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Newsletter of the Ecological Consultants Association of NSW Inc.

President's Message

This is the first opportunity that I have had to address you all in my new guise as President of the ECA. Firstly please let me extend my thanks to you for your support at the Annual General Meeting and to all those that have since wished me well.

I am very honoured to be in this role and aim to continue to build on the fine work of the past President and committee members. (It is no coincidence that the words "committee" and "committed" are similar!) I am standing on giant shoulders, particularly those of outgoing President Martin Denny. However, we will not lose Martin's knowledge, enthusiasm and even temperament, as he remains on Council. Thank you Martin. And thank you too to Leong Lim, outgoing First Vice-President. After a long involvement with running the ECA he is taking a well-earned break. The absence of his forthright contributions to our Committee meetings will be noticed! Danny Wotherspoon, too, is concentrating on other endeavours this year and we all wish him well. I am sure that although Leong and

Danny are not formally required to do so, they will continue to be active for the ECA.

Welcome to the new members of our committee - Phil Burrell, Toby Lambert, Liz Norris and Brian Wilson. Thank you for offering to give your most precious commodity - time - and I hope it will be a rewarding experience for you all.

We have such a big year ahead of us. The rules guiding our industry have changed - governments at all levels seem determined to keep us on our toes.

As of November 1, the Threatened Species Conservation Legislation Amendment Act is in place with the 7 part test and a raft of other changes. I hope you have all been to at least one of the briefing sessions run by the Department of Environment and Conservation.

Also, December 1 heralded the Native Vegetation Act (note, no longer the Native Vegetation **Conservation** Act - should I be cynical?) and the Department of Natural Resources (their name this week) is also running briefing

sessions for this legislation - check with your local Catchment Management Authority for details. Department of Planning (their name this week) was also included in these seminars, with officers there to explain Biodiversity Certification, the standard LEP, local and regional strategies and the removal/bundling up of SEPPS.

I have been to 3 of these sessions and have come away overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task, a little fearful of the future for nature conservation, but also excited by the new directions and opportunities for our industry.

I did, however, discover a bit of confusion with seemingly inconsistent advice regarding Routine Agricultural Management Actions and rural residential zonings. I am formally seeking clarification of this matter for you all and we will distribute the advice via email and/or in the next Newsletter.

If there are any other questions or comments you have about these changes, please discuss them with your fellow members via email so that we can all learn and, if there is an obvious confusion, we can have it clarified via formal advice from the relevant departments.

And I cannot let the federal government's changes to the industrial relations landscape pass without comment. Politics and opinions aside, the

proposed changes have the potential to affect every one of us, whether employer or employee or sole trader. The potential impacts I anticipate include the need for an added set of negotiation skills in our quiver, the need to give more time to negotiating contracts for pay and conditions and the power that these changes may give to the unscrupulous competitor to drive their input costs down. This last effect would mean that there is no longer a level playing field in regard to base level wage costs; this may have a big influence on the ability for us all to fairly compete for work.

I hope I haven't opened Pandora's Box here, but I think this is a suitable topic for civilised debate over a nice red or cleansing ale. I commend you all to take that opportunity over the festive season.

Have a wonderful and safe holiday season - enjoy whatever it means to you - and I look forward to a productive year ahead.

Kindest regards,

Liz Ashby
President

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Proceedings of the 2005 ECA Conference

The 2005 ECA Conference was entitled “**Meeting the Challenge - Understanding Endangered Ecological Communities**” and was held on Friday 16th September in the Hallstrom Theatre, Australian Museum, 6 College St, Sydney.

The subject of ecological communities is much debated and is the cause of a lot of uncertainty when assessing vegetation. It was therefore of particular interest to all concerned and resulted in an interesting and informative conference.

The aim was to clarify the definition of ecological communities from a legal

point of view as well as from a botanical point of view.

The following speakers put in a great deal of time and effort and presented interesting, practical and helpful papers:

Brian Preston SC (Keynote speaker)

Brian is an eminent barrister and expert in environmental law. Since 1992 he has taught at the University of Sydney and was involved in the establishment of a number of post-graduate environmental law courses including environmental dispute resolution and environmental impact assessment law.

Brian has also worked on several national and international environmental law projects including the drafting of national parks legislation for Trinidad and Tobago.

He was a member of the teaching faculty for the Indonesian Environmental Law and Enforcement Training Programme for the Indonesian Judiciary and a member of the Legal Working Group, National Oceans Office, Australia, at which he provided advice in relation to the development of the National Oceans Policy.

He has recently been appointed as Chief Judge of the NSW Land and Environment Court, succeeding His Honour, Justice Peter McClellan. He brings a legal perspective to many issues associated with

Endangered Ecological Communities, as well as offer advice to prospective expert witnesses to the Land and Environment Court.

Brian presented a paper called “Ecological Communities in the Courts” in which he highlighted the legal understanding of “Ecological Communities” and also a lot of the terminology that has a legal bearing on this subject.

Associate Professor Paul Adam

Paul is the current Head of School of Biological, Earth and Environmental Sciences (BEES) at the University of NSW and was formerly the Chair of the Scientific Committee, established by the Threatened Species Conservation Act.

He is a botanist and plant ecologist, who currently spends most of his time as an administrator but who has a long involvement in wetland ecology (particularly saltmarshes), rainforest ecology, pollination ecology and heathland studies.

Paul is involved with conservation agencies in the UK and Australia over many years, is a Board Director of the National Trust (NSW), and Chair of the Trust's bush management committee.

Paul's presentation was entitled “Grasping Bubbles – the elusive nature of Ecological Communities” in which he probed the existence of communities and expanded on the legal definitions and

understanding as explained by Brian Preston.

David Keith

David is Principal Research Scientist with the Department of Environment and Conservation. He has 25 years experience in research on native vegetation, including development of survey, mapping and analytical methods in the course of extensive case studies of plant communities on the east coast and tablelands of NSW

He is the author of a new book, "Ocean shores to desert dunes" on the native vegetation of NSW and the ACT, and over 50 scientific papers on aspects of plant ecology

David's other research interests include vegetation dynamics in relation to fire and grazing, plant population biology and risk assessment in conservation biology. He is also the former Vice President of the Ecological Society of Australia and a current member of the NSW Scientific Committee.

David's presentation, called "Assessing the values of native vegetation – Three alternative landscape models and their implications for conservation", gave a good overview of the representation of landscape transformation in models as useful tools for understanding and managing landscapes and helpful in the assessment of bushland values.

Judith Rawling

Judith is Managing Director of Urban Bushland Management Consultants and a field-based bush regeneration company – UBM Projects – both based in Castle Hill. She is an acknowledged expert on the management of threatened flora species and plant communities, and is widely known for her practical and pragmatic approach to environmental issues.

Judith is a graduate of the University of Ottawa (Canada) where she studied philosophy and English literature. She also studied Science at the Australian National University and at Macquarie University, where she earned a Master's degree for her research work on Pampas Grass (*Cortaderia selloana*).

Judith is a Ministerial appointment representing the Community to the NSW Noxious Weeds Advisory Committee, having served on this Committee for over 12 years. She is a past member of the Executive Board of Greening Australia, the Lane Cove Catchment Management Committee, the Revegetation Steering Committee of the Hawkesbury-Nepean Catchment Management Trust and the Cattai Catchment Management Committee.

Judith gave an entertaining talk entitled "The Difficulties of Implementing the Threatened Species Legislation in the Urban Environment". She successfully explored the various issues relating to

implementing the legislation in areas unsuited to sustainable recovery.

Peter Komidar

Peter is Director of the Ecological Communities Section within the Australian Government Department of the Environment and Heritage. During his 17 year career in the Federal Public Service, Peter has worked in areas as diverse as native forests, the Economics Unit, the ESD Secretariat, the Department of Finance and in the Minister's Office under Senator Hill. As a Director, Peter has headed up the Water Policy Section, the Wildlife Impact and Assessment Section and for the last 18 months has supervised the activities of the Ecological Communities Section. In his spare time Peter enjoys reading postmodern philosophy and racing sled dogs.

Peter's talk, "Ecological Communities – Definition and Identification", detailed the ecological community listing process and the process used to define the community once it is accepted.

Steve Mercer

Steve heads up the EPBC Act Referrals Section within the Federal Department of the Environment and Heritage. The section deals with all development proposals referred under the EPBC Act and decisions whether these proposals are likely to have a significant impact on matters of national environmental

significance, including listed ecological communities.

Steve presented a paper entitled "Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act) - Significance and Ecological Communities". He described the EPBC Act and how it works and detailed the general EPBC Act referral process.

We would like to thank all of these speakers for their excellent presentations and for their cooperation during the conference preparation and the compilation of the Conference CD.

Danny Wotherspoon
Conference Convenor



Some Comments on Endangered Ecological Communities

After the ECA conference on endangered ecological communities (EECs), I had further thoughts on some of the problems associated with

defining and assessing these sometimes-tricky buggers.

One of the main problems is determining whether the vegetation you are assessing is a specific EEC. Examples are the confusion between some variants of common communities and those occurring at the ecotone between the EEC and the common community, or the ecotone of two EECs.

In some of these cases, the NPWS has also subsequently published interpretative guidelines (eg NPWS 2002) that encompass a wider range of vegetation types than those referred to in the Scientific Committee's listing. In their defence, these guidelines are based on quadrat-based sampling and subsequent PATN analysis. For example, NPWS (2002) describes two communities - Shale/Sandstone Transition Forest High Sandstone Influence and Sydney Turpentine-Ironbark Forest Margin Forest, which do not conform to the Scientific Committee's listings of Shale/Sandstone Transition Forest and Sydney Turpentine-Ironbark Forest. Any lawyer worth their salt would latch on to this in court should a determining authority reject a development application on the basis that it had a significant effect on these communities.

The situation has been improved in more recent listings where the Committee has referred to published,

regional scale work in its determination eg with the various floodplain communities in which reference to analysis of quadrat data is included. However, there is still some confusion experienced by practising ecologists when tackling these communities. For example, the delineation between Swamp Oak Floodplain Forest and Swamp Sclerophyll Forest and communities on more elevated ground and where determination of "salinity" (apparently referring to concentration of NaCl not Total Dissolved Solids) of water tables is either difficult or dubious (J. Berrigan pers comm).

My proposal to resolve some of the difficulty is that DEC should establish a system whereby an accredited practitioner can submit data that is consistent with that used in regional surveys i.e. the standard 400m² quadrats in which cover abundance of each species is recorded along with information on the structure of the vegetation and dominant species and abiotic information (soil type; geology, landform, aspect etc). The data would be subjected to PATN analysis to compute which community/communities they are assessing in a given situation to provide comparison and consistency.

When I put forward this idea during the discussion session of the conference, it was put to me that CRA and other DEC

data is too unreliable; and (rather pompously, I thought) that as ecologists we should be able to judge for ourselves "what is what".

Tackling the second assertion first, I consider that if you think you should be able to judge any situation without reference to the data of others, then you shouldn't pretend to be a scientist. Reverting to the issue of data, I concede that there are inherent problems such as the reliability and variability of the data that would be submitted and that already in the database. However, I feel that analysis is superior to a practitioner standing there and saying well "It's this community because X% of the species listed in the determination are present", without taking into account their relative abundance; or as one practitioner (not an ECA member but experienced in the wiles of lawyers) has done - avoiding assessing an EEC as the soil landscape at the site was not listed in the determination even though everything else conformed. Also, if you are giving an opinion on whether some vegetation is an EEC or not, you should have the ability to do quadrat-based surveys i.e. standard scientific skills.

At the very least, the analysis of site vegetation data should be used in those Land & Environment Court cases where there is discrepancy between the two sides on whether an EEC is present or not. Furthermore, the building of the database

would be an iterative process where it becomes more robust over time and would allow the Scientific Committee to revisit some determinations.

Revisiting of previous determinations is necessary I feel, as some are obviously of State significance and can be demonstrated to be an entity in their own right (eg Coastal Saltmarsh) whereas others appear to be minor variations on a broader community e.g. Eastern Suburbs Banksia Scrub (ESBS). The problem lies in the broad definition of an EEC in the TSC Act ("an assemblage of species occupying a particular area") and the use of undefined terms in the associated assessment criteria such as "large" (in relation to reduction in ecological function), and "highly restricted" (in relation to geographic distribution).

The determination for ESBS states that it is different to other coastal heaths due to the age of the Aeolian sand on which it occurs and the lack of a few maritime species. However, in Dr David Keith's (2002) state-wide analysis of vegetation there is no mention of ESBS as anything different, although it does get a mention in his subsequent (2004) publication *Ocean Shores to Desert Dunes*. ESBS just appears to be a southern variant of his state-wide map unit "Wallum sands heaths", of which he estimates <30% has been cleared since European settlement. The online mapping of NSW vegetation generated from Dr Keith's

work (<http://maps.environment.nsw.gov.au/stateveg/default.htm>) also indicates this classification.

I agree with Judie Rawling's assertion at the conference that the amount of money and time that has gone into conserving tiny, non-viable remnants of some EECs is well beyond their significance at a State scale. I am not denying the importance of such communities at the local (LGA) scale and their significance could easily be recognised in the new biodiversity certification of LEPs that is a feature of the amended TSC Act. However, when they are blocking up the Land & Environment Court and other areas of the assessment process, their overstated status is diminishing the importance of truly endangered communities that are much more important at the landscape scale, especially those west of the Divide.

In conclusion, I would like to see a more analytical approach to the declaration of EECs and a system whereby ecologists such as us can contribute and benefit from a database of vegetation communities.

References

- Keith, D. (2002) *A compilation map of Native Vegetation for New South Wales. Draft Report July 2002*. NPWS Hurstville.
- Keith, D. (2004) *Ocean Shores to Desert Dunes the native*

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NPWS (2002) *Native Vegetation Maps of the Cumberland Plain, Western Sydney: Interpretation Guidelines*. NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Hurstville.

Paul Burcher



The ECA and the Port Stephens Comprehensive Koala Plan of Management

The Port Stephens Comprehensive Koala Plan of Management (CKPoM) has been a long time in the making. The CKPoM was preceded by the draft Port Stephens Koala Plan of Management (1994), prepared by NSW NPWS, Port Stephens Council and the Hunter Koala Preservation Society. A Port Stephens Koala Habitat Atlas was also prepared by the Australian Koala Foundation

(Phillips *et al.* 1996). The CKPoM was formally adopted by Council in June 2001 and approved by DIPNR, in accordance with SEPP 44, in June 2002. The CKPoM supercedes the requirements of SEPP 44 to identify potential and core Koala habitat and the need to prepare an individual Koala Plan of Management. Koala Plans of Management approved before 2002 are still applicable.

The objectives of the Port Stephens CKPoM (Port Stephens Council 2001) are as follows:

- Evaluate and rank Koala habitat throughout the Port Stephens LGA;
 - Identify priority conservation areas and strategies to protect significant Koala habitat and populations;
 - Identify threats that impact on Koalas and Koala habitat;
 - Provide for long-term survival of Koala populations by devising conservation strategies to effectively address each of the threats impacting on Koalas and Koala habitat;
 - Provide for the restoration of degraded Koala habitat areas;
 - Ensure that adequate detail is
- provided with DA's in order to assess, minimise and ameliorate likely impacts on Koala habitat;
 - Provide guidelines and development standards to protect Koalas and Koala habitat;
 - Provide for effective public awareness and education programs concerning Koala conservation issues;
 - Encourage appropriate eco-tourism programs;
 - Provide a formal approach for the assessment, retrieval, rehabilitation and release of sick, injured, orphaned or distressed Koalas;
 - Identify potential funding sources for implementation of the CKPoM;
 - Facilitate targeted Koala conservation and management-oriented research projects within the Port Stephens LGA; and
 - Provide for the effective implementation and monitoring of the CKPoM.

In order to oversee the implementation of the CKPoM a steering committee was

formed. This consists of representatives from Port Stephens Council, NSW NPWS, Hunter Water Corporation, Australian Koala Foundation, Native Animal Trust Fund, Hunter Koala Preservation Society, local residents and recently the ECA. I was originally drafted into the committee in 2003 as a representative of the Australian Wildlife Hospital and also as a local resident. Following the demise of the Australian Wildlife Hospital, I suggested that I could remain on the committee as a representative of the ECA. This suggested change in allegiance was readily accepted by the committees of both the CKPoM and the ECA, as some benefit to both groups was obvious.

Of most relevance to members of the ECA is the preparation of flora and fauna impact assessments as part of the DA application process. A major problem that I have encountered is the accuracy of the Koala habitat mapping. Like most large-scale habitat mapping, not all areas have been ground truthed and in the case of the Port Stephens CKPoM most emphasis has been placed on the Tomago Sandbeds, Tilligerry Peninsula, Tomaree Peninsula and swampy habitats around Raymond Terrace and Medowie. These are the areas with the highest populations of Koalas, with the most favoured food tree species being the Swamp Mahogany *Eucalyptus robusta*, in association with the Broad-

leaved Paperbark *Melaleuca quinquenervia*, Forest Red Gum *Eucalyptus tereticornis* and where it occurs, the Parramatta Red Gum *Eucalyptus parramattensis* subsp. *decadens*. However, the habitat on higher ground in the western parts of the LGA has been identified as marginal or unknown Koala habitat quality and the importance of the Grey Gum *Eucalyptus punctata* and Small-fruited Grey Gum *E. propinqua* to outlying Koala populations has been largely ignored.

Given the uncertainty of the mapping, consultants should not take the classification of a particular area in the CKPoM as 'gospel' and any inconsistencies should be noted in the assessment report and, particularly in the case of identified preferred habitat, the vegetation boundaries should be mapped. It should be remembered that a buffer zone of 50m, even over cleared land, is often required. This has major implications when dealing with the client as, in some cases, development of the property may be impossible under the CKPoM.

Another issue is the identification of potential urban growth areas in Port Stephens LGA, particularly in Medowie and Anna Bay. Port Stephens Council is currently conducting structure plans for the identified investigation areas, however, some developers may be under the impression that they will be able to develop all land within these areas. In truth, unless

the CKPoM is changed, (this requires agreement with DIPNR), any preferred Koala habitat plus a buffer zone and identified corridors will need to be excluded from any development plans and this substantially reduces the available area of developable land.

The CKPoM is a slowly evolving process and the Committee is able to make changes to the implementation procedures. Improvements to the habitat mapping, particularly in areas being considered for urban expansion, is seen as a top priority for the effective implementation of the CKPoM and is under consideration. My presence on the Steering Committee of the Port Stephens CKPoM gives the opportunity for consultants to comment on issues arising from the implementation of the CKPoM. Committee meetings are held four times a year, the next meeting scheduled for the 16th December 2005, so any comments, (not too many!), will be greatly received. Any submissions can either be emailed to me, Ray Williams at ray@ecotoneconsultants.com.au or directly to Steve Wilson at Port Stephens Council steve.wilson@portstephens.nsw.gov.au

Ray Williams



ECA Constitutional Vote Tally

Prior to the 2005 AGM, voting forms were distributed to practising members concerning proposed changes to the ECA Rules endorsed by the Council. 49 members were eligible to vote and a 75% majority is required by our rules to pass any proposed change. Therefore, for a change to be approved an affirmative vote of 37 was required. Votes were tallied at the AGM and with only 37 members voting, unanimity was required to pass any proposed change. The results were as follows:

Proposed change	Yes	No
<u>13. Constitution and Membership:</u> (6) A member may be appointed a particular office-bearer position for no more than 3 (three) consecutive years. (7) A member may be appointed Councillor for no more than 6 (six) consecutive years.	36	1

<u>11a Special Admission</u> The President may admit, with the recommendation and advice of the membership committee, under special and exceptional circumstances to full practising membership a non-graduate by special resolution at a general meeting, notwithstanding rule 2 (1) (c).	36	1
4. Financial and Membership Year <i>membership year means the 12 month period from and including 1st day of January in any year to and including 31st day of December in the same year,</i> <i>financial year means the 12 month period from and including 1st day of July in the previous year to and including 30th day of June in the current year,</i>	37	0
23c Annual General Meetings - Calling of and Business at to receive from the treasurer an Income and Expenditure	37	0

Statement for the preceding financial year and a Balance Sheet as at the 30th day of June of the preceding financial year,		
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41 Surplus property <i>In the event of the winding up or the cancellation of the incorporation of the Association, the Association shall vest its surplus property in the Royal Zoological Society of NSW or an association or corporation with similar objects to the Association, in accordance with a special general meeting of the Association</i>	35	2
42 Disciplinary Committee and Penalty <i>The ECA shall have a Professional Conduct and Ethics Committee made up of three (3) senior members of the Council and the Council shall determine, with the advice of the Committee, the appropriate proportionate penalty on any member found to have breached the Professional Conduct and Ethics Code.</i>	35	2

At the subsequent ECA Council meeting (24/10/05), it was decided that those rules that failed to be passed were of sufficient importance and the margins of their defeat so small that they should be put to the membership again. Consequently, a special issue of the newsletter will be published in the new year setting out arguments for and against the changes. Voting forms will then be issued.

Paul Burcher

Have you built a better mouse trap? Or discovered a better method than a random meander? If so, let us all share it with you and write for the newsletter.



Unusual/casual observations.

New Cat Exclusion Product

An article in the recent Australian Koala Foundation newsletter details a new product intended to benefit

wildlife via controlling movement of cats. The product is called "Catmax" and is an enclosure for house yards etc to contain or exclude cats and minimise cat-wildlife interactions. The article in the AKF newsletter details

"Catmax enclosures are constructed from a revolutionary new product called Clearnet which is a pre-stretched, knotted, low visibility, amazingly strong netting that can be applied to almost any domestic or commercial situation. It is UV protected and guaranteed for 10 years".

More information is available from the AKF website (www.savethekoala.com/catmax.html) or Catmax on 1300 306 605.

Before recommending to clients as an ameliorative measure or purchasing this product, I would check its potential for entanglement of birds and bats, which of course is a serious problem with some kinds of current exclusion netting used in orchards and yards (some types freely available in hardware stores are lethal). The pictures suggest it is a rather rigid (square-shaped) mesh which could be okay, however its worth asking the manufacturers first before creating a new problem when solving another.

Jason berrigan

Speckled Warblers, Winter Dunnarts and reptiles.

During a recent survey at Gundabooka National Park (and following on from my observation in the last newsletter) a pair of Speckled Warblers (*Sericornis sagittatus*) were caught in a pitfall trapline about 50km SW of Bourke. These birds are not listed for this area and it was an unusual capture, and may have been related to the capture of a Black-headed Monitor (*Varanus tristis*), in an adjacent trapline, which could have been following the little warblers too close for comfort. No Dunnarts at all this survey!! I think we were following on from Gerry and his reptile crowd, as all we seemed to capture were reptiles e.g. Lined Earless Dragons (2), Bynoes Geckos (2), Eastern Spiny-tailed Geckos (3), Shingle-backed Lizards (9).....(Where were you Gerry when we needed you??)

Phil Burrell

ECA Web Page

The ECA web page is at www.ecansw.org.au so go and have a look, then let others who might be interested know about it. The site contains some information on the history of the ECA and why it was formed, and a Mission Statement on what the ECA stands for. As well the

Office Bearers are listed as well as the Committees and their members.

There are details on how to join with the various categories of membership, and a list of current members with their contact details.

Membership Report

At the time of writing the number of members of the ECA was 59, comprised of 49 practising members, seven associate members and three non-practising members. New members (since volume 11 of the newsletter) are as follows:

Name	Town
Amanda Lo Cascio (Associate)	Sydney
Ben Hope (Associate)	Sydney
Bruce Hansen	Orange
Colin Bower	Orange
Jennifer Lewis (Associate)	The Hill
Malcolm Bruce	Sydney
Roy Wilson (Associate)	Valley Heights

Paul Burcher



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