

Northern Midlands Restoration Program Summary

June 2015

Introduction

The Midlands Restoration Program is a landscape-scale environmental restoration project designed to increase connectivity and biodiversity in the Northern Midlands, an agricultural region with a history of extensive vegetation clearing and slow decline in natural values. The program provides a great demonstration of how strategic restoration at an industrial scale (1,000ha in Stage 1) can reconnect a fractured agricultural landscape.



Macquarie River near Ross: cultivation of riparian strip in preparation for planting. Photo taken in June 2014

Aims and Objectives

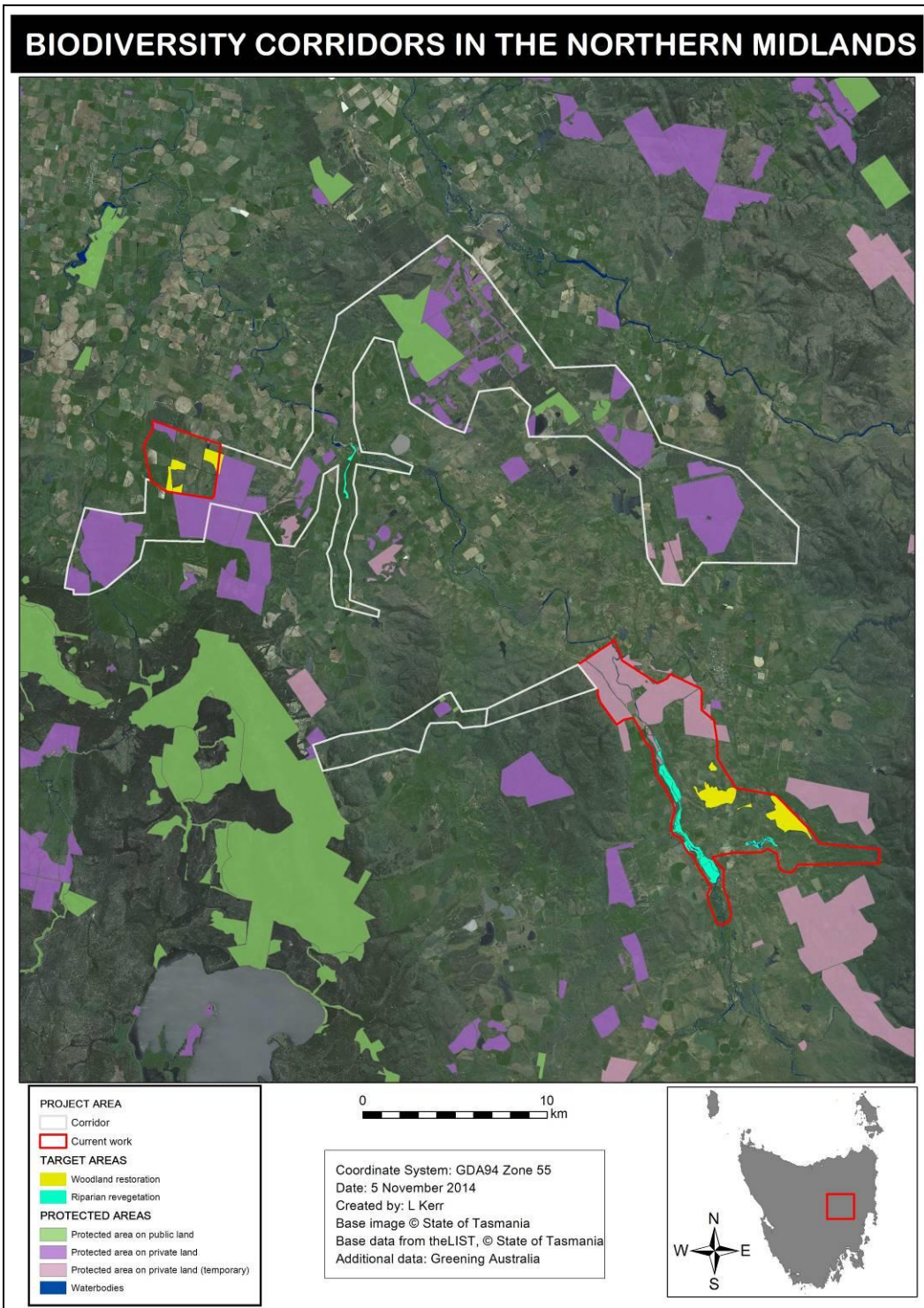
The aim of the project is to re-establish functional connectivity for critical weight range marsupials (those at risk from cats and foxes) and woodland birds in the northern Midlands Bioregion of Tasmania where less than 10% of native vegetation and less than 3% of native lowland grasslands remain. This is achieved by strategic restoration using local native species to buffer and connect existing vegetation remnants.

Background

The low dry landscapes in the Midlands of Tasmania are predominantly privately owned and have been farmed for more than 200 years. The distinctive native dry vegetation communities are now present as small fragments in a sea of intense agricultural production. Most remnant patches are severely degraded through loss of understorey, tree decline and invasion of exotic weeds, and are at great risk of further decline as a result of climate change. Greening Australia is working in partnership with the Tasmanian Land Conservancy, Bush Heritage Australia, Department Primary Industry Parks Water and Environment, UTAS, NRM North, and Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association implementing a Conservation Action Plan for the region and ecological models that identify optimum pathways to reconnect existing vegetation remnants to create 'corridors' and 'stepping stones' which facilitate the movement of native mammals and birds across the Midlands from the Eastern Tiers to the Central Highlands in response to a changing climate (see Map 1).

Greening Australia is the industry partner for two University of Tasmania ARC-Linkage research projects imbedded in the restoration program. Professor Brad Potts is leading a large scale field experiment investigating whether it's best to use local native provenance eucalyptus seed for restoration plantings in an area experiencing a changing climate. Associate Professor Menna Jones's team is researching how native marsupials and birds move and what do they see as good habitat in fragmented landscapes? This will help us determine design attributes of future restoration.

The program also employs a teacher on an education project with the local Oatlands, Campbell Town and Cressy District schools to engage local children and communities in all aspects of the program.



Map 1: Biodiversity Corridors in the Tasmanian Northern Midlands

Approach

The program is a long-term initiative (multi decades) with an investment of \$5.6million and 3-year objective in Stage 1 to restore 1,000ha of native dry woodland. The program's principle financial supporters are the Australian Government, the Ian Potter Foundation, the John Roberts Charitable Trust, the ARC Linkage program, Pennicott Wilderness Journeys, Targa Australia, Stornoway, the Dahl

Trust and participating landowners.

Two restoration approaches are being employed:

1. Riparian restoration: This is currently the largest riverine revegetation project in Australia. Near Ross, we have already replanted 8km of the banks of the Macquarie River and Tacky Creek (110ha) with local native riparian plants. These are dense plantings (625 to 830 stems/ha) that provide habitat for less mobile and secretive animals and birds.
2. Woodland restoration: We have buffered and restored 370ha of native woodland remnants near Ross and Cressy. The wide-spaced plantings recreate an open grassy woodland suitable for more mobile animals and birds.

Our 2015 planting program is further progressing wildlife corridors in the Ross link and Western Tiers to Epping Forest link through work on another four farms. Most plantings are along the Macquarie and Isis Rivers.

Successes

The 480ha of restoration conducted in 2014 with 120,000 native plants is growing well despite a 1 in 15 year dry season. Work is highly visible as a major part of the plantings is at Ross and includes the area either side of the road bridge where the Midlands Highway crosses the Macquarie River. This has created great public interest. We have received great support and interest from local landowners, a wide range of natural resource management organisations, and University researchers.



Grassy woodland restoration at 'Connorville'. Caged trees & shrubs planted August 2014 – photo May 2015

Conclusion

The project demonstrates that landscape scale restoration (100s to 1000s of ha) is achievable at a realistic cost and delivers benefits of increased connectivity and biodiversity. The establishment of the first 450 ha of restoration has generated great interest from neighbouring landholders making a continuous connection from east to west across the Northern Midlands possible.