Progress

People power is working for the landscape



Community members meet researchers and Trust representatives at an open day.

A historic farming property in Victoria's Gippsland region has become the focus of a unique community 'living lab' partnership between landowners, scientists and the government, who are working together to understand and restore the area's natural resources

In May 2003, trusteeship of the 1800–hectare 'Strathfieldsaye Estate', first settled in 1842, was transferred to Australian Landscape Trust from Melbourne University. After landowners in the Gippsland area approached the Trust and CSIRO to help in better understanding and improving the environmental management of their region, the Estate was nominated as 'hands on' point for the transfer of knowledge between scientists and the local community.

'Many local landowners are concerned about securing a long-term future that includes maintaining biodiversity, an aesthetic landscape, productive farms and jobs' says Dr Matt Colloff from CSIRO, scientific project leader.

Matt sees creating a working demonstration at Strathfieldsaye and other local properties as one of the best ways for landowners, scientists and the community to gain a collective understanding of how farming activities affect and interact with the broader landscape.

Like many other areas in Australia, decades of sheep and cattle grazing have severely changed and fragmented Gippsland's native landscape. The indigenous vegetation of the once magnificent red gums plains, for example, has been reduced to less than 5% on public land and to just 3% on private holdings.

Research and restoration of the local landscapes and ecosystems, began in July 2003 with the Red Gum Plains Restoration Project, funded by the Commonwealth Department of Transport and Regional Services. The projects main goals are to establish an environmental monitoring program and to adapt local land management practices to incorporate principles of revegetation ecology, soil ecosystem health and pasture weed management.

Revegetation has recently been tried for some time on the red gum plains, but trees are failing to establish and thrive. Landowners participating in the project intend to research the factors behind this, looking at seed quality, soil health and insect damage.



Strathfieldsaye's once magnificent red gums have been cleared or have died off.

More widely, the project's goals are linked to conclusions of a report on the current and future conditions of the Gippsland Lakes, commissioned by the Gippsland Coastal Board and undertaken by CSIRO.

Agricultural runoff from the red gums plains was found to be causing the blue green algal blooms in the Gippsland Lakes, the condition of which influences developments such as tourism, affecting the economic, social and ecological conditions of the region.

Running in parallel is critical work on community capacity building, teaching and supporting landowners to be able to independently respond to future challenges and actively manage their natural resources. Dr Gail Kelly, from CSIRO, is establishing a monitoring program designed to evaluate changes in community attitudes and practices.

'We need to understand how scientists can better combine local and scientific knowledge, and interact with people in a way that will maximise cultural change', says Gail. 'The three measures, both quantitative and qualitative, of community capacity we are looking at over the course of the project are the knowledge and views of the general public, of community leaders and of the administrators of relevant government bodies.'

At the first open day at Strathfieldsaye Estate last November, which brought locals, the Australian Landscape Trust, and various community groups together, Nobby Clark, AO, Chairman of Australian Landscape Trust said 'Our primary goal is to see Australia's degraded landscapes brought back to life. This project, and being given the trusteeship of this significant property, provides a wonderful opportunity to actively pursue our philosophy'.

'A vital part of the project involves enlisting the support and enthusiasm of the broader community. The open day was a small step in securing their interest and cooperation,' Mr Clark said.

Through directly involving the people of the Gippsland region, the Red Gums Plains Restoration Project aims to build up the community's knowledge base to level that will carry the project through its initial three years and then beyond, through the longer timeframe required for successful landscape restoration.

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