

Mersey White Water Regional Reserve – Bushfire Damage Update

MERSEY FOREST ROAD IS STILL CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE

The road is closed from the Lake Mackenzie turnoff – for updates check www.parks.tas.gov.au

Recommendation

Canoe Tasmania strongly recommends that people **Do Not** paddle the Mersey River between Rowallan Dam and Lake Parangana until:

- it has been confirmed that the known trees that are still across the river in dangerous locations have been removed;
- the entire slalom course has been checked for wires and ropes in the river and these have been removed; and
- a party has checked the remainder of the river from the bridge below Rowallan Dam down to Lake Parangana and confirmed that it is safe for normal use.

Canoe Tasmania will work with the Parks and Wildlife Service to arrange these checks and necessary clearance work at the next available opportunity.

Most people in the Tasmanian white water community are probably aware that the upper Mersey River between Lake Parangana and Lake Rowallan was burnt in the recent Mersey Forest complex of fires started by the lightning strikes on the 13th of January. As at 8 March 2016 the area is still closed to the public for safety reasons but Canoe Tasmania managed to gain a permit to inspect damage to the section of river at the Slalom Course on Saturday 5 March 2016.

Many might not be aware that the former Mersey Forest Reserve that was once managed by Forestry Tasmania has been transferred to the management of the Parks and Wildlife Service as part of the 2013 Tasmanian Forest Agreement and is now known as the Mersey White Water Regional Reserve.

Once a fire burns through a heavily forested area like the upper Mersey Valley there are many public safety risks that remain after the fire has been extinguished. The area is usually still closed whilst fire crews make the area safe enough for utility companies such as Hydro Tasmania and TasNetworks to reconnect critical infrastructure such as the electricity distribution line leading up to the Rowallan Power Station. At the moment Hydro Tasmania and TasNetworks have access to the area but there are still dangerous trees along the roadside and the potential for rock slides on sections of intensely burnt steep slopes particularly in the area near the Parangana dam wall. The incident management team expect that these issues will be addressed soon and the road reopened.

The Incident Management Team that has been managing the fire allowed two people to go in, inspect the course and liaise with the Parks and Wildlife Service fire crews that are working in the area to clear all the roads, tracks, and campgrounds to make the area safe for the public.



The damage to the area of the river around the slalom course is quite variable as the fire burnt some areas and not others. As you head upstream from Lake Parangana the fire has burnt on both sides of the road to just short of the Arm River. The Arm River Camp has not burnt. From about Arm River on the left hand side of the road (river right) as far along as the picnic ground (slalom course) is unburnt. River left in this area is burnt all the way up to the bridge below Lake Rowallan. From the Toilet block at the Picnic ground up to the bridge is burnt on river right (left hand side of the road). The toilet block at the put in below the bridge is not burnt.

At the slalom course the picnic shelter, picnic tables and toilet block have not been damaged but the area around the toilet block has been burnt. A number of trees in this area burnt in the base and had to be felled.





The fence at the look out over the cliff between the picnic shelter and the toilet block has been burnt in sections with around 1/3 of the posts burnt out at the bottom. Some of the trees over the bank in this section had to be fallen as they were unsafe as were a number in the picnic ground.

Upstream of the toilet block (to the right) the bridges and staircase have all been burnt. There are three platforms on the river bank in this area (upstream of the washing machine). The one most upstream is undamaged whilst the middle one is burnt at both ends and also crushed by a fallen tree. The lower platform was not assessed.

Around 6 trees had fallen into and across the river between the Platform above the Washing Machine and Gemini Rocks. The Tasmanian and New South Wales Parks and Wildlife Service fire fighters were busy cutting these up so that they will hopefully float free and not remain a hazard to paddlers. A couple of the wires from slalom gates had felled into the river and were pulled to the side.



Burnt out bridge at left and staircase at right



Platform above the Washing Machine



Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service fire Crew cutting up one of the trees in the river



Tasmanian and New South Wales Parks and Wildlife Service Crews cutting up trees in the river below the Washing Machine.

Downstream of the picnic area the damage was not as great. The main staircase leading down to the river just above Gemini Rocks and the Staircase at the lower car park are both intact as are all of the platforms on the river bank.



Staircase up to lower car park



Staircase up to main picnic area

In the section of the river from just above Gemini Rocks down to the DR race finish the fire has burnt the bank on the river right but not on the river left. As a result the walking track between the two main staircases is as safe as it has always been as are the platforms on the river bank.

Unfortunately in this area around half of the slalom gate wires and return wires have come down. Quite a few of the trees that wires were attached to on the right bank have burnt out with the wires coming down across the river as a result. Some of the return strings have simply burnt at the river right end with the remainder falling into the river. Most of the wires and ropes that have come down turned into a tangled mess when the water was turned back on. Most of these have now been removed and put up on the river left bank out of the way.

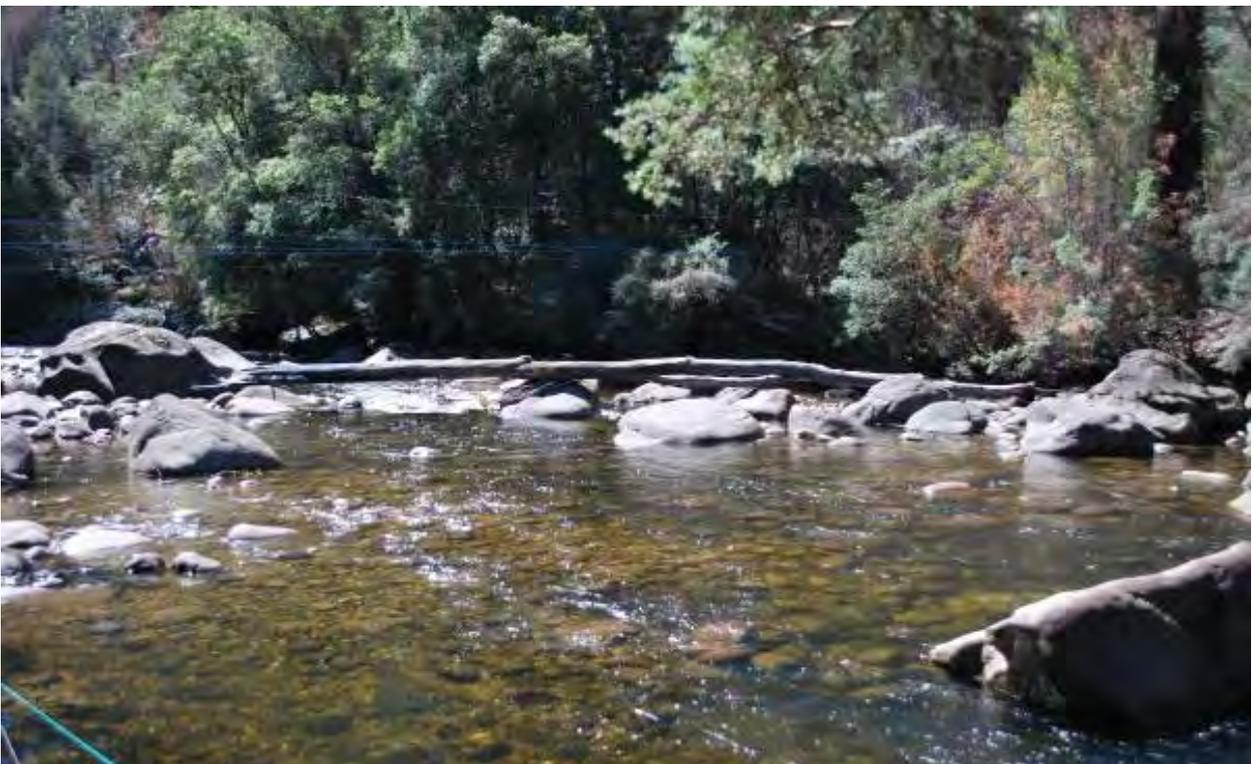


There are about four gate wires and three sets of return wires in this tangle.

There are two logs in the river in this section. One is about midway down the course in an eddy on the right and the other is at the bottom of the course lying on the rocks just above the last main rock in the middle of the river (often has an up left gate below it). Both of these will need to be removed but the Parks crews did not have time before the water was turned back on. They will reschedule this soon.



Slalom Course logs in river



Slalom Course logs in river

The Berlin Wall campsite has been burnt but will be able to be used. It looks a bit stark at the moment but will recover and be quite pleasant again. One day.....

Unassessed river sections

The section of the river between the put in at the bridge and the Washing Machine has not been checked for fallen trees. As this section burnt on both sides of the river it is expected that there are probably trees in the river if not across it and will most likely pose a safety hazard for rafters and kayakers.

The section downstream of the slalom course to the lake has not been checked either and again it is likely that there are trees in the river at some point.

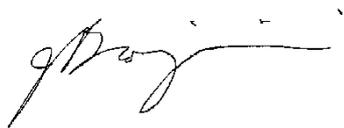
Recommendation

The Mersey Forest Road is likely to be reopened by mid-march. Many canoeists and rafters will undoubtedly wish to use the river whenever Hydro Tasmania are running Rowallan Power Station.

However, Canoe Tasmania strongly recommends that people Do Not paddle the Mersey River between Rowallan Dam and Lake Parangana until:

- **it has been confirmed that the known trees that are still across the river in dangerous locations have been removed,**
- **the entire slalom course has been checked for wires and ropes in the river and these have been removed, and**
- **that a party has checked the remainder of the river from the bridge below Rowallan Dam down to Lake Parangana and confirmed that it is safe for normal use.**

Canoe Tasmania will work with the Parks and Wildlife Service to arrange these checks and necessary clearance work at the next available opportunity.



John Borojević
Chair – Canoe Tasmania Inc.

8 March 2016

Map of Mersey White Water Reserve showing burnt areas.

