

## Workshop summary

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### What we sought to achieve

This 'Conserving grasslands of the South Eastern Highlands of New South Wales' workshop sought to:

- a) Collate information on existing conservation programs for Natural Temperate Grassland (NTG) in the South Eastern Highlands (SEH);
- b) Identify gaps and lessons from conservation programs to date;
- c) Identify priorities and opportunities for collaboration for conservation of the SEH's NTG communities among government, non-government agencies and landholders.

A key question that we sought to address is: *what enhanced cross-tenure conservation initiatives are needed to better conserve adequate areas of NTG in the SEH, and to sustain populations of and habitat for threatened grassland species?* The focus was on proactive conservation initiatives and not on research or regulatory measures.

This workshop has brought together over 50 enthusiastic participants from New South Wales (NSW) and federal government agencies, landholders, researchers and community organisations. Despite our best efforts, Indigenous land managers were missing from this workshop, a regrettable gap that needs to be rectified in future.

This workshop summary represents the observations, lessons and opportunities that Friends of Grasslands derived from the presentations and discussions (and does not necessarily represent the views of participating organisations).

### What is the current state of grasslands conservation?

Natural Temperate Grassland is a critically endangered ecological community. In the past three decades, better knowledge of the distribution of grassland remnants and of threatened species, and of good management practices has developed. As an example, the recovery program for the four Grassland Earless Dragon species is making good progress in better understanding the species' extent, habitat requirements and captive breeding techniques.

Information presented to the workshop suggests that only around 5000 of 500,000 hectares of the original extent of Natural Temperate Grassland of the South Eastern Highlands were formally reserved by 2016 in NSW and the ACT. Now, in addition, there are over 1800 hectares of grassland in the Monaro Local Government Area under NSW Biodiversity Conservation Trust agreements. Further, Travelling Stock Reserves (TSRs) conserve key remnants of a variety of ecosystems, including around 700 TSRs managed by South East Local Land Services, of which more than 140 are in the Monaro region, and more exist throughout the SEH.



Monaro Golden Daisy ©Andrew Zelnik.

### What has worked well?

The workshop papers outline a wide range of targeted programs that are having positive impacts, including for: extension/peer learning, conservation agreements, threatened species conservation, and weed and fire management. Yet more systematic and better funded programs are required if NTG is to be conserved. The

former grassland conservation management networks within the SEH had excellent engagement of many landholders and other interested parties across all tenures, but were ultimately defunded.

The workshop discussed the application, benefits and cost of the 'Bulldozing for biodiversity' techniques for recreating grasslands by scaping away weed-infested and nutrient-rich soils in order to re-establish grasslands on a clean substrate. These techniques offer ways of restoring highly degraded grasslands and reconnecting key sites.

The workshop benefited from lessons from programs in Victoria and Tasmania. Partnerships with pastoralists are resulting in benefits for conservation of grassland biodiversity, pastoral production and marketing of livestock produce (especially wool). The Victorian Trust for Nature program in northern Victoria shows that a focus on an iconic threatened species, the Plains-wanderer, can inspire landholder pride and engagement. This raises the question of whether the Grassland Earless Dragons or similar species can provide a similar focus in the SEH of NSW. Sustained funding for the Tasmanian Midlands Conservation Partnership (a conservation management network) from an endowment fund ensures that it is not 'in hock' to precarious government funding. The examples from



'Merton Vale' grassland conservation agreement property, Tasmanian Midlands © Andrew Zelnik.



Monaro Grassland Earless Dragon  
© Andrew Zelnik.

these states raise the question of whether non-, semi- or 'regional' government organisations may have greater traction with some landholders who are wary of mainstream government agencies.

### Lessons learnt

The workshop discussions highlighted some key areas for greater work.

**Generating key knowledge.** There are major knowledge gaps, including of the current extent and rates of loss of remaining Natural Temperate Grassland and loss of condition of remnants, compared to sites surveyed between 1995 and 2015. Proposed research by La Trobe University could help fill this gap for the SEH. The Bathurst and Orange region grasslands are less well known and need further survey and investment.

**Being strategic in our conservation work.** Dr Sue McIntyre outlined five requirements for the ongoing survival and improvement in the condition of existing Natural Temperate Grassland in the following order of importance: a) preventing addition of more nutrients; b) maintaining a 'friendly' landscape matrix as much as possible to restrict influxes of weeds and nutrients from neighbouring lands; c) continuous weed control; d) biomass management; and, only then, e) reintroduction of lost species.

**Investing in restoration.** The workshop discussed the need to invest in a grassland restoration industry, at scale, to lower costs and increase capacity to achieve conservation goals. This requires investment in knowledge, people, funding and seed supply if threatened species are to be conserved, the Global Biodiversity Framework targets are to be met for grasslands conservation, and for the Nature Repair Market to be effective for this ecosystem. For instance, it is easier to recreate grasslands on 'ugly' sites than to restore a degraded grassland, but this requires skilled people and a cost-effective seed supply.

**Increasing resources for management.** Enhanced resources are needed across tenures to manage grass biomass and weeds. Sustained funding is needed for conservation management networks and other

stewardship programs to support private landholders to conserve NTG. Management by Indigenous communities is an emerging opportunity.

### Emerging opportunities

Importantly, the workshop discussed three important emerging opportunities, namely:

- Re-establishing a SEH-wide grassland conservation management network. This is essential to link and support landholders and land managers across tenures, and others, including researchers, non-government and government agencies and the broader community. We can learn from past and existing NSW programs and those from other states to re-establish an even more effective program. Continuity of funding is essential if these networks are to achieve their greatest potential.
- Engaging emerging markets. It is as yet unclear what the emerging Commonwealth Nature Repair Market or the proposed reforms to the NSW biodiversity credit system will mean for conservation of NTG. Those working for conservation of grasslands need to engage in the development of these programs to ensure that grassland managers have opportunities to benefit from good stewardship as much as managers of woody ecosystems.
- Funding Indigenous ranger programs. As native title is recognised and more lands are returned to Indigenous nations there is a need and an opportunity to support management of Country by these communities. The Commonwealth Government has a policy of supporting the establishment of more Indigenous ranger programs in southern Australia. Not only would this help address past dispossession and increase socio-economic opportunities for Indigenous nations, but there are opportunities to improve management of grasslands by reintroducing traditional practices like cool burning. More boots are needed on the ground, including to contribute to management of grasslands under the tenure of public agencies. Indigenous rangers could make major contributions to enhanced management for grass biomass, weeds, threatened species, cultural sites and infrastructure.



Silky Swainson-pea (vulnerable in NSW) © Andrew Zelnik.

### Conclusions

Natural Temperate Grassland is a key critically endangered asset in the South Eastern Highlands of New South Wales. The goodwill and constructive discussions in this workshop from government, community and academic participants demonstrated that there are practical ways of working together to greatly enhance conservation of grasslands.

There are great existing government programs for conservation of native grasslands and their component species. Effective conservation of grasslands requires better support for pastoralists with native grasslands on their properties. Trusted, ongoing support programs are needed, including conservation management networks. These can be supplemented by seizing new opportunities, including from nature repair investment and Indigenous ranger programs.

Friends of Grasslands thanks all the contributors to this stocktake for conservation of the grasslands of the South Eastern Highlands of New South Wales. This coming together of our 'community of practice' demonstrates that by collaborating we can achieve so much more for conservation and restoration of grasslands to benefit the people and biodiversity of our region.