

2013-2014



NATURE CONSERVATION SOCIETY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

ANNUAL REPORT

ACHIEVEMENTS THIS YEAR:

- Ongoing collaboration in significant biodiversity monitoring projects including Mt Lofty Ranges Woodland Birds and surveys of Crown Land parcels adjacent to Black Hill CP
- Completion of a Review of our Bush Condition Monitoring program
- Advocacy for protection of our state's biodiversity, with a focus over the past year on management of protected areas, planning and policy for prescribed burning programs and nominations for listing of threatened orchids and birds and key threatening processes under the EPBC Act.
- Conducted two well attended public Walks with Nature at Morialta and Cleland Conservation Parks
- Undertook a survey of our member's views on types of NCSSA activities they would like to participate in and issues they consider of importance.
- Continued support for conservation based research through our Conservation Biology Grant. This year we provided funding for three student projects
- Sponsored the 'Flora and Fauna' art exhibition by Jorji Gardener and Andrea Wyatt.

ABOUT THE NATURE CONSERVATION SOCIETY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

The Nature Conservation Society of South Australia is a not-for profit voluntary conservation organisation working to promote and protect South Australia's wildlife and natural habitats.

The NCSSA has a history of over 50 years as a leader in advocacy for the environment and is a respected source of scientific information and informed comment on the biodiversity of South Australia.

One of the primary objectives of the NCSSA is to "foster the conservation of the State's wildlife and natural habitats", and the Society has taken action on many varied environmental issues since its formation in 1962.

- Our activities include:
- promoting, protecting and managing native habitats
- researching and protecting threatened species and their habitats
- advancing the protection, management and strategic expansion of the state's reserve system, and
- educating the community and all tiers of government about environmental matters



NCSSA PEOPLE

MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

President: Laurie Haegi

Vice-President: Helen Vonow

Secretary: Robert Lawrence

Assistant Secretary: Ali Ben Kahn

Treasurer: Anna-Lucia Draper

General Committee:

Blair Grace, Kelly Henderson, Michael Stead

STAFF

Administrative Manager: Amanda Stewart

Conservation Programs Manager: Stuart Collard

Conservation Ecologist: Nicki de Preu

Threatened Plant Action Group Program Coordinator: Tim Jury

Bushland Condition Monitoring Project Officer: Peter Mahoney

Woodland Bird Survey Coordinator: Erin Sautter

Database & Website Project Officer: Lesley Parton

Other project staff: Bob Bates, Ali Ben Kahn, Alice Blackwood, Gabrielle Bond, Tom Bradley, Louise Brumfield, Sonia Croft, Monica Deptula, Jeff Edwards, Tom Hands, Ben McCallum, Mel McCallum, Bill New, Gareth Oerman, Simon Parker, Penny Paton and Meg Robertson

REGULAR VOLUNTEERS

Keith Lloyd (General office support and library)

Max Possingham, Brian Knill (Woodlands Birds database)

and all of the MLR Woodland Bird surveyors

and many others who generously contributed their time throughout the year to various conservation projects and activities

FUNDING 2013-14

NCSSA activities are funded by membership subscriptions, donations, bequests, book sales, investment interest, government grants and external funding agencies that fund many of our conservation projects.

Funding bodies for the 2013-14 financial year included:

Aboriginal Lands Trust; Australian Government Grants to Voluntary Environment, Sustainability and Heritage Organisations (GVESHO) Program; Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources (including the Native Vegetation Council; NRM Regions of: Adelaide & Mount Lofty Ranges, Eyre Peninsula, Northern & Yorke Agricultural Districts, SA Murray Darling Basin, and the South East; and the State NRM Community Grants); Department of Planning, Transport and Infrastructure; ForestrySA; Goolwa Wellington Local Action Planning; Lower North NRM Group; Prospect Hill Bushland Group; SA Water; Trees for Life.



WALKS WITH NATURE

Two *Walks with Nature* were held during the last year, one in Morialta Conservation Park on 22nd September 2013 and one in Cleland Conservation Park on 4th May 2014.

Both walks were well attended and generously supported by the Adelaide and Mount Lofty Ranges Natural Resources Management Board.

The 5.5km long walk in Morialta followed a traditional route in the park, taking in the Second Falls Gorge Hike and Morialta Falls Plateau Hike and passing the Giant's Cave.

The walk featured two of the three spectacular waterfalls in the park and provided an opportunity to observe its unique flora and fauna associations.

One hundred and seventeen walkers participated in the event, expertly organised by Simon Parker.

The walk in Cleland followed the Wildlife Park Perimeter Track and other nearby tracks. It traversed areas in different stages of succession following prescribed burning.

Sixty people completed the walk in six different groups.

Highlights of the walk included observations of threatened bird species including Chestnut-rumped Heathwren and Bassian Thrush, and clear views to Adelaide.

These walks provide a wonderful opportunity to educate the public in nature conservation, promote NCSSA and other conservation groups, and enlist new members.

The walks also provide an effective way to help the NRM Board achieve its community engagement targets.

This year, the funding support made it possible to provide a free barbeque lunch following the walks, something that was greatly appreciated by the walkers.

Thanks to all of the volunteer walk leaders and others who helped organise and promote the walks.

Simon Parker, Gabie Bond, Annie Bond and Claire Williams deserve special thanks for their help with organising the walk, coordinating walk leaders and preparing leader notes and maps.

PUBLIC INFORMATION MEETINGS

Our general meetings are held four times a year and are open to NCSSA members and the general public.

The meetings usually involve an update of current issues that we are working on, and any general business of the Society, followed by a talk from a guest speaker invited to discuss an environmental topic of current interest.

Over the past year we have run our meetings in partnership with the Biology Society of South Australia (BSSA).

Thanks to Ali Ben Kahn and the team from BSSA for organising these meetings.

Talk topics over the 2013-14 year were:

Chris Daniels on 'Citizen Science: Bringing Science into our backyards'

Stuart Collard on 'NCSSA Conservation programs, and how they contribute to natural resources management in SA'

Dr Charles Huveneers, Flinders University on 'The Biology and Conservation of Sharks'

Presentations by 2013 BSSA and NCSSA Grant Recipients:

Amy Slender on 'How do you catch a Thick-billed Grasswren?',

Chris Brauer on 'Conservation and Restoration Genetics of Re-introduced Southern and Yarra Pygmy Perch in the Lower Murray River' and

Shaun Adams on 'Terminal Pleistocene-Holocene Palaeoecological Investigation from Kelly Hill Cave, Kangaroo Island'



Fan-tailed Cuckoo Photo: P. Gower

CONSERVATION BIOLOGY GRANT

Each year we offer honours and post-graduate students the opportunity to apply for grant funding of up to \$1000 to support their research into aspects of conservation biology.

Funds are available for research which is aimed at:

- improving understanding of the conservation status of species or ecological communities
- providing recommendations for improvement of some aspect of biodiversity conservation
- understanding the ecology of species or communities
- understanding threats to biodiversity and management of those threats.

This year we funded the following research projects:

Giulia Ghedini, PhD Candidate, The University of Adelaide "Preserving subtidal forests: the ecological value of intact kelp forests"

Steffi Graff, Honours Student, Flinders University "Is there potential to conserve declining little penguin populations in the Gulf St Vincent?"

Angharad Johnston, PhD Candidate, Flinders University "Generating genomic tools to assist future conservation of the pygmy bluetongue lizard *Tiliqua adelaidensis*"

MOUNT LOFTY RANGES WOODLAND BIRDS MONITORING PROGRAM

The Mount Lofty Ranges Woodland Bird Monitoring Program is a long-term project which aims to assess the evidence for declines in woodland birds through repeated surveys of sites throughout the Mount Lofty Ranges (MLR). The project was initiated by Professor Hugh Possingham from the University of Queensland (UQ) and has been running since 1999.

We manage and coordinate the annual survey through funding received from the Adelaide and Mount Lofty Ranges (AMLR) Natural Resources Management (NRM) Board. Survey data is gathered annually from September to December. Each monitoring site is independently surveyed by expert volunteers and ornithologists three times per year using the Bird Atlas' 2ha/20 min methodology.

During the spring and summer of 2013, all 166 bird monitoring sites from Gawler to Victor Harbor were re-surveyed. Over 6,590 individual birds were recorded and 92 species observed.

This year, NCSSA staff undertook an analysis of the 24 long-term monitoring sites located on Forestry SA land. There were some concerning downward trends in the abundance of a number of species, generally consistent with trends across the MLR.

In fact, recent analyses by UQ using monitoring data collected between 2000 and 2012 show that increasing trends have been observed for larger generalist and cuckoo species, while many smaller insectivorous birds and frugivores are continuing to decline across the region. The results of these analyses are presented in a new program pamphlet to be released in spring 2014 and will be available through the Society website.

Community and government commitment for this project remains high, with the AMLR NRM Board providing funding to add a further 60 sites to the existing program over the next two years. In consultation with the project steering committee, it was decided that these sites would be established in vegetation communities across the region where survey effort is currently under-represented, including riparian areas, heathlands and low rainfall woodlands.

Society staff and volunteer surveyors have worked closely with the NRM Board and Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources (DEWNR) to select, map and ground-truth 40 of these sites for inclusion in the survey program this year.

A special thanks to all the surveyors who have helped gather data for the project again this past year; the landowners for permission to gain access to their properties; the AMLR NRM Board, UQ and DEWNR for their ongoing contributions and support to the program; Brian Knill and Max Possingham for their assistance in maintaining and updating the database; the project steering committee (Hugh Possingham, Patrick O'Connor, Tim Milne and Stuart Collard); and to Erin Sautter, Megan Barnes and Ali Ben Khan for survey coordination, data management administration.

ADVOCACY

The Society continues to advocate for a wide range of nature conservation issues through our Conservation Ecologist position. Key areas where we provide input and advice include conservation of wildlife and natural habitats, protected areas, and sustainable natural resources management.

Regular meetings were held with Minister Hunter to discuss NCSSA projects and priority conservation issues for SA.

ADVOCACY CONTINUED

In the last year we have made the following contributions:

Wildlife and Natural Habitats

We provided advice, comments and/or scientific data for the following:

- Guidelines for clearance of native vegetation for ecological purposes
- EPBC nominations for the Bell-flower Hyacinth-orchid *Dipodium campanulatum*, Lax Leek-orchid *Prasophyllum laxum*, Flinders Ranges Short-tailed Grasswren *Amytornis merrotsyi merrotsyi* and Gawler Ranges Short-tailed Grasswren *A. merrotsyi pedleri*
- Nomination to list Escaped Garden Plants as Key Threatening Process under the EPBC Act and comments on draft Threat Abatement Advice
- Draft Interim Guidelines for Ecological Prescribed Burning (including cold burns) under the Native Vegetation Act
- Survey Guidelines for Threatened Orchids listed under the EPBC Act being developed by the Commonwealth
- a report on the biodiversity conservation values of the Crown Land proposed for addition to Black Hill Conservation Park.

The following submissions were made to Senate Standing Committee Inquiries:

- Environmental Offsets - history, appropriateness and effectiveness of the use of environmental offsets in federal environmental approvals in Australia, including the principles that underpin the use of offsets, processes used to develop and assess proposed offsets and adequacy of monitoring and evaluation of approved offsets arrangements to determine whether promised environmental outcomes are achieved over the short and long term;
- Environmental Biosecurity - the adequacy of arrangements to prevent the entry and establishment of invasive species likely to harm Australia's natural environment;
- National Landcare Program (NLP) - the history, effectiveness, performance and future of the NLP program including past and current funding arrangements and role of natural resource management bodies in planning, delivery, reporting and outcomes. We were asked to participate in one of the public hearings for this inquiry where we could further discuss issues raised in our submission.

Submissions were made on the following topics:

- the future management of the Monarto Crown Lands
- the proposed addendum to the Kangaroo Island Plan
- the Mining Lease Proposal and Management Plan for the Rex Minerals - Hillside Copper Project on the Yorke Peninsula
- the third phase of a Review of Declared Plants under the Natural Resource Management Act, 2004 (NRM Act)
- the draft EPBC Bilateral Agreement
- the Fifth National Report to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) to be used to inform a mid-term review by the Federal Government of progress towards the implementation of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 and the Aichi Biodiversity Targets.
- Paralowie Development Plan Amendment where 7 of 12 Significant and Regulated Trees in the area for rezoning were proposed for removal.
- in support of the nomination to list 'Biodiversity decline and habitat degradation in the arid and semi-arid Australian rangelands due to the proliferation, placement and management of artificial watering points' as a key threatening process under the EPBC Act.
- A Letter to the Advertiser expressing concern about spread of feral olives in bushland of the Adelaide Hills and ongoing reductions in funding for the environment.

Protected Areas

We continued our membership of the National Parks Australia Council that aims to bring together organisations like NCSSA in other states and territories and to provide coordinated advocacy about the reserves system, at the national level.

The Society provided comments on a range of DEWNR Park Management Plans including:

- Eastern Eyre Peninsula Parks
- Coongie Lakes National Park in the far north of South Australia ~ a core component of the internationally significant Coongie Lakes Ramsar Wetland.
- Kati Thanda-Lake Eyre National Park & Wabma Kadarbu Conservation Park
- Discussion paper to guide development of new management plan for Gawler Ranges National Park
- Amendment to the Deep Creek & Talisker Conservation Parks management plan on the Fleurieu Peninsula

Fire continues to be an area of concern. We continued to provide advice on Adelaide Mount Lofty Ranges Region prescribed burning program including proposed burns for 2014-15. Ongoing liaison with DEWNR Fire Management staff to ensure maintenance and protection of biodiversity conservation assets given highest priority.

And we also provided comments on:

- the draft Collaborative Fire Management Plan for South Para Parks including Para Wirra Recreation Park, Hale Conservation Park, Warren CP and Sandy Creek CP, SA Water and Forestry SA Land.
- the draft Central Eyre Peninsula Fire Management Plan that covers a large number of Reserves on the central Eyre Peninsula, selected Crown Land parcels and participating Heritage Agreements
- the draft report produced by DEWNR on the Strategic Assessment of Fire Management under the Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act.

Sustainable natural resources management

We continue our involvement in the NRM Alliance that involves a formal agreement and commitment to work collaboratively between eleven environmental NGO's and the NRM Boards in South Australia. The NRM Alliance works in partnership to contribute to a number of key NRM initiatives at both state and national level.

We expressed concerns to the Premier and Minister about the cessation of the NRM Community Grant Program as part of ongoing budget cuts to the environment.

We continued our involvement with Wild Eyre program, Southern Yorke Peninsula, Living Flinders and Mid North Agricultural Districts Conservation Action Planning (CAP) processes being co-ordinated by Greening Australia that aim to provide a collaborative, landscape-scale planning approach to biodiversity conservation in these areas.

Feedback was provided on:

- Adelaide Mount Lofty and SA Murray Darling Basin Region Plans, Kangaroo Island Planning Strategy and the Eyre Peninsula and SA Arid Lands three year Business Plans.
- Adelaide Hills City Council Biodiversity Strategy
- Major Projects Development Assessments Report.
- Port Bonython Bulk Export Facility Environmental Impact Statement
- PIRSA report 'Ecological Assessment of Beachcast Seagrass and Marine Algae Fishery' as required under the EPBC Act. Fishery has potential to impact shorebirds including migratory waders.



THREATENED PLANT ACTION GROUP

The Threatened Plant Action Group (TPAG) continue to make a real and tangible contribution toward improving the in-situ conservation prospects for some of South Australia's most threatened flora. This consists both of considerable on-ground work and contribution to Threatened Species policies and assessments.

During 2013-14 TPAG continued with threatened flora recovery and stewardship work throughout fragmented habitat in South Australia's agricultural regions.

Our working bees and field days produce results from the actions undertaken to regenerate and restore threatened flora. Over 2000 hours of on ground work by more than 40 volunteers contributed to recovering populations of threatened species and improving the condition of their critical habitat at around 40 sites. We assisted around 60 threatened plant species and six threatened ecological communities.

Implemented recovery actions included abatement of serious weed threats; fencing to protect habitat; pest control; revegetation; plant population monitoring; flora surveys; stakeholder liaison; and public education.

We continue to develop effective working partnerships with landholders, environment agencies and other community groups.

The TPAG Program Coordinator position is funded through NCSSA by the AMLR NRM region and small grants. Our thanks go to Tim Jury for his great work in this role and to all of the volunteers willing to get their hands dirty.

Tim and others made a considerable contribution to the DEWNR Regional Species Conservation Assessment Project of plants of the Mount Lofty Ranges and Kangaroo Island.

Thanks to our partners and supporters including DEWNR and regional NRM Boards, the Australian Plant Society, Friends of Parks, NCSSA, District Councils, Forestry SA, SA Water, and numerous private landholders.



Robust spider-orchid *Caladenia valida* Photo: T Jury

MOKOTA

With support from the Native Vegetation Research Grants, the long-term monitoring sites at Mokota Conservation Park in the State's mid north were again sampled in Spring 2013, following the controversial reintroduction of sheep grazing to the park.

The biennial monitoring was carried out by Meg Robertson, with field assistance provided by volunteers Valerie Lawley and Pam O'Malley.

Meg and Erin Sautter coordinated a grassland survey at Mokota Conservation Park on the weekend of 5-6 April 2014, involving volunteer botanists and regional DEWNR staff.

The goals were:

- * to map the distributions of some important native species that have a patchy distribution and may be sensitive to management interventions such as burning and grazing;
- * to repeat the vegetation assessment undertaken by Threatened Plant Action Group members in 1999 along transects which followed the ridgelines, including the most degraded parts of the park;
- * to repeat the monitoring of the nationally threatened *Dodonaea procumbens* in permanent plots established by TPAG in 1999; and
- * to map the distributions of the major perennial weed species that have a localised distribution in the park.

Results from the surveys are being collated and analysed, and selected records are being entered into the BDBSA (Biological Databases of SA).

BUSHLAND CONDITION MONITORING

The Bushland Condition Monitoring (BCM) project provides training, manuals, and a database to allow community and professionals to score and monitor the health of the native vegetation of South Australia.

Field observations are made on ten condition indicators that are scored regularly. These indicators are measurable and dynamic attributes of bushland health, biodiversity and habitat value. They demonstrate current condition and the magnitude of and direction of changes.

The year was very busy with BCM activities, with a significant achievements being:

Reprinting the BCM Manuals for: Southern Mt Lofty Ranges; AMLR Coastal Vegetation Communities; Northern and Yorke; and South Australian Murray Darling Basin; all of which are still in high demand.

The Bushland Condition Monitoring Regional Review, a project funded through a grant from the State Community NRM grants program.

Peter Mahoney and Stuart Collard visited our conservation partners in the regions to seek feedback on the BCM method and its application across the state.

This project has contributed to a greater understanding of the BCM method and its application for regional staff and practitioners.

It is expected that improvements to the method and how it is applied will be a direct result of the project, leading to the collection of higher quality data in the regions.

This is particularly important because the data is increasingly being used for NRM evaluation and reporting at regional and state levels.

BCM sites

During the year we have been very busy with BCM survey and reporting work ~ much in Northern and Yorke; also Adelaide Mount Lofty Ranges; Eyre Peninsula and SA Murray Darling Basin Natural Resource regions.

This comprises sites linked to management as part of specific NRM projects; and baseline sites in under-sampled vegetation communities of a region. It includes:

- establishment of 20 BCM sites in the Rockleigh / Bondleigh area, on private properties participating in the joint project between Trees for Life and NCSSA to restore grassy woodlands in the region.
- establishment of 20 BCM sites in the Northern and Yorke NRM region, in open woodlands of the Port Victoria and Minlaton areas of southern Yorke Peninsula.
- 20 sites in samphire and woodland communities around the 'Diamond Lakes', to the East of Lochiel in the mid North
- 15 sites in coastal dune, samphire and mangrove vegetation communities along the coastline near Port Pirie and Port Germein; and three sites near Corney Point
- Eight sites in riparian corridors on the western side of the range as part of the "Mount Remarkable to the Sea" project which aims to protect and restore these highly degraded but important systems.
- Revisits to four sites in areas that were burnt during the Bangor fire in January 2014. These sites were initially established before the fire and it is intended that these sites will continue to be revisited periodically to assess the recovery of the vegetation through time.

- revisits to coastal BCM sites, established under the AMLR NRM Board's Seascapes program to monitor changes in condition in response to conservation investment.



Training

DEWNR and NRM Boards across the state continue to use and train in BCM as the standard methodology for their vegetation monitoring in restoration projects and to inform conservation strategic planning (CAP). It is now standard training required for 'Bushrat' Assessors.

Over the year NCSSA conducted 7 training workshops, including at Woorabinda Environment Centre at Stirling Linear Park in July 2013, four at the excellent facilities at Volunteers Centre in Belair National Park, one at Pt Pearce on YP and one at Neagle's Rock at Clare.

Overall, 68 people were trained in the BCM methodology in these workshops this year. They comprised DEWNR and NRM Board staff, private environmental consultants, NCSSA staff, and members of the public. These training sessions also led to the establishment of 5 further demonstration / training sites.



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**THE NATURE CONSERVATION
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