

Fire Recovery... a natural progression

regrowth

A newsletter by Parks Victoria and the Department of Sustainability and Environment on public land fire recovery



April 2010

Over 287,000 hectares of Victoria's public land was burnt in the February 2009 bushfires, including almost 100,000 hectares of national and state parks and reserves managed by Parks Victoria and nearly 170,000 hectares of state forests and reserves managed by the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE). The most severely affected parks were Kinglake National Park, Wilsons Promontory National Park, Bunyip State Park, Cathedral Range State Park and Yarra Ranges National Park. The fires devastated the Ash Forests through the Central Highlands.

The fires impacted many visitor sites and forced the closure of many more parks and state forests. They also put at risk threatened plant and animal species, and affected indigenous and post settlement heritage sites. But since that catastrophic day, **Parks Victoria** and the **Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE)** have been working closely with the **Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBRRA)** to rebuild and reopen areas, and protect our natural and cultural values.

Parks Victoria and DSE's priorities immediately after the fires were:

- emergency stabilisation works to ensure public safety and prevent further damage;
- re-opening parks and forests to the community by clearing roads and rebuilding visitor facilities;
- protecting threatened flora and fauna;
- controlling pest plants and animals, and;
- protecting historic and Indigenous heritage values and sites.

This newsletter provides an update on what has been achieved over the last 12 months, and what still needs to be done.



Clearing of debris at Bunyip State Park

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... plus an update on fire-affected parks and reserves

Protecting our Environment

The scale and intensity of the fires were a significant disruption to ecosystems. Many animals – not all of them officially recognised as endangered – were put at risk and needed special attention. Concern for species such as **Helmeted Honeyeater**, **Brush-tailed Phascogale**, **Long-nosed Potoroos**, **Greater and Yellow-bellied Gliders**, **Southern Brown Bandicoot** and **Broad Toothed Rat** has triggered works to protect them as they and their habitats recover.



The Helmeted Honeyeater

The lack of vegetation cover is one of the reasons why native species are much more vulnerable to predators such as foxes and cats. A number of targeted **predator control programs** were immediately implemented after the fires to protect specific native species such as the **New Holland Mouse** at **Wilson's Promontory National Park**. Fox control programs to protect vulnerable native species in parks and forests are being expanded across all of the fire affected areas.

A success story is the discovery of the **Alpine Tree Frogs** at **Mt Bullfight Nature Conservation Reserve** by scientists from DSE's - Arthur Rylah Institute for Environmental Research. This native species has tested negative to the Chytrid fungus that is currently causing significant damage to other populations. This colony of frogs is very significant in maintaining this highly endangered species.

Connecting with Community

Parks Victoria and DSE's relationship with local communities is paramount to its successful recovery program. Extensive community consultation is undertaken by Parks Victoria and DSE by attending regular community meetings; radio and television interviews; ongoing distribution of the *Kinglake Community Newsletter*; stakeholder tours and regular updates on the Parks Victoria and DSE websites.

A cooperative program providing contract employment for **Licensed Tour Operators** proved very successful. Many tour operators were hard hit by the fires and it affected their business. This program gave them the opportunity to adjust their business and involved them directly in the fire recovery effort. Nine operators completed a range of recovery projects across **Wilson's Promontory National Park, Cathedral Ranges State Park, Yarra Ranges National Park, Bunyip State Park** and **Walhalla Historic Area**. Jobs included four wheel drive track assessments, track maintenance and heritage assessments.



Clearing the debris at Kinglake

Honouring our History

Archaeological consultants have completed post-fire assessments of the historic values of **Wilson's Promontory National Park, Walhalla Historic Area**, and the **Steels Creek** mining area in **Kinglake National Park**. Data from these assessment programs has been submitted to Heritage Victoria for inclusion on the Victorian Heritage Register. Progress is also being made on the development of a Heritage Action Plan to assist Parks Victoria to better conserve and manage newly discovered mining and settlement sites along **Fear Not Creek Gully** in the **Walhalla Historic Area**.

Visitor facilities and horseyards are being rebuilt at **Keppels Hut**, one of a number of huts the Keppel family constructed in the Marysville area from the late 1880s. Other fire recovery projects associated with post-settlement heritage are being finalised for **Havilah Cemetery** at **Running Creek** and **Comet Mill** in the **Mt Disappointment State Forest**, in **Kinglake National Park, Walhalla Historic Area** and **Yarra Ranges National Park**. Parks Victoria and DSE's fire recovery staff are working closely with Melbourne Water to move these projects forward.

Our Vital Volunteers

Parks Victoria and DSE have worked collaboratively with Friends Groups and volunteer networks in progressing the recovery of parks, reserves and forests. By October 2009, 305 volunteers had contributed 2065 hours to bushfire recovery works. Local horse riding groups will assist DSE to repair the stables at the **Andersons Mill** horseyards near Marysville, located along the **Bicentennial National Trail**.



Building a fence at Buxton

Green Corps Recovery Efforts

Three Green Corps volunteer crews from the Australian Conservation Volunteers teamed up with Parks Victoria to undertake recovery activities in bushfire-affected parks. Funded by the Commonwealth Government, each composed of ten 17 to 21 year old trainees and a supervisor. The team based at **Kinglake National Park** installed silt traps and other erosion control measures, collecting eucalypt seed and installing nest boxes for native birds, small possums and gliders. The **Wilson's Promontory National Park** team measured and recorded post-fire recovery of flora and fauna and completed major erosion control and track repair work. The **Bunyip State Park** team assisted with supplementary feeding of Helmeted Honeyeaters and undertook walking track recovery and erosion control in creek lines.



Trackworks at Cathedral

Steavenson Falls – restoring a local gem

One of Marysville's main tourist attractions, **Steavenson Falls**, has been open on weekends over summer and early autumn with the operation of a free shuttle bus. The bus from Marysville, provided residents, visitors and tourists with the opportunity to visit the site and witness the early stages of environmental recovery after the 2009 bushfires. The bus has now ceased as works get underway on stage one of a \$3 million recovery project.

First opening in the 1860s, Steavenson Falls is located just five minutes drive from Marysville and is one of Victoria's most spectacular waterfalls. Before the February fires, people flocked to visit the Steavenson Falls Scenic Reserve and to see the water tumbling 84 metres down over rocks into the Steavenson Valley. The Falls were floodlit in the evening by power generated from the Falls' own hydroelectricity system. Prior to the fires, the reserve attracted up to 150,000 visitors each year and was a major regional tourism attraction.



The intensity of the bushfires caused significant damage to visitor facilities and vegetation at the falls, its surrounding walks and the scenic Lady Talbot Drive. The only salvageable piece of infrastructure was the hydro-electric generator that powered the lighting system that lit up the falls at night. The area was closed after the fires due to public safety concerns, and this project will ensure the site can be fully reopened to the public.

The \$3 million project is funded by the Victorian and Commonwealth governments 'Rebuilding Together' – Statewide Bushfire Recovery plan, announced last October.

Major works being carried out include the construction of an improved capacity carpark, toilet block, shelters, pathways, handrails and stairs. Fortunately, the hydro turbine and weir were only partially damaged by the fire, and will be restored as part of the project.

New viewing platforms will also be constructed to enhance the visitor experience, and a consultation process will encourage input from visitors and the local community. There are also plans to upgrade the 4km Treefern Gully walking track that links the Falls with the township.

Substantive restoration of core facilities is aimed to be completed by September 2010. The aesthetic values of the Falls will progressively improve as the forest regenerates, however this will be a slow process.

The works within the reserve immediately after the fire focussed on restoring the town's water supply and were followed by land management issues including the removal of dangerous trees and erosion.

The Falls are significant to the Marysville community and the longer term economic recovery of the areas.

Yarra Ranges National Park

Over 29,412 hectares (38 per cent) of the park was burnt in the Kilmore- Murrindindi fire.

Staff have worked tirelessly to reopen the **Summit Walk at Lake Mountain** and access trails up to **Mt St Leonards, Mt Monda and Dom Dom Saddle** (the Bicentennial Trail). **Cambarville** and key adjacent walking tracks have also been reopened, including the **Big Tree Walk** and the **Big Culvert Walk**. **Donnelly's Weir** Picnic Area has also re-opened with portable toilets installed while reconstruction of the toilets is underway.

A Dream of Discoveries

Six **Leadbeater's Possums** were discovered after the fire at Lake Mountain within the Yarra Ranges National Park. Forty three per cent of the known range of these highly endangered marsupials was affected by the fires. In order to increase the survival of the populations, a supplementary feeding program was introduced over winter by the Friends of Leadbeater's Possum, Healesville Sanctuary, the Lake Mountain Alpine Resort and Parks Victoria. The feeding program has been successful and an enormous undertaking by the dedicated Friends of Leadbeater's Possum and park staff, providing nightly feeding in often blizzard conditions.



Out of the ashes of the Black Saturday fires, a colony of one of the State's rarest and most endangered plants, the **Shiny Nematolepis** (*Nematolepis wilsonii*) was discovered in the O'Shannassy catchment. Even more thrilling was the discovery of a second colony by park staff undertaking rehabilitation work. These exciting discoveries have confirmed the rare plant can withstand the heat of inordinately hot fires and given the right conditions, the seedlings will germinate and re-establish themselves in the ash bed. The areas have been fenced off to protect the plants from deer browsing, wallows and rubbing. This project is supported by Port Phillip and Westernport Catchment Management Authority with funding from the Australian Government's Caring for our Country Bushfire Recovery Program.

Kinglake National Park

Over 22,110 hectares (96 per cent) of the park was burnt in the Kilmore- Murrindindi fire.

Park rangers recently spotted the first koala since the bushfires burnt 96 per cent of the park. It was a healthy young male that has made the long journey that would be kilometres from the nearest unburnt forest. It was a welcome surprise to see this animal back in the burnt forest so soon after the fire. Another positive sighting has been the Large-footed Myotis, a rare bat species that fits in the palm of your hand. Park staff weren't too hopeful that this species would be seen again in the park, until one night a wildlife consultant found the bats with the assistance of a spotlight and an anabat detector. This detector converts their inaudible chatter to audible frequencies which greatly assists surveying.



Picnic tables at Kinglake

The popular **Frank Thomson Reserve** has re-opened offering views across the fire-affected area to the Melbourne city skyline, with a re-established car park and a new gas barbecue installed. More picnic tables will be installed over the coming months.



Mt Sugarloaf - carpark re-opens

Many tracks have also re-opened:

Everard Block: Mt Everard Track, Brock Spur Track, Watsons Creek Track, Old Kinglake Road and Cookson Hill Track.

Wombelano Block: Andrews Hill Track, Stringybark Track, Mountain Creek Track, Dusty Miller Track, Candlebark Track, Burgan Track, Easement Track, Powerline Track, Scentbark Track and Perimeter Track. Wombelano Falls walking track is open to view the falls.

Some sites require further works:

Yet to reopen are **Masons Falls, Jehosophat Gully, The Gums** camp site and **Island Creek** picnic area, however regeneration is already apparent and Parks Victoria is working hard to rebuild and make these areas safe for visitors to access again.

Planning for the Future

Extensive community consultation is underway for the development of the **Kinglake National Park Master Plan**. The plan will set out a 15 year framework for protecting the important conservation and recreation values of the park and to strategically plan the replacement of visitor facilities such as picnic and barbecue areas, camping areas, access tracks and car parks. A draft Master Plan will become available for further community consideration and comment in mid 2010.

For further information contact ashannon@parks.vic.gov.au or go to www.parkweb.vic.gov.au

Community Engagement and Open Day

Park staff hosted an open day for over 200 local residents at Kinglake National Park in October 2009 for the community to witness the park's regeneration.

New entrance signs have been erected along major roads into Kinglake National Park to acknowledge the traditional owners - Taungurung and Wurundjeri.

The second edition of the *Kinglake National Park Community Newsletter* was distributed in March 2010. The newsletter is an ongoing communication tool to regularly update the local community on recovery works and park news.

If you would like to be on the mailing list, contact Tamara Watson 13 1963 or email twatson@parks.vic.gov.au

Guided Walks on Offer

Since December 2009, rangers have been hosting regular two hour guided walks into Masons Falls concluding with a drive up to Mt Sugarloaf for local residents and the general public. The tours are promoted on the Parks Victoria website (www.parkweb.vic.gov.au) and in the local paper.

The next guided walk is scheduled for Sunday 16 May, 10am and 2pm. Walks will resume after winter in the warmer months of August or September 2010.



Masons Falls guided walks



Community Open Day at Kinglake National Park

Murrindindi Scenic Reserve set to be a showcase again

A popular destination for more than 30,000 campers every year, the Murrindindi Scenic Reserve was severely burnt in the fires, with most of its vegetation and camping ground infrastructure destroyed. All one hundred individual campsites – grouped into eight different camping areas – have since been closed to the public due to safety concerns.

The extent of the damage meant that DSE had essentially been left with scorched earth on which to rebuild. Only four recently rebuilt metal bridges survived.

Although the main road through the reserve is open to all picnic areas, the camp sites and walking tracks remain closed to the public due to safety and environmental concerns.

The substantial DSE redevelopment program is now underway and it is intended that stage one of the Murrindindi camping areas will be open for the 2010 Melbourne Cup Day weekend.

Landscape works are underway at the northern camping and day visitor sites while the task of constructing, toilets, shelters and other visitor infrastructure will be put to public tender as the project progresses. Meanwhile, the community is being kept abreast of plans and progress through existing community and DSE forums.

Back on the ground, the Reserve is showing remarkable signs of recovery with seed and root stock now emerging and good grass cover, which will later be slashed to clear areas for campsites.

Located 80kms northeast of Melbourne, the Murrindindi Scenic Reserve provides a unique environmental experience for both day visitors and campers. It is well known for its many picturesque streams, including Wilhemina Falls and Murrindindi Cascades.

The \$2.5 million project is funded under the joint State and Commonwealth governments "Rebuilding Together" – Statewide Bushfire Recovery plan, announced last October.



Murrindindi Scenic Reserve



Regrowth at Bunyip

Bunyip State Park

The fire started before Black Saturday on 4 February 2009. A total of 7,640 hectares (46 per cent) of the park was burnt over the next four weeks before the fire was contained.

Ninety-five per cent of the park is now open including **Dyers** and **Mortimer** visitor sites. Protecting the park's extensive network of trail bike and four wheel drive tracks by improving their drainage and surface is mostly complete. Drainage and upgrade works are progressing on **Forest** and **Tea Tree** Roads to bring these roads up to contemporary standard. The roads and tracks will continue to need lots of maintenance until the surrounding land stabilises and the rate of erosion returns to normal.

New toilets at the **Forest Road** trail bike unloading area have been rebuilt and at **Nash Creek** camping area and both sites have re-opened.

Lawsons Falls picnic ground is being redesigned to improve its layout. Although this has taken time, the wait will be worthwhile. The site is expected to reopen by June 2010.

New records of species recorded for Bunyip, and seen in the fire-affected area include **White-browed Woodswallow**, **Masked Woodswallow** and **Rufous Songlark**, **Pallid Cuckoo** and **Horsefield's Bronze-Cuckoo** all of which are considered to be dry or open country birds. The **Painted Button-quail** and **Grey Fantails** are a few of the more common birds that are regularly seen in the park.

Judy Downe and Ed McNabb from The Arthur Rylah Institute for Environmental Research located an extensive patch of *Grevillia barklyana* regeneration near **Discovery Track**.



Extensive patch of *Grevillia barklyana* regeneration near Discovery Track at Bunyip State Park

Bendigo Regional Park

Following the Bracewell Street fire, an area known as **Liddell's Calcine Sands** became exposed after vegetation was destroyed. The site dates back more than 100 years to Bendigo's mining history, and contains contaminated mine tailings that were a by-product of the gold mining era.

To protect the health of residents and the environment, Parks Victoria's first priority was to secure and stabilise the site to prevent the sands from being either blown or washed away.

A specially developed mulch which contains a blend of recycled paper, binding agent, water, dye and sterile grass seed has been regularly applied to bind the site's surface. A gully was realigned to direct surface water away from the site and avoid the movement of the sands down Derwent Gully. Recently, jute matting has been used in some areas to further stabilise the sands. The area has been regularly inspected by Parks Victoria staff, and air monitoring confirms the stabilisation works have been effective in suppressing airborne contaminants.



Hydromulching Day

Parks Victoria is working to find a long term solution to clean up the site, and is undertaking a voluntary site audit and clean up in accordance with section 53V of the *Environment Protection Act*. This process has been recommended and endorsed by the Environment Protection Authority (EPA). The audit will provide information about the level and extent of contamination and possible clean up options. Parks Victoria continues to work closely with the EPA and City of Greater Bendigo in the management of the site.

Cathedral Range State Park

Over 3,200 (92 per cent) hectares of the park was burnt in the Kilmore-Murrindindi fire.

Although a vast 92 per cent of the park was burnt, today all of the camping areas are open as are most of the walking tracks with trail markers, trailhead signage and directional signage progressively being replaced. However, some areas remain closed for further repairs and are planned to reopen in 2010.

Little Cathedral Track from Neds Saddle to Little Cathedral Peak remains closed due to extensive alignment works being carried out.



The Friends Nature Trail and **Cooks Mill Heritage** area remain closed while new decking and railings are installed.

A **stakeholder information tour** was held on 16 December 2009 with representatives from local tourist information centres, local business owners, Licensed Tour Operators and VBBRA. The tour was hosted by park staff to provide the group with a chance to witness first-hand the fire damage and to be informed of the rebuilding program. It gave everyone the opportunity to discuss key management issues pertaining to the areas that remain closed within the park.



A **Camp Host** was on site over the January 2010 holiday period providing visitors with information on camping sites at Neds Gully and Cooks Mill.

Sugarloaf Saddle is being redesigned to improve the way it serves the many visitors who use the area as a base for bushwalking and rock climbing. The site will receive a new purpose built visitor shelter to cater for rock climbers and Licensed Tour Operators who utilise the area. It will also include new toilet facilities and car parking spaces. Construction will commence on the completion of a cultural heritage study and is expected to reopen in October 2010.

The Friends of Cathedral Range State Park were treated to a BBQ in December 2009 to reconnect with park staff, witness the regeneration taking place and were informed on the progress of works.

Wilson's Promontory National Park

Over half of Victoria's beloved Wilson's Promontory National Park was burnt in a fire started by lightning in remote country north of Sealers Cove the day after Black Saturday.

However dramatic this sounds, the fire brought as much good as bad. The loss of infrastructure was small and most of the visitor sites were available when the Park re-opened on the 27 March 2009. The complete **Lilly Pilly Circuit** including boardwalk and access to **Mt Bishop** reopened in time for the Labour Day weekend 2010 after the foot bridges that burnt in the fire were rebuilt. Access to **Tongue Point** from **Darby River** and **Sparkes Lookout** is still closed while the walking track is rebuilt. Sections of the track were in poor condition before the fires and this is a good chance to repair the whole walk to a good standard. **Whisky Bay Track** is still closed but should be re-opened by Melbourne Cup Weekend 2010

Most of the tracks and camp sites in the wilderness zone in the north of the park are now open although **Johnny Souey Cove** camp has been closed to protect an archaeological site. Walking in the north end - which was always very challenging because of the thick vegetation - is now comparatively easy and provides great views and the chance to see nature regenerating close up.

The recovery of the vegetation is the most spectacular story of this particular fire. Much of the country burnt was covered in heaths and heathy forests. These need fire to regenerate but had not been burnt for nearly 60 years. The first spring after the fires treated visitors to one of nature's great displays when grass-trees over huge areas put up two metre tall spikes covered in thousands of cream coloured flowers. Many orchids unseen for years appeared and flowered. You can see some photos of this display at: <http://www.parkweb.vic.gov.au>



Caring for Country

Wilson's Promontory National Park has a long history of Aboriginal occupation, with evidence for its use dating back at least 6500 years. Following the February 2009 fire, Parks Victoria took advantage of the reduced undergrowth and increased ground visibility and engaged archaeological consultants to undertake a cultural heritage assessment of the fire-affected areas. Priority areas for the survey were identified through a comprehensive search of the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Register, and by extensive consultation with park staff and the **Boonwurrung, Bunurong** and **Gunaikurnai** Aboriginal communities - the Traditional Owner groups with a connection to this country.

During fieldwork, forty-five previously registered Aboriginal heritage places were located and assessed for fire-related impacts. In addition, thirty-seven previously unknown Aboriginal heritage places were identified and fully recorded, significantly expanding our knowledge and understanding of the Indigenous history of the Prom. By working with Traditional Owners and heritage consultants to update and expand the cultural heritage record of the Prom, it has been possible to develop detailed recommendations relating to ongoing conservation and cultural interpretation of this significant cultural landscape.



A stone tool found at Wilson's Promontory National Park

What's Ahead...

Surveys of Broad-toothed Rat and Eastern Pygmy Possum

Parks Victoria in conjunction with Ecology Partners will be undertaking targeted surveys for the Broad-toothed Rat and Eastern Pygmy Possum at key sites at Mount Bullfight Nature Conservation Reserve and Lake Mountain Plateau, Yarra Ranges National Park in March and April 2010. Both species have been recorded at Lake Mountain prior to the 2009 bushfires. Techniques will include Elliott trapping, infra red motion detector cameras, hair tubes, pitfall traps and predator scat collection and analysis.

Watsons Creek Biolink Project

Parks Victoria is working with The People and Parks Foundation to co-ordinate its volunteer networks and corporate volunteers to participate in the planting of seedlings at Watsons Creek in May 2010 to provide a corridor of habitat for the threatened Brush-tailed Phascogale and create a link between Kinglake National Park and Warrandyte-Kinglake Nature Conservation Reserve.

Mammal Trapping

A Victorian Government funded project is proposed in April / May 2010 for Conservation Volunteers Australia to undertake small mammal trapping works in burnt and unburnt areas of Wilson's Promontory National Park. Species to be targeted include Southern Brown Bandicoot, Long-Nosed Potoroo and New Holland Mouse.



Mammal trapping of the Long-nosed Potoroo

regrowth

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