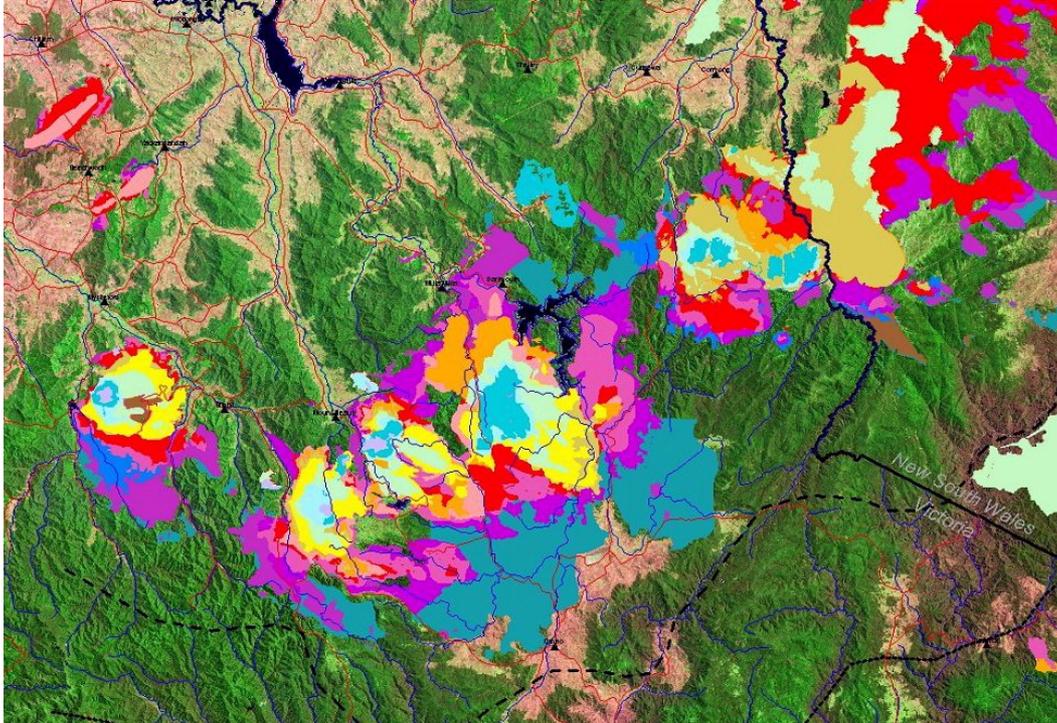


Forest Fire Victoria* News No 1

WE MUST TALK SERIOUSLY ABOUT NATURAL HERITAGE

An inquiry should examine, coolly and calmly, the management and preservation of Victoria's forests, writes Tony Cutcliffe. (text from "The Age", August 13, 2004)



Alpine holocaust Day 22, showing fire ravaged forest, Bendoc to the Hume Reservoir

WHEN bushfires raged through the south-eastern part of Australia last year they consumed an estimated 3 million hectares of forest. Almost half of that was in Victoria. The fires produced more greenhouse gas than the annual emission of every car, bus, truck and motorbike in Australia put together. In Victoria, among other things, we lost forever more than 20,000 hectares of glorious, towering alpine ash. In this drought-ridden state, our most prolific water catchment had its water harvest reduced for decades to come as new plants and ground cover fuel their growth with a voracious appetite for water.

Thousands of native animals were cremated and their fragile habitats destroyed. Millions of dollars of public money was diverted to firefighting and making good the damage. These bushfires were the greatest ecological disaster to strike this state in more than 200 years of written history. They were the Exxon Valdez of Victoria.

Yet this almost unimaginable disaster has been allowed to disappear from our civic radar screen as though it never occurred. Why? There are two reasons.

The first is that successive Liberal and Labor state governments have locked up increasing acreages of national park without providing the corresponding levels of investment and resources required to nurture these treasures.

The creation of new and bigger parks has been announced in romantic, deep-forest media circuses that cleverly disguise the policy fraud that sits behind them.

The second reason is that the State Government has refused to attach any financial value to our pristine national parks, and so they earn only token value on our state's balance sheet.

According to our Government bean-counters, when we lost the forest, we lost nothing.

As a result, the destruction bypasses all the financially driven checks and balances that motivate Victoria's surplus-fetishist public policy agenda.



Extent of alpine fires, 2002

The consequences of this bipartisan pea and thimble trick is that the forests have been allowed to deteriorate in much the same way as Rippon Lea house would deteriorate if it were simply fenced off and forgotten.

The difference is, of course, that Rippon Lea sits squarely in the public gaze, while some of our most vulnerable forest is hidden and inaccessible. It is out of sight and out of mind. For this very reason, last year's bushfires are not the ones that should worry us most - the bushfires that lie ahead of us should be enough to frighten the daylight out of every Victorian. Imagine a disaster of last year's proportions combined with the intense heat and northerly blusters that fanned the 1939 bushfire epic. Had those same conditions prevailed in 2003, experts say the fires would have raged until they reached the coast.

Our chronically underfunded forests have been left in the care of radically depleted teams of foresters and scientists who are left, in turn, to struggle with equally depleted budgets. This has resulted in the hemorrhaging of qualified and dedicated managers, to be replaced with compliant policrats who are prepared to dance to the politicians' tune.

In the CFA, the same applies, as the increasing "professionalisation" of the force squeezes out the country volunteers who have consistently refused to admire the environmental emperor's new clothes.

CFA volunteers from the city fringes are wedged away from their country brethren, just as city and rural folk are manipulated by spin to be seen as irreconcilably opposed on matters of conservation. These divisions run long and deep. The absence of a properly informed civic conversation has created artificial and emotional differences of opinion between country folk and city, between the farmers and the financiers.

The view that holds true for the vast majority of each is that the national parks and forests are of inestimable ecological and cultural value and deserve to be protected and nurtured.

What also unites them is the giant political con trick that has been played out by starving the forests of the funds to match the political rhetoric. Even the most ardent, publicly recognised "environmentalist" will agree with this assessment in private conversation.

For these reasons, an increasing number of concerned Victorians will not abate their call for a formal coronial inquiry into the 2003 bushfire crisis. Such an inquiry need not be long or expensive. In fact, the Stretton royal commission that followed the 1939 fires reported less than four months after it was instigated, and its lessons served us well for more than 50 years. Nor should the inquiry be formed as a witch-hunt. The argument is not whether those involved in managing the forests and the fire suppression did their personal best under the circumstances.

Indeed, it is the circumstances themselves that need examination, so that Victorians can consider their environmental options in the same context as health, education and law and order. The same inquiry can produce environmental indicators and performance criteria that the average voter can understand, to the extent that anyone does, in the same manner as hospital waiting lists, police numbers and student/teacher ratios.

Victoria's national parks do not belong to our generation any more than they did to the generations past. They are an enduring asset that we hold in trust for generations of Australians who are still to be born. While an independent coronial inquiry may have its feet in the present, its eyes should be focused on the future. A proper inquiry can provide the start of a rational discussion in which our cherished forests become the basis for a united community purpose rather than a cause for bitterness and divide.

Tony Cutcliffe is a director of the community forum The Eureka Project and a member of the Stretton Group for responsible forest management.

The alternative is more forest devastation.

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