

STORY OF FOOPS AND THE ORGAN PIPES NATIONAL PARK



This is a summary of the history of the FOOPs group and the area today known as Organ Pipes National Park from the 1830s onward, post-European colonisation of the region.

The FOOPs group works ongoingly with the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, and we acknowledge that their custodianship of, connection to and knowledge of the land far extends the colonial history or understanding of the area.

This information is in no way intended to provide a comprehensive overview of the area, particularly of its Indigenous, pre-colonial and geological histories. Rather, it is a summary of knowledge passed on from past FOOPs members of the history of Organ Pipes National Park, collecting over the decades the FOOPs volunteer group has existed.



Organ Pipes National Park

FROM KEILOR PLAINS TO NATIONAL PARK



The earliest European settlement of the Keilor Plains was in the 1830s by Tasmanian sheep farmers, and the area's native vegetation was quickly destroyed by grazing sheep and dairy cattle.

With its thin soils and rocky, uneven surface, the land had little agricultural potential to European settlers, but smallholders were established regardless and caused significant ecological damage.

Heavy grazing prevented the effective regeneration of almost all species of indigenous flora, and the area became overrun by weeds, predominantly pasture grasses and garden species. When rabbits and foxes were introduced, they soon became pests in the grasslands of the plains. In spite of the damage to the native ecosystem, the Keilor Plains were a focus for Field Naturalists Club of Victoria excursions.

After a period of private ownership, the land was eventually donated to the state government. The future of the land, now ecologically devastated, was uncertain. Many geologists pushed for legal protections for the basalt formations in the area.

At the time, the only way to confer legal protection to these was to declare the area a National Park, in spite of the many ecological issues - including severe gully erosion, invasive species and farm rubbish - impacting the area. As such, the area was ultimately given National Park status in 1972.



REGENERATION AND THE FORMATION OF FOOPS: 1972- 1980



Following its declaration as a National Park, the area required extensive work to mitigate the effects of invasive pests, repair the extensive ecological damage and allow recovery of the natural ecosystem.

There were very few native trees and animals remaining in the area: a 1972 bird survey found only 30-40 species, compared to the nearly 200 species recorded by grazier Isaac Batey in the mid 1800s.

Work within the new park began: dilapidated fences were replaced to secure the area against rabbits and foxes, and to enable invasive species populations within the park to be managed more effectively.

The park's first ranger, Jack Lyale, employed labourers to undertake the fencing work along steep rocky slopes and remove huge quantities of invasive African boxthorn and artichoke thistle.

The National Parks Service also poured vast quantities of herbicide onto parts of the park to control horehound and thistles. An entrance road, carpark and a small shed office were established to cater to the rapidly increasing number of park visitors.



REGENERATION AND THE FORMATION OF FOOPS: 1972- 1980...



In 1972, the Maribyrnong Valley Committee (MVC) - a local conservation group founded in 1969 by Don Marsh, Bob Osborne and Lawrie Groom - also became involved with the new National Park, with a focus on restoring the land to its pre-colonial state. The group would go on to become our group today, the Friends of the [Organ Pipes National Park \(FOOPs\)](#)

The most immediate issue for the group's attention was the severe, ongoing soil erosion linked to denudation of the land. Working in cooperation with Ranger Lyale, the MVC surveyed local valleys for remnant vegetation, collected seeds and propagated seedlings, and started planting trees on the understanding that establishing plants with large root systems would quickly stop the erosion. They also made efforts to establish herbs and grasses, and Marsh maintained a bird survey ultimately spanning 15 years to chronicle the slow return of indigenous species to the area as the flora recovered.

In 1973, the group was joined by amateur botanist Barry Kemp, who undertook revegetation planning and developed a zoning system based on both published works of earlier botanists and his own surveys of the area. Through Kemp's tireless efforts, a planting program was established, and a nursery seedbank would eventually be set up at the park in 1985.

The group's initial planting efforts were foiled when the first seedlings were eaten by rabbits, and it became clear that new plants would require ongoing maintenance and the construction of protective frames to provide shelter from pests and the elements. Ranger Lyale, a long-time scout master, encouraged scouts to help the FOOPs group at planting days, and they were joined by other local groups.

Within six years, the FOOPs group was awarded the Institute of Architects Robin Boyd medallion for landscape, and in 1982, won the Garden State Award for improvements to the park.

REGENERATION AND THE FORMATION OF FOOPS: 1972- 1980...



When the Sydenham growth corridor was approved by the Cain government in the mid-1980s, FOOPs made an effort to transplant as many grass tussocks as possible from this rich grassland, and to harvest kangaroo grass to spread the seed-rich hay around the National Park and start native grass patches.

FOOPs founder Don Marsh also pushed for the release of sugar gliders into the reforested park, which was eventually achieved in 1989-90 with the first ever release of wild-captured gliders into a National Park.

In the late 1980s, VicRoads began to convert the Calder Highway into a freeway by duplicating the existing two-lane road into two separate two-lane roadways. Knowing that such works typically involved planting trees along freeway verges, Marsh contacted VicRoads in the hope that species indigenous to the Keilor Plains would be selected.

With VicRoads' cooperation, the species list was set and Ranger Lyale's successor, Ranger Matt LeDuc, arranged for appropriate seed collection within the National Park. Ultimately this led to over 20 000 young trees being planted along an eight-kilometre segment of freeway in 1991-92; an area that has effectively become an extension of the park.

The entire process began a general program of selecting indigenous species for freeway plantings, made possible by FOOPs committee member and Western Plains flora expert Ian Taylor.



RECOVERY AND EXPANSION: 1990S AND BEYOND



Following the success of its regenerative efforts, the FOOPs group sought to further monitor and improve the biodiversity of Organ Pipes National Park. In response to a 1988 park fauna survey by two biologists, ten bat roost boxes were installed in 1992.

Bats first moved into these boxes two years later. The bat colony increased from 35 to over 150 insectivorous bats today. Ours is the longest-running monitoring project in Australia, and has been used as a model for similar projects elsewhere. In 2001, the program gave rise to a nationwide Bat Roost Box Network for others interested in native bat conservation. Find out more about our current bat box program and how [you can get involved here <URL to bat box info>](#).

Frog surveys were also conducted by FOOPs volunteers Robert Irvine and Mark Scida to establish a list of seven species within the park, including the rare growling grass frog. Fungi surveys were conducted within the park as part of the Fungimap project conducted by the state Herbarium, resulting in a growing list of species gradually being recorded.

At this time, FOOPs began to focus on lobbying to expand the park as a way to preserve more of the Keilor Plains ecosystem. In 1991, Melbourne Water undertook the Upper Maribyrnong Concept Plan: a major study that proposed forming a continuous linear park by joining the Organ Pipes National Park with Brimbank Park, located ten kilometres downstream.

Since then, a major restoration effort in neighbouring Sydenham Park has been undertaken to form a wildlife corridor along Jackson's Creek, allowing plants and animals to migrate along the waterway.

RECOVERY AND EXPANSION: 1990S AND BEYOND...



The conservation of areas outside the park also became a focal point of the FOOPs group. In 1991, Ranger Matt LeDuc arranged with the City of Keilor to install exclusion fences around a selection of old native Cypress pine trees on the escarpment of neighbouring Sydenham Park. FOOPs has taken responsibility for maintaining these enclosures since then, and has organised working bees to remove invasive weeds and monitor seedlings.

In 1992, FOOPs volunteer Carl Rayner organised grant funding and permission to fence four high-quality grassland patches along the Sunbury rail line. FOOPs continues to visit these areas annually to conduct maintenance weeding and litter collection. Lobbying for the Organ Pipe National Park's expansion and the protection of nearby areas of the Keilor Plains continues to be a major focus for the FOOPs group today.

In recognition of their commitment to the park, three members of FOOPs have received the Best Friend Award from the Victorian National Parks Association Friends Network committee: Don Marsh in 1991, Barry Kemp in 1993, and Carl Rayner in 1998. In 2020, Carl Rayner also achieved national recognition when he was awarded an Order of Australia Medal for his ongoing work in conservation.

Over the years, FOOPs has mapped numerous sites around the park where Aboriginal and European artefacts have been found, including Aboriginal stone tools and European ceramics and glass. Surveys of the park by the Wurundjeri traditional custodians indicate that the land is rich in Aboriginal artefacts. Today, consultation with the Wurundjeri Council is integral to how we interact with the landscape. We are grateful to the Council for their generous sharing of knowledge about the land and its history.

RECOVERY AND EXPANSION: 1990S AND BEYOND...



In 2022, the Organ Pipes celebrates fifty years of having National Park status, and FOOPs celebrates its fiftieth anniversary as a volunteer group.

As the oldest Friends group in Australia, we have spent decades restoring the park's natural ecosystem to help preserve a part of Victoria's unique Western Plains ecosystem. We are proud of the remarkable conservation achievements we've accomplished at the Organ Pipes over the years, and look forward to many more milestones in the future.

