

HFNC Excursion to the Wilkin wildflower area on 02 June 1974

Rod Bird

Several HFNC members attended a meeting at the Wilkin School ground with a spokesperson from the Lands Department and a pine plantation company (SAPFOR), with members of Portland and Mt Gambier FNCs, Wannon Conservation Society and Ian McCallum from the Casterton Field & Game Association. The objective was to discuss a proposal to alter the Land Conservation Council's (LCC) recommendations (that had been accepted by government) to acquire areas of land requested by conservation organisations for a Wilkin Flora Reserve. That would appear to result in about half of the proposed conservation reserve going to SAPFOR for pine plantations.

[The LCC commenced an investigation here in 1971 and published recommendations in April 1973 for SW Area District 1 that included Wilkin. The proposed 3,600 ha Wilkin Park was recommended as 'uncommitted land', 'pending possible future incorporation into the park system'].

The meeting began at 11.30 am with about 100 people present. Ian McCallum presented the conservation case while at the same time looking at the issue from the point of view of the pines industry group. He did a fine job, speaking with the authority of someone familiar with the swamplands of this region and the native bird population.

Lunch was taken at 1 pm. Ian then guided the group on the trip around the disputed area across the Glenelg River. That began at 2 pm and continued until 5 pm.

Several points of clarification emerged at the meeting:

1. The area under dispute was 4,300 acres, 3,200 acres of which is Stringybark-bracken sandy banks and 1,100 acres are heath flats.
2. There are 12 swamps in the area and some are permanent. The area is a watershed and should be protected. Ian expressed the opinion that pine plantations will disturb this environment. The swamps support Latham's Snipe (a protected migratory species), Pacific Black Duck (local all year around), Brolga and Red-tailed Black-cockatoo. The Casterton Field & Game Association is concerned that these swamps will be disrupted, firstly by an excess of water following clearing and later by a deficit when the pines develop
3. The land has a narrow frontage to the Glenelg River. The Wilkin area land will not be exchanged for an area held elsewhere by SAPFOR – contrary to press reports. The pines lobby want this land to link up with pines on either side of the river.
4. The pines lobby will 'give us' the area I3 in Drajurk, which is hardwood forest classified as Multiple Purpose Land (i.e. unoccupied Crown Land). The LCC classification is 'Land with no primary use'. It can be seen as uncommitted land, set aside for future determination/use. So, we have the situation where we are being offered what we already may have, while what we think we have at Wilkin is being taken away! As it stands, the Wilkin area has 9,000 acres – losing land to the pines will halve that area.

The pines SAPFOR spokesperson made several points and replied to questions:

- They want to consolidate their extensive holdings in the Wilkin area
- It would have advantages of easy access for management and fire control
- 1,100 acres of the disputed land (the swamps) will be left intact.
- There will be a 5-chain band of undisturbed forest between any pines and swamps/watercourses (that is a new Forests Commission requirement). They claim that will safeguard any swamp and maintain a corridor for wildlife.
- The Drajurk area has 'better' flora.
- On the matter of pine invasion of the forest strips around swamps and adjacent proposed Wilkin Reserve, they stated that it was not their responsibility to control that!
- Job opportunities were hinted at but there was no undertaking that logs would be milled locally.

Hilary Turner (Wannon Conservation Society) and Fred Davies (Portland FNC) made the point that the tourist potential of the wildflower area would probably outweigh any economic benefit from pines.

