

## **Creating a Conservation Community At Wedderburn**

**Slide** of locality

**Slide** photos

The Wedderburn CMN was set up in 2003 by the Department of Sustainability and Environment, in part out of concern for the Nationally endangered Malleefowl. The group tapped into a local concern for this species and undertook some works to help in that regard.

The CMN is basically a partnership between various government & non-government organisations and the local community.

**Slide** this was the Wedderburn partnership

**Slide** of conservation lands. **flurescent green**

But things really started to change when Bush Heritage bought their first block of land in the area.

I was driving with direct seeding contractor to do some work on the new Bush Heritage block. It was stinking hot and we dropped into a local pub. The barmen asked where we were going and when I explained we were heading to the new conservation block he thought for a while then said "I suppose you're against mulesing then".

Mulesing is the controversial practice of removing the skin from around the a sheeps backside to prevent them becoming flyblown.

The point is that has nothing to do with conservation.

This simple statement said many things but what it reflected was a deep suspicion in the area of a conservation group moving in to manage land. Land is for food production not conservation. A fear that the land would not be well managed and that weeds and rabbits would get out of control.

However in only a few years Bush Heritage was able to turn this around and built local credibility.

How?

In part the qualities of their first person on the ground there. Great at talking over the farm gate, and an excellent ecologist. A rare skill set.

He and the new Bush Heritage Ranger set about diligently, tirelessly and enthusiastically controlling wheel cactus, and rabbits and also participated in community fox baiting and when necessary, kangaroo control.

Slides  
Slide

The local farmers were impressed to the extent that more land was offered to Bush Heritage. This was a massive turn around in community attitude, particularly from the highly skeptical farming community.

### **Then**

Paul Dettman seeing the activity going on his area started buying up land for his Carbon Offset Company, Greenhouse Balanced? Paul is a great visionary and prepared to take on the financial risk for a better environmental future in the area.

His company buys land, revegetates for the carbon offsets for other organisations, applies a conservation covenant to the land with the Trust for Nature then resells the land to conservation minded people.

I believe as a result of the on-ground work done by Bush Heritage and the credibility they established through their hard work, the farmers were far more willing to sell to Paul.

We are talking a few thousand hectares.

**Slide** Then

**Slide** of new conservation lands. Private estate

You can see that ecologically these two organisations and others have had a huge local impact.

But that is only part of the story.

On the back of Greenhouse Balanced selling conservation land in the area people were buying the land and moving in from Melbourne and other places.

People with a conservation mindset.

It seemed to become something of a conservation hub out at Mt Korong. In 2009 there was no one with a conservation interest living in the Mt Korong area.

By 2015 there were about 13 new conservation-minded land-owners. A new group was formed called Mt Korong Ecowatch, that regularly attracts up to 20 people to its meetings.

You can imagine how that has transformed the energy in the area and the local conversations.

The new discussion is about rewilding the Mount. They have just launched a

small crowd-funding effort to kick things off but with a bigger objective to perhaps fox-proof the Mount and reintroduce locally extinct native species.

This groups now meets over good food and wine and talks, exchanges ideas, has arguments and seeks to learn more about their local ecology.

Parks Victoria has been influenced in their Management of the adjacent Park by this group. The Rangers have said how much they appreciate the pressure the group brings in helping them bring in more funding to the area for works.

The Ecowatch group has even undertaken some conservation works on the Parks managed land.

These new locals are now joining other community groups such as the choir and I expect over more time that general community attitudes to conservation will continue to change. It has already aroused local curiosity with people wanting to know what is going on out there?

Greenhouse Balanced ( it is now called Cassinia Environmental), has had a huge impact. The money Paul has brought in has enabled some farmers to let go of less productive land and has helped others, wanting to retire, along that path.

Time does not allow more detail about the how this took place but the transformation is significant.

If you recall "I suppose you're against mulesing" to a conversation about rewilding Mt Korong

While the whole thing was initiated by a Government Department, the change was driven by non- government organisations and local private land owners.