

FRIENDS OF HODDLES CREEK NEWSLETTER



FOHC Newsletter is also on line at www.provender.com.au/fohc.

Thanks to Yarra Ranges Council for generously printing the Newsletter.

The Tuesday koala

Koalas return to Hoddles Creek

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Recent sightings of koalas in and around Hoddles Creek have a lot of residents excited, especially the staff and students at Hoddles Creek Primary School. Over the past three months, one koala has been spotted within the school grounds on three separate occasions, each time on a Tuesday.

Victoria has the largest number of koalas in Australia and in some areas population

former French Island koalas. The one sighted at the school does not appear to have an ear tag, which could indicate that it was a joey at the time of the release.

We are interested to hear from fellow residents to know whether our koala population is increasing. Several of the sightings have been made from cars travelling on the road (both during the day and at night time), yet another reason for the review of speed limits on Gembrook Road.



'Tuesday' enjoying the afternoon sun at Hoddles Creek Primary School

numbers become so high at times that maintenance of their food source (various species of eucalypts) is at risk due to overbrowsing. To help deal with this situation, removal and relocation of koalas may become necessary.

In October 2011, over 250 koalas were taken from French Island and released into Kirth Kiln Regional Park as part of the Victorian Koala Management Strategy undertaken by the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE). Adult koalas were ear-tagged (males blue and females orange) while joey koalas were not tagged.

Friends of Hoddles Creek are unsure whether recent sightings are linked to these

Koalas can live for up to 20 years in the wild and only have one offspring a year, usually in the summer. The young koala remains in the mother's pouch for around six months after which it can be observed piggybacking on the mother. Weaning from the mother's milk occurs at one year of age. Due to their low energy diet of eucalypt leaves, koalas rest for most of the day and, being nocturnal animals, they are most active just after sunset. Koalas do not normally share trees and a typical koala territory ranges from 1.2 to 1.7 hectares.

More koala information can be found on the DSE website (www.dse.vic.gov.au/plants-and-animals). To report sick or injured koalas, call DSE on 13 61 86.

A burning question

Once again, we are in the time of year when bushfires and the threat of bushfires is a reality. While minimising the impact of major bushfires on life & property is of paramount importance, the Friends of Hoddles Creek are concerned that the use of prescribed burning to reduce the risk of bushfires could do more harm than good in some circumstances.

We have a particular interest in bushfire management plans and fear that deliberately increasing the frequency of fire may lead to loss of biodiversity and degrading of ecosystems whilst achieving little to protect life and property.



Inappropriate fire regimes are regarded as a significant threat to biodiversity in Victoria and are listed as a potentially threatening process under the 1988 Victorian Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act.

In the wake of the 2009 fires, the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission made 67 recommendations. Number 56 was that “The State fund and commit to implementing a long-term program of prescribed burning based on an annual rolling target of 5 per cent minimum of public land.” This was interpreted as 270,000 hectares by the former Labour Government and increased to 390,000 hectares under the current Liberal Government.

Historical support for widespread burning questioned

Proponents of such burning regimes often claim that our plants have evolved with fire and that the original

aboriginal settlers burnt extensively and often. However, some researchers are now questioning this perceived wisdom. In the most comprehensive survey to date, an international team of scientists led by Dr Scott Mooney, of the University of NSW, analysed results from more than 220 sites in Australasia dating back 70,000 years. Their study of charcoal records suggests that the arrival of the first Australians about 50,000 years ago did not result in significantly greater fire activity across the continent. Their research indicates that the aboriginals were using fire at a local scale, but not with the major impact that most people have thought. Dr Mooney concludes that the popular

notion that Aborigines carried out widespread burning of the Australian landscape is a myth.

In contrast, these findings suggest that it was the arrival of European colonists more than 200 years ago that led to a substantial increase in fires. What we really need to consider is whether carrying out the prescribed burning regimes will indeed protect our properties and our lives.

The legacy of the 2009 fires

The loss of 172 lives in the 2009 fires was a tragedy that we hope will never be repeated. Would lives have been saved on that day

if more of the bushland had been burned in recent times? A careful reading of available evidence suggests the answer to this question is no, especially when one



considers the extreme weather conditions on the day and the circumstances in which so many of the fatalities occurred.

An extensive analysis of the circumstances surrounding all deaths was undertaken by John Handmer and others in the 2010 “Review of Fatalities”, prepared for the Victorian



Bushfires Royal Commission. This review found that more than half of those who perished had no clear bushfire safety plan and many people perished while passively sheltering in unsafe places. Of the 30 per cent of fatalities that occurred among people defending their properties, only 5 per cent were well prepared to do so. Less than 1 per cent of fatalities involved people who had decided to evacuate and were well prepared.

According to Joan Webster, author of *Essential Bushfire Safety Tips* (CSIRO Publishing) "*The research findings show unequivocally that people died on that dreadful day not because of the bushfire itself, not because of any emergency controller, not because they stayed to defend their homes, but because they did not know enough about how to react safely.*"

It also needs to be remembered that the extreme weather conditions on that day caused spot fires in excess of 25 kilometres ahead of the main fires. The evidence clearly indicates that many more lives could have been saved if people had a better understanding of the risks and how to protect themselves and their homes. The evidence for the efficacy of planned burning under these extreme conditions is much less apparent.

It is unfortunate that although there are statistics regarding the loss of life and the circumstances, the Royal Commission obtained no information regarding the many people who safely and successfully defended their homes –

information that may have been very useful in improving defence strategies for the future.

As noted in a previous newsletter, research by Dr Phillip Gibbons from the Australian National University showed that all fuel treatments were more effective if undertaken closer to houses. In short, clearing to reduce risk within 40 metres of a house was far more effective than fuel reduction some kilometres away. Gibbons stated that a shift in emphasis away from broad-scale fuel reduction to more intensive fuel treatments closer to properties would be more effective. The proximity to houses of fuel reduction treatment is more important

than the total percentage of the landscape that is burnt through prescribed burns. These authors also noted that it remains untested whether the strategy of prescribed burning is effective in extreme weather conditions. (There is a copy of this report on the FOHC website for anyone interested in reading the whole report.)

Planning and preparation is vital

Bushfire preparation requires an awareness of the fire risk and knowledge of what to do in a fire situation. It is important to have a contingency plan if your first plan cannot be carried out. So let's be sensible. Take precautions to reduce fuel around our homes. Have a practical fire plan that may include leaving your property on or before days of extreme fire risk. Know whether you are physically and emotionally able to defend your property. Attend local CFA meetings (they happen each year) to be informed of how to best look after yourself, your family and your home.

Then, with these plans in place, remember that most of us live in this area because we value our bushland environment and accept that living here is not without risk. This means doing all we can to understand the importance of our native plants and animals and working to ensure that we are all protected.

Photos in this article were taken at the Hansen Creek Road prescribed burn (GB300), conducted in March 2012.

References used in this article

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Hoddles Creek history

Part One

Hoddles Creek was named after the Senior Surveyor for NSW and planner of Melbourne city streets, Robert Hoddle. In 1844-5 he conducted a survey of the Yarra River from its lower reaches to its source. In December, 1844, he camped on the creek named after him and not far from this camp built a bridge to take his dray across the creek.

By 1862, the gold rush was in full swing and a Post Office opened at Hoddles Creek (first known as Hoddles Creek

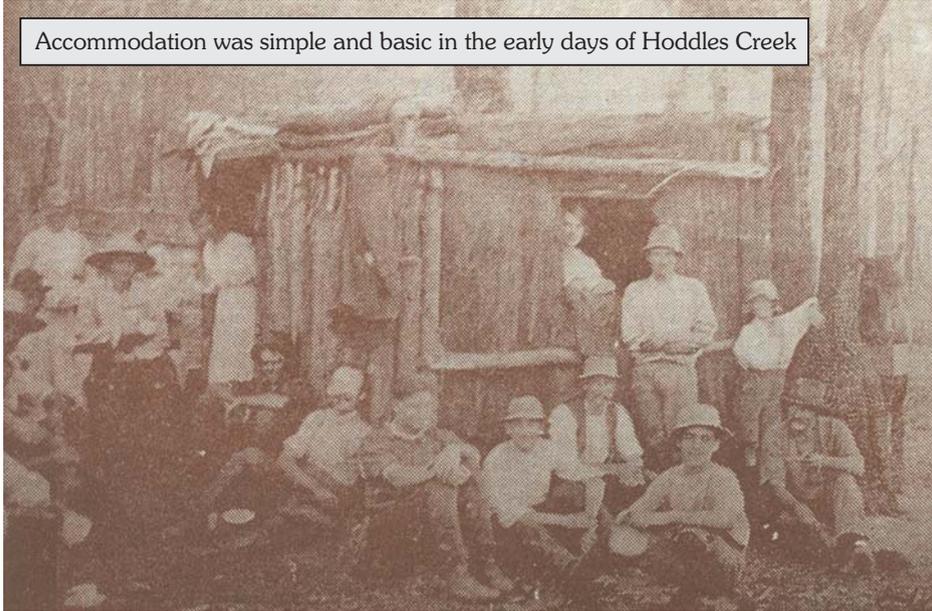
With the clearing of the landscape as a result of logging it was inevitable that farming became a prospective and profitable source of income. The rich soil and gentle sloping hills gave way to agricultural crops, with orchards, vineyards, berries, vegetables and cut flowers and this industry has continued until the present day.

A community hall, built by a working bee around 1909, served numerous purposes over the years, including schooling, meetings, functions and even a wedding, in 1956. In 1962, electricity came to Hoddles Creek with the official switch-on ceremony held at the hall. By this time, the old weatherboard building had seen better days and the community rallied to raise funds for a new hall. Following

the demolition of the old hall and sale of the land in the 1970s, sufficient funds had been raised to construct the present hall on the site of the recreation reserve.

(Extracts and photograph from 'Hoddles Creek, the School and District', written and financed by D. Burville to celebrate the centenary of Hoddles Creek Primary School in April 1975. Part 2 of this article will appear in the Autumn Newsletter).

Accommodation was simple and basic in the early days of Hoddles Creek



Falls), serving as a postal village in the Upper Yarra for the alluvial gold mining industry. The post office was closed and reopened on numerous occasions and on various sites over the next one hundred years until it was officially and finally closed in 1967.

The surrounding country was mountainous and scrubby and covered with heavy timber. The flatlands were particularly swampy in winter. The only communication with Lilydale and Warburton was by pack and saddle horse, or dray passing along the Hoddles Creek (Gembrook) Road.

In 1875, The Australian Handbook noted of Hoddles Creek that... "The township is an improving one and the mining and pastoral interest in particular, one reef is known to exist and it is believed by residents that enterprising capitalists would be well rewarded".

Not everyone (if anyone) found their fortune in mining and an alternative source of income was found in the timber industry. Numerous mills operated in the Hoddles Creek area and large stands of eucalypts were felled and milled. The aftermath of the 1926 and then 1939 bushfires brought about a major change to the timber industry with the destruction of the rail lines that were used to move the logs and the burnt undergrowth taken over by vigorous regrowth of wattles.

Gembrook Road speed limit review moves at snails pace

Six months ago, FOHC made a formal request to VicRoads to review speed limits along Gembrook Road. We suggested that the number of speed zones be reduced and the maximum speed limit be lowered from 100 km/h to 80 km/h. In October 2012, we received a response from Louie Chuson, Traffic Operations Engineer for VicRoads Metro South East region, that our proposal was to be submitted to the speed limit panel for review. Recent requests to VicRoads for an update have revealed only that the matter is still 'under review', with no consideration for funding likely before 2014. If we want any changes to this situation, it is clear that further action will be required. We will keep you informed.

Come on and join FOHC

The Friends of Hoddles Creek are always on the lookout for new members. To join, just contact us with your name, address and phone or email details. You can mail these to FOHC, PO Box 298 Yarra Junction, Vic 3797, or email us at friendsofhoddlescreek@gmail.com.

See more at our website (www.provender.com.au/fohc) or on Facebook – just search 'Friends of Hoddles Creek' or 'FOHC'.

