

Harmans Valley lava flow receives permanent protection

John Brush

UIS Commission on Volcanic Caves

The iconic landscape vista of the Harmans Valley lava flow (near Hamilton in western Victoria) will be permanently protected following a recent decision by the Victorian Minister for Planning.

The vehicle for protection, which was gazetted on 18 October 2018, was an amendment (Amendment C36) to the Southern Grampians Planning Scheme to include a Significant Landscape Overlay (SLO) over those parts of the flow that lie on privately-owned land within the Southern Grampians Shire.

As noted in the ACKMA Journal No 110 in March 2018, the area had been afforded interim protection under a temporary SLO that was due to expire on 31 October this year.

The Harmans Valley lava flow is about 20 kilometres long. It originated at the Mt Napier volcano and flowed across the landscape in a pre-existing valley. At about 40,000 years old, the flow is one of the most recent in Australia. It is widely regarded as having one of the most intact and significant collections of young volcanic features in Australia and for being the best local example of a lava flow constrained by a valley.

Mt Napier and the upper section of the flow, which contain the renowned Byaduk lava caves, were already protected as they are within the Mt Napier State Park. However, most of the flow lies beyond the park boundaries where it had almost no protection until the interim SLO was applied in October 2016. Prior to that date, parts of the flow were significantly damaged in 2004 and again in 2015-16 by 'rock-crushing', an operation that pulverises and smooths the rock surface to make it more suitable for grazing, and by small-scale quarrying activities over a period of many years.



A view of the Harman Valley lava flow with Mount Napier beyond (John Brush)

The intent of the permanent SLO is to protect the landscape character of the flow as well as its surface features. It will also protect several small caves that occur outside the boundaries of the Mt Napier State Park.

The process of introducing permanent protection of the flow commenced with a call for public submissions in October 2017. Of the 74 submissions made, most supported permanent protection. The Victorian Government then established a Planning Panel which, in March 2018, convened a 2 day public hearing in Hamilton at which those who had made submissions were invited to speak. I spoke on behalf of ACKMA and the UIS Commission on Volcanic Caves. Following the public hearing, the Planning Panel reported to Council and recommended permanent protection of the flow in a manner that addressed some of the concerns of landowners. The key recommendations, including changes to the proposed Amendment C36, were agreed by Council on 18 July 2018 and then submitted to the Victorian Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. On 5 October 2018, the Planning Minister formally approved Amendment C36 to the Southern Grampians Planning Scheme. This came into effect following tabling of the Amendment in Parliament and Gazettal on 18 October 2018.

The lower reaches of the Harmans Valley lava flow, within the Glenelg and Moyne Shires, are not covered by Amendment C36 and thus remain exposed to potential damage.