

Our rural roadsides – can we save them?

Our magnificent and irreplaceable roadside remnants are becoming smaller and more fragmented. If current trends continue unchecked they may disappear altogether. This paper is about why this loss is happening, why it matters, and what we can do about it.

High Conservation Value roadsides with rich layers of native vegetation need protection because they...

- provide permanent corridors and crucial connectivity between varied habitats
- hold important remnants of rare native plant communities
- are a wildlife refuge for many, sometimes threatened, animal species
- are critical in these times of climate change for species to move and adapt
- are beautiful and nourish our hearts and souls

What is destroying these ecological assets?

- Inadequately regulated Shire contractor practice for road and infrastructure works, and residents inappropriately mowing, slashing and removing ground litter, are destroying and damaging trees, shrubs, ground plants and soils.
- Waste material dumping is smothering significant ground vegetation, including rare species.
- Slashing is preventing seeding of flowers and grasses and replacement trees.
- Standing dead trees and fallen wood providing diverse habitats are being removed
- Weed seeds spread by machinery are establishing in disturbed soil.
- Non-native farm tree plantings close to or in the roadside and huge exotic weed invasion are pushing out native plants.

State and Federal legislation protects both plant and animal species threatened with extinction.

Yet there are there are insufficient local protections in place for our priceless ecological assets.

Inadequate action has been taken by our local responsible authority, the Macedon Ranges Shire, to provide the protection our local significant roadsides need.

We have no Roadside Management Strategy in the Macedon Ranges Shire though a draft document has existed for over 15 years.

We know where the High, Medium and Low Conservation Value roadsides are from two surveys in 2004 and 2009, and yet they remain unprotected. **High and Medium Conservation Value remnants could be protected now** by specific Shire management plans and directives to contractors. **New works of all kinds on High and Medium rated roadsides** must be preceded by **detailed flora surveys** of the location. We need to know what we have to protect it.

Fire risk is being used to justify clearing more native roadside vegetation when highly-flammable exotic woody weeds such as Gorse, are **not being controlled by the Shire, nor private land owners**, despite it being a **statutory responsibility**. Pine trees, Cypresses and exotic pasture grasses such as Phalaris also represent a major fire hazard on roadsides, but have not been targeted to date.

We are concerned that the motion passed by the Council in October 2015 will lead to indiscriminate clearing of native vegetation that has significant conservation value. (see Newham visit briefing paper)

Fire and conservation can and must be strategically managed in parallel :

- **Fire-prone exotics** on Shire land and noxious weeds on private land must be **rapidly removed**.
- Slash to reduce fire hazard **on listed strategic fire breaks and escape routes ONLY**.
- **Roadsides with significant vegetation** must be assessed and remain **undisturbed** if possible.

What is needed is an evidence-based Roadside Strategy as a foundation for all roadside management, taking into account the three priorities of road safety, fire management and biodiversity protection.

The Shire should own the roadsides issue and provide leadership.

Action from concerned community members is vital too. (see over page for details)

Where to from here to save our significant roadsides?

Community leadership, local government action and many community members doing conservation work on the ground are all needed. Here are some suggested actions.

1. Actions for Everyone

a. Do the things we're legally obliged to do

- Control weeds on our places
- Learn what we legally can and can't do on roadsides, which are public land. A permit is required to legally remove trees, shrubs, grasses or branches or to rip or plough or to plant any species. Check where mowing is restricted.
- Contact Macedon Ranges Shire Council (mrsc@mrsc.vic.gov.au) with queries, or to report issues such as wrong practice by contractors

b. Read and talk about rural roadsides

- Study the Shire brochure *Maintaining our roadsides – who does what?*
- **Educate yourself and investigate issues, such as**
 - Why should we keep rural roadsides for native species?
 - What type of roadside do I have? How should it be responsibly managed?
 - What is the significance of roadsides for climate change?
 - Which species should I remove from my roadside and my property?

2. Actions for Concerned Community Members

- Join Landcare if not already a member
- Lobby for the development and adoption of a Roadside Strategy** for the Shire
 - The Shire must take leadership and we must ensure they do, with State and Federal input where possible.
- Engage in and initiate Landcare community education and conservation projects.
 - **Create new educational events, spread the word.**
Attend information sessions and educational workshops on indigenous seed collection and propagation, species identification... and many more
 - **Engage in Landcare activities** such as working-bees on roadsides, following up Shire weed spraying, a **conservation project on your road** or the nearest or favourite significant remnant roadside, eg. Egans Lane Roadside Renewal Project.

3. Actions for Landowners

- Allow natural regeneration** or progressively **plant out buffer strips of native** tree layer, middle understorey layer, grasses and wildflowers, on your land adjacent to roadsides. (Vastly more ecologically valuable than a row of cypresses.)
- Control weeds and pest animals** both on adjacent roadsides and within your property boundaries. Research or attend Landcare and other educational events for assistance.

4. Some Key Actions for the Macedon Ranges Shire

- Develop, adopt and implement a new Roadside Strategy** (as detailed above)
 - Ensure all contractors are trained in and adhere to Strategy derived guidelines
- Provide more information and education for residents**
 - The excellent 2015 brochure *Maintaining our roadsides – who does what?* is the first information to guide residents on more than weeds. Much more is needed.
- Stop contractors dumping on significant roadsides immediately.**
 - Insist contractors mulch and remove all prunings and timber fallen onto roads
 - Enforce complete removal of all spoil from roadworks and any infrastructure works
- Work with Landcare on roadsides**
 - Respect the extensive Landcare contribution to reducing fire risk by tackling weeds on (private and) public land
 - Collaborate effectively with Landcare
- Limit slashing**
 - Slash roadside fence-to-fence only for designated fire breaks and areas ranked as Low or Zero Conservation Value.
 - Slash 3m from bitumen only where there is exotic grass, 1.5m on native grass verges.