



## Ravaging Buffalo

AN OUTRAGEOUS NATIONAL PARK DEVELOPMENT GRAB DISGUISES ITSELF AS A 'COMMUNITY LED' PROPOSAL. PHIL INGAMIELLS TAKES A GOOD LOOK AT IT.

Mount Buffalo National Park is one of Victoria's oldest and most loved natural areas. First gazetted in 1898, it's roughly equal with the Prom as Victoria's oldest national park.

It has long been a favourite destination for nature-based tourism, well before the term was invented. Indeed, Alice Manfield, the legendary Guide Alice who brought many travellers to the plateau around the year 1900, was following in the footsteps of her parents and grandparents.

I once met Guide Alice's daughter, Genevieve Baumgarten, who told me how much her mother was captured by the spirit of the plateau, spending months at a time there before a viable road made access easy. Buffalo's many plants and animals, especially the lyrebirds, fascinated her, and wandering among the plateau's tumbled granite boulders gave her strength.

I couldn't help remembering Genevieve's account of Guide Alice as I read through the 'Vision for Mount Buffalo', launched recently by the 'Mount Buffalo Destination Advisory Group'.

The comparison left me sad.

The 'Vision' is flagged as a 'gift from the community', but has been delivered to Parks Victoria before the Victorian community has even seen it. And it calls for at least six hectares of the national park to be excised and handed over to private development, in perpetuity.



Winter near the Mount Buffalo Gorge.

PHOTO: DAVID TATNALL

So, let's have a good look at this 'gift'.

After a few failed attempts by various Victorian governments to rehabilitate the historic Buffalo Chalet, a group of local people, including tourism interests, offered to solve the Chalet 'problem'.

Perched near the edge of the precipitous 'wall', and a short stroll from where Crystal Brook cascades through great boulders into the Buffalo Gorge, the Chalet is well-placed for tourists. But since its construction in 1909, a rambling hotch-potch of added accommodation, sheds, stables and tennis courts behind it has expanded its footprint over some six hectares.

The government's last attempt to fix the Chalet proposed the removal of most of that ad-hoc expansion and a couple of old wings of the Chalet, reducing the footprint to a more sensible one hectare.

But the 'Vision' recommends the excision of the whole six hectares from the park, allowing massive commercial occupation of the area in a new, privately owned 'Mount Buffalo Village' development.

The old Chalet would be refitted with luxury suites up front, and a hostel at the rear. It would also house a new park office.

But accommodation options would be doubled, with the construction of a new Mount Buffalo Spa Retreat Hotel and day spa.

The many old outbuildings would be revamped, or rebuilt (see map opposite).

The new 'village' would create a parking problem, so the plan is to turn the current park office and works area into a 'centralised car park hub and logistical point' and shuttle people around the plateau in electric cars.

There is more.

The Lake Catani camp ground would be expanded with 'glamping' facilities and wilderness huts, Dingo Dell would get a new 'Outdoor Education Centre of Excellence', and an 'Alpine Activity Centre' would be constructed at Cresta Valley.

The plan is honest about the need to generate a considerable amount of power to supply all of these developments, provide water and deal with waste, but less clear about where that considerable infrastructure might be located. (Power supply has been a long-standing problem with the Chalet, as the plateau is often cloaked in cloud, and winds tend to be updrafts.)



Google Earth view of current chalet and outbuildings.

Perhaps the most bizarre aspect of the proposal is the mooted key visitor attraction, the 'Mount Buffalo Gorge Skywalk' – a great glass-bottomed loop walkway extending out over the Buffalo Gorge. It would be modelled on the USA's Grand Canyon Skywalk (try Googling it!).

But the Grand Canyon is around 450 kilometres long and occupies some half a million hectares; its skywalk has limited visual impact.

The Buffalo Gorge is tiny by comparison and only tens of metres wide where you might put the skywalk. The visual impact would be considerable, but that doesn't seem to bother the development's planners.

In order to distinguish the skywalk from similar experiences elsewhere,

they recommend adding 'an in-air dining option that capitalises on the uninterrupted views' to 'enhance the profile of the offering'.

The proposed skywalk would have a disastrous visual impact on Mount Buffalo's famous gorge, and is a completely inappropriate addition to an already fine natural attraction.

The driving logic behind the whole scheme is that while visitor numbers to the park are increasing, those visitors do not actually spend a lot of money 'inside the park'.

But it's a national park, and its prime objective is the protection of its native animals and the ecosystems that support them. A secondary objective is to allow visitors the opportunity to experience the place in its natural

condition and, by implication, its natural ambience.

Even without a re-opened chalet, visitor numbers are now increasing at 5% a year, approaching the pre-alpine fire figures of over 200,000 a year. There is plenty of opportunity for off-park attractions, such as wineries and B&Bs, to capitalise on those numbers.

Handing over Mount Buffalo to the fantasies of private developers would, I can't help thinking, have appalled Guide Alice.

And it should seriously concern all Victorians who value our remarkable natural heritage, and the national parks that seek to protect it. • PW