



LITTLE TOWN, BIG MOTORS - CORNELLA CREEK CATCHMENT COMMUNITY PIONEERS OF LOCAL AREA PLANNING

Cornella Creek rises near Heathcote and flows north through the small town of Colbinabbin, draining into the Corop wetlands just downstream of the central Victorian hamlet.

With a population today of just 300 people, the Colbinabbin district exhibits the striking characteristic of many small towns – a few residents with big motors. When it came to developing a local area plan for the Cornella Creek catchment the same small town people who are active in Landcare, CFA, footy club, church, bowling club and school council stepped up.

Shane Ryan is an active member of the Cornella Local Area Plan Implementation Committee (CLAPIC) which set out to tackle a range of natural resource management issues in the catchment such as salinity, rising watertables, poor water quality, loss of native vegetation, weeds and pest animals.

Shane is a second generation irrigation farmer who today farms downstream of Colbinabbin on the Cornella Creek floodplain. However, it was another property in the catchment that his father bought in 1927 where Shane gained most of his experience in tackling land degradation.

“When dad bought the farm there was a drainage line or depression running through it. Dad remembers being able to jump across it in the 1930s. By the time I took over the farm the gully was getting wider and wider and it was clear that we had to do something to stop the erosion.

“I fenced 30 metres back from the edge of the gully, excluded stock for 10 years and put in about 10,000 tubestock plants sourced from the local NRCL nursery.

▲ Image Above: Shane Ryan (left) and John Avard (right).

▼ Image Below: John Avard checks an artesian bore beside Lake Cooper.





“The area was naturally heavily timbered with Grey Box, Spotted Gum, Buloke and Belah. In fact the whole farm was cleared of trees in the 1880s. Woodcutters came from Heathcote and Rushworth to cut timber for fence posts, firewood, mine supports and bridges. Much of the wood went to one of two timber mills in Colbinabbin in the early days. It helped pay off the farm.”

John Avard, a retired irrigation farm machinery businessman, says he and Shane had put their hands up to be involved in the CLAPIC because they had experienced firsthand the benefits of caring for land and waterways.

The CLAPIC pioneered local area planning commencing in 1999 with a series of public meetings supported by the Goulburn Broken CMA and other local agency staff. The CLAPIC was set the task of implementing the Cornella Local Area Plan which aims to reverse the land, vegetation, water course and water quality degradation in the Cornella Creek catchment. The main strategies revolve around earthworks, revegetation, environmental management and education.

The first Cornella Local Area Plan was released in November 2000 and in 2008-09 the CLAPIC completed a management plan for the Lower Cornella Creek.

John Avard says, “Lake Cooper – the largest of the Corop wetlands - is the judge and jury. The water quality in the lake is a good indicator of the health in the catchment. It is home to a ski club, provides habitat for bird life, and has been impacted by

extensive clearing in the catchment.”

The Corop Wetlands comprise a series of wetlands that cover an area of over 1500 hectares on the Goulburn River floodplain. Over 60 species of birds have been identified and several endangered species of plants have been found at the lakes and wetlands.

In the mid-1980s John, who was an Irrigation Association of Australia representative at the time, was appointed to the local Tongala Salinity Plan Implementation Group (SPIG).

John says, “About that time the thinking changed regarding how smaller local catchments functioned and the connections in our own patch. CLAPIC is in many ways an extension of the early work done by the Lakes Action Group and the SPIG, but this time the community owns the plan.

“Most of the landowners in the catchment and along the creek are really switched on. There are quite a few absentee landowners in the area, and most of them have also come on board.

“We have developed a plan that is always tucked away in the top drawer ready to go. As a result we have received more than our fair share of funding.

“We recently put our hands up for access to flood recovery funding and secured a Flood Recovery Employment Program (FREP) works crew to help with a lot of the clean-up, re-fencing and planting works required after the 2010-11 floods.

“We supported the Goulburn Broken CMA’s Flood Recovery Program by identifying suitable sites, liaising with landholders and providing a locally based depot for the flood team to operate from and to store materials and equipment.

“Peter Morgan, the local fencing contractor, has erected over 100 km of fencing for us.

“Because the gullies and feeder gullies are now fenced we are finding run off occurs much faster, so the catchment drains better.”

About four years ago John started direct seeding using the Mt Camel Landcare Group’s tree planter with great success.

John says, “The local area likes local trees and so we collect and use local seed. We deep rip, spray, wait 12 months, spray again and then plant the next winter. We work primarily on the flat agricultural land north of the Cornella State Forest. It is the western most boundary of the Goulburn Valley. The fall is one foot to the mile and the total fall is just ten metres all the way to the Murray River.”

Both Shane and John are modest about the time and effort they and their fellow committee members put into supporting community natural resource management initiatives. In his inimitable style John sums it up succinctly, “Little towns have big motors.”



Australian Government



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