

Grassy Box Woodland Sites

Geurie Cemetery

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Geurie is a small village near Dubbo in the central west of NSW with a population of 500 people. Like many small rural villages, it has a strong sense of community. However, some conflicting interests are causing havoc with the local fledgling conservation movement.

A volcanic plug to the south of the village provides a backdrop of some one hundred metres in height known as 'Bald Hill'. If you imagine the top of a monk's head you will see a feature with a fringe of trees and a bald grassy top. It can look quite magnificent in the early morning as the rising sun catches it.

The Geurie Bald Hill Reserve (150 ha) reveals much about the history of the village. In the northern section of the reserve there is evidence of an Aboriginal campsite which was probably frequented in winter. Early this century, villagers picnicked in the reserve on weekends and left the week's rubbish behind in the gullies. In early photos no understorey is present, indicating heavy grazing pressure and the likelihood that timber was regularly collected for firewood. A small adjoining reserve over Geurie Creek was leased and heavy grazing pressure ensued.

At the turn of the century Geurie was a thriving community requiring three pubs to slake its thirst. By the 1950s only a dozen or so houses were left. Gone were the horses, the bustle, the coaches, the butchers, bakers, tinkers and fakers. The village, to use a cardiologist's parlance, was flatlining.

In the 1960s things began to change. Geurie started to grow again and a new generation of villagers introduced new ideas. Geurie Bald Hill Reserve was proclaimed as a refuge for wildlife and a dam was constructed to provide water for birds migrating between Lake Burrendong and the Macquarie Marshes. Enthusiastic trustees reduced grazing pressure and regeneration on the reserve began.

As the village became a sought after dormitory suburb of Dubbo, new building and roadworks increased run-off into Geurie Creek. Effluent from the village flowed into the creek and the Macquarie River. New roads were built with gravel quarried from the reserve and rubbish collected from the village was disposed to landfill within the reserve.

Geurie Cemetery, adjacent to Geurie Bald Hill Reserve, remains largely unspoilt. The generous provision for interment has not been required and much of the six hectare reserve remained in something like its 'pre European' condition - a relatively pristine grassy Fuzzy Box and Pine woodland.

In the early 1990s a slightly eccentric botanist arrived in the village with tales about the worth of the vegetation community within the Cemetery Reserve. Despite some quite horrible chemicals used around the graves and the occasional grazing of sheep of the reserve, much of the value had survived.

There were plants with tubers underground, like sweet potato, which were regularly dug up by Aboriginal people for food and small orchids that attracted insects by emulating the odour of mating wasps. We learned about the struggle between fire-resistant and fire-sensitive plant communities.

There were birds who built nests shaped like those stainless steel vessels that the nurse brings around to bedridden male patients. There were other birds too lazy to build nests of their own, who sneaked into these strange nests to lay their eggs, to be hatched and raised by foster parents.

The gum trees were not all the same and if you looked carefully there were different types. The colours and shapes of the leaves were different. Colourful parrots nest in the tree hollows and particularly near the creek. They talk back to you if you can copy their call well enough, so do the frogs.

Different animals feed at different times. The wallabies and possums sleep all day and are active at night. The possums feed in the canopy of the trees and the wallabies in the neighbouring cereal crop. There is the odd fox to be seen at daybreak slinking back along the creek to its lair.

In 1993, Wellington Council prepared a draft plan of management for Geurie Bald Hill. As a result, trail bike activity ended, Council's activities in the quarry ceased, rubbish dumpers were pursued, noxious weed were sprayed, travelling stock were moved on and the grazing lease over the creek between the two reserves was terminated. Whilst well received by the majority of villagers, there was strident opposition from a small group of farmers.

In early 1999 an application for funding from the Natural Heritage Trust was successful. A modest \$14,000 was granted to the village and the two reserves. The nub of the

matter was twofold. On the one hand grazing pressure has denuded the creek bank causing bank erosion, on the other hand increased stormwater discharge from the village and the upstream catchment has exacerbated the bank erosion. The question raised was why one landholder should contribute land to remedy a problem which was largely attributed to others.

The next question was if the landholder agreed to donate land to remedy the problem how much land would be required? Would the donated land be excised and owned by the community or would it be retained by the landowner? If it was retained by the landholder, (which seemed likely given the paucity of community funds for acquisition) who would be responsible for management costs? Was the landholder entitled to relief in the form of reduced rates?

There is another problem. Geurie Cemetery is an area of some 6 hectares. The area is divided according to an agreement between the Crown and religious groups prevailing at the time. The Protestants have used up their area and now wish to encroach into the woodland to obtain more space for burials. To add to the dilemma there is an engineering proposal to construct a swale up-slope of the headstones to divert the run-off and reduce soil erosion. The woodland stands where the swale is proposed. A swale would not only encroach on the woodland, it could introduce weeds.

Despite these problems there is a determined proposal from within the community to have the Cemetery Reserve, the Geurie Bald Hill Reserve and the yet to be donated section of Geurie Creek linking the village with the cemetery all gathered together under a 'Land for Wildlife' type concept.

Being involved in the conservation of the few remaining fragments of grassy box woodlands is one way to begin to understand how our ecosystem works. The real challenge ahead is the large scale environmental reconstruction required to redress land degradation and how to encourage sustainable land use. The resources available are meagre, community views vary and time is fast running out. How quickly can communities learn to identify ecological problems and how quickly can they implement remedies?

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