



## **Submission from RFPG to State Parliamentary Inquiry into securing our environment, particularly parks and open space, for urban-dwelling Victorians**

Since its inception in 2015, the Rubicon Forest Protection Group (RFPG) has been campaigning against the unsustainability of logging in the Rubicon State Forest and the Central Highlands forests more broadly.

We are distressed at the loss of biodiversity and ecological integrity (loss of nature), by the destruction of eco-tourism and recreational opportunities not only for Melburnians and regional Victorians but also international and interstate visitors (loss of jobs), by the loss of Aboriginal heritage and links with country (cultural neglect) and by the despair felt by so many people in the community, especially young people, about their future in a fire-ravaged, oven-like world (existential despair).

No new reserves of any great size, or substantial expansions of existing reserves have been gazetted in this area since under the Hamer Government in the 1970s when the Land Conservation Council (LCC) undertook its various statewide reviews. Since then Melbourne's population has more than doubled.

The establishment of the Yarra Ranges National Park and expansion of the Kinglake National Park in 1997 essentially involved a rebadging of Melbourne's closed water catchments and despite many submissions supporting the creation of a new Central Highlands National Park in the LCC's Melbourne Area 2 review in 1994, this was strongly opposed by timber industry interests and did not happen.

Now, in the wake of the recent bushfires in northeast Victoria and East Gippsland, an already dire situation has become worse. With 4 massive bushfires this century leaving little of eastern Victoria untouched, we have lost vast areas of forest that once sustained vibrant regional ecotourism, outdoor education opportunities, horse-riding, bush camping, bushwalking, picnicking and pure enjoyment of nature.

The Central Highlands encompass by far the largest intact forested area closest to Melbourne but massive areas were killed or severely scorched in the Black Saturday fires: 98% of Kinglake National Park, all of the Murrindindi Scenic reserve, all of the Lake Mountain part of the Yarra Ranges National Park and most of the Cathedral Range national park.

Yet since 2009 another 14,000+ hectares have been logged, mostly clearfelled. National Parks aside, this equates to around 10% of Melbourne's parkland area, with a similar area set to be logged by 2030.

While the Black Saturday fires did less damage to the Central Highlands forests on the south of the Divide, most of the southern forest has no public access due to the long-standing 'closed catchment' policy of Melbourne Water. Particular State Forest areas are also often inaccessible due to logging operations.

Despite the logging and despite the fires, the area still contains very many picturesque spots, such as the Rubicon Valley Historic Area, the Mt Torbreck Scenic Reserves, the Cambarville Historic Area and a myriad of waterfalls (although mostly inaccessible due to lack of investment in walking tracks) and scenic drives. However, the ongoing excessive and unsustainable logging of these forests acts as major deterrent to tourism and recreational use in many ways. It is evident in the reluctance of the State Government to provide adequate tourist and camping infrastructure. Thus, the few areas where such infrastructure exist, such as the camping grounds on the Rubicon River in Rubicon, on the Little River in the Cathedral Range State Park, on the Murrindindi River in the Murrindindi Scenic Reserve and The Gums in Kinglake National Park are all overwhelmed in holiday periods. It is also evident in the paucity of features that can be found in DELWP's "More To Explore" app and in the lack of touring and camping maps on DELWP's website.

And the desirability of the area as a tourist and recreational destination will only get worse as logging intensifies, including of some of the most marvellous areas, at least until 2025 and probably beyond. Despite the supposed constraints on logging to protect scenic and tourist values imposed by the *2014 Code of Forest Practice for Timber Production*, these are routinely flouted by VicForests. Skyline views of the forest from the Maroondah and Goulburn Valley Highways are wrecked and few screening buffers exist on scenic roads, often revealing vast clearfelled areas. Where buffers do exist they are generally a mere 20m wide. Despite such Code breaches being reported, DELWP takes no action and small voluntary community groups are obliged to use the Courts to halt the worst excesses.

And then there's the 6 day per week log truck traffic throughout the year, especially in summer, that makes the use of forest roads during the holiday period extremely hazardous.

The Government may claim that the end to timber harvesting in 2030 will change matters for the better, but by then the remaining vestiges of beauty and biodiversity outside parks and reserves will be largely lost.

The Committee must understand that the reason the Government has chosen 2030 is by then the little remaining mature ash forests arising from the Black Friday fires of 1939 not protected in the Yarra Ranges National Park or in a few small, scattered reserves will be gone. Most of the of the old growth forest that survived the 1939 fires and was not later logged, was lost during Black Saturday.

Until unsustainable logging ceases, investment in new forest tourist experiences will not be possible. To enhance tourism, our group has suggested the conversion of the historic haulage line from the Rubicon valley to the Middle Range plateau to an exciting new scenic railway akin to the Scenic railway in the Blue Mountains. But why invest in such a venture if all the mature forests in the hinterland are gone? Similarly, the proposed Iconic Walk from Melbourne to Marysville will be barely worth developing if VicForests' current logging plans come to pass.

A multitude of much smaller initiatives could turn the area into a tourist mecca to rival the Dandenongs or even the Blue Mountains if logging were to cease. This would give renewed hope and pleasure to many Victorians, especially Melburnians, and result in many new and ongoing jobs in our region.

We urge the Committee to study [our website](#) for more information about these possibilities, but more importantly to look at the [Great Forest National Park](#) website, in particular the Great Forest National Park report, which present far more of the beauty and possibilities of this area.

We urge the Committee to recommend that:

- logging rules in the Central Highlands be immediately revised to properly protect all scenic features, scenic drives and walking tracks and that all logging cease far sooner than 2030,
- that DELWP's capacity to develop and maintain walking tracks, signage, camping grounds and scenic drives in State Forest be substantially boosted,
- Melbourne's closed catchment policy to be overturned so that the full beauty of the Yarra Ranges National Park can be appreciated by all, and
- more frequent route bus services from Melbourne to Kinglake, Alexandra and Yea be approved.

We look forward to an invitation to present further information and ideas to the Committee at its public hearings whenever they may be. We can be contacted on [admin@rubiconforest.org](mailto:admin@rubiconforest.org).

