

**Session 5: Views from Other Regions (I):
A Few Victorian Experiences of Mechanisms
For Conservation of Grassy Ecosystem Remnants**

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Introduction

The last several years have seen a variety of new initiatives to promote nature conservation outside of reserves with some significant results. Excellence in this area is only achievable through sharing information and learning from each other's experience. I'd like to take this opportunity to share with you a few of these experiences from Victoria.

These examples are just a small selection but represent an interesting range:

- Revolving funds
- Rate rebates
- Conservation auctions
- Community protection

Revolving fund

The Trust for Nature (Victoria) has accomplished some terrific results in Victoria. The success of the Trust lies in its independence and in developing a close relationship with the landowner and local community. It has 10 part-time regional coordinators that assist landowners with protecting grasslands and grassy woodlands. As at August 2000 it had 329 properties with registered covenants covering 13 292 ha and owned 39 properties (3 449 ha).

One mechanism the Trust administers is a revolving fund that involves the purchase of land and application of statutory covenants to the title to protect conservation values in perpetuity, followed by resale to sympathetic purchasers. The money from the sale is then reused to purchase other properties. The revolving fund enables the establishment of a private conservation reserve system managed by private owners. The effectiveness of the fund is that it:

- Recaptures most of the capital purchase cost; and
- Passes responsibility for land management to owners who are committed to a conservation ethic.

One of the major benefits is that the Trust is not bound by usual government approval processes for land acquisition and therefore is able to react quickly when high value conservation properties come onto the market. An added benefit is that the Trust is able to buy above valuation, which is sometimes necessary.

Other Australian States are now looking into establishing similar organisations.

Rate rebate

Eleven shires in Victoria now have rate rebate schemes to encourage biodiversity protection through conservation covenants or management agreements. The Buloke Shire Council has just launched a rate rebate scheme that gives landowners a 100% rate rebate on eligible land.

It is a simple scheme aimed at encouraging the widest participation level possible.

To qualify for this scheme the area must be:

- Native vegetation,
- Able to be managed separately from the rest of the property,
- Managed in accordance with a management agreement, or a pre-existing management approved by the shire,

- Be a minimum of 2 hectares,
- Not farmhouses, yards, or sheds, and
- Approved after an inspection.

The management agreement signed is a simple one-page statement. The applicant agrees the site nominated for Rate Rebate:

- Will be managed to conserve biodiversity, and to control environmental weeds, rabbits, foxes and feral cats,
- May be subject to approved, controlled grazing by livestock,
- Will not be used for cropping, firewood collection or cutting of fence posts,
- May be subject to periodical monitoring visits as determined by Buloke Shire,
- Will have relevant fencing to protect the remnant vegetation, and
- May be subject to revegetation with indigenous species approved by the Shire.

It's written in a way that people can easily understand. The Buloke Shire has received much interest by property owners. Funding to initiate the scheme was obtained through the Bushcare program of the National Heritage Trust. Its Rate Rebate Scheme is a great model for other local governments.

Conservation auction

This is a new approach to encourage effective conservation management on privately owned land. The Victorian Department of Natural Resources and Environment (NRE) is currently developing the mechanisms. It is expected to be a bidding process similar to that used for the Conservation Reserve Program in the USA. Landholders would be invited to put forward a proposal to alter the use (eg remove or reduce grazing) or improve the management (eg pest and weed eradication) of a remnant to achieve an improvement in the quality of the vegetation. They would also estimate the cost of providing these services. NRE ranks the bids taking into account what the benefit of the work is likely to be, the significance of the vegetation and habitat, and the cost. NRE would then enter into management agreements with highest ranked landholders.

Two trials will be run in 2001 in partnership with Catchment Management Authorities in northern Victoria. The key objective is to encourage long term changes in the use and management of existing remnants on private properties and to support complementary revegetation. The State Government has allocated funding to the program and is seeking additional money from the Federal government.

Community protection

Mechanisms and initiatives tend to be considered independently of the communities within which they operate, yet I'd bet the best correlation with good conservation results is going to be having community members who are actively involved in nature conservation. Thank you to all those people who are involved. Your efforts may go largely unrewarded but are vital in protecting biodiversity. There are thousands of examples where valuable grassy remnants have been protected through community action, and I'd like to give just one.

The Evans St Native Grassland in Sunbury, on the northern outskirts of Melbourne is a 4ha remnant home to over 100 native plant species, four of which are of State Significance. Local naturalists who were trying to reinstate native grasslands into the Organ Pipes National Park discovered the area in 1983. The Shire acquired the area in the same year for development as a car park. After 10 years campaigning by the local community the Council was convinced to enter into a ten-year management agreement. The site is now managed by the Friends of Evans St, a voluntary community group, and it is one of the best-managed urban sites in Victoria. Without community support the site would not have been, and will not be, managed and protected.

Conclusion

The value of remnants on private land cannot be underestimated. Grassy ecosystems are not adequately represented in our reserve system and secondly, they are commonly under threat, often through misunderstandings and lack of appreciation.

In grassy ecosystems our conservation dollar will often be best spent in facilitating active management of grassy remnants through the provision of small, regular grants to community members and groups to undertake fencing, burning and weed control, and possibly the propagation and reintroduction of rare species. Tax concessions to landholders that maintain their properties should also be introduced more widely. The provision of assistance and incentives to local people will go a long way towards engendering respect and support for grassy ecosystem conservation in rural communities.