

Extending that little bit further

An interview with Martin Driver and Ian Davidson

By Tein McDonald

Two long-term practitioners in restoration extension reflect on how far we have come with remnant vegetation management in rural southern NSW — and how far we have yet to go



Martin Driver (left) and Ian Davidson work together on the Fencing Incentives and Vegetation Enhancement Program in the Murray Catchment [photo: Greening Australia (NSW)].

TM: You have both worked in this field over a long period. What motivates you both? What draws you to the task? Clearly you both have a vision, what is it?

MD: Well, I think I can speak for both of us when I say that our vision is about seeing broad, extensive management of what remnant vegetation is left in rural lands. We both want to see active management of remnant vegetation and don't want to see further deterioration. I want to pass on a personal appreciation and understanding of natural systems that I feel I've gained over the years — and have a real belief that something can be done to help people find the motivation to integrate these systems back into the farm landscape.

ID: I agree, although the same insight that allows you to see the potential of natural

ecosystems, also sensitizes you to the degradation that is underway. In my areas, most of the ecosystems that are left are just barely hanging on, if at all. But both our catchments fall into what are considered two of the most degraded bioregions in Australia, and we are both very much dealing with fragmented landscapes. The belief that motivates me is the ability to make a difference, to actually get some positive change happening. If I feel that's gone — well, I'm gone, basically.

TM: Is the degradation that depressing, that alarming?

MD: There have been some really big 'hits' of degradation, but we've gone through a period in recent years where it's been very gradual. Most people are not seeing that gradual decline towards the next major

Martin Driver and Ian Davidson work with Greening Australia (NSW). The interview is based on Martin's experience after 9 years working in an extension and coordinating role in the Riverina — and Ian's 3 years in the South-west Slopes (after 14 years in rural northern Victoria with the Victorian Department of Natural Resources and Environment).

catastrophe. The changes are generally subtle and most people think 'Oh, it has always been like this'. They can't see that the gradual invasions of weeds, overgrazing and lack of regeneration and so on — all the subtle sorts of interactions — are all part of this directional wave that is all downhill. Passive, unintentional neglect, not deliberate, active destruction, is the real issue now.

Certainly, at the far east and the far west of the region, clearing is an issue, but across that whole central portion it's just the potential for continuous slow and subtle degradation. We are talking about the functioning of the whole system at both an ecological and hydrological level. The character, the hydrology, the aesthetics of it. The whole thing. It is death by a thousand cuts.

ID: Again there is that issue of what eyes people are seeing through. Landholders can relate to trees when they are dying. They don't have a problem recognizing when a landscape is really degraded. They have a problem picking up those subtle elements — all the other plants and animals that are intertwined and interdependent.

TM: These are the invisible threads, and the threads are fraying. Can there be a reweaving of those threads?

ID: The threads are gone in a lot of cases. And, as far as reweaving, I think you've really got to try to shore up the little holes, if you like, or go to where there are fewer threads missing. That is pretty well the emphasis of our programme — get the best bits first, where you can. But you also need to go with the interest, wherever the motivated landholders are. You see, we do have a lot of interest coming from landholders in very degraded landscapes, and while this certainly takes a lot of your time, it is often worth it, if only to give people a kick start. It is almost beside the point what outcome they might have at that site because sometimes it can start them on the road to greater awareness and, hence, more action.

MD: It's human nature to always want to re-tree the bare areas first, fix up the really knackered bits first and just let the other bits, which appear alright, go downhill until they get to that point. So we need to play an education role too, I think.

TM: So you are working on two levels? On one hand you go to where the interest is, for its educational value, but are also trying to find the best bits to save first?

ID: Yes. In the Savernake-Corowa area, which still has some high-quality vegetation, for instance, we are endeavouring to meet every landholder. We try and get them to appreciate that they have a relatively intact system in which, if they act now, they can minimize problems down the road.

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MD: In that general area, even the bad bits are good, relative to the areas to the west. They've got some exceptionally good bits of vegetation. So there are different standards in different areas. What is seen as being of moderate conservation value in the Savernake area is seen as high conservation value around, say, Urana-Jerilderie because it still gives you the indicators of the area's pre-existing vegetation. And it also gives you the start — the genetic structure, the physical structure, the hydrological indicators — to use as a basis for something on which to build your restoration.

TM: And in the areas with healthier remnant, you can have the two strengths of community support and quality remnants coinciding, so you can take strategic advantage of both?

ID: Yes. But I guess where a lot of conservation authorities have a problem is that they are good at identifying where the good areas are, but they have a difficulty in mobilizing interest. And that can only be done by community involvement and giving people the courage and means to undertake improved management themselves.

TM: Do you find you gain a core of people to form a basis for these community interest programmes, with

the interest expanding out from this pivotal group?

MD: We certainly started with a tight network of people who were really keen and who have gone on to higher and higher levels of involvement. Bill Sloane, from the Savernake area, is a classic example of that (see box, p. 6). In his case, it is the fifth generation holding the land. While a conservation ethic possibly oscillated from generation to generation, it certainly hit a chord with Bill at a time when he both had a yearning and a realization that something needed to be done — and, hopefully, has a capacity to do something about it.

ID: We are strongly supportive of having these working models of clusters or cores of active people applied in different areas, so we try and empower those people who are using best management practices and enlist them to influence others. We advocate on their behalf outside that area and they advocate on our behalf in that local area.

It is very much a working model or management model, with landholders. Most appreciate the language of weed control, feral animal control and regeneration which are fundamental to ecosystem management. But when it comes to threatened species management it is not so easy to get the message across. So we need to work closely with more sympathetic land managers to devise solutions that can be incorporated into everyday land management practices and special projects and then communicate these in ways that are meaningful to their community.

MD: The technical understanding is fundamental. But at the end of the day it is still a people's game. You are dealing with people. And it is interpretation and getting that information across to people at a speed and a pace and a level that makes sense to them. You are not bombarding people with technical information. For success, you need to deal with small groups of people, or individual landholders, showing them little indicators: 'See the structure of that community? This is why these birds prefer it like that better than like this.' And you build it up. So it really is a process about understanding and working with people.

ID: The amount of literature you send around is incredible. And people think, 'Well



Fencing Incentives Program field day in the South-west Slopes (photo: Greening Australia (NSW)).

why don't landholders understand this?' But most farmers are very tactile. Or they like to see it. I've actually given up sending out lots of printed information, because they really want to relate to something you can show them. The information needs to be delivered personally, by someone they find credible and at a time when they are receptive to it. That is why Pivot and Monsanto have all these reps getting around door-knocking. They've obviously worked it out!

But probably the main thing is credibility. It is not necessarily Greening Australia or a government agency, per se, who are regarded as credible. Farmers talk about a

person. In the first place they want to know that you are technically competent. There is any amount of extension-type people around who have an extension competency but not a technical competency. Second, you need to communicate at their level. And their level isn't necessarily low. Sometimes it is very high and it is very challenging. But you need to spend time and be accepted by those people.

TM: The current focus of Greening Australia's extension work is providing incentives and technical advice for fencing and managing degraded remnants.

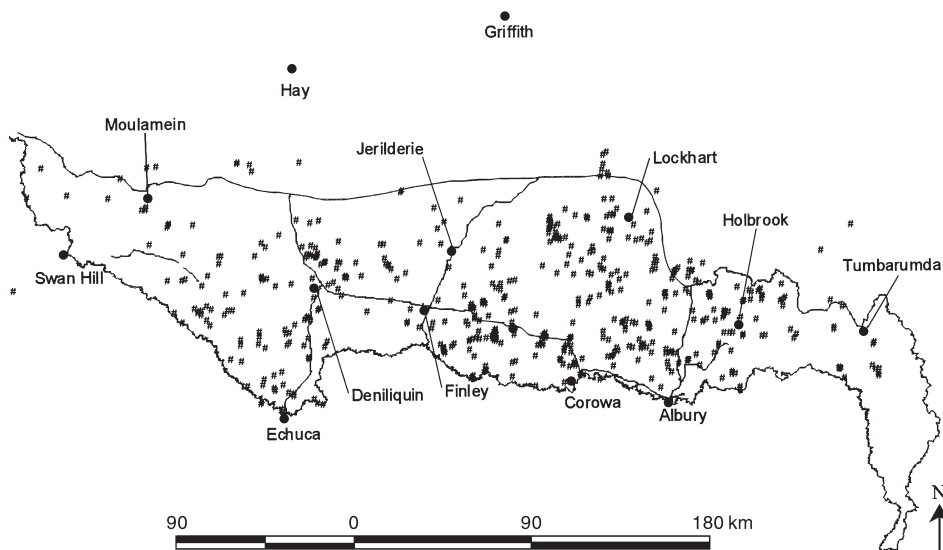
MD: Yes, by the end of last year we had processed 800 km of fencing, protecting approximately 10 000 ha of remnant vegetation. But, given that most of the vegetation is degraded to various degrees, we realized we need money for not just fencing, but also for enhancement, reinstatement of understorey, weed management and other management inputs. This is now being funded through the Bushcare program, through an extension of the fencing programme called the Vegetation Enhancement Program.

TM: Could landholders use the Fencing Incentive Program to sponsor fencing in areas that perhaps don't qualify?

MD: No. That is part of the extension role — to really bring about the best outcomes. But, having said that, good planning and good technical input really enables smart use of fencing which may meet other objectives. There have been some very good incorporations that bring about better vegetation management outcomes while at the same time providing management advantages such as a laneway or something like that. It comes back to the technicians or extension people understanding where the landholders are coming from and suggesting things. 'Look we could fence this, but if we did this it provides you with another fence here'. So you can actually see from their perspective, which sometimes triggers them to do more than they otherwise would have done.

ID: Quite often I have gone onto a site and asked to see their aerial photograph and in many cases we end up working on different sites or different dimensions to what they were first proposing. And, yes, I'm not phased if they want to fence off a degraded gully and it happens to have an interesting ridge adjoining it. I'm happy to do the gully if they include the ridge. You can ask 'Are we really looking at the best patch here, the one that is going to be simplest to shore up and regenerate?' And on some sites we can gain a multiple benefit, such as recharge sites or a riparian zone, so those opportunities need to be spotted by the extension person.

MD: I think that's the point. To take the first site at face value is missing the extension opportunity. It is really about looking at the thing in context and sometimes even looking over the neighbouring fence. And even if the project is not funded, the



Map of sites fenced (to September 1999) under the Fencing Incentives Program in the South-west Slopes, South-west Plains and Riverina bioregions of the Murray Catchment, New South Wales (prepared by Liza Price, Greening Australia NSW).

Why we have chosen to manage our remnant vegetation: By Bill and Jacquetta Sloane, *Kilnyana*, Mulwala NSW

The Savernake area between Albury and Deniliquin is home to some of the most significant patches of remnant vegetation remaining in the Murray Catchment. With around 10 per cent tree cover (compared to approximately two per cent in most of the surrounding region) it is an important refuge for the endangered Superb Parrot (*Polytelis swainsonii*), the Bush Stone Curlew (*Burhinus grallarius*) and a number of rare plants including Red Swainsona (*Swainsona plagiotropis*).

Our property, 'Kilnyana', has been managed by our family since 1898. Because it contains terrain ranging from gilgai swamps and sandhills to granite outcrops, it supports a wide variety of plant communities. Early accounts of the flora and fauna were recorded within family diaries which provide us with information on what was here more than 100 years ago. Dingoes, bandicoots and kangaroo rats were known to exist, as were Magpie Geese and Black Cockatoos. The names of the paddocks, still used today, also tell a story: Quandong, Big Forest, Little Forest, Sawmill and so on.

Permanent fencing of remnant corridors began back in 1987 but it wasn't until 1995 that we took a more planned approach. Using aerial photographs to prepare a physical property plan gave us that third dimension that helped us to fit everything together, and in 1998 we commissioned Rick Webster of Deniliquin to undertake an ecological survey to provide us with a basis upon which we could develop a conservation plan. We wanted our plan to guide management that was both ecologically and economically sustainable for the long term, and to be flexible enough to be implemented over time, as finance permits.

More than 20 per cent of the property is intermittent wetland which has never been cropped and is conservatively stocked and managed for its wetland value. Apart from the wetland areas, another 11 per cent of the significant remnants are fenced off, taking in forest blocks and corridors. We propose to increase fencing of remnant vegetation by another 10 per cent, which can be achieved by strategically linking our remnants with those of neighbours, using roadsides, rocky outcrops, sandhills and awkwardly shaped paddocks. We have also formed a local group of landholders known as Savernake and Native Dog Living Landscapes (SAND) to work at a district scale and are collaborating with the Grains Research and Development Corporation and CSIRO on research projects aimed at improving environmental management systems. It is clear, however, that farmers can only do so much. Much more could be done with real government assistance to landholders in the form of rate relief for conservation work, fencing costs and 'set-aside' payments etc.

It is very hard to put a dollar cost on the benefits of maintaining and increasing the native vegetation. Certainly, the remnants provide important shelter for both animal health and production and also crop and soil protection. They also provide a significant wildlife habitat and are indeed indicators of environmental health — and their aesthetic value is unquestionable. The pleasure that we get from our remnants is something money cannot buy. We see ourselves at a crossroad in terms of the survival of ecosystems for future generations. We firmly believe a more sustainable approach is possible and that we must take a stand before it is too late.



Bill Sloane, Mulwala landholder, in the Big Forest paddock at Kilnyana, Murray Pines ranging in age from 2 to 3 years, 10 years, 50 years (medium size) to a very old tall tree in the background (photo: L. Palmer, Murray Catchment Management Committee).

landholder is usually picking up both information and understanding and that will ultimately lead to something down the track.

ID: There is always an outcome. We leave the landholder with a basic management outline, regardless of whether the individual project is funded or not. And that deals with issues like weed control or revegetation and so on. I have never recommended a site be funded without having visited it with the landholder.

MD: It is a matter of trust. Ours is a relationship of trust. Basically, our field people are working with land managers that are keen and are seeking support and advice.

ID: And we're going in there expecting that they are wanting to do the right thing. Programmes that go into infinite detail to check bonafides, often imply that the landholder is after something that they don't deserve or that they are trying to rip the public off. That really starts things off on the wrong foot.

TM: Because the culture of rural communities is fundamentally one of trust or people don't survive?

ID: Well, if you want respect, you don't do it that way. You have to have credibility, which is earned, not given.

TM: And what about long-term security for those sites — devices such as property agreements or covenants attached to the title deeds? Do you have some arrangements?

ID: We have no arrangements except for empowering landholders to better understand and manage their land. But I see it as a natural evolution, moving from initial primary protection, through to a consideration of 'I want this to be protected in the long term' and eventually considering covenants and the like. Having been involved in Victoria with Land for Wildlife, I've seen exactly the same thing happen. It is an initial entry point.

MD: I agree. Two of the first of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NSW (NPWS) conservation agreements in southern NSW were original Greening Australia clients who then went on. Many of the Department of Land and Water Conservation (DLWC), NSW clients are Greening Australia clients who have gone that next step to full conservation agreements. I think we



Less than 1% of the once-extensive white box woodlands remain. Remnants are a high priority for protective fencing and understorey reconstruction (photo: T. McDonald).

are offering a threat-free incentive to start looking at management.

TM: And is there also something to be said for the idea that management and conservation of these areas need to be based in the culture rather than the legislation?

MD: Exactly, legislation in itself will not bring about better vegetation management. In fact, there are pretty good indications that it gets people's backs up. Legislation is the tool of last resort for stopping clearance. But it is not the tool to encourage better management.

ID: Funnily enough, our job has become a lot more complicated in fairly recent times because there are lots of other agency programmes and options for landholders. And while that sounds fine, a lot of them appear to be in competition. Prior to the advent of other programmes, it was rare, for example, for me to undertake more than one inspection of a site before some decision was made. Now I am sometimes doing up to three and four inspections and the property is being visited by other people. There is such an array of options now, that people are actually looking at all of their options and starting to do horsetrading and all sorts of things. Having said that, we are working

well with DLWC and the NPWS to cooperatively present the programmes and prevent confusion.

TM: So it could be better to stratify all the government-funded programmes in some way so that they offer compatible services without duplication?

MD: Yes, I think community groups like ours could be involved in terms of the first entry point and providing the practical skill on

'I think we are just beginning a huge experiment. As more sites are fenced over the years, we are going to get clusters of these different vegetation communities under different management regimes. Then we will really learn something from these sites.'

the ground. And then, when people feel comfortable and happy with what is going on, they move into the more structured, secured situation which needs a legislative framework which would necessarily involve DLWC and NPWS. In terms of vegetation management we've got to start looking at a longer-term, ongoing, devolved grant system that can be delivered at the regional level, not funded for 3 years from the Natural Heritage Trust's limited lifetime programmes. It needs to be part of core extension money, whether the delivery of this is contracted or not. It needs to be part of a regional programme for the management of remnant vegetation.

TM: What about progress so far, in ecological terms?

ID: In the fencing and management programme in the Murray Catchment, some 19 of the 24 main vegetation communities have had some privately owned or leasehold areas fenced to varying degrees. So there is a good coverage of the main vegetation communities. The concentration has been on fencing those communities that are most pressured: White Box, Grey Box, Black Box, Yellow Box and Callitris Woodlands — the grassy woodlands and grasslands of the fertile agricultural heartland of the South-west Slopes and Riverina. In many sites, recruitment of trees and shrubs has already occurred and, in some others, species are appearing that were not previously recorded by the land manager, although we must ask whether this is due to better observation by the landholder.

MD: In terms of improved management, there is certainly a positive change in the Rural Lands Protection Boards who manage the Travelling Stock Reserves (TSRs). The TSRs, of course, contain some of the best remnants that are left and cover virtually every vegetation community that is not represented in national parks. In the Riverina Board's area there are 23 000 ha of travelling stock reserves, something like two or three times the size of the only national park in the Riverina. And they represent high biodiversity because, by nature, they are linear and are traversing a whole lot of vegetation communities. So when seen in this perspective, they are really significant, large areas; and by helping to bring information and

support to the Boards, we are first helping to protect those very important areas and second, helping to develop working models from which others can learn.

While most of the understorey of the sites we look at are still in poor condition, there are some where the grass swards have already increased their native perennial component. And very occasionally we come across some absolute gems which are not degraded; grasslands, for instance, that people didn't even know extended this far into the Riverina. An example is a site in Urana containing Mulga Grass (*Thyridolepis mitchelliana*) and Kangaroo Grass (*Themeda australis*), which I believe is as close to pristine as any of that type of grassland within the Riverina. All the time, you're picking up gems of relict communities that no one was picking up before.

TM: Can we learn from these sites about what grazing regimes work best for individual species or communities and which ones lead to degradation — or to restoration, for that matter?

MD: I think we are just beginning a huge experiment, quite frankly. As more sites are fenced over the years, we are going to get clusters of these different vegetation communities under different management regimes that start to head in different directions. This means we have got to be involved in some level of monitoring and feedback on what is happening on these sites. And we are not going to do that on our own. This means partnerships with the landholders responsible for implementing the management, and partnerships with research organizations like CSIRO and universities. Then we will learn all sorts of things from these sites.

ID: And the knowledge is just not yet available to say what is the best management. And that is certainly the view of the research institutions. What we do know is that the current management, with respect to grazing in most of these agricultural areas, is a path to decline. So at least we are redirecting that with fencing or with fine-tuning of grazing regimes. As a rule of thumb, the better the condition of a site, the less we alter management.

MD: Fencing merely allows grazing management flexibility to be introduced. It

allows management of stock on or off a site. So grazing may not be totally excluded where it is needed to maintain diversity. I think, for virtually all the systems, further down the track, there is going to be scope for some level of grazing management whether it is for the vegetation management per se or for stocking flexibility. But at the end of the day, fencing is the tool for management. Fencing doesn't create biodiversity but it enables it to be managed.

TM: So can you see some overall trends in culture? Have you observed any cultural changes?

ID: With the land managers we deal with, there is definitely a change. We've had a series of workshops which haven't been hugely advertised, in that we haven't put anything in the paper. At the first one we had 70 people, of whom 50-60 were landholders. And the last one we did recently was around 50. And remember, these are out in rural areas, they're not in towns or anything. So I think it is becoming a less 'uncool' thing for farmers to do, if I can put it in those terms.

TM: And what about the farmers' organizations, are they taking on board these questions?

MD: At the grass roots level, at the level of the farmers involved in these organizations, there is definitely a level of interest. I would be brave enough to say that that doesn't seem to be reflected at the political level. But it is growing. People with this level of interest, 10 years ago, would have been considered far left field.

ID: They were 'closet' sympathizers with bushland.

MD: That's right — far left field to the point where it was a definite 'coming out' if someone let it slip that they had this strange tendency. A landholder with whom I worked some 10 years ago recently said to me 'You know, Martin, you were the first person I ever spoke to about this sort of thing. I thought there was something wrong with me because people would talk to me about ripping out these areas and ploughing them up and it just didn't seem right to me. I thought there was something wrong with me.' Now he is leading a large cluster in his area, doing some amazing things. And now, in

his area, while it is not yet mainstream, it is certainly not 'misfit' stuff.

TM: So is it enough? Is it enough to counterweigh the very large threats?

ID: Well, it has to grow to make a difference. But it is a good start; although, in Victoria, we have politicians saying we should treble agricultural outputs in the next decade. That's what you are up against.

MD: There is corporate agriculture, which doesn't necessarily hold the same views as the private landholders who think about their children's children. The corporate level is still looking primarily at the bottom line, although that is a broad generalization, because I know that there are some corporate people who

'It is a community-wide dilemma. And at the moment, the majority of the community is not involved in this debate.'

take a longer term view than that. But I think we are in a situation at the moment where a large segment of rural Australia is feeling financially pressured and socially and politically isolated, and it is very difficult.

ID: I agree. There is a definite stewardship attitude growing. But the problem is that the commodities that currently get the highest price are the ones that are most damaging. There are landholders we know who would definitely do a lot more conservation management work if they had more money. While I don't think for one moment that if agriculture is in better condition, we will get better nature conservation outcomes across the board — I know that there are certainly people who would make much larger contributions if there were more economic benefits in it.

TM: So are we talking now about the broader community paying for the stewardship carried out by the rural sector?

MD: That's the message I'm getting loud and clear from everyone on the land. They want to do things, there is no doubt about that. But they do need to be supported because

many of them are not making fair living incomes anyway. They are getting two seemingly disparate messages; one to conserve and manage, and one to compete with the world and survive on their own.

ID: I was at a meeting recently with people from the high-rainfall country and they're keen to do works on improving their waterways. But they realized that the water users, who are going to benefit from their works, should be contributing say \$2-3 per megalitre to pay for those works, which, if you want to put it in hard-nosed terms, are infrastructure costs.

MD: I actually posed that question to some people in the irrigation community and asked how that would be received. And they said 'Well, that's fine, as long as we can pass on that cost to the broader community who are consuming our goods.' So it is a community-wide dilemma. And at the moment, the majority of the community is not involved in this debate. Currently it is only the people involved on the land. There is definitely a cost in mismanaging our resources, but there is also a cost to landholders now in managing them well and society needs to recognize and support this.