

Habitat 141: evolution of the beast (Abstract)

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The idea of forming networks of patches of remnant vegetation has been around for quite a while. Western Victoria has been a stronghold, with Project Hindmarsh, Yarrilinks, Kowree Biolink and Cooboboonee to Kalingur to name a few. When The Wilderness Society travelled across western Victoria to meet the organisers of these projects to suggest that they be linked, it seemed to be

an idea whose time had come. We have since created an alliance of eleven organisations into what is now known as Habitat 141. This project straddles the South Australian—Victorian border and runs from the coast as far north as Broken Hill. My talk outlined the background to Habitat 141.

Habitat 141: a people project

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Introduction

Habitat 141 is a large scale, long-term initiative managed by an alliance of over a dozen organisations, both government and non-government. It aims to safeguard the natural and associated agricultural areas of western Victoria, eastern South Australia and south-western New South Wales against a range of threats including climate change. It will do this by protecting and renovating important areas of native vegetation communities across the landscape on both public and private land.

The Habitat 141 area is as large as England plus half of Scotland, stretching from the coast to Broken Hill, and from Murray Bridge to the Grampians and to the Mungo Willandra area. It has many blocks of remnant vegetation, both large and small, many of which are in reserves or national parks. Between these blocks is farmland where the economy is based on primary production—agriculture, horticulture, forestry and grazing.

Three months ago I landed the job as Habitat 141 Coordinator. I was shown a map with green bits for reserves and national parks, and was told: “Your mission, should you choose to do it, is to fill in the gaps between the green bits.” I gulped, said “Yeah, no worries.” So I was handed a car, a computer, a mobile phone and a map.

The gaps I promised to fill in on the map are farms. Farms are owned and managed by farmers, so it is important to try to understand them and how they think, and how to excite them to join in this massive, crazy scheme to make it happen.



A team of Korean volunteers relaxes after fence building for Kowree Biolink. Photo: Sue Close

Farmers: some Sociological Analyses

Over the past few years there have been a number of sociological studies of farmers and their attitudes towards making land management changes and towards conservation on their farms. I know of four of these studies in my area alone. They all say the same thing: farmers aren't particularly worried by conservation issues and don't have the resources or skills to do anything about them.

I carried out a sociological study of my own outside the front gate of a farmer/shearer called Stewy. One overcast September afternoon I was outside Stewy's house, direct seeding trees and shrubs into a public laneway which linked a couple of wetlands. I knew a bit about Stewy: he had recently had a run-in with the DSE (Department

of Sustainability and Environment) over some of their tree seedlings which his sheep had eaten. This altercation had taken place on land over which he had previously held a grazing licence. I also knew from Kenny, one of our shearers, that Stewy had taken too many drugs in his youth and that his brain was, well, compromised. Kenny refuses to shear in the same shed as Stewy, because he is so big and always itching for a fight.

I was about half way through my seeding job when I stopped to check the seed box, depth and gear, and heard a ute start up at Stewy's house. There was a hole in the muffler; the wheels were spinning. It was coming this way, and coming fast. Here we go!

The ute skidded to a halt next to me and my four-wheel bike and seeder. Luckily Stewy had his missus with him, so he didn't just pull out the shot-gun and blow my brains out. Maybe I could get out of here with just a few broken bones. He and the missus jumped out. "What do you think you are doing here?" A reasonable question; I might survive this yet. I said "Well, I'm just sowing some trees in this laneway."

"I hate trees."

"Fair enough, but this is a public lane, and the shire has given permission to do this work."

"My sheep need to get in that gateway there. I don't want trees clogging up this laneway."

"If I start the seeding just there would that be OK?"

"It had better be a fair bit further on than that. What trees are you planting? I can't stand those Bastard Gums, what do you call them?"

"I'm sowing a mix of trees and shrubs to link the School Swamp with that salty lake over there. Have a look at the seed I'm using."

Stewy drops his arms, leans forward and has a good look. GOT HIM. All farmers are hooked on growing things. The laneway is now a forest.

Kowree Biolink: a People Project

Consistent with the results of this rigorous sociological study, the Kowree Farm Tree Group based in Edenhope in the south-west Wimmera set up and ran a project called Kowree Biolink. The project ran for four years over an area of about a thousand square kilometres and linked the Little Desert with the Glenelg River. It involved about 70 farmers, all of whom contributed an average of \$5,000 each towards the conservation work done on their farms.



The 'Grand Tour' of Kowree Biolink 2002. Photo: Sue Close

Over four years we conserved 900 hectares or approximately one per cent of the landscape. This was definitely a people project. Work was done by farmers, volunteers, school groups and local contractors. We did plenty of showing off and celebrating our activities. We staged a horse ride from the top to the bottom of the Biolink, and held barbeques and dinners to celebrate the success of the project. There were a number of extremely popular bus trips, with many farmers wanting to see what their friends and neighbours were up to.

Farmers were attracted to the Kowree Biolink because it was big, bold, well run, seen as successful, would improve their farm, was flexible and would accommodate their needs.

The facilitator drove a bomb. No logo, no business card, no lap-top, no barriers. Plans were made in the ute and the deal was signed and sealed at the boundary gate. No site was ever left half done—100% success was the benchmark, no matter what the recurring cost.

Conclusion

Kowree Biolink is not an aberration. Project Hindmarsh is happening 100 kilometres to the north east. It is bigger, ran for longer, has won numerous prizes and is famous for its massive planting weekends. Yarri-links has been cruising along for years. With lots of farmer involvement and a prize or two, it now pulls in busloads of refugees and others to their community planting weekends.

Can we take the lessons learned from Kowree Biolink and the numerous other successful projects and apply them to a project 200 times as large? Yeah, no worries, but for God's sake, on your way out remember to shut the bloody gate.



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