

WCC leasing deals: a wall of silence...and a shiny new shed

Nothing to see here. The WCC pulls down the shutters on revelations a staff member has rented a council property for more than 30 years.

Lifting the lid on 30-year-rent deal for WCC staff member

A senior WCC staff member has lived in a subsidised, council-owned apartment for more than 30 years. How?

Are we being told the truth about Flagstaff Hill?

I have been looking at visitor numbers for Flagstaff Hill and there are worrying signs.

Plastic dump investigation needs a whistleblower



Warrnambool film maker and environmental activist Colleen Hughson, meticulously collecting tiny plastic 'nurdles' that were illegally dumped through the Wannon Water system last November. Photo: Rosana Sialong.

By Carol Altmann

Every time I look at the above photo of Warrnambool woman Colleen Hughson, I am struck by the humility of it.

There is Colleen, at Shelly Beach, on her knees, deeply focussed, picking up tiny plastic beads – aka an environmental nightmare called “nurdles” – between her fingertips, one by one by one by one...the number appears to be endless.

That shaved spot you can see above her right ear was where she had surgery to remove a brain tumour not long before this photo was taken by fellow 'nurdler' Rosana Sialong*.

I am sure surviving a brain tumour must change you. It would make some of us, I suspect, become more selfish. In Colleen's case, however, it has made her generous spirit even more generous.

When Colleen, a film maker, discovered that tens of thousands of nurdles had been [illegally dumped](#) through the local Wannon Water sewerage system last November, she started a community action and clean-up group, [Good Will Nurdle Hunting](#), that is still going gangbusters today.

Colleen and Rosana and dozens of others have now been cleaning up this plastic pollution for months, including days of blazing heat and finger-freezing cold.

So far, they have picked up more than 650,000 nurdles from our local beaches and it ain't over yet. They just keep coming.

Wannon Water has also been cleaning up this mess for months.

It recently announced it had so far spent \$334,000 on collecting nurdles: imagine the cost if Good Will Nurdle Hunting was not helping out for free? It would probably be at least \$500,000.

What happened here was a major environmental crime.

A crime that is equivalent to someone stealing half a million bucks from a bank, except unfortunately crimes against the environment are not measured that way.

And yet nobody has been held responsible and nobody will because Wannon Water, despite its best efforts, has run out of leads.

I asked Wannon Water's general manager (service delivery) Ian Bail a bunch of questions about where the investigation was up

to and, in a nutshell, this is what he said:

- 20 sites have been visited. There are no more visits to come;
- the nurdles have been inspected by two independent labs and they still don't know what specific type of plastic it is or what it might be used for;
- investigator and retired police officer Mick Fennessy, who was hired by Wannon Water, has finished his immediate task;
- the multi-million dollar upgrade to the Warrnambool Sewage Treatment Plant will include a new system for accepting sludge which, hopefully, means this won't happen again.

Wannon Water is keeping the investigation open. It still hopes for a breakthrough, but that won't happen unless someone who knows what happened speaks up.

And somebody knows.

The person who poured the zillions of the nurdles into the system knows.

The person who delivered the sludge to Wannon Water's treatment plant containing all of these zillions of nurdles also knows, or *should* know.

Was somebody paid to look the other way?

Somebody knows.

And while we wait for somebody to grow a conscience, people like Colleen and Rosana and Keith and Brenda and Donna and Luke and Megan (the list of names goes on), will keep picking up the pieces.

*Rosana's photo provided the inspiration for this year's Warrnibald portrait prize winner, Megan Nicolson, who reproduced it in needlepoint.

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We just signed up to 76,800 horses on our wild beaches



By Carol Altmann

The full power of the horse racing industry in Victoria has been laid bare.

In 118 pages, the [Belfast Coastal Reserve Management Plan](#) released this week ties itself in knots to justify the unjustifiable: allowing full-scale racehorse training along one of the few, accessible wild beaches in our area.

At no time, unlike with the dirt-bike riders or off-road

drivers, did the State Government consider banning racehorse training on the stretch of beach between east Killarney and Levy's Beach, which is home to a breathtaking array of endangered birdlife and indigenous cultural heritage.

No, from day one, it has been a case of the government working out how to accommodate racehorses, as if they have been on our beaches for thousands of years and have wings and feathers, or gills and scales.

Let's do the maths on what is now going to happen:

Up to 40 racehorses a day, five days a week, all year round, will be allowed to train on 'Hoon Hill', a long sand dune area west of Levy's Beach. This equals up to 200 horses a week.

Up to 120 horses a day can train on Levy's Beach foreshore, five days a week, all year round. This equals up to 600 horses a week.

This means up to 800 horses a month will be running up the dunes and 2400 running along the beach.

In one year, this is the equivalent of up to 9600 horses on the dunes and 28,800 on the beach.

In two years time, when the government plans to assess the impact, there will have been – potentially – a combined total of **76,800 horse movements along Levy's Beach and up the dunes at Hoon Hill.**

Up to 76,800 horse movements in just two years of a 15-year plan.

Will it have an impact on the beach? Hmm, let me think about that for one nano second.

This entire "problem" of what to do about professional

racehorse trainers has been created by the sheer power of an industry that has huge clout well beyond our little patch in south-west Victoria.

You only have to see the cosying up that goes on between politicians and the Victorian Racing Club.

Free passes. Memberships. Tickets to the Cup. Heck, some of them even own racehorses themselves, like our local MPs **Dan Tehan** and **James Purcell** who, in an Orwellian twist, receives lavish praise for looking after his own interests and that of his son, Aaron, a professional racehorse trainer.

And if anyone dares to mention that racehorses can be trained in purpose-built facilities, that they don't actually need to be trained on our wild beaches, they are whacked with a thinly-veiled form of blackmail: the trainers will go "elsewhere" (although I am not sure where "elsewhere" is), all the jobs will dry up and the local racing industry will collapse.

What a load of bullshite.

The Warrnambool Racing Club [would not be investing millions](#) into the Warrnambool racecourse if its whole survival depended on continued access to a stretch of coastline.

Let's not forget that these professional racehorse trainers just started showing up at Levy's one day, using the beach without permits or permission, and when one of those horses won a Melbourne Cup in 2015, they began to arrive by the truckload.

But instead of telling these trainers to pack up and leave a coastal reserve, it was decided there was no option but to bend the rules *around* them. Not only that, carparks and tracks will now be added to give them better access!

The motorcross riders and off-road drivers must be feeling

hard done by.

They have been tearing around the dunes at Levy's Beach for years and – quite rightly – have been given notice that they will no longer be tolerated.

So as one form of horsepower moves out, another much stronger horsepower is moving in.



The churned up sand at Lady Bay, Warrnambool. left by racehorses in training. Image Bill Yates.

Don't be fooled for one second by the romantic images of horses wading into the surf to soothe their weary muscles, or swimming gently behind a row boat as they swim out their strains. They can do that now at Lady Bay.

This is not horse riding, this is *racehorse training*, on a massive scale.

This is about conditioning, this is about pace and strength: the hard, powerful stuff, up dunes and down dunes and along long stretches of beach, dodging the walkers and birdwatchers

and startled birds, and squashing the starfish and worms and bugs and shellfish and little pids and pods that make up the full and brilliant ecosystem of a wild coastline.

It makes me want to weep, this sort of destruction, all for no other reason than convenience, ease and greed.

And nobody else, nobody, but the powerful racing industry would ever get away with it.

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