

CHAPTER 3

GRASSLAND CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

A variety of projects and programs have had the objective of furthering native grassland conservation in the regions in which they occur. In many respects their effectiveness has been unquestionable in revealing and attending to the plight of native grasslands. Indeed many projects have achieved the aims that they set. However, if these projects are assessed against the immediate objectives for native grassland conservation (see next chapter) then many aspects are yet to be adequately addressed.

The majority of grassland conservation programs have aimed to increase community involvement in the management of native grasslands and increase knowledge of the distribution and composition of native grassland remnants. With the obvious and notable exception of the acquisition of significant areas for conservation reserves, few projects have had success in achieving long-term protection for significant native grasslands or have adopted specific strategies directed to this end.

While this can be seen as a failing of grassland conservation to date, in many cases it simply reflects the conservation cycle of knowledge-education-protection. In some regions though there has clearly been inadequate attention paid to some of the basic requirements for long-term conservation.

Grassland Ecology Program

Commonwealth funds totaling \$1 million were provided to a program to conserve native grassy ecosystems for the period 1993/94 to 1996/97. This Grassland Ecology Program was reviewed by Bland (1997).

The review found that significant progress had been made in grassy ecosystem conservation during the course of the program. In particular, knowledge of distribution, status and management had been enhanced and community and government awareness increased and the program had engendered significant cooperative action. However, while enhanced action had occurred, grassy ecosystems continued to be destroyed through conversion to crops and pasture or through poor management.

The review found that the provision of information to land managers, activity of groups and government funding had been insufficient to arrest the decline of grassy ecosystems.

Some of the recommendations of the review were that:

- The NHT should establish clear and measurable performance indicators, targets and milestones;
- A biodiversity financial incentives component should be developed;
- Non government organisations require infrastructure funding if they are to fully participate in government programs;
- Information should be made available to landholders on how to manage native grasslands and the implications of landuse changes;
- Advisers should be trained to provide multi-disciplinary whole farm advice;
- Government programs should focus more strongly on regional and local governments and communities given the development of regional plans and the trends in devolution by governments and reductions in state government expertise and staffing;
- Increased emphasis and priority should be placed on the retention of ecosystems and their restoration, with less emphasis on re-creation of treed ecosystems;
- Management of public lands that contain grassy ecosystems should be enhanced;

- The National Reserves System Program should maintain grassy ecosystems as a priority for purchase and should provide support for the development of partnerships with private landholders to enhance the grassy ecosystem reserve system; and
- Funding by the Commonwealth of vegetation or biodiversity initiatives should be conditional on regional vegetation plans and vegetation retention controls being in place.

These recommendations remain highly relevant for native grassland conservation today.

National Grassland Conservation Overview

The Grassland Ecology Program commissioned an overview of the status of native grassy ecosystems and recommendations on where future investments in conservation of these ecosystems should be made.

The review (AACM 1995) identified a number of key opportunities for conservation of grassy ecosystems including:

- Integration of conservation and production through focusing on the productive uses of native grassland and grassy woodland communities especially in areas where reservation is not a likely option;
- Off-reserve biodiversity conservation and management on public land;
- Developing awareness of the management and attributes of grassy communities to promote the productive benefits of grassy communities to landholders and managers;
- Developing best management practices for grassy communities; and
- Reservation of grassy ecosystems in a number of regions including the Darling Downs, Murchison Plains, the Riverina and Victorian Volcanic Plain.

Grassy Ecosystem Reference Group (Victoria)

The Victorian Grassy Ecosystem Reference Group (GERG) is a cooperative program involving the community and government to develop a strategic approach to grassy ecosystem conservation and management in Victoria. The GERG was established in late 1994 by the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments to develop and implement a program to address and help coordinate grassy ecosystem conservation as a community and government partnership. The Commonwealth Government undertook to provide \$160,000 per annum for three years to fund high priority projects identified by the GERG. This was provided through existing programs: the Grasslands Ecology Program; Save the Bush Program; National Reserve System Cooperative Program; and the Endangered Species Program. This commitment was in addition to existing funding from these programs for Victorian grassy ecosystem projects. The GERG represents sectors of the community most actively involved in the conservation and management of native grasslands and grassy woodlands.

In May 1995, the GERG developed the Grassy Ecosystem Implementation Schedule (GEIS) which provides strategic direction for the GERG to guide its activities and decisions (Craigie & Ross 1995). The GEIS was developed with on-going consultation of key people and organisations. The GEIS is reviewed annually, and recommendations and adjustments made as necessary.

A database of participants is maintained, and feedback regarding the GERG activities and progress is provided through the newsletter *Grass Clippings*.

The GERG receives executive support from a government project officer and a non-government project officer (funded through Bushcare and based at the Victorian National Parks Association).

In recommending projects for funding, the GERG concentrates on projects that: are unlikely to be funded from other sources, raise awareness of the biodiversity values, or contribute to conservation management programs (either existing or new). Where possible, shared funding is sought from other sources. Notable projects recommended for funding through GERG include the Trust for Nature (Victoria) Grassland Stewards Program, Second Generation Management of Reserves (Lunt & Morgan 1998a), the field guide 'Plains Wandering' (Lunt *et*

a/1998), the Research Advisory Group and Grassland Education Kits for Schools developed by the Melbourne Zoo.

Although there has been some confusion both within and outside government regarding the roles and responsibilities of the GERG, it has nonetheless been successful in:

- developing a more cooperative approach to grassland conservation;
- ensuring that actions are undertaken by the most appropriate organisation;
- sharing information through cooperation;
- developing an ecosystem focus throughout the state; and
- progressing grassy ecosystem conservation as an issue in Victoria.

There is little doubt that the actions of the Commonwealth in committing significant funds and instigating the process were crucial to the successful development of the GERG.

The challenge now for the GERG is to maintain effectiveness and a profile with government agencies and community groups in the absence of continuing funding from the Commonwealth. It is clear that the projects that have been funded through GERG have produced enhanced outcomes for grassy ecosystems. The GERG's effectiveness to date suggests that similar programs funded under the NHT would provide value for money.

Following on from the establishment of the Victorian GERG, two apparently similar groups were formed. The Riverina Bioregion Group was established in 1995 to bring together interested parties to share information on grassland issues, encourage a coordinated approach and develop future actions. The group's activities were significantly affected by the introduction of the NSW SEPP 46 (vegetation retention controls) which substantially altered the relationship between group members and landholders in the region.

In contrast the NSW GERG was established specifically by NSW Department of Land & Water Conservation to advise on issues relating to SEPP 46 in response to landholder concerns with the regulations. Advice was sought on the development of Vegetation Management Plans following the removal of grasslands from SEPP 46 and the management and conservation of native grasslands. The Group included a number of government and non-government organisations with both agricultural and conservation perspectives.

Neither of these latter two groups has continued beyond its initial period of operation.

Community Groups

Individuals and community groups are responsible for the management of many important grassland remnants that are publicly owned. Most of these sites are managed for non-conservation purposes (ie. as cemeteries, fire management on roadsides, stock reserves etc). The role of such groups in on-going maintenance of conservation values must not be ignored. With some encouragement (such as small grants to cover costs) there is every reason to believe that this management, and the remnants themselves, will persist.

Not all community conservation management is unintentional. There are increasing numbers of groups involved in the active conservation of grassland remnants. These include Landcare groups with an interest in maintaining regional flora and fauna for both conservation and agricultural purposes, urban "Friends" groups with an interest in one or more local sites and special interest groups who may participate in relevant activities on an occasional basis.

Community groups can develop important strategic alliances with government, research institutions, non-government organisations and landholder groups to mutual benefit. The challenge for all community groups is to find ways of working effectively with government. Government agencies responsible for grassland sites may not always be responsive to community approaches, especially for activities that may seem to be unusual or even threatening.

Successful community groups tend to be pro-active rather than reactive. They develop a range of activities to stimulate and involve their membership. Importantly too they communicate regularly with their membership and interested parties through a variety of means. Hazards for community organisations include the loss of key

members and generating conflict either within or beyond the group. Developing and maintaining an active committee with clear objectives and an overall strategic vision is one way of reducing these risks.

Friends groups may in some cases be the dedicated managers of sites. The Friends of Evans Street Native Grassland in Sunbury have entered into a management agreement with the local government authority that owns the grassland. Under this agreement the Friends are responsible for the majority of management actions including weed control, ecological burns and monitoring and for education and promotion associated with the site (Ross 1995).

Other groups, most notably the ACTs Friends of Grasslands and the Friends of the Merri Creek, are regional groups with a regional perspective. They are interested in process and education and, generally, see their role as catalytic rather than one of ownership.

The Friends of Grasslands (FOG) conduct tours, working days, seminars and workshops for its members and the broader community and produce a regular newsletter. They participate in the planning and legislative process for conservation in the region, serve on recovery teams and maintain a network of interest groups and individuals. FOG is also effective at lobbying politicians and the media for the conservation of remnants and to raise the profile of grasslands in general.

Incentives directed at voluntary groups, either as grants, technical support or funding for administration, are an indirect incentive to landholders to protect native vegetation and an effective means of developing positive conservation outcomes (Young *et al* 1996).

Non-Government and Similar Organisations

The programs of Birds Australia, Greening Australia, Trust for Nature (Victoria), Victorian National Parks Association and World Wide Fund for Nature have been an integral part of the emergence of native grassland conservation as a significant conservation issue throughout south-eastern Australia (see Case Studies).

NGOs (including similar organisations such as the Trust for Nature) are efficient and effective at networking, providing advice and delivering programs and are increasingly seen as the most suitable means of providing rural extension services and achieving long-term conservation of important remnants on private land. Many of these projects have been and are supported by funding from Commonwealth programs. It is essential that NGOs receive adequate infrastructure funding if government objectives for the conservation of native grasslands are to be fully addressed.

The development of partnerships, both formal and informal, between NGOs, governments and government agencies is crucial in developing multi-faceted approaches to conservation of native grasslands. The successful GERG model and its application in other regions were largely dependent on the willingness of NGOs to engage in a cooperative approach with all parties. The provision of funding for NGOs to develop programs and networks outside government has been a significant step in increasing the capacity for grassland conservation in the community as a whole.

A clear distinction can be drawn between the advocacy required for native grassland conservation and extension and education at a regional level. There is a continuing need for peak conservation organisations to lobby for native grassland conservation through government policy, planning and legislative programs. It is important that this role of NGOs in providing frank and fair advice to government is acknowledged and respected by government agencies.

Such advocacy must extend to regional processes including regional vegetation management plans to support local extension activities. Without this essential support, extension staff risk being diverted from their main task and perhaps being brought into conflict with the community they work with.



World Wide Fund for Nature's Mid-North Grasslands Extension Officers, Ann Prescott and Millie Nicholls: an effective blend of botanical expertise and local knowledge. Both have excellent extension skills. (Photo WWF).

Local and Regional Government

Local government has a major role to play in protecting native grassland areas. They are directly responsible for the protection of many of our most important public land remnants and in some jurisdictions are responsible for considering planning permits to develop areas of native grassland.

Ignorance of the conservation value of grasslands within local government and related agencies poses a major threat to their long-term survival. Without a coordinated campaign of education and information dissemination, further loss of grasslands will be suffered by continued attrition through land-use changes either sanctioned by or undertaken by local government.

Local governments, regional authorities and Rural Lands Protection Boards should be encouraged to undertake mapping of remnant vegetation and manage high-quality areas for nature conservation. Such programs have begun in some areas. For example, a partnership between local government, community groups and state and Commonwealth governments has identified significant native vegetation remnants across three shires in northern Victoria (see below *Local Government Area Surveys on the Victorian Riverine Plain*).

Local government can act to remove barriers to conservation on private land by providing incentives in the form of rate reduction or direct grants to landholders that commit to long-term conservation on their land. Such incentive schemes (often with assistance from the Commonwealth's Natural Heritage Trust) are proving successful in many local government areas as a means of protecting significant remnants and achieving local biodiversity goals. Indeed, local government is well placed to provide financial incentives for biodiversity conservation. As with all incentives programs, they must be linked to a defined strategy.

The potential cost of local government incentive schemes must be considered. In fact, the remaining area of high quality grassland requiring protection (and hence the possible cost to local government) is generally quite small. It can be argued too that the local community can gain significant economic advantages through the protection of remnants.

State and Commonwealth Governments

The operation of threatened species legislation at state and Commonwealth level, combined with native vegetation protection legislation in the various states provides the legal basis for conservation actions for temperate native grasslands.

The conservation of temperate lowland native grasslands and their constituent species is consistent with the objectives of the Bushcare, National Reserve System and Endangered Species Programs, the *National Strategy for the Conservation of Australia's Biological Diversity*, and *An Australian National Strategy for the Conservation of Australian Species and Communities Threatened with Extinction*. It is also consistent with the objectives of the relevant state conservation and biodiversity strategies (eg. DNRE 1997).

There is little doubt that the recognition accorded to native grasslands by governments has increased astonishingly in the past decade. State and Commonwealth Governments have acquired and reserved significant grassland areas, developed conservation strategies for grassland communities and species, conducted surveys and extension programs and provided considerable funding to the community for native grassland conservation programs and activities.

From the case studies detailed in Chapter 5, it is clear that the Commonwealth Government in committing significant funds to native grassland conservation initiatives through the programs of the Natural Heritage Trust and Environment Australia (and its predecessor, ANCA) has been pivotal in achieving many of the successes in this field to date.

Regrettably, there have also been numerous instances of governments failing to act to protect significant areas. Such lack of commitment is not by any means restricted to native grassland communities but merely reflects a generally pro-development ethic in governments. However, the suitability of native grassland areas to development, coupled with low awareness of their values, does make them particularly susceptible to government-sanctioned destruction.

It may be sensible and efficient in many regions to tackle long-term conservation on public land as a first step. Significant nature conservation gains could be achieved by reviewing the status and management objectives of other public land reserves. Many 'non-conservation' reserves or 'low-level' conservation reserves support remnant grasslands of high conservation value that, if adequately reserved and managed for conservation, would add greatly to the current reserve system reducing the need for costly land purchase or incentive programs.

Certainly in New South Wales, the existing system of Travelling Stock Reserves provides an excellent 'sampling' of land systems, soil and vegetation types across agricultural regions and a number of TSRs in the Riverina and Monaro support native grasslands of very high nature conservation value. TSRs cover some 2.7 per cent of the state (Carr 1995) and are found mostly in regions with low numbers of conservation reserves.

Given legislative commitments to biodiversity conservation there would seem to be little impediment to permanent protection within the formal conservation reserve system for at least those public land areas of high conservation value.

Similarly, state and Commonwealth threatened species legislation contains mechanisms that, if fully utilised by government, have the potential to provide a process for the strategic protection of important grassland remnants and the conservation of rare and threatened grassland communities and species.

Despite the existence of clearing controls in most states, land clearing and land development continues to reduce options for biodiversity conservation in agricultural regions of Australia. While the use of such controls has proved problematic for native grasslands (see Chapter 4: *Means*) there is a perception that governments will simply not enforce them in relation to native grasslands.

The generally low presence of government conservation agencies in agricultural regions reflects the development of the current conservation reserve system based on large, contiguous areas of public land. The development of effective conservation for highly fragmented vegetation communities will require a different approach that includes the development of protected area networks within agricultural regions.

Government programs should focus more strongly on regional and local governments and communities given the development of regional plans and the trends in devolution by governments and reductions in state government expertise and staffing. The implementation of regional plans and strategies provides an opportunity to achieve this. However, it is vital that all levels of government ensure that regional strategies do, indeed, address conservation issues in the landscape. State and commonwealth governments should also identify agricultural incentive schemes that act as a disincentive to conserve native grasslands and modify these to remove this perverse effect.

There is a particular need to ensure that government agencies that do not have conservation as a primary objective (such as defence, transport and industry) are included within programs for grassland conservation. This is especially significant where public assets are to be privatised or corporatised.