

Symposium Presentation No. 6

Slopes2Summit living the connectivity dream

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Summarised by Dr Peter Mitchell, Biolinks Alliance

Holbrook Landcare Network is based in the south-west slopes area of NSW with rolling hills and floodplains and a high rainfall. Most land use is for primary production and this influences the willingness of landholders to do landcare work. The Network does a lot of work with meat and dairy industry groups as well as land care and biodiversity.

Slopes2Summit is a collective of many partners under the Great Eastern Ranges Initiative. S2S doesn't do on-ground works or even necessarily get funding itself. The S2S partnership is an enabling group that brings it all together at a regional scale.

The region has large areas of remnant vegetation, mostly in reserves, and the concept for the partnership is to work with private landholders to enable the maintenance and enhancement of connectivity between these larger reserves. The dream is "to achieve connected and functional landscapes, and maintain and provide greater security for faunal movement and dispersal in response to climate variability".

S2S is about the people, the on-ground works, and the research and monitoring. The partners are doing many great on-ground projects with landholders. But it is important to get the community engaged and excited about the wildlife in their landscape, and then do great things on their farms. This engagement makes people feel good that some of their tax money is hitting the ground for conservation in their area – a social licence for the work. The third aspect of S2S is research, monitoring and evaluation. The Australian National University's Fenner School and Charles Sturt University's Institute of Land, Water and Society are active partners in this.

S2S is focussed on protection of woodland species including woodland birds and Squirrel Gliders. Good local population data is not available for any of these species and the group hasn't landed funding for a project that will provide the data to help direct on-ground works. But there is strong local evidence that revegetation is good for most species. The Fenner School at ANU has a long-term monitoring project with study sites across the south west slopes and this is generating good information on the effects of revegetation in the

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landscape. S2S has also worked with CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems on re-birding projects. (See the [South West Slopes Restoration Study](#) and [Revegetation and Birds in New South Wales](#) pp10-11 for information on these). Plus there is the evidence referred to at this Symposium, all supporting the on-ground actions of S2S.

Holbrook Landcare Network is an important partner in S2S. Holbrook is a small town (population of 1500), the membership base is small, and the local focus is on primary production. Despite all these factors, members are driven and excited to do landscape-scale works and revegetation on their farms. The group has a history of doing this work going back to the late 90s when the impact of tree die-back was recognised and a large National Heritage Trust-funded “re-birding” project was started. This project is locally famous and kicked off a lot of landscape work.

Then in 2011, the Landcare group obtained \$2.3 million over five years from the Biodiversity Fund for a “*Bushlink*” project. This was a big project with a big on-ground component. When they received the funding, the group needed to develop a plan to do works that would have a positive effect on biodiversity. They needed an objective way to assess sites to make sure they were making the right decisions. The various strategies and models were not a great help in the paddock. They ended up with the “Doerr et al” model, now officially the CSIRO Functional Connectivity Model, doing on-ground works between reasonable quality patches of at least 10ha and less than 1km apart.

The group had target areas that went out to the community, but in the end a lot of the investment was driven by opportunity – people who want to do things on their land. For a facilitator, it was about being in the paddock with the landholder who really wanted to do something, and saying “well, whatever work you want to do for whatever reason, it would be great if it was wider or bigger or over there”. The fact that the works were not in the best place on the property may not really matter. And, as with Doug Robinson’s Babbler project, the group started with a lot of target sites where the landholders initially didn’t want to do anything. Grants were a good opportunity to build up momentum for the project and get landholders interested in doing things.

In the last year, the group started another funded project called “*BushConnect*” supported by the NSW Environmental Trust. Despite the new name, the aim was to maintain the same concept – small projects adding connectivity between patches. This concept had become embedded in people’s minds over the previous 5 years and this made people more willing to engage.

But *BushConnect* has less money. So it has focussed on a couple of priority areas where there is already a lot of connectivity. The Circuitscape analysis shows the areas of least resistance to movement in the landscape and helps the group to decide which sites are the best investments that will maintain or enhance connectivity.

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Final funding decisions come down to site-based assessment. Most of the scores for each site are based on connectivity. But habitat values are also important, including the presence of older trees and the fertility of the land (most revegetation is on poorer hill country and more fertile country needs to be included). Size and the area:perimeter ratio are also important considerations. Carbon sequestration and possible threats to connectivity are other factors that are added to the final score for each site.

High scoring sites received higher financial incentives. Landholders with medium score sites were often persuaded to make their sites wider or larger to get the higher scores and hence higher funding (or more particularly, more assistance in getting the projects done when time rather than money was an issue for them). However, the Landcare group is committed to cost-sharing; although better sites receive more funding, landholders still have to put some funding in to their projects.

Bushlinks was a big project over a large area, and site assessments show that many were quite local in their ecological effect. But if you add the re-birding project and other Landcare work over the past 20 years, plus the works by CMAs and landholders funding themselves, you get a real picture of how a project can make a difference. Added to this is the permanent protection on properties under the NSW Biodiversity Conservation Trust. The target area for the *BushConnect* project now shows quite clearly the gaps where on-ground works are needed.

Over the five years of *Bushlinks*, the growing relationships with landholders has built up the momentum of the projects. The increasing number of project sites is fabulous. The message is that, while a single project does not make connectivity, the progression of projects over time does achieve the ultimate goal of connectivity. But this requires funding to keep people on the ground supporting landholders.

Monitoring also requires long-term projects. Funding for on-ground projects does not provide for benchmarking and monitoring. Despite this, every project site has been benchmarked with a rapid assessment and photo-points, and the group is working on graphics that can demonstrate before and after snapshots to landholders. But the group hasn't landed any funding to monitor the ultimate effects on wildlife. Significant changes do not occur within the time frames of on-ground projects and the Landcare group does not have the time or skills for research. Long-term investment in ecology projects is needed, and Landcare is relying on the other S2S partners for this work.