



PROTECTING AND ENHANCING SAND RIDGE WOODLAND HABITATS ACROSS YORTA YORTA COUNTRY

Sand hills across Yorta Yorta country in northern Victoria and southern NSW hold important natural and cultural heritage values. The Sand Ridge Woodland Program is a six-year Australian Government funded program designed to improve and protect these values.

By supporting Yorta Yorta people working on Country, and creating employment opportunities in natural resource management, the program engages with public and private land managers in revegetating and regenerating native vegetation sites on and near sand hills controlling pest plants and animals and protecting cultural heritage sites.

▲ Image: Yorta Yorta's Woka Wolla NRM team members Andrew Saunders (left), and Amos Atkinson (right) with Project Manager, Mark Anselmi (centre).

These works will help protect and increase populations of plants such as White Cypress Pine, Yellow Box, Silver Banksia, Hooked Needlewood, Lightwood, Buloke and Sweet Bursaria that provide important habitat for fauna species including Barking Owl, Powerful Owl, and the Squirrel Glider.

Andrew Saunders and Amos Atkinson are two young Yorta Yorta men who happily spend each day working on Country protecting and enhancing endangered and culturally sensitive Sand Ridge Woodland habitats.

They are members of a works team known as *Woka Wolla* – an enterprise of the Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation (YYNAC). *Woka Wolla* is Yorta Yorta for 'land and water'.

In the first three years this project has achieved

1,346
hectares of revegetation

237
hectares of remnant protection

1,583
hectare area managed for pest plant and animals

450
kilograms of native seed collected and direct drilled

16.56 km
kilometres of fencing

4,466
plants planted

“When I was young no-one taught me, but through this project, and being around elders like Uncle Col, I have learnt a lot and I want to pass this on to my kids.”

- Amos Atkinson

Amos says, “The land has amazing power. We were doing some cultural heritage surveying up near Torrumbarry, at Richardson’s Lagoon, and just being there was eerie. I have two kids and I want them to learn about our culture.”

Andrew also speaks favourably of his experience. “We have had way too many young people wanting to join the *Woka Wolla* team. It is just the best job. It is awesome!”

Goulburn Broken CMA’s Jim Begley is proud of the relationship with YYNAC and what has been achieved.

“In the last three years the overall project has worked across 1500 hectares. The *Woka Wolla* team has been involved in a large portion of these works, including fencing, revegetation, weed control, rabbit control, site maintenance, seed collection, cultural heritage surveys, plant propagation and vegetation surveys.”

“Since private landholders manage 55% of Sand Ridge Woodland the project requires working with both public and private land managers.

The *Woka Wolla* team members have done a great job engaging with private landholders: it is a two way conversation, landholders often volunteer sites and artefacts that have been found on their properties over the years - often exposed when cultivating the ground - or *Woka Wolla* members have identified sites during surveys. Importantly, these sites can now be protected into the future.”

Neville Atkinson, YYNAC Elder, says the *Woka Wolla* NRM enterprise is a core part of the YYNAC business and a best practice model. Neville says, “Participation in *Woka Wolla* has been excellent and in fact we have had 30 people drop off resumes hoping to get into the team. We can’t promise anything. The young men and women who are in the team are important ambassadors for the Aboriginal community.

“It is not just about working on Yorta Yorta Country. It is about providing a service based on a capacity to fundamentally change those paradigms that exist in society. It is part of addressing the big issues affecting Aboriginal people, particularly the social inequity and welfare dependency.

“It is important to make sure we keep doing those things that are central to our cultural heritage. As Traditional Owners Yorta Yorta people need to make sure that those values are kept in play.

“My vision is that one day this enterprise will be more than just a service provider. It will be a major contributor to the economic and social well-being of the regional community.”

Goulburn Broken CMA co-ordinates the project with Murray Local Land Services, New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service and Parks Victoria also engaged in the project as key partners due to the large areas of Yorta Yorta country under their management. A Project Steering Committee has been developed with key stakeholders and experts in the sciences of ecology, biodiversity and archaeology to ensure that works undertaken are consistent with best practice for environmental and cultural heritage protection. Monitoring of the program is essential with photo points established and management agreements prepared to ensure commitments to monitoring over time and maintenance of investments.

The unique approach of a project that spans catchment boundaries and the state border has provided opportunity for YYNAC to develop partnerships, in areas where there had previously been little engagement, and has allowed for the improved management of many sand ridge woodland sites and associated cultural values that were not previously recorded or protected.