

Grass Clippings

A newsletter of the Grassy Ecosystem Reference Group
and other happenings in native grasslands and grassy
woodlands

June 1999

Number 8

Grass Clippings is an occasional newsletter to provide brief updates on initiatives and activities aimed at conserving and managing grassy ecosystems.

Please send comments, contributions or requests for further information:

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Please call ...

As we explained in the last issue, this is no longer a newsletter devoted primarily to the work of the GERG. *Grass Clippings* aims to provide snippets and updates on activities in grassy ecosystems, both in Victoria and interstate. We would like to hear from you, to receive your feedback and contributions.

As also noted in issue 7, *Grass Clippings* is being sent also to people who attended the "Down to Grass Roots" conference in July 1998. If you prefer not to be included on the mailing list, please inform us.

To counter the increased mailing cost, we are now emailing *Clippings* to people for whom we have addresses. In the absence of high technology, you'll continue to receive the newsletter via the traditional method. If you would like to change the way you receive it, please let us know.

GERG activities

As in 1997/98, GERG provided informal input into the recommendation process for Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) funding. GERG provided endorsements and advice to the State and Regional Assessment Panels.

These recommendations were of an "in principle" nature, based on GERG's priorities for conservation of Victoria's grassy ecosystems. GERG does not consider whether a proposal fits the NHT eligibility criteria, whether one proposal duplicates another, or whether it is cost-effective. These issues are rightfully the responsibility of the RAPs and SAP to determine the most effective means of delivering outcomes and avoiding duplication.

1998 Research Projects

Another workshop will be held later this year (at a time and place to be confirmed) where the results of all of the previous year's projects will be presented and discussed. Stay tuned.

Issues, events and activities

F2 Freeway

Numerous groups have lodged submissions with the Planning Advisory Committee that has been set up to advise on the route of the proposed F2 freeway north of Melbourne. VicRoads identified 7 options for the route. Five of the options are directed to the east of the existing highway, and VicRoads noted that they all affected areas of significant native grasslands to a greater or lesser degree. The other options are to duplicate existing Hume Highway, and to use the E14 reservation, to the west of the highway.

Rail reassessment

The Government's public transport reform is proceeding swiftly. To prepare for this, the status of "biodiversity assets" along rail reserves needs to be reviewed – what condition remnants are in, exactly where they are located, what is required for their management and so on. During this year NRE intends to work with VicTrack and the private franchisees to identify key sites and develop management guidelines.

Significant Sites Documentation Project

This project has been funded by Environment Australia to assist in the development of a conservation strategy for grassy ecosystems, encompassing a range of protection measures on a variety of land types and tenures.

The first stage of this project identified those sites which most effectively contribute to grassy ecosystem

biodiversity conservation in grassy ecosystems of the Riverina, Western Volcanic and Gippsland plains.

The second stage aims to:

- determine which sites are significant for the conservation of these grassy ecosystems;
- map these sites;
- document for each site their values, threats operating and management requirements;
- develop management guidelines for these sites.

For further information contact the Project Officer, Alan Brennan, at NRE, 4/250 Victoria Parade East Melbourne 3002 ph. 9412 4190, fax 9412 4586, email Alan.Brennan@nre.vic.gov.au.

Works to date

On 27 January Minister Tehan presided over a ceremony handing over 8ha of remnant grassland from the 250 ha Gilbertsons' private property at Derrimut. The Gilbertsons family donated this land to Parks Victoria as a grassland reserve.

Parks Victoria, NRE and other management agencies have undertaken works on grasslands reserves around Melbourne:

- 1000 bales of *Themeda* were harvested from the Gilbertsons' property adjacent to Derrimut Grassland Reserve. Much of the hay was laid at Derrimut, and some will go to the Merri Creek Management Committee.
- The south-west corner of the Derrimut Grassland Reserve was burnt in early summer. Areas of senescent *Themeda* in the north east part of the Reserve were burnt in May. Follow-up weed control works and possible *Themeda* thatching are planned for these areas.
- Weed control works, mainly for Chilean Needle-grass and Serrated Tussock, were undertaken at Derrimut and Laverton.
- Burning of the Laverton North Grassland Reserve did not occur in early summer as planned, because of unfavourable winds. To overcome this, PV undertook a night-time burn at the Reserve in early February. A 1am start allowed the Princes Freeway to be closed down to one lane, and allowed a burn on a southerly wind.
- All of the 250 ha Gilbertsons' grassland was burnt, to provide interim management until the site is fully developed at some time in the future.
- The native grasslands of the old Laverton RAAF base were burnt, as well as part of the southern end of Central Creek grasslands, 6 ha of the Cooper Street grassland, parts of the Burns Road grassland and Truganina cemetery.

The grasslands of the new Terrick Terrick National Park have received a lot of management attention.

- Infiltrations of Patersons curse and boxthorn were controlled.
- Minimal disturbance techniques for Rabbit control are planned for later this month. About 700 warren entrances are to be targeted.
- A male Plains-wanderer was sighted in the park on 2 January. More birds were seen in February, March and April, culminating in sightings of nine

birds, including juveniles, in one paddock in a single night (30 April).

- Large numbers of Curl Snakes (vulnerable in Victoria) were found in 5 paddocks, also good numbers of Tessellated Geckos (rare) in 4 paddocks and rare legless lizards.
- Little button-quail (threatened – data deficient), stubble quail and fat-tailed dunnarts are also breeding on site.

"Down to Grass Roots" conference

Proceedings of the conference have been compiled and edited, and are now with the printers. They will be published by Victoria University. All those who attended the conference will receive a copy. For those who did not attend, copies will be available for purchase, for around \$10 - \$15 a copy. If you wish to obtain a copy, please contact Vanessa Craigie if you haven't already done so.

Grassy ecosystem email group

An email-based discussion group has been established to provide a forum for all people interested in the ecology, conservation, management and research of lowland temperate grassy ecosystems in south eastern Australia.

The major emphasis has tended to be on conservation management of remnant grasslands and grassy woodlands, but many current subscribers are also involved in regeneration and native pasture management. Participants include management staff from government and non-government agencies, community members and researchers, including ecologists, agricultural scientists, environmental consultants, economists and social scientists.

The geographic focus is on south eastern Australia, reflecting the localities and interests of current participants but this may expand depending on future participation.

Once you have joined **GrassEcol** you will be able to:

- Send messages quickly and easily to a wide range of people with similar interests and a variety of perspectives.
- Participate in stimulating discussions involving researchers, field workers, policy makers, academics, planners, farmers, and anyone else who has something to contribute.
- Establish contact with people from afar with similar interests, problems, questions and answers.

To subscribe, send an email message:

**'subscribe GrassEcol <your email address >
(new line) end'**

to **majordomo@life.csu.edu.au**.

If you have trouble subscribing, please contact Dr Ian Lunt, The Johnstone Centre, Charles Sturt University, PO Box 789, Albury NSW 2640. Ph. (02) 6051 9624, fax (02) 6051 9897, email ilunt@csu.edu.au.

Economics workshop

On 16-17 March, a workshop was held on "Economics of native grassland management on farms - reality and policy implications." Jim Crosthwaite and Bill Malcolm of Melbourne University

presented the results of their several years of research on farms on the Riverine Plain and the hills and tablelands of south-eastern Australia. Forty invited guests from the south-eastern States discussed the project's methods and results and the specific policy and extension implications. For further information, view the project's reports at

http://www.landfood.unimelb.edu.au/research/grass_eco/ or contact Jim Crosthwaite at the Institute of Land and Food Resources, University of Melbourne, Parkville 3052 ph. 03 9344-5008, fax 03 9344 4665.

Bushfire99 conference

Anyone interested in fire in natural (and modified) ecosystems may be interested in attending the BUSHFIRE99 conference, which is being held in Albury on 7-9 July this year.

If you are interested in attending the conference or in submitting a paper or poster, then further details, including on-line registration and abstract submission, are available on the Web at

<http://life.csu.edu.au/bushfire99/info.html>.

Alternatively, information can also be obtained from the conference Convenor, Brian Lord (ph. 02 6051 9846 or email: blord@csu.edu.au) or Secretary Liz Chubb (ph 02 6051 9718, fax 02 6051 9897 or email: lcubb@csu.edu.au).

Conference - "Balancing Conservation and Production in Grassy Landscapes"

This is the theme of a 'Bushcare' conference to be held in Clare, SA, Aug 19-21, 1999. It will complement last year's "Grass Roots" conference through focussing on grassy ecosystems on private land. An impressive array of invited speakers has been assembled to explore a range of themes and covering the entire SE Australian range of grassy ecosystems. Details are contained in the enclosed flier, or contact Tim Barlow for further info.

Grassland Ecology course

The three day Grassland Ecology Course was held on 25-27 November 1998 at Dunkeld. The course was developed by Greening Australia and NRE. Key presenters were Neville Rosengren (geology/geomorphology), Beth Gott (aborigines and fire history), Bruce Fuhrer (non-vascular flora), Simon Hinkley (invertebrates), Tim Barlow, Randall Robinson (flora), Alan Webster, John Seebeck (fauna). Despite the inevitable glitches that occur for a first-time event, the course was very successful and feedback has been generally favourable. We visited some superb grasslands, admired the expertise shown by the assemblers of bat traps, and withstood both blazing sun and torrential rain.

The course will be run again in October this year, and will be altered and improved, as the organisers will have gained both experience and useful feedback. For further information please contact Mary Trigger or Brenda Scicluna, at Greening Australia, ph. 9457 3024, or Vanessa Craigie.

New Books and Projects

Eddy, D., Mallinson, D., Rehwinkel, R. & Sharp, S. (1998) *Grassland Flora: a field guide for the Southern Tablelands (NSW & ACT)*. Environment ACT, NSW NPWS, NSW DLWC, WWF and Snowy Mountains Hydro-electric Authority.

This beautiful field guide describes the lowland grassy ecosystems of the Southern Tablelands, but the most of the plants occur throughout south-eastern Australia, so it is a superb addition for your library. Plants are clearly described, with colour photos and b&w sketches, and information on status, distribution and related species is provided. In addition to graminoid and forb species, the guide includes ferns, shrubs and trees. To obtain a copy, send \$15 plus postage \$2.50 for 1 copy or \$5 for 2 or more to Grassland Flora

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Please make your cheque/money order payable to *Receiver of Public Monies*.

Proceeds from sale of this publication will be directed into reprinting, republishing or otherwise into threatened ecosystem conservation.

Friend, G., Leonard, M., Maclean, A. & Sieler I. (eds.) (1999) *Management of fire for the conservation of biodiversity : workshop proceedings*. Dept. of Natural Resources and Environment, Melbourne

This document reports on the outcomes of five workshops held around Victoria in 1998. Among the priorities identified by the workshops were the need for on-going primary research, and continued access by land managers to appropriate specialists, and guidelines for ecological burning.

Copies are available from Gordon Friend, NRE, ph. 9412 4237, email gordon.friend@nre.vic.gov.au.

Pick of the Lit - new reports and projects

This section by Tim Barlow is designed to bring to your attention a range of literature relevant to grassy ecosystems. Tim is willing to help search for specific information (for a small charge to cover costs), so if there is something you particularly require, let him know.

Best practice conservation of temperate native grasslands

World Wide Fund for Nature

This project is assessing grassland conservation projects throughout South-eastern Australia, including the best cases of conservation of native grasslands within productive landscapes. This will enable current and new projects to learn from the successes and failures of the past to more efficiently conserve the ecosystem. The resulting models of 'best practice' will be documented and presented at the Bushcare Conference in August as well as published in a report and on the internet.

This project is funded by the Commonwealth National Reserves System Program. For further information,

contact Tim Barlow or James Ross
(jross@enternet.com.au)

Perception of native vegetation in rural landscapes: Implications for ecosystem protection and sustainable land management
(Inst. of Land & Food Resources, University of Melbourne)

Ever wondered why some people just don't get it when you're trying to explain the beauty of the infinite array of sounds, sights and smells that adorn the local grassy remnant? Or why so many people want to plant more trees but mow the understorey? Kath Williams, John Cary and Bob Edgar's research project *Perception of native vegetation in rural landscapes* has yielded some fascinating insights to the way people perceive different types of vegetation, with some clear distinctions between landholders and city folk emerging. From this research, guidelines have been developed that really are a 'must-read' for anyone trying to promote the conservation of native vegetation in either urban or rural environments. Contact Tim for a copy of these guidelines, or peruse the report on the internet at <http://www.landfood.unimelb.edu.au/research/> where you will also find reports by Jim Crosthwaite on the *Economics of Native Grasslands*.

Benefits of Biodiversity

published by the Council for Agricultural Science and Technology, USA.

Of course, there are many who just aren't interested in nature's beauty (unless it's on telly). Such people usually want to know if the stuff is 'of any use' before they'll accord any value to biodiversity. In this case you need to be fully versed in the **Benefits of**

Biodiversity. This highly readable booklet (33 pp) brings together a vast array of information (all cited) that anyone interested in biodiversity, agriculture, or the planet's future will find indispensable. You can download a text version from <http://www.cast-science.org> or order the illustrated booklet from CAST, 4420 West Lincoln Way, Ames, IA 50014-3447, USA for \$US25 (includes air-mail postage).

The fire issue continues to simmer away amongst grassland managers throughout SE Australia. Adding fuel to the debate is the work of John Morgan and Ian Lunt which has been recently published in *Biological Conservation* **88** (pp379-386), elegantly entitled ***Effects of time-since-fire on the tussock dynamics of a dominant grass (Themeda triandra) in a temperate Australian grassland***. This paper describes the results of work carried out at the Derrimut Grassland Reserve, initially aimed at examining the effects of fire-frequency. An *ad hoc* approach to management has generated a meaningless frequency regime, so the authors could only deal with time since the last fire. They conclude that frequent firing, with an upper limit of 5 years max., is critical to maintain a 'living' *Themeda*-dominated grassland; any longer results in tussock death, increases susceptibility to weed invasion, and hotter and more hazardous burns.

Contact Tim should you wish to obtain a copy of this paper – he'll even send this one out for free.

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