

## **The Gippsland Environment Group's submission regarding the changes to the Owl Management Areas in East Gippsland**

The Gippsland Environment Group Inc. was formed in 2005 by residents in the Bairnsdale district who were concerned with the on-going decline in the health of the environment. Our goal is to see improved ecosystem management for biodiversity conservation, especially in our local area.

The Gippsland Environment Group welcomes the opportunity to comment on the recent changes to the Owl Management Areas in East Gippsland. We recognize the importance of owls within ecosystems as iconic top-order predators that are 'indicators' of ecosystem health and well as 'umbrella species', because their conservation measures should cater for a range of other forest dependent fauna. It is based on these reasons why the Masked Owl was chosen as our group's symbol (see above).

We are concerned that recent amendments to the Owl Management Areas will result in a negative outcome for the three large forest owls.

If we are to manage our forests sustainably and find a balance between sometimes conflicting management objectives (e.g. owl conservation and logging) we must base conservation measures on the best, up-to-date science available. Sadly, the Action Statements for the Powerful, Masked and Sooty Owls are actually rather old and conservation measures are actually based upon speculation (or hope) that they work. To our understanding, no testing of current conservation measures has been conducted to establish whether conservation measures meet their objective. Additionally to this, conservation concerns raised by recent studies of owls have not been addressed by the recent amendments to the Owl Management Areas, despite the Action Statements specifying that they will be reviewed within 5 years or once new knowledge becomes available (the Powerful Owl Action Statement is now 13 years old).

We are concerned that current amendments to the Owl Management Areas result in a reduction of the SPZ system (of approximately 6500ha), when recent evidence indicates that the size of Owl Management Area's should actually increase (Bilney et al. 2011, *EMU* **111**, 92-99). This is because owls have been shown to occupy home-ranges much larger than the 500ha SPZ's, and somewhere in the order of several thousand hectare (over 4000ha has been recorded for both Sooty Owls and Powerful Owls) while owls have also been shown to actively avoid logging regrowth. Logging reduces the amount of food, nesting and roosting opportunities in the landscape (due to reductions in densities of hollow-bearing trees), and although owls can tolerate some logging within their home-ranges, as the amount of logged forest increases this will result in owls home-ranges and territories expanding and probably result in reductions in breeding success (due to increased energy expenditure) and reduced owl populations. Therefore, we believe that any reduction to the SPZ system will negatively impact owl populations, and ultimately we believe (based on scientific research) that more habitat should be preserved for owls.

Of further concern is that since 2003 substantial wildfires have occurred with over 3 million hectares being burnt in Victoria, along with increased fuel reduction burning. How have the fires impacted upon

owl populations? And what are the population trends of the owls? Are the statewide owl populations above the 500 pair target specified under the Action Statement? These fires have incorporated a large proportion of the distribution of the Sooty Owl and Powerful Owl in particular, yet this factor does not appear to have been considered in the amendments to the Owl Management Areas in East Gippsland. East Gippsland is likely to provide considerable refuge for all three of the owl species. Long-term drought may also have affected their overall population size.

We are concerned that there are few Owl Management Areas in state forest in the foothills, and they are instead focused in coastal and higher elevation forests in National Parks. Many SPZ's within prime logging habitat appear to have been removed. We would like to see a more even spread of SPZ's throughout the landscape.

Are the Powerful Owl Management Areas 800ha in size (as specified in the Action Statement)? They appear to be the same size as Sooty Owls and Masked Owls which are supposed to be at least 500ha.

Have the 'released' Owl Management Areas actually been surveyed recently to indicate whether the owls no longer occupy the area?

We are concerned that many Owl Management Areas and SPZ's actually cater for several species. Instead, owls are likely to consume many of the same prey species (especially Sooty and Powerful Owls), yet only 500ha is allocated for sometimes 2 or even 3 owl species. Surely individual Owl Management Areas should not overlap other owl species Management Areas entirely.

Thank you for allowing us the opportunity to provide comments on this important conservation measure.

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