

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY ACTIVISM IN THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF COASTAL COMMUNITIES: THE NEPEAN CONSERVATION GROUP INC, A CASE STUDY.

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INTRODUCTION

The Nepean Conservation Group Inc (NCG) was formed in 1973. The jurisdiction of the NCG covers the whole the Nepean Peninsula, the tiny sliver of land between Port Phillip Bay and Bass Strait, at the end of the Mornington Peninsula, Victoria, Australia. Much of the Nepean Peninsula is moonah woodland.

The NCG Constitution states that their primary object is

“To make every effort to ensure that the land and waters of the Sorrento Portsea Blairgowrie Area are used with wisdom and foresight and that the competing demands upon them are resolved in the best long terms interests thereof ...”

The NCG deals with issues as diverse as vegetation and development overlays; heritage; townscapes; public access; neighbourhood character; hooded plovers; historic towns and fire protection. The NCG coordinates Friends Groups that care for bushland parks and coastal reserves, for flora and fauna, on the Nepean Peninsula. The NCG is an advocate for a dynamic fragile coast. Implicit is an expectation that such a local community group is the guardian of their coastal environment. After thirty-eight years of dedicated voluntary work it is timely to reconsider the role of community activism in the sustainable development of coastal regions and towns. This paper examines a number of significant recent issues: public rights to access; subdivision; historic coastal town development and fire protection. The author acknowledges the NCG Committee for their support and access to the NCG papers and archives. This case study is situated in a larger ongoing research investigation.

THE NEPEAN PENINSULA

The Nepean Peninsula is a tiny sandy sliver of land at the end of the Mornington Peninsula, Victoria, Australia. Together with the Bellarine Peninsula it forms the gateway to Port Phillip Bay at the Heads. It shields the Bay from the tumultuous forces of Bass Strait. This inspirational landscape has nurtured humans over eons. Here along the cliff tops and along the quieter shores of the Bay the Boonwurrong people have walked for over 6000 years. Here Europeans claimed land as their first settlement in Victoria in 1803. From here the city of Melbourne has been supported by raw materials and defended against threat and disease. Here many Melbournians now holiday to seek respite from urban stress. By the 1970s, it was evident that the historic coastal town of Sorrento and its environs were under pressure from development (Calder, 1970).

THE NEPEAN CONSERVATION GROUP INC, HISTORY AND FORMATION

In October 1973 a group of people met at *The Age* offices in Melbourne to discuss opposing a proposed Sorrento Foreshore Development Plan drawn up by P. Parkinson, the Flinders Shire Council Engineer. The marina landfill would have extended from Sorrento Pier West to Lentell Avenue. Those present were Randal McDonald, Frank Shipton, Brigadier A.T.J. "Ding" Bell, Forster Stuart, Roderick Carnegie, Campbell Guest and Jack Ritchie. A public meeting attended by about fifty people was held in Sorrento on 24 October, and a Committee formed. Frank Shipton was elected as chairman, Forster Stewart as vice-chairman, they were supported by sixteen committee members. A fighting fund was established, and consultants Graham Lomas and Associates were hired. Advertisements were placed in *The Gazette*, leaflets and posters prepared, and another meeting held in November.

On 1 December a public meeting was held in the Ellen Grant Hall, Sorrento. About 400 people crowded the Hall and 150 people had to be turned away. Two of the three Collins Riding Councilors and the MLA sent their apologies. Frank Shipton chaired the meeting. He explained how the Group had come into existence, and that while members agreed better boating facilities were needed at Sorrento, they were against the Council Plan. The then Flinders Shire Council had replied to the Group's letter of protest by asking for details of this new Group: the Sorrento Portsea Blairgowrie Conservation Group Inc (Maine,

2003).

The objects of their constitution made their purpose clear. Their primary objects were

(a) To make every effort to ensure that the land and waters of the Sorrento Portsea Blairgowrie Area are used with wisdom and foresight and that the competing demands upon them are resolved in the best long terms interests thereof ...

(b) To foster the conservation of the vegetation and fauna and natural features of the Sorrento Portsea Blairgowrie Area

(c) To cooperate with, or promote cooperation by any means among persons, trusts, corporations, firms, associations, institutions, governments, instrumentalities of government, municipal authorities, and other bodies in the Commonwealth or its Territories or elsewhere concerned with or interested in conservation

(d) Generally, to take such action as it considers necessary or appropriate in the interests of promoting conservation; and make available, whether by sale or otherwise, things and materials including books, monographs, periodicals, pamphlets and lectures ...(NCG Constitution, p.1)

THE NEPEAN CONSERVATION GROUP INC: A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTIVISM

The jurisdiction of the Nepean Conservation Group Inc (previously the Sorrento Portsea Blairgowrie Conservation Group Inc.) covers the whole of the Nepean Peninsula, from Canterbury Jetty Road down to the Point, at the end of the Mornington Peninsula, Victoria, Australia. The historic coastal town of Sorrento is the heart of the Nepean Peninsula.

Major development and planning issues in this fragile coastal environment have kept the NCG active over the decades since its foundation. The NCG deals with issues as diverse as vegetation and development overlays; heritage; townscapes; public access; neighbourhood character; hooded plovers; historic towns and fire protection. The NCG in conjunction with Parks Victoria and the Mornington Peninsula Shire, coordinates Friends Groups that care for bushland parks and coastal reserves, for flora and fauna, on the Nepean Peninsula.

The NCG is an advocate for a dynamic fragile coast. Change has been constant, development gathering pace over time and now seemingly engulfing the place itself. Academic and landscape architect, Raymond Green, encapsulates this when he writes: 'The upshot of these changes is that the locally unique constellation of landscape features that have traditionally defined the character of many coastal towns is slowly, but surely, being eroded and replaced by one of global uniformity in the built environment and a degraded natural environment' (Green, 2010).

Coastal areas such as the Nepean Peninsula have been undergoing change faster than most other areas in Victoria. Coastal scenic quality is an amenity that attracts new residents yet is threatened by new development accompanying them (Lokocz, Ryan, Sadler, 2010:66). The pressures of the 'sea change' phenomenon, increased tourism and holiday home ownership, and ever-improving access have had major impacts. Environmental and heritage overlays have not protected the historic town of Sorrento or its hinterland the Nepean Peninsula. In 2002 the NCG developed and published a brochure *Conserving the Character* to articulate the character of place, name the threats to character and offer suggestions to residents as to how character might be respected, conserved and maintained into the future. In doing so, it described the natural character, the history, the vegetation and named the aims of the NCG as maintaining the character and amenity of the Sorrento, Portsea and Blairgowrie area; ensuring new developments are in harmony with the character of our area; and fostering conservation of the vegetation, wildlife, natural attributes and historic features of the area.

While coastal landscapes, such as that of the Nepean Peninsula are highly valued by the wider community for their scenic beauty and for recreational activities, they are also highly desirable as real estate. As Raymond Green's research along Victoria's Great Ocean Road has revealed, 'One unfortunate consequence of this migration [of urbanites to small coastal communities] has been a perceived loss of distinctive place character. Local residents and visitors alike now consider these towns and their surroundings at risk of transformation toward global uniformity' (Green, 2008). Balancing the economic, social and infrastructure needs of growing residential and tourism communities with environmental sustainability and the capacity of such a sensitive coastal landscape is a considerable planning conundrum.

The NCG has worked consistently with other local groups: namely the Nepean Historical Society (NHS), the Nepean Ratepayers Association (NRA) and the Sorrento Portsea Chamber of Commerce (SPCC), forming at times a Community Coalition. Over time the capacity of these voluntary community groups to deal with the

issues facing the Nepean Peninsula has decreased as the number and complexity of issues has increased. There is not simply one development or one project that needs to be dealt with but a continuous barrage of residential and commercial planning and building permit applications, policy and planning overlays, management plans, et cetera.

THE NEPEAN PENINSULA AND 'CHARACTER OF PLACE'

One of the major problems in any planning application has been the definition of 'character of place', 'neighbourhood character' and 'sense of place'. Planners have not found these definitions as applied to coastal (or rural) places easy to articulate or codify (Lokocz, Ryan, Sadler, 2010). The urban design practitioners, Planisphere (2010) argue that 'neighbourhood character studies have become the primary vehicle for documenting sense of place, and for translating it into planning scheme policy'.

Research on neighbourhood character is thin compared with the substantial literature on conceptions of place. Defining neighbourhood character is not a simple task – character is not easily reducible to a collection of elements, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Yet Dovey and Woodcock suggest that definitions of neighbourhood character are often 'an assemblage of built form elements' though 'place-identity is strongly territorialized' (Woodcock et al, 2009; Dovey and Woodcock, 2011). Green (2010:2) argues that character of a place is 'an experiential phenomena', physical features plus experiential perceptual phenomenon. Relationships between the built and the natural environments are critical to neighbourhood character, which touches on scale, height, as well as surface articulation of architecture and materials used, the amount and type of vegetation in the landscape. Green (2010:5) suggests that 'we are talking about aesthetics' coupled with meaning, about place attachment. Woodcock et al. (2009:19) argue that neighbourhood character is 'profoundly social', that it is 'fundamentally about the way built form mediates relations between neighbours and the ways such forms and practices give rise to a "sense of place"'. As the NCG has found, it is hard to define character of place, or neighbourhood character and it is even harder to determine what a "good" neighbourhood character might comprise in planning terms. It is clear that neighbourhood character will change according to the contextual situation in which a neighbourhood is located, and whether, for example, it is a suburban environment with low density housing or an urban environment with medium density housing or a coastal area within a fragile environment. While recognising that neighbourhood character involves many complex and inter-related elements, this paper contends that an understanding of the interaction between the built form and its relationship to topography and vegetation is needed to gain a whole picture (Planisphere, 2010:13). And further that the descriptor 'character of place' rather than 'neighbourhood character' is more meaningful in the coastal environment of the Nepean Peninsula where it is critical to understand place as a unique and inviolable whole.

The American landscape architect, Anne Whiston Spirn argues powerfully that 'The language of landscape prompts us to perceive and shape the landscape *whole*. Reading and speaking it fluently is a way to recognize the dialogues ongoing in a place, to appreciate other speakers' stories, to distinguish enduring dialogues from ephemeral ones and to join the conversation. The language of landscape reminds us that nothing stays the same, that catastrophic shifts and cumulative changes shape the present. It permits us to experience pasts we cannot otherwise experience, to anticipate the possible, to envision, choose, and shape the future' (Spirn, 1998:25-26).

Equally important to character of place (or neighbourhood character) is the concept or notion 'sense of place'. Over the past decade the author has been researching the meaning of place using the Nepean Peninsula on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria, Australia, as the focus of research to explore a series of perceptions and overlays of the personal, communal and historical.

Assessing the sense of place is not an exact science but a creative analysis of the attributes of place, such as landform, vegetation, history of use, landscape patterns, views and vistas, community identification with landscape patterns, the complexity of relations between intersecting landscapes, as well as the local community's special attachment to the landscape developed over generations. Just as landscape and its features contribute to the sense of place, so too do intangible qualities, such as moods, diurnal and seasonal changes, memory, poetry, reflections, spiritual qualities and social connections. Intangible and spiritual dimensions of place are integral to meanings and understandings.

The Nepean Peninsula is significant for its natural heritage: landscape values, parks, relationships of land and sea; the geological formation of the whole; the contrasts. Views, vistas, and viewlines into and out of the site are spectacular; flora and fauna in this habitat are notable. The scale of the whole is precious and priceless. As Spirn has written: 'Significance does not depend on human perception or imagination alone. Significance is there to be discovered, inherent and ascribed, shaped by what senses perceive, what instinct

and experience read as significant, what minds know. ... Landscape is not mere scenery' (Spirn, 1998:18, 24).

Developing an integrated approach to the meaning of place does require a major re thinking, a shift from looking at the micro to embracing the macro. In a philosophical sense academic and philosopher, Jeff Malpas suggests further that 'The delineation of place can only be undertaken by a process that encompasses a variety of sightings from a number of conceptual landmarks and that also undertakes a wide ranging crisscrossing set of journeys over the landscape at issue – it is only through such journeying, sighting and re-sighting that place can be understood' (Malpas, 1999:41). The rapidity of change often does not allow communities the luxury of reflection.

Place as a notion is not at all clearly defined. Topographical mapping is relatively easily and objectively accomplished nowadays. The facts of history can be documented. In contrast, the more subjective evocative and poetic qualities of a place or landscape do not reveal themselves so easily. Only over a period of time, and by visiting at various times of the day in all seasons, can one begin to fathom its moods, its soul, its many colours; its scale and wide-angle limitless views, and to touch its memories - history stretching over eons. Yet as Malpas observes 'We are often led to view places as if they were just the static backdrop to action and experience, rather than being the very ground and frame for such' (Malpas, 1999: 41).

The urban planner David Salvesen (2002:37) argues that 'In general, a sense of place has to do with the interaction of three elements - location, landscape, and personal involvement; each by itself usually is insufficient to create a sense of place ...' Further he suggests that 'To some (people), it derives from shared memories, experiences, traditions, and history ... To others, however, a sense of place comes from distinctive sights, smells, and sounds'. Salvesen concludes that 'in any case, a sense of place is difficult to define and measure, primarily because it is so subjective'. Salvesen (2002:38) does concede that 'Place is more than just a location - a spot on a map - and it is more than just a landscape'. Place also shapes individual identity. Salvesen (2002:41) concludes that 'A sense of place provides a sense of belonging and of commitment. It is the repository for our shared memories, experiences and dreams. It is a place of family and community ties - of roots - that stems from our connection to a particular location and its people. And when people feel connected to a place - emotionally, culturally, and spiritually' they care deeply about it. Membership (active or passive) of the NCG stems largely from this connection to and concern for place.

CONSERVING THE CHARACTER OF THE NEPEAN PENINSULA

Fragile coasts such as the Nepean Peninsula, at the interface between land and sea, are geologically and ecologically sensitive places, areas of high bio-diversity and particularly susceptible to developmental impacts – dredging of the Heads and the Bay, building on the edge of the bay or ocean, tourism and 'loving it to death', the erosion impacts of the sheer numbers of visitors who leave only their footprint – but how many footprints can it bear? Environmental and population pressures have resulted in habitat decline. Now even fire protection threatens the environment – the policy is to protect the built assets not the natural assets, a shift in the language of policy documents impacts on the nature of place.

The NCG is an advocate for this dynamic fragile coastal place: keeping a watchful eye, working with the Shire on policy matters, writing letters to municipal and state authorities, reviewing building and planning applications, writing objections, appearing at VCAT, communicating with NCG members and the wider public. The NCG is an advocate for the protection our local habitat, making 'every effort to ensure that the land and waters of the Sorrento Portsea Blairgowrie Area are used with wisdom and foresight and that the competing demands upon them are resolved in the best long terms interests thereof'. While much of the monthly work deals with reviewing residential permit applications related to renovations and new buildings in an historic coastal environment, where homogenisation of the built environment threatens the sense of place, the following four case studies serve to highlight the diversity and complexity of some of the bigger issues the NCG is dealing with in order to advocate for the Nepean Peninsula to conserve the character of place.

The Public Walkway Lentell Ave to Point King

The NCG determined that the alterations proposed by the Trustees to the title boundaries of the historic Netley Estate could threaten the integrity of the Public Walkway, Lentell Ave to Point King, Sorrento, and affect public rights to walk along the cliff top. Also known as 'millionaires walk', this is one of the most beautiful and still largely unknown cliff top walks on Port Philip Bay. An objection was lodged in 2008. Ordinarily a realignment of boundaries that reduced the number of titles and which essentially retained and extended the existing title boundary between two lots would not cause much concern. However as noted in

evidence provided to the VCAT hearing in September 2010 the case was complicated because much of the eastern lot which was to be consolidated within the other two lots was located either within Port Phillip Bay, the foreshore or the cliff edge; easements of way in benefit of the general public existed over the eastern lot and the land was affected by diverse overlays testifying to natural and cultural sensitivities relating to it.

In the eleven page VCAT decision, 9 November 2010, on the matter regarding the public walkway along the cliff top or foreshore land within the title, the permit conditions proposed by the responsible authority would include existing easements across the subject land be transferred to the two new titles. This condition was accepted by the permit holder and is depicted on the most current version of the plan of subdivision (Revision C). It then followed that the existing entitlement would continue to apply to the land unchanged. The entitlement for the public at large to have the opportunity to traverse the public walkway along the cliff top, including along the frontage of the subject land, is an entitlement to use the foreshore land currently in private ownership. This confirmation satisfied the immediate concerns of the NCG. It will be up to the NCG and/or the public at large to monitor any threats in the future.

The First Settlement Shelmerdine Subdivision

The First Settlement site is located on Port Phillip Bay about two kilometres south-east of Sorrento. The land, comprising both public and private land, lies between Point Nepean Road and the beach, and extends SE from Camerons Bight Jetty NW to near the Sorrento Sailing Club. The site includes two small promontories, the Eastern Sister and the Western Sister that enclose Sullivan Bay. There has been a thirty-year battle for the First Settlement site at Sullivan Bay, Sorrento. Along the way there have been opportunities for both State and Federal Governments to buy back land in private hands and amalgamate it into the historical settlement site as crown land. The importance of the history of the site at national and state levels is reflected in its inclusion in the National Heritage Inventory (H7821 – 0001) and the Victorian Heritage Register (H1050). As well, the Collins Settlement Site is classified by the National Trust as being of cultural landscape significance.

At the beginning of the 19th century the British Government established a second penal colony south of the existing colony at Sydney to further secure British control of the Australian continent. Sullivan Bay, Sorrento, was selected as it is strategically sited near the entrance to Port Phillip Bay. In October 1803, Lieutenant Colonel David Collins, accompanied by civil officers, marines, over 300 convicts and a small party of free settlers landed at Sullivan Bay. This was the first attempt to settle Europeans permanently in Victoria. Scarcity of fresh water, little suitable timber, adverse conditions for whaling, and vulnerability to attack due to shortage of marines, led to the settlement being abandoned soon after and transferred to Hobart, Van Dieman's Land by May 1804. There are no visible remains in the built environment of this early settlement (the early settlers' graves on the Eastern Sister headland most likely date from a later period).

In 2000, a panel was appointed to consider Amendment C12 to the Mornington Peninsula Planning Scheme. Amendment C12 proposed that the Collins Settlement be included in the Schedule of Heritage Places in the Planning Scheme. The Panel, finding the Collins Settlement of historical and cultural significance at every level, recommended that Amendment C12 be approved and released its report in April 2001. The Panel recommended that 'any approval to subdivide the land comprising the Estate of Peter Rand [subsequently purchased by the Shelmerdines] should be conditional on transfer to the Crown of the area of the site adjoining the beach, as an extension of the existing public reserve. The area should be at least 20 metres wide measured inland from the cliff-top and should be transferred at no cost to the State.' This would have provided for continuous public access between the Eastern and Western Sisters.

The NCG and NHS assumed incorrectly that Amendment C12 protected this land from development, until we learned from the Shire that 'The status of this recommendation is at the heart of the current misunderstandings over amendment C12'. The MPS considered the recommendation as 'advisory' only and it was never adopted. The NCG and the NHS have always recognised the pressing need for a public walking track to link the Sisters, to allow access and enable a greater understanding of the natural and cultural heritage of this unique site. To that end the NCG and NHS worked hard to secure the construction of a public walking track for the local community and for visitors to the Collins Settlement Precinct once subdivision was announced.

VCAT approved the five-lot subdivision of the Shelmerdine land in December 2010, subject to a number of conditions to help conserve the natural environment of this historic place. The conditions included:

a. The appointment of a master architect for the duration of the development of all five lots to oversee design and development to ensure that design quality and appearance of both built form and landscaping are sensitive to the significance of the site.

- b. A seven to ten meter wide landscaped area adjacent to the beach and the top of the cliff for the length of the northern (beach side) of the site - species selected should grow to create a canopy under which the houses can see the water
- c. 319 square metres of land in the northern corner of the site to be set aside as public open space - for the creation of a lookout platform to view Sullivan Bay Beach and the Western Sister.

The appearance of the NCG at two VCAT hearings in 2010 was extremely time consuming and expensive. A great deal of negotiating was involved at local and municipal level before preparations were ready for VCAT. Over the past 24 months the NCG has borne the full costs of this (approximately \$6500.00).

The NCG also obtained Mornington Peninsula Shire Council's (MPSC) minuted agreement, with the help of Nepean Ward Councillor Tim Rodgers, for the balance of open space contribution (approximately \$500,000) from the subdivision to be used to build a pathway around the base of the Eastern Sister, from the Visitor's Centre to Sullivan Bay Beach. The feasibility and full cost of this pathway is yet to be determined.

Historic coastal town development: Sorrento Ocean Beach Road

Despite community pressure on the Shire to come up with a 'design vision' supported by appropriate planning controls, little has been achieved over the last five years despite recommendations from numerous consultants. During 2007 the MPSC worked with the Sorrento Township Planning and Consultative Committee (STPCC) (made up of representatives of the four local community groups including the NCG) and Village Well, a Place Making Consultancy, to help create a new vision for Sorrento. In early 2008 the community was invited to contribute to Sorrento's Future Vision and Directions. Sorrento was described as 'a beautiful and historic seaside village linking the bay and ocean' with a bright future. It was suggested that 'By working together with a bold new vision and plan, we can all tackle the challenges that development pressures, climate change and energy costs, among a range of issues, will bring to our community. Now is the time to prepare for change and build a resilient, sustainable and vibrant town centre for Sorrento'. The intent was 'to develop a vision for the future that is shared throughout the community, while also addressing the "nuts and bolts" issues such as infrastructure capacity, pedestrian safety, heritage protection, development controls, parking and traffic calming'. The overall review was aimed at 'both reinforcing the character of Sorrento and encouraging a strong local centre', through a welcoming town entry, improving the streetscape, creating a series of beautiful public spaces, balancing heritage values with new development and building a better business environment and local economy. In July 2009 Hansen Partnership 'an award winning consultancy offering expertise in urban planning, urban design and landscape architecture' were employed to come up with a streetscape concept plan for Ocean Beach Road. They tackled four key components: gateways, focal spaces, a unified streetscape image and distinguishing vehicle and pedestrian spaces. Community consultation took place in Ocean Beach Road on a cold wet winter Saturday. Unfortunately Hansen Partnership's proposal for a town with an avenue of palm trees (*Phoenix canariensis*) dominated all discussion, while this provided a unified landscape character it did so without respect for coastal qualities and heritage significance, without reference to character of place. The palm trees obscured more considered suggestions to enhance and provide high quality public spaces focussing on pedestrian linkages (Hansen Sorrento Ocean Beach Road Brochure 2009). (This issue polarised public opinion and effectively distracted stakeholders and ratepayers from the big picture of traffic considerations, loss of parking spaces, the concept of a 'shared movement area' which would slow traffic, reduce vehicle capacity in Ocean Beach Road at the same time enhance visitor experience and amenity. These changes to Sorrento's centre could be for the greater good, but they must be carefully examined and analysed in some depth.)

The plan was to be supported by much needed strengthening and streamlining of the present planning statutes regarding consistency of clear height provisions of private developments on adjoining land, the designation of ALL Morse Avenue as a location for medium density housing and office/professional services premises. The review of relevant overlays was the most pressing issue of the draft concept plan – the strengthening and clarifying Design and Development Overlay 10 needed to be urgently dealt with. If the overlays are not strengthened in the short term the concept plan will not be consistent with the development pattern down the track and will turn out to be a waste of time, effort and money (Janine Burke, 2010).

A report on the draft streetscape concept plan (produced by planning consultants Hansen Partnership) was considered by Council at the Forward Planning Committee meeting on 16 November 2009. Council expressed in principle support for the work undertaken to date and recommended investigation of available implementation options, emphasising however that there is no commitment to funding capital works outside of the budget assessment process (MPS, May 2010:12; June 2010:11).

The Shire has promised the community 'interim planning controls' to stop the loss of town character for the last five years - no such controls have been put in place to provide a breathing space for the streetscape

vision to be finalised and implemented. Development has continued unabated. The historic coastal town of Sorrento has been irrevocably changed – so much so that at a VCAT hearing into a proposed development on Ocean Beach Road, it was claimed that the characteristic of Sorrento's main street was diversity of building styles. In June 2011 an interim planning amendment DDO17 was passed by Council and forwarded to the State Minister for ratification. It is to be in place for 18 months, not five years. Two months later there is confusion among planners and among developers, no one knows about it and its application, and the towns of Sorrento and Blairgowrie and Portsea are at the mercy of developers. Only the watchful eye of the community alerts authorities to potential breaches. Intimidation and threats to go to VCAT are rife. The community groups have worked hard and closely with their Councillor, with the Shire's senior planners, and with consultants in order to ensure the viable and sustainable future development of Sorrento while preserving its heritage. As yet there is nothing to show for the time and effort. The community is exhausted and disheartened at the lack of outcomes after hundreds of hours of volunteer time.

Fire protection on the Nepean Peninsula

Once the State Government declared the Nepean Peninsula a place of high fire risk, DSE, CFA and MPS introduced fuel reduction strategies and fire protection plans. Blairgowrie and Sorrento have been assessed as having an extreme or very high bushfire risk (Blairgowrie Community Preparedness Guide, 2010/2011). In February 2011 it was announced that Melbourne would get more firebreaks. The new firebreaks were to be built in high-risk fire areas around Melbourne, which is already surrounded by more than 500 kilometres of firebreaks. Parks Victoria announced that they would cut 45 kilometres of firebreaks on government land, in the Dandenong Ranges, around Warrandyte and along the Mornington Peninsula.

The manager of the Melbourne bushfire protection program, Bob Brinkman, acknowledged that the firebreaks or fuel breaks alone would not stop a major bushfire. "But they do certainly help firefighters control bushfires and they help us conduct planned burns," he said. "They also act as a buffer between the forested areas, vegetated areas and residential areas." Brinkman stated that the plan is to build on the existing network, filling in gaps and improving the standard of existing firebreaks in high risk areas (Posted Thursday February 17, 2011 PV website).

Parks Victoria (PV), Notice of Works, explains that 'selected vegetation, mainly understorey shrubs and weeds, will be cleared from road edges leading to beach car parks within coastal sections of the Mornington Peninsula National Park'. The Mornington Peninsula National Park (MPNP) is a long narrow strip of mixed coastal vegetation. While bushfires within the MPNP are rare, PV explains that there is potential for a bushfire to spread during elevated fire conditions (such as Code Red fire danger days). The fuel breaks are up to 20 metres wide and intended to slow a fire, help evacuation and provide access for fire fighters. One such firebreak was put in along St Paul's Road: a wide area of land was cleared of ALL vegetation either side of the bitumen road. Contractors were blamed for 'misinterpreting' instructions. In the months following this clearing, invasive weeds have grown in abundance. Such strip clearing is destructive. While the NCG has queried the habitat impact of such a policy, other community members have called for more such clearing to 'protect' the area from potential bushfires (Blairgowrie Action Group).

Moxham, Sinclair, Walker and Douglas (2009), in their research paper 'The Vegetation of the Nepean Peninsula, Victoria – an historical perspective', conclude 'that much of the area was once covered by open, grassy woodlands, variously dominated by *Allocasuarina verticillata* (Drooping Sheoak), *Banksia integrifolia* subsp. *integrifolia* (Coast Banksia), *Acacia* species (Wattles), and *Melaleuca lanceolata* subsp. *lanceolata* (Moonah), along with a range of other species. Some areas supported shrublands, woodlands, forests, grasslands and wetlands. This area was markedly distinct from most other nearby areas, and has ecological affinities with areas in western Victoria. Over 200 years of 'European' land use have left this landscape remarkably different today – even in places where native vegetation persists'. In order to promote the NCG's second object, 'to foster the conservation of the vegetation and fauna and natural features of the Sorrento Portsea Blairgowrie Area', the NCG is working to educate and inform the local community about the natural habitat and indigenous vegetation of the Nepean Peninsula. How does a moonah woodland behave in a fire? It has been suggested that 'the lack of wildfire experience and knowledge in this vegetation type may be contributing to faulty perceptions about its actual flammability in a non-weedy state' (Peninsula Speaks, 2011). Gidja Walker, former Southern Peninsula Indigenous Flora and Fauna Association (SPIFFA) President, was the guest speaker at the 2010 AGM; excerpts of her presentation were published in the NCG Newsletter (April 2010); the NCG is working with the Shire to present a community information session and forum where all agencies and community groups can present their points of view and members of the public can have their questions answered (October 2011). Recent work by consultants Terramatrix P/L for Vic Roads and the MPS confirm that the majority of the fuel load is in the ground and middle storey plants which in many instances are made up of woody and grassy weeds (Duncan Maughan, Rye Community Consultation, July 2011). It is critical that the community be informed about the role of indigenous vegetation

and the bushfire threat on the Nepean Peninsula. The call for extensive inappropriate firebreaks threatens the remnant natural vegetation and the character of place.

ADVOCACY FOR CHARACTER OF PLACE: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

There is a critical need to understand the types of natural and cultural landscapes that are valued, that contribute to character of place, and should be preserved from new development. You are invited to look, and while you are looking, you might as well also listen, linger and think about what you see - patterns, scale, nature, water, quiet places in a dynamic coastal environment. Voluntary community groups such as the NCG are stretched to their limits in advocating for preserving the character of place on the Nepean Peninsula. Salvesen (2002) argued that 'much of the interest in environmental conservation, farmland preservation, historic preservation, and neighborhood protection derives from peoples strong connection to place and their reaction to threats against it'. Incremental change is hard to fight, once you see it, it is usually too late. The suburbanisation of the landscape diminishes the sense of place of the Nepean Peninsula. Just as insidious are the threats documented in these four case studies, each engagement stretching over years. In each case the NCG has been grappling with the complex notion of how to manage change to conserve local character and values of place: safeguarding public access along the cliff top walk in Sorrento; ensuring that subdivision of an old private landholding next to Victoria's First Settlement site resulted in respect for the natural environment and yielded community benefit; working with the community and the Shire to develop a plan for the future viability and sustainability of the historic coastal town of Sorrento while preserving its heritage; defending the habitat, natural vegetation, landscape values and character of place against excessive and inappropriate fuel reduction strategies and fire protection plans. Each of these cases has demanded long term commitments by people who are passionate about their 'place', who care about the Nepean Peninsula, the character of place. The NCG is keenly aware that it is an advocate for a dynamic fragile coastal area. In rewriting the vision and mission statements for the organisation (2011), the NCG Committee highlighted protection and stewardship as key to their *raison d'être*, to the physical, social and cultural belonging to this place:

'VISION: The NCG's vision is for people to understand and appreciate the natural, cultural and built heritage that contributes to the sense of place of the Nepean Peninsula, in order to protect and conserve the amenity and enhance the character of the Nepean Peninsula.'

'MISSION: To lead and inspire the community to appreciate, recognise, conserve, protect and celebrate the natural, cultural and built heritage of the Nepean Peninsula.'

Implicit is an expectation that such a local community group as the NCG is the guardian of their coastal environment. At the beginning of the 21st century one needs to ask who is nurturing and renewing the guardian? As the NCG community ages, where are the next generation of volunteers to take their place? Residents cry 'time poor' when invited to actively participate. The Nepean Peninsula community requires every type of volunteer from professional hours to fieldwork hours. In a climate where the Victorian State Government is opening green wedges for development and flagging private development in Victoria's National Parks, protection and stewardship of 'the local' (Lippard, 1997) are ever more important. The NCG clearly has an ongoing role to empower the local communities to preserve character of place.

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