

## The Painkalac Valley – at the Heart of Aireys Inlet



### Summary

- The Painkalac Valley and estuary is the largest and most significant estuarine wetland along the Great Ocean Road, flooding regularly each wet year.
- The Valley formed the border between major domains of Indigenous peoples and was familiar territory to William Buckley and the Wadawurrung people who adopted him, and visited the area to hunt swans and kangaroos, both of which still inhabit the area.
- The exceptional landscape values of the Valley, surrounded by the wooded hills of the Great Otway National Park and linking them to the estuary and coast, have meant that the community has repeatedly fought off attempts to develop it over many decades.
- A regenerated river valley linking the national park and the sea, unspoilt by development, could be enjoyed in perpetuity by residents and visitors, as well as the sometimes unique flora and fauna which still survive in the area.
- In a world where wetlands are shrinking, migratory birds face major threats to their existence. To rehabilitate this wetland would protect species such as Latham's Snipe, which fly between Japan and the Painkalac Valley each year.

The Painkalac Project seeks to secure and regenerate a major area of remnant wetland in the Painkalac Valley between the existing nature reserves on the lower creek and Old Coach Road.

This proposal sets out the environmental and cultural significance and the educational and tourism potential of the project.

The project envisages the return to public ownership of approximately 40 hectares of privately-

owned land on the valley floor, with the following major benefits:

- Preserving the valley and its landscape values from built infrastructure has long been a primary goal of most home-owners in and around Aireys Inlet.
- Public ownership would permit the rehabilitation of remnant wetlands, which form a complex ecological link between the forest and the river estuary.
- Public ownership would enable proper recognition of the Valley as a resource for and the border between the Wadawurrung and Gadubanud peoples.
- Low impact pathways would facilitate the use by residents, holiday-makers, bird-watchers and tourists, of wetlands linking the river mouth and upper valley (and, potentially, with the pathways and recreation facilities at the decommissioned reservoir).
- The regeneration of a natural reserve offers opportunities for ongoing involvement of primary through to tertiary students and education about Indigenous and non-Indigenous history, the value of wetlands for migratory and other bird species, and environmental richness, diversity and regeneration.

The success of the project would affirm the conclusion of the Surf Coast Shire 2016 Aireys Inlet to Eastern View Strategy Plan, that 'The open valley landscape of the Painkalac Creek, separating the timbered hillsides of Aireys Inlet and Fairhaven, has high environmental, geomorphological, scenic and cultural values and contains flora and fauna of high State ecological significance.'

## The Painkalac Project

The Painkalac Project is an initiative of The Aireys Inlet and District Association (AIDA), The Anglesea, Aireys Inlet Society for the protection of Flora and Fauna (ANGAIR) and community members (see last page). It is seeking to secure and regenerate a major area of remnant wetland in the Painkalac Valley. This proposal sets out the environmental and cultural significance and the educational and tourism potential of the project.

### Painkalac Valley for sale

There are three main sections to the valley. The Mellors Swamp Nature Reserve (south of the Great Ocean Road) and Painkalac Creek Nature Reserve (to the north) protect the lower Painkalac Valley between the estuary and Beach Road. Mellors Swamp is a 4.66ha Surf Coast Shire owned and managed nature reserve. It is under a Trust for Nature Conservation Covenant which protects and enhances its natural, cultural and scientific values in perpetuity. The Painkalac Creek Nature Reserve (16.3ha), also owned and managed by the Shire, is also under a Conservation Covenant. Prior to 1972, this area was used for agriculture and grazing. (See the Surf Coast Shire document, *Painkalac Estuary Management Plan* (2005), [http://www.estuarywatch.org.au/documents/ccma\\_document\\_12831.pdf](http://www.estuarywatch.org.au/documents/ccma_document_12831.pdf))

Since 1972 the reserve has regenerated and it is now a significant wetland area supporting a wide range of flora and fauna, including some rare ecological vegetation classes and fauna. The reserve is routinely weeded by community volunteers and maintained by the Surf Coast Shire.

The middle section of the valley – the primary object of this proposal – is privately-owned land, on which the impact of over a century of clearing and grazing is obvious. The upper valley beyond Old Coach Road ends with the creek's headwaters beyond the decommissioned reservoir.

Together the three sections of the valley cover over 60 hectares, and the valley and estuary is the largest and most significant estuarine wetland along the Great Ocean Road.

The proposed sale of the approximately 41.3ha of freehold land between Beach Road and Old Coach Road offers an opportunity for community purchase and management of an important stretch of currently degraded wetland. AIDA and ANGAIR registered the 'Painkalac Project' (TPP) as an

incorporated association, with the overarching objective of securing the joint ownership of the land. This working group has called on the support and involvement of other organisations and individuals, notably Trust for Nature to advise and to assist with necessary regulatory and funding matters. Immediate steps have been taken to obtain a commercial valuation of the property.

### Slow tourism

Rehabilitating and developing the valley as a destination for green tourists, nature lovers, birdwatchers, and other visitors fits perfectly with Aireys Inlet's emphasis on slow tourism, where visitors are encouraged to leave their cars or buses and discover the beauties of the area up close and on foot. This encourages visitors to plan an overnight stay, bringing custom to local businesses.

#### **There are significant opportunities for tourism.**

Aireys Inlet has the capacity to welcome more tourists, especially on walking tours, through linking the existing pathways converging at the Bottom Shops along River Road to the proposed pathway from Butlers Bend to Old Coach Road. This new **Painkalac Path** (as provided for in the 2006 Pathways Strategy as PP1162) along the eastern bank of the Painkalac Creek, connecting the Bottom Shops with Old Coach Road, could ultimately be extended to both the Distillery Creek Picnic Ground and the former reservoir and its picnic and walking areas. In time it would be possible to walk from the sea to the headwaters of the creek.

At the heart of the new nature reserve could be a small area of cleared land known as the **Aireys Inlet Common**, with open space for recreation and a picnic area, with information boards on the Indigenous, environmental and recent historical significance of the area.

### Landscape value of the valley

Aireys Inlet is a much loved and highly valued place. A central element in the affection of residents and visitors is the Painkalac Valley, an open river valley and estuary abutting the Great Otway National Park. Since 1983, AIDA has conducted four detailed surveys of its members and other residents. The most recent survey, in 2015, was consistent with earlier surveys showing the deep attachment respondents feel to the Painkalac Valley and their clear opposition (over 75per cent) to any built development on it.

## Environmental significance

The entire Painkalac Valley acts as a complex ecological link between the forest and the river estuary.

In the words of the Surf Coast Shire 2016 Aireys Inlet to Eastern View Strategy Plan, 'The open valley landscape of the Painkalac Creek, separating the timbered hillsides of Aireys Inlet and Fairhaven, has high environmental, geomorphological, scenic and cultural values and contains flora and fauna of high State ecological significance.' (See [http://planningschemes.dpcd.vic.gov.au/schemes/surfcoast/ordinance/21\\_mss12\\_surf.pdf](http://planningschemes.dpcd.vic.gov.au/schemes/surfcoast/ordinance/21_mss12_surf.pdf))

### The Valley is particularly rich in biodiversity.

An extension of the lower valley nature reserves across the middle reaches of the valley floor would create a significant increase in the resources available to a rich variety of plant and animal species.

### Fauna – General



The *Atlas of Victorian Wildlife* (DSE, 2004) lists 185 fauna species in the Painkalac Creek and Estuary area, 12 of which are exotic (non-native). The range of animals includes birds, mammals, reptiles, frogs and fish. Some species are known to be dependent on the estuary while others live in the area and utilise the estuary and creek environments in different ways.

### Birds



There are more than thirty estuary reliant species of regular, occasional and irregular frequency. Of particular note are the Intermediate Egret, Blue-

billed Duck, Australasian Bittern, Musk Duck, Great Egret, Caspian Tern, Whiskered Tern, and Latham's Snipe. Records collected by local residents indicate that over 100 bird species used the Painkalac Estuary during 2000–05.

### Mammals and Monotremes



Among the species recorded are the Feathertail Glider, Agile Antechinus, Swamp Antechinus (near threatened in Victoria), Eastern Grey Kangaroo, Bush Rat, Swamp Rat, Broad-toothed Rat (near threatened in Victoria), Sugar Glider, Common Ringtail Possum, Koala, Chocolate Wattled Bat, Gould's Long-eared Bat, Little Forest Bat, Whitestriped Freetail Bat, and Wallaby.

### Reptiles and Amphibians



John O'Neill

The wetlands attract Long-necked tortoises, Common Blue-tongued Lizard, Lowland Copperhead, Red-bellied Black and Tiger snakes. They also support populations of Marbled Geckos, Mourning Skinks, Water Skinks, Common Eastern Froglet, the Spotted Green Frog, Eastern Banjo Frog (Pobblebonk) and the Brown Tree Frog.



The vegetation of Painkalac Creek reserve is predominantly characterised by a Common Tussock-grass (*Poa labillardieri*) grassland with other minor communities that include a salt marsh complex, submerged saline herbfield, Common Reed, grassland and other herbfields variously dominated by Austral Bracken, Common Spike-rush, and Sea Rush. In total, 15 different vegetation communities exist, consisting of 185 indigenous and 114 exotic species.

**Poa grassland is of State significance** while the other communities are of **Local to High Regional significance**. These provide important habitat to a wide range of birds, mammals and amphibians, many of which have a restricted range or are rated as threatened throughout Victoria.

There are noxious and environmental weeds in and around the estuary and river, including Blackberry, Boneseed, Flax-leaf Broom, Watsonia, Sweet Pittosporum, Arum Lily, Agapanthus, New Zealand Mirror bush, Pampas Grass, Scotch Thistle and Kikuyu Grass.

ANGAIR has established weeding programs in a number of locations such as The Allen Noble Reserve, the Aireys Inlet Coastal Reserve and Painkalac Nature Reserve that meet on a regular basis. There are also 'Friends of' groups that maintain local reserves and parks.

## Indigenous history and culture

The Valley has profound significance in Indigenous history and culture. The Painkalac Valley marked the border between the Waduwarrung and Gadabanud people for thousands of years, and as such has significant cultural and historical value for Indigenous peoples.

In the words of Bruce Pascoe, an Australian Indigenous writer from the Bunurong clan of the Kulin nation, and winner of the Prime Minister's Literary Award, 'the Painkalac Creek (the name has in it as suffix the word for creek in Wathaurong) is the absolute border between the Wathaurong to the east and the Gadubabud to the west. It is a very important place.' (Mr Pascoe has offered valuable advice about appropriate consultative processes.)

The Mon-mart clan of the Waduwarrung (Wathaurong) lived in the region for more than 25,000 years prior to European arrival. The name Painkalac Creek is derived from the Waduwarrung language, with 'Yaluk' meaning creek or river. The Waduwarrung name for Aireys Inlet was 'Mangowak', which meant 'a good place for hunting swans'. There is evidence of pre-contact Aboriginal occupation around the estuary mouth and foreshores, including seven shell middens, a coolamon tree, artefact scatters and burials.

William Buckley was familiar with the area during the years he lived with Wadawurrung people.



## Education

A new reserve offers precious educational opportunities for local schools. The regeneration of a new area of natural reserve offers great potential for ongoing school involvement and education about Indigenous history, European colonisation and history, water quality monitoring, and environmental diversity and regeneration.

The Aireys Inlet Primary School has a clear commitment to the educational value of environmental awareness and learning: 'Our dedicated staff and students make connections with their surroundings, with each other, with our school community and extended community members. We believe learning is not confined to the four walls of a classroom and encourage our students to be active and develop a learning connection with the environment in which we live.' See: <http://aireysinletps.vic.edu.au/>

A major new reserve would represent a highly valuable educational resource.

## Night sky

If accepted as a member of the International Dark Sky community the Painkalac Valley could be promoted as a location for viewing the night sky. This has the potential to encourage more tourists to stay overnight supporting the area's businesses.

## Vision

Our vision of the nature of Aireys Inlet and district in 20-30 years is that both future generations and visitors will continue to be able to enjoy what today is distinctive about Aireys Inlet and its district, both its bio-diverse natural environment and its village character. At the heart of that vision is a regenerated river valley linking the Great Otway National Park and the sea, unspoilt by development, and able to be enjoyed in perpetuity by residents and visitors. There are opportunities to improve the amenities available which do not impinge on the natural beauty of the area or its environment, to enhance the experience of the increasing numbers of those who value walking and bike-riding, and to meet the safety challenges of a changing climate and increasing numbers of visitors.



## An International Dark-Sky Association community

These opportunities could be enhanced – and the quality of life for Aireys Inlet residents improved – by an application to become an IDA community. An IDA community 'is a town, city, municipality or other legally organized community that has shown exceptional dedication to the preservation of the night sky through the implementation and enforcement of a quality outdoor lighting ordinance, dark sky education and citizen support of dark skies.' See: <http://www.darksky.org/idsp/communities/>

## Painkalac Valley regeneration framework

The successful restoration of the Painkalac Creek Nature Reserve over the past 65 years provides a framework for the future regeneration of the privately-owned land that is the subject of the Painkalac Project. Since 1972, when grazing and agricultural uses ceased, the reserve has regenerated and it is now a wetland area that contains species of flora and fauna that are identified in the Surf Coast Shire's 2016 Strategy Plan as 'of high State ecological significance'. Maintained by the Shire, the

rejuvenated reserve is also routinely and regularly weeded by community volunteers.

*The exact details of any proposed regeneration program are yet to be determined.* For the purposes of this statement, however, an overview of the method for successful regeneration is outlined below.

#### Plant identification

Research will identify the species of flora suitable for reintroduction. Local experts, Shire environment officers and others will be consulted about appropriate plantings and a more detailed literature search conducted. Some species – such as Common Tussock-grass (*Poa labillardieri*) – already exist in the valley. Such species can be propagated by the ANGAIR propagating group, using seed material with Surf Coast provenance. Given the natural regeneration of the Mellors Swamp Nature Reserve from the surviving seed banks, it is likely that native species will be able to re-establish themselves.

#### Program implementation

Any regeneration program must be incremental. Beginning at the southern end of the land, a small manageable sector would be fenced and weeded adjacent to the Painkalac Creek Nature Reserve, allowing for species in the reserve to move into the fenced area over time. Dormant seed banks of species not previously seen can regenerate once competition by invasive species and damage caused by grazing are removed. After initial clearing of weeds, appropriate species would also be planted.

Once the first sector is established, work on an adjoining second one would begin. The incremental approach ensures that horse grazing would continue in the medium-term, which would reduce fuel and create a fire break along Bambra Road.

#### Future management issues

The Painkalac Project intends to continue to consult with local and other experts – as part of the plant identification process – to determine what, if any, burning regimens are required to maintain the regenerated plant colonies' health.

The regeneration project will, of course, be slow and time-consuming. The commitment of community volunteers has been proven and their interest and dedication shown over many years will no doubt be sustained.

#### AIDA, ANGAIR and the community

AIDA (the Aireys Inlet and District Association) is a voluntary association of over 400 members of the community, both residents and non-residents, which since 1965 has worked with the Surf Coast Shire to ensure that land-use change in the area is sympathetic to the environment and preserves the special character of the coastal communities of Aireys Inlet, Fairhaven, Moggs Creek and Eastern View.

Like AIDA, ANGAIR (the Anglesea, Aireys Inlet Society for the Protection of Flora and Fauna) has been very active since the 1960s in seeking to protect and improve the natural environment, in a geographically overlapping area and with overlapping membership. While AIDA has a particular concern with neighbourhood character and planning issues, ANGAIR has a primary focus on indigenous fauna and flora. Both are committed, above all, to maintaining the natural beauty of the coast and its hinterland.

Along with community members, AIDA and ANGAIR make up The Painkalac Project, dedicated to securing the Painkalac Valley in public ownership in perpetuity.

