

## Introduction

Grasslands occupy much of the Australian landscape. Nevertheless temperate lowland native grasslands, which once occupied extensive areas of south-east Australia, now occupy less than one half of one percent of their original area. Few Australians realise that such grasslands ever existed. Similarly, temperate grassy woodlands (lightly treed landscapes with a grassy understorey) were equally widespread but now cover less than seven percent of their former area.

The situation is much worse than these startling statistics even suggest. Grasslands and grassy woodlands include a wide variety of landscapes and communities, some of which have fared even worse. Drastic reduction in area and quality, and fragmentation of these ecosystems has led to the extinction of some plants and animals that inhabited them, and threatens many of those which remain.

What are native grasslands and grassy woodlands? These are communities in which grasses play a dominant role. It may come as a surprise but there are over 500 native grass species in NSW alone. Few Australians could name one. In native temperate grasslands before settlement, there were well over 500 native forb (wildflower) species. Several recently published books provide a good introduction to many of the more common forbs.

Areas of grassy vegetation were preferentially settled and developed because they often occurred in the more productive parts of the landscape. Therefore most remaining grasslands occur on private farmland; a much smaller area remains on travelling stock reserves, military reserves, road and rail verges, and in cemeteries. Only very recently have grasslands been intentionally placed in conservation reserves. However, the formal reserve system covers only a very small proportion of the landscape. Meaningful conservation of grassy ecosystems will be seriously improved by incorporating conservation management into broad-acre rural land management.

This workshop addresses the vision of off-reserve conservation, its potential to integrate effective conservation with and evaluate our experience to date. Speakers include private landholders, public land managers, government agencies, scientists, and community groups. Given the diversity of grasslands, ownership arrangements, stakeholders, management skills and tools, the workshop addresses how those involved can share their experience and skills and keep in touch.

The workshop is being held on Friday and Saturday 1 and 2 December 2000 in the heart of some of Australia's best grassland country. Day one focuses on presentations and day two on visits to three local sites. The timing of the workshop has been chosen to ensure that grasslands are in full flower. The workshop has a national focus with a Monaro flavour.

The workshop convenors (David Eddy, Geoff Robertson and Michael Treanor) would like to thank the very many people who contributed to the workshop. First, the Friends of Grasslands Committee and other active members who were responsible for organising publicity, editing these proceedings, and organising on the two days. Second, the sponsors and other organisations who assisted with some direct funding and donating the time and expenses of their employees. Third, the speakers who contributed their time and energy and whose only compensation is our genuine appreciation. Fourth, to participants who by their interest and commitment to grassland conservation and/or land management make the endeavours of grassland conservationists achievable.

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