

2011 ACT Landcare Awards: **The Quiet Achiever Award**

About the Category

This award is to be presented to either a group or individual who has shown consistent contribution in volunteer work for the environment. This award is designed to recognise long term dedication and commitment to the environment.

Judging Criteria:

1. Consistent involvement in volunteer work for the environment spanning several years. This can involve commitment to either one project/activity or a number of projects/activities across a region.
2. Demonstrated contribution to improving the environment through on-ground work or building the capacity of the local community.
3. Provide examples of environmental projects preferably with evidence such as photographs, media clippings, posters etc.

Submission from Red Hill Bush Regeneration Group

Summary – Red Hill Regenerators: the almost quiet achievers

Today Red Hill supports one of the largest, most diverse, best condition remnants of box –gum woodland in Australia, and brims with over 50 regionally rare or threatened species. Twenty-two years ago when the Red Hill Regenerators formed over 60% of the Hill was choked with weeds, its high plant diversity was unknown and the thistle fields and dense prickly woody weeds restricted recreational use. The hill was so devalued that rubbish dumping along the road in the Reserve was a common occurrence, while the ACT Electricity Authority used parts of the Reserve as store for building fill and concrete pipes.

A transformation from rubbish bush to nationally significant woodland has occurred as the result of a partnership between Red Hill Regenerators volunteers and the ACT Government Parks and Conservation Service professionals. Without the consistent drive, energy and dedication of Red Hill Regenerators, Red Hill would not be anywhere near the magnificent state that it is in today.

The Regenerators have spent tens of thousands of hours undertaking weed control. Working consistently and systematically the group has now undertaken primary control across 300 hectares and in some places have undertaken follow-up control on 3-4 occasions. Highlights include:

- a six fold reduction in woody weed cover;
- tens of hectares of serrated tussock reduced to a few scattered plants;
- over eight hectares of Chilean Needle Grass infestation restored to native grassland;
- thickets of Cootamundra Wattle removed and replaced by high quality woodland through assisted natural regeneration; and
- the many thousands of eucalypt saplings, abundant native shrub growth and increases by orders of magnitudes of most of the rare plants that has been the result of the long years of weed control.

The group has also halted most of what was once quite widespread track and gully erosion on the hill. The wildlife and vegetation monitoring undertaken by the Regenerators has informed both our actions and restoration efforts more widely.

Through seeking and supporting community, resident, scout and school group involvement in the weed and erosion control activities and through consistent and diverse education activities, Red Hill Regenerators have both raised the profile of the conservation importance of Red Hill and been a major player in why Red Hill is expressed, in ACT Planning and Land Authority neighbourhood planning documents, as the most valued community resource by residents in all surrounding suburbs.

Red Hill Regenerators have dedicated tens thousands of hours to Red Hill because of our love for the hill and the enjoyment we have in undertaking the tasks and observing the improvements. We would much prefer to just quietly get on with it. However, for more than two decades we have recognised that Red Hill would only ultimately become and remain the prime woodland example that it is if we had the wider community supporting our efforts. Building this support has been a long-term investment, that has required us to raise a voice for Red Hill.

Criteria 1: Consistent involvement in volunteer work for the environment spanning several years

For the last 22 years the Red Hill Regenerators as a group has invested over 30,000 volunteer hours enhancing Red Hill's environment, enthusing others about its value and protecting its endangered woodland from a host of urban developments. The group has had a fairly consistent membership of about 30, and email list of about 70, and between 6 and 15 people joining in its monthly activities. The main tasks of these regular activities have been weed and erosion control. Members have also consistently engaged in additional activities including supervising environmental activities of school and scout/cub groups, leading public wildlife walks, initiating and being active in local environmental campaigns, identifying rabbit warrens to assist in their fumigation, undertaking plantings, monitoring kangaroo numbers and populations of rare and threatened plants, speaking to community groups, weed spraying, building and erecting nesting boxes, undertaking Indian Myna control, developing a signposted walk and establishing and maintaining a website about Red Hill (www.redhillregenerators.org.au).

In total the volunteer hours of the group membership has been the equivalent of employing one person to work full-time for over 17 years enhancing the 375 hectares of Red Hill.

Criteria 2: Demonstrated contribution to improving the environment through on-ground work or building the capacity of the local community

The efforts of Red Hill Regenerators has transformed Red Hill from a weedy, eroding woodland with little community recognition of its conservation values to a woodland readily recognized as being of national conservation importance and a locally valued placed. Red Hill Regenerators have demonstrated the value of practical activities in the following areas.

Weed Control

When Red Hill Regenerators commenced activities, woody weeds (such as firethorn, cotoneaster and Cootamundra wattle) occupied 20% of the northern half of the Hill and were common in the other half. Today they occupy less than 3%. This equates to the removal or spraying of over 300,000 woody weeds. While Canberra Nature Park staff

and contractors are major players in this control effort, the bulk of the woody weeds have been controlled as part of Red Hill Regenerator activities.

The group has also spent thousands of hours manually spraying, weed wanding or mattock chipping invasive grasses and herbs, such as Chilean needle grass, serrated tussock, African lovegrass, St John's wort, verbascum, thistles and paterson's curse. There are many tens of hectares on Red Hill where these species used to dominate that are now dominated by native plants. The consistent efforts of the group have not only reduced the extent of the species on Red Hill, but have prevented the highly invasive exotic grass species from becoming widespread.

Track rationalization and erosion control

Up until 1995 cattle grazed on Red Hill, resulting in actively eroding gullies and a mishmash of eroding cattle pads across the Hill. Track erosion was exacerbated by informal bike and pedestrian use of the myriad of tracks. Red Hill Regenerators undertook a track rationalization program. By repeatedly placing woody weed debris at points across the hill some kilometers of eroding tracks were closed and eventually rehabilitated. Woody weed debris and hay bales were also used to stop active gully erosion.

Natural regeneration

Weed and erosion control together with the removal of cattle has resulted in flourishing natural regeneration. In 1990 the group mapped the degree of weed invasion across Red Hill. Weeds were mapped as to whether they occupied 50% or more of the understorey (poor condition), 50-25% of the understorey (moderate condition) 5-25% of the understorey (high condition) or less than 5% (very high condition). A 2003/2004 mapping of lowland woodland by the ACT Government recorded woodland quality. The Red Hill Regenerators remapped the degree of weed invasion in 2011.

Condition of woodland	Area 1998 (ha)	Area 2003/2004 (ha)	Area 2011 (ha)
Poor or substantially modified	168 (53%)	29 (9%)	40 (13%)
Moderate or secondary grassland	71(22%)	26 (9%)	114 (36%)
Moderately modified (equivalent to either moderate or high in 1988 and 2011 surveys)		174 (63%)	
High	56 (18%)		29 (8%)
Very High or partially modified	21 (7%)	46 (16%)	131 (42%)

In 1998 weeds dominated 53% of the hill now it is down to 13% and much of this is on golf club lease or heavily slashed inner asset protection zones. In 1998 there were 21 hectares of very high quality woodland on the Hill now there are 131.

Not only has overall vegetation condition dramatically improved but populations of nearly all of the fifty threatened or rare plant species have flourished. In 1984 there were 1,475 plants of the endangered daisy, Button Wrinklewort, on Red Hill. Today this number is at 5,500. Populations of Silky Swanson's Pea, Yellow Burr-daisy, Tick Bush, Native Trefoil and Nawarra Burr have increased by at least an order of magnitude.

Woodland birds

Concern that the extent of woody weed removal was reducing small woodland bird habitat, the group to conducted an experiment, where all birds were recorded within

three 1ha areas, prior to weeding and then again over several years post weeding. The experiment expanded and became an awarded University Masters degree of one of our members, and concluded that about a 10% level of woody weed invasion was favourable to most woodland birds, and that bird species diversity and abundance did trend towards recovery with natural regeneration of eucalypt saplings and other native shrubs following woody weed removal. Unfortunately a 2001 bushfire impacted about 75% the Reserve, while the 2003 Canberra fires resulted in stricter fuel reduction requirements being adopted by the ACT Government. The wildfire and subsequent fuel reduction activities basically destroyed much of this recovering habitat. As one measure of mitigation the group recently planted trees and shrubs on the site of a former stock camp, well away from houses. The group has also placed about 150 nesting boxes on Red Hill for specific hollow breeding woodland birds, sugar glider and bats.

Community capacity building

The Red Hill Regenerators have consistently encouraged local community groups and institutions to become involved in the above conservation and regeneration activities and through this involvement has increased the understanding of the local community for Red Hill and its values and their capacity to undertake works of environmental benefit. Over a total of three school years, the group supervised fortnightly weeding activities with classes from the Canberra Girls Canberra School and Deakin High School. Students from Red Hill Primary School assisted in an early planting exercise, while with Red Hill Regenerator funding or assistance, nesting boxes have been built by students at Deakin and Telopea High Schools. Other groups that Red Hill Regenerators have actively involved in weeding, erosion control, wildlife monitoring and Indian Myna trap building activities include La Trobe Scouts, Ventures and Cubs, Mugga Cubs, Hughes Scouts, the Hughes Boys Brigade, Canberra Boys Grammar School, Australian Conservation Volunteers, the Church of Transfiguration and the Hughes Residents Association. The total number of local residents involved would run into the high hundreds.

Red Hill Regenerators assisted in the formation of the neighboring Isaacs Ridge Parkcare group, through initial provision of equipment, advice in relation to priority actions and joint activities, and members also provide advice and assistance to conservation activity on the nearby Stirling Park Box-Gum woodland.

Community education

Throughout its 22 years, members of Red Hill Regenerators have led around 30 environmental walks on Red Hill usually of about 10 people each, as part of weed, landcare or seniors weeks or environment day activities, or at the request of local resident, walking, natural history or church groups.

The group has twice letterboxed, with brochures about Red Hill and its values, several thousand residential houses and units within the close vicinity of the Hill.

The involvement of most of the school, scout and community groups has included slide or powerpoint talks about why Red Hill is special, which have also been provided to a wider audience such as the Woden Community Council and Yarralumla and Deakin Residents Associations.

The group has developed the content, images and layout of a signposted walk that will soon be established on Red Hill and also contributed \$6,000 towards the cost of the signs.

Consistently across 22 years, Red Hill Regenerators have promoted Red Hill and Box Gum Woodland generally in the media through appearing in or writing articles for the *Canberra Times* and *Canberra Chronicle*, and being interviewed on ABC local radio and ABC, WIN and Prime local television.

Environmental campaigns and advocacy

Red Hill Regenerators were pivotal in organizing parkcare and other conservation groups in representations to ACTEWAGL on work practices within Canberra Nature Park that were having significant detrimental impacts. Work policies, procedures and practices have improved as a consequence.

For many years, Red Hill Regenerators have also campaigned against the Canberra Nature Park network being seen by some as a potential land bank for future infrastructure projects. Over 20 such projects have occurred or were planned on Red Hill over the last 22 years. Red Hill Regenerators made major contributions towards minimizing the impacts of this infrastructure (gas, water, electricity, fibre optic, telecommunication towers) and for encouraging a culture that only allows such developments as a last resort.

Red Hill Regenerators have also been key players in campaigns to prevent proposed developments clearing Box – Gum woodland on Red Hill or nearby areas. These campaigns include action against residential development over prime woodland bird habitat at the adjacent suburb of East O’Malley, several attempts by the adjoining Federal Golf Club to clear woodland within a central component of Red Hill and the construction of an aged persons home on the Reserve adjacent to the Hughes suburb. While not all campaigns have been successful, they have resulted in less clearance than originally proposed and recognition that woodland values were central to arguments.

The ACT Heritage Library recently requested the archive records of the group. The several hundred pages which were catalogued are testament to the group’s consistent advocacy on behalf of Red Hill, and include letters to relevant management and approval authorities, legal documents of action taken by the group, calls for support from other groups and environmental experts, details of organised stalls, an onsite fair, petitions, letters to the editor, letterboxed material and surveys and literature reviews that help document the conservation values of Red Hill.

Criteria 3: Provide examples of environmental projects preferably with evidence such as photographs, media clippings

Signposted walk

Based on a red theme, Red Hill Regenerators has developed seven 115 cm x 70 cm metal signs, that will shortly be erected along a 3km circular walk. The signs will be located next to features being explained and answer the questions: why a red hill; what color flowers do the 1917 historic Callistemon plantings have; why is Red Gum – Yellow Box woodland important; Red Hill animals; Red Hill plants; Red Gum and other trees; and red coloured birds that occur on Red Hill. In addition each sign describes an environmental threat to Red Hill and actions that the reader can take. the signs also show a hidden red bird for children to find in a ‘where’s Wally’ exercise. The Red Hill Regenerators largely authored the content and took or organized use of the photographs and contributed \$6,000 to the overall production. The signs are informative

about Red Hill and its values and encourage active participation in protecting these values. The \$6,000 was the major part of a 2002 Territories Environment group of the year, National Bank Award. The award related to a big effort on weed control following the 2001 Red Hill fire. Two of the signs have been provided as an attachment.

Weed Maps

Maps of surveyed degree of weed invasion and woodland quality from 1998, 2003/2004 and 2011 are included. Pictures of before and after weed shots are available on request.

Planting Day

Pictures of a May 2011 planting day are included. Please see the section on woodland birds above.

**Dr Michael Mulvaney
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