A *Reference* area could be established in two areas of the proposed Volcanic National Park:

- (A) Within the centre of the Stones Faunal Reserve
- (B) Within the Mt. Napier forest - approximately 1.5 km west of the Reserve. This contains an intact scoria cone with associated collapsed lava channel, caves and 'bridge'. It has not been disturbed and as a Reference area could represent geological features unaffected by human agents. There is also a group of scoria caves and craters about 1 km west of site 21 (see map of Gill and Elmore, *loc. cit.*) which could be considered for inclusion in such a Reference area.

We stress that there is ample scoria available from freehold land for the use by Shires for road construction and that that should not be a consideration when deciding on the future use of these volcanic areas.

It is of concern to us that Dundas Shire has opted for continued management of the Mt. Napier area by the FCV. In fact the FCV has very little responsibility in the area and the present situation is going to get worse if the status quo is maintained. What is required for the area is day-to-day supervision, which can not be provided by Committees of Management or organizations based elsewhere.