

Progress

Buying the Bush Family Reserve

Trust for Nature's Land Acquisition program is helping preserve Australia's disappearing natural heritage in Victoria's Gippsland region.

When the 255 hectare Bush Family Reserve came up for sale in the late 1990s, Trust for Nature (TfN) regional manager, Robyn Edwards, was quietly excited. The former sheep and cattle farm at Meerlieu boasted significant remnant vegetation types, including the threatened Gippsland grassy woodland, sedge wetlands containing the nationally endangered Dwarf Kerrawang, and Forest Red Gum communities. The property also sat in a strategically important part of the Gippsland Plains landscape – close to scattered remnants, other reserves owned by TfN, and properties under Conservation Covenants.

But Edwards, a 10-year veteran of TfN for Nature program, knew that not all 'acquisition' attempts go to plan. Usually, it's because TfN can't raise the money to buy a property.

'We can't pay over 10 per cent of the independent property valuation – because of limited funding – and sometimes this valuation is way below what the owner wants, so that's the end of it,' Edwards says.

Fortunately, with the Bush Family Reserve, TfN was able to secure enough money through a strategic application to the National Reserve System, the philanthropic RE Ross Trust, and their own limited acquisition fund.

In its grazing heyday, the property suffered from an inappropriate fire regime, where paddocks were burnt every year to encourage green pick. This caused a dense bracken layer to regenerate and replace the grasses.

'The property was also cleared and ploughed for potatoes, and a lot of big timber trees were removed, but it still had a lot of good values,' she says.

Because of the remnant vegetation (only 10 per cent of native vegetation remains on the Gippsland Plains), the property contains a higher proportion of

biodiversity than surrounding regions and acts as a 'core' that feeds out into revegetated corridors.

'The reserve links other remnants and acts as a reservoir of genetics for flora and fauna to feed out into revegetated areas and link with other isolated remnants between the foothills and the coast,' Edwards says.

'It's really significant from a landscape point of view and it complements what other landholders in the region are working towards.'

Through the Meerlieu Committee of Management (on which a Bush family member sits), and volunteer groups such as Greencorp, TfN has overseen management of the property for weeds, pests and fire, and initiated fencing, direct seeding and

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strategic plantings. Scientific trials are being conducted in collaboration with universities to determine the best burning regime and to reduce or prevent browsing of new growth by macropods. The local field naturalist group has also been helping to monitor populations of the Dwarf Kerrawang, while the Australian Bird Observers conduct periodic surveys.

Six years on, the property and TfN's reputation in the region have continued to grow.

'When we took over the block, the local farming community thought we were going to lock it up and throw away the key,' Edwards says.

Robyn Edwards, Trust for Nature's East Gippsland Regional Manager and Kevin Phillips, TfN Associate, enjoy the fruits of negotiation efforts.

Trust for Nature





Top left: Community field day participants. Top right: A school planting project. Above: The official unveiling of the newly acquired Bush Family Reserve. Trust for Nature

‘We were actively managing the block for weeds, rabbits and fire – as the previous owners had done – but suddenly we were a time bomb waiting to go off. We were the “green” organisation up to no good.’

By communicating with the community and working with groups such as the Country Fire Authority, TfN was gradually accepted. Edwards says they are now part of the culture in the region.

‘Having regional managers throughout Victoria has been an important part of our success, because people know us and feel comfortable approaching us now. I get a lot of phone calls from people offering us the first option to buy their property, or

wanting to covenant their land or advertise the sale of their property through us.’

The Bush Family Reserve is now one of three blocks purchased by the Trust in the Gippsland Plains region which, along with covenants, will help protect the public’s natural heritage on private land in perpetuity.

● Wendy Pyper

More information:

About the Bush Family Reserve:
www.tfn.org.au/BushFamilyReserve.html

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