What is Connecting Country?

Connecting Country is a project which aims to collect and collate knowledge and information about the natural landscape in the Mount Alexander region.

Specifically this project will inform and encourage new ways for this community to live compatibly within that landscape.

Underpinning the research is the belief that the social and built community of the future is co-dependent on the survival of a diverse and resilient natural landscape.

In 2007, The Norman Wettenhall Foundation developed a work plan that focused on supporting community-led landscape restoration in south-east Australia. The new Executive Officer contacted Friends of the Box-Ironbark Forests (Mount Alexander Region), an environment group in Castlemaine, to see if there was interest in working collaboratively across the region on a landscape restoration project. A Reference Group was then formed. The project aims to produce a Biodiversity Blueprint that will identify our assets, the possible threats they face and what future actions we can take. It will suggest directions, clarify our priorities in landscape restoration and help us to reconcile cultural, agricultural and natural values.

The Reference Group project partners bring a strong ecological knowledge base as well as the capacity to draw on further expertise and interest through existing networks. They comprise local Landcare and environmental groups; agencies including the Departments of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) and Primary Industry (DPI), Parks Victoria, Mount Alexander Shire and the North Central Catchment Management Authority (North Central CMA); and non government organisations including Trust for Nature, Greening Australia, the Victoria Naturally Alliance and Spatial Vision.

Grants from The Norman Wettenhall Foundation totalling $50,000 funded:

- a Project Worker to collect information from the community and agencies for the Biodiversity Blueprint,
- community workshops and information sharing sessions,
- a website, and an interactive mapping tool
- and the blueprint.

The story so far:

March 2007
First contact between NWF and FOBIF.

April 2007
First community meeting.

May 2007
Community groups agreed to be a part of the project.

August 2007
Project approved by NWF awarded grant.

November 2007
Project worker appointed. Steering Committee from FOBIF was set up.

December 2007
First formal meeting of Reference Group. Decision to hold meetings first Thursday of each month.

February 2008
Project Worker Julie von Platen began work.
Aerial photographic exhibition by FOBIF "Scene from the Air" held.

March 2008
Bus trip around Trust for Nature properties.

April 2008
Information Sharing Session held.

May 2008
Second grant awarded from NWF.
Connecting Country story told at Victorian Landcare Conference.

June 2008
Submission to Land and Biodiversity Green Paper made.

July 2008
Presentation to Mount Alexander Shire Council.
Submission made to Caring for our Country - Federal Government Program.

September 2008
Workshop to set priorities for future on-ground projects.

November 2008
Launch of the Biodiversity Blueprint and website. End of Stage One.

Top to bottom: NWF approval; Information workshop; Scene from the Air Launch; Mapping workshop.

Top to bottom: Roadside remnant vegetation; Orchard; Assessing vegetation.

Background of Mount Alexander Shire

Mount Alexander Shire has unique strengths for a project like this.

Firstly, the shire consists of a complex mosaic of land tenures and land managers, which promotes neighbourly relationships that can support work on landscape continuity. The main components of this mosaic are:

- ***Public land***, which is an important component of land use in the Shire, and includes the Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park, Mount Alexander Regional Park and Muckleford, Campbells Creek, Upper Loddon and Fryers Ranges State Forests, and the Fryers Ranges Flora Reserve. This bushland is more or less continuous native vegetation cover of varying quality and condition, providing a core habitat for indigenous plant and animal species for most places in the shire, and is a valued cultural and recreational resource for the local and wider community. The native vegetation on roadsides adds another important part to this mosaic.
- ***Farmland***, which has been the centre of valuable activity by both long-term and new owners involving new ways of managing the land for agricultural productivity in recent years. Agriculture in the shire includes orchards, vineyards, grazing enterprises and others.
- ***Some marginal farmland***, which is increasingly being managed for nature conservation and landscape amenity. Often this has been integrated with economic change involving tourism, recreation and other 'lifestyle' changes that have impacted on land use.

Secondly, important signs of regeneration and restoration are appearing across the shire. This is a result of land use change, past work and recent or current developments as well as withdrawal or limitation of past extractive industries such as timber harvesting and mining, and landscape protection in parks and reserves. In addition, the shire has relatively high native vegetation cover of low to moderate quality.

Thirdly, there is a network of people with skills, knowledge and positive attitudes that has accompanied and been nurtured by these processes. Within the shire there are, for instance, 168 Land for Wildlife properties and 44 properties with Trust for Nature covenants covering 502ha. There are more than 30 Landcare and environmental groups, most of which are involved in Connecting Country.

The work that has already been done and the skills, knowledge and attitudinal change that has been generated offers Connecting Country the opportunity to encourage projects that combine the strengths of both bushland and agricultural landscapes across the shire.

Through consideration of all three landscape components, there is 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 adjoining regions in Victoria. Such linkages will not only strengthen biodiversity, they will also assist in anchoring the shire's agricultural strengths in a time of changing weather patterns.

What is Biodiversity?
'Biodiversity is the variety of life and its processes. It includes the variety of living organisms, the genetic differences between them, the communities and ecosystems in which they occur, and the ecological and evolutionary processes that keep them functioning, yet ever changing and adapting.' –Noss and Cooperrider 1994
'Biodiversity underpins ecosystems and the services they provide, upon which all people fundamentally depend. It supports recreational, cultural, spiritual and aesthetic values.'—Land and biodiversity at a time of climate change Green Paper 2008

Protection of remnants and enhancing connectivity are 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 habitat across the shire through supporting natural regeneration and rehabilitation wherever possible.

What are 'biolinks'?
Biolinks are areas connecting existing native vegetation where natural regeneration potential is maximised, major ecosystem functions can be accommodated and movement of species is possible. Biolinks are not corridors in the traditional sense but rather landscapes across which there is increased tree and other native vegetation cover. Corridors would form local scale contributions to the broader biolink landscape, as would discontinuous stepping stones. Biolink zones should allow for and maximise the evolutionary potential for organisms to adapt to changing climates. It is not asserted that biolinks will be available or used by all species, rather that they provide a landscape skeletal framework for adaptation. Biolinks are large (tens of kilometres in length) and thus have human and economic activities embedded within them.
–Sources: VNPA, Cardinia Environment Coalition, Professor Max Finlayson

Land Use and Ecological Background

In the Mount Alexander area, as elsewhere across Victoria, some ecological processes have been impaired through prolonged unsustainable use of the land.

There is general recognition that natural values in this 152,895 ha shire are threatened by the legacy of land clearing, changing weather patterns (including reduced annual rainfall) and ongoing threats posed by poorly planned development.

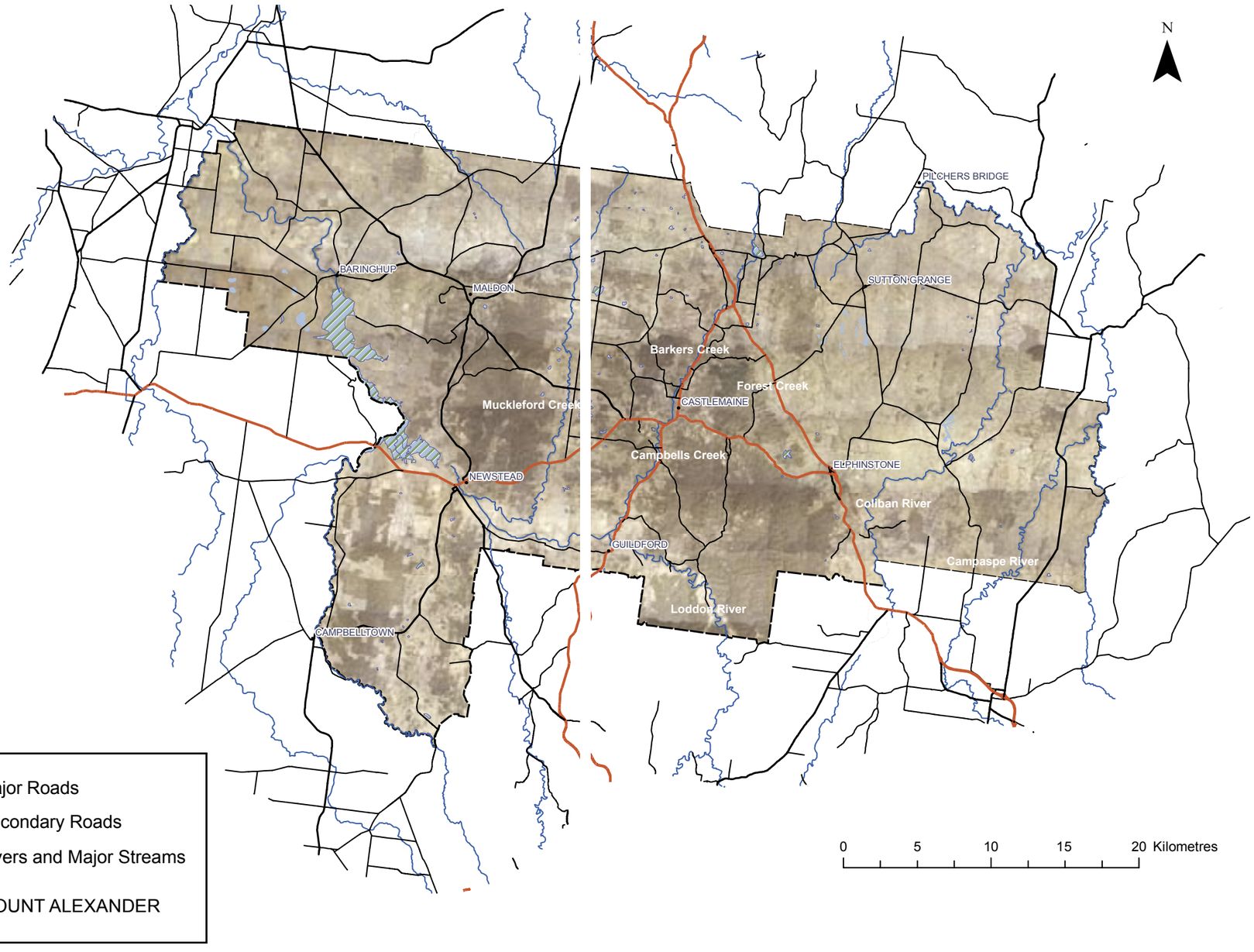
Several periods of extensive land clearance and conversion have resulted in the loss of woodlands and grasslands and the dominance of regrowth forests. These forests are structurally poor, as they are thick with coppiced eucalypts that shade out understorey plants, and lack big old trees with hollows. Such larger trees in the past offered hollows of varying sizes and abundant nectar flows.






Left to right: Mount Alexander; Castlemaine from the Old Goal; Harcourt Valley; Looking south-west over Cairn Curran; Looking west over Guildford Plateau; Myrtle Creek.

Map 1: The Country



Rainfall (Mean average):

- Castlemaine, 595mm.
- Baringhup, 460mm.

Land Use and Ecological Background (Continued)

An abundant and varied understorey of shrubs, grasses and herbs offered habitat for many insects and smaller birds, and a ground cover of mosses, ferns and lichens stabilised and protected soil and soil dwelling organisms and retained moisture. A coppiced forest of smaller trees does not generally provide adequate habitat for the larger birds, bats, invertebrates and many marsupials.

The biodiversity of the Box and Ironbark forests includes a unique and varied range of birds, mammals, reptiles, insects and plants—over 1500 different flowering plants have been recorded in the Box Ironbark region. However, numerous species have already disappeared and about 350 endangered plants and animals rely on these bushlands for their survival. In the Mount Alexander area there are many flora and fauna species under threat including Swift Parrot, Painted Honeyeater, Crested Bellbird, Powerful Owl, Barking Owl, Tuan, Clover Glycine, Fryerstown Grevillea, Spiny Rice Flower and a number of endangered orchids There are significant ecological communities in the shire that are classed as endangered or vulnerable as indicated on the maps.

Thousands of hours have been put into restoring damage done in the past, and in the process the community has built up extensive knowledge of how the country works.

What are 'ecosystem services'?

'Ecosystem services are the natural assets such as soil, plants, animals, air and water that are essential for us to obtain clean drinking water and sustenance, to maintain a liveable climate and atmosphere, to meet our cultural needs and to provide options for the future through the maintenance of biodiversity.'—Australia 21

By landscape restoration we mean more than just planting trees. Landscape restoration involves recognising the different plant communities or Ecological Vegetation Classes (EVC's), knowing where they occur and understanding how they function across the landscape. This knowledge can be used to restore the kind of plant cover that is most appropriate to an area, as well as protecting and enhancing existing habitat. Such an approach can be used to strengthen biodiversity in order to enable a landscape to provide the kind of 'ecosystem services' that we need in order to survive.

It is important to note that such services are sometimes best provided where no direct exploitation is involved: an example is water catchments, which function best where human activity is curtailed.

There are two challenges for local people here. The first is widely accepted: that we should engage in action to restore damaged landscapes. The second is only now coming into clearer focus: it is that we should be more systematic in our approach to works and more conscious of how different activities interact with and influence each other.

Connecting Country is a response to both these challenges.

Vision, Objectives and Guiding Principles

The land of Mount Alexander Shire is 'country' for the Dja Dja Wurrung. In taking this term and concept as the name for the project, we hope to acknowledge and encourage the concept of stewardship for the land by all its inhabitants. As Djarra Elder Brian Nelson has pointed out on many public occasions, the way forward is for us all to share in and work towards 'caring for country'.

Connecting Country is based on the belief that the health of the community is dependent on that of the environment; and the health of the environment is based on its level of biodiversity.

Our vision, therefore is to:

- Connect people and landscapes in the management of a healthy, resilient natural environment.

Our main aim is to:

- Achieve a resilient, living landscape supported by a committed and engaged community.

Our objectives are to:

- Enhance the quality and connectivity of high value native vegetation through education and action
- Facilitate a better appreciation of the importance of biodiversity in supporting agriculture
- Provide for the continuation of ecological processes across boundaries
- Define and target iconic restoration works
- Ensure the blueprint informs the MAS strategic planning process
- Preserve urban green wedges
- Establish effective ways in which government agencies and authorities undertake to respond to community views
- Facilitate community biodiversity appreciation and knowledge of flora and fauna
- Facilitate a better understanding of the role of fire in bushland
- Facilitate co-operation between public and private land managers

Guiding Principles

- Long–term actions aiming to restore ecological processes depend on the participation and goodwill of the local community.
- A long-term approach enables the building in of a system of checks and balances that can strongly underpin protection and restoration activity.
- Building resilience into ecological systems will strengthen the capacity of such systems to manage in the future.
- The best way to help species to progress through the landscape in a time of changing weather patterns is to promote vegetated connectivity regardless of land tenure.

Top to bottom: From Mount Alexander; Echidna; Wildlife Corridor on the Guildford Plateau.