CASE STUDY

Regeneration for Koalas and the Franklin River

The Franklin River is one of Corner Inlet catchment's major river systems. It rises high in the hills of Mt Best, north east of Foster, and flows through the steep slopes of the Strzelecki Range, through productive farmland, down to the inlet's estuary at Port Franklin.

The upper catchment is mountainous and extensively forested, making it excellent habitat for wildlife including lyrebirds, kangaroos, wallabies, owls and, importantly, the genetically unique Strzelecki Koala. The dominant ecological vegetation class is Wet Forest, characterised by a tall eucalypt overstorey that includes Mountain Ash, Messmate and Blue Gum – popular koala food.

Assisting landholders protect and increase on-farm koala habitat is one of the aims of the Habitat for Life - Friends of Strzelecki Koalas (FOSK) Project. The project, an initiative of the South Gippsland Landcare Network Fund, allocates funding through the Victorian Government Communities for Nature Grant for on-ground works that protect, enhance and restore habitat for the Strzelecki Koala population.

Landcare Groups in the Strzelecki Range have joined forces to do on ground works that provide both environmental and on-farm benefits. Mt Best farmer Tony Bowditch is one such Landcare member whose FOSK project will benefit not only his property, but also the Strzelecki Koala and the Franklin River.

***Photo** - Tony Bowditch standing at the top of one of his gullies where vegetation is quickly regenerating.*

Key Project Facts

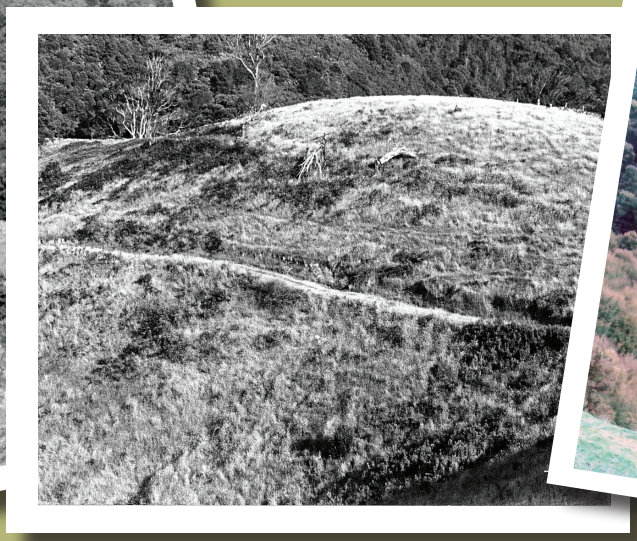
Property Owner
Tony Bowditch

Location
Mt Best
North-east of Foster

South Gippsland Landcare Network Group
Foster North

Property Description
66ha of steep slopes and gullies with 40ha cattle and sheep grazing and 26ha of remnant and regenrated bush vegetation.

FOSK Project Description
Fencing and weed management, primarily blackberry, on 1.22ha of river bank on the Franklin River.



Letting the Bush Regenerate

The Mt Best district was selected and cleared, with great fortitude, some 100 years ago. Initially consisting of dairy farms, the dairy cows are long gone and the steep slopes are now home to beef cattle and sheep.

Farming his 66ha since 1973, Tony has 360 degree views across his farmland that include Corner Inlet and Wilsons Promontory to the south and the forested hill tops of the Strzelecki Range to the north. He is also the custodian for a stretch of the Franklin River that borders the property to the west.

The farm is approximately 40ha of cleared grazing land and 26ha of bush. It has great vegetation connections to neighbouring landholdings, but this wasn't always the case.

"When we first arrived here in '73, there was very little native vegetation on the property, a patch or two of remnant bush and a couple of giant Mountain Ash, but that was about it," explained Tony. "The land was fairly bare, it had been heavily grazed and there was a fair bit of blackberry around."

For a period of 12 years, until quite recently, Tony had been unable to devote much time to maintaining the property due to major illness in the family.

However, over this period, and together with a decreased stocking rate, he has seen a remarkable amount of bush regenerate on the property.

"The bush has really come back in the deep gullies and in the areas where the stock no longer tend to go," said Tony.

There are some magnificent old trees scattered around the property and, without grazing pressure, they have self-seeded quite prolifically.

"More recently those areas have developed a thick understorey and now support a range of wildlife," added Tony. "Having sighted only one lonely grey kangaroo in 25 years they are now a most welcome presence."

This natural regeneration has been aided by one of Tony's methods of managing blackberries, particulary when infestations tower overhead. Firstly, taking due care to avoid hidden wombat holes etc, he drives a tractor over the mounds crushing the dead canes beneath and laying the bushes flat. Secondly, the bushes are allowed to lay flat until they 'freshen up'. Finally they can be easily sprayed on a more accessible terrain.

This has recently been put into practice, peparing access sites for upcoming fencing adjacent to the Franklin River as part of the FOSK project.

Photos *- Two black and white photographs from the 1970s highlight the contrast in vegetation coverage compared to that of today.*

The Strzelecki Koala is one of the most important koala populations in southern Australia.

The fact that they have a very high genetic variability may be the key to the survival of Victorian koalas in the future.

Stock Management, River Health and Koala Habitat

Fifteen years ago Tony fenced off his boundary with the Franklin River. According to Tony, back in the 1970s-80s when his children were young they would swim in the river in summer and had clear access to a number of favourite spots.

“Now it’s a bit of trek getting down to the river thanks to the regeneration that’s occurred since the cattle have been off the banks.”

The value of not having cattle in the waterway is not lost on Tony as he recognises the importance of this to the health of the river and the quality of water that flows downstream.

Through the FOSK project, Tony will be able to fence and manage the weeds on an additional 400m of Franklin River, resulting in Tony’s entire 2.75km of river frontage protected from livestock.

“From my experience here, I shouldn’t need to plant any tubestock or sow seed on the riverbank; by just keeping the weeds down and the cattle and sheep off the banks, nature I trust will do the rest,” Tony advocates.

Strzelecki Koala

Historically koalas were widespread across Victoria but populations declined in the early 1900s.

In order to combat this, koalas were translocated from populations with a very low genetic diversity on Phillip and French Islands to the rest of Victoria.

These koalas overwhelmed most of the remaining koala population in Victoria, except for those in the Strzelecki Ranges in Gippsland.

As a result the Strzelecki Koala population is believed to be unique in Victoria as a genetically intact and diverse population.

It is therefore feasible that this genetically diverse population will better withstand threats such as climate change than their genetically uniform cousins.

Wet Forest EVC

Wet Forest is extensive in high rainfall areas such as the Strzelecki Ranges. This Ecological Vegetation Class (EVC) is characterised by a tall eucalypt overstorey and a moist and shaded ferny understorey.

Mountain Ash, Blue Gum and Messmate tend to be the dominant tree canopy. These are eucalypt species that are part of habitat preferred by the Strzelecki Koala.

Blackwood, Silver Wattle and tree-ferns are common in this EVC.

Tony standing next to one of the more mature trees on a fenced-off section of Franklin River frontage.

Biolinks for Biodiversity

The fencing and weed control work that Tony has done along the Franklin River, and the work he is about to do through the FOSK project, effectively creates biolinks or vegetation corridors that contribute to the biodiversity of the area.

"It's great to see stands of 30 to 40 year old vegetation now linking with the remnant that's always been here and that will pretty soon link to patches of saplings that have shot up over the last couple of years," said Tony.

A good proportion of vegetation on the farm also links with that on neighbouring properties providing connected koala habitat and increased range for the local population.

"You hear the koalas rather than see them, so it will be good, over the coming years, to hear and especially see more of them around the place."

FOSK Habitat For Life Project

The FOSK Habitat for Life program is a community based four year program aiming to protect and support the unique Strzelecki Koala population in the Strzelecki Ranges.

The project aims to do this through a combination of strategic on-ground projects on private properties across South Gippsland and an extensive community education and volunteering program.

What Can You Do?

Many of the threats faced by koalas are due to the effects of urban growth and habitat loss.

You can help by:

- Becoming a FOSK supporter and subscribing to the quarterly newsletter
- Joining you local Landcare Group and planting trees for koala habitat
- Driving slowly on roads especially at night near remnant bush
- Joining a community education day where you can learn to monitor koalas
- Adding Fosky Koala as a friend on Facebook
- Looking after any trees you have by fencing them off from stock and controlling weeds.

Become a FOSK Supporter

Contact South Gippsland Landcare Network
phone | 5662 5759
email | sgln@landcare.net

www.fosk.org.au
www.facebook.com/SouthGippslandLandcareNetwork