



## Celebrating 25 years of ParkCare and Landcare in the ACT: reflections and a vision for the future <sup>+</sup>

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**Abstract:** Since the establishment of the first ParkCare groups in 1994, the ACT Parks and Conservation Service (PCS) ParkCare program has grown from 10 to 21 groups that care for reserves across the ACT. In addition to this are the additional 14 Urban Landcare groups that have formed to improve and enhance Canberra's urban open space. Many of these areas encompass our treasured grassy woodland ecosystems. In the 2013–14 period, ParkCare and Urban Landcare volunteers spent approximately 20,000 hours assisting PCS to manage ACT parks and reserves. Volunteers participate in this important conservation work for a variety of reasons, and many commit themselves to the cause well beyond the usual weekend activity. The continual drive by community to improve the conservation values of our parks and reserves is to be commended. The support of PCS staff for the volunteer program has varied over time, and various attempts have been made to develop shared objectives and outcomes for managing our parks and reserves. Reflecting on past achievements in the program gives us hope, and acknowledging the challenges people have come up against in achieving their goals gives perspective. Twenty-five years is a time to create a space for conversations about the future of ParkCare and Urban Landcare. It is an opportunity to imagine what the future could look like, and a chance to think creatively about how to improve existing relationships and inspire a new generation of ParkCarers and Landcarers.

I welcome the opportunity at this forum to celebrate the achievements of our volunteers in the ACT, as we have now had 25 years of ParkCare and Landcare here.

It began in 1989 when there was interest from the community in caring for our bushlands. A community group was established with about 13 people engaged in weed management. Today the Parks and Conservation Service (PCS) ParkCare Program is made up of 35 groups with over 400 volunteers. Those figures are potentially an underestimate of what is really taking place on the ground when we consider the growing number of urban Landcare groups forming in local neighbourhoods, as well as other volunteers working 'across the board', including the Friends of Grasslands and Greening Australia and the Catchment Groups.

In mid-October PCS, the Regional Landcare Facilitator Program and the Catchment Groups hosted a ParkCare and Landcare forum titled 'Reflect, Explore and Inspire: Celebrating 25 years of ParkCare and Landcare in the ACT'. This forum brought together a diversity of volunteer groups to talk about the overall land management achievements to date, and to discuss what aspects of land management require further exploration in the community context. It was also an opportunity to get inspired about the future and think about what we want the future to look like. A number of workshop-based activities were held and some really stimulating presentations got people thinking about the issues and opportunities. Today I am presenting the preliminary results of that forum (it was just two weeks ago!), and will focus on the 'big picture' achievements.

With its continuous community participation the ParkCare program has been a great success. I really do not know of anything else like it elsewhere in Australia which has continued for 25 years! The photo at right includes Anne l'Ons (with Lillian Burless and Ruby Tunks-Frawley) who has been involved



Photo: Kathy Eyles & Ross Osborne



## 'Grass half full or grass half empty? Valuing native grassy landscapes'

Friends of Grasslands' forum 30 October – 1 November 2014

Friends of Grasslands Inc. ([www.fog.org.au](http://www.fog.org.au)) supporting native grassy landscapes

in the program for 25 years, and there are several other individuals who have remained committed to the cause and dedicated their time and knowledge to ParkCare for longer than I and many other park staff have been in our jobs. It is important to recognise that ParkCare grew as a grassroots community initiative that has led to the establishment of a number of our reserves. This momentum and passion continues in the Canberra community today and people still care for the bush.

In my role as ParkCare and Volunteer Coordinator I regularly get queries from people wanting to volunteer.

We have to refuse people who want to start up new groups, because we do not have the resources to support them. Canberra is an astonishing place; we have had people from New South Wales ask: 'What is it that makes it work?'. Essentially, it is *you, our community!*

The caring for the bush demonstrated by the ParkCare program has also created a really powerful sense of belonging and connection to our local environment and places. Anyone who has the opportunity to venture into the patches of reserve where volunteers are working can see for themselves that the land is being looked after. They can hear and learn about the intimate knowledge that people have of those areas. Among my photos there is one of a group with a tarp over their heads in Aranda Bushland (see composite above). It was an extremely rainy day, and the photo shows that volunteers are truly dedicated to their work – working rain, hail or shine, and still having fun.

ParkCare groups have brought about a huge transformation of degraded landscapes. I have heard stories about Hawthorn thickets in Aranda Bushland that took 8–9 months to cut through, if not more. I have been told of the big clumps of Cotoneaster that used to back [the suburb] Ainslie, going into the Ainslie Reserve. When I look at those reserves now, there is no sign of those weeds. It is important to reflect on those times to get a full idea of the differences that have been made over time. It is just like looking at your own backyard; you keep on seeing things that need to be done. I think our ParkCarers do that all the time, because they are so passionate about what it is that they want to do – they constantly want to make improvements. However, when we look at what has been achieved we can see, as I said before, that ParkCarers and urban Landcarers have been instrumental in making our reserve system what it is today.

Individual volunteers and ParkCare groups are also instrumental in raising community awareness. They are out there engaging with the community, taking guided walks and talking to schools. In the past, Parks staff ran regular guided walks in Canberra Nature Park, but as resources for community education have been stretched the ParkCare volunteers have taken up that challenge and run regular programs. There are also the social and health benefits that come from volunteering for the environment. People talked about some of these at our forum two weeks ago, and I think that shows how the program extends beyond the ecological perspective of having parks and reserves.

### Activities

ParkCare activities are very diverse and vary depending on the people involved and the reserve. The PCS is interested in seeing ParkCare activities align with priority conservation objectives. The success of the program has largely been measured on the basis of number of groups, number of volunteers and the number of volunteer hours. We all know that

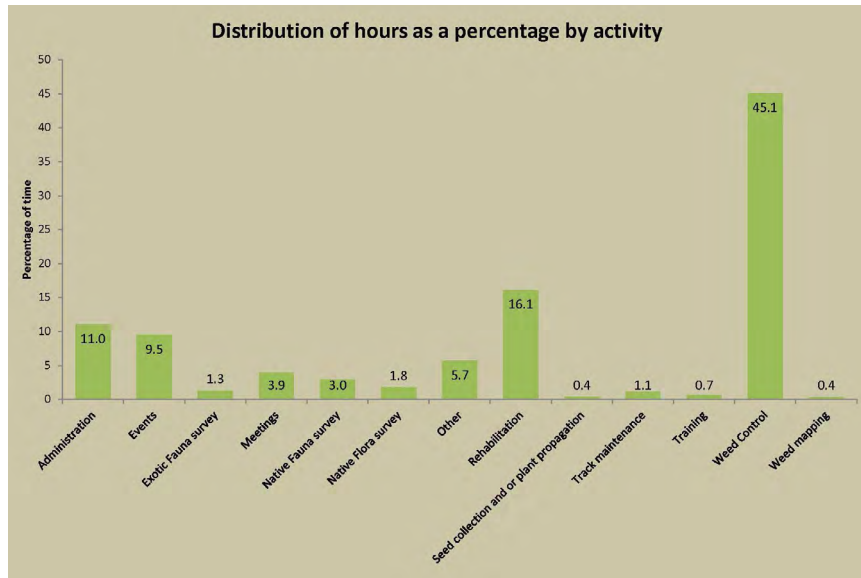




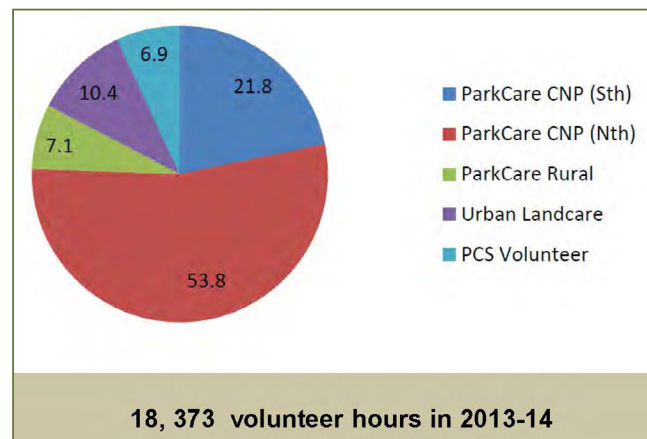
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program success is so much more than these, and the development of trust and relationships is just as important. However, when I report on the success of the program it is primarily the statistics that capture the interest of our managers and decision makers. The latest 2013–14 figures (at right) reflect the number of volunteer hours that have been reported to PCS. At this time there are 14 groups working in the Canberra Nature Park areas, north and south. The interest in urban Landcare groups is expanding quite exponentially, with requests to establish around five new groups in the last six months.



Weed control is the main activity for all the ParkCare groups, and those of you who have been out doing weed control in some of those reserves will know it is 'hard yakka'. This 45% figure (graph above) represents about 7000 hours-worth of weed control and rehabilitation work.

Landcare also involves planting trees; in the early years of the program reporting was not based on the number of hours worked but rather the number of trees planted.

Improving woodland ecosystems is a really important aspect of ParkCare, but the groups also recognise grassland ecosystems. The rehabilitation figure above is not just from planting trees; it is also to do with grasslands and their associated flora. Looking across the graph it is clear that our groups are involved with almost everything relating to reserve management, and would be involved even more if we had the capacity to support them. The PCS team is not short of ideas on improving our reserves and neither are the ParkCare groups. Indeed, ParkCare groups are often the first to take action in these areas.

The maps (next page) show the areas with Yellow Box – Blakely's Red Gum grassy woodlands, both ACT listed (purple) and listed under the Commonwealth EPBC Act (hatched) within Canberra Nature Park (brown). In the north (top map) there are volunteer groups operating at Mulligans Flat, Mount Majura and Mount Ainslie and in the Belconnen Hills including The Pinnacle, Aranda Bushland, Bruce Ridge and Mount Painter. What this map does not show is that our urban landcarers are continually working in those small pockets of grassland in North





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Belconnen. The other map shows the situation in the south, and a number of volunteer groups are working across grassy woodland environments in the reserves there as well.

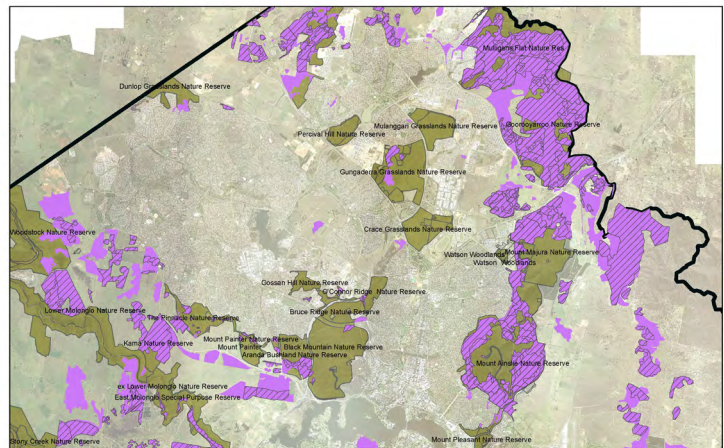
### Outcomes of the ParkCare and Landcare forum two weeks ago

The ParkCare and Landcare forum this month was an opportunity for collective thinking about challenges and opportunities: for learning, adapting and finding new perspectives. It brought together Park services staff as well as community members. The list (below right and next page) shows the main ideas that were put forward as a result of that forum. They have not yet been written up and we have not decided how to set about achieving them. This list is just for your interest, to see what people are keen to pursue.

A very popular idea was the need to look at landscapes a little bit differently and to bring in Indigenous perspectives on managing the land and in collaborative research. That is already beginning to happen in relation to fire, but a lot more could be done.

Another well-supported idea was the promotion of community involvement and education. This is regularly mentioned by our volunteers, and it is important to start some succession planning: who is going to be in the groups in the future? and how should the programs be diversified to cater for new interests and for recreational users? An example is the Friends of Bruce Ridge which is a group of mountain bikers who both maintain challenging tracks for bike users and close other tracks to maintain the reserve's conservation values.

There was also discussion about the alignment of environmental management goals, plans and strategies. To me, that remains our biggest challenge, as it has been for many years. I think we are getting better



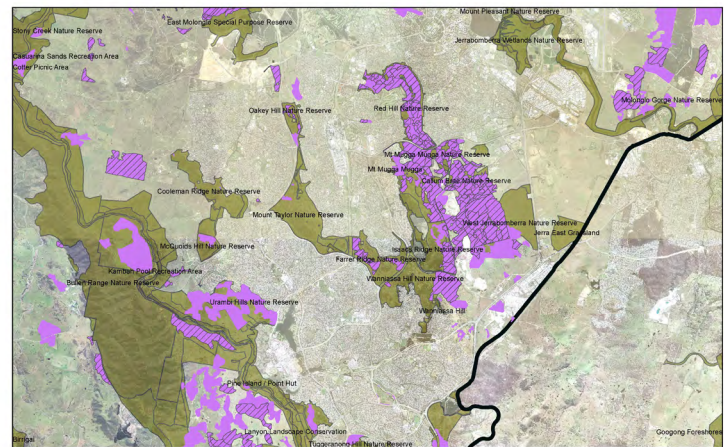
Northside Reserves with Yellow Box Grassy Woodland

**Legend**  
EPBC Woodland  
Box Gum Woodland ACT listed  
Reserve Area

Map Date: 14/04/2014  
Map Scale: 1:50,000  
Map Data: © Australian Government  
Map Projection: GDA94  
Map File: 210102014  
Aerial Photography 2014

Prepared by:  
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Southside Reserves with Yellow Box Grassy Woodland

**Legend**  
EPBC Woodland  
Box Gum Woodland ACT listed  
Reserve Area

Map Date: 14/04/2014  
Map Scale: 1:50,000  
Map Data: © Australian Government  
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### Challenges/opportunities/ideas

1. Incorporate Aboriginal perspectives:
  - Question/revisit goals and objectives for landscape rehabilitation.
  - Review aims and methods of grassland and woodland conservation including use of fire.
  - Undertake research and apply best practice.
2. Promote community involvement and education:
  - Advertise ParkCare and Landcare history and achievements.
  - Diversify programs.
  - Embrace all recreational users.
3. Alignment of environmental management goals, plans, strategies and works:
  - Improved cooperative planning, monitoring and communication.

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at it, particularly monitoring and incorporating the knowledge held by our volunteers through the monitoring that they are already undertaking, and including that in management decisions. Connectivity was also a key area of discussion. The list shows that there was interest in the impacts of climate change on reserves. Enhancing networking opportunities helps generate ideas, and having more forums where individuals can feel inspired, should continue so we can all work towards an agreed vision and goal.

You will be able to find out more by talking with community volunteer colleagues, and by watching and listening to the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tKgE0V3ZhVW4/>.

Dr Jasmine Foxlee is the ParkCare and Volunteer Coordinator for the ACT Parks and Conservation Service. She has worked in a variety of community engagement and visitor management positions in parks and reserves throughout Australia. She has also undertaken a PhD which documented the social significance of visitors souveniring and returning rocks at Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park.

### **Challenges/opportunities/ideas**

*continued from box on previous page*

4. Actively promote ecological connectivity across urban, fringe and reserve zones:
  - Encourage native street trees and park plantings.
  - Select species specific for sites.
  - Save dead trees.
  - Produce guidelines and publications to assist.
5. Climate change:
  - Rethink what climate change means to the ACT environment and to the ParkCare and Landcare programs.
  - Monitor changes by keeping good records of local areas.
  - Be responsive to climate change.
6. Enhanced networking:
  - 'ParkCare central' – a central web portal that includes information about the programs and reporting functions, and that facilitates networking and youth engagement.
  - Share expertise across groups.
  - Specialised meetings and access to up-to-date research.
7. Junior and youth programs – 'plant the seed early':
  - Coordinated education and in-school programs (e.g. Junior ParkCare and rangers in schools).
  - Recruitment activities focused on youth.

<sup>+</sup> This record of the talk given at the forum has been checked by the presenter, but not peer-reviewed. To find out more, contact the presenter, via their institution or by email to: [info@fog.org.au](mailto:info@fog.org.au).