

Fraktos Forest, the only virgin forest in Greece

The old-growth forest of Fraktos, situated in the northeastern part of the Prefecture of Dramas in northern Greece under the highest summit of central Rhodope Mountains with an altitude of 1,953 meters, is the only Virgin Forest in the country and among the most unique in Europe. The Fraktos Forest had been declared a military zone for years and grew following only the rules of nature due to the fact that no humans had intervened. The human presence was limited to such a degree that the forest ecosystem was unaffected for at least 500 years

The woodland was registered as a virgin forest in 1979 and a year later was declared protected monument of nature. The Fraktos Forest fauna is home to 100 species of birds and 32 species of mammals including all rare animal species in Greece and Europe.



MAKE GOOD INTENTIONS LAST:

GET THE FACTS ABOUT GYMS

Acting Fair Trading Minister, Graham West issued a timely reminder to consumers to do their homework before entering a long-term gym contract.

Mr West said many gyms advertise attractive-sounding deals at this time of year, capitalising on a common New Year's resolution to get fit.

"Getting fit is a great New Year's resolution, but good intentions can sour quickly if consumers find themselves locked into long-term and high cost gym memberships," Mr West said. "No one wants to be paying hundreds of dollars for a gym membership they never use and can't get out of."

"My advice to consumers is to try a casual membership, for example one month or ten visits, before signing a contract that locks you in for a long period."

Fair Trading receives approximately 300 complaints against the fitness industry each year. More than half relate to cancellations, cooling off periods, and refunds.

"The good news is that approximately 80 per cent of these disputes are successfully mediated by Fair Trading

without the need for further action by consumers," Mr West said.

"While the number of complaints is fairly static, Fair Trading conducted a fitness industry compliance blitz, Operation X Trainer, in the first quarter of 2009.

"The results showed that a majority of gyms were compliant with the Fair Trading Act 1987 but there are ongoing issues with membership contracts.

"A customer survey showed many consumers did not read contract terms and conditions before signing a contract.

"Further analysis identified issues such as the disclosure of contract terms and conditions, non-supply or lack of promoted services, lack of refunds following closures, bank accounts continually being debited after cancellation and personal training sessions not supplied as promised."

"Consumers are less likely to read convoluted contracts printed in tiny fonts – a common factor in many of those examined by Fair Trading."

The findings have put membership contracts under the microscope, as NSW works with the Commonwealth towards the introduction of the Australian Consumer Law.

The law will take full effect on 1 Jan-

uary 2011 and includes the national unfair contract terms law currently before the Australian Parliament.

"This is the single biggest reform to Australia's consumer laws since the introduction of the Trade Practices Act 1974," Mr West said.

NSW consumers are already protected under the Fitness Services (Pre-paid Fees) Act 2000, which limits fitness centre membership pre-payments to a period of 12 months.

"Before this legislation was introduced in 2001, some gyms had sold long term pre-paid memberships plans. Consumers could pay \$1,500 up front for a five year membership only to lose their money when the gym went out of business."

NSW's voluntary Fitness Industry Code of Practice is administered by Fitness Australia. Consumers are also protected from misleading and deceptive conduct under Part 5 of the Fair Trading Act 1987. To further assist consumers, Fair Trading has a plain English guide to gym memberships and a fact sheet for industry.

"My message to gym proprietors is to deal with your members fairly," Mr West said.

"Making it difficult for consumers to understand their rights, and onerous

cancellation penalties and refund policies makes no business sense.

"The laws uphold the rights of the consumer and Fair Trading will step in to defend those rights," Mr West said.

If you are experiencing a problem with a fitness centre, or would like a copy of Gym Memberships: 10 Things You Should Know, call Fair Trading on 13 32 20 or visit the website, www.fairtrading.nsw.gov.au.

TOP 10 TIPS FOR CONSUMERS

1 Shop around. Don't feel pressured into signing on the spot and check for a cooling-off period

2 Be cautious of 'great deals'. Some deals may not be as good as they seem, once you read the fine print.

3 Read the fine print. Never take the salesperson's word for it. Know what you are getting into before you commit.

4 Check the cooling-off period. Can you cancel the membership in writing within a limited time period?

5 Where will you be in 6 to 12 months? The gym may not be easy to access if you change jobs, work different hours or move house.

6 Pre-paid fees. Fitness centres cannot accept pre-paid fees in excess of 12 months.

7 Direct debit. You may need to provide the gym with 30 days written notice to stop deductions.

8 Cancelling your membership. A membership is a binding agreement - you may be charged up to \$300 for cancelling your contract.

9 Fitness Australia. Check if the gym is a member of Fitness Australia at www.fitness.org.au or call 1300 211 311.

10 If things go wrong. If the gym is not a member of Fitness Australia or you cannot resolve the issue, call Fair Trading on 13 32 20 or visit www.fairtrading.nsw.gov.au for help and advice.

NEW CHILD PROTECTION GUIDE GOES ONLINE

A new guide to assist teachers, doctors, police officers and other mandatory reporters to report cases of child abuse and neglect is now online, Minister for Community Services Linda Burney today announced.

"Almost 200 mandatory reporters met in Sydney in December to learn about the new Mandatory Reporter Guide and the web-based application," Ms Burney said. "We have now put the guide online to allow mandatory reporters to practise using it before the new child protection system goes live on 24 January."

The guide can be accessed via the Community Services website, www.community.nsw.gov.au or the Keep Them Safe website, www.keepthemsafe.nsw.gov.au/reporting_children_at_risk. Ms Burney said the new guide helps mandatory reporters understand the new reporting threshold and helps them decide when to report suspected cases of abuse and neglect to the Child Protection Helpline, to Child Well-being Units or to other services.

"The guide is not intended to replace critical thinking or to stop a mandatory reporter acting in a way they believe is appropriate," she said. "Until now, mandatory reporters tended to refer all children at risk to the Child Protection Helpline. Under the new system, they will be guided through a series of questions and prompts to assist them in

identifying children or young people at risk of significant harm.

"For matters that are not significant harm, reporters will need to work out what assistance can be provided by his or her own agency or through other government and non-government organisations. It is simply beyond the ability of one government agency to deal with problems of this scale and magnitude. We need shared responsibility and we need collaboration."

World-renowned child protection expert and Director of the US-based Children's Research Center (CRC) Raelene Freitag MSW, Ph.D was commissioned by the NSW Government to develop the decision-making tool drawing on international evidence and expert knowledge in the assessment of children at risk. "Other jurisdictions have guidelines for professionals in child protection but as far as I'm aware the development of a tool for use by all those legally obliged to report children at risk is a world first," Dr Freitag said. "What is so good about the guide is that all mandatory reporters will have the same tool to help them answer the difficult question: is this situation so serious that it requires intervention by the Government or is there some other person or organisation that can help the family and prevent further problems?"