

# Community Action and Initiatives on the Keilor Plains

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The major conservation reserves on the Keilor Plains, Derrimut Grasslands, Laverton Grasslands and Organ Pipes National Park have been heavily grazed for nearly 150 years. Therefore, they have a poor representation of forb species which are an important component of the original native grassland (DCE, 1992). In contrast, small remnant railway reserve sites and some cemetery plots have a rich diversity of forbs because they have been burnt frequently over the years and have not been grazed (DCE, 1992). Consequently, it is important to protect and manage these small remnant sites on the Keilor Plains. Otherwise many rare or endangered plants will become extinct in the region.

In the past two decades, the Department of Natural Resources and Environment (DNRE) has lacked the resources to protect and manage small remnant sites on the Keilor Plains. With the proposed State Government cutbacks it is unlikely that the situation will improve over the next four years. Some local governments such as Keilor and Sunshine Councils have shown an awareness of their indigenous grassland flora but they lack expertise in their management. I believe local government is an important resource in the protection and management of Keilor Plains flora but their future initiatives will be dependant upon the community action of local volunteers through conservation groups.

In essence I feel the protection of these small remnant sites in the Keilor plains will depend upon local conservation groups, such as IFFA and the VNPA, and individual volunteers being actively involved in protection and management works.

In this paper I propose to briefly describe some of the historical background of some remnant sites that Friends of Organ Pipes (FOOPS) and the Keilor Plains Group of the Society for Growing Australian Plants (KPSGAP) have been actively involved in protecting, other flora protection work both these groups have undertaken, and what needs to be carried out to protect these small remnant sites in the future.

## Protection of remnant sites by FOOPS and KPSGAP

### 1. Sunshine/Tottenham Railway Reserve Site

It all started 20 years ago with the formation of FOOPS and their efforts to protect the endangered orchid *Diurus fragrantissima* (White Diurus) and other orchids and forbs that grew on the Sunshine/Tottenham rail reserve site (Rayner et al., 1985). Although an agreement with the Environmental Officer with the railways was made to protect the site, dirt from the underground loop was dumped on the site in 1984, thus destroying a majority of the site, except a small area fenced by the Native Preservation Society.

The site has been neglected over the years with constant damage by the railways with recent dumpings of fill on the edge of the site and serious weed infestation by Fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*).

Andy Govenstone, planning officer from DCNR Melbourne Region, and James Ross Grasslands Project Of-

ficer VNPA, organised a weeding day at the site in July 1992. Ten volunteers worked on removing fennel and other weeds from outside the fence and also along its boundary.

For these small flora sites to survive it is mandatory that frequent weed control works are carried out, especially in the next couple of years.

### 2. St Albans Railway Reserve Site

In October 1982 Professor Carrick Chambers, formerly Professor of Botany at Melbourne University, emphasised the importance to KPSGAP members of this nationally significant site which contains the endangered plant *Rutidosia leptorhynchoides*. Unfortunately it has taken a 10 year battle to get this site finally protected.

The great stumbling block has been that it has taken over 7 years for the railway reserve management agreement between the Public Transport Corporation and DNRE to be ratified in the metropolitan area, so we were not able to gain a lease to protect and manage the

site even though Keilor Council was very keen to assist.

In February 1992, KPSGAP gained a community grant from DCE for materials and signs from Keilor Council to fence the complete site. The Minister of Conservation and Environment, Hon Barry Pullen, officially opened the site on August 1992.

Progressive damage to the site by the railways over the years has caused major weed invasion to occur and weed control work is of the highest priority.

### 3. Evans St Sunbury Site

I found this site in August 1983, and in the following spring it produced the richest diversity of forbs in mass display that I have ever seen on the Keilor Plains. In addition it was relatively weed free. FOOPS tried to prevent the sale of the site by Vic Rail to Bulla Shire in October 1983, but were unsuccessful. FOOPS also attempted to persuade the State Labour Government to purchase or swap the land with other blocks of land required by Bulla Shire, but without success.

Andy Govenstone, also President of the Bulla Conservation Society, has created a lot of excellent publicity in Sunbury about this site over the last few years. The Shire Council has recently moved to protect the site, after a number of rescission motions were put.

A committee of management has been formed consisting of volunteers from community groups, DCNR officers, Bulla Shire officers and Councillors. Unfortunately, Bulla Shire Council have indicated that they are unwilling to use Council resources to manage the site. Consequently, it is going to depend upon both DCNR and volunteers to manage the site and create community interest in the site, otherwise it may be lost as a conservation reserve.

### 4. Sunshine Tip Site

This site was located by KPSGAP in the late 1970s but unfortunately, in November 1992, the Western Ring Road freeway was carved through the middle of the reserve.

Andy Govenstone (DNRE), James Ross (VNPA) and Ian Taylor (KPSGAP) have obtained some concessions from Vic Roads including moving the freeway 25 m south and fencing the remaining grassland on the site.

DNRE held a public transplant day in August 1992 to dig up rare plants in the pathway of the freeway. Approximately 100 people attended. However the long term survival of the transplanted plants is uncertain.

Both FOOPS and KPSGAP have been actively involved in the protection of many other small remnant sites including Bravbrook Rail Reserve, O'Briens Park Grassland, St Albans Rd Rail Reserve Nth Calder Railway Reserve, Diggers Rest — Sunbury Rail Reserve, Sydenham Reserve Grassland and Strathnaver Reserve Moonee Ponds Creek.

## Other Flora Protection Activities

### 1. Location of Rare Plants

Community groups can make a substantial contribution just by locating rare species and notifying the State Herbarium and the DNRE regional office. Last year KPSGAP found *Stylidium graminifolium* growing in profusion on the plains and recently the rainforest plant *Rapanea howittiana* (muttonwood) growing at the Holden Flora Reserve.

### 2. Collecting Seed and Cuttings and Propagation of Rare Plants

Locating sites containing indigenous plants, collecting seeds and cuttings and propagation are very time consuming activities but very valuable for the restoration work at Organ Pipes National Park.

KPSGAP members grew the endangered plant *Psoralea tenax* which had originated from the road reserve at Taylors Lakes and has since been destroyed, at an indigenous plot in their Australian Plant trail at Brimbank Park. The *Psoralea* has naturally revegetated and we have been able to collect substantial quantities of seed over the years.

FOOPS have recently conducted direct seeding and tube stock experiments with native forbs on a restored grassland at Organ Pipes National Park with an Open Space 2000 grant under the supervision of research scientist Dr Keith McDougall and John Morgan. Restoration of native grasslands including the forb component is still in its infancy and very difficult to achieve. Protection and management of existing remnant sites must receive greater emphasis otherwise the extinction of many rare plants on the Plains will soon occur.

Also FOOPS have been deeply involved in the development of a Plant Bank of rare indigenous plants where seed and cuttings can be collected for restoration experiments and the genetic resource can be protected in case of extinctions at remnant sites on the plains.

### 3. Grassland Harvest

In the middle 80's Dr Keith McDougall carried out research for DCNR on techniques to restore Kangaroo

Table 1. Activities that Friends groups could carry out.

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| Obtain grants for protection and management of remnant sites |
| Fence and signpost remnant sites                             |
| Initiate preparation of management plans                     |
| Carry out routine weed control                               |
| Help in the management of sites                              |
| Restoration of rare plants                                   |
| Visit sites regularly to prevent impending damage            |
| Educate the community  |
| Carry out surveys of flora and fauna                         |

grass grassland at Organ Pipes National Park. It was very successful and now the Friends with park staff help carry out a harvest of seed from remnant Kangaroo grasslands every year and help spread the herbage on the site at Organ Pipes where it is to be restored.

#### 4. Community Education

Both FOOPS and KPSGAP have conducted wildflower shows emphasising our grassland flora, produced photographic displays for meeting and shows and organized wildflower walks. In addition, both groups have received a lot of positive publicity about native grasslands in local newspapers. These activities are extremely important in improving the public perception of our native grasslands.

#### Flora Protection in the Future

Although FOOPS and KPSGAP have carried out valuable work at remnant sites in past years, their major objectives are focussed on either the restoration of Organ Pipes National Park or on native plants in members' gardens. A new Friends group focussed on the protection and management of remnant flora sites would be a great advantage but may not be achievable in the short term. Such a Friends group could carry out the tasks shown in Table 1.

Often volunteers will only stay committed to a project for a limited period of time, so it is important that a more permanent management committee is set up to look after remnant sites. This must be coordinated through an officer in the DCNR so that a professional approach is taken and no ad hoc decisions are made by inexperienced volunteers. It is also important to obtain advice from grassland research scientists.

I believe the best way various groups could be actively involved in the management of remnant sites on the Keilor Plains is through a committee of management, Representatives from DCNR, local Councils, Victoria University's Department of Environmental Management, local conservation groups and local residents could be invited to serve a term on the committee. Such a management structure would coordinate resources and enable excellent communication between all parties.

It is extremely important to involve local councils in the management of significant flora sites in their municipality as through their parks and gardens department they have wide ranging resources and can monitor reserves on a day to day basis. If local government is not supportive for the protection of their own local sites it will be difficult to convince other government groups to do so.

#### Conclusions

One of the most important points to remember is, if you want to attract community interest in a significant remnant site in order to protect that site is, that whatever YOU do to promote the site will be of benefit, and can only help, even if at the time it seems wasted energy. By not doing anything to protect the site you are increasing the likelihood that the site will ultimately be destroyed.

Many people in the community would like to be involved in something they know is important, but they are unsure what to do. We have a tremendous amount of expertise within this conference and my challenge to you is to allow and assist these people to get involved.

#### References

Derrimut Grassland Reserve, Draft Management Plan, Melbourne Region, DCE, May 1992.

Rayner, C., Marsh, D. and Kemp, B. (1984) Keilor Plains Flora - a battle against extinction. *Parkwatch* No. 139, Victorian National Parks Association.

