

Forest up in smoke

The forest walk along the Gippsland Lakes Discovery Trail between Log Crossing and the Mississippi Quarry in Colquhoun Regional Park near Lakes Entrance, must be one of the most beautiful old growth forest walks anywhere in the country, according to many residents of Lakes Entrance and surrounds.

"This remnant stretch of rare lowland Riparian Old Growth Forest, along the Mississippi Creek, is unique," local resident Charley Daniels said.

The diverse range of towering Manna Gums, River Peppermints, Blue Gums, Grey Gum, Messmates, Blue Box and Apple Box, host an incredibly rich variety of birds, Lyrebirds, rare Spotted Quail Trush, Honeyeaters – Scarlett, Yellow-Tufted, Lewins, White-Napped, Crescent, Beautiful Firetails, Gang Gangs and Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos, Yellow Robins, Gerygones the list goes on and on.

The lush green understory of old Blackwoods, Rough Tree Fern, Pomaderris, Blue Olive Berry, River Lomatia, Current bush and a host of delicate ferns, sedges, fungi and mosses, create a mostly, fire sensitive or fire exclusive environment.

"Unlike dryer Eucalypt forests, this forest shows little or no sign of historical fire. There is little or no fuel build up as the leaf litter is swiftly broken down into rich moist hummus by the birds, small mammals, insects, micro-organisms and fungi," Charley said.

"It is a green moist sanctuary."

The bad news, according to Charley, is Fire Forest Management Victoria (FFMV) is going to incinerate this forest within the next month.

"A large burn of 1373 Ha (GP-TBO-NOW-0504) has been planned to go right through the middle of this magnificent, unburned forest. This forest is not a fire hazard, it is not fire prone, in fact it is a fire buffer, a fire break, that can stop wildfires in their tracks and has done so for hundreds of years," Charley said.

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To burn or not to burn?

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"The FFMA planned burn in this forest will change it forever, it will kill the fire sensitive species, which are replaced with fire dependant species, such as bracken, that recolonise after such fires. Another recent planned burn, that burned from the west side of the trail down to the creek, killed off the Blue Olive Berry and other fire sensitive species and has left a paddock of fire prone bracken in its place.

"Anyone who loves forests must go and have look at this magnificent forest while you still can and decide for yourself what will be the impact of such a large fire through this fire sensitive ecosystem.

"Access to the trail is easy, the walk is a flat and easy and you can go by bike or horse if you wish. The whole trail is 17km but if you enter from Log Crossing you are straight into the old growth forest."

Charley pointed out there are many carers who are distraught about these planned burns because they are done in areas where rescued animals have been released.

Lisa Roberts is with Gippsland Environment Group and Friends of Bats and Habitat Gippsland and also has grave concerns about certain burn offs, in particular: Forest Fire Management Victoria, (FFMV) plan to burn 11,000 hectares of Glossy Black Cockatoo critical habitat in East Gippsland over the next three years, 2024 – 2026.

"Much of this Glossy Black Cockatoo critical habitat is in Coastal Parks and Reserves including Colquhoun Forest Park 2000Ha plus burn that is the very western occurrence of the Glossy Black Cockatoos' range," Lisa said.

"The unburnt coastal forest between Colquhoun Forest Park, Lakes Entrance and the Snowy River is the heartland of the Victorian Glossy Black Cockatoo population, which numbers only 35-40 individuals.



Areas that have been burnt near Log Crossing have come back with just bracken fern.



"Glossy Black Cockatoos are critically endangered in Victoria and listed as vulnerable nationally. The 2019-20 bushfires burnt through 64 per cent of the species' modelled habitat. Twenty-six per cent of their habitat was burnt by high severity fire," she said.

Deputy Chief Fire Officer, Gippsland, Sam Quigley stated planned burns play a critical role in reducing the size, intensity, and impact of future bushfires, helping to protect lives, property and the environment.

"Before all planned burns we prepare well in advance using fire behaviour modelling and on-ground assessments to ensure conditions are suitable and safe," he said.

FFMVIC stated they work with emergency sector partners including CFA, FRV and EMV to manage bushfire risk, prepare communities and respond to bushfires and other emergencies.

The Colquhoun Franks Track planned burn has been on the Joint Fuel Management Program for 12 months. Bushfire risk reduction works in this area are a priority in line with the Gippsland Bushfire Management Strategy.

Delivery of this burn will be determined by suitable weather conditions. The planned burning schedule is adaptable to allow for

flexibility based on weather conditions, meaning they can deploy resources to where the best opportunities are.

"Management of all planned burns including those referenced is informed by local knowledge, science and our bushfire modelling technology," Mr Quigley said.

"Our approach is underpinned by evidence, local knowledge and continuous improvement.

"This burn has been carefully planned to protect biodiversity values present in the landscape with site specific mitigations in place.

Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFM-Vic) conduct planned burns where they will achieve the greatest impact on reducing the risk of bushfire to the community and the environment.

"We greatly appreciate the understanding and support from communities across the region when delivering our planned burning program, we work every day to make communities safer," Mr Quigley said.

To keep up to date on planned burns near you, sign up to receive notifications at <https://www.vic.gov.au/plannedburns> or download the VicEmergency app.

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