

RURAL ROADSIDES IN THE MACEDON RANGES – DEATH BY A THOUSAND CUTS

Most of the detailed observations of rural roadsides discussed here have been from the Newham and Woodend area, but similar treatment of roadsides has been observed throughout the Shire.

More and more of the priceless fragments of rich and significant biodiverse roadsides in the Macedon Ranges are being lost.

Rural roadsides are being constantly reduced in biodiversity by the actions of landowners and Shire workers and contractors from many authorities. There is a stated intention to protect the biodiversity of rural roadsides in Macedon Ranges, according to various MRSC policy documents, especially the MR Natural Environment Strategy. There are very significant gaps in the policies, strategies and actions required to implement this intention.

Investigation of the MRSC website and other sources shows that while legal and educational instruments exist to support roadside biodiversity conservation, they are not being effectively applied in the Macedon Ranges.

The majority of landowners appear to have little understanding of rural roadsides as important remnants of rare and endangered local plant communities and habitat for rare and endangered animal species, from soil organisms to mammals and birds.

It appears, from what most landowners do, that they believe that their responsibility is to clear and mow all roadsides, till they look like the artificial landscape of an English estate, with simply grass and large trees. This belief is not surprising as it is the appearance being adopted by most of the larger and more affluent landowners and by rural tourism businesses (I can give examples), and no alternative picture of roadside management for biodiversity is being communicated.

Examples of unsuitable treatment of significant roadside vegetation in the Shire: (see photos)

- Cutting back and removal of roadside eucalypts and wattles, native shrubs, groundcovers and wildflowers.
- Removal of dead wood that provides habitat for diverse species
- Mowing and ripping of large stretches of biodiverse roadsides leaving only large eucalypts (and completely preventing the growth of young trees to replace old ones).
- Addition of domestic animal manure (motivation not clear, maybe in order to encourage non-native grasses? To cultivate the grass and trees landscape?)
- Planting of large non-native windbreak trees very close to the fence (*even on the roadside reserve itself*, see photo) where they encroach on and compete with indigenous vegetation on the roadside (and require trimming by road authorities for safety purposes).
- Regular dumping of large loads of road material by drainage and grading contractors on top of significant vegetation.

Searches on the MRSC website have yielded no mention of rural roadsides and their management for biodiversity.

The MR Municipal Fire Management Plan does not mention rural roadside conservation as a consideration at all. The CFA Roadside Fire Management Guidelines states, among other things, that 'Under the

Planning and Environment Act 1987, Native Vegetation Clearance Controls are included in all planning schemes to restrict the removal of native vegetation except by Council permit.' However none of the recommendations in this document are referenced in the MFMPC Macedon Ranges Shire Council Municipal Fire Management Plan Version 2.0 Amended: 22nd August, 2012

There is no information on the MRSC website about the conservation of rural roadsides, nor is the Natural Environment Strategy even available to download. The Roadside Biodiversity Management Plan is still in draft form and is not on the website nor was it able to be quickly found by shire officers when requested (although it was expected to be adopted soon after the adoption of the Natural Environment Strategy back in the early 2000's, and its adoption by Council was recommended in the NES in 2009).

Extract from the 2002 MR Natural Environment Strategy re Roadside Management:

The Roadside Management Plan is currently in draft form. It has many environmental guidelines that apply the goals set out in the Natural Environment Strategy to roadside situations. The RMP will include Action Plans that will be developed in conjunction with the Natural Environment Strategy Action Plans. The Action Plans will be in a user friendly format that can be implemented by landowners and contractors. The RMP is an advisory not a regulatory document, but may influence changes to environmental overlays in the Planning Scheme, and will be included as a reference document in contract specifications for road construction and maintenance. It will also be used as a reference document for service authorities and they will be encouraged to include it as a reference in their own specifications and service agreements and thereby improve the environmental values.

Extract from the 2009 Updated MR Natural Environment Strategy:

Program 4.1 Macedon Ranges Shire owned and managed land

Council owns or is responsible for significant areas of native vegetation in bushland reserves and roadsides...few of these areas have adequate management plans or resources to protect and enhance biodiversity values. a lost opportunity to for residents and visitors... also a lost educational opportunity..... represent an excellent opportunity for Council to show a lead role in the protection of local plant and animal species and habitat and as demonstration sites for local landowners.

Significant Macedon Ranges roadside vegetation is not fully mapped. While there was some Significant Roadsides signage installed years ago, it was minimal, and some signs seem to have been removed. Even with these signs in place, little or no information was given to nearby land owners about what the custodianship of a significant roadside should entail.

No guidelines for landowners regarding their adjacent roadsides are available on the MRSC website.

A typical example of information being provided to landowners about roadsides: A neighbor who has recently bought property in the area asked about roadside management responsibilities and was informed that the Shire would mow the road verge and the landowner was encouraged to mow the rest of their roadside , as an act of goodwill. No mention of conservation of biodiversity was made.

Some Shires do inform and guide landowners and relevant authorities about the management of rural roadsides for biodiversity. E.g. Shire of Mansfield, Indigo, Nillumbik and Greater Shepparton all have rural roadside strategy documents. Links available on request. A friend who recently bought land in Greater Bendigo was thoroughly informed of the significance of her roadside reserve and how to manage it.

Some Macedon Ranges landowners have for decades cared for their significant roadside. A shining example is outside the property on Three Chain Road near Boundary Road, formerly owned by Margaret and Geoff Dunn, which provides a superb demonstration site. This property is now fortunately owned by active Landcare members and its conservation is being actively continued. Newham Landcare commissioned a full ecological study of this site and a complex ecosystem was found with several rare and endangered species.

Information I'm asking MRSC for:

To be brought up to date by the appropriate Shire officer(s) about the strategy and actions being undertaken by MRSC at present with respect to rural roadside protection and management, including:

- the current state of play regarding the adoption and implementation of the Draft Roadsides Biodiversity Management Strategy (listed in the 2009 NES as a significant MRSC policy gap) ;
- a summary of current guidelines and training in place for all works on rural roadsides, including Council works departments and other authorities
- a summary of any current education and information programs for landowners on rural roadsides.
- information about action that the Shire will take to inform and ensure appropriate restoration, where individual landowners have recently destroyed significant vegetation on rural roadsides.

What I will do:

1. Develop over the next twelve months, with other members of Newham Landcare, a short information leaflet about the value of and custodianship of rural roadsides for residents in the Newham Landcare area.
2. Consult with MRSC Environment Officer(s) about the content of that leaflet and make it available to MRSC for wider distribution and/or further development
3. Embark on a restoration to biodiverse indigenous vegetation of our own roadside at 85 Egans Lane Newham. This site has been essentially a piece of pasture for the over 30 years we've lived here and has power lines above, but we are interested to learn and demonstrate what can be done to restore it.
4. Continue to photograph and document examples of roadsides in various states of health and destruction.

Vision for the Future

The destruction of roadside beauty and biodiversity on rural lanes near my place has been painful and brought me to tears. It's also galvanised me to do something. I now have a vision of how our rural roadsides could be and that it can be done. Never again do I want to cry over spilt milk.

I see the Macedon Ranges in the future as being the Shire where others look to learn how to engage the community in conserving and rehabilitating rural roadsides. I see a place where people walk along their rural roads with enormous pleasure, observing and documenting on a shared online platform, the species they spot and delight in. I see a method creatively developing, through vigorous community debate and experimentation, whereby the needs of conservation and biodiversity and fire control are balanced and effectively managed. I see newcomers welcomed into the exciting world of custodianship of their roadsides as a unique kind of community park, a wild yet effectively managed space, where people and wildlife live side by side and enjoy each other. I see much more...

This is all possible. It's possible only by working together. We live now in the age of crowd funding and community science. Never before has there been the technology to support such communal action. I'm keen to see MR Shire lead the way.

PHOTO GALLERY

All the photos here have been taken at the end of a very dry period extending from spring into autumn, making it more difficult to see the diversity that is present. Nevertheless there is a great deal to be seen on close inspection. Even better is to go to these places and see the real thing, especially after the rain comes.

Site A Rapid Destruction of a Significant Rural Roadside

Site A is a formerly significant roadside which has had its biodiversity values reduced drastically. Much of it has been reduced to bare earth, many small trees have been cut down, then their roots totally removed, and most ground plants having been destroyed entirely by ripping. The addition of horse manure completes the destruction, changing the conditions, introducing weed seeds and inhibiting any regrowth of indigenous plants.



Site A-1: All but the larger trees have been removed, ground cover mown to bare earth or the soil ripped.



Site A-2: Manure has been added to the ripped area



Site A-3: Another section showing stark reduction to bare earth under large trees. See quality of the roadside on the opposite side of road.



Site A-4: Similar to A-3, also see the type of vegetation on opposite (East) side of road similar to that which had formerly been present on the West side. The East side is competed with by a cypress hedge, so the West side had been in better shape before the devastation shown.



Site A-5: This old giant has been ‘tidied up’ by the adjacent landowner, who has unnecessarily (and illegally) removed most of its dead branches, which gave it balance, grandeur, and beauty, and precious habitat hollows.

Site B A Well-Managed Significant Roadside in Three Chain Road Newham

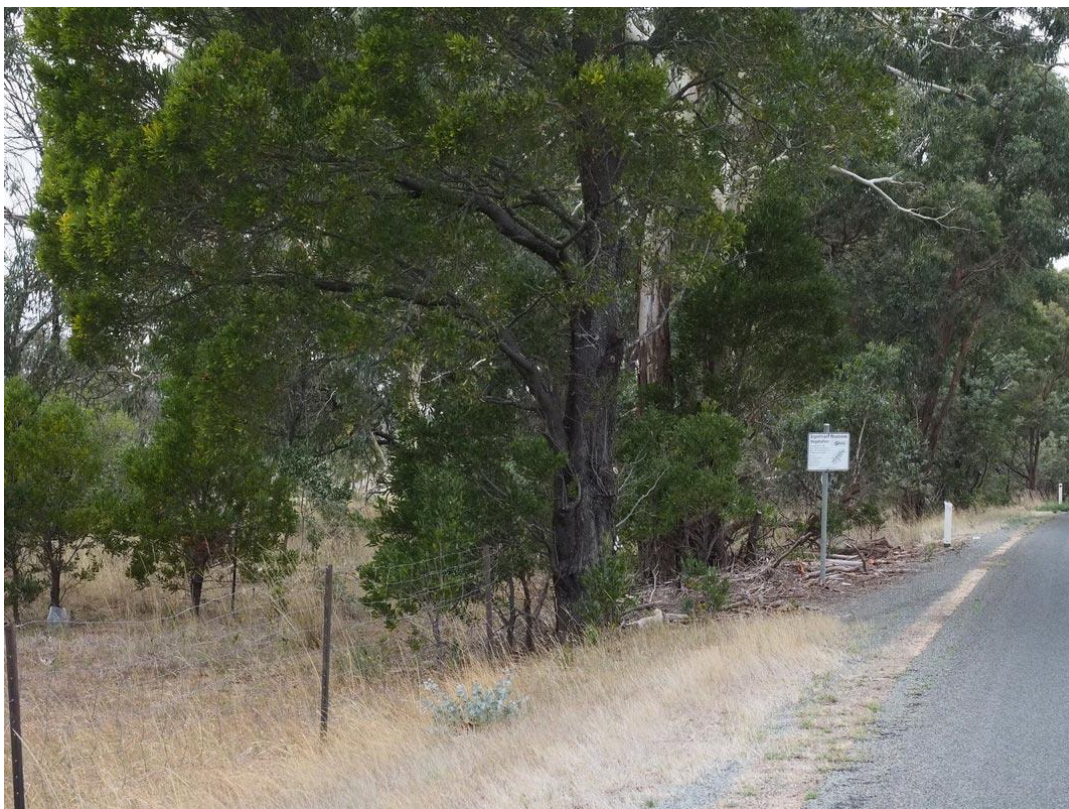
Outside the property of former owners, Margaret and Geoff Dunn, who devotedly tended this roadside, as well as woodlands on their property, for decades. Fortunately the current landowners are active Newham Landcare members and are continuing this story of first class custodianship.



Site B-1: This wonderful roadside remnant, with documented rare and endangered species, has been lightly fenced to prevent damage, with Shire approval, from horse riders and trail bike riders.



Site B-2: Note the dead wood left for habitat, and the healthy young trees



Site B-3: Fenced significant roadside with sign. Note native grasses with trees of various ages and sizes.

Site C Competition from Windbreak Trees

Cypresses, illegally planted on road side of fence, competing with indigenous vegetation, and soon needing cutting back for road safety. This was formerly a biodiverse roadside.





Sites D & E: Contrasts between landowner's house side of road and (relatively) undisturbed side of road



Roadside stripped bare, compared with opposite side where no landowner has interfered. Also note the fairly young cypresses planted near the fence, which will crowd out the indigenous vegetation (if any is allowed to grow).

A quality roadside on both sides

