VICTORIAN

LANDCARE

WINTER 2026 ISSUE 91

& CATCHMENT MANAGEMENT

40 years OF LANDCARE

FORTY YEARS OF LANDCARE SPECIAL EDITION

Landcare and headspace connect youth with nature

Volunteers protect turtles; blend science, culture

One bird, four decades, a community that won't quit

Landcare Victoria Inc.

Victorian Landcare Program

VICTORIA State Government

Maude and Districts Landcare Group reflects on local impact across generations.

Landcarers from Yarram celebrate a thriving community nursery.

Victorian Landcare and Catchment Management

Winter 2026 Issue 91

Cover photograph

A Helmeted Honeyeater takes flight – a symbol of four decades of science, stewardship and a community that wouldn't quit (see page 24). Photo: Zoos Victoria.

Editorial contributions

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Contents

We acknowledge and respect Victorian Traditional Owners as the original custodians of Victoria's land and waters, their unique ability to care for Country and deep spiritual connection to it.

We honour Elders past and present whose knowledge and wisdom has ensured the continuation of culture and traditional practices.

We are committed to genuinely partnering with Victorian Traditional Owners and Victoria's Aboriginal community to progress their aspirations.

ISSN 1327 5496 (print)
ISSN 2207 3396 (pdf)

Accessibility

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Minister's Foreword

It all started in November 1986 at Winjallok, near St Arnaud in north central Victoria, when a group of farmers banded together to form the world's first landcare group, Winjallok Landcare Group.

Landcare began around a simple idea: farmers and landholders recognised that they could be more effective and have greater impact if they worked together to address their common land management issues. The formation of landcare groups (since 1986) has enabled landholders to come together to design and implement practical solutions to address these land management issues.

In 1986, the late Joan Kirner (then Minster for Conservation, Forest and Lands), and the late Heather Mitchell (then president of the Victorian Farmers Federation), were joint chairs of the Victorian Government's landcare program during its design and implementation stages. Back in 1986 who would have predicted the success that landcare has achieved in its first 40 years, and the enduring impact of community-driven conservation across the state.

Today in Victoria, 75 percent of the state's privately owned land is covered by the more than 600 landcare groups. Landcare groups are now found across Australia, and there are landcare groups or projects in more than 20 countries worldwide.

This issue of the Victorian Landcare and Catchment Management magazine celebrates and acknowledges four decades of community-led action to care for the places we live, work and value. Thank you to everyone who continues to care for and contribute to Victoria's natural environment and great outdoors.

In this issue we explore stories from 40 years of landcare in Victoria – centred on the themes of people, places and practice, to highlight landcare's achievements, partnerships, challenges, and the lessons learned. We also look back at landcare's origins and celebrate the individuals and communities who have shaped landcare by caring for the land, water and biodiversity, and how landcarers care of the land continues to evolve. Over the decades landcare has responded to shifts in environmental pressures, and changing community attitudes and needs, and continues to play a vital role in modern farming communities. Landcare Victoria Inc's Chair, Jane Carney, also takes a look forward to the future of landcare in Victoria.

The Victorian Government has supported landcare since its inception in 1986, and remains proud to support the landcare movement, and its environmental volunteers, groups and networks, who make it possible. The Victorian Government through sustained investment in community-led action, which includes funding for the 10 Regional Landcare Coordinator roles (since 2002), 80 landcare facilitators (since 2011), and the Victorian Landcare Grants (for more than 25 years), remains committed to ensuring landcare has the resources it needs to continue delivering positive outcomes for our environment, our communities, and future generations.

We proudly support landcare and environmental volunteers who work tirelessly to keep our unique natural environment healthy, allowing Victorians to continue enjoying the biodiversity, beauty, and offerings of our great outdoors.

In October 2026, we will celebrate 40 years of landcare in Victoria at the 2026 Victorian Landcare Awards ceremony in Melbourne. Nominations for the 2026 Victorian Landcare Awards are now open (until 31 July 2026). I invite you to submit nominations for the awards, which are an ideal opportunity to recognise the outstanding contributions of landcarers, coastcarers, groups, networks, farmers, and young people (across 13 award categories).

I look forward to celebrating the achievements of the nominees for the 2026 Victorian Landcare Awards, as part of the celebrations of 40 years of landcare in Victoria, later in 2026.

I hope you enjoy this issue of the magazine, and am grateful to everyone who contributed stories reflecting on the past 40 years of landcare in Victoria.

Enver Erdogan MP
Minister for Environment
Minister for Outdoor Recreation
Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation

In 1986, Heather Mitchell (then the Victorian Farmers Federation president) played a critical role in the formation of the movement, along with Joan Kirner. This story reminds us that landcare's roots lie in people willing to bridge communities, politics and practice for the long-term.

Heather Mitchell – an agent for change

By Hugh Mitchell

Newlyweds Heather and Lester Mitchell arrived in Hopetoun in mid-summer 1941.

Heather, a nursing graduate educated in Albury and trained at the Austin Hospital in Melbourne, was not particularly enthusiastic about their future there.

The town lacked electricity and a reliable water supply, and drinking water had to be collected from rooftop catchments. Moreover, the summer's thick dust storms felt both unfamiliar and threatening.

Lester, a son of Hopetoun, had a father who broke with tradition by valuing education over physical labour.

After completing his studies at Scotch College boarding school in Melbourne, Lester graduated from pharmacy college and became a qualified compounding pharmacist.

The couple were well-suited to care for Lester's ailing father, whose declining health had first influenced their decision to move to Hopetoun, where his extensive farming properties were located.

Their business, the Mallee Pharmacy, became an oasis for healthcare products and advice, and a valuable centre for veterinary and agricultural supplies and guidance.

Lester's reputation quickly grew, earning recognition from state and federal agricultural and veterinary agencies.

His knowledge was instrumental in managing land and vermin control not just in the region, but also internationally — as far away as South Africa, where his 1080 rabbit poison was in great demand.

While Lester attended to the community's farming needs, Heather became an equally valued resource.

All the while, she not only supported her husband through periods of deep depression but also became the go-to person for many mothers and children.

She provided healthcare advice and administrative expertise in managing the town's public resources — chairing public meetings, organising funding for community projects such as a retirement village, hospital modernisation, and a community-owned hotel, among other contributions that enhanced the town's reputation throughout the state.

Heather's organisational skills were so effective that she was drawn into many state community organisations, including the Victorian Bush Nursing Hospital Association, the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind, the Public Land Council of Victoria, and St John Ambulance.

Heather's role model was Dame Edith Cowan OBE, the first Australian woman to serve as a member of parliament in 1921.

Inspired by her example, Heather earned her place as a leader in Hopetoun, a highly conservative community, through considerable relationship-building, overcoming long-held prejudices, and confronting institutionalised parochialism.

These experiences shaped her gift for connecting with people across political and social divides.

Having served as Country Vice President of the Victorian Liberal

Party, it was only natural that she should become the first woman president of the Victorian Farmers Federation in 1986.

Then in 1989, aged 71, she was elected the first woman vice-president of the National Farmers Federation.

During 1986, Heather's friendship with Joan Kirner — then Victorian Minister for Conservation, Forests, and Lands — deepened.

Both shared quick wits, and their company was always entertaining, yet anchored by their shared commitment to protecting the land. The perspective they shared was the empowerment of those they called the "stewards of the national estate" — those whose wellbeing was most at risk.

From the formation of landcare in Victoria, it would take three years of quiet coalition-building until their vision reached the national stage.

In 1989, in perhaps her most significant legacy, the national program Landcare Australia was formed, and Prime Minister Bob Hawke declared the "Decade of Landcare".

Today, there are thousands of landcare groups across Australia and around the world.

The Mitchell Family,
Still in awe of our parents.

Before landcare had a name, people like Pam Robinson were already acting on the belief that land, water and community wellbeing are inseparable. She reflects how grassroots leadership and early salinity action helped give rise to the movement 40 years ago.

How salinity concerns gave rise to landcare

By Peter Somerville

They called her "the roadrunner" because she was always on the move – up and down the Hume Highway, between farms, meetings and government offices.

Carrying an unshakeable belief in community, for Pam Robinson that nickname captures the energy and urgency of Landcare's earliest days – when everything was new, unpaid and powered by people who simply "got it".

"I was either down at the VFF talking to Heather Mitchell, or I was up talking to Joan Kirner," Pam recalls.

"They were both fantastic women … totally different politics … but we all had a big sense of community. What mattered was what Landcare was going to do and how it would fit in the community."

Pam's story begins before landcare had a name.

In the early 1980s, while farming near Violet Town at the foothills of the Strathbogie Ranges, Pam and her neighbours noticed something strange. Patches of land where grass no longer grew, sheep licking the soil and rolling in it.

"We knew something was going on," she said.

"So, we went to the Soil Conservation Authority and said, 'look, what is this?'."

What they were seeing was dryland salinity – not widely recognised at the time.

That local curiosity led to action, and soon Pam and others formed the Warrenbayne–Boho Land Protection Group, incorporated in 1983.

"We were already organising ourselves," Pam explains.

"That was the point – it was grassroots. People getting off and doing something."

It was also the beginning of Pam's deep involvement in landcare-style thinking: local leadership, practical action and strong connections between community and government.

Alongside her farming life, Pam served on local council, became involved in Women in Agriculture, spoke nationally on food and farming, and sat on early salinity and land management committees.

Those roles brought her into close contact with Joan Kirner and Heather Mitchell at a critical moment.

"If they could work together with their different politics, then communities could too," Pam said.

When landcare formally emerged in the mid-1980s, the group Pam helped establish was acknowledged as a precursor. They were encouraged to change their name from 'land protection' to 'landcare' but declined.

"We said no. We'd take on the landcare themes – that was already what we were doing – but this wasn't about ticking a box. It was about a community who had already established a group."

Pam went on to contribute to the first landcare group development materials, chair committees at state level, and serve on both the

Pam Robinson took part in many of the discussions that led to the formation of Landcare Victoria, frequently meeting with Joan Kirner and Heather Mitchell in the 1980s.

inaugural Victorian and National Landcare Advisory Committees.

Looking back, she describes it as "a very exciting time".

"You didn't get paid … your hand was always in your own pocket, but the work mattered."

Now in her 80s and living in Melbourne, Pam remains actively involved in landcare.

She turns up to landcare activities, mentors students, speaks at events and joins groups wherever life takes her.

"Landcare is something you can take with you wherever you go," she said.

"You pull some weeds, plant a few trees, meet people – and it's a really good feeling."

Her hope for landcare's future is simple and grounded in the same values that set her running all those years ago.

"We are actually nature ourselves," Pam said. "We are part of it not apart from it. And if we keep working together, generously, that's where landcare will always be strong."

At its 40-year milestone, landcare remains grounded in people taking responsibility for their surroundings and supporting one another. Landcare Victoria's Chair explores why local leadership has been central to the movement's endurance and impact.

Local action at scale: the core of landcare's 40 years

By Jane Carney, Landcare Victoria Chair

In these times of challenge, the power of landcare's local conservation action at scale gives me great hope.

No matter what happens in the broader system, people will keep taking action in their local area. People with a deep understanding of the environments in which they're operating will continue to care for their places. That has been true for 40 years, and it will keep happening, regardless of the pressures we face. That's something truly special and worth celebrating.

As landcare in Victoria marks its 40th anniversary, I find myself taking heart from the people who make up this movement.

Having been involved in landcare myself for more than a decade, I'm particularly aware that it takes a tribe of landcarers to make a difference. That always has been the case, and it always will be.

In this edition of the magazine, we've done our best to represent a cross-section of the volunteer movement and its trailblazers. We'll never be able to acknowledge everyone who has helped shape landcare into what it is today.

I would like to express my deep gratitude for these people and their contributions.

I meet individuals who have volunteered for decades to improve their community and their place, while learning and adapting their work over time – from early efforts to address salinity, to waterway restoration, to understanding carbon emissions reduction and biodiversity protection.

What's so incredible about landcare is this ability for people to grow and contribute over long periods of time.

Every time someone turns up to an event, activity or meeting, they make an active choice. They could be somewhere else. But they bring a willingness to have a go, learn and adapt as the challenges we face evolve, and to share that knowledge with others. That's what makes landcare special.

I see this generosity demonstrated across landcare organisations – from the smallest groups to the largest networks.

It might be a young person just starting out, planting trees for the first time. It might be a university student getting involved in extension and the role landcare plays in connecting science, community and practice. Time and again, I see landcare people offering value – sharing what they know, supporting those just starting their journey, and strengthening the collective capability of the movement.

As chair of Landcare Victoria, I see my role as a steward of an extensive social network with a 40-year legacy.

I'm humbled to hold that responsibility at this moment in time. My task is to honour what has come before while helping ensure landcare remains strong and relevant into the future.

That means continuing to subscribe to the values that underpin landcare, particularly local leadership and community-led action, while also supporting the movement to evolve.

Our operating context is changing rapidly, and that requires evolution in the way we work and collaborate.

> I see my role as a steward of an extensive social network with a 40-year legacy.
>
> Jane Carney

At the same time, the importance of maintaining a strong community and local focus has never been more relevant. Bushfires, floods and drought continue to place pressure on our landscapes and our communities. Our work in environmental protection and threatened species increasingly intersects with wellbeing and resilience.

The challenge ahead is not to move away from local action, but to strengthen it and to connect it more effectively across regions, systems and scales.

After 40 years, landcare remains powerful because it is grounded in people and place. That foundation gives me confidence for the future.

Local people taking action, in ways that make sense for their communities, will continue to be at the heart of landcare – now and for decades to come.

Four decades on, landcare continues to be powered by passionate people who know their local environment and are prepared to think long-term. In the Mount Alexander Shire, a small group, supported by a wider landcare network, is carrying that legacy forward and promoting their work on new platforms.

Branching out with big dreams on upside-down country

By Barkers Creek Landcare and Wildlife Group

Described variously as "upside-down country" and "an in-between place" (between Harcourt and Castlemaine) when it comes to Barkers Creek Landcare's 30 members, there's no lack of direction or dedication.

Quiet but for the thrum of traffic from the highway that runs through it, Barkers Creek has a population of under 500, a general store and an auto wrecker.

While the local landcare group's numbers only run to about 30 adults, the Mount Alexander Shire claims the highest concentration of landcare groups in the world.

This thriving network of groups is supported by the not-for-profit, Connecting Country and is also guided by Djaara Traditional Owners through strategies such as *Turning Wrong Way Climate Right Way*. The thriving community and culture of nature conservation in Mount Alexander shire makes it possible for small groups to dream big.

"We call it upside-down country," local Djaara Elder Uncle Rick Nelson said, describing how gold mining upturned the forests, grasslands and topsoil, leaving behind bald slag heaps pocked with clay pits.

"There is lots of healing to do here."

Much of the regenerated forest and bushland of Barkers Creek is in stasis; alive but losing biodiversity and struggling to set seed. This is a predicament that motivates many members.

"With landcare, it's definitely the shared goal around nurturing the land and trying to undo some of the damage that's been done since colonial settlement," member Lois Denham said.

Dreaming large

The Barkers Creek Landcare and Wildlife Group is a small group with a big vision – to work alongside the local community to restore ecological function and health to the natural sites of Barkers Creek.

"I think we are trying to achieve habitat for wildlife and people – so we can get back into those patches of nature that still exist, and those patches of nature where we can get together," group president, Cath Jolly said.

The Barkers Creek Landcare and Wildlife group has developed an ambitious project to restore 37 hectares of degraded bushland reserve in Barkers Creek.

With support from a Victorian Landcare Grant, the group created a roadmap with local ecologist Paul Foreman and the Biolinks Alliance. The plan draws on cutting edge techniques to restore the landscape from the ground-up.

The group launched its plan, the Harcourt Bushland Reserve – Landscape Restoration Options, at a local theatre in August 2025.

The launch event, dubbed Taking Root and Branching Out was an evening event which brought the shire community together to talk about improving the health of natural landscapes from the soil-up.

The group has also produced an audio documentary, *Taking Root in Barkers Creek*.

Compiled by group member Kyla Brettle, the narrative podcast details the almost 30-year story of the town's landcare and wildlife group and the long game to restore ecological health to our natural environments.

To find out more about the group's bushland reserve restoration project or listen to the podcast, go to www.barkerscreeklandcare.org.au.

At Barkers Creek, near Castlemaine, landcarers celebrate the launch of their plan to restore 37 hectares of bushland.

As landcare celebrates 40 years of community action, engaging the next generation has never been more important. Landcarers are adapting to connect young people with nature, wellbeing and place.

Teaching young people to be good ‘Nature Neighbours’

By Eloise Lane

When the Nature Neighbours program started looking for presenters to help connect young adults with nature in Greater Shepparton, the Goulburn Murray Landcare Network (GMLN) saw an opportunity it couldn’t ignore.

The program partners with local organisations to encourage young people aged between 12-25 to get out into nature for their social and mental wellbeing through a fortnightly outdoor social group. It aims to foster a deeper connection to self, others and nature.

“We do a lot of education, both with adults and primary and secondary students. But that 17 to 25 age group is a bracket we don’t engage much with,” Dan Walker, Landcare Facilitator, GMLN said. “We just thought it’s too good an opportunity not to get involved.”

Lauren Barker, Clinician at headspace Shepparton, helped establish Nature Neighbours following the success of a similar pilot program developed in partnership with People and Parks Foundation’s Nature Scripts program.

“While we’re delivering this in a formalised, structured setting, the foundational idea of the interconnection of health, land and community is rooted in thousands of years of First Nations ways of thinking and knowledge-sharing,” Lauren said.

The program has seen a wide range of activities delivered including yoga, African drumming, creative journalling, walks out on Country with local Elders and nature walks with landcare.

Dan supports the program as a presenter, sharing expertise and making the local environment feel familiar and welcoming through evening sessions in nature across the Greater Shepparton region.

The format is intentionally relaxed and hands-on: participants sample aquatic macroinvertebrates, can compare what they find in a wetland and a nearby river, and talk about what those species can indicate about waterway health.

“We go collect some bugs, talk about them, talk about what they mean … then go for a bit of a walk and wrap it up,” Dan said. “We allow lots of questions and engagement.”

In the sessions, participants make connections between what they can see in a collection, and bigger ecological questions like why one location might be missing sensitive species, and what that could mean for the health of a river.

“We saw that a lot of the participants were initially drawn to the program’s social elements, but over time have also developed a love of the outdoors and have expanded their understanding of what mental health care can look like,” Lauren said.

The local knowledge held by Dan and the network has been of great benefit to the program, utilised during walks at Victoria Park Lake, the Shepparton Botanic Gardens and Reedy Swamp wetlands.

“Dan’s passion for the environment is infectious, and his sessions provide an opportunity for young people to expand their understanding of the natural environment in and around Shepparton.” Lauren said.

Alongside Lauren, Tone Jessup, Coordinator at Greater Shepparton Lighthouse Project, co-facilitates Nature Neighbours. For them, the partnership with GMLN has provided access to new ways of connecting young people to nature.

“Almost every young person that we’ve taken to Victoria Park Lake has been there before, but we’re zooming in on things they have never considered, like the health of the waterways and what people’s impacts can be on the lake,” Tone said.

“When we revisit places like the botanic gardens, where we’ve planted trees in a previous session, the participants get to see the literal growth from their actions, which is a great opportunity for reflection.”

> **Whether it’s insects or a plant … it’s increasing environmental literacy within our communities.**
>
> Lauren Barker

Above: Nature Neighbours participants explore local wetlands with the Goulburn Murray Landcare Network, building environmental literacy and connection to place through hands-on learning.

The partnership has also been a full circle moment for Tone, allowing them to connect with their family on a deeper level.

“I grew up on an orchard farm in Toolamba just outside of Shepparton, and I remember this man teaching my stepfather about all manner of farm stuff. It wasn’t until we went to a landcare conference that I realised that he was a landcare member.

“Now I get to share the work we do with GMLN with my stepfather, and he understands the work I do through his personal landcare connection,” they said.

A review of the initial Nature Scripts program by the University of Melbourne reported improvements across measures such as life satisfaction, mental health and loneliness, and a cost–benefit estimate of about four dollars of benefit for every dollar invested into the program.

“Those cost benefits are obviously important, but being able to see a greater sense of belonging in community spaces where young people can feel unwelcome, and seeing it foster real, strong connections to nature has been so empowering,” Lauren said.

“We use this term a lot – environmental literacy – and that’s a big part of what landcare does,” Dan said.

“Whether it’s insects or a plant … it’s increasing environmental literacy within our communities.”

One of the realities of engaging new audiences is that outcomes can take time. So far, Dan hasn’t seen participants join a landcare group directly. But awareness is building, especially in a city like Shepparton, where many participants are new to the landcare story.

“At the sessions, no one’s heard of landcare before,” Dan said. “So it’s sowing the seed.”

During sessions, he introduces landcare, what local groups do, and how people can get involved when the time is right.

“All it takes is someone going ‘Oh look, there’s a landcare event happening, I remember looking at bugs with them and that was cool’ to get them on their way to joining a landcare group.”

In Shepparton, that pathway already exists. Dan points to the Shepparton–Mooroopna Urban Landcare Group, which runs regular working bees and mid-week activities.

Dan sees Nature Neighbours as a program that could be picked up by other communities, especially larger regional centres. The key ingredients are straightforward: local nature spaces, trusted youth and wellbeing partners, and landcare members willing to share practical knowledge in an accessible way.

“There’s potential for this to be rolled out anywhere landcare groups are operating, if we could secure some funding, landcare could quite happily adopt this program with other mental health providers.”

For groups looking to broaden their reach, the project is a reminder that sometimes the most important outcome is simply making landcare visible to people who haven’t encountered it before.

In celebrating Landcare Victoria's 40th anniversary, a new column – *Digging Deep* – celebrates one of landcare's guiding lights – Dawn Parker, from far East Gippsland. Dawn has been involved in Landcare since 1992, when she started a group at Wangarabell. She later helped convene the Far East Victoria Landcare Network, which was instrumental in helping locals recover from the Black Summer bushfires.

The editorial committee welcomes suggestions and contributions for landcarers to profile in future editions.

Shaping a legacy of landcare in far East Gippsland

By Lyric Anderson

Dawn Parker, President of the Snowy West Landcare Group, is a longstanding leader in landcare across far East Gippsland and her contribution to the movement is immeasurable.

Dawn played a key role in the formation of the Far East Victoria Landcare Network (FEVL), ensuring it remains deeply connected to the people and landscapes it supports. She has contributed as secretary, and now president, helping to guide the network's strategic direction and championing community-centred environmental stewardship.

Attitude, aptitude and action

Her insights and learnings over her landcare journey could fill books and blogs but for Dawn, the two greatest things landcare has brought about have been the marked change in land management, and a type of social support group, bringing together people who share their ideas, anxieties and plans.

In 1984, after working as a teacher, Dawn and her partner made a career change to become beef farmers, in the remote locality of Wangarabell, north-west of Genoa and not far from the NSW border.

As a school teacher, Dawn admits she was a "complete novice" with a lot to learn about her new pursuit.

"That can be an advantage because you're not doing things just because you've been doing them for a lot of years," Dawn said.

"But the flip side is you don't know a lot."

So, she and her curious mind went looking for advice.

"There was no internet, there was basically the ag department and fertiliser companies giving out advice, which was 'put on fertiliser and it will all happen'," she said.

"We discovered that was not quite the truth and that we needed a more complex management plan.

"I really loved working with animals, then developed a great interest in looking after land and finding out what made healthy soil."

During one of her first encounters with a staff member of the then Department of Conservation and Environment, Dawn was told of a group called landcare.

"I got in touch with landcare and we formed a local group of mostly farmers," she said.

It was 1992 and an early realisation for Dawn was that there were many diverse interests in the group, but the common factor was that people in landcare "like to do things".

And nearly 35 years on, neither of those things have changed.

Decades of innovation in far East Gippsland

Changing the way land was managed has been a standout for Dawn.

"When landcare was introduced to the region, it brought with it a great many resources and enabled many farmers to re-think how they managed land," she said.

She said vegetation is significant for land protection and shelter in farming land.

"There's always room for improvement and greater biodiversity which has multiple health effects," she said.

"Over time the word biodiversity has become very important, (with) the realisation that monocultures aren't very good."

Looking back, Dawn says she wishes she had realised earlier the value of local networks.

"Having our own local networks and employing a good facilitator who identified the necessary support for people in our region has been incredible.

"The importance of facilitators – and their need for some sort of job security – is something I hope is realised.

"I think there is stronger support from the Catchment Management Authority, for which I'm extremely grateful for being an intermediary."

With rising climate anxiety being reported, Dawn hopes that more young people join their local landcare groups.

"Landcare offers a major way for people to get involved and able to get action," she said.

"If young people would become involved in landcare they'd see they'd be able to make a difference."

She hopes that in 40 years' time landcare continues to have an intelligent and united voice to government.

A more recent standout project for Dawn is the Snowy West Landcare Group's East Gippsland Rail Trail project, along Burn Road at Newmerella.

"The change in the landscape has been astonishing," she said.

"We started with removing a whole lot of weeds and then replanted and restored the walking tracks; it's now a much-used cycling and walking trail.

"It's very satisfying to change a mess into something quite beautiful, with great people to work with."

Supporting community through disasters

In terms of action for the environment, Dawn said landcare was a "first responder" around her local area in the wake of the Black Summer bushfires in 2019-20.

Dawn now lives six kilometres south-west of Orbost, near Corringle Beach, in a small patch that wasn't burnt during the bushfires.

"I watched the red skies, the ash falling and the black smoke," she said.

"The damage and the depth of loss was huge, and it still impacts many people."

She says during the recent spate of small fires, the community nervousness was palpable.

"It doesn't take much to bring back that fear."

In the aftermath of the bushfire recovery effort, landcare members' input was remarkable.

"We had a facilitator who was very much in touch with community needs and quite a visionary with restoration and recovery," Dawn said.

"There was much carried out, and it also let people in the community know there was something they could do.

"It strengthened landcare, not just as an environmental action group but also a social support group.

"The way it brought people together, and how they could share their woes, successes and anxieties.

"There's a growing focus on social and mental wellbeing and that's become very significant."

She says people working within Landcare come to the realisation they can get more done together, and people also offer each other various supports.

"Landcare has people with very diverse interests but there's a place for everybody and you learn so much from people with different interests and skills."

Right: Dawn Parker has helped shape landcare across far East Gippsland since 1992, championing practical land management and strong local networks.
Far right: As a leader with Snowy West Landcare Group, Dawn has supported on-ground restoration and community connection around Orbost and beyond.

> **When landcare was introduced to the region, it brought with it a great many resources and enabled many farmers to re-think how they managed land.**
>
> Dawn Parker

Forty years after landcare began changing how farmers value native vegetation, new technology is helping landcarers in the Wimmera understand what's changed on-the-ground as a result of plantings in past decades.

Wimmera farm plantings get a high-tech check-up

By Dr Elia Pirtle

Looking at the wooded hilltops or winding creek lines of the Wimmera today, you might not realise they haven't always looked this way.

Many of these thriving patches of green are the result of a pioneering generation of farmers who completely shifted how agriculture valued native habitat. They recognised tree plantings as assets for soil health, livestock protection, and farm resilience, but also habitat for the native birds and animals with which they shared the land.

Now, as Landcare Victoria celebrates its 40th anniversary, Wimmera landcare groups are looking back at some of the region's pioneering projects to see how those early visions have transformed the land.

Project Platypus, a not-for-profit supporting landcarers in the Upper Wimmera, has teamed up with the Wimmera CMA and the Hindmarsh region Landcare Facilitator Jonathan Starks.

Their approach combines rigorous ecological data with personal stories and insights of the farmers who led the original plantings.

The revegetation sites being assessed all occur on working farms and were each established more than 20 years ago.

The work includes windbreaks, trees planted to stabilise soils on steep hillsides, and fenced-off and revegetated creeks providing clean water.

In a landscape of fragmented habitat, these places can also represent vital 'stepping stones' for native species.

They can provide safe refuge and crucial connectivity to other habitats, allowing wildlife to persist outside of pristine national parks and reserves.

The initial design choices of a revegetation project are key to its long-term success, not only as an asset for a resilient farm, but as a valuable link in connecting habitats.

To create practical recommendations for future revegetation in the Wimmera, local ecologists are working with landcare volunteers to learn how a site's connection to surrounding native vegetation impacts its value as a habitat bridge.

To get that data, we are rolling out some incredible new technologies, while still maintaining a human touch.

At each site, Jonathan Starks, also an expert birder, collects bird data with the assistance of solar-powered, off-grid acoustic monitoring stations to extend the collection window.

Before and after: Tens of thousands of trees have been planted at Glendhu Station since the 1990s.

> While the technology and the ecological data are exciting, the true heart of this project lies with the people who manage these places.
>
> Dr Elia Pirtle

Above: Dr Elia Pirtle with one of the solar-powered, off-grid acoustic monitoring stations used to collect bird data in the Wimmera.

Left: Paul Harrington at one of the group's planting sites.

birds, yellow robins and gang-gang cockatoos.

These are not species that would survive in an open sheep pasture. They have returned because a farmer explicitly planted a place for them.

While the technology and the ecological data are exciting, the true heart of this project lies with the people who manage these places.

The farmers who planted these trees decades ago did so out of a deep-seated love for the local environment and a desire to heal the landscape.

At Glendhu Station and the Holden Farm, two of the Upper Wimmera's earliest large-scale landcare planting sites, George Holden and Jack and Lyn Start all shared a vision to restore steep, eroding hillsides stripped bare of native vegetation. Planting with their own two hands and hosting large community efforts, these farmers have put tens of thousands of trees into the ground since the late '90s — including 13,000 planted at the Holden farm in a single community event. Today, those restored native spaces are lovingly tended by the families who helped create them.

For those who have moved off the farm after years of hard work, this project offers a chance to return and see how their efforts have been built upon. Rob and Debbie Shea were delighted to find that new owners Tim and Megan Shea and the Pilgrim family have continued and expanded the revegetation work they started.

This evaluation work has been a long time coming. It acknowledges the phenomenal effort of Wimmera farmers over the last 40 years, honouring the very foundation of the landcare movement.

It also will allow future farmers and landholders to make data-driven decisions that ensure the next generation of revegetation will be the highest-performing, most ecologically valuable sites yet.

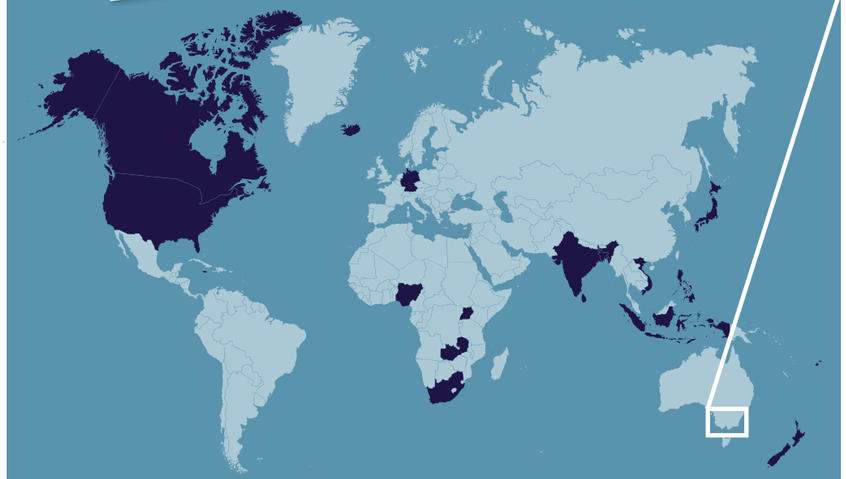
To follow the progress of this revegetation evaluation program in the Wimmera, or to learn more about the history of our 'Places' over the last four decades, visit www.platypus.org.au.

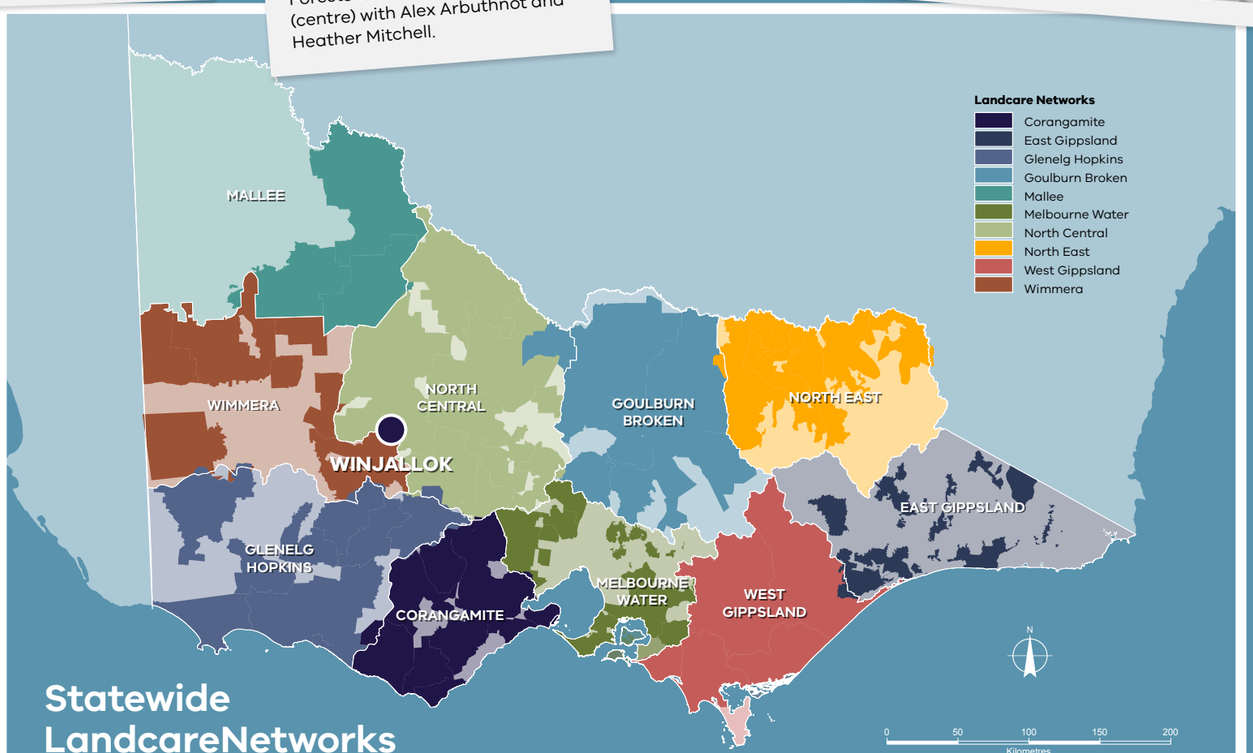
Dr Elia Pirtle is the Upper Wimmera Landcare Facilitator, Project Platypus.

Joan Kirner, a former premier of Victoria, was a key figure in the early days of landcare.

Former Minister for Conservation, Forests and Lands, Kay Setches (centre) with Alex Arbuthnot and Heather Mitchell.

Former VFF president Alex Arbuthnot with then-prime minister Bob Hawke at the National Landcare Launch in Wentworth, NSW, 1989.





Statewide LandcareNetworks by CMA

Landcare launched in the Victorian farming community of Winjallok in 1986.

Bob Hawke launched the national program in 1989. He is pictured with Pam Robinson.

40 years on – landcare in 2026

From Winjallok to the world

Landcare in Victoria sits at the heart of one of the country's most influential community-led environmental movements.

It first gained momentum in response to land degradation and challenges faced by rural communities, quickly growing with the establishment of a national landcare movement in 1989 and further extending impact in many countries around the world.

Landcare as we know it today dates back to a momentous day in November 1986. After much planning, the then president of the Victorian Farmers Federation, Heather Mitchell, and Victoria's Minister for Conservation, Forests and Lands, Joan Kirner, launched Winjallok Landcare Group – the first of hundreds to follow.

As the stories in this magazine describe, other groups were caring for the land in similar ways prior to this official launch. The groups were generally united by concerns around soil erosion and declining productivity, and took practical, grassroots action which quickly took hold.

Landcare evolved over time into a more structured movement, with Landcare Victoria today supporting more than 600 groups across the state.

Above: There are over 600 landcare and environmental volunteer groups in Victoria, covering around 56% of the state. These groups cover 74% of the total private land and 26% of the total public land.

40 Years of Landcare

> **Landcare evolved over time into a more structured movement, with Landcare Victoria today supporting more than 600 groups across the state.**

Landcare Victoria Inc. | Victorian Landcare Program | VICTORIA State Government

Healthy places depend on people who are willing to notice, protect and persist. As landcare marks 40 years, community-led care of waterways is sustaining both wildlife and connection in fast-growing regional landscapes.

Where waterways support community

By Jo Vincent

Along the Murray and Kiewa Rivers and their wetlands, a dedicated group of volunteers is giving freshwater turtles a fighting chance – and building the science and community connections to sustain that work long into the future.

Stand at the edge of Ryan's Lagoon on the outskirts of Wodonga on a warm spring evening, and the water can seem almost still.

But look carefully and you might catch the slow arc of a turtle surfacing — a moment that speaks to both the richness of this place and how much its future depends on the community of people watching over it.

Turtles Albury Wodonga (TAW) was established in 2016 to protect three freshwater species that call these waterways home: the eastern long-necked turtle, the Murray short-necked turtle, and the broad-shelled turtle, a large, shy animal that spends much of its life on the bottom of deep water, rarely venturing onto land.

The group operates as part of Wodonga Urban Landcare Network (WULN) and brings together volunteers, researchers, Traditional Owners, and wildlife carers in a shared effort to protect animals that are all too easy to overlook.

Places under pressure

Albury-Wodonga is one of the fastest-growing regional centres in Australia.

That growth brings opportunity, but it also brings more roads, rooftops and pressure on the wetlands and waterways that wildlife depend on.

Belvoir Lagoon at Sumsion Gardens, Ryan's Lagoon, and Maloney Wetland sit within or alongside rapidly developing urban fringes – making the conservation work happening in and around them even more critical.

Foxes thrive in these transitional landscapes, and are devastating for turtles.

They have destroyed more than 90 per cent of freshwater turtle nests in parts of the Murray River basin.

In some areas, eastern long-necked turtle, *Chelodina longicollis* numbers have fallen by nearly 70 per cent.

Two of the three Murray River basin species, Murray Short-necked Turtle *Emydura macquarii* and the Broad-shelled Turtle *Chelodina expansa* are now listed as threatened.

Turtles that survive to adulthood can live for decades, meaning population declines are slow and easy to miss, until the damage is already done.

Roads add another layer of risk. Female turtles travel overland to find nesting sites, often crossing busy streets.

TAW volunteers respond to callouts when turtles are spotted in danger, and have worked with Staghorn Wildlife Shelter and Kangaloola Wildlife Shelter to rescue and rehabilitate animals struck by vehicles.

Ten rehabilitated turtles were released back into local waterways last year alone.

The good news is that with careful planning, thoughtful urban design, and community education and support, wildlife can not only survive in these environments, it can recover.

Watching, protecting, responding

When nesting season arrives each spring, TAW volunteers fan out across the region.

If a member of the public spots a turtle laying eggs, a call goes out and the group moves quickly, placing mesh cages over nests to exclude foxes.

The citizen science app TurtleSat, developed by researchers in NSW and Victoria, helps the community log sightings and keep track of where turtles are active.

This ground-level monitoring is essential. The more nests that are found and protected early, the better the chances of hatchlings making it to water.

Education is woven through everything the group does. TAW volunteers have delivered turtle talks at local kindergartens through programs like Turtles for Tots, bringing children face to face with these animals for the first time.

An Eastern Long-necked Turtle (*Chelodina longicollis*).

Far left: Turtles Albury Wodonga uses innovative methods including conditioned taste aversion (CTA) to support the species. CTA teaches foxes to associate turtle eggs with nausea – helping reduce predation.
Left: Aunty Valda Murray with turtle hatchlings at Ryans Lagoon, Wodonga.

> **This ground-level monitoring is essential. The more nests that are found and protected early, the better the chances of hatchlings making it to water.**
>
> Jo Vincent

At events like the Riverside Vibes Festival, which drew more than 2,000 visitors last year, the group creates opportunities for the broader community to learn why healthy waterways depend on animals that most people never notice.

The WULN 2024 Landcare Award for Community Partnerships, presented at the group's annual general meeting, recognised the collaborative conservation achievements TAW has built with researchers, wildlife carers, local councils, and First Nations groups.

Caring for country together

At Ryan's Lagoon, TAW's work has grown into a meaningful partnership with local Elders, the Duduroa Dhargal Aboriginal Corporation, and La Trobe University researchers.

Freshwater turtles hold deep cultural significance as totem animals for First Nations communities in the region, and that connection shapes the group's approach to the landscape.

Wildlife surveys, turtle tagging and joint revegetation projects, including a student-led planting that forms a turtle shape now visible on Google Earth, reflect what is possible when conservation science and cultural knowledge work side by side.

Teaching foxes a lesson

In 2024, TAW became a key partner in a research project turning heads in conservation circles.

Dr Lígia Pizzatto, a researcher at La Trobe University's Centre for Freshwater Ecosystems, is leading a trial of conditioned taste aversion (CTA) — a technique that trains foxes to associate turtle eggs with nausea, so they leave nests alone.

Working with WULN, TAW, the Duduroa Dhargal Aboriginal Corporation, and other community groups from across north-east Victoria, the project is not replacing traditional fox control, but trying to add a new tool that is especially valuable in urban areas where lethal methods cannot be used.

The early results have been extraordinary.

At Mullinmur Billabong near Wangaratta, egg predation fell from 91 per cent to just 10 per cent within two weeks of conditioning beginning.

In areas where foxes were conditioned, predation stayed low throughout the nesting season, while in control areas with no conditioning predation increased by 39 per cent, demonstrating that foxes can be taught to leave turtle nests alone.

Despite the approach being more successful in some areas than in others, the team keep working to fully understand the limitations and best ways to deliver it.

More than 20 citizen scientists are now trained to participate in the ongoing experiments, monitoring real turtle nests during the main nesting season.

The project is funded in part by WIRES National Grant Programs and La Trobe University, with community involvement through citizen science designed to continue long after the research phase concludes.

Lessons from ancient animals

Freshwater turtles have been part of Australian waterways for millions of years.

As scavengers, they play an essential role in keeping rivers and wetlands healthy, yet they remain largely unappreciated compared to their marine relatives.

TAW's work is slowly changing that — one rescued turtle, one protected nest, and one curious child at a time.

In a region growing as fast as Albury-Wodonga, the group's presence is a reminder that development and nature don't have to be at odds.

Where communities choose to care for their waterways, wildlife finds a way.

Over the past four decades, landcare has shown that innovation often emerges from local knowledge and collaboration. Community-led conservation can transform the future of a place and influence practice well beyond it.

Big lessons from Little Penguins on Middle Island

By Tom Bicknell

When foxes decimated the Middle Island little penguin breeding colony in 2006, the population was reduced to just seven birds.

The tragedy sparked what would become one of Australia's most innovative conservation partnerships, developing techniques and lessons now flowing out to affect conservation efforts around the country and beyond.

Middle Island lies just a few hundred metres off the foreshore of Warrnambool in Victoria's southwest. The small island is home to one of the few remaining breeding colonies of the little penguin (*Eudyptula minor*) in Victoria.

In 2005, foxes swam to the island at low tide and went on a killing spree, reducing little penguin numbers from more than 600 to less than 10. The shocking event drove the creation of the Middle Island Project to protect the little penguin colony from further fox and dog attacks. The project brought together the Warrnambool Coastcare Landcare Network, Warrnambool City Council, Deakin University's Warrnambool campus, and Parks Victoria.

At the suggestion of Dave Williams, a network member working for a local free range chicken farmer who used dogs to guard his flock, the project introduced Maremma guardian dogs to the island to protect the penguins.

"The thinking was that penguins were just like chickens in dinner suits, so if it worked for chickens, it could work for penguins," network chair Bruce Campbell said.

The nascent project borrowed some of the chicken farmer's Maremmas – a dog specially bred to protect livestock – and introduced them to the island to see what would happen.

"Dave took the dogs over to the island and actually slept with them over there to see if the foxes were deterred," says Bruce. "It was determined that they were, and that was the beginning of the Maremma penguin project."

As the project team learned more about the dogs' deterrent effect, the process evolved into taking the dogs over to Middle Island for a few hours at a time to leave their scent around the penguin colony, doing the same along the beach nearest the island.

The Maremmas quickly showed their worth, and by 2011 the estimated little penguin population on the island had recovered to 182.

But despite the success, the project has faced several major setbacks. Access to the island is often limited by rough seas, and on several occasions foxes and wild dogs have made it to the island before the project team has been able to refresh the Maremmas' scent.

Community engagement has been a key part of the project. Since 2006, around 2,000 volunteers have participated in population counts on the island, and this sustained community engagement strengthened local commitment to conservation.

"The way the project was run was codified into 'the Warrnambool Method' so it could be picked up by other scientifically-minded conservation projects," says Bruce. "It was written up as a paper by researchers at Deakin University and Federation University, along with the Network and Warrnambool City Council."

Top: Dave Williams with Maremmas leading community members on a tour of Middle Island.
Above: Middle Island's pink flowers in bloom. Photo: Warrnambool City Council.

The future for the Middle Island project will also be about exploring new ideas, according to Bruce.

"We're thinking about using remote sensor camera and audio equipment to do some of the monitoring for us," he explains.

Looking ahead, the Warrnambool Coastcare Landcare Network hopes to apply the citizen science models it developed for Middle Island in new projects.

Through its setbacks, the Middle Island Project has demonstrated that persistence through setbacks, willingness to adapt methods, and investment in community participation create value that ripples outward far beyond an individual project's footprint.

Some of landcare's longest-running stories are written quietly, one challenge at a time. A 40-year reflection on the Maude and Districts Landcare Group shows how sustained local action has shaped both landscape and community.

Four decades of Maude motivation

By Sue Higgs

From introducing farmers to the threat posed by serrated tussocks to tackling rabbit populations with poisoned carrots, the Maude and Districts Landcare Group has helped landholders tackle countless challenges since its formation in 1986.

Despite missing out on the bragging rights to being the first landcare group to be formed in Victoria (by just a matter of hours), the Maude Landcare Group has wasted no time in supporting local landholders and the local environment.

We are fortunate to have a founding member, Lex Stray, who was present at that very first meeting, still actively involved today. Lex has served as the group's secretary and was presented with life membership in 2023.

The initial meeting was called in response to local farmer Murray Thompson's concern about serrated tussock.

He brought a sample of serrated tussock along to a meeting and, for many, it was their first introduction to what would go on to become a significant weed in the area.

It was decided to make serrated tussock and rabbit extermination our two main targets in the early days.

After all these years, despite huge efforts, they remain a serious threat to the health of our landscape.

Chilean needle grass became a focus in about 2003 and is now also widespread.

Poisoning of rabbits continues to be another focus each year.

Initially the group used the less expensive and more immediately effective 1080 baits, however we now organise a very popular annual distribution of Pindone poisoned carrots to around 40 farmers and small acreage property holders.

We've also spent years targeting gorse, boxthorn and blackberries, helping landholders to identify and remove the shrubs and then deep rip the rabbit warrens underneath.

Financial assistance from numerous statutory authorities along the way allowed us to plant lots of trees on private properties, creeks and waterways.

Reflecting on our 40-year history, it has been fascinating to read through records and files to get a glimpse at how many people have endeavoured to preserve the best of this magnificent area – much of the work carried out along Moorabool River and Sutherland Creek Waterways.

In 2023 we welcomed members of the Bamganie and Meredith Landcare group as they merged to create the Maude, Meredith and Districts Landcare Group.

Since then, we have organised regular evening meetings on topics relevant to all landholders.

These meetings have seen us work to identify weeds, collect seeds, assess soil health, plant trees, visit Mt Rothwell Biodiversity and Interpretation Centre at night, propagate plants and watch a documentary on the state of the Moorabool River together.

The group presented its inaugural local Landcare Awards in 2025, making presentations to local primary school students in recognition of their conservation efforts.

We reflect on 40 years of local impact while relishing in the efforts of the children and their commitment to supporting local conservation efforts. Hopefully they will become the future of this worthy group!

Emily and Jeremy Hollingsworth at a planting day at the Maude and Districts Landcare Group's Perdrisat Road project in 2019.

Across its 40 years, the way landcare engages with farmers has evolved considerably. Shared resources, strong governance and collaboration are helping farming communities adapt practice while staying true to landcare's roots.

Landcare driving change at agriculture's cutting edge

By Marissa Shean

Across the vast, wind-shaped landscapes of north-west Victoria, where red sands meet resilient communities, landcare is a mainstay of grassroots action and innovation redefining what can be achieved in a modern farming environment.

Covering more than 1,085,000 hectares, the Mallee Landcare Group is the largest landcare network in Victoria. Since its formation in 1990, it has built a reputation not only for its scale, but for its enduring commitment to sustainable agriculture, environmental stewardship, and community resilience.

With more than 160 volunteer members spread across towns including Speed, Tempy, Walpeup, Ouyen, Patchewollock, Underbool, Nandaly, Mittyack and Hattah, the group reflects the diversity and determination of the region it serves.

Community-led sustainability

At its core, Mallee Landcare exists to support the natural environment while educating the community on best practice land management, with a deeply collaborative model.

Volunteers work side-by-side with schools, local councils, agribusinesses and community organisations to tackle the region's most pressing natural resource management challenges.

Partnerships are central to the group's success, continually evolving and opening new pathways for knowledge sharing and joint problem-solving.

From working with community groups like Ouyen men's shed and historical society, to engaging with agricultural leaders like North West Ag and Lamattina's Carrots, the group has built a network that bridges tradition and innovation.

The group also has a strong commitment to educating the region, having facilitated training on everything from farm chemical use and pest control to governance and occupational health and safety.

Workshops extend beyond technical skills, addressing mental health and wellbeing in rural communities.

A standout example is the Mallee Mates Working Dog School, delivered by the Mallee Landcare Group, which cleverly integrates resilience coaching into practical, hands-on learning.

Left: Tempy Primary School students visited Wyperfeld and Hattah National Parks as part of the Mallee Threatened Birds Project.
Right: The group held a pest animal workshop in March at the Ouyen football ground.

> **Landcare's traditional role as an information broker is evolving into something more dynamic: a facilitator of access, innovation and practical solutions.**
>
> Marissa Shean

Mallee Landcare Group President Alex Hulland at the Speed field days with some of the items available for loan from its extensive tool library.

It reduces isolation in the region by building trusted peer networks, resilience and community around shared learning and local support through a central focus on working dog training.

Nurturing the next generation

Mallee Landcare's commitment to long-term change is perhaps most evident in its work with young people.

Collaborations with Tempy and Underbool primary schools and Ouyen P-12 College have brought environmental education into the classroom and out into the field.

One of the most inspiring initiatives is the Malleefowl Project at Tempy Primary School. The project has won various accolades, including from the Junior Landcare Awards and the Keep Australia Beautiful campaign.

Supported by the landcare group, students have taken an active role in restoring degraded habitats and building wildlife corridors to protect the threatened Malleefowl. Beyond conservation outcomes, the project fosters a sense of stewardship and demonstrates that even small communities can make a meaningful environmental impact.

Changing agricultural landscapes

Farming in the Mallee is changing rapidly.

The shift toward continuous cropping, the consolidation of farms into larger operations, and the rise of automation have transformed how land is managed.

With fewer staff and increasing workloads, farmers are facing pressures to remain productive while adapting to new environmental and economic realities.

Information flows have also shifted. Where farmers once relied heavily on peer networks and local knowledge, many now turn to agronomists and digital platforms for advice. In this context, landcare's traditional role as an information broker is evolving into something more dynamic: a facilitator of access, innovation and practical solutions.

The tool library

One of the most effective ways Mallee Landcare has responded to these shifts is through its extensive tool library; a shared resource that embodies the group's focus on both economic and environmental sustainability.

The origins of this model date back to the 1990s, during the Wimmera Mallee Pipeline Project.

Recognising that individual farmers could not justify the cost of specialised equipment needed for a short-term transition, the group purchased a pipe layer to share among members.

Over the years, the group has invested in a wide range of equipment available for members to borrow.

This includes rabbit rippers and bait carts for pest control, grader boards, specialised tools for dune reclamation and erosion repair, and a hydraulic Chatfield tree planter for large-scale revegetation.

The library allows landholders to trial new practices without significant upfront investment, supports coordinated landscape-scale action, and generates income to sustain the group's activities.

It is a clear example of how practical support can drive meaningful practice change.

Strong governance, fresh energy

Behind these initiatives lies a well-structured organisation with strong governance and a wealth of expertise.

Members bring skills in project management, accounting, compliance and facilitation, ensuring that projects are delivered effectively and safely.

Importantly, the group is also embracing generational change.

At its 2025 annual general meeting, a new, younger committee of management was appointed, bringing fresh ideas and energy.

The transition has been carefully managed, with experienced leaders such as retiring chair Leonard Vallance and treasurer Karen Crook continuing to mentor the new committee.

This blend of experience and innovation positions Mallee Landcare well for the future. It signals a willingness to adapt in landcare groups not just in farming practices, but in leadership and organisational culture.

Looking ahead

As climate pressures intensify and agricultural systems continue to evolve, the role of groups like Mallee Landcare will only become more critical.

Their ability to connect people, share resources and foster practical change offers a blueprint for resilience in rural communities.

Mallee Landcare's story is ultimately one of adaptation. It has built a community that understands its landscape, embraces change, and works collectively to secure a sustainable future. In a region often defined by its challenges, that spirit of collaboration and innovation may be its greatest asset.

Landcare's impact is often measured not in individual moments, but across decades. Patient, consistent practice has transformed a waterway and a small Victorian town, reflecting the quiet persistence that underpins 40 years of landcare.

A slow and steady story of change

By Belinda Pritchard

If there is one thing that sits at the heart of the Woodend Landcare group, it is not a single project or planting day, but a commitment that has quietly endured for more than three decades.

Over that time, methods have shifted, priorities have adapted, and community attitudes toward the environment and waterways have steadily evolved.

Yet, through all of this change, the core purpose has remained constant: to improve and care for the natural environment along the creek that runs through the middle of Woodend.

In the early years, the work was often practical and immediate – tackling obvious problems with the tools, knowledge, and resources available at the time.

As understanding of ecology deepened and broader environmental thinking emerged, so too did landcare practice.

What began as weed removal and tree planting gradually became more strategic, including revegetation to save the threatened local Black Gum (*Eucalyptus aggregata*), developing biodiversity corridors, habitat restoration, and an increasing awareness of how waterways function as living systems rather than simply a drain through town.

Each week and month, small groups of dedicated volunteers have continued to show up.

They chip away at weeds, plant seedlings and replace losses.

On any given day, the work might look modest – just a handful of people with gloves and tools – but over time those small actions have accumulated into something wonderful.

Thirty years on, the result is a rich, indigenous bushy corridor that winds through the town, offering both a safe place for wildlife and a respite for people.

The largest project was the removal of the poplar forest between Pyke and Bowen Streets between 2005 and 2007. At the time, it was a bold undertaking, replacing a long-established exotic landscape with a vision for a healthier, more resilient native ecosystem.

That project reflected growing confidence – not just within the group, but within the wider community – that long-term environmental change was possible and worth investing in.

Seeking funding has always been a challenge, however the group has managed to secure more than $130,000 through a wide range of sources over the years including the Bundaberg Rum Bush Fund, North Central CMA, Australian Government's Envirofund, Victorian Government Landcare Grants, Victorian Junior Landcare and Biodiversity Grants, Macedon Ranges Shire Council community grants, Bendigo Bank community grants, Community Volunteers Action Grant (with the Threatened Species Conservancy) and private donations.

Over the years, community involvement has increased.

School groups, Girl Guides, Scouts, church volunteers, community organisations, corporate groups, and visiting corrections services crews have each played a role.

As the town grew new challenges emerged.

Living in a semi-urban setting within a rural landscape brought tensions – between pets and wildlife, bushfire risk and native vegetation, garden plants and invasive weeds.

Responding to these challenges required more than just on-ground work; it called for conversation and learning.

Education became a key part of landcare's role, through guided walks, community events, and regular articles in The New Woodend Star, helping people understand not just what was being done, but why.

The current fauna discovery survey, funded through a Victorian Government Landcare Grant, has opened the door to a new cohort of people – those drawn in by a love of animals.

This has expanded landcare practice once again, from revegetation and conservation to include nest boxes, monitoring programs, and a stronger focus on habitat as a whole.

> **"It's the continuation and commitment of our landcare volunteers and support of the community that is the key to our success."**
>
> Nicole Middleton

The message is simple but powerful: caring for wildlife also means caring for the vegetation that feeds, shelters, and supports it.

By 2025, more than 30,000 plants had gone into the ground across the town and surrounding reserves.

Only a fraction of these were trees; the majority were understorey and groundcover, reflecting a growing understanding of how ecosystems function.

Added to this was the Boxes of Habitat program, which extended Landcare's impact well beyond organised planting days that are generally focussed on public land, and into private gardens, strengthening the environmental fabric of the wider community.

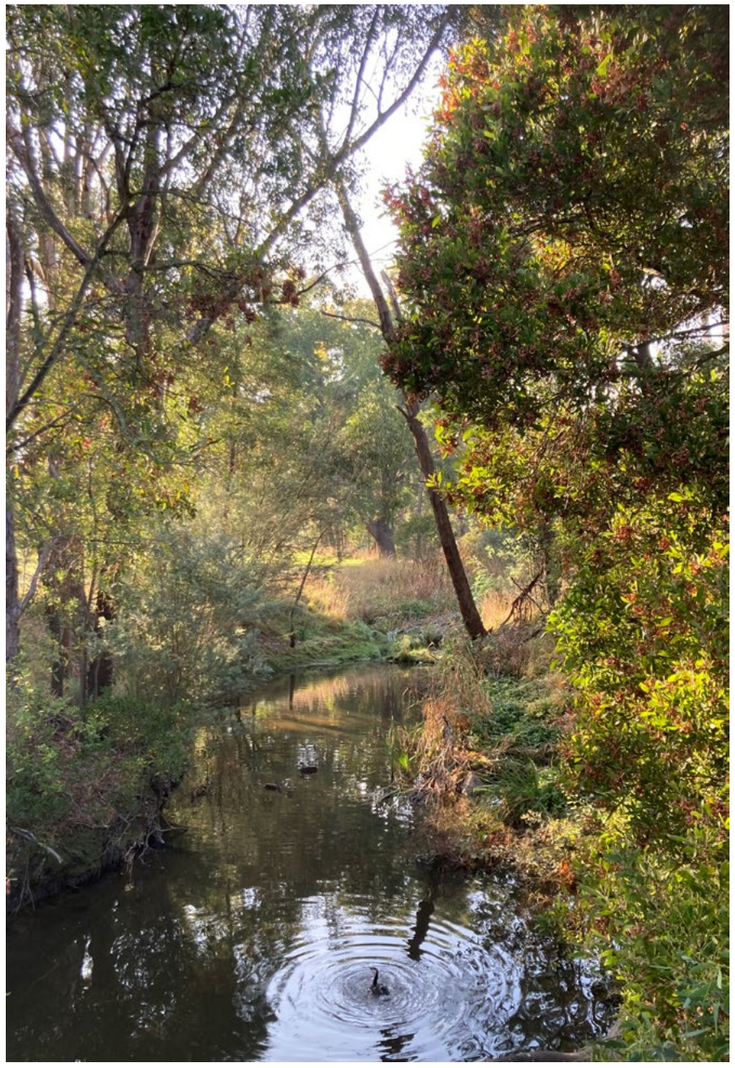
When visiting groups ask for guided tours, they often expect to hear about the biggest projects or the most visible changes.

Those stories are important, but what truly captures people's attention is the continuity – the quiet persistence of a volunteer group who have stayed the course through successions of helpers, funding cycles, and environmental thinking.

The real achievement is not just what was planted or removed, but the culture of care that has grown alongside the vegetation.

As Nicole Middleton, current Woodend Landcare President said, "it's the continuation and commitment of our landcare volunteers and support of the community that is the key to our success".

It turns out that the old saying holds true. In landcare, as in nature, slow and steady really does win the race.



Top right: Five Mile Creek, Woodend, is a picture of health, with birdlife including this Black-faced Cormorant.

Bottom right: Woodend Landcare volunteers Paul Boland, Heidi Fisher and Peter Yates work on a pollinator corridor planting along Five Mile Creek.

Few stories demonstrate the evolution of practice that incrementally improves landcare's work as clearly as the work done with the Helmeted Honeyeater. Over 40 years, community commitment, science and stewardship have combined to bring hope to a threatened species.

One bird, four decades and a community that wouldn't quit

By Jenny Lyndon and Peter Somerville

On a scorching afternoon in February 1983, bushfires tore through Cockatoo and Upper Beaconsfield. The fires caused terrible loss of life, livestock, and native animals.

For one small bird, it nearly meant extinction.

The Helmeted Honeyeater population had already been in freefall for a century. Once ranging from Healesville to Western Port Bay, it had lost more than 99 per cent of its ecosystem.

Dr Dan Harley, Threatened Species Project Officer at Zoos Victoria, puts it plainly: "We wiped out all their habitat. And as a consequence, populations declined one by one."

By 1980, only three populations remained. Ash Wednesday 1983 finished two of them.

A single wild population clung on at Yellingbo, in the Woori Yallock Creek catchment on Melbourne's urban fringe. By 1989, only 50 birds remained.

"When a species is confined to one location, it's incredibly exposed," Dan said.

"Bushfire, disease – one event can wipe out the lot."

That year was a pivot point.

The Helmeted Honeyeater is Victoria's avian emblem. A recovery plan was written, the first for any Victorian species, with an ambitious goal: ten self-sustaining populations, totalling 1,000 birds.

Zoos Victoria launched a captive breeding program.

A formal multi-agency recovery team was established to coordinate efforts between the Victorian Government, Zoos Victoria, and community groups.

A picture appeared in a newspaper – a small yellow bird, a number – 50, and a notice of a public meeting. Richard Case was one of those who turned up.

"Part of it was a sense of duty," he recalls.

"This bird was going extinct on the edge of Australia's second-largest city. If we couldn't save that, what exactly did we think we could save?"

The Friends of the Helmeted Honeyeater formed that night.

Their goal was simple: save the bird in five or 10 years. No one imagined they would still be at it nearly forty years later.

> "This bird was going extinct on the edge of Australia's second-largest city. If we couldn't save that, what exactly did we think we could save?"
>
> Richard Case

Two steps forward, one back

The decades that followed were a story of incremental, hard-won progress and loss.

Volunteers planted thousands of trees along Woori Yallock Creek.

Zoos Victoria released captive-bred birds into the wild each year.

Science, genetics and hard truths.

With only 50 founders and decades of isolation, the wild population was inbreeding badly.

A carefully managed rescue program introduced birds from a related Gippsland population, restoring fitness without eroding the species' identity.

"The outbred birds – the 'super honeyeaters' – survive better and breed more successfully," Dan said.

By 2020, for the first time in recorded history, more than 200 Helmeted Honeyeaters existed in the wild.

Living space

Success created a new problem. The birds had begun to outgrow their Yellingbo refuge.

The reserve couldn't carry the species' recovery indefinitely. More landscape and connectivity were needed.

In 2017, the Friends of the Helmeted Honeyeater invited the neighbours, Macclesfield Landcare, Johns Hill Landcare and Monbulk Landcare to join an initiative that became *Beyond Yellingbo* – focussed on strengthening habitat connectivity on private land surrounding the reserve.

It was a shift in scale and philosophy: from protecting a remnant to rebuilding a landscape.

With philanthropic and agency support, the project engaged more than 120 private landholders and coordinated habitat restoration across over 300 hectares.

New release sites in Warburton and Beaconsfield established new populations from genetically healthy founders.

For the first time since Ash Wednesday, the species was no longer confined to a single location.

In 2025, Nangana Landcare Network (which had formed from the Beyond Yellingbo project), won the Australian Geographic Nature Award, with $30,000 in funding, for saving faunal emblems.

"This award is not just recognition of work happening today – it is part of a relay," Arabella Eyre of Zoos Victoria said when accepting the award.

"For more than 30 years, hundreds of people have carried the baton of conservation for Victoria's faunal emblems. We accept this Award with a clear responsibility: to keep going."

Beyond Yellingbo also won the Australian Wildlife Society Community Wildlife Conservation Award 2025.

The Helmeted Honeyeater is Victoria's avian emblem.

In the words of Beyond Yellingbo co-founder Dorothy Scott: "If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a community to save a species".

Keep going

With around 200 birds on three sites, the goal of ten populations and 1,000 birds lies some way ahead.

Nangana Landcare Network has initiated a community-led stewardship plan for 128,000 hectares across the Yarra Valley and Dandenong Ranges.

C411 Country – Natural Capital for Generations aims to embed biodiversity, regenerative agriculture and structured environmental investment into the fabric of a working landscape.

"The concept that species recovery should happen behind locked gates is the opposite of where we need to go," Dan said.

"People are central to whether this species persists."

It's a sentiment Richard Case agrees with.

"The best thing has been people stepping up – again and again – and refusing to walk away," he said.

Far left: Dr Dan Harley, Threatened Species Project Officer at Zoos Victoria, has worked with partners and volunteers for decades to help bring the Helmeted Honeyeater back from the brink.

Landcare's story is dotted with examples of practical, locally driven solutions growing into valuable, lasting community assets. The Bellarine nursery reflects how sharing effort between project partners can embed landcare practice in everyday life.

A million native plants and counting on the Bellarine

By Peter Somerville

What began as a practical solution to a local problem on the Bellarine Peninsula has well and truly surpassed expectations, producing more than a million native plants while also growing a community asset.

The nursery was established around the year 2000, when Bellarine Landcare recognised a pressing need to source indigenous plants for local projects.

"The initial aim was to get trees in the ground at a reasonable cost to farmers and landholders," said Bernie Malone, President of the Bellarine Landcare Group.

"We needed indigenous plants that were native to the Bellarine Peninsula, which had been largely denuded through early settlement."

> **We reckon we've produced over a million plants in the last 20 to 25 years.**
>
> Bernie Malone

With spare land available at the back of Bellarine Secondary College, the partnership took root. Over time, it has far exceeded its original vision.

"We reckon we've produced over a million plants in the last 20 to 25 years," Bernie said.

"It's become way more successful than I for one ever envisaged it to be."

Supported by the expert community-building skills of a manager, funded through the proceeds of plant sales, almost all of the work is undertaken by volunteers.

The nursery itself was built largely by community effort – from welded benches to irrigation infrastructure – and today it's largely self-funding.

Producing between 50,000 and 70,000 plants each year, the nursery underpins landcare projects across the Bellarine Peninsula, while also supplying urban landholders increasingly keen to plant indigenous species and bigger commercial projects.

Alison Murphy is a former principal of the Bellarine Secondary College and now an avid volunteer at the nursery. She has always viewed the nursery as more than just a place to grow plants.

"I saw it as a really valuable community connection," Alison said.

"Schools can become their own island in lots of ways, and partnerships like this help connect students with the local community in a really authentic way."

Located alongside the school's agriculture and horticulture program, the nursery offers students access to professional propagation facilities and expertise.

Students work alongside adult volunteers in an environment without traditional hierarchies.

"That opportunity for young people to work alongside other adults, with no real power imbalance, is incredibly valuable," Alison said.

She said the nursery plays a critical role in helping young people feel empowered in the face of environmental challenges.

"There's a lot of worry about the environment for young people, and they often feel powerless. The nursery shows them that when you act locally and you make a difference."

Bernie said the nursery has grown to become "absolutely crucial" to Bellarine Landcare's operations.

"The nursery and the landcare group feed off each other," he said.

"If one ceased to exist, (the other) would be in real trouble."

From wildlife corridors and seed collection to school engagement and community volunteering, the Bellarine Landcare nursery stands as a powerful example of what can be achieved on a shoestring, with commitment, collaboration and care for place.

As Bernie put it: "it's become a really special place … a true community hub".

One of landcare's biggest strengths is the people who turn up, week after week. In Victoria's east, a simple community rhythm is building practical skills, local knowledge and long-term resilience through shared practice.

> **The group is continuing to build seed-collection skills among volunteers.**
>
> Anna Feely

Tuesday tradition powering Yarram's nursery and seed bank

By Anna Feely

On Tuesday mornings, a quiet corner of the Yarram Recreation Reserve becomes a hive of activity.

Inside the old Pony Club shed, you'll find volunteers from the Yarram Yarram Landcare Network (YYLN) potting up local natives, swapping propagation tips and building something the whole district can be proud of: a community nursery and seed bank.

The project was initiated and is led by Bronwyn Teesdale, with ongoing support from YYLN facilitator Anna Feely.

The nursery began with a $6,000 Wellington Shire Council grant Bronwyn secured in 2024-25. A first propagation workshop – focused on growing local native plants from seed – quickly showed there was strong community appetite to roll up sleeves and get plants in the ground.

With funds to invest in a polytunnel, pots and potting mix, the next step was finding a home base.

YYLN approached Yarram Recreation Reserve President Peter Jenkins, who gave the project an enthusiastic "yes" and helped establish a community hub in the north-west corner of the reserve.

Momentum has since continued.

With support from Victorian Landcare Grants in 2025, the nursery now has new benches, an improved watering system and a neatly fenced growing area. These practical upgrades make weekly volunteering easier and help seedlings thrive.

Together, the group has chalked up several improvements, above and beyond the weekly working bees.

With incredible support behind-the-scenes from YYLN's chair Julianne Peavey, communications officer Helen Spittle and treasurer Russell Bottom, the journey scaling up from producing just a few thousand plants per year to 27,000 has been a professional one.

While there have been challenges, the overall success of this project is due to the dedication of the group's volunteers. They share enthusiasm and knowledge to build the enterprise into something the community can be proud of.

Projects like this only work because people show up, week after week.

YYLN thanks every volunteer who has helped sow, prick out, pot up, water and weed. Volunteer time and care is the engine of this nursery.

YYLN also acknowledges the support of Wellington Shire Council, the Victorian Landcare Grants program and Yarram Recreation Reserve for providing a practical base and ongoing encouragement.

What's next

The group is continuing to build seed-collection skills among volunteers and refine growing systems so more locally sourced plants can be supplied for on-ground projects across the district.

If your group is thinking about starting a similar nursery or seed bank, YYLN is happy to share what has worked (and what hasn't) along the way.

Get involved

YYLN Community Nursery and Seed Bank meets Tuesdays, 10am – 12pm, at the old Pony Club shed, Yarram Recreation Reserve.

2026 Victorian Landcare Awards open

Don't miss this opportunity to celebrate and honour the people and groups who are restoring and protecting Victoria's land, water, soils, animals, plants and ecosystems. If you know an individual, group or organisation in your community making a difference, nominate them for a Landcare Award.

The nine national categories celebrate innovation, environmental leadership, sustainable agriculture, First Nations Peoples, women in landcare, youth, Coastcare, and community partnerships. There are four additional categories exclusive to Victoria, including the Joan Kirner Landcare Award, the Victorian Farmers Federation/Landcare Victoria Inc. Heather Mitchell Memorial Fellowship, the Landcare Network Award and the Environmental Volunteer Group Award.

You can self-nominate for an award, or nominate someone else.

The Victorian Landcare Awards will be presented on Thursday, 15 October at ACMI, Fed Square, Melbourne.

Keep any eye on Landcare Victoria's social media for the latest announcements and ticketing information for this event. The event will be followed by a celebration to mark 40 Years of Landcare in Victoria.

The winners of the national Landcare Award categories will advance as finalists to the 2027 National Landcare Awards, to be held in Adelaide, South Australia.

For more information or to nominate visit landcareaustralia.org.au/awards. Nominations close on Friday, 31 July.

The 2026 Victorian Landcare Awards and 40 Years of Landcare in Victoria celebrations are being delivered by Landcare Victoria Inc. with support from the Victorian Government through the Victorian Landcare Program. The Awards program is administered by Landcare Australia with funding from the Australian Government's Natural Heritage Trust.

The Victorian Landcare and Catchment Management magazine is published and distributed by Landcare Victoria Incorporated and funded by the Victorian Government through the Victorian Landcare Program. The magazine aims to raise awareness of landcare and natural resource management among Victorian farmers, landholders, the Victorian landcare community and the wider community.

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Together we can make a difference for Victoria's landscapes

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