



Wollombi Valley Landcare Group News for November 2012



Visit a hilltop garden and stay for our Christmas Party

*The next Landcare meeting will be on Saturday 1st December at
Brian & Barbara Barnes' property, commencing at 3 PM.*

Many of our Landcare activities have been held in the valleys around Wollombi, but now we are going back to one on a hilltop that we last visited in mid June 2008.

Brian and Barbara Barnes have invited us back to their property and garden located high above Blaxland's Arm.

Building a house and creating a garden on the top of one of our sandstone ridges has both advantages and problems (challenges?) some of which have been conquered, others are still in the process of being sorted out.



The advantages? *The garden includes many species of fruit trees that we are told can't be grown in this area. Bananas! How? Because they are high enough to be out of the frost zone in the valley. They also have an impressive view.*

And the challenges? *Bushfire, shallow to non-existent soil, exposure to the full summer sun and a 4WD only road. Brian and Barbara have come up with many interesting and innovative ideas for overcoming these problems, so it will be interesting to view progress since our last visit.*

We will car pool at Laguna at 2:15 pm for a 2:30 pm departure for anybody with a non-4WD vehicle.

Turn into Blaxland's Arm and drive in 1 km, turn left into Nichols Road and travel 3 km to the ridge top. There will be the usual Landcare notice board and banner and we will place some balloons in trees along the way, to guide you, once you enter Nichols Road.

PS. Because this is our Christmas meeting/party you are asked to bring along some food, meat, etc if you want to barbeque (Brian has a 6 burner BBQ) plus a salad and /or a dessert to share, together with a bottle or two of your favorite beverage, alcoholic or otherwise.

Everyone is welcome. We look forward to seeing you there.

The views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of Wollombi Valley Landcare Group Inc, or any other Landcare agency or government department, but are presented to promote discussion about and the practice of sustainable land use and environmental responsibility.

Our last meeting on the 20th October 2012 was a visit to Warwick Biggs' property, St Yves, Wollombi

On one of the hottest days so far this year we gathered at St Yves for a brief description by Warwick of his new Voluntary Conservation Agreement (VCA)¹ and a walk through his protected area.

As an environmental lawyer, Warwick renegotiated the terms of his VCA and this new format is available from him for anybody else interested in protecting their bush block. NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service was very helpful and supportive with the outcome very satisfactory to both parties. Land, even small acreages such as St Yves, which can act as a corridor, or part of a corridor, between other areas is considered particularly valuable. The presence of endangered species of plants and animals is another plus.

The stand of the Casuarina species (Forest Oak), most important to the survival of the endangered Glossy Black Cockatoo, was another justification for including St Yves in the VCA network. The more land covered by VCAs, the better the overall protection of the Wollombi valley as the more difficult it is for mining and over development to occur.

After the talk, the more energetic members went on a conducted tour up the hill to the heath. Unfortunately we had missed the major flowering of the shrubs which dominate the heath. This occurs in August/September. It was agreed that we try to arrange a visit next year a little earlier to coincide with the spectacle of the flowering of the *Calytrix tetragona*, etc.

The recent dry spell had dried up the heath and we were walking on crunchy mosses and lichens on the rocks. This "hanging swamp" heath is found on the top of the ridge where a layer of rock creates a shallow bowl with a very thin layer of soil that is frequently waterlogged and cannot support trees.

The endangered Groves Paperbark, *Melaleuca groveana*, is found upslope from the heath and was another major reason the area was accepted by NPWS as a VCA.

At 25 acres, St Yves is at the smaller end for VCAs. The bigger the better is true for most conservation areas, but its unusual vegetation, endangered species of animals and plants and the commitment of its owner to conservation that got St Yves accepted.

Several people at the meeting showed interest in getting a VCA and Landcare will provide assistance in getting more privately owned property protected.

If you are considering a VCA, Warwick is willing to help anyone who interested in establishing a VCA on their property while I am happy to help with the vegetation description. Jane Mowatt



¹ A 'Conservation Agreement' is a form of "Voluntary Planning Agreement" that has the status of a statutory instrument (like a Local Environmental Plan) under planning law. It is recognised by the EP&A Act as a statutory instrument, like a Council Local Environmental Plan (which it over-rides). In effect it is a special law that takes the Conservation Area outside normal planning controls such as the Local Government Act and brings it under the National Parks & Wildlife Act. This ensures that conservation cannot be compromised by other government departments or priorities, such as mining. It provides a conservation minded landowner with powerful legislative tools that are not available to most freehold landowners. Of course, it is a common misunderstanding that freehold title is unrestricted. In fact, freehold titles are limited by many other laws such as the Mining Act, Petroleum (Onshore) Act, Local Government Act, etc. In effect a VPA creates a privately owned and controlled National Park.

Warwick Biggs

What's WARTs up to?

As you are no doubt aware Wollombi Valley Landcare has had WARTs for the last year or so. WARTs is in fact the "Wollombi Area Restoration Team" and our main area of focus is currently the section of Wollombi Brook in Wollombi itself that runs between Negro Street and the main road to Cessnock. The site runs from the far end of Negro Street (That's the street out the back of town where the tennis



Catherine Craig, Chris Jackson, Val Milgate & Shelagh Brigg

courts are) where you can access a walking path via a well-disguised set of stairs. These stairs have been cunningly designed to blend into the landscape so that nobody knows they are there unless you are in fact aware of their existence and are indeed looking for them. The same engineering skills have been used on a set of steps that run from the main road (when I say main road please read this to mean the road from The General Store to Cessnock). These steps are sited about 50 meters past the Old Dance Hall, which itself is 50 meters past the General Store.

I have gone into all this detail because I'm not sure if many people are aware of the walking path that provides a nice little link if one wishes to take a stroll around the Village. It is along this path that Warts is at work. Currently we get down to the Brook once a week for a couple of hours on a Wednesday or Thursday morning. From 10am until around 12/12.30pm three/four or five of us plod/toil away planting and weeding. This is usually followed by lunch down by the water's edge and recently with hotter weather by a quick swim in Yellow Rock Pool that is just a short walk downstream of where we are working through the towering Privet and Tradescantia forest. It is indeed a pleasant way to spend a morning whilst making a real difference to an important recreational/ environmental part of the Village.



Catherine Craig, "Maggie" & Val Milgate

Over the past couple of months we have been concentrating on planting out and weeding areas at either end of the path, and we have planted around 140 seedlings. At the Negro Street end we have *Shelagh's Site*, whilst at the main road end we have *Catherine's Corner* and *Valerie's Verdant Verge*. These three ladies are our regular attendees and have recently been joined by Angus and in the recent past by John, Jane and Kyle. Landcare life member, Evelyn Bloom, has been on occasion our consultant and mulch provider. I myself wander around trying to stay out of trouble.

This is a long-term project where we are making real inroads, but we have plenty more to do. We welcome any assistance anyone can offer.



Shelagh Brigg busy planting

Currently we work on a Wednesday or Thursday morning and anyone can join us, and if we get a bit of interest we can certainly organise the occasional weekend activity (perhaps with a BBQ and swim). Skill and knowledge levels are not required as we have plenty of people willing and able to tell you what to do, and all equipment is supplied.

The work is easy and enjoyable, but if you need a challenge we can certainly find difficult and dirty tasks to suit.

Please feel free to join us. Regular commitment is NOT expected and occasional help is very welcome.

Contact Chris Jackson ph. 4998 8660 for times, etc (please leave a message).

Chris Jackson

Wollombi Valley Country Fair

Landcare hosted a stall at the Wollombi Valley Country Fair on Saturday and Sunday 3rd and 4th November. Thanks go out to those non-committee members who volunteered to help out on the stall - Bernadette Harris, Andrew Mortlock, Meg Berg, Pam McCarthy, Ken and Lorraine Wicklund, Audrey Balla and Janet Ho.

A number of members and visitors to the stall suggested activities for 2013. There was a request for Landcare to foster more social interaction. One suggestion was more time at or after activities for members, and in particular new members, to get to know one another. The committee will take this into account in planning for 2013. Any other ideas most welcome.

The weed identification books continued to be a hot sale item. Weeds generally were also a topic of interest for activities.

On this topic, a *Tree of Heaven* questionnaire was made available at the stall for landowners to indicate whether they have the weed *Tree of Heaven* on their properties. This weed is becoming somewhat prolific along the Wollombi Brook visible from the road to Cessnock. This generated some interest and will be further considered by the committee. Let us know if are aware of *Tree of Heaven* on or around your property.



BAD - Tree of Heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*)

See pictures above but beware, it does have a couple of lookalikes, e.g. Red Cedar (a native) and Rhus tree (a weed which needs to be handled with care due to the toxic sap, etc).



BAD - Rhus Tree (*Toxicodendron succedaneum*)

GOOD – Red Cedar (*Toona ciliata* var. *australis*)

As usual the wombats and mange display generated a lot of interest. For landowners who would like to know more about mange treatment options see <http://www.wombatprotection.org.au> or contact Chris and Louise on 4998 8660. If you find an injured wombat or orphan in the Wollombi Valley (or any native animal/bird) contact Hunter Wildlife Rescue on 0418) 628 483 or 0418 NATIVE.

Louise Hicks

Proposal to establish a Database on the Natural Vegetation of the Wollombi Valley

There is a perceived need for a comprehensive database on the naturally occurring vegetation in the Wollombi Valley. New landowners would welcome such a database to help them in the decisions they make on what to plant on their properties. It is a long time since the native vegetation has been in its natural state and although we may never know exactly how much of the endemic vegetation has been lost, at least we can record what we have now. This would be an invaluable historical snapshot of what is in the Valley at the beginning of the 21st century.

It could also be a source of information about local provenance seed for planting out where the parent plants have been destroyed over the last two hundred years. As an example, the revegetation of the Wollombi Brook at the end of Negro Street is being hampered by the lack of seed sourced locally for planting along the edges of the brook. We are in need of seed of *Tristaniopsis laurina* (water gum) and *Eucalyptus deanii*, neither of which is extant on the brook or easy to source. Luckily we do know of two properties where these plants are growing and we will be contacting the owners to request permission to harvest some seed for propagating and subsequent planting. The presence of a database would be invaluable in situations like this.

Currently the vegetation of the Wollombi Valley is covered in several publications, two of which have been created by the Hunter Catchment Management Authority, but the section covering Wollombi is not at all comprehensive, and the area has been lumped together with Cessnock region, which has a slightly different plant community. What is envisaged is a fully comprehensive (in time, of course) exhaustive database of what is still here, where it is, and what conditions are needed for the plants to thrive.

We would like to collect plant lists from various properties, together with information on the site where they are growing, the aspect, and various other bits of information which would help landowners decide where to plant their tubestock where their efforts would be most likely to lead to a successful outcome.

We would need to be sure that the plants are truly endemic to the region. For instance, we would be reluctant to include *Grevillea robusta* (Silky Oak) in the list, as these trees have been introduced and have naturalised here. My own property has lots of *Pandorea pandorana* (Wonga Vine) but it has all escaped from nursery-sourced plants bought when I undertook a revegetation programme some ten years ago.

Shelagh Brigg

Your farm. Your biggest asset. How are you managing it?

FarmKeeper is a simple, useful computer program you can install on your own computer. With minimal computing knowledge, FarmKeeper can help you quickly and easily map, record, analyse and plan your farming enterprise.

There is another farmkeeper course running on the 4th and 5th of December at Gloucester. Refer to the website for more details: www.farmkeeper.com.au

If you are interested in the course please call.

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Shooting in National Parks

You recall previous reports that the NSW Government in an agreement with the Hunters & Fishers Party proposed a new program of pest control by individuals licensed under the Game and Feral Animal Control Act (GFAC Program) to allow shooters access into national parks.

At the time many NPWS staff, including rangers, expressed their concern at the proposal.

We recently have been advised that the proposal is proceeding with a start date of January next year. The nearest national park affected by this decision is the Watagans National Park, meaning that a number of properties on Watagan Creek Road and Congewai bordering this national park will be affected.

Apart from the risk to those people using the national park, this decision to proceed raises issues for those with properties adjoining the park. If you wish to voice your concern you can of course write to NSW politicians and/or sign the petition in the Wollombi General Store.

If you seek further information on this matter then there is the NSW government assuring us that the program will be carefully managed with the paramount objective of ensuring safety of visitors, staff and others in or near national parks.

<http://www.premier.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/120530-GFACA.pdf>
<http://www.gamecouncil.nsw.gov.au>

Alternatively, there is the view of the Green Left who believe that Hunters in NSW's national parks will put park users at risk.

<http://www.greenleft.org.au>

EDO under threat


Over the last month members and friends will have received several emails from Landcare seeking your support to save the EDO (Environmental Defenders Office NSW).

Many will have attended our meeting on the Saturday 16th June in the Wollombi Hall when Jemilah Hallinan and Emily Ryan from the EDO gave a presentation on Coal Seam Gas and Conservation Agreements and will appreciate what a valuable resource we have in the EDO.

However, if you are not familiar with the EDO and their work, I encourage you to have a look at their website at www.edo.org.au and their weekly newsletter updates. In fact you may already have a copy of the EDO publication *"The Rural Landholder's Guide to Environmental Law in NSW"* on your bookshelf.


The EDO is our independent source for information on landholders rights and responsibilities and has actively defended our rights and those of the environment against the onslaught of coal and coal-seam gas activities in our state.

Clearly there are vested interests, including MPs in the NSW government, who do not like what EDO is doing and want to destroy them by withdrawing their funding support, which was brought to a head by the recent community conference in Gloucester.



WOLLOMBI VALLEY LANDCARE GROUP, Inc.

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Mr. Clayton Barr, MP
Premier Barry O'Farrell MP
Hon. Greg Smith Attorney General
Hon. Brad Hazzard, MP, Minister for Planning and Infrastructure

Dear Sirs

ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS OFFICE

The Wollombi Valley Landcare Group is a voluntary, self-help group of landholders in the Wollombi area which aims to raise awareness of the sustainable use of our natural resources. We have organised two presentations from the Environmental Defenders Office in recent times. The topics were voluntary conservation agreements and the rights and obligations of rural landholders generally.

The presentations and the presenters were balanced and excellent. Without the EDO a lot of information about the current state of the law would remain unknown to the ordinary landowner. The information is not easily accessible through other means. The EDO lawyers were prepared to travel in their own time on weekends to country areas to an audience of rural landowners including long term farmers and full-time and part-time rural residents.

The Wollombi Valley Landcare Group expresses its strong opposition to any reduction in the funding of the EDO and to the review of its activities proposed by the NSW government.
Please do not hesitate to contact the writer if you wish to discuss.

Yours sincerely

President : Jane Mowatt

Secretary: Shelagh Brigg

The EDO has been very active in supporting community groups in their efforts to challenge various developments and coal seam gas mining under the law. The EDO has prepared a new publication *"Mining and the Law in NSW: A guide for the community"* that would be an invaluable resource for landholders and communities – something the mining industry would rather not see the light of day.

The EDO is an independent source of information on environmental law for all landholders in NSW and where warranted can help in the application of the law to protect the environment. The continuation of the EDO, independent of vested interests and government influence, is essential.

If you have not yet signed the petition then PLEASE take a minute to click on the link below and add your name to the petition. So far 3,800 have signed with a target of 5,000.

<<https://www.change.org/en-AU/petitions/nsw-government-save-environmental-defender-s-office-edo-nsw>>

PLEASE HELP!

Wollombi Valley Landcare has written to the Premier (Barry O'Farrell), the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure (Brad Hazzard), the Attorney General (Greg Smith) and Cessnock MP (Clayton Barr). See copy of the letter.

But that is not enough, we need your support as individuals to take action by writing to the politicians and asking your friends and contacts to also write and sign the petition. It is only by a ground swell of resistance that we will be able to make the NSW government change their mind.

The EDO is also asking for donations. If you are in a position to make a donation then please do so. All donations over \$2 are tax deductible.

Press Release – 22nd November 2012

Cessnock Council Rejects Coal Seam Gas Exploration

Cessnock Greens Councillor James Ryan has welcomed last night's unanimous Cessnock Council decision to reject an application by AGL to use local roads to explore for coal seam gas.

'This is not just about the vineyard area,' said Cllr Ryan. 'The community of Cessnock overwhelmingly do not want coal seam gas exploration or production.'

'We do not want our water polluted, we do not want our landscape scarred, and we do not want fugitive methane emissions leaking from the ground.'

AGL had made the application to undertake exploration along Richmond Vale road near Kurri Kurri and through the Pokolbin State Forest.

Cessnock Council had previously asked the Minister for Resources and Energy not to renew an exploration license in any part of the Cessnock Local Government Area.

Prior to the vote there was uncertainty as to how Cessnock Council would vote as ALP Cllr Maybury had been reported in the media as saying he supported the application by AGL.

However by the time of the Council meeting Cllr Maybury voted to refuse the application along with the other Councillors.

Cllr Ryan said 'This is great news for our local community. I congratulate the ALP Councillors for sticking to the NSW ALP policy of opposing new coal seam gas exploration and production.'

'It remains to be seen whether AGL will challenge Council's decision in the courts,' said Cllr Ryan. 'However I feel confident after last night's debate that Cessnock Council will do everything it can to prevent coal seam gas exploration and extraction in our area.'

James Ryan
Cessnock Greens Councillor
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