Connecting Country
Restoring landscapes across Mount Alexander

A preliminary proposal prepared as part of Victoria's bid to Caring for our Country

Overview

This proposal is about matching the scale of the response to the scale of the problem. For too long biodiversity conservation initiatives have been applied 'vegemite thin' or dabbed here and there across the landscape. As environmental challenges mount, such a limited and fragmented, piecemeal approach holds only the promise of becoming increasingly ineffectual. This proposal adopts an innovative, whole of landscape approach aimed at reversing the fragmentation of habitat and incremental degradation of natural resources that has occurred since settlement.

The proposal is based on the premise that an effective whole of landscape approach is as much about connecting people and communities as it is about connecting landscapes and habitat. Initially, the core objective has been to bring together as many private and public stakeholders as possible in order to reverse decline in a co-ordinated manner across all parts of the targeted landscape. This has occurred via an independently funded partnership building process, which is driven by a wide range of community and agency stakeholders with knowledge and a concern for the environmental future of their landscape. The process, then, has been strongly built from the bottom up.

In contrast, landscape restoration projects are generally wholly government or agency funded. This leads to agendas being set from the top down, with the resulting stakeholder partnership formation being skewed towards government and agency representation. Input from private landholders, community groups and NGOs is often largely missing. Consequently, lack of meaningful engagement with these groups can compromise a whole of landscape approach from the outset – particularly when it is borne in mind that 65% of Victoria is in the hands of private landholders.

Initiated by a local conservation network, a project called Connecting Country (the subject of this proposal) has brought together public and private stakeholders in the Shire of Mt Alexander, central Victoria, with the initial aim, as a first priority, of pooling local, scientific and agency information about the shire's state of environment. The initial nine month phase involves developing a 'biodiversity blueprint' through a combination of community engagement and capacity building, participatory research, management actions and adaptive management. Funding to develop the blueprint has been provided by an environmental philanthropic organisation. The biodiversity blueprint is discussed in detail in the next section.

Once completed by October 2008, it is expected that the comprehensive mapping and data arising from the pooling of information and knowledge will allow the partnership's stakeholders to identify a range of options for protecting and enhancing habitat within the shire. How these might be implemented and funded across the whole of the landscape is the subject of the concluding section of this proposal. It is in this second phase that the partners of Connecting Country are looking to government to help share the cost of transforming landscape restoration in the shire from a piecemeal approach to undertaking a range of integrated interventions across the whole of the landscape in a sustained manner.

The Connecting Country process followed in Mt Alexander Shire holds, we believe, the potential to act as a model for 'whole of landscape restoration' partnership building around the nation, so long as two key conditions can be met:
   a) A wide ranging group of private, public and non-profit stakeholders is willing to take part in building a biodiversity blueprint; and
   b) Government funding can be matched with community, corporate and/or philanthropic funding to ensure local 'ownership' of the information pooling process and its outcomes.

It is intended that sharing of information, knowledge and experiences between this project and complementary work in adjacent LGAs and CMAs and beyond will act as a feature of the project's operation, aiding replicability.

What is Connecting Country?

Connecting Country is focused, as a first priority, on how all groups concerned with the state of the environment in Mt Alexander Shire can pool their information and knowledge so that we can discover new ways of linking 'to bring back the bush'. There is a recognition by stakeholders that natural values in this 152,895ha shire are threatened by the legacy of clearing, subsequent fragmentation and decline in habitat quality and ongoing threats posed by inappropriate development. This has, in some cases, led to the loss of critical elements of the shire's native biodiversity.

Under the guidance and leadership of a dynamic community group, Friends of the Box Ironbark Inc [FOBIF], Connecting Country has brought together a wide range of stakeholders to develop and implement a biodiversity blueprint across the shire. Project partners bring a strong ecological knowledge base as well as the capacity to draw on further expertise through existing networks. Stakeholders include all local Landcare and environmental groups; agencies including DSE, DPI, Parks Victoria, local government and the North Central CMA; NGOs including Trust for Nature, Greening Australia and the Victoria Naturally Alliance. $50,000 in funding has been provided by a philanthropic environmental organisation, the Norman Wettenhall Foundation. This has allowed the employment of a skilled NRM co-ordinator to pull the information together.

As part of the blueprint, information obtained from stakeholders is being added to an interactive database, accessible to all parties to the project. The resources of the North Central CMA and other government agencies are being brought to bear in ensuring a sophisticated, comprehensive website is designed, which will act as the springboard for a multi-platform approach to targeting core areas for habitat connectivity and expansion. The website, while not the only medium of communication and knowledge sharing for the project, is being designed to encourage interested stakeholders to participate, share information and support practical involvement in the project's activities.

Connecting Country forms an important node in a chain of conservation efforts spread across the Box-Ironbark ecosystem, extending from western Victoria to north-eastern Victoria. The shire is relatively well-vegetated (compared with some other parts of the region and state) and consequently has a foundation of core habitat around which biodiversity conservation efforts can be built on both public and private land. Many of the ecological communities found on both private and public land have high conservation status (endangered/vulnerable), and loss of habitat quality in remnant vegetation is a significant issue. An additional concern is the loss of veteran trees, some of which existed prior to European settlement. The shire is home to a range of threatened and near-threatened fauna species including Brush-tailed Phascogale, Swift Parrot, Painted Honeyeater, Crested Bellbird, Brown Toadlet and Powerful Owl. Threatened flora species include Clover Glycine, Fryerstown Grevillea, Spiny Rice-flower and an array of endangered orchids. The status of many of these threatened species is in many cases poorly known across their range and within the shire itself.

Across the shire, fragments of this ecosystem are showing significant signs of regeneration as marginal farmland is increasingly being managed for nature conservation and landscape amenity by a new generation of land managers. Within the shire there are, for instance, 168 Land for Wildlife properties and 44 properties with Trust for Nature covenants covering 502ha. As such, there is significant potential to build on the remaining native vegetation in the shire for landscape scale biolinks that will form part of larger bioregional linkages that traverse the landscapes of northern Victoria.

Protection of remnants and enhancing connectivity is recognised as essential to maintaining the health of the Australian landscape. As a result, a key focus of the blueprint is to protect and enhance the condition of habitat across the shire through supporting natural regeneration and rehabilitation wherever possible.

The case for human-induced climate change is becoming accepted across all tiers of society. We are now wrestling with thinking about what this means at the local scale for our way of life and the landscape we live in. Climate change provides a series of challenges and opportunities for landscapes such as ours, which in the past have been dominated by conventional agro-ecological systems. Their ability to withstand system shocks, such as forecast rises in temperature and reductions in rainfall, have been compromised by the legacy of past intervention. The actions and initiatives developed within the blueprint should be directed at increasing the resilience of our landscapes and, if successfully implemented, would buffer our ecology, community and economy in the face of climate change. It would essentially increase the adaptability of our local community to live within and manage a changing landscape.

Moving from ideas to action

Large scale funding will be required in the second phase to implement the ideas and outcomes identified in the development of the biodiversity blueprint. While much of this funding will come from local, non profit, corporate and philanthropic sources, without aid at a Federal and State Government level, the necessary scale to effect whole of landscape change is unlikely to be achieved. In Mt Alexander Shire alone, conservative estimates suggest $10-15 million is required over the next five years to transform the landscape from a declining trajectory to a sustainable, resilient state. A proposed budget breakdown between Connecting Country partners is attached.

Through sharing locally held information and knowledge, the project aims to increase the uptake of land management practices that conserve and enhance local biodiversity values. While there is considerable interest, participation and sympathy for biodiversity conservation across the shire, the importance that natural systems play in sustaining our way of life is not universally understood. As part of the second phase, it is intended to establish an interactive website, which acts as a long term dynamic resource for exploring options and pathways, connecting and restoring country across Mt Alexander Shire, now and into the future. It will not so much be the blueprint itself that engages the community, but its continuance as an interactive, evolving resource.

Already, the development of the blueprint has proven an important step in developing conservation priorities, communicating the value of biodiversity in providing ecosystem services and highlighting the natural values associated with the local landscape. It will act as a communication tool with a number of audiences, providing the opportunity to make the case for significantly greater investment in biodiversity conservation through agencies such as CMAs, DSE, local government, NGOs (e.g, Trust for Nature, Greening Australia) and the philanthropic sector.

Although modest in scale, Connecting Country has already developed into a sophisticated, complex project with widespread support and great potential for successfully reversing landscape decline across many fronts. This is not a triage situation: core habitat is already in place. The Box-Ironbark ecosystem is iconic and highly threatened, but has high restorative potential as evidenced by large areas of natural regeneration currently occurring. The project complements and augments current natural resource management activities being undertaken by a range of agencies and groups across the shire landscape.

The proposal outlined above has been developed by a consortium of community groups and supporting agencies with the objectives of restoring habitat, building landscape resilience and engaging and involving an already active community in biodiversity conservation for the long haul. We, the existing partners in Connecting Country, stretch out our hands to you to join with us in bringing this potential to fruition.

Components and timelines

Element	Annual Cost	Details
Project Coordination	240,000	2 x FTE's incl. on costs, office, travel etc
Stewardship program • Farm to landscape planning • Biodiversity Tender • "Traditional grants"	500,000	• Design of integrated incentive delivery model • Auction/MBI design • Information/knowledge management
Community participation/education/capacity building	100,000	• Property Management Planning • Community Training program • Property assessments
Adaptive Management – M & E	100,000	• Baseline data collation • Long term ecological monitoring strategy development
Landscape repair crew	200,000	
TOTAL	1,140,000	

Proponents

Friends of the Box Ironbark (Inc)   Marie Jones
                                                           Doug Ralph
                                                           Bernard Slattery

Victoria Naturally Alliance   Karen Alexander

Partner collaboration and governance

With such a large and complex project, a high level of project management expertise and clear governance processes will be established. While the details of this are still to be finalised, the following steps are indicative of our thinking:

- o High level steering committee – small group with skills-based experience in organisational leadership, financial management, environmental management and community development. The Chair of the North Central CMA, Dr. Ian MacBean has offered his time to be involved, as has Gib Wettenhall, Chair of the Norman Wettenhall Foundation;

- o Project management group including the proponents and representatives from key agencies to oversee/support operational matters;

- o Community/stakeholder reference group to provide advice, community liaison, local integration with participating groups and individuals.

There is already strong involvement from a range of partner agencies in Connecting Country. This includes the North Central Catchment Management Authority, Trust for Nature, Greening Australia, Shire of Mount Alexander, Department of Sustainability and Environment, Department of Primary Industries and Parks Victoria. ***Significantly, however, these organisations are playing a supporting role in what is truly a community-led initiative.***