

A TALE of WOE for the HARMANS VALLEY LAVA FLOW

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In early March, Marjorie Coggan and I attended a public hearing at Hamilton in Western Victoria into a land use planning issue concerning the nearby Harmans Valley lava flow. At the hearing I spoke on behalf of ACKMA and also the IUS Commission on Volcanic Caves of which I am Chairman.

The Harmans Valley lava flow, which came from the Mt Napier volcano, contains the Byaduk lava caves. The Mt Napier volcano and many lava caves are within the boundaries of the Mt Napier State Park and as such are protected. However, most of the flow is on private property where, until recently, it had not been afforded much protection at all.

Several caves are known to exist on private property but little is known about them.

As the lava flow is very young (around 40,000 years old), many surface features of the flow are still visible. It is regarded by experts as the best preserved flow in Australia and is very important for education and research purposes. It also has aboriginal and early-European cultural heritage significance as well as dramatic landscape values. When viewed from some

vantage points, the flow can be seen at the bottom of a pre-existing valley with the volcanic source (Mt Napier) in the background (see photo). A public viewing point has been constructed beside the Hamilton-Port Fairy Road at one of these vantage points.

In recent years, some sections of the flow have been bulldozed, crushed and levelled to improve its farming potential. Unfortunately, this has obliterated some surface features and, as the most significant damage has been in areas that are visible from the public viewing point, the landscape significance has been diminished.

Prior to 2004, areas visible from the viewing point had been subject to small-scale quarrying and rock removal operations over a long period of time but these had not had a major impact on either important geological features of the flow or on the overall landscape vista. However the 2004 rock crushing operations flattened an estimated 15 hectares and 'surplus' rock was pushed into large heaps. At the time, a number of geologists, including the late Ken Grimes, agitated for action to prevent further damage and the local Council



*Harmans Valley as it was in 1975
Photo: John Brush*



*2018 - also note the plantations in the background obscuring the base of Mount Napier
Photo: John Brush*

apparently agreed to place an Environmentally Significant Overlay (ESO) over the flow area. A couple of months later, the Victorian Government produced maps of the proposed ESO area based on information that was provided by Ken. Unfortunately, the ESO was never implemented.

After a change of landowners, further rock crushing operations commenced in November 2015. The works were soon halted after a stop-work order was issued and the owner was asked to complete a Cultural Heritage Management Plan. The landowner recommenced work in mid-2016 to the east of (ie up-flow from) the 2004 work but from photos taken at the time, it is apparent that they also re-worked the areas crushed in 2004. In July 2016, another stop-work order was issued under the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006. Then, in October 2016 following representations to the Minister for Planning, an interim Significant Landscape Overlay (SLO) was imposed over that area of the flow that was on private land within the Southern Grampians Shire. This basically meant that a permit was required to undertake any 'works'.

The Interim SLO will expire on 31 October 2018 and the purpose of the public hearing was to consider whether the SLO should be made permanent. As a first step in the process, last September a draft permanent SLO was released for public comment and submissions were invited by 20 October 2017. A total of 74 submissions

was received, including one by ACKMA and two by individual members of ACKMA. Most of the submissions supported the SLO being made permanent.

At the Hamilton hearing, there were 18 presentations over two days, including several by landowners, the local Traditional Owners Corporation, academic institutions, naturalist groups and, as already noted, by ACKMA and the Commission on Volcanic Caves. A wide range of views was expressed in the hearing and during a field inspection. The hearing and outside discussions took place in a constructive and productive manner and a range of amendments proposed to the draft SLO addressed some of the concerns of landowners (most of whom were not keen on the SLO being made permanent) as well as those of the organisations seeking permanent protection of the flow.

The Planning Panel Chairman now has six weeks to finalise his report which will then go to Council for consideration, public comment and decision. If considered necessary, the Minister can intervene and override a decision of Council. Unless of course if a state election is called before the Council position is finalised. Even if a permanent SLO is implemented, Council will need to have the resources and inclination to ensure compliance.

At a later date I hope to be able to report on a good outcome on this issue and will provide an update at the ACKMA Conference in May.