

Symposium Presentation No. 10

Biolinks: the Cobaw Forest to Tooborac Forest Connection

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Summarised by Dr Peter Mitchell, Biolinks Alliance

The Cobaw Forest - Tooborac Forest corridor crosses the Nulla Vale Pyalong West Landcare Group area – an area of 20 by 20km. The corridor bypasses the small townships of Tooborac and Pyalong but passes through a few localities – Nulla Vale (literally “no valleys”) and Emu Flat (strange names in this hilly area) and High Camp. As well as these interesting place names, the area has some of the most attractive landscapes in Victoria (according to locals). It is characterised by large granite boulders that were originally more than a kilometre below the surface and have been gradually exposed over millions of years by erosion. The area is bisected by Mollisons Creek that carries sediments into the Goulburn Valley. Unfortunately the land was heavily cleared during early settlement, so that there were vast areas with very few trees in 2000 when work on the corridor started.

The corridor zig-zags for about 20km. At the south end it links to the Cobaw Ranges – an extensive forest area running east and west along the Divide. To the north it links to the Tooborac forests – the beginning of the box ironbark country that extends north to Heathcote and the forests around Whroo and Rushworth.

The corridor started in 2000 with urging from the Goulburn Broken CMA and funding from the Federal Government (Natural Heritage Trust) and State Government (through Department of Primary Industries). By 2006 the basic route of the corridor was completed.

The zig-zag route was determined partly by the terrain and partly by landholders who were or were not willing to have the corridor on their land. Although the corridor was 20 kilometres long, it only involved ten landholders. Two landholders didn't allow the corridor, but the corridor managed to get around these. Wherever possible the corridor runs where there were existing old trees, largely along roadsides and old road and rail reserves. In other parts, the corridor runs across farmland and through gullies.

Wherever possible, the corridor is 40 metres wide to provide an outside buffer and inner sanctuary. Where the corridor runs along a 20m road reserve, the group added another 20 metres on adjoining land. Two nodes were established with 10 or more ha of plantings to provide more habitat. Another corridor up a valley is 60-80 metres wide. There are also two

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areas of public land with larger patches of old trees. And the corridor has small links to other areas. So although the corridor is mostly in strip form, it does provide habitat for species. Overall, the corridor occupies about 70ha of land.

In line with thinking at the time, the plants were all local provenance. Some came from nurseries and some came from seed collected by the group and grown by themselves or by others such as the Tree Project who were extremely helpful. In 2000, the group commissioned a report from Brian Bainbridge to catalogue the plants in the area and identify any rare and threatened species. From this information, the group established two seed orchards to assist with seed collection of species such as *Banksia marginata* and local Casuarinas. Over the years, one of the seed orchards has developed into a conservation reserve that is a show piece for a range of local species and an exercise in looking after plants, with help from the local schools. Eventually the group hopes to have a fully catalogued and displayed range of local plants. This reserve is on Mollisons Creek at Nulla Vale (on the Lancefield Tooborac Road).

Large planting days were – and still are – held each year with up to 60 people planting 4-6,000 plants. Participants come from local Landcare members and from various clubs and volunteers such as the ANZ Bank volunteers.

The corridor was completed in 2006 but the group has added to the corridor in various ways every year since 2006. They have thickened up areas where the plantings were sparse or had died out. They have put in branches, some winding through valleys. They have added areas within one kilometre of the corridor. And they have increased the variety of species. From the beginning, they used a variety of taller eucalypts and midstorey species such as wattles and banksias, but very little understorey; the group is now going back to add more understorey species.

Has the corridor been a success? It has been a great community-building exercise and has increased awareness of the work and its benefits. It has provided benefits to farmers through shelter belts and the ecological effects from increased biodiversity. It has been a boon to biodiversity in the area, both through the range of plants now spread across the area and in the other species that have increased: bird life has increased, and there are more Antechinus and larger mammals (not always welcome by farmers). And the corridor has vastly improved the visual landscape. So the group feels that the whole project has been a great success.

Questions

Q: The project started in 2000 – would you do anything different now?

A: With climate change in mind, we might include plants from outside the area. We would not be so rigid about a continuous corridor – we fretted about narrow sections and gaps across roads. But there were no bad mistakes. We might now plan more branches, nodes and connections.