

Southern Bellarine Coastal Forum, 21 June 2019

Peter Haffenden's Response to Audience Questions

At the recent Southern Bellarine Coastal Forum time permitted only 3 questions per speaker. Following are Peter's answers to the submitted questions in order of audience voting.

1. Would you support a bike path that runs parallel to Buckley Park but not in Buckley Park?

No! For several reasons. If you followed my presentation you will remember that a key factor in our resistance to a path is the suggestion that the ecosystems in the ground unravel up to 30 metres from the edge of a newly made path. Argue me back to a 10-metre unravelling and it would still have a devastating impact on the ecosystems in the park.

Someone in the audience said this had not happened to a path at Warrnambool. I do not know the path, but I would question whether this person who asked this question knew whether the ecosystems in the ground had unravelled leaving a few bushes still standing within that distance. 'Unravelling' doesn't mean the whole lot goes it simply means the 'integrity' of the ecosystem, or the 'holding togetherness of the more invisible parts of the ecosystem' could go, without this being obvious to our eyes.

A path travelling 'parallel' to the dunes would have to run through about eight (8) private properties. This would mean several owners of properties either handing over land or selling land to who? The State Government, the City of Greater Geelong or some other body?

The landowners behind the dunes do not want a bike trail or any kind of trail near the back of their properties. They have already had too many bad experiences with illegal entries and would not welcome an open trail that led to a floodgate of curious trespassers. Furthermore, there are insurance issues with people wandering around on private properties that are working businesses. None of the people pushing for a path through the dunes have spoken to the landowners involved as far as I know.

2. It's all very well to tell how us how beautiful is Buckley Park so why not allow controlled access?

First, I am not in a position to 'allow' controlled access. The fences were up before our group, 'Friends of Buckley Park Inc. was even formed. It is a reserve fenced off by the State Government and managed by the City of Greater Geelong.

And what does 'controlled' access mean anyway? Until about 20 years ago there were no fences. Anyone could wander in and out of Buckley Park from either end. But most people didn't because it was hard going through all the scrub and bush. We have been able to protect the 'integrity' of the ecosystems of Buckley Park for twenty years because most people did not know it was even there? It has been a blind spot. And that includes most locals.

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Anyone who wanted to walk between Ocean Grove and Point Lonsdale walked, and still do, along the beach, as someone suggested at the forum. It is a fabulous walk. It is a classic walk. It is a favourite walk already.

Now I think it is beautiful, because it is wild. But many people will not see it as beautiful at all. Most of the time it might just look like a lot of stunted, scrubby trees and bushes. Which it is. It is 'beautiful' to people who are interested in indigenous ecosystems and to people trying to 'save' something of an earlier world. Foolish idealistic and romantic people. But so is the government. Every environment plan relating to the Bellarine Peninsula talks about saving 'biodiversity'.

If you really want to see what is going on then approach a local environment group. There is no shortage of environment groups in the Ocean Grove area. They have 'controlled' access, in that they go on field trips into places like Buckley Park with supervisors and people who know what is going on.

3. You appreciate Buckley Park because you have spent time in it. How do we engender care from the OG/Pt Lonsdale community about the park and also restrict them from accessing it?

Do you go around the rocks on the reef at low tide at Point Lonsdale looking for the last surviving Abalone and scrape them off the rocks for your own pleasure? Probably not? Why not? Because you know they are nearly all gone and you won't find them anyway.

The only way to protect anything is through some form of community education. Or a lot of community education. Relentless community education. You are probably aware of the campaign to protect Hooded Plover chicks on the beach between Point Lonsdale and Ocean Grove. The amount of time and effort by many people to get that across is immeasurable, but it is getting through.

Again, there are community groups in the region dedicated to saving, maintaining, protecting and monitoring a whole range of environment and other community issues. It isn't hard to find them. You can approach the Barwon Coast offices at the Barwon Heads Caravan Park for example. Drop into the Lobster Pot. Ask around. That is how everybody who is involved in these issues got involved.

4. How come Warrnambool coastal dunes paths HAVE NOT destroyed their coastal dunes?

There is no need to shout. That is a fair enough question but there could be a host of reasons. I tried looking up these Warrnambool coastal dune paths and came across a few things. The pictures I found had raised wooden platforms about the vegetation. So this particular path I was looking at was going above the dune ecosystems not through them? There are similar structures at Cape Schanck.

The stairways down to Thirteenth Beach also have this raised wooden platform structure that lifts the walker above the plants. Makes perfect sense and is a favoured way to address such issues. Whether the paths you are talking about continue like this I do not know yet. Furthermore, the dunes that I could see in the pictures I was looking

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at seemed to be a lot wider than the dunes at Buckley Park. A lot more land behind them.

I also found a 'rail trail' that seemed to be going through farmland rather than through the sand dunes.

As to an actual path across the Warrnambool dunes, I couldn't find an appropriate picture? I will try to get someone to show me on 'Google Earth'. And even then I would need to talk to someone from DELWP, based in Warrnambool or close by, to verify whether these paths had caused environment disruption or not. I am not an expert. All the statements in my presentation were given to me by experts.

My point being that I do not know or whether or not the paths through the dunes at Warrnambool have had any negative effects? Bear in mind that such effects are not always obvious. If you spray round up on your garden you cannot see all the dead Microbes and invisible creatures in the soil that you might have killed? If an ecosystem partly unravels the bushes might still be there but the ground cover might have shrivelled up. Would you notice the disappearance of the smaller plants in the system?

5. Is there a case to leave Buckley Park in its current pristine state and not develop a path?

In my presentation I showed the covers of the environment policies of the City of Greater Geelong, The G21, The Corangamite Catchment Management Authority, the Biodiversity 2037 Implementation Framework from DELWP, the Borough of Queenscliffe, Surf Coast Shire and even the United Nations, who all have some say on the management of environment issues on the Bellarine Peninsula.

All these responsible government bodies make the retention, protection, maintenance, conservation and even reclamation of local biodiversity a priority in their environment policies. If any of these organisations had any intent of applying their own policies, which all make a case to leave Buckley Park in its pristine (not so sure that is actually pristine but it is largely intact) state as a major priority in their future planning there would have been no point in there even being a discussion about a proposition to put a bike path through Buckley Park in the first place.

All these responsible government bodies are against such an idea and such a suggestion in principle. Don't take my word for it, read the reports. You might have noticed that 'compliance' in banking regulations, 'compliance' in building regulations (cladding) and 'compliance' in nearly anything in the last twenty years has basically been blatantly ignored. However, that is changing.

6. Do you disagree a path along the fence line actually assists environmental restoration works, controls current public access and asset offers protection?

To me that is like putting a hole in the bottom of a boat to let the water out.

7. Are you opposed to track going through this sensitive ecology and remanent wildlife.?

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Yes! What is this urge or this need to walk through somebody's project to protect and conserve a remnant of an ecosystem that once covered a much bigger area. There are thousands if not millions of places to walk on the Bellarine Peninsula and other part of the world. It seems a bit like a kid who has lots of toys wants the one toy somebody else has got. Simply because they don't have it. Not for any real reason.

8. Wouldn't it be better to go alongside Shell Road?

Well, Bob Jordan, from 'Bike Safe Geelong/Surfcoast, who spoke about bicycle riding on the Peninsula did not mention Shell Road as one of the dangerous routes. He certainly talked about the dangers of riding a bike on the Queenscliff/Portarlington Road and several other roads on the Peninsula, but he did not mention Shell Road as a problem Road.

Also, there is a very wide road verge along Shell Road where it seems it would be simple to put in some kind of bike path along most of Shell Road. There are a few trees here and there along the way, but not nearly as many as there are through the sand dunes.

Furthermore, a couple of the landowners have offered to donate land from the Shell Road end of their properties if it will help to encourage the placement of a bike path along Shell Road

9. Are beach walkers invading Buckley Park dunes?

I don't think I would say beach walkers are 'invading' the Buckley Park dunes. In fact there are remarkably few people walking from the beach onto the dunes. And a light exploration into the dunes is not really a great problem.

A bigger problem might be people coming in through the Fellows Road paths and onto the dunes. They are usually local and usually have a low impact. It is probably more an issue of the number of people walking through the dunes. There were some problems with dogs wandering freely but this problem seems to have eased recently with greater awareness about the plight of the Hooded Plovers.

Probably the biggest issues are people making bike paths on the back of the dunes close to the private properties. There has been an ongoing battle between landowners at the back of the dunes and intruders for years. Someone makes a bike path and then a landowner or land manager will block off the path. There have been some heated confrontations.

10. How do you stop/report current private landowners removing vegetation and illegally changing fencelines?

This is not really a big problem. There was some problem with the houses in Lockington Crescent extending their backyard furniture into Buckley Park at the Fellows Road end of the park. But this was dealt with by the City of Greater Geelong.

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The larger landowners along Shell Road have proved to be very supportive and very cooperative. One major landowner along Shell Road, with a kilometre of land backing onto Buckley Park, has been a founding member of the 'Friends of Buckley Park'. Most of the others have been involved in a major environment 'connectivity project' organised by Friends of Buckley Park and the Bellarine Catchment Network. So, most of them have actually added vegetation to the broader ecosystems in that area.

Furthermore, there are a couple of unknown Moonah Groves on the larger private properties which extend the ecosystems of the dunes into the woodlands behind them. So, the existence of the larger properties has actually helped preserve this system beyond the government owned land that is Buckley Park

11. Are there any WW1/2 defence remnants in Buckley Park?

There are certainly WW1/2 defence remnants around Buckley Park. I haven't seen any actually in Buckley Park, but I wouldn't be surprised if they were there. Most of the defence remnants that I know are in the dunes area between the Point Lonsdale Lighthouse and Fellows Road.

This is not technically Buckley Park, as far as I know, but it is definitely part of the same dunes system. There are also the remains of tank traps built during WW2. These are on the Menheere Quarry site, halfway between Point Lonsdale and Ocean Grove.

I am very familiar with these WW2 remnants, particularly near the Point Lonsdale end. I have been playing in them all my life. Still do.

12. Do you deny most of the vegetation on Buckley Park was planted since the 1950's?

I know most of the vegetation was not planted since the 1950s. Perhaps some Marram Grass has been planted on the dunes and has spread profusely but I don't know what else you think has been planted since the 1950s?

I have been in the Friends of Buckley Park since 1999 and we haven't planted a thing. Most environment groups have only really been active for about 20 years and I don't know of any who have planted things in Buckley Park. Most environment groups have been removing weeds rather than planting anything. Maybe there has been a bit of planting at the Collendina end of Buckley Park. But that is only in the last couple of years.

The first speaker gave an impression that there no plants on the dunes in the 1950s. I pointed out that there are quite a few Moonah trees and Moonah groves at the Point Lonsdale of Buckley Park. And those trees have been there longer than Europeans have been on the Bellarine Peninsula. Europeans wiped out nearly all the Wattle trees on the Bellarine Peninsula and probably the Moonahs in the paddocks, but they didn't seem to touch the Moonah trees in the dunes.

The Warrigal greens and the pigface have grown themselves. Plants don't always need humans to plant them. Some plants are quite capable of planting themselves. In fact, most plants are capable of planting themselves. I said at the presentation that the dunes

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might have been degraded in the 1950s, but they were not destroyed. Whenever I have been in the park, inspecting one thing or another, I have been pleased to see a number of new plants establishing themselves in the sand. My favourite is to watch a young Cushion Bush struggling to establish its roots in the sand. Left alone the dunes have been quite capable of re-establishing themselves over the seventy years that have passed since the 1950s. Accompanied with millions of weeds that have also established themselves alongside the indigenous revival.

Recently the City of Greater Geelong have cleared a lot of land of weeds at the eastern end of Buckley Park. They burnt tons of Bellarine Pea and other weeds and without any extra help a whole variety of indigenous plants have popped up all by themselves in the hundreds in their place.

On another point, several years ago I happened to visit the 12 Apostles near Port Campbell. I think it was even before we formed the Friends of Buckley Park? We went for a walk along the cliffs and I couldn't help but notice that this cliff coastland, so much further away from Melbourne than Point Lonsdale, had a much less interesting set of vegetation. Didn't make sense?

Then I learned that the local farms had gone right to the edge of the cliffs until recently. Unlike at Point Lonsdale where the coastal strip had been preserved or reserved. There was a marked difference between the degraded but surviving ecosystems of Buckley Park and the cliff tops at the famous 12 Apostles region. I remember thinking at the time, well before any environment consciousness, that this was a pretty amazing discovery and that the coastal dune system at Point Lonsdale was a pretty unique place.

Do you have a garden?

13. Do you believe a linear shared trail is feasible?

I work in a museum in a park, Pipemakers Park, on the banks of the Maribyrnong River in the City of Maribyrnong. There is a shared path on the banks of the river. I often take school groups and other groups for a walk in the park because there are a number of items in the park that can be used as part of a walk and talk.

Part of the tour takes place on the banks of the river. To get to the river we have to cross the shared path. This is really traumatic because I have to warn the groups about the maniacs who came racing along that path at a tremendous speed. It can be really dangerous.

I read the letters to the editor in the Age quite regularly. Whenever there is a letter from a cyclist about the insensitivity of car drivers there is often a flood of letters from pedestrians and milder cyclists complaining about the insensitivity of some cyclists. We only have shared paths anywhere because no one can think of what else to do. They might work but I would not be keen on walking along a narrow path shared with bicycles.

So, a shared path, to be safe at all, is going to have to be a certain width, probably defined by insurance guidelines, which would then threaten the environmental

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concerns. So the feasibility of a shared path would probably be challenged on a number of grounds.

14. Why do we talk about bikes so consistently? Why not a walking path like what exists at the Fellows Rd end?

Leaving the walking path open into Buckley Park a few years ago was a controversial decision, although not a serious one. The path only goes for a couple of hundred metres and leads almost directly to the beach. This path is now fenced off on either side.

Although it has led to people accessing a large sand dune on its west side which has an erosion problem because of a number of people 'exploring' it. It is a great sand dune to slide down. It is quite fun to slide down the sand dunes and most of us older people did it when we were younger. We also drove cars without seat belts. But we don't let our kids leave off the seat belts because we didn't wear them when we were younger. We are learning all the time.

There is a walking path from a tourist holiday place just west of Fellows Road through to the beach. It is a very narrow path and appears to be treated relatively responsibly.

The other path that leads into Buckley Park, near a beautiful patch of Moonahs by the way, is the path that has been used for a series of parties in the dunes over the last three (3) years that have been organised by a group of teenagers whose families are regular holiday makers at Point Lonsdale.

The first of these parties was pretty quiet and the revellers left the dunes fairly clean. The third party involved a knifing, abuse of police, a pile of rubbish, and a fair bit of broken plants in the vicinity of the party. The role of social media in this escalation of danger and destruction cannot be over estimated.

Otherwise there is no path along the top of the dunes. There are trails or a trail behind the dunes, close to the fence separating the park from the private properties, that people access illegally. Traffic has been relatively quiet but has led to several incidents with City of Greater Geelong staff managing and monitoring vegetation and private landowners.

15. Where the vegetation is sensitive could raised boardwalks reduce the damage?

A very interesting question? It has been mentioned but not seriously discussed. Usually these raised platforms are only a few metres long. I suspect a five-kilometre raised platform of wood travelling for five (5) kilometres through Buckley Park might keep the echidnas safe but might be a bit costly? I don't know. I would have to get a quote.

One problem would be that it might work for walkers but might not work for cyclists. And even if it was only for walkers I imagine that a number of cyclists, who take a broader view of 'the rules', would ride along it anyway.

Another problem with such an otherwise workable proposal is that a number of people would want to climb out of the confines of the wooden platform to explore some of the things they saw from the platform. There would also be the almost irresistible urge to

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climb off the platform and walk up the dunes to see what part of the beach you were up to? As a fifteen-year-old I would do exactly that. I would not see any problem with that and would wonder what all the fuss could possibly be about.

I would have no concept that my footsteps in the sand could actually disturb anything. I would also have no concept that if 20 people did what I did that it would have any effect on the landscape or vegetation.

Also, on a full moon night I would get some of my friends to get some beer, or some of those pretty cans with Bourbon and raspberry lemonade, and walk or ride down the trail or boardwalk for a while to go to our 'special spot' in the dunes, which we had 'discovered', and have a party.

16. Are you aware marsupials are present at the Black Rock Bike Path

No I am not aware that 'marsupials' are present along the Black Rock Bike Path? What kind of marsupials? I have heard there are some of those Black Faced Wallabies around Breamlea somewhere. But I have never seen one. I will make it a pilgrimage next Summer.

17. What happened to the native grasses after the introduction of the dune Marram grass.

Gosh! I don't know much about that. I don't think I could even name one of the native grasses. I will look into it. I know someone who will know.

18. How has the dune character been altered.

When I was a teenager, in the late 1950s or the early 1960s, I had to carry my young sister over the large sand dune at Point Lonsdale that led to the surf beach because the sand was so hot it was burning her feet. It was burning my feet too but at least I wasn't screaming.

That large sand dune is gone. It has been replaced by built paths and trails. And some planting of coastal wattles to bind the sand. Actually, this might be the planting that an earlier question addressed. Except this is not Buckley Park. This is the sand dune system connected to Buckley Park but there was no planting west of Fellows Road, which is where Buckley Park begins.

Basically, it seems that there is more vegetation on the dunes, both indigenous plants re-establishing themselves and weeds invading the dunes. However, it seems the basic structure of the dunes has remained pretty much the same. Although there is one large sand dune, just west of Fellows Road, that has re-shaped itself on the beach side of the dune. It had a big hollow in front of it but the fore dune has broken down a bit and the hollow has filled up with sand. And it has re-vegetated itself with pig face and young cushion bushes and some spiky indigenous plants. Some trees, indigenous trees or bushes have also moved down the dune a bit.

There has been a magnificent effort by the City of Ocean Grove Environment team to remove a good deal of the more noxious weeds at the Western end of Buckley Park and

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around the Collendina area of the park. Notably the Bellarine Pea, which had seriously clogged up the native ecosystems.

19. Think it should be beside the road

Makes perfect sense doesn't it? Shell Road has one of the widest verges that a road could have. Plenty of room for a bike path and a walking path, if you don't want to walk along the beach.

There are patches of trees along the verge, and I am sure a few people are attached to these trees. However, I doubt that these are remnant trees? I could not swear to this, but I believe this part of the Bellarine was described as heathland, without any trees in early written records. I am sure the fellow with the historic photographs, Mr. Jon Wynn, could verify this for us?

I have tried to contact the local historical societies to see if I could get photographs of the road area but have been unsuccessful.

20. That archaeological report is from 2000. Nearly 20 years old. Your next step should be updating this. Agree?

I agree entirely, however this is not up to us. It is now up to the Wadawurrung. The first archaeological report we did was done in conjunction with the Wathaurung, a different Aboriginal group.

The first archaeological report indicated a rich ground for discovery. The report identifies a lot of material discovered in a relatively small area. This indicates that there is a lot more to find and analyse to find out more about the Aboriginals who occupied this area.

Apart from shells in middens there have been stone axes and quartz knives found in the dunes and I believe there are some burials in the area. I don't know exactly where. I would hate to think of the potential for discovery of this remarkable story of earlier occupation to be compromised by a gravel path of some kind.

A Cultural Officer of the Wathaurung told me twenty years ago that the Aboriginals came to the beach in the Summer for the same reasons as us. To keep cool and have a summer holiday.

21. How do you suggest we protect Buckley Park?

Just as the price of freedom is constant vigilance I suspect that the protection of heritage, nature, planet Earth and so on is constant vigilance. And to remember that it is not just developers that threaten some of our greatest treasures but it can also be our friends and good people with honourable intentions who simply do not have the whole story of what might be at stake and endangered by what seems to be a good thing to do for 'the community'.

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On a more basic and pragmatic approach, wherever we can we need to be reminding the land managers in the area that their own environment policies put the preservation of biodiversity as a major priority. I think I presented a list of these land managers in an earlier question.

You might be shocked to learn that some government organisations are unaware of their own policies. Like the protection of biodiversity being a priority in their own environment policies.

According to our calculations if a path were put in the park the unravelling of the biodiversity system in Buckley Park would take out about 250,000 square metres out of the system. And arguably this would be a part of the system that has the greatest concentration of that biodiversity. Gosh what if we are wrong and it only takes out 200,000 square metres from the biodiversity system?

22. Why do you focus on Moonahs when these will not be endangered by a shared, planned trail?

Someone was not listening. I did not 'focus' on Moonahs as such. Moonah is not just the name of a tree it is also the name of the ecosystem that contains all the other plants and animals I was talking about. I think I only had three images of Moonah trees as such. The name of the whole system is the 'Coastal Moonah Woodland'. As with most forest, bush or woodland systems there is a hierarchy of plants. The others are there because the Moonahs are there, more or less. I think I had more images of orchids than I did of Moonahs?

I did refer to Moonahs before I even began my talk because it had been suggested by the first speaker that the sand dunes had been completely degraded by the 1950s and there was virtually no original vegetation left.

I am seventy-three years old and have been playing in those sand dunes from the 1950s. There are beautiful stands of Moonah trees in the Buckley Park area, near the Lighthouse and further west along the dunes. They were all there in the 1950s. So, the indigenous vegetation was not all wiped out at all. That was an 'illusion' or a 'delusion' even.

I was referring to those Moonahs to point out that the original vegetation had not disappeared at all. That it was hard to tell from those aerial photographs what was there and what wasn't there. Moonah trees were a good example to use to refute the disappeared vegetation argument because they are very old trees and could not have been planted by Europeans.

Furthermore, the smaller indigenous plants have come back of their own accord. We are discussing an 'ecosystem' in the sand dunes these days not just a single species of a tree. Maybe the Moonah trees would not be endangered by the destruction of everything else around them but this is to miss the point entirely.

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You take out a certain insect in a part of New South Wales then a certain tree does not get pollinated. Then a certain bird cannot feed and leaves the area. That bird has a role in the pollination of Almond trees. No more almonds. How did that happen.

Some people think the danger to the unravelling of biodiversity in ecosystems is more important than Climate change. If you believe in that sort of thing? I did read a metaphor somewhere that asked how many nuts and bolts can you take off an aeroplane before it can't fly anymore? Maybe not a great metaphor but we need something to better explain the risk to biodiversity because it appears invisible to most people. And it is hard to understand but we are at a certain point in history where we have to adjust more quickly to things we cannot see.