

Symposium Presentation No. 11

# *The GOANNA Project*

## *Landscape Restoration on a Landcare Budget and Partnering for the Future*

**James Nelsson**

Facilitator, Loddon Plains Landcare Network and GOANNA Project Officer

*Summarised by Dr Peter Mitchell, Biolinks Alliance*

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This talk was about partnering and collectively achieving environmental outcomes.

The Loddon Plains Landcare Network is largely in the Loddon Shire, and covers an area of around 480,000 ha. The member groups include around 300 land managers responsible for 300,000 ha of private land.

The Network was formed in 2009 as a partnership of 18 groups: friends groups, catchment management networks and several agriculture-based landcare groups with an interest in conservation. Members are capable people with multiple skills. They are interested in the natural environment and are working to enhance the natural values and agricultural productivity of their properties.

The Network has a landscape-wide focus which is why they developed the GOANNA project – which stands for Group Organised Activity Nurturing Natural Assets. The project is focused on connectivity, ecosystem restoration, land stewardship and landscape management. It also has a focus on building and sustaining networks with natural resource managers, philanthropic organisations, landholders, schools, social enterprises, local businesses and volunteers. An important aspect of these partnerships is the personal relationships that have been developed – you can phone someone and know something will happen.

The Goanna Project has partnerships with the North Central CMA, Parks Victoria, Bush Heritage and Trust for Nature, and also with the Norman Wettenhall Foundation. With guidance and financial assistance from the Foundation, the Loddon Plains Landcare Network developed a blueprint for action. It is a business model that sets out the vision and roles for LPLN and strategically maps out how to improve environmental outcomes with targeted landscape restoration. The blueprint has assisted LPLN in establishing itself as a

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capable NRM provider. A project officer position was created and funded (to September 2016). The Network is now discussing ways the member groups might help the NCCMA achieve some of their landscape-wide projects – with the Goanna Project as a likely candidate for implementing these projects.

The summaries below demonstrate the wide range of projects and partnerships developed by the Network.

## **Wheel Cactus Control**

From the blueprint for action, Wheel Cactus was identified as a major issue across the catchment. The main project area is around Mount Buckrabanyule, north of Wedderburn. All the granite hills in the area – including Mount Korong and the Nardoo Hills/Mount Kerang – are affected, although not as severely as Mount Buckrabanyule. 800 ha are affected by the cactus and spread is affecting neighbouring agricultural and conservation lands. Each fruit has up to 500 seeds and each pad can have around 10 fruits. Birds love the fruit and are the main vector for spread.

Control was spear-headed by Wychitella Landcare Group nearly three decades ago. The infestation was nearly controlled in 2009, then funding was withdrawn and large parts of the land were purchased by an absentee landholder.

Control is labour-intensive. It involves stabbing with herbicide at least three-quarters of the terminal radial pads to be effective. If only lower parts are poisoned, the terminal pads will drop off and re-sprout. The best time to control the plant is when it is just emerging, as the plants can be easily pulled and removed. The Green Army and Conservation Volunteers Australia have been recruited to help with control, along with lots of local volunteers.

Cochineal beetles have also been introduced with some success. The entry points of the larvae are marked as cottony spots, and the affected plant eventually collapses and dies. One problem is that it is effective in the younger plants before fruiting but results are poorer in older plants. But it is an extra tool in the control toolkit.

## **Threatened Black Box Woodland at Calivil Creek**

Calivil Creek at Yarrawalla (west of Mitiamo) has threatened Black Box Grassy Woodlands. The trees were ring-barked by previous generations but still provide structure and habitat including nesting sites for local birds. This project was funded through the 20 Million Trees Program (part of the National Landcare Program). The Network undertook 16km of direct seeding and planted 3000 tube stock in partnership with East Loddon School.

## **Kamarooka Wetland Complex Restoration**

Swamps within the wetland complex, like Tang Tang Swamp, are ephemeral wetlands that on average receive water 2-3 times every ten years, and hold the water for 3-6 months. Govetts Swamp is a shallow swamp with a harsh environment that alternates between very

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wet and very dry. When wet, these wetlands can hold around 30cm of water, which is ideal breeding habitat for Brolgas.

The North Central CMA identified these wetlands as a priority for works, but were not successful in engaging the landholders. Through members of the Landcare Network, the Facilitator was able to engage and sign up all the landholders for restoration works.

## **Community Bird Monitoring Sites**

The Network has 54 community bird monitoring sites in five separate ecological areas: in the granite country south of Wedderburn (part of the Kooyoorra Connections Project), the Loddon foothills, Kamarooka Swamp, Terrick-Terrick/Kow Swamp and the northern wetlands and woodlands. The group has run two monitoring workshops and has 12 community bird monitors who survey the sites four times each year. The data is sent to the Atlas of Living Australia.

## **Nest boxes and monitoring**

The group partnered with East Loddon College and Wedderburn Men's Shed to build nest boxes. GPS coordinates for 45 boxes in the Hard Hills Reserve and other sites in Wedderburn allow monitoring using the "high tech" camera on a stick method.

Any serious monitoring programs take a lot of planning and organization and require a huge commitment of time and resources – a big challenge. The group wants to do lots more monitoring, so is developing methodologies to take to the table with their partners.

## **Kooyoorra Connections**

Loddon Plains Landcare Network is in partnership with Wedderburn CMN, Friends of Kooyoorra, Trust for Nature, Bush Heritage, Parks Victoria and the North Central CMA, with funding coming through the CMA from the National Landcare Program (see also Talk 11 by Paul Dettmann and Jeroen van Veen). The overall program supports local landholders and community groups to improve the condition and increase the area of native vegetation between Kooyoorra State Park, Mount Korong Nature Conservation Reserve and through Wedderburn to the Wychitella area. This area is recognized as a biodiversity hotspot. Improving connectivity will increase the available habitat for threatened species like Malleefowl and the threatened Woodland Bird Community.

One of the activities is an adaptive management approach to direct seeding around Malleefowl mounds, particularly using species missing from this landscape. Lack of understorey affects nesting success. The technique is to scrape a 30cm square on the ground, spread seed and lightly tamp. This was done with the Green Army in September 2016 and plants have emerged – but they will need to survive the increasing numbers of wallabies.

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Another activity was around the old Eucalyptus harvest sites which are now a Blue Mallee monoculture with bare eroding surfaces and a lack of mid- and understorey and ground layers. Works included ripping, cutting and laying branches across slopes to slow water, and direct seeding. Unfortunately the seeding was unsuccessful due to the dry season. So the Green Army was called back to do hand direct seeding described earlier. They were welcomed to country by Dja Dja Wurrung elders.

## **Community and Cultural Activities**

The partners in the Kooyoora Connections have held several successful community and cultural activities. One of these was "Listening to the Mount". Participants were welcomed to country by local Dja Dja Wurrung leaders, then visited a variety of special and significant places. During the event the men visited Mt Kooyoora, a special place for local Indigenous men, and the women visited Mt Korong, a special place for women. Language was spoken on country for the first time in far too long. This day created a much greater understanding, awareness and respect for the local Indigenous people, their culture and society, and their connections to country.

James finished by thanking all the many supporters of the projects, and noting that, if we want our efforts to create Healthy Country, our best results will be obtained through collaboration.