

Roadsides: protection of roadside remnant is a State-wide issue.

Rural roadsides represent one of our great natural assets, but all over the state significant roadside remnant is being lost or damaged by multiple disturbances. Some areas are known to contain floral species and plant communities listed under the 1999 Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (EPBC), or form an important part of the landscape habitat web of EPBC listed faunal species. Many more areas contain species listed under the 1988 Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act (FFG) or those that are regionally significant. The majority of roadside remnant has *not* had detailed surveys, and so the true value remains unknown.

Fire risk is a widespread concern in the Macedon Ranges and mis-information about the risks or role of roadside vegetation in relation to fires is rife. Actions taken on roadsides to mitigate fire risks should be informed by research data and expert opinion, not hearsay. The focus of concern needs to shift back to climate change and actions that will mitigate it.

At the October 2015 ordinary council meeting of the Macedon Ranges Shire Council the following motion was carried:

“that council request the State government provide full funding to immediately commence the preparation of a detailed roadside vegetation management plan for the Macedon Ranges Shire to be completed by mid-2016” and “request the State Government fund expedited priority actions in the roadside vegetation management plan in relation to fire hazard reduction measure prior to the 16/17 fire season”.

It is the second part which is most concerning.

Roadside remnant vegetation urgently needs to be protected from wholesale loss in the name of ‘fire safety’. Noxious weeds (such as Gorse, Broom and Blackberry), exotic pasture grasses (eg Phalaris) and conifers (eg Cypress hedging, *Pinus radiata*) on roadsides all constitute a fire risk but ‘environment’ funding at \$39 per ratepayer annually means this risk has not been dealt with effectively in the Macedon Ranges.

Targeting native vegetation for its perceived fire risk makes no sense at all if other, greater, fire risks of no intrinsic value remain.

Scientific surveys are necessary to establish their value and enable roadside management plans that protect these values to be developed.

The cost of scientific surveys and the development of RMPs might appear to be the problem, but it is not.

North Central Catchment Management Authority (NCCMA) funded roadside vegetation surveys for Macedon Ranges, Hepburn Shire and Central Goldfields Shires in the period 2006 - 2009.

Ian Higgins, the project manager, when asked *why?* stated “*because NCCMA hoped that the councils might care*”. They didn’t. None of the 3 Shires surveyed has a roadside management strategy to protect significant roadside vegetation as identified by the surveys undertaken.

What little roadside remnant that remains is being progressively lost through

1. Actions of contractors (both Council and Vicroads)
2. Actions of residents / landowners
3. Inaction of local government – the failure to develop and implement an effective roadside management plan for roadsides with significant remnant vegetation .

Notable dates relating to MRSC strategy development:

- 1994 Draft Roadside Management Plan for the Shires of Newham and Woodend
- 1999 1st MRSC Environment Strategy
- 2002 2nd MRSC Environment Strategy
- 2002-2003 Roadsides in Macedon Ranges assessed and ranked
(Lachlan Milne, MRSC Environment Resource Officer – results published in June 2004)
- August 2003 Draft Roadside Management Plan for Macedon Ranges
- 2004, June 'Macedon Ranges Habitat Quality and Conservation Significance' report released
- 2007-08 Roadsides in Macedon Ranges surveyed and conservation value ranked (NCCMA funded)
- 2009 3rd MRSC Environment Strategy
- 2016 4th MRSC Environment Strategy due for release for public comment shortly

* Roadside surveys to identify the quality of roadside remnant vegetation have been undertaken **twice** to date but this remnant remains under threat from uncontrolled noxious weeds, council contractors and landowners.

* No botanical surveys have been undertaken by MRSC to determine the presence or absence of listed species on Shire roadsides listed as being of high conservation significance prior to roadworks being undertaken despite public recognition by the Shire Fire Prevention Officer *“that if Council proposes to carry out significant additional clearing scientific studies may be necessary to ensure that Council will not be in breach of these Acts.”* (Council meeting minutes April 22, 2009, referring to EPBC and FFG Acts)

> In spring 2015 two 'fire access roads' were created at Newham (Boundary Rd north and Hennebergs Lane south). Both of these roads are unsealed, marked as 'no through roads' and carry virtually no traffic yet they have been widened and had multiple truck passing bays created *without prior flora surveys or involvement of the Environment Department*. Spoils have been dumped onto roadside vegetation.

> #671 Three Chain roadside – multiple instances of damage over many years resulting in decline of what is a highly significant section of roadside vegetation (see below for more detail). In 2014 Newham & District Landcare group (NDLG) commissioned a full botanical survey. A species protected by the EPBC and FFG Acts was found, along with 1 species listed as rare under the Victorian Advisory List (2005) and 6 regionally significant species, and the high quality of the plant community containing it was confirmed.

At Newham the local Landcare group has been actively involved in roadside weed management for more than a decade but, as our cumulative knowledge of local flora has increased, we have become extremely concerned about the ongoing loss of roadside remnant vegetation due to multiple threatening processes. This has been amplified by the very limited Shire budget for 'environment' activities and the knowledge that MRSC has had access to two roadside surveys and prepared 3 environment strategies but has yet to complete and endorse a roadside management plan that protects significant roadside vegetation or initiate full flora surveys of roadsides ranked 'highly significant'.

The extent of our concern is indicated by our decision to fund flora surveys of a further 20km of significant roadside within the Newham district. The surveys were undertaken in spring 2015 and the report will be available in February 2016.

Why are we worried?

#671 Three Chain Roadside as an example

Drainage and road works (with dumping and spreading of spoils onto roadside remnant) and horse-riding impacts prompted a full survey of roadside adjacent to #671 Three Chain Rd in spring 2014. The survey identified multiple patches of a species listed as endangered under the EPBC Act 1999.

A history of #671 Three Chain roadside:

- 1950 – 2010: roadside cared for by adjacent landowners. Weed control as required by landowners, discussions with Shire Officers resulted in slashing being limited to 3m adjacent to bitumen.
- ~2002: #671 roadside ranked as high conservation quality. Roadsides within Macedon Ranges surveyed by Lachlan Milne (Environment Resources Officer for MRSC).
- ~2002: Installation of 'significant roadside vegetation' signage.
- 2004: publication of "Macedon Ranges Habitat Quality and Conservation Significance". Map 4.1 being 'Roadside Conservation Value' showing the data from 1999 draft Roadside Management Plan, confirming high quality.
- 2010 – 2015: current owners of #671 have approached MRSC on multiple occasions to inform of damage sustained due to the actions of council contractors and horse-riders.
 - Slashing of remnant ground and under-storey layer vegetation when the slashing contractor changed, and the prior agreement was 'lost'.
 - 2011: major drainage works after the drought broke and the road flooded - excavated material was spread on-site over a broad area.
 - February 2014: more drainage works and piling of spoils onto road reserve.
 - November 2014: Grading of road verges and dumping of spoils onto roadside remnant
 - Horse-riders mowed a track, cut regenerating Snow Gums that blocked access, left serious compaction/pugging in wet areas and progressively compacted and introduced weeds to their preferred path.
- November 2014: full botanical survey by Atlas Ecology found multiple patches of an EPBC listed species within a high quality vegetation community, 1 species listed as rare under the Victorian Advisory List (2005) and 6 species considered to be regionally significant.

Action sought:

- Completion and endorsement of Macedon Ranges Roadside Management Plan for council managed roads **with specific actions to protect high and medium quality roadside remnant from further damage by contractors and landowners.**
- Development of specific management plans for Vicroads managed roads ranked as having roadside remnant of high or medium conservation value (NCCMA survey data ~ 2009) and full botanical surveys of those roadsides not yet surveyed by NDLG.
- Funding of specific management plans for roadsides ranked as having significant conservation value.
- Urgent provision of guidelines to the council works department so that no further damage is inflicted on significant roadsides whilst awaiting a formal RMP.