

The Public are being Ignored in Discussions about Public Land

In early September the Victorian Government's Forest Industry Taskforce released its 'statement of intent' which made it clear that this group was actively working towards the creation of new National Parks in the Central Highlands.

Prior to the 2014 election, Labor made a commitment that this Taskforce would consist of 'relevant stakeholders'; when the Taskforce was formed in late 2015 the most relevant stakeholders – the public who use the land – were not included. Interestingly the Taskforce also has no representation from foresters or anyone with a practical understanding of the realities of administering public land.

In response to concerns about the lack of consultation, recreational land users were assured both that they would have 'direct access' for close and regular consultation with the Taskforce and, that the Taskforce would be solely focussed on the timber industry and would not be considering the creation of any new National Parks. No such consultation has occurred with recreational users and the statement of intent clearly shows that 'establishing new parks and reserves' has been front and centre in the Taskforce's discussions.

The terms of reference set out that the Taskforce would complete its work with the delivery of recommendations (now reframed as a 'Statement of Intent') by the end of June 2016; it is now clear that the Taskforce will continue indefinitely.

Central to the reluctant acceptance by recreational users of the already compromised Taskforce process was the understanding that the chair would be independent and impartial. The appointment of Professor Don Henry to that position raises serious concerns. For more than a decade (until very recently) Professor Henry was the CEO of the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF). The ACF is a vocal supporter of the creation of a new national park in the Victorian Central Highlands and has a member on the Taskforce. The ACF actually shares an office building with other protagonists for new parks, including the leader of the Victorian Greens Party and even other members of the Forest Industry Taskforce such as the Victorian National Parks Association.

The Australian Deer Association do not have an ideological position either for or against national parks, we do however have a clear and consistent position that decisions which affect us should be based on evidence, facts and data; not on ideology and prejudice.

In a previous edition of *Australian Deer*, we outlined how the creation of national parks had become an ideological and political end unto itself – regardless of whether the locking up of land was the only way or even the most effective way of protecting biodiversity. For politicians, creating national parks has become the soft option. They appease well-organised, well-resourced and vocal lobby groups without being responsible for ensuring that the land they lock up is properly maintained; thereby creating repositories for weeds and pests.

In the process recreational users of public land such as weekend fossickers and hunters are either collateral damage at best or ideological scalps at worst.

If past performance is a measure, the great danger is that this will turn out to be another Taskforce that is working towards an ideological end favoured by its chair and the majority of its members; and that ideology will trump evidence. The fact that all of the work is being done behind closed doors without even the appearance of transparency amplifies these concerns.

A close examination of the claims advanced to support creating national parks shows that all of them (other than the sign that says 'national park') can be achieved under the existing land tenure.

Viewing this issue through a political lens it is clear that there are some who believe that ceding to the demands of the green lobby will help Labor in particular, but also the Liberals, stave off encroachments by the Greens Party in inner-suburban electorates. Logic says that the reverse is true. The Greens Party have already successfully claimed 'ownership' of the push to create new national parks. Any subsequent delivery by a party of government will inevitably lead to the Greens Party both claiming credit and making claims that more of the same could be achieved by installing more Greens in Spring Street. Remember, the Greens Party leader literally shares an office building with the protagonists - any notion that they can be uncoupled is fanciful.

The inevitable result of creating another unnecessary national park once again will be the disenfranchising of tens of thousands of recreational land users such as hunters, trail bike riders, fishermen, prospectors and mountain bike riders whose access would inevitably be curtailed due to the closure of forestry roads and tracks and regulatory constraints that have accompanied the declaration of every regional national park in Victoria's history. As one wag recently put it – 'they'll be cheering the Greens in Fitzroy and jeering the Government in Frankston'.

The Victorian Government has made a couple of sound, evidence based decisions lately which have protected and improved the amenity of recreational deer hunters. The decisive quashing of the proposed no camping with firearms areas in the Alpine Parks and the decades' overdue enabling of access for balloted hunting on Snake Island are shining examples of this. The un-consultative and exclusionary approach to running this Taskforce to date is neither evidence based nor sound.

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Empty steps! The lobby pushing for new Parks is small in size but is vocal, well resourced and well organised.