



# A Vision for the Arthurs Seat Parklands

(The Roy Everard Ross Nature Sanctuary and the  
Roy Everard Ross Environment Centre)

## Background

It is now over 3 years since the Ross Trust, through its quarrying company Hillview Quarries, first sought state government approval to open an old quarry and use, for quarrying and associated infrastructure, up to 58 hectares of land of high environmental quality owned by the Trust and sitting between two sections of the Arthurs Seat State Park on the Mornington Peninsula, Victoria.

This highly controversial proposal is the subject of an environmental effects study process. This process does not however address, on a fundamental principles basis, whether this new quarry should proceed.

The Trust's current business model sees it operate a quarry for the primary purpose of fulfilling its responsibilities under Mr Ross's will by generating income in perpetuity to be distributed for charitable purposes. This is a classic model that has been used since the 1800's whereby industrialists would generate great wealth from business practices that would not be tolerated today, and then use this wealth to do 'good works'.

The Trust's reliance on this old fashioned 'virtuous circle', whereby it is seeking community licence for another 50 plus years of environmental destruction in order that it can continue to hand out funds for environmental good works elsewhere, is no longer defensible on any grounds and has been rejected by a wide range of community and environmental groups.

Over 93,000 Victorians, including some of Australia's leading environmentalists, have signed a petition condemning this proposal.

This proposal came to the attention of Jeff Floyd earlier this year, and Jeff subsequently added his name to an advertisement placed in The Age by the Save Arthurs Seat campaign. Jeff was the founding CEO of Parks Victoria and subsequently the CEO of Tourism Victoria. He has also chaired Parks Victoria, the Phillip Island Nature Parks, and has served on a number of environmental boards.

Jeff resolved to prepare a detailed alternative proposal for the consideration of the Trust, which would achieve its mission to respect the wishes of its benefactor Roy Everard Ross, and provide Mr Ross with a permanent legacy.

The attached letter and report were submitted respectfully and in confidence to the Trust on October 29<sup>th</sup> 2021 and Jeff was hopeful that the Trust would take the report seriously and be prepared to discuss it with him.

The world has moved on. It is important for the Trust to go back to the values of its benefactor and ask itself, 'what would Mr Ross want if he were alive today?' Would he be able to reconcile the Trust's Mission to 'enhance biodiversity for the sustainability of Victoria's native flora, fauna and ecosystems' with a plan to remove one of the most significant areas of remnant vegetation left in Melbourne?

There is another way forward for the Trust. It can work with the Traditional Owners, the local community, Parks Victoria and the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning to establish the Roy Everard Ross Nature Sanctuary and the Roy Everard Ross Environment Centre.

### A Real Alternative to a Quarry at Arthurs Seat

The report outlines a vision for the Arthurs Seat Parklands that involves the creation of a continuous habitat and wildlife corridor across the Arthurs Seat escarpment, containing the Arthurs Seat State Park and two new environmental assets built on the current/ old quarry sites and the other lands owned by the Ross Trust.

These new assets would be:

The Roy Everard Ross Nature Sanctuary, on the old Pioneer Quarry site and surrounding bushland.

The Nature Sanctuary would be a safe haven for endangered wildlife, a showcase for conservation best practice and, importantly, a place to celebrate the spiritual meaning and use of this land by the Traditional Owners. It would offer the opportunity to reintroduce the near threatened Tiger Quoll and protect the endangered Southern Brown Bandicoot, which is nearing extinction on the Peninsula.

Its establishment and the restoration of the old Pioneer quarry site would bring together Traditional Owners, the local community, the State government and the Trust in a true coalition to realise this new vision. The new Sanctuary would be distinct but integrated ecologically with the surrounding State Park and other nearby open spaces, creating a major parklands and ecological corridor.

The sanctuary would be around 65 hectares in size. This would allow for a nature wildlife corridor and public walking path to pass through the Trust land immediately to the south of the sanctuary and link to the Trust land in the east.

A predator proof fence would enclose the sanctuary, with public access limited to occasional guided walks.

The sanctuary would play a key role in habitat and species protection, while also being used for the release of key threatened species. It would form part of a network of predator free areas being established across Australia.

Before the sanctuary could be established, the Trust would need to undertake a full rehabilitation of the old quarry site, including the removal of non-indigenous tree and

plant species (including those that have migrated into the State Park). Careful planning would also need to be undertaken for a permanent body of water in the old quarry.

To achieve this we have wonderful examples to follow, such as in the Phillip Island Nature Park, where the local community and the State government came together in 1985 to realise a vision to save critical habitat and the penguin colony by the government purchase and removal of a large housing estate for new parkland at a cost of over \$40 million. Closer to home, in 1975 the State government purchased 500 hectares of habitat from the Green family and in 1986 a public appeal was launched by the Victorian Conservation Trust to buy the remaining area. Over \$1.3 million was raised and this precious habitat is now part of the Mornington Peninsula National Park.

The Trust has been very supportive of the role that sanctuaries can play in species protection and reintroduction: it has recently made a substantial donation of \$200,000 to the Odonata Foundation for its Orana Sanctuary outside Bendigo. A few years earlier the Trust made a very substantial loan to assist in the establishment of a wildlife sanctuary ('Wildlife Wonders') in the Otways near Apollo Bay. Designed to be hidden from view, 1.4 km of fencing encloses an area of more than 12 hectares, creating a safe haven for the bandicoots, potoroos, koalas and other native species who live here, protected from the feral predators, cats and foxes, which would otherwise prey upon them.

Work on the Pioneer site restoration, planning for the establishment of the sanctuary, and seeking funds from the Federal and State governments could start immediately.

### The Roy Everard Ross Environment Centre, on the current Hillview Quarry site

The Roy Everard Ross Environment Centre would be based on the current Hillview quarry site and would be established at the cessation of quarrying activities and the removal of all quarrying infrastructure from the land. To ensure funding and a successful outcome planning should start now. (Map 5).

The Centre would consist of:

- A Traditional Owner cultural history interpretive space.
- A Roy Everard Ross profile space.
- A Forest Therapy Facility
- Eco-accommodation Pods
- Walking & Nature Therapy trails into the surrounding State Park
- Environmental and cultural education programs for the community.

Before the Centre could be established the Trust would rehabilitate the site and plan for a permanent body of water in the decommissioned quarry.

There are many examples around the world of successful quarry and habitat restoration projects.

For example, Hornsby Quarry in NSW operated from 1959 to 2003. Although the quarry had reserves sufficient to last until 2020, community pressure saw the Hornsby Shire Council compulsorily acquire the Hornsby Quarry and develop a master plan for its restoration. After a long period the Council adopted the master plan, which includes the protection of 60 hectares of surrounding bushland.

While the scale of the Roy Everard Ross Environment Centre would need to be modest to protect environmental values in the surrounding State Park and recognizing access is via quiet residential streets, the opportunity is there to work with the community to create something of world significance.

Forest therapy, forest bathing and nature-connection walks are part of a booming worldwide eco-tourism trend. Forest Therapy is an evidence-based, effective and economically valuable public health practice. For Victoria and Australia it constitutes an increasingly important aspect of health tourism. This would also complement other wellness experiences on the Mornington Peninsula.

This Centre would play a key role in slowing down the trip to the Mornington Peninsula helping both Melbournians and tourists connect with the area, extending their stay and spend. The Global Wellness Institute estimates wellness tourism is a \$639 billion global market, growing twice as fast as general tourism, with Australia in the top five wellness tourism markets in the Asia Pacific.

## A Win for the Trust and the Environment

The community health benefits of a cessation of all quarrying activities will be substantial. The proposed environment centre will add another significant community health bonus through the therapeutic power of nature-based experiences.

The community will also have access to a larger State Park with an enhanced network of walking trails.

The environmental benefits of these proposals are substantial, starting with the value of protecting all of the Arthurs Seat remnant bushland areas in one critical bio-link. The proposed sanctuary site alone will protect over 30 hectares of native vegetation, in the heart of one of only two substantial contiguous areas of intact native vegetation remaining on the Mornington Peninsula, and at least 28 endangered species, with six listed under the Federal Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999, including the Swift Parrot.

The site is also an important koala habitat and breeding ground and will materially help to ensure their survival in the southern Peninsula. It also contains what is likely to be the oldest eucalyptus trees on the Peninsula, there before European settlement and providing important nesting locations for the threatened Powerful Owl. It also has many native orchids and is rich in fungi.

These proposals will materially assist in branding the Mornington Peninsula as a destination for eco-tourism and wellness. In 2019-20, tourism was estimated to be worth \$888 million to this region's economy.

The direct and indirect ongoing tourism jobs generated will well exceed the job losses associated with the inevitable cessation of quarrying activities. The negative impacts of quarrying on the visitor perception of the Peninsula will be gone.

There are also very significant benefits for the Trust in these proposals.

First and foremost, the Trust will honour both the spirit and the provisions of the will and wishes of Roy Everard Ross by establishing two permanent legacies in his name for the benefit of all Australians. There can be few finer memorials than something that protects our environment for all time.

Agreement by the Trust to implement these proposals would also begin to restore its standing with donor recipients and the wider community. As the full implications of the Trust's current proposals become known more broadly there will be even more environmental and community groups who will refuse to accept funds from the Trust. Instead, this proposal will allow the Trust to get back to focussing on its good work with the community.

With the lead-time for the cessation of rock extraction the Trust has ample time to address in a respectful way the phasing out of the jobs of the current employees of Hillview Quarries.

### So Where are we at Today?

On November 25<sup>th</sup> 2021 the Trust replied with a proforma response to Jeff Floyd, which made no attempt to address or even reference the proposals in the detailed report but advised that the Trust was persisting with its quarry plans.

The opportunity to engage in a respectful process to explore these proposals has been rejected by the Trust.

### The Next Steps

Jeff Floyd is sending his report to all impacted community groups, all key environment groups, MPs and local government.

The State government needs to step in, acquire the Trust's properties and put an end to the new quarry proposal for all time.

There are plenty of precedents around Australia for State government action to protect the environment by land acquisition, either by negotiation or compulsory acquisition.

The land sale proceeds, plus the substantial funds already held by the Trust, would allow it to exit quarrying and focus on its community support work.

With these key sites in public ownership, the State government can then appoint a Committee of Management to realise a new vision for these lands, in partnership with the Traditional Owners and Parks Victoria.

Jeff Floyd

November 2021