

Green Web Sydney: A strategic approach to biodiversity conservation in the Sydney Region

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ABSTRACT

For a highly urbanised city, such as Sydney, there are limited opportunities for revegetation. Through consultation with councils, private landholders, community groups and State Government agencies, realistic opportunities have been identified particularly along riparian and transport corridors occurring on both public and private land. This has been made possible by the Green Web Sydney project. Green Web Sydney proposes the establishment of a green web of native vegetation to protect, conserve and enhance remaining remnant bushland in the Sydney region. Central to this plan is the establishment of habitat corridors that link fragmented patches of bushland to facilitate the movement of wildlife and natural dispersal of native plants, and the implementation of various biodiversity initiatives within Council organisations. The project encourages a consistent and cooperative approach to native vegetation management in the Sydney region. By working locally and regionally within the framework of Green Web, councils and the community will create a green web of bushland corridors, protecting remnant bushland of conservation value and thus enhance Sydney's rich biodiversity and natural heritage.

Key words: biodiversity conservation, habitat corridors, vegetation management, incentives, local government.

Introduction

Green Web Sydney is an Action Plan for local government to provide best practice policies, planning strategies and development controls for vegetation management. The Green Web Sydney Vegetation Management Action Plan (Seidlich 1997) was initiated in 1997 by the Sydney Regional Organisations of Councils (ROCs) in response to growing concern over the destruction of remnant bushland, as a result of clearing and urban development in Sydney and the seemingly ad hoc approach to its management.

In May 2001, the project secured funding from the Bushcare component of the Natural Heritage Trust to establish a devolved grants process whereby funds were provided to Sydney's local councils to undertake biodiversity and revegetation initiatives, recommended under the Action Plan. Initiatives encouraged by the project included such tasks as revegetation of proposed corridors, the introduction of new environmental planning regulations, incentives for private landholders, the formation of new partnerships among councils and communities, and education programs supportive of institutional change.

For councils, Green Web Sydney specifies policies, planning strategies, on-ground vegetation works, development controls and management practices for vegetation management that will ensure biodiversity conservation and enhancement in Sydney. This project will provide funding strategically to council projects to implement the Action Plan recommendations. In particular, this project supports (through the devolved grants process and the Green Web Sydney Regional

Biodiversity Coordinator), the introduction of institutional arrangements designed to establish long-term commitment by councils to regional bushland protection, conservation and management. It will also support the involvement of communities in council initiatives, and the joining of councils in projects that have mutual environmental and institutional benefit.

The six long-term objectives of Green Web Sydney are to:

- Identify, protect and enhance biodiversity, environmental health, natural heritage and landscape amenity.
- Re-establish habitat by means of enhancing and creating sustainable ecological systems where the long-term survival of local species is guaranteed.
- Create bush corridors between core habitats for the movement of native animals and plant species.
- Protect wildlife by protecting its habitat from degradation caused by inappropriate use and encroachment of invasive plants, and from predation by cats and dogs.
- Encourage natural regeneration on public and private land with a particular focus on riverine environment, coastal foreshores, endangered species and ecological communities.
- Initiate the restoration of natural ecosystems to repair environmental degradation and to prevent increasing costs to the community by preventing further loss of natural systems, ecological processes and natural resources.

History of Green Web Sydney

In 1996, Sydney's councils identified that there was a benefit to adopting a consistent approach to vegetation management. As a result, the ROCs developed the idea of Green Web Sydney and employed a consultant to prepare the Action Plan. This Plan was formally launched by the then federal Minister for Environment and Heritage, The Hon. Robert Hill in August 1998 and released to Sydney's councils shortly thereafter.

In January 2000, the ROCs again came together to undertake a survey to determine to what extent each council had embraced the Action Plan. The results of the survey were mixed and generally the finding was that implementation of the Action Plan had not been consistent throughout Sydney's councils. Accordingly, the ROCs applied to the Natural Heritage Trust for funds to implement the Green Web Sydney Action Plan via the establishment of a devolved grants process. Under this process, Sydney's local councils can apply to Green Web Sydney for funding to undertake the biodiversity initiatives listed in the Action Plan. The applications in both 2000 and 2001 were successful, and the project to date has secured over half a million dollars worth of funds.

Green Web Sydney Action Plan

The Action Plan (Seidlich 1997) provided a reference resource for Sydney's local councils and a practical tool for use in planning and undertaking revegetation work. As councils undertake works consistent with the Plan, they will help to create and protect a green web of bushland corridors that connect high conservation value remnants of native bushland.

The Action Plan contains a series of initiatives for local councils to adopt and implement. Below is a description of just a few of the initiatives outlined in the Action Plan and which could be adopted by Sydney's councils. A full list of the initiatives and a detailed description of each initiative is available in the Green Web Sydney Action Plan.

Protection of Indigenous Vegetation on Public land as biodiversity conservation zones

The desired outcome of this initiative is for each council to zone all remnant vegetation on public land to Conservation Zones and/or list them as items of Environmental Heritage and manage accordingly for the protection and enhancement of biodiversity. Most councils have adopted an Environment Protection Zone (or Conservation Zone) in their current Local Environmental Plan (often zoned 7a). This initiative would, therefore, not necessarily involve introducing a new zone, but amending an existing zone to include existing open space areas that contain remnant bushland (i.e changing existing zoning from 6a Open Space to 7a Environment Protection).

Vegetation and Habitat Protection Order

Replace councils' existing Tree Preservation Order (TPO) with a Vegetation and Habitat Protection Order which not only encompasses trees but also understorey plants and other elements, such as natural soil and its associated seed store, bush rock and fallen timber.

Generic Biodiversity Development Control Plan

A Biodiversity Development Control Plan (DCP) would provide for the protection of all remnant vegetation, including those elements that would normally not be required to be assessed under the Threatened *Species Conservation Act 1995*. As a minimum the DCP should be able to:

- Protect indigenous plant communities (including understorey);
- Require the use of plants indigenous for landscaping of new developments; and
- Introduce incentives for landowners, developers and Council staff to identify and reserve remnant indigenous species, and include them as protected open space or flora regeneration areas in site planning and development applications.

The idea of a Biodiversity DCP is not new, and several Sydney councils already have such a plan in place. These existing plans could provide guidance in the formation of a DCP for specific areas. In addition, councils could refer to the *Biodiversity Planning Guide for NSW Government* (NSW NPWS 2001) which contains an outline of a model Biodiversity DCP and provides an excellent starting point for any council.

Habitat Requirements in Landscape Design for New Developments

The preparation of standard landscape design guidelines for new developments is another way that councils can assist in ensuring that existing habitat is protected and enhanced on environmentally sensitive sites. Councils should aim to prepare a landscape design control plan with guidelines and requirements for the protection and enhancement of indigenous flora and fauna through appropriate site layout and landscape design.

The Environment Protection Authority (EPA), in conjunction with Australian Institute of Landscape Architects and Landscape Contractors Association, have recently prepared two documents that are essential reading for any council considering this initiative. The two documents, *Draft Model Landscape Development Control Plan* and *Draft Model Environmental Plan for Landscaping Works* (2001), contain much useful information and could easily be moulded to form the basis of a landscape design control plan.

Education and Training Programs

Education and training programs should not be limited to the community but also target Council's own staff. This initiative could for instance be combined with Initiative No 11 *Biodiversity Management Manual for Staff and Contractors* to help assist Council staff in increasing their awareness of biodiversity in their local area.

Community education programs are an excellent idea although councils should try to not limit their target

audience. Communicating the message to as many people as possible is the key to a successful program and this could include activities such as targeted school programs or programs to target non-English speaking residents (e.g. educational material printed in different languages).

Incentives Program

Green Web Sydney encourages the use of incentive programs to protect and enhance biodiversity on private land. Useful information on the use of incentives may be found in such publications as Bateson (2001), Fallding *et al.* (2001) and Binning *et al.* (1999).

References

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Binning, C., Young, M. and Cripps, E. 1999. *Beyond roads, rates and rubbish: Opportunities for local government to conserve native vegetation.* National Research and Development Program on Rehabilitation, Management and Conservation of Remnant Vegetation. Research Report, 1/99 Environment Australia, Canberra.

Green Web partnerships

Green Web Sydney has formed partnerships with many other environmental organisations and agencies in order to strengthen both external commitments and ensure that the project is promoted to its full extent. Examples of some of the partnerships formed, include:

- Planning NSW – Sydney Harbour Habitat Working Group
- Greening Australia
- Environment Australia – through Bushcare
- Environs Australia
- CBN – Community Biodiversity Network

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