



# Connectivity conservation through landholder engagement and capacity building events

9 Valley Wildlife Trail –Pilot Project

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Date: 28 November 2016

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# 1 Introduction

The 9 Valleys Wildlife Corridor in the Upper Hunter (Jerry's Plains to Giants Creek) is arguably one of the most diverse and species rich areas in the Hunter region comprising of multiple native vegetation communities endemic to the area. Much of the valley floor has been cleared for farming and grazing activities and remnant vegetation, paddock trees and natural features such as waterways provide important habitat and potential linkages for a wide range of threatened and endangered fauna. In many cases the retention and enhancement of these values is critical for the survival of these species.

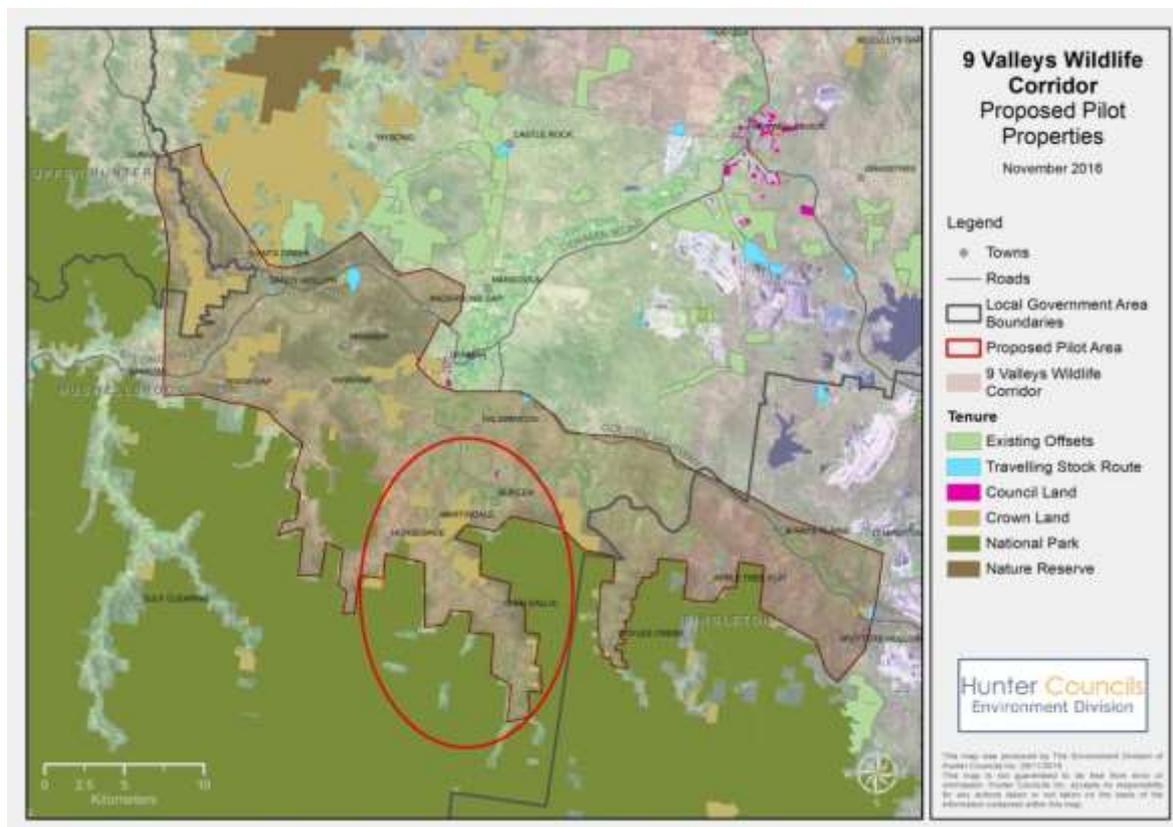
This pilot project aimed to direct landholder engagement in a portion of the broader corridor to assist landholders to understand and identify biodiversity values located on their rural properties, with the goals to:

- create or establish wildlife corridor connections to larger contiguous bushland areas through, planting, regeneration (through fencing), weed control, retention of existing habitat features, and/or restoration through broad scale direct seeding of native grass species
- generate long-term collaboration and coordination between all stakeholders

Martindale Valley was identified as the location (refer Map 1) to pilot the 9 Valleys Wildlife Corridor project. The Martindale Landcare group have been active in undertaking weed control works over the last 2 years and the Great Eastern Ranges Initiative also involved completion of weed control works (targeting Honey Locust, Blue Heliotrope, Cestrum and Coolatai Grass on both road reserve and on private land), and planting of endemic tree species within the Martindale Valley.

This Pilot project developed a framework for landholder engagement that can be replicated throughout the broader Corridor through the expansion of the 9 Valleys Wildlife Trail project.

**Map 1: Martindale Project Focus within the broader 9 Valleys Wildlife Corridor.**



## 2 Project Methodology

Commencing in June 2016, the project was delivered in collaboration with a number of State Government Agencies, community groups and local landowners. These stakeholders included Hunter Local Land Services (HLLS), National Parks and Wildlife Service, Department of Lands, Birdlife Australia, Martindale Landcare, Upper Hunter Weeds Authority and Australian Network for Plant Conservation.

The following outlines the main activities and outcomes of the 9 Valleys Wildlife Corridor Pilot Program

### 2.1 Stakeholder and Community Engagement

#### Stakeholder Engagement

The project commenced in June 2016 with a number of stakeholders meetings with Hunter Local Land Services (HLLS), National Parks and Wildlife Service, Department of Lands, Birdlife Australia, Martindale Landcare, Upper Hunter Weeds Authority and Australian Network for Plant Conservation. The purpose of these meetings was to:

- identify alignment of current or proposed on-ground works or monitoring programs
- confirm funding opportunities available to landholders if they decided to action recommended land management activities
- confirm support and involvement in the project through the planned drop-in session or technical workshop

#### Drop-in Information Session

A Drop-in information session was held at St Martin Church Hall on the 20<sup>th</sup> August 2016, from 9:30am to 12:30pm. The session provided an opportunity for the local community to discuss the 9 Valleys Wildlife Corridor Project with officers and engage with State Agency staff on land management issues. Where possible, it was hoped that session attendees would agree to schedule a property inspection as part of the project. The drop in session hosted the following agencies:

- Hunter Councils Environment Division – Provided details on the 9 Valleys Wildlife Trail project
- HLLS - provided information to landholders about current funding opportunities and current programs relevant to local farmers
- Upper Hunter Weeds Authority - provided information about any major weed incursions and offered an opportunity to undertake noxious weed inspections
- Martindale Creek Catchment Landcare - provided information about Landcare activities and opportunities to become a member.

A total of ten community members attended the session and from this 4 property site inspections were booked. A 5<sup>th</sup> inspection was secured during the November Technical Workshop (and conducted on the same day).

## 2.2 Property Site Assessments

A total of 5 property inspections were undertaken to identify existing biodiversity values, potential restoration areas, creation of stepping stones for woodland birds, control of priority weeds, creek restoration and potential regeneration areas.

A property site assessment report (including maps) was generated for each participating property (refer to Attachments 1-5). The Site reports provide the following information:

- Habitat features including presence of habitat trees, fallen logs, burrows etc
- Location of vegetation communities and habitat features
- Potential areas for regeneration and restoration, including appropriate tree planting sites and appropriate species to create contiguous patches of vegetation
- Land management issues including weed infestations and pest species

## 2.3 Technical Workshop

A Creek Restoration technical workshop was held on the 4<sup>th</sup> November 2016 at the 'Fitzroy' property on Martindale Road (the site of one of the landholder property inspections). The workshop was designed and tailored to address some of the management issues identified through the property inspections conducted, with additional information related to LLS funding opportunities at the time. The format of the technical workshop was:

- Creek and River Restoration (Presented by HLLS)
  - How to reduce bank and bed erosion of streams
  - How to manage fenced creek lines i.e. Stream watering, establishing shade off stream and weed management
  - Why is native vegetation beneficial to creek health
  - How to identify if your creek is healthy
- Weed Identification and Control (Presented by UHWA)
  - How to control the major riparian weeds such as Cestrum
  - How to identify weed and native plant look-a-likes
  - Can you use herbicides over creeks?

The workshop was well received with a total of 15 landholders attending. A number of additional landholders expressed interest in attending the workshop but were unable due to work commitments. To keep them engaged in the project, information packages were sent to those landholders.

### 3 Key Achievements

Key achievements that have been realised from the relatively short 5-month implementation of the 9 Valleys Wildlife Corridor Pilot Project – Stage 1 include:

1. Direct engagement of 25 local landholders from the project area through their participation in the Community Drop in Session, Creek Restoration Technical Workshop or through their uptake of the free property inspections. Direct involvement by landowners in these targeted activities, which were tailored to the local area, provided an effective means through which to meaningfully engage and raise awareness of land management issues, and importantly, the opportunities and resources available to landowners to protect, restore and manage environmental and biodiversity values on their properties in a way that contributes to broader conservation outcomes.
2. Given the limited time frame available for project delivery, the identification of five landowners willing to commit to the undertaking of a property inspection (where no previous relationship with Hunter Councils existed) represents an important achievement. The technical reports developed for these landowners from the inspection process (refer Attachments 1-5) now provides them with a clearer understanding of the ecological features and attributes of their properties, and of the priority opportunities for ecological conservation and restoration that will not only provide local environmental and land productivity benefits, but will contribute to the broader environmental objectives of the 9 Valleys Project.
3. In addition to identifying priority opportunities for environmental protection and restoration on those properties where inspections occurred, the project has been successful in procuring commitments from 4 landowners to partner in a funding application to the NSW Environmental Trust's Restoration and Rehabilitation Program. If successful, this \$97,178 project will directly support the implementation of priority works that have been identified from the property inspection process, works that would not have been identified had the pilot project not proceeded.
4. The effective alignment of the activities and resources of a diversity of organisations to collaboratively and effectively undertake landowner engagement on a targeted locality basis. These organisations included Hunter Local Land Services, National Parks and Wildlife Service, Department of Lands, Upper Hunter Weeds Authority, Australian Network for Plant Conservation, Birdlife Australia and Martindale Landcare. This was achieved as a direct result of the project resourcing a project coordination role, which was central to engaging and aligning these cross organisational efforts and contributions in a manner that provided a seamless, accessible, single point of contact for landowners within their local area.

## 4 Conclusions

1. From a very practical and local perspective, the site assessments completed during the pilot have confirmed the presence of important habitat features, remnant native vegetation and opportunities to create linkages between habitat patches in the Martindale area. They have also identified and highlighted the main management issues and opportunities to retain and enhance vegetation and soil condition through a number of on-ground activities including weed control, fencing, native grass restoration, and planting. It is considered that if implemented and expanded over time, these works would contribute to achieving the longer term conservation objectives or “stepping stones” proposed for the 9 valleys corridor.
2. Importantly, the property inspection process has also proven an effective means through which to provide active and meaningful engagement with landowners, and by doing so, to facilitate their commitment to the next stage of practical restoration and rehabilitation works. This is directly reflected in the fact that 4 landowners are now partners to the Environmental Trust Restoration and Rehabilitation grant that has been submitted to the NSW Environmental Trust.
3. At a more strategic level, the pilot project has demonstrated the benefits that can be realised through a collaborative, locally focused approach to raising community awareness and landowner involvement in conservation initiatives. More traditional approaches have involved government agencies predominantly directing resources to support landowners who have been proactive in coming forward to access such support. This approach however, does not guarantee resources are directed to these areas of highest conservation priority or strategic value, but rather to those areas where interest is highest.

In contrast the 9 Valleys Pilot Project has demonstrated that proactively and strategically identifying a priority conservation area, and aligning and directing resources to that location can be effective in engaging and securing landowner commitment to conservation and land restoration activities. Such an approach can also bring with it valuable resource efficiencies. For example, targeting a particular locality means that technical (e.g. mapping), community education and engagement and project coordination activities and resources can be more efficiently directed to a more focused area, while they can also be more directly tailored to the particular needs and characteristics of that locality.

4. The project confirmed the value of investing in project coordination to facilitate the delivery of conservation projects that require the participation and alignment of numerous stakeholder organisations. The absence of such coordination makes it extremely difficult to effectively bring together the programs and resources of different organisations that all have a role in supporting private land conservation. From the landowner perspective, such investment has value as it provides a seamless, accessible, single point of contact (a one stop shop) to the range of support that is available. Often landowners are unaware of the available resources, funding initiatives and programs available to the community. This pilot program enabled the local community to find out about current and future programs through appropriate agencies and staff.

## 5 Attachments

Please find attached the Property reports developed for participating landowners.

- 'Fitzroy' Martindale Road
- 400 Bureen Road
- 1971 Martindale Road
- 1611 Martindale Road
- 1875 Martindale Road