

Belowra Valley Landcare Group

Belowra is situated 80 kilometres south west of Moruya. Over the past 5 years local landholders of the Belowra Valley Landcare group have been focused on a huge Landcare project to restore their valley. What makes this project so outstanding is not only the massive problems they have tackled or the environmental benefits they have achieved, but also the way they have brought together technical information, government agencies and the community.

Landowners were concerned about the large blackberry infestation, rabbit problem and soil erosion in the area. In 1997, landholders got together in the 6,000 hectare valley and formed a Landcare group.

A change in the original vegetation is thought to have triggered valley erosion problems. This occurred with the settlement in the 1860s when both cattle and sheep were grazed in the open country. When rabbits arrived around 1912, they severely affected the vegetation cover until well into the 1950s, exposing the fragile, highly erodible soils.

Although the valley landholders had all been working to control erosion on their properties - such as installing contour banks and building dams in the gullies to stop them progressing up slope - they were unable to reverse the degradation.

Development of the Project.

Blackberry & Rabbit Control.

The first major problem in the valley was blackberries, which covered most of the watercourses. The bushes harboured rabbits and were spreading out into the grasslands. The South Coast Rural Lands Protection Board provided \$15,000 for the purchase of chemical to control the blackberry problem and prevent it spreading down the river system. Grazon was sprayed after flowering, at the rate of 300-ml/100 litre. The destruction of the blackberry bushes, combined with the release of the Rabbit Calicivirus Disease, achieved very good rabbit control

Initiating studies

The next major problem was the very severe soil erosion in the valley.

"We knew that the blackberry seed and sediment being washed down the Tuross River were causing big problems downstream. The dairy farmers, fishermen and oyster growers were being affected as well as the community in general through flooding," Keith Dance Chairman of the Belowra Valley Landcare Group said.

They encouraged the completion of the land degradation survey, which identified the Belowra Valley as the area with the most extreme erosion within the five major south coast catchments. The Tuross Estuary Management Committee also undertook a study to identify the source of sedimentation in the Tuross River. The sediment was found to originate largely in Belowra Valley.

The erosion in Belowra Valley was not just a problem for the landholders but for the whole community and particularly the Tuross Catchment.



Gaining Support

The Landcare group and the Lower South Catchment Management Committee held several on site meetings with relevant government agencies to highlight the problems this resulted in funding to carry out major gully control works.

The project received \$200,000 over five years from the Department of Land and Water Conservation's 'Section 10' funds for erosion control and fencing.

"The largest gully stretches for two kilometres and is 10 metres deep!" Keith said. "Once the topsoil is broken the highly dispersable clay subsoil just melts away until bedrock is reached"

Funding.

Funding from a variety of sources for blackberry control, streambank erosion, property and catchment planning, fencing, revegetation, promotion and monitoring has been received totalling \$580,000 over five years from section 10 funds, South Coast Rural Lands Protection Board, Eurobodalla Landcare Management Committee, Department of Land and Water Conservation, Eurobodalla Shire Council Water Fund, Lower South Coast Catchment Management Committee Small Projects Fund and the Federal Governments Natural Heritage Trust.

Starting the Landcare Group.

The Belowra group is fairly informal, meeting in members homes as the need arises. After forming the group applied for funding firstly with the Rural Lands Protection Board for blackberry control. When this was successful the other landholders were keen to become involved.

Some farmers were concerned about how they would meet their contribution to the project. Once they realised that it would be by in-kind support such as labour to build fences, spray blackberries, plant trees and the use of machinery they were satisfied.

Stabilising the Gullies.

The Department of Land and Water Conservation is trying several new techniques to prevent the continuing spread of gullies up the catchment. These include constructing a dam at the top of a gully head and piping the water into the floor of the gully. The large volumes of underground water moving through the soil profile make stabilising the gullies even more difficult.

Once the head of the gully is stopped, the floor is then stabilised. This is done by the constructing a series of siltation traps to raise the gully floor and then planting it with native species. The gullies are fenced to exclude stock to allow natural regeneration and stock grazing will be further managed.

Maintenance of the property will involve on going control of blackberry bushes and rabbits, maintenance of fencing and replanting where necessary.

Community Benefits.

"Everyone benefits from a project like this". Keith said. "The environment, industry, tourism and the general community benefit through cleaner water, reduced sediment load and less blackberry infestation. The landholders benefit by having erosion stabilised and blackberry and rabbit problems under control."

Further Information.

For further information on the Belowra Valley Landcare Group please contact Secretary Bruce Loder on: 44 779 309 or Peter Gow, Eurobodalla Landcare Coordinator on: 44 74 1329

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