



Year in Review

Kara Kara Conservation
Management Network Inc.

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President's Report

Welcome, everyone, to the *Year in Review* for the Kara Kara CMN for 2020.

Wow, what a challenging year it has been! Reflecting back to when I delivered my Report to members at our 2019 Annual General Meeting, little did any of us realise that we would soon be overtaken by a run-away train in the form of a Covid 19 pandemic! Over the past 12 months, what began as a few cases of a mysterious virus has grown into a global health crisis affecting almost every aspect of our working and personal lives.

This somewhat truncated *Year in Review* is a reflection of the impact the pandemic has had on the Kara Kara CMN's projects and programs during the year.

Our projects and programs

At an organisational level, the Kara Kara CMN has weathered the Covid 19 storm better than many. The first lockdown in mid-March and the associated restrictions placed on social gatherings and travel saw the cancellation or postponement of many of our programs, particularly educational events and activities targeting regional schools and the broader community. It is hoped that we can revive some of these programs in 2021 and beyond.

That said, we were able to complete the on-ground activities associated with the final year of our three-year Biodiversity On-ground Action (BOA) Grant and our 2019/20 Landcare Grant. Completed works included the revegetation of seven hectares of private property to further improve bio-linkages to the east and west of the St Arnaud Range, the attainment of our targeted 200 nest-box installations for threatened and declining species, and the erection of protective fencing to ease the intense grazing pressure on an 18-hectare remnant of core Box-Ironbark habitat at Kooreh.

Seeing these projects through to conclusion in the midst of a global pandemic took some doing! Something that became clear fairly early on was that, for 2020 at least, we would not be able to rely on our established pool of volunteers to assist with our autumn/winter plantings and other on-ground works. The partial closure of schools and the move to home schooling put excursions and planting days off the agenda for student groups. At the same time, Victoria's prisons were also in indefinite lockdown so our back-up option – prisoner labour through Corrections Victoria's Landmate program – was also unavailable for the foreseeable future.

The story of how the Kara Kara CMN team – notably our Committee, Landcare Facilitator, participating landholders and small groups of volunteers – saw these projects through to conclusion is a tribute to their creativity and dedication, and is outlined elsewhere in this Report.

Our Facilitator

Throughout the pandemic, the Kara Kara CMN was fortunate to be able to retain the services of our part-time Facilitator, a position funded through the Victorian Landcare Facilitator Program (VLFP). The Committee is under no illusion: without this funded position, the Network would not be able to achieve as many positive outcomes for biodiversity.

The current funding cycle for this important program ends on 31 December 2020 and the Government has just announced an extension which effectively secures the tenure of the 78 Landcare Facilitators employed throughout Victoria to 30 June 2021.



What will happen after this date is less certain. At this stage, we know that in the New Year all organisations who currently host a Facilitator, including the Kara Kara CMN, will be required to submit an Expression of Interest (EOI) to the Victorian Government for the right to continue to receive funding through this Program. On the one hand, this process will provide an opportunity to implement much-needed improvements to the Program; on the other, it has created a lot of uncertainty within the Landcare movement and impeded the ability of existing host organisations to plan for the future with certainty. One thing is clear: as a group, the Kara Kara CMN Committee must be flexible and open to change if we are to comply with the new VLFP guidelines when they are released in the coming weeks.

Whatever happens, we will keep members posted about developments through our regular communications channels.

Looking ahead

There are always positives to be found in times of adversity and in this topsy-turvy year, I would like to express my thanks to the Kara Kara CMN Committee, our Landcare Facilitator and our volunteers – both new and of long standing – for doing such a great job in ensuring that the Network was able to rise to the extraordinary challenges we faced throughout 2020. We are also grateful for the ongoing support of our partner organisations and regional schools, who have been busy coping with challenges of their own.

Closer to home and with many restrictions on our freedoms still in place as 2020 draws to a close, I extend to all members, volunteers and the broader community my best wishes for a healthy and safe Christmas and New Year.

Chris Campbell

President

Kara Kara CMN management and administration 2019/20

Committee:

President: Chris Campbell

Vice-President: Helen Yuille

Treasurer: Andrew Borg

Secretary: John Boadle

General Committee members: Deb Borg, Brenda Proctor and Jeroen Van Veen (Bush Heritage Australia)

Landcare Facilitator: Deb Saxon-Campbell

What we achieved

We now report on the Kara Kara CMN's achievements during 2020 in more detail and link these to the key strategies for biodiversity outlined in our *Strategic Plan 2019-2023*.

Strategy #1: Conserve, protect and enhance natural habitats and species

In a year of extraordinary challenges, the Network successfully completed the final year of activities associated with our three-year Biodiversity On-ground Action (BOA) Grant, which concludes on 30 November 2020. These activities were concentrated around the two key project areas outlined below.

Reconnecting the landscape

From late autumn through to early spring, we worked closely with local landholders to revegetate another seven hectares of land with indigenous seedlings, in the process creating new habitat and linking areas of existing woodland to facilitate wildlife movement and dispersal through the landscape.

In July, we found ourselves in the unexpected position of having ~3,000 plants – they had been ordered months previously – but with no-one to plant them! The majority of our established pool of volunteers were unavailable, and the on-again off-again nature of health restrictions and limits on public gatherings made the scheduling of on-ground works problematic. Sourcing additional eucalypts was also difficult as regional native nurseries struggled to supply the unprecedented demand for trees from a public largely confined to home and taking the opportunity to undertake revegetation projects of their own.



It was time to get creative! We put out a public appeal for volunteers through regional media and bartered seedlings with other regional Landcare groups in an effort to source additional plants. Fortunately, some landholder families chose to take on responsibility for revegetation works on their own farms. As for the rest, we quickly learnt to make the most of opportunities, mobilising at short notice and even organising our volunteers in shifts of 10 when a slight easing of restrictions meant we could get back out in the field.

Fortunately, this flexible approach yielded results and we were able to finish all of our plantings just as another tightening of restrictions was announced in response to Victoria's second wave of Covid 19. As a bonus, the regular rainfall delivered by the prevailing La Niña weather pattern during winter and spring has given young seedlings a good start ahead of the summer heat.

Nest-boxes for threatened and declining species



During the year, we installed another 120+ artificial nest-boxes for threatened and declining species – specifically, the Brush-tailed Phascogale, Laughing Kookaburra and Southern Boobook – bringing to 200 the total number funded under this grant. All of these boxes were installed on private properties within, or just outside, the Kara Kara CMN's area of interest.

Fortunately for us, most of the nest-boxes had been constructed by woodworking students and teachers at our regional colleges before Covid 19 restrictions necessitated the move to home schooling. The small number of boxes remaining were

constructed by teachers and our volunteers.

Protection of core woodland habitat at Kooreh

In 2019, we were fortunate in securing funding through a Victorian Landcare Grant to protect an 18-hectare block of remnant native forest on private property at Kooreh, east of St Arnaud. This block is one of several large patches of remnant forest within a ~2,000 acre mixed-farming property that have been set aside for conservation by successive generations of the same farming family. It features a mix of vegetation communities, including depleted Box-Ironbark Forest and endangered Grassy Woodland/Alluvial Terraces Herb-rich Woodland Mosaic on grey, sandy loam soils.

The block has high biodiversity values, containing several rare, vulnerable and/or endangered species including:

- Forbs such as the Stuart Mill Spider Orchid^{^^} (*Caladenia cretacea*) and Red-Cross Spider Orchid^{^^} (*C. cruciformis*) – both of which are endangered and found only in Victoria's north-central region – together with the Purplish Beard Orchid (*Calochilus robertsonii*) and Golden Cowslip (*Diuris behrii*);



- Buloke^{*^} (*Allocasuarina luehmannii*) – a key food source for the endangered Red-tailed Black Cockatoo^{^#} which is still recorded occasionally in the region – and Buloke Mistletoe^{*} (*Amyema linophylla*); and
- Mammals such as the endangered Brush-tailed Phascogale[^] (*Phascogale tapoatafa tapoatafa*), and the Fat-tailed Dunnart (*Sminthopsis crassicaudata*).

While free of roaming stock, the block had been under intense grazing pressure from a booming kangaroo population. The project's aim was to address this threat by erecting a 1.8 metre high grazing-exclusion fence around the entire woodland remnant to protect the native understorey and promote natural regeneration, all within a relatively short timeframe. The project also included pre- and post-fencing vegetation surveys to gauge the initial impact of the completed fencing on the native understorey.

It was originally intended that the fence would be erected by a Landmate crew out of the Glenelg-Hopkins Correctional Facility in Ararat, but with all prisons in indefinite lockdown and limits placed on outdoor gatherings, necessity dictated that most of the work be undertaken by the landholders themselves. In the end, the fencing was completed by mid-September, a few months later than originally intended, but a monumental effort nonetheless given the challenging circumstances and one that deserves special mention.

The vegetation surveys – one each in mid-spring in 2019 and 2020 – were undertaken by small groups of volunteers, the latter only when Covid 19 restrictions had eased sufficiently to allow small, conditional outdoor gathering. As expected, the delays in completing the protective fence around the block meant that the second survey did not reveal any real improvement in understorey condition. This will occur naturally over time; however, the exercise did serve as a useful training exercise in native plant identification for our volunteers, many of whom would not otherwise have had the opportunity to see this privately-owned remnant woodland gem.



All work on this project was completed by the end of October 2020; an excellent result given the numerous delays and shortage of volunteer labour.

Conservation Status Key:

- * DELWP (formerly DEPI and DSE) – Species status on the Advisory List maintained by the Department of Environment, Land, Water & Planning, Victoria.
- ^ FFG [Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988 (Vic)];
- # EPBC [Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (Cwth)].

Silver Banksia reintroduction

The second vegetation survey at Kooreh and specifically, the on-the-spot availability of volunteers, also provided the Network with an opportunity to reintroduce Silver Banksia (*B. marginata*) into this patch of core habitat. Silver Banksia was once widespread in the region and was known to have been present on this conservation block, however, grazing pressure, changing climatic conditions and other factors had seen it progressively disappear from the landscape over time.

Earlier this year, the Kara Kara CMN was offered a small number of Silver Banksia seedlings which had been propagated by one of our partners in a regional Silver Banksia Project, the City of Bendigo, from seed with two provenances. The first was from a natural population on private property at Emu, near Arnaud – seed that had previously been collected by the Network with permission from the landholders – and the second was from the Silver Banksia Seed Production Area within the Euroa Arboretum.

The seedlings were planted in three groupings of mixed provenance in an area with a similar soil profile to that of the original naturally-occurring population. They will be closely monitored during their establishment period and, if needed, given extra support through the warm summer months ahead.



Strategy #2: Be an advocate for biodiversity

In June of this year, regional Landcare Chairs and Facilitators came together to provide input into two key planning processes: (i) the Biodiversity Response Process (BRP); and (ii) the Regional Catchment Strategy (RCS).

Biodiversity Response Process (BRP)

The aim of the BRP is to identify priorities and develop strategies to underpin the biodiversity goals within the Victorian Government's seminal environmental plan, *Protecting Victoria's environment - Biodiversity 2037*. During this, the second stage of the BRP, the Department of Environment, Land, Water & Planning (DELWP) sought the views of the Kara Kara CMN and other natural resource managers to help identify priority landscapes in the region and the threatened species and habitats contained within them, as well as provide input on the most effective actions to protect these biodiversity assets.

Regional Catchment Strategy (RCS)

Developed by the North Central Catchment Management Authority (CMA), the RCS has similar aims to the BRP but at a catchment level. In this context, the Network provided input on our current biodiversity priorities as well as current and emerging threats, and other challenges to effective natural resource management in our area of interest.

Strategy #3: Engage with the community

Regrettably and after a promising start, the introduction of Covid 19 restrictions in mid-March severely limited our opportunities to engage with the community in person during the year.

After considerable planning, events such as our 'Young Citizen Scientist Day' scheduled for 26th May, and our delivery of an autumn School Holiday Program in St Arnaud on behalf of Stawell Landcare had to be cancelled. Similarly, our annual environmental education program for secondary schools could not be held. It is hoped that these activities can be revived at a later date.

Despite these setbacks, we nonetheless maintained a regular flow of information to members and friends of the Kara Kara CMN through our Facebook page and *eNewsletters* to ensure that were kept informed of Network activities.

'Chicks in the Sticks' 2019

While no-one realised it at the time, the Network's participation in the North-Central CMA's annual 'Chicks in the Sticks' event in late October 2019 would be one of our last opportunities for community engagement and interaction for some time to come.

Held at a different venue each year, the 2019 *Chicks in the Sticks* was held at Moonambel Gap Olives at the northern end of the picturesque Pyrenees Ranges, on the western frontier of the north-central catchment and the Network's area of interest.

The Kara Kara CMN hosted an information display at the event with the aim of promoting the creation of habitat for native wildlife. Whether the ladies who attended came from an urban or rural setting, each had the opportunity to receive a free native plant



courtesy of the Network, together with a flyer explaining how to create habitat for native wildlife in their home garden.

Strategy #4: Build strong and enduring partnerships

With restrictions on people movements putting face-to-face meetings out of the question for much of the year, the Network resorted to the use of technology to stay in touch with our partner organisations in the natural resource management space and within the broader community. In this way and despite the restrictions, we managed to maintain existing, and forge some new, partnerships.

Notably, we connected with Stawell Landcare with a view to delivering their autumn School Holiday Program in St Arnaud. While this program ultimately had to be postponed, we have no doubt that it will proceed once Victoria achieves 'Covid-normal'.

Another new and more recent connection for the Network was with the fledgling Australian arm of Netherlands-based LandLife Company. Essentially, LandLife acts as a broker for European 'big business' who, having recognised the link between a healthy and biodiverse planet and the future of their business, are seeking to invest in various large-scale habitat creation and biodiversity protection projects within Australia. At a local level, our small contribution to this large and worthy vision is to act as 'eyes on the ground', identifying properties with good biodiversity values and potential for rehabilitation within our region as they hit the market and passing this information on.

Strategy #5: Contribute to scientific knowledge

The Network's monitoring activities and quarterly woodland bird surveys continued during the year, albeit within the boundaries allowed by the prevailing Covid 19 restrictions. Regrettably, mid-winter bird surveys at some sites could not be undertaken, particularly those within the Kara Kara National Park which was temporarily closed to the public at the height of Victoria's pandemic response.

Strategy #6: Secure the Network's future

Broadening our volunteer base

At the Kara Kara CMN, we are ever alert to opportunities to broaden our volunteer base, and never more so than in 2020! With school excursions and prison work programs off the agenda for most of the year, we were extremely grateful to those individuals and organisations within the community who responded to our calls for assistance by coming forward to help with the delivery of Network programs, often at short notice.



Network funding

Victorian Landcare Facilitator Program

As mentioned in the President's Report, the current funding cycle for the Victorian Landcare Facilitator Program (VLFP) ends on 31 December 2020 and has now been extended to 30 June 2021. In the interim, the Network will be required to reapply for the right to host a funded Landcare Facilitator position. The Committee is keenly awaiting the release of the guidelines for the new-look VLFP.

Water cart

Sometimes it's the simple things that make the biggest difference. For the Network, having access to our own dedicated water cart during our autumn/winter revegetation program and when providing seedlings with extra water in the height of the 2019/20 summer season was a huge benefit. It has made the lot of our volunteers much easier, completely negating the need to ferry buckets to and fro across uneven ground and substantially reducing planting times.



Once again, special thanks to the Wettenhall Environment Trust for funding the purchase of what has now become an essential piece of Network equipment.

Images

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- i Yellow Sun Orchid, 'Rabbits ears' (*Thelymitra antennifer*).
- 3 A small group of volunteers assist with a planting at Beazleys Bridge in July 2020.
- 4 (i) Kara Kara CMN President, Chris Campbell, installing a nest-box for Brush-tailed Phascogales and Gliders on private property at St Arnaud East.
(ii) Part of the recently erected protective fence around the 18 ha conservation block at Kooreh.
- 5 Purplish Beard-orchid (*Calochilus robertsonii*), one of the species known to be present in woodland at Kooreh.
- 6 Volunteers assist with a reintroduction planting of Silver Banksia (*B. marginata*) at Kooreh.
- 7 Olive grove tour during the 'Chicks in the Sticks' event at Moonambel Gap Olives in October 2019.
- 8 Volunteers from the St Arnaud Neighbourhood House and Norman Simpson Memorial Pipe Band lend a hand with a planting at Kooreh in July 2020.
- 9 The Kara Kara CMN's water cart has become an essential piece of Network equipment.

Images by M Fernandes, A Hughes, B Proctor, D Saxon-Campbell and H Yuille.