

A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding a small, green, leafy plant against the rough bark of a tree trunk. The background is a blurred forest scene with sunlight filtering through the trees.

Understory

NSW BCT Newsletter
March 2020

Biodiversity
Conservation
Trust





Welcome to our fourth issue of Understory



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The effect of the Coronavirus pandemic on the operations of the BCT

In these unprecedented times we are all experiencing levels of difficulty and uncertainty. Here at the BCT our priority is the safety and peace of mind of our customers and our staff. We are now all working remotely where possible, and, as a temporary measure, we have ceased all field trips and site visits until the end of April when we will review this policy to determine whether this restriction needs to be extended into May. We have also made the decision to postpone any gatherings until further notice, including field days, conferences and educational events. This includes the 2020 Private Land Conservation Conference which we were due to host in Sydney this year – this has been postponed to an unconfirmed date in 2021. We remain optimistic and know that as the experts do their best to minimise the impact of the virus, we will do our best to support you and our people.

Recovery and regeneration

I want to take this opportunity to thank all the fire-impacted landholders who have reached out to us here at the BCT and encourage those who have not done so to contact us when you’re ready. Our focus for the months ahead will be on recovery and rejuvenation of landscapes that have been devastated by bushfires and drought; and assisting landholders in any way we can to speed up this process. In this issue of Understory you will read about landholders who have already applied for bushfire grants, and others who are still pursuing agreements with us despite so much loss. There are others who are simply seeking ecological advice and support from us. It is important to know what to expect on your land and how to manage it after fire and our regional ecologists can help.

Get in touch

We are continuing the process of updating our landholder database to include all relevant details, including email addresses. Please contact us if you think your details need to be updated, or if you want to share your story – we’re always looking for great examples of private land conservation to share in Understory!

Paul Elton,
Chief Executive Director

FRONT COVER Epicormic shoot at the Oxygen Farm. Image by Harriet Ampt.

OPPOSITE Bark of a leopard tree (*Flindersia maculosa*) near Quambone, NSW. Image by Coral Latella.

BACK COVER Landholder Jane Watson inspects an epicormic shoot at the Oxygen Farm. Image by Harriet Ampt.

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Central West Rivers conservation tender underway

This past month or so BCT staff have been busy working with landholders who have put in expressions of interest as part of our Central West Rivers (CWR) conservation tender (which is now closed). The BCT opens conservation tenders in high priority areas periodically throughout the year, providing landholders who have important native vegetation on their land, with an opportunity to receive annual payments to help manage and protect this landscape.

The CWR tender area covers approximately 238,000 hectares and includes the Warren, Coonamble, Narromine, Gilgandra and Bogan Local Government Areas. The area has been highly cleared or modified and much of the vegetation is listed as either a threatened ecological community or a type that is commonly over-cleared. Examples of these communities include grassy open woodlands dominated by coolabah and black box, myall, Mitchell grass, and wetlands. Many threatened species are also found within the tender area such as the bush stone curlew, brolga, and black-tailed godwit.

We ran a series of information sessions last November to introduce the tender and invite landholders in the region to submit an expression of interest to participate. These EOIs were prioritised and the highest-ranking sites were offered a site assessment.

BCT staff spent time in the last month or so visiting eligible properties, discussing management actions with the landholder/s and conducting ecological assessments. Our landholder support officers worked closely with landholders to develop a conservation management plan and proposed conservation management actions and these will form part of the landholders' submission as part of their tender bid. The plan and management actions map out the proposed conservation area on the property and includes agreed actions around



pest and weed management and grazing within this protected area.

Bid submissions close on 9 April 2020 and successful landholders will be notified in June 2020.

For more information about the CWR tender and other BCT tenders currently running, visit our website or contact us using the details at the bottom of this page.

Fixed price offers now available in the West

Along with conservation tenders, the BCT's fixed price offers are one of the mechanisms through which landholders can receive an income for their conservation efforts. Eligible landholders can apply to be considered for annual payments in perpetuity at a fixed price per hectare for managing their conservation area. Fixed price offers focus on the highest priority NSW landscapes and occur where there is biodiversity with limited existing protection, or where native vegetation is extensively cleared.

In early March 2020 the BCT extended fixed price offers to select areas in Western NSW, covering vegetation types we have not yet targeted under our Conservation Management Program. We are holding face-to-face information sessions with



key stakeholder groups in the West to explain the program in more detail. More information including eligibility and priority areas is available on our website. We will also be releasing an interactive online map which will enable prospective landholders to check their eligibility and calculate a price per hectare estimate.

The annual payments made under a fixed price offer are intended to contribute to the management of the conservation area and may include an additional one-off upfront payment to help establish essential infrastructure, such as fencing. Landholders can submit an expression of interest form at any time, and we assess and prioritise these forms at fixed times throughout the year. If a site ranks highly, we arrange ecological site visits to identify the potential conservation area and talk the landholder through the application process. If you'd like more information about our fixed price offers or Conservation Management Program, you can visit our website or contact us through phone or email.

OPPOSITE BCT's Cassie discusses the Central West Rivers conservation tender with a landholder. Image by Coral Latella.

ABOVE An echidna attends a site visit in the Central West. Image by Coral Latella.

RIGHT Accredited assessors attend the forum in Sydney. Image by Harriet Ampt.

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Accredited assessors forums in Sydney and Newcastle

On 5 March in Sydney and 12 March in Newcastle, we hosted workshops specifically for accredited assessors, who are external ecological consultants that are qualified to apply the biodiversity assessment method (BAM) for landholders and developers as part of the Biodiversity Offsets Program.

The forums were an opportunity for the BCT to share updates regarding the program, including BCT staffing roles, requirements for BSAs, streamlining processes, and new ecological guidelines. With the rate of biodiversity stewardship applications expected to increase, it was important to make sure everyone was on the same page in terms of the application process and ongoing monitoring and reporting. The forum was a great success and we will look to host similar events in the future.



Two days, six fire-affected properties

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In November last year, a number of out-of-control bushfires tore through NSW's Mid-North Coast. Hundreds of landholders were hit hard, and over 40 BCT agreement-holders were directly impacted. We visited a small handful of these landholders three months later, following a significant downpour of rain. The BCT staff who went along witnessed the sadness but also strength of these landholders as they begin to assess the damage and plan for the future. Sadly, many of the landscapes are permanently changed, however there are patches of green – indicating the natural recovery process has begun.

Phil Sheridan owns a small Registered Property Agreement along Bobin Creek. Phil saw the fire race towards his property and decided to stay and fight, with the help of a small bulldozer and house sprinklers. Miraculously his house is still intact, despite the hot fire burning meters away.

Phil is seeking funding through our conservation partners grants to restore damaged fencing and keep his cattle out of the creek, and to control the weeds popping up after the fire.

Also Seeking grant funding were the joint owners of the Oxygen Farm Inc. This collective of local residents owns one property close to Elands and the other in the Kippax Valley. They purchased the 375-hectare Oxygen Farm in 1993 and established their original agreement under the NPWS Act. Seeking more properties to conserve they bought a 101-hectare property in the Kippax Valley and established the Kippax Oxygen Farm agreement with the BCT in 2018. We were given a tour of the original Oxygen Farm near Elands by the collective's Chris Sheed and shown the incredible views from the Bulga Plateau. The fire damage is very visible along their walking track and down into the valley. Many residents believe it was the wetter forest in the valley that slowed the fire down and saved the neighbouring town of Elands from significant damage.

After receiving a grant application from the Oxygen Farm and handing over a new gate sign, we drove another ten minutes to Phil Sweeney's conservation area, also in Elands. Phil greeted us on the front of the lawn, full of stories. His land has a rich settler and veteran history, and he feels passionately about preserving that history along with the property's biodiversity. He showed us a number of notched trees which he believed are so old they formed part of the first buildings of Sydney. After being told about our conservation partners grants, Phil was also interested, and took a grant application form along with a wildlife watering station that the BCT's Toby had built and brought along.

On the second day we met Glynn and Margaret Edwards at a house in Cundletown. It was unusual to make a visit in town – this was not the Edwards' property and was a fair distance from their land – but it was where their insurance company had put them up for twelve months after their house next to Mount Coxcomb was completely destroyed in the fires. Together, we drove up to the property and three months after that fire, the mood was still very sombre. The Edwards lost priceless paintings and a decades-old fabric collection for quilting. In the months leading up to the fire event the Edwards had filled out an application to upgrade from a wildlife refuge to a conservation agreement, a document that was burnt along with their house and many other precious belongings. Despite their hardships they still asked for a new set of forms and wanted to proceed with the upgrade so that their land could have a stronger level of protection, in perpetuity.

Not only were the Edwards still keen to upgrade their agreement, they also convinced the owner of the neighbouring property, Meryl Clarke, who, after our visit, is now in the process of applying for an in-perpetuity agreement. The final landholder we visited has a legacy conservation agreement that was in place when he bought the property a few years ago. It was

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TOP Phil Sheridan showing BCT's Alison and Toby the extent of the damage. Images by Harriet Ampt.

BOTTOM Margaret and Glynn Edwards with what remains of their house after the fire.



the BCT's first visit to this agreement site, so we wanted to make sure the landholder John had all the information he needed about us and what support we are able to offer him. About half of John's conservation area was burnt in the fires, but the flourishing, bright green cycads provided a feeling of resilience and recovery. It was a positive end to the two days, with a hairy drive up a sloped road to a magnificent view of the area. Despite the devastating burns the flourishes of green on the landscape provided hope for the landholders of the Mid-North Coast, and the desire for continuing biodiversity conservation was potent.

ABOVE Phil talking through grant options with the BCT's Alison.

OPPOSITE, TOP Toby handing over grant application forms for Phil.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM New life for the cycads at John's property.

Regeneration in the Monaro

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Fifth-generation farmer, scientist and author Charles Massy wants to understand his country more than anything else, and delights in learning from it. On his property of just under 2000 hectares near Cooma, Severn Park, he has run a merino sheep stud for 40 years, and more recently his approach to land management has aligned with the growing movement of regenerative farmers. Massy believes an increase in ecological literacy, combined with modern management and scientific knowledge, is key to combating the constant pressures that natural landscapes endure under some conventional farming practices. He has collated all his research, knowledge and experience in his book, *The Call of the Reed Warbler: A New Agriculture, a New Earth*.



An area with characteristically treeless landscapes and rolling pastures, the Monaro is a priority investment area for the BCT. Diverse native grasslands are a vital part of the region's resilience and agricultural productivity. Some of them are also protected under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) because they contain a unique collection of plant and animal species not found anywhere else in Australia. In 2018, the BCT ran a conservation tender targeting these native grasslands, resulting in eleven new

conservation agreements covering a total area of 1,829 hectares. Charles Massy was one of these eleven successful applications, signing an agreement for a conservation area covering over 240 hectares of his property. The annual payments he receives as part of this agreement help support vital management actions such as installing fencing and regenerating native plants.

However, Massy's conservation efforts do not stop at the fence line of his conservation area, nor did they begin at the signing of his agreement with the BCT. His holistic approach requires him to understand and manage the entire piece of land rather than portion it off – he talks about his land as one living entity. This view of a landscape isn't necessarily rare amongst farmers and land managers, but Massy sees his land as a teacher, offering continual learning to those who listen.

It was raining when we visited Severn Park in March, relieving the exhaustive dry conditions felt across the state. The impacts of the drought were clearly visible as we drove across the Monaro landscape, seeing hills of bare, eroded soil and reduced numbers of sheep and cattle. The resilience of Massy's land compared to other land in the area is clear. In fact, a similar drought in the 1980s was the catalyst for him to change his land management approach.

For Massy, regeneration and production go hand-in-hand. He rejects notions of controlling the landscape, and instead emphasises the need to listen to, and work with it. Massy believes 'you don't have to kill things to grow things', which is evident on visiting his property. Massy is scientific, but that doesn't stop him from being extremely adaptable and able to act quickly. Driving across in paddocks, he points out the products of his hard work.

"That old acacia up there finally died," he points out to us while driving, "but then all these children started popping up all around it – the seed bank was clearly there. I stopped what



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OPPOSITE Lichen-covered basalt is scattered over the grasslands. Images by Harriet Ampt.

TOP LEFT Pointing out some key features on the landscape. Images by Harriet Ampt.

TOP RIGHT Improved cover is one benefit of Massy's approach to land management (right).

LEFT The drizzling rain highlighted the already striking landscape of candlebark trees and granite boulders.



I was doing and put a fence around it so the sheep wouldn't get to it."

Needless to say the new recruits were thriving.

Massy says being a regenerative farmer requires open-ended learning. The information that he has gained and will pass on to his family and the wider community is reminiscent of Indigenous knowledge sharing, a theme that clearly resonates for Charles. This end will stay open to future generations – Charles' daughter Tanya, a keen land manager and academic herself, is succession planning for Severn Park. She wants to continue her father's work of enabling a strong, resilient landscape for farm productivity, biodiversity, their family and the community as a whole.



OPPOSITE, TOP Charles (left) with daughter Tanya.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM There's a variety of native legumes growing at Severn Park, benefiting overall soil health.

TOP Candlebark trees (*Eucalyptus rubida*) changing colour in the rain.

ABOVE Looking closer in the grassland reveals a plethora of flowers, such as these native daisies.

Properties for sale

The BCT Revolving Fund is always looking for properties with high biodiversity value to purchase. To get in touch, please contact our Property Sales Manager Chris Perceval on 0437 147 611, or you can contact our general enquiries line (info on the back cover).



Blackbutt \$625,000

NORTHERN NSW

15 minutes to Uralla and less than 40 minutes to Armidale

- | Conservation/Agriculture
- | Mountain escape
- | Breathtaking views to the Honeysuckle and Moonbi Ranges



Gooreengi (3 Blocks) \$875,000 per block

HUNTER COAST

Minutes to Tea Gardens and beach
Under 1 hour to Newcastle or Nelson Bay
2 ½ hours drive from Sydney CBD

- | Conservation/Lifestyle
- | 3 unique blocks to choose from
- | Elevated House sites, easy access



Pretoria \$725,000

NORTHERN NSW

Centrally located between Tamworth, Gunnedah and Quirindi

- | Mixed farming
- | Lifestyle/weekend getaway



Fernleigh \$2,300,000

NORTHERN NSW

Located near the village of Blackville on the foothills of the Liverpool Plains

- | Conservation/Agriculture
- | Versatile Farming/Grazing
- | Family and/or Group accommodation



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Alan Goodwin, Director Regional Delivery

Thank You

The Biodiversity Conservation Trust gratefully acknowledges all those landholders who have shared their stories for this issue and for past communications.

Thank you to those who have supported the BCT through its start up, and to the many landholders who have told their neighbours, friends and family about us. Together we can work to protect biodiversity on private land in New South Wales.

Did you enjoy this issue of *Understory*? Please remember to recycle or pass this on to friends and family.

Do you want to receive your copy of *Understory* via email? If so, drop us a line at info@bct.nsw.gov.au with your name and property details and we will add you to the database.



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