



Reconnecting to Country

Introduction

Reconnecting to Country was a cutting-edge catchment management project, for which Rous Water received funding from The NSW Environmental Trust. The project took place over four years and focused on working with local communities in the Wilsons River catchment area to develop environmental improvement projects in association with Widjabul traditional custodians.

Land and water restoration projects were focused on several geographical locations throughout the Wilsons River catchment so that local communities could focus on places that held significance for them.

Reconnecting to Country was a 'partnership project' with local partners being Rous Water, the Widjabul traditional custodians and Sustainable Futures Australia. A 'sister' project at The Gully in Katoomba brought project partners Blue Mountains City Council and The Gully Traditional Owners to share skills and experience in a similar project which ran in parallel.

Vision and Objectives

Our vision for Reconnecting to Country was:

- To cultivate a new culture of sustainable catchment management through community engagement in on-the-ground action and cultural exchange with Aboriginal custodians.

Our objectives were to:

- Improve catchment health
- Build a culture of sustainability
- Develop creative partnerships
- Build capacity to employ Aboriginal people in sustainability education and action
- Cultivate 'sense of place' and reconciliation through action and culture.

Community Involvement

The success of this project depended upon the extent that our local community got involved. This Reconnecting to Country project provided an exciting opportunity for many different people and organisations in the Wilsons River to collaborate on practical projects which restore the catchment and promote reconciliation.

Different groups who were involved in the project included:

- Local community members and riparian landholders
- Local Landcare groups
- Wilsons River Catchment Working Group
- Environmental and interpretive/educational professionals
- Rous Water staff, executives and Councillors
- Widjabul and other Aboriginal people in the Wilsons River catchment

Read on to find out how people have been involved over the history of the project.

Detailed Design Process

Between April and June 2009, the four Reconnecting to Country local working groups hosted a series of community workshops. The local working groups were formed following a series of community workshops in November 2008, where participants identified the natural and cultural values of areas in the Wilsons River catchment. The local working groups met regularly to develop their project plans. At these workshops, these local community projects sought support from other community members and the Reconnecting to Country Steering Committee (made up of project partners Rous Water, Sustainable Futures Australia and Widjabul custodians) for their project proposals. Specifically, the groups presented their plans for the project, invited community feedback on the plans and invited people to form a project team of local residents who are interested in getting involved in the project on the ground. Each group potentially had access to \$45,000 funding from the NSW Environmental Trust.

Following feedback from the local community and the Reconnecting to Country Steering Committee between June and September 2009, the local working groups then worked on the Detailed Design phase where detailed site-specific plans for the environmental and cultural regeneration projects in the Wilsons River catchment were developed. These detailed designs were then presented to the Steering Committee in early December 2009, and are available for viewing upon request. All detailed designs have been successful and began on-the-ground implementation early in 2010.

Issues considered during the detailed design phase involved a wide range of tasks and included:

- Assisting with administration of the project including management of financial and insurance issues and coordination of contractors and volunteers.
- Liaison with local government and other organisations to obtain the necessary approvals.
- Connecting with other community groups about increasing public access to natural places for local people.
- Private landholder & neighbour liaison (enthusing, involving, addressing concerns, writing letter of agreement).
- Drawing up detailed plans and writing up associated descriptions for the project.
- Organising materials (determining quantities of materials required, researching costs, etc).
- Initial design of educational/interpretive materials (eg., signage, booklets, fliers)
- Participating in the cross-cultural experience and liaison process.
- Many members of the local community were involved in this phase of the project and should be congratulated on their work!

“Congratulations on your project's approval! Thank you for the work you have done over the past months to prepare for the 'on-the-ground' phase of the project in 2010. Your plans, designs, negotiations, applications and intentions have cleared the way for effective and innovative projects that will care for the catchment, our community and culture. Thank you for 'holding the vision' of your local project and the larger vision of Reconnecting to Country.” (E Bragg, RtC Steering Committee, 17 Dec 2009)

Project History and Events

The timeline for Reconnecting to Country was:

- November 2008 - Series of **Community Workshops** in different Wilsons River sub-catchments. These workshops introduced the project, the Widjabul custodians and ways of working together; workshopped the natural and cultural values held by the local community in the area; identified sustainability issues important to that community; brainstormed ideas for local projects (including

projects already underway); and formed local 'working groups' of local residents to further develop project ideas.

- December 2008 to April 2009 - **Local Working Group Meetings** in each sub-catchment developed project ideas, and got creative and practical together.
- April to June 2009 - Second series of **Community Workshops** for the Working Group which announced and presented ideas for local projects; presented other sub-catchment project ideas; and formed 'detailed design teams' of local residents interested in implementing the project 'on-the ground'.
- June to December 2009 - Detailed design teams completed **concept designs and project plans** for on-the-ground projects; sought approvals from necessary authorities; engaged specialist environmental consultants to assist with projects; participated in cross-cultural training.
- December 2009 to January 2011 - **On-the-ground environmental restoration and cultural education** by local community project teams, environmental consultants and Widjabul custodians.
- March 2011 - **Final celebrations of projects and open day events.**



Coopers Creek Landcare Inc., members and friends planting trees at an Open Day at Havillah Place.



Members of the Deadly Dancers perform at the Banyam / Baigham Family Day in North Lismore.



The Banyam / Baigham Landcare Group and the local community planting the first trees as part of the regeneration of Slaters Creek.



Widjabul artist Sheldon Harrington with Aunties Irene Harrington and June Gordon present Sheldon's wetland painting to David Pont of the Bangalow Reconnecting to Country working group.



The composting toilet at the Rosebank Recreation Reserve was officially opened for business at the recent open day.



Aunty June Gordon (a Widjabul elder of the Bundjalung Nation) and Dennis Matthews (Dorrobee Grass Reserve Trust) open one of the beautiful interpretative signs at Dorrobee Grass.



Widjabul artist Sheldon Harrington painting with younger kids at Wilsons Creek Public School.



Students at Wilsons Creek Public School planting a bush tucker garden with Gaven from Madhima Gulgan Aboriginal Bush Regeneration Team.