

Fiery Creek Healing Walk 2006

Lake Bolac Eel festival forum speech delivered by Neil Murray on 21/4/06

My name is Neil Murray; I was born and raised in Tjapwurrung country. Tjapwurrung is the name of the indigenous language that was spoken in this region, which includes the Lake Bolac foreshore where we are gathered this evening. So in the absence of any senior indigenous person I'd like to welcome you all to Tjapwurrung country.

The Fiery Creek Healing Walk of 2006 grew out of last years successful Healing Walk, which followed the Hopkins and Salt Creek waterways to Lake Bolac from the coast.

The concern in the community about the decrease in water flowing into Lake Bolac and the Salt Creek gave impetus to the decision for a Healing Walk along the Fiery Creek that feeds water to the lake.

I'll give an explanation of some of the ideas behind the Healing Walk before going on to report specifically on what we gathered on the Fiery Creek journey.

The Healing walk is a collective community initiative of environmental and cultural significance and has evolved out of a desire to participate in and care for the land we inhabit. The Healing Walk believes, that like-minded people, with a collective desire to "heal country" can have a beneficial effect on the environment, themselves and others.

Over a period of days, we walk through country with an attitude of care and respect for the earth. With deep sincerity we hold this attitude because the land provides for our existence. We have a responsibility therefore to look after the land, to care for it and not abuse it. By doing this we believe are contributing to "healing" both the inner and outer landscape of our region and community. Healing the inner landscape refers to an individuals own mental and physical restoration. The outer landscape is the natural environment we depend on and share with all other forms of life on the planet.

The Healing Walk believes many western peoples have lost their connection with the earth and need to restore it. One way to do that is to go back to our first mode of transport- our legs – and use them exclusively over several days. You get to watch time slow down, your perceptions of the world around you change. You actually start seeing and hearing more. By camping outdoors, rising and going down with the sun you begin to fall in step with nature's rhythm.

The Western district of Victoria is a prosperous region, but industrialised farming is extracting a heavy toll on the environment, its waterways and eco systems.

We believe there has to be a comparable effort directed to preserving and restoring the environment or in the long term such land use will be untenable.

The Healing Walk acknowledges and respects the first peoples of Australia and their culture that successfully balanced resource use with the preservation of a sustainable, environment that provided for thousands of years. Therefore, wherever possible, the Healing Walk seeks to apply indigenous wisdom and interpretation to the land.

The Fiery Creek, along with the Salt Creek marks the eastern extremity of Tjapwurrung country, a boundary it shares with Wathu-wurrung country on the east side as far down as the Nerrin Lakes, where it then becomes the boundary with the Kirrae Wurrung nation for the Fiery Creeks final eastern run into Lake Bolac and down the Salt Creek. To the canny observer these old tribal boundaries make good environmental, geographical and ecological sense. As Dorothy Dunn from Streatham observed, they largely correspond with catchment areas.

The Healing Walk believes, that given proper protocol, the right of passage for people travelling on foot should exist the same as it does for wildlife to pass through country irrespective of who owns it. Stream and riversides constitute much of the traditional indigenous "walking highways" that once went all over this country.

We do not oppose the rights of any landholders to earn a livelihood. We are concerned however that landholders be encouraged to see themselves as holding land in stewardship and trust for the future rather than seeing themselves as defenders of a possession.

On the morning of Thursday April 13th 2006 a dozen people were gathered at the Glut picnic ground at Mt Cole. Nearby, at a small rivulet (perhaps one of many rivulets that constitute the headwaters of the Fiery creek) Ted Lovett, a senior indigenous man of Tjapwurrung descent performed a smoking ceremony to purify us and heal country and ensure that we would have safe passage to Lake Bolac.

Ted Lovett, Neville Oddie, Una Allender, Dave Nicholson, Phillip Robertson, Lou Hollis, Dave Mcinnis and myself all walked on that morning. Sandy Troup and other Raglan locals had seen us off. From Beeripmo rock or Saddle rock we began to follow the first formation of the creek.

At Raglan, we saw the first of what was to become a major curse along the waterway- gorse infestation. From Raglan almost to the western hwy there was extensive gorse and willows. The last hundred acres before the highway was clear due to conscientious work by a landholder. However we feel their efforts are in vain unless all landholders upstream and downstream are equally vigilant. Over the coming days we would encounter even heavier infestations of Gorse. If this is left untreated, within ten years the entire system will be clogged and native grasses, wattles and ti trees will be choked out.

It seems to us that the spread of Gorse is preventable. Why isn't there a co-ordinated campaign to eradicate it? Why not have the unemployed help out? These are some of the questions that spring to mind.

On Friday April 14th we entered the creek half a kilometre upstream from the Middle Creek Road bridge, noticing the extensive plantings of blue gums nearby. Blue gums are being planted all around the upper catchment with little consideration as to their impact on water runoff. However as the trend in farming has shifted to cropping generally the specific effect of blue gums is hard to quantify. We believe that all mono cultural cropping does impact negatively on water run off and consequently stream flow. Perhaps landholders could adjust their crop management plans to provide for some pasture retention in significant run off areas.

Downstream from the Middle Creek Road Bridge the creek was fenced off for some distance. However by not allowing enough room for a vehicle to get between the fence and the creek it would make spraying to control gorse difficult.

We came out onto unfenced areas and there was much erosion. And over a distance of approximately 4 kilometres we estimated there were no less than twenty sheep dead in the creek. We did manage to pull two out of a bog.

Further down we came across a pump house that piped water from the creek up to a large dam in the paddock. We wondered how efficient a use of water that would be.

We are grateful to Doug Hopkins for allowing us to camp on his "Challicum" property on the night of Friday 14th.

The Billy Billy creek is an exquisite creek with a deep furrow coursing between ancient red gums with flat banks of native grass. There was little gorse along its length but after it joins the Fiery there are severe gorse thickets for hectares over the tussocky flats. I walked along kangaroo and cattle tracks beneath Gorse 10 or 12 feet high.

Finally a clump of woolly tea tree signals the start of a magnificent waterhole some 200 metres in length. There is brick pump house situated on its west bank.

There is a marked change from here on. There are more redgums and ti tree and more water holes in the creek. The creek is virtually a chain of water holes. Wherever the creek has been fenced off high well back from its bank is a delight. There is an explosion of native grasses and shrubs and the water looks much healthier. Platypus tracks abound between the waterholes. There were still however the occasional, outbreaks of gorse and foxes were frequently sighted.

John and Julie McDougal greeted us and welcomed us on to their property. They walked with us over their paddocks to the creek to show us a platypus hole that is largely covered in duckweed. John had installed fencing to protect remnant vegetation along the creek and to encourage regrowth. It appeared to us, problematic that John had securely fenced off his side of the creek from stock, when his neighbour on the opposite bank had not.

Sunday 16th April was a glorious sunny day and we headed off downstream from our campsite at Travellers rest. Neville Oddie and his friend Peter as well as Rachel Taylor joined us.

We passed by some significant scar trees; one in particular was a superb example, still on a living tree. Along the way we were welcomed by landholders Geoff and Heather Phillips then later Greg and Sue Joyce accompanied us along with their children for several kilometres and gave us much insight. Greg said they had good flow in the creek for six weeks in 2004 though it failed to have much impact on levels in Lake Bolac. Greg also informed us that he takes no water from the creek, and is vigilant against gorse. Sue believes all landholders along the creek should do likewise. However, with gorse on the opposite bank from us it was obvious not all landholders shared Greg and Sue's values.

We passed by some remarkable long waterholes in Peter Phillips property in the afternoon before camping near Wayne Harrops.

On Monday 17th April, our group consisted of Wayne & David Harrop, Phil Robertson, the two Dave's, Michelle Casanova, myself and welcoming us on to "Blythvale" was Bill Weatherly.

Bill showed us the extensive electric fencing he had installed along the creek, specially designed to let go in a flood. He spoke of the spraying and seeding he had done to encourage native vegetation regrowth. As we walked he pointed out a number of waterholes where the tracks of platypus were clearly evident. Bill is a conscientious landholder, and has devoted a great deal of thought and consideration to preserving and protecting the creek and its flora and fauna on his property. We were especially impressed with his paddock of native grass that had been left ungrazed for several years. Bill was informative and frank and was not afraid to admit where he'd made mistakes. Bill has invited us back in the spring when the creek is flowing.

Thanks to Dorothy Dunn, Phil and I sheltered at the fire centre in Streatham on the windy night of Monday 17th. The next morning Dorothy, Bruce and Nerol Dunn guided Phil, Una, Rob Nichols and myself through their property. I was especially interested in the evidence of indigenous campsites beside some of the favourite waterholes where Dorothy had spent her childhood.

By the afternoon of Tuesday 18th, we had walked from Streatham to Margaret Moreton's, and had been accompanied by Rob Nichols and Richard Collopy. Pat Clarke had driven Richard up from Framlingham to meet us during the day.

On Rob Nichols place the creek drops a couple of metres through basalt stones. It is a significant site and was clearly utilised by indigenous people as a fish trap.

Further on we saw the deep V shaped drain cut across the paddocks to drain a swamp through to the creek. Although dry, Rob Nichols assured us he has taken water samples both above and below where the salt drain enters and his readings indicated there had been no appreciable difference in salinity levels in the Creek. Still we remain circumspect about any large-scale artificial water impediment or drainage system, as its effects are not always predictable and can often be disastrous.

Beside a section of the creek that was dense with common reed, Rob posed the question as to whether reeds were good for the creek. Richard Collopy's advice was that reed beds are good for creeks as they trap silt and actually exacerbate water flow.

The fact that they grow so profusely in some areas may be a result of excess nutrient and fertiliser run off. To remove them would certainly invite erosion and more silt transference downstream.

Margaret Moreton met us and welcomed us to camp on her property "Wahroonga Park" for the night of Tuesday 18th April. We cooked and ate some of the eels that had been provided by Bill Allen.

On Wednesday April 19th up to 80 school children accompanied us on the walk from Wahroonga Park to Lake Bolac. We witnessed the magnificent sight of more than 20 brolgas near a swamp east of the lake. We were welcomed by John and Jenny Malin onto their property and they walked with us to the fiery creek mouth and around to the overflow for a barbecue.

The Fiery Creek Healing walk of 2006 has concluded the following: -

The decrease in water flowing into the Lake Bolac and Salt creek systems is first and foremost a result of changed rainfall patterns, which could be an outcome of climate change. We are just not getting the rainfall when it matters – that is in winter or spring when the ground is saturated and follow up rains provide maximum run off. In recent years we have been getting a lot of rain in summer, which is not providing run off.

Exacerbating this lack of water run off is changed land use practices. There has been an exponential increase in mono cultural cropping –whether it is bluegums, cereals or oilseed- this land use now far out strips grazing in the catchment.

We believe that land holders should be encouraged to allow for pasture run off areas within their cropping regime and that they should be encouraged to develop water supplies independent of the creek.

If necessary, water rights should be suspended to assist some environmental flow through the system. We believe that landholders with help from land care groups or volunteers should make more use of fire as a cleansing tool and regenerative agent for native plants during the appropriate season. We feel all landholders with creek frontage should install fencing and raised water points to encourage regeneration and to control stock.

As for Lake Bolac, we believe the lake should be allowed to revert to as natural a state as possible. We believe the time is opportune to remove the concrete overflow. We feel the community must come to accept that the lake may dry up periodically, but if it does the wind would then clean it of much salt and silt. When it fills it would overflow more readily into the Salt Creek reducing salinity build up whilst allowing eels to migrate. The lake may not be suitable for power boating, but it will remain a haven for wildlife and still attract campers, fishermen and eco-tourists. We have got to trust in the regenerative powers of nature.

Mahatma Ghandi said: "The earth provides enough to satisfy everyone's need but not everyone's greed"

Everyone is dependent on the health of this system. We call on all people in the region to be mindful of that and to desist from bickering, or of making unsubstantiated allegations or of justifying negligence with the “my neighbour doesn’t bother so why should I?” or “he’s pumping water so I’m going to pump my share too”. This kind of attitude leads to environmental vandalism and degradation. We believe the Fiery Creek/Lake Bolac/Salt creek system should be able to follow its natural course unimpeded and that tributaries that supply it should not be dammed or blocked.

We believe that funds should be directed towards preserving or restoring the system commensurate with funds that go elsewhere in the state- to the Glenelg River for example- and that there should be a co-ordinated gorse eradication programme beginning from Raglan and extending all the way downstream.

Lastly I wish to deliver a message to landholders concerning indigenous sites.

There are some landholders who are concerned about indigenous sites- whether they be middens, scar trees, artefacts, fish traps, campsites, burial grounds or skeletal remains being on their farms. There is not a square metre of land in Australia to which some particular language group, clan, family or individual did not belong. There are footprints beneath ours. The signs of habitation and occupation left by indigenous people are everywhere. They are marvellous secret jewels in the landscape. To the keen eye they can be read like an open book. For indigenous people they carry powerful meanings that continue to resonate. The presence of these things does not impinge on the landholder’s ability to earn his livelihood. Some landholders fear if they divulge such sites it will lead to the loss of their holdings. Such fears are groundless. One of the aims of the Healing Walk is to absolve such fears.

Indigenous people are grateful to any landholder who protects and preserves such historic sites. Future generations of all Australians will be grateful also.

Landholders should welcome indigenous community members who may wish to visit a site on their holdings. Much knowledge, important dialogue and often valuable new information can be obtained. All that is required is that indigenous sites be catalogued and registered, because it forms part of the important history of people in this continent. It is after all, the true history of Australia- a history that belongs to all of us.

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