

*Feathertop's wild eastern side from  
Diamantina Spur, not far from  
the proposed luxury huts.*

## Falls to Hotham alpine crossing

PHIL INGAMELLS REPORTS  
THAT PLANS TO CONSTRUCT  
31 BUILDINGS ALONG ONE  
OF VICTORIA'S MOST POPULAR  
LONG BUSHWALKS ARE  
RINGING ALARM BELLS.

It's the latest of four 'icon walks' emerging from a decade-old ecotourism strategy. That document found that Victoria was short of experiences to attract the 'comfort in nature' market, the sought-after big spenders from foreign lands.

The trouble is that Victoria, by far the most cleared state in Australia, isn't short of buildings and the comfort they provide. What it is short of is wild experiences.

The first walk off the rank was the Great Ocean Walk along the Otway coast, and the second the Grampians Peaks Trail, running north to south through Grampians National Park (Gariwerd).

Despite initial hopes, neither of these walks attracted interest from private operators for lodge accommodation along the track. The easily accessible

existing B&B accommodation adjacent to the parks won the day.

Now, as if seeking revenge on those lost ambitions, the tourism industry and Parks Victoria have conspired in a scheme to actually displace the low-spending 'adventure seeker market' (the people who already walk between Falls Creek and Mount Hotham), with walkers prepared to pay big bucks for guided walks with serviced huts and gourmet food at every stop.

The prime camp spots along the route are to be occupied by bookable tent platforms, large communal shelters and a stack of double-bed luxury huts. Self-sufficient campers will have to find somewhere else to pitch a tent. The draft plan admits there will be a drop in the number of adventure walkers but optimistically predicts a surge in comfort seekers to replace them.

There are a few very basic things wrong with this scheme.

For a start, it completely ignores the many hundreds of empty beds the two alpine resorts of Falls Creek and Hotham have over summer. A really simple way to attract big spenders to the Alpine National Park might be to promote a great range of day walks over the Bogong High Plains and the Hotham area, all accessible during a week's stay in a fine ski lodge.

This can be done without discarding, or disrespecting, those who want a self-sufficient experience in the wild.

Then there's the problem that, through many years of underfunding, walking tracks and visitor facilities are in a poor state in many of Victoria's parks. And there's a host of other serious management issues that need addressing, such as feral horse, deer and weed

populations. These are fundamental things that a park management agency should attend to before it embarks on glam tourism promotion.

And there's a serious safety issue. Sending inexperienced people on a High Plains walk without their own food and shelter is plain dangerous.

There was the day on the northern Bogong High Plains when my beard had long icicles hanging from it, and a howling gale swept up snow-drifts covering the pole line we were struggling to follow in a whited-out landscape. And the day we started walking from the Howqua Valley in blissful sunshine, to be greeted by freezing sleet once we'd climbed onto the Howitt High Plain: my hands were so cold I had trouble undoing my pack's buckles to get at the much-needed protection inside.

It has been a long-standing practice to advise alpine walkers to be self-sufficient with shelter, clothing and food. People have died trying to find huts in fierce weather.

So it's alarming that the Alpine National Park's managers are encouraging inexperienced people to set off on a five-day unencumbered walk, with a luxury hut, warm doona and fine food waiting for them each evening – if they get there!

Then there's the Mount Feathertop issue.

Australia is a time-worn landscape without the great peaks of New Zealand, Canada, South America or the Himalayas. And Victoria is particularly lacking on that scale, with only one large free-standing mountain in the state: the majestic and much-loved Feathertop. It has a couple of small huts on its western side, but the eastern side, where a series of parallel, angled spurs may have given the mountain its name, has remained unencumbered.

The proposed trail has a series of luxury huts perched near the top of Diamantina Spur, and they would have to be serviced daily by helicopter. Why any community would choose to do this to its finest mountain is beyond understanding.

But perhaps the most short-sighted part of the whole deal is that it may not be the best way to make a contribution to the state's economy anyway – not by a long shot!

According to Parks Victoria's own figures, their parks already contribute around \$1.2 billion annually to the economy through tourism, a figure that completely dwarfs its meagre management budget.

And the parks also contribute a relatively small but important \$180 million to what is called 'avoided health costs'. It's now well-established that people who spend time in nature are physically healthier than those who don't. They are also less likely to suffer from depression, and more likely to make positive contributions to society generally. It's a figure that can, and should be, greatly increased.

Parks Victoria, most usefully, could be putting its famous but somewhat empty slogan of 'Healthy Parks, Healthy People' into action. It could be promoting access to natural areas

for disadvantaged kids, for marginalised social groups, and for anyone else who needs an escape into nature.

The well-off 'comfort in nature' seekers are already very well accommodated.

The Falls to Hotham alpine crossing project should go back to the drawing board, along with its key premise of civilising the wild. And the next proposed 'icon walk', along the remote and beautiful Croajingolong coast in East Gippsland, should be dropped completely.

Our park managers should be vigilant in protecting the wildness of the remaining natural areas in their care, if only to protect the wellbeing of the community. It may only be once in someone's life that they need to escape into nature, but that one time can be critical. • PW

This article first appeared in *Wild Magazine's* March 2017 issue.



*An artist's impression of Norman Bay where the amphibious boats will land and be parked.*

### Prom boats' proposal

Parks Victoria is assessing a licence application by Pennicott Wilderness Tours (PWT) to operate three powerful amphibious boats, each holding 34 people, from the main visitor area of Norman Bay beach at Tidal River, Wilsons Promontory National Park. Currently, the Prom is suffering from 2-3 times its carrying capacity for cars in peak periods, a situation that compromises visitor enjoyment and safety. These proposed tours, which can only exacerbate that situation, should not be granted a permit until the Prom's traffic dilemma is solved.

Parks Victoria has set up an appalling process. Back in September 2015 they glowingly praised the PWT proposal in a letter supporting a tourism grant, compromising their capacity to assess the licence application.