



Mid-Murray Field Naturalists Inc.

PO Box 1255 Swan Hill Vic 3585 *Reg No: A0001571K*

President David Thompson

Secretary Judy Irvin

Submission to VEAC State Wide Assessment of Public Land

Author: Neil Macfarlane, MMFNI

Date: 18 June 2015

CONTENTS:

Introduction

A. Water Courses

B. Salinas

C. Roadsides

D. Important Bird Areas of the World (IBA) classification areas: Wandown, Menzies & O'Brees

E. Former townships and rail way reserves

F. Almost Wilderness: Annuello Block

Final Comments

INTRODUCTION

The Mid-Murray Field Naturalists Incorporated welcome this timely assessment and review. It is well overdue considering the time elapsed since the original Land Conservation Council (LCC) studies, and subsequent actions (or inactions) in formally gazettement, delineating, and placing identifying sign boards on many of the sites.

The signs in particular, tend to give the local communities a sense of personal recognition and ownership of these areas, as well as a connection to the historical past, and on appreciation of the environmental values of their local area.

The following submission contains some comments regarding some of the public land reserves in the Eastern Mallee and adjacent areas.

RIVER RED GUM FORESTS INVESTIGATION

Regarding the **River Red Gum Forests Investigation - Final Report by VEAC in 2008**, we endorse the findings therein and recommendations arising though we strongly disagree with the classification of **Heywood's Lake** as a Game Reserve. We would support it being fully protected as a flora and fauna reserve as it is an important breeding area for waterbirds (when wet) and other birds when dry.

Prior to management of Murray River flows by dams and weirs, this unusual lake would only be filled in very high floods, perhaps about 20 year intervals to judge from the few post-settlement records. Present artificial flooding has pluses and minuses. It is a significant aboriginal site and is geographically and topographically intriguing.

A. WATER COURSES

The Lalbert and Tyrell Creek systems which arise primarily from the Avoca and other systems in the North Central District have rightly been well reserves along their watercourses with excellent cooperation between local landholders and Mildura CMA in our area.

The lakes and salinas associated vary in habitat and nature. They also bear witness to the many evolutionary stages of the present mallee landscapes, and indeed of aboriginal culture.

Significant archaeological sites have been excavated at the north end of Lake Tyrell (for example) as well as along the Murray River frontages.

B. SALINAS

Large areas of low-lying land in the Mallee have become hyper-saline since large scale clearing removed the once dense tree cover. These are usually land about 50 metres above sea-level but area increasingly extending in area and elevation. Formerly they were well vegetation with potable ground water - (as attested to by homes built there, and dams sunk there). Now they are wastelands due to the rise in the saline ground water levels – and this is still rising.

Many of these areas have- and are - being mined for gypsum – and in a few areas for salt-harvesting. This may be sustainable – but the loss of salt-tolerant vegetation is not. The protection of salt-tolerant vegetation in these areas, particularly deep-rooted species should be paramount, and indeed encouraged where possible. Many plant species very rare in Victoria, are confined to these habitats. Saline areas are still appearing in dry-land farms on a small scale- necessitating rehabilitation.

More alarmingly the huge increase in irrigated farming on Mallee soils off the Murray Floodplain (soft fruits, grapes, almonds, olives, potatoes, carrots and other vegetables) is seeing significant salinisation of soils in the formerly healthy country.

Some of this is happening alarmingly close to very important reserves such as the large Annuello Flora and Fauna Reserve south of Hattah – and the Wandown Flora and Fauna Reserve (FFR) between Annuello and Kooloonong.

This raises significant questions about the long-term management and viability of much dryland irrigation in the region.

C. ROADSIDES

At the time of the closer settlement/agricultural development in the Mallee; original surveys were for relatively small 'blocks' on the heavier and 'better' soils, with the consequence that almost all tree cover was cleared except for home sites and near water supplies. Most timber was used for building homes, farm buildings and fences.

At the same time roadways were surveyed mostly one chain or in some cases up to 3 chains wide. This left very little roadside vegetation – and in the present era necessitated the clearing of most timber to allow movement of large trucks and even larger agricultural equipment. **Consequently all the remnant vegetation is of even higher value.**

Further north in the era of Soldier Settlement – (Annuello- Kooloonong, the Millewa, and west of Ouyen) hindsight ensured that minimum road widths of 3 chains and 5 chains applied- resulting in good permanent vegetation corridors on either side of the roads. This has greatly benefited the movement of native birds and mammals, as well as retention of a wide range of plant species.

Indeed in the area between Heywood's Lake, Wandown Flora and Fauna Reserve (FFR), Annuello Township Reserve and the large 'Annuello Block' (Annuello FFR) towards Hattah – former Land's Department staff, Land Care Groups and Mildura CMA staff have cooperated with local landholders in revegetating corridors on both roadsides and private land to facilitate wildlife and plant movement between isolated reserves. This is particularly in relation to active, but disjointed, populations of Malleefowl – including those at **Wandown FFR, Menzies Block and O'Brees**, the first two of which are probably the most productive in Victoria, if not Australia (that is the world!).

D. IMPORTANT BIRD & BIO-DIVERSITY AREAS OF THE WORLD (IBA) CLASSIFICATION: WANDOWN, MENZIES and O'BREES

While on the subject of Malleefowl it should be noted that **Wandown Flora and Fauna Reserve, Menzies Block and O'Brees Block** (situated south of Boundary Bend and west of the Boundary Bend-Kooloonong Rd) were grouped (in a submission to Birds Australia on 16th August 2007) as a potential **Important Bird and Biodiversity Area of The World (IBA)**. This recommendation was subsequently **confirmed and is internationally recognised**. All of these reserves are monitored annually by the Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group.

The block known as O'Brees was about 8,500 acres in area of which about half was uncleared mallee, high quality regrowth mallee, or Black Box Forest on floodplain. The property changed hands several times over a short period with the cleared country being purchased by a local potato grower, and the timbered areas (unable to be cleared) reserved.

Subsequently via funding from the then environmental department, local contributions, and Trust For Nature, the mallee and box timbered areas were surveyed, fenced and joined by vegetated corridors, under the management of Trust For Nature.

Trust For Nature has since divested itself of this area, and it is now under new management of Department of Environment Land Water and Planning (DELWP) and Park's Victoria. The area is directly connected to other areas of uncleared mallee to the south and south-east including former Yungera township site, and vegetated roadsides, particularly to the south.

It should be noted that Annuello Block (FFR) is classified as an IBA: The Murray –Sunset Hattah Annuello IBA.

Railway Reserves

There is also almost continuous vegetation along the former Railway Reserve from Yungera south to Kooloonong, Natya, Coonimur and Piangil – the terminus of the present railway service. This former rail corridor was reserved for conservation purposes by the **Land Conservation Council (LCC) 1989 Final Recommendations**. It should be noted that O'Brees is one of the very few places where uncleared mallee vegetation is in direct contact with the riverine plain, and in close contact with a significant breeding area of the threatened Regent Parrot.

E. FORMER TOWNSHIP RESERVES – NORTH TO SOUTH ALONG FORMER RAILWAY LINES

i. Yungera

No buildings or other facilities. Furthest extent of this former line. Buffer ends, at the limit of rail bed. Mostly well vegetated with Mallee. Major irrigation adjacent (olives and almonds). Huge irrigation storage dam alongside. Large areas of uncleared mallee on property to west of old railway. Cleared land on that, planted with olives and almonds.

ii. Kooloonong

Soldier Settlement areas after World War 1 (as was Yungera). Rail arrived there 1920. Channel water supply system progressively constructed thereafter as land 'taken up' to north and west. Many settlers forced off due to Depression of 1930's and isolation, rather than drought. That came later in the early 1940's.

The township was a thriving one in the first 10 years or more with a full range of shops and services including by the mid-1920's, a Bush Nursing Hospital, Land's Department Office, State School and Returned Serviceman's hall, railway station and sheds, stockyards and loading ramps, football and cricket oval, weighbridge for grain receipt and huge bagged wheat stacks in a good year. There was even a red gum sawmill at the then rail head.

At the present there is one occupied house; the old hall (now seldom used); a new CFA Head on the old railway reservation; a more or less derelict house in the mallee (towards the northeast of the township area) probably not occupied, former football/cricket oval.

The only other structures are grain silos, grain shed, truck weighbridge and grain bunkers on the former railways land. The writer of this report has no idea who would now claim ownership or access to these. They were originally constructed on railway land by the now

defunct Grain Elevators Board. This situation would also apply to Natya rail siding and possibly elsewhere in the region where rail lines have been removed e.g. Kulwin Township/ Bushland Reserve.

iii. Natya

Some of the former rail line between Kooloonong and Natya ran through cleared paddocks and as the railway tracks and sleepers were long since removed, it is possible that this section of rail reserve has disappeared under cropland.

There are currently an old hall, unused silos and other grain storage facilities on the former rail easement; a new CFA Shed and rooms, and a private house in the township area as well as a former water supply dams and remnant sporting facilities.

NOTE: Outbreak of Weed of National Significance

There is also an extremely serious outbreak of a cactus (Cylindropuntia tunicata) Brown-spined Hudson's Pear which is being widely spread by trail bikes and other motor vehicles (e.g. CFA trucks) as well as wildlife (kangaroos, rabbits, foxes, cats, even birds- due to its vicious hooked spines).

Local farmers, Landcare groups, Parks Victoria, Swan Hill Rural City Council and Mallee CMA are presently combining on a major eradication project and subsequent monitoring. There can be no doubt that this weed is infinitely more threatening in the short and long term to Mallee farming a Mallee environment than Wheel Cactus or any other species. It has to be eliminated. This species is known to occur at Mittyak. It is classed as a Weed of National Significance.

iv. Coonimur Rail Siding

Further south on the former rail line was the small rail-siding of Coonimur where only remnants of the former platforms exist. The alignment is widely used by trail bikes and other recreational vehicles but it is well vegetated. Properly managed, this former rail reserve is accessible and of great historical and environmental interest. The rail reserve from Coonimur to Piangil is in part inaccessible through private property.

The rail line running north from Manangatang is still functional, but the writer understands it is rarely used. It passes through the small township of Bolton, where a few houses are still occupied.

v. Boulton and Annuello townships

Grain silos at Bolton and Annuello still exist, though not still in use to the writer's knowledge. Annuello as a township no longer exists except as a good local hall, a new CFA Shed and a small meeting room once used by the Country Women's Association. The surrounding and extensive bushland areas in the township boundaries are in excellent condition.

NOTE: PROPOSAL FOR HISTORICAL SITE CLASSIFICATION:

It would not be inappropriate for the two **former townships of Kooloonong/ Annuello Soldier Settlement Area** to be assigned special historical status reflecting their particular origin e.g. Historic Site.

Our understanding is that this area was proposed to be for settlement by returned servicemen almost from the outbreak of World War 1, and that an Act of Victorian Parliament enabling this was passed prior to the embarkation of troops. Subsequently the Closer Settlement Board facilitated the surveying of new Settler blocks, roads, railway line and water supply channels and townships developing progressively north from the pre-war limits of closer settlement. Granted, there is little infrastructure of that settlement era still extant except the odd building, the railways, remnants of the old water supply channels and towns and farm dams. But the people of that post war era created the present rural success story.

vi. Manangatang

There is still a thriving Township at Manangatang, though the former stock sale yards have closed (and adjacent uncleared mallee to the west of them) were in recent years transferred by Swan hill Rural City Council to DEPI. There is extensive mallee scrub east of the rail line, including a dirt golf course and former waste dump.

vii. Chinkapook and Chillingollah

To the south at Chinkapook and Chillingollah, small townships of several homes remain, with varied adjacent bushland reserves of good quality.

viii. Kulwin and smaller reserves

West of Manangatang a very varied and excellent former township reserve, Kulwin, has been to some extent impacted by the ILUKA mineral sands mining (which is now in process of rehabilitation). There had been extensive salination in the areas prior to mining which destroyed some unusual vegetation areas associated, though remnants of them survive. The only settlement remnants in the township area are disused grain handling storage and traces of the former railways infrastructure that ended here. A couple of cairns remember former building sites.

The ILUKA mine sites at Kulwin and further west also impact marginally on some other small reserves to the west, as well as on private properties, but remediation after mine closure includes some replanting, or offsets purchased elsewhere in the area, with similar or better natural history values.

Unfenced reserves- Stock grazing

There are some instances in the area where livestock have access at times to unfenced reserves, in some cases by deliberate intent of the owners. Proper monitoring, fencing etc. should minimise this, though there are some situation which could need more stringent action.

F. ALMOST WILDERESS: THE ANNUELLO BLOCK

“Annuello Block”: The Annuello Flora and Fauna Reserve. The huge area of virgin mallee south of Hattah and east of the Calder highway was virtually trackless when first visited prior to the **First Mallee Area Report**, except for the major power line cutting though the eastern end. A subsequent

major fire (lightning strike) led to the then Conservation Forests and Lands Department putting in three fire breaks and access roads radiating from a centre point to facilitate future fire control.

The writer of these notes, in a later conversation with David Scott- then chairman of the LCC- was told that if those firebreaks had not been constructed, this block of mallee land would have been considered as one of Victoria's first Wilderness Areas.

The writer can also attest to the area's huge variety and wildness from 10 years of monitoring Malleefowl populations in the area on behalf of the Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group. The area is still truly wild, inhabited largely with indigenous species through depreciated by the need for fire access and control.

FINAL COMMENTS

The comments herein relate almost entirely to the Eastern Mallee, which is the area Mid-Murray Field Naturalists Inc. mainly operate in. We will be happy to make ourselves available for comment, or assistance in the field if required. We certainly welcome the finalisation of this long drawn-out process.

NOTE: Cliff Beaglehole in his reports for the LCC took great pains to establish local names for most parcels of land he studied, relying on locals, as well as government bodies- hence local acceptance.

Neil Macfarlane
MMFNI Herbarium Curator
Mid-Murray Field Naturalists Inc.
PO Box 1255
Swan Hill, 3585

REFERENCES:

- River Red Gum Forests Investigation - Final Report. July 2008
Victorian Environment Assessment Council (VEAC)
<http://trove.nla.gov.au/work/25397902?q&versionId=44717618+209380218>
- Mallee Study Area - Final recommendations –1977 ISBN 0 7241 9074 0
Land Conservation Council
- Mallee Area Review – Final Recommendations 1989 ISBN 0 7241 9242 5
Land Conservation Council
- Important Bird and Biodiversity areas <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/site>
- Wandown IBA <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/sitefactsheet.php?id=26500>