

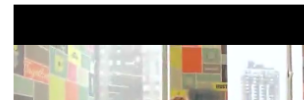


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'Guns for hire': Dishonest tactics used to strip protected trees from development sites

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Developers are using dishonest tactics to strip trees from residential blocks, including hiring private arborists to recommend that healthy trees be removed and illegally cutting down protected vegetation very early in the morning, it's been claimed.

Concern about this behaviour and a trend of "moonscaping" (legally clearing blocks prior to development) has led a number of councils to call for stronger tree protection laws and penalties.



Whitehorse mayor Denise Massoud with residents angry about tree removal at a property in Blackburn South. Photo: Eddie Jim

They say some developers are accepting penalties for illegal tree removal "as the cost of doing business", and that current fines of up to \$143,000 are rarely, if ever, enforced in full.

"It is community vandalism. It is environmental vandalism," said Nillumbik shire councillor Peter Clarke.



A moonscaped construction site in Burwood East. Photo: Planisphere

The state government is facing growing pressure to act, after dozens of councils voted to demand increased fines for illegal tree removal at a recent state council meeting of the Municipal Association of Victoria.

They argue that chopping down trees illegally should be met with a similar no-tolerance approach as the illegal demolition of Carlton's Corkman Irish Pub, where the developers are facing fines of more than \$1 million.

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Recent research by Whitehorse council found that some trees in Melbourne's leafy east were being fatally damaged during developments and private arborists were occasionally hired to recommend a tree be removed, even if it was healthy.

Arboriculture expert Greg Moore said only a small minority of arborists were willing to write flawed reports, but it did happen.



This site in Mitcham South has been stripped of all vegetation in preparation for development. Photo: Mitcham South

"In any profession you can get so-called 'guns for hire'. There are arborists that will essentially do their client's bidding," Dr Moore said.

Banyule council is concerned about tree loppers who doorknock and solicit work, sometimes telling people that trees are dangerous when they are not.

"They also often ask for upfront cash payments and disregard planning controls which protect trees," Banyule mayor Tom Melican said.

Cultural factors are also at play in some removals, as trees at the front of homes can be considered bad feng shui.

Feng shui master Jodi Brunner said if something blocked the front door, such as a pole or a tree, it was considered a source of negative energy and could affect the auspiciousness of the site.

"I'm a little bit of a greenie myself, I don't like to cut down trees. But now and then I will find properties with a tree at the front. If it is really blocking the front door it should be moved or cut down," she said.

Some councils are now moving to protect greater numbers of trees in their municipalities by expanding planning laws to require land-owners to get permits to cut down any mature tree.

Whitehorse mayor Denise Massoud said she was recently shocked by the actions of a developer who had an application to build a childcare centre in a Blackburn South rejected by the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal – only to cut down all the trees on the block a few days later.

"The owner of the property got a tree lopper in and moonscaped the site," Cr Massoud said.

"It's not illegal what they've done, but it certainly flies in the face of neighbourhood character and what the municipality stands for."



Whitehorse mayor Denise Massoud with residents angry about tree removal at a property in Blackburn South/ Photo: Eddie Jim

This week, Whitehorse council officially requested that Minister for Planning Richard Wynne introduce interim laws requiring land owners to get a permit to remove any tree more than five metres tall and 50 centimetres in circumference (measured one metre above the ground).

Dr Moore said many developers were reckless in their removal of vegetation.

"The development model for many people has evolved with the assumption that they will have a blank canvas," Dr Moore said.

"When you look at the climate change predications for Victoria, the last thing we should be doing is removing vegetation. We should be doing everything we can to preserve the vegetation that we've got."

Most of the outrage over tree removal has come from Melbourne's leafy council areas, such as those in the council area of Boroondara, where the mayor is calling for the community to write to Local Government Minister Natalie Hutchins asking for illegal tree removal fines to be increased.

But statistics show that the biggest problem is in the fringe and western suburbs, where less than 10 per cent of land is covered by trees (compared to 28 per cent in Boroondara).

<http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/guns-for-hire-dishonest-tactics-used-to-strip-protected-trees-from-development-sites-20170517-gw6ve1.html>