

PHILLIP ISLAND CONSERVATION SOCIETY INC



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Cr Michael Whelan Mayor
Bass Coast Shire Council
michael.whelan@basscoast.vic.gov.au

cc. Catherine Basterfield
CEO Phillip Island Nature Parks
cbasterfield@penguins.org.au

Re: Scenic Estate Conservation Reserve: Current Concerns

Dear Cr Michael

As you are aware PICS and the volunteers of Friends of Scenic Estate Reserve (FOSER) help manage the Scenic Estate Conservation Reserve (the Reserve) in partnership with Council and Phillip Island Nature Parks. Great achievements have been made since the formation of FOSEER and the commencement of the tripartite arrangements. PICS are most appreciative of all the efforts of all the parties involved.

The Reserve is now listed on Bass Coast Walks and Trails and other publications as being known for its birdlife, endangered grasslands and vegetation. Visitations from domestic and international travellers, as well as local residents have increased over recent times. We consider this is a positive outcome and it sets the Reserve as conservation showcase for Phillip Island that further reinforces the mantra that the environment is our economy.

As you also know, FOSEER volunteers work tirelessly at the Reserve, conducting 6 working bees (5 weed control, 1 litter clean up and 1 planting) each year, which equated to 140+ documented hours in 2022 of volunteers working hard to improve and maintain the Reserve's natural environment in the best condition possible.

Several concerning issues at the Reserve over the last 6 months have been referred by FOSEER to the PICS management committee. Unfortunately, damage to the vegetation and the dog waste problem have left the volunteers disheartened as it seems to undermine their efforts especially since no remedial work to repair damage to the Reserve has yet been undertaken.

This letter and the attached report and supporting photographs are intended to bring those concerns to your attention and to seek your support to ensure that these concerns are addressed.

The attached report outlines three key areas of concern.

Damage to Moonah woodland - New BMX bike tracks

It is clear that this damage has been caused by teenagers using spades to create mounds beneath the trees to develop an ad hoc BMX track that may unfortunately also lead to erosion and the death of some of the Moonahs.

Damage to vegetation

The report shows extensive damage caused to the vegetation along the edges of the walking and access tracks. It appears that this damage has been caused by a mechanical device such as a slasher. Interestingly the damage appears to have been caused on 31 December 2022 ie New Years Eve.

Preliminary enquiries by Council as outlined in the report advise that the Council depot staff are not aware of the slashing. Our enquiries with Phillip Island Nature Parks have advised that this activity has not been undertaken by Nature Parks or its contractors. This position has been recently confirmed by the Nature Parks conservation manager.

So at this stage it remains a mystery as to who accessed the reserve on New Year's Eve and conducted the slashing/destruction.

Ongoing dog and dog waste issues at the reserve

Issues related to improper disposal of dog waste bags were reported by FOSER to Council in September 2022. A plan was devised by Mitch Fievez, Community Safety Officer, to monitor this issue through patrols and the possibility of further action such as installing an extra bin and CCTV cameras if the problem continued. Since then PICS has continued to contact Council for updates on the situation. In January 2023, we found out that as a result of Council being short staffed limited patrols have occurred and only 3 offences (with warnings) have been recorded, and a new Community Safety Officer, Molly Watchorn, has recently been appointed.

This issue is a strong concern to PICS as whilst volunteers enjoy improving the Reserve the volunteers never enjoy having to approach dog owners with their dogs off leash or pick up dog waste or dozens of dog litter bags being strewn into and hanging from the vegetation.

The Way Forward

PICS strongly believe that Council need to further resource By Law compliance and management of the Reserve. Whilst the current Council staff have been most helpful and supportive their available time is simply far too limited.

Whilst Council and other tourist attracting authorities are also pleased to see increasing visitation to a conservation reserve it needs to be recognised that increasing visitation comes at a cost. Appropriate resourcing is a part of having a tourist attraction. Volunteers should not need to undertake this work on behalf of the stakeholders with an interest of attracting more visitations.

Some considerations have been made by FOSER on solutions to these issues including the use of CCTV, installation of a waste bin within the reserve, regular Council surveillance, increased clear signage and engagement of work crews.

All of these possible solutions and others require a genuine commitment to fully resource a natural asset of Phillip Island to support its role in enhancing the experience of the natural world by our community and visitors alike.

On this basis PICS and FOSEER representatives would be pleased to be involved in discussions with Council and Nature Parks representatives to discuss solutions to current and ongoing issues at the Reserve as transparency is a key to our unique partnership. We believe such discussions can only further improve the relationships between the parties and go a long way to achieve the objectives and enjoyment of the visitors to the Reserve and continued support by volunteers.

We look forward to hearing from you so we can work together on addressing these issues.

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J. Nottle". The signature is stylized with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Jeff Nottle

President