

A HISTORY OF THE SOUTH PINE RIVER PROJECT

by Jim Dale

INTRODUCTION

This is a story of change. It is a story of community vision, action and commitment. It is partly a story about the gradual loss of what was a unique ecosystem so common these days with urban development. The storyline however has had an upward trajectory with the commencement of the South Pine River project, with the potential to be part of volunteer folklore.

EARLY DAYS OF THE CATCHMENT ASSOCIATION

The North and South Pine Rivers Integrated Catchment Association (NASPRICA) was officially incorporated in January 1996 following a well attended public meeting in August 1995. (The acronym however proved to be too much for the more delicate minded, so the constitution was eventually changed in 2009 to reflect the association's preferred identity as the Pine Rivers Catchment Association - PRCA).

The whole of catchment management philosophy was espoused in the State's then *Integrated Catchment Management Strategy (1991)*, in what was a new approach to natural resource management that was being progressively adopted by a number of other states. The Goss Government of the time implemented large scale reorganisations of those agencies which dealt with natural resource management issues as part of its reform agenda. This saw the closure of the Soils Advisory Service and certain other extension functions in the old DPI, with the funding largely directed to the establishment of catchment management projects/groups throughout the State.

The initial quorum for the new association was determined through a number of public meetings, but it wanted nothing to do with any of the State agencies, appointing its own executive and catchment coordinator, and then developing a constitution based on model rules supplied through the then Department of Natural Resources. Towards the middle of 1996, invitations were extended to the various departments to "supply" representatives to represent them on the management committee, as per the sectors identified in the constitution.

Terry Shaw was the first coordinator, closely followed by Col Nielsen who operated from the Kallangur office of the old Pine Rivers Shire.

Meetings were then held in the council chambers of the then Pine Rivers Shire Council in Strathpine.

These were drawn out affairs sometimes lasting four hours, with not much understanding of what a catchment association was or what it could do. Much of the conversation was critical of both state and local government action and inaction, and it soon became apparent that political schisms were present and

developing within the membership, with catchment management shaping to become an issue at the forthcoming local government elections.

Certain seed funding had been provided to the association to develop its agenda and constitution, but it was seen in some sectors that these monies were being used to fund a campaign against sitting councillors. This prompted a complaint to the then Minister for Natural Resources (Howard Hobbs), who demanded that the association refocus its activities in accordance with the state's ICMS.

This refocussing took the form of an intervention by the Department of Natural Resources through a meeting with the Mayor (Councillor Yvonne Chapman), at which it was agreed that the department would assist the association to apply to the Natural Heritage Trust for a grant to continue the employment of the association's coordinator Peter Hayes, whose priority it would be to seek funding to establish the South Pine River project. Such a works project was seen as better focus for the association's energies.

Peter was assisted in developing the application in 1999/2000 by Norbert Hans who at the time was the caretaker at the then Bunya Sanctuary.

As part of this renewed direction, Council approved that the association move into the sanctuary building along with the Bunya Community Association Inc.

The NHT grant application was a significant ask by contemporary standards, and it was an even bigger surprise when it was approved. The project was underway!

THE PROJECT

The project commenced in January 2001, with Nathan Kirby as the first project coordinator. With assistance and guidance from Peter Hayes, the initial works program was implemented with the aid of several Green Corps teams.

The project was officially opened on 18 March 2001 by the then Member for Dixon, Cheryl Kernot, with a planting ceremony at the end of Dugandan Road at the spot where the old bridge was washed away in 1974.

Thus it was that the initiation of the South Pine River project was to give the fledgling catchment association a focus on what it should be doing.

A significant part of the original grant was allocated for the supply of plants, mulch and other consumables for the establishment of riparian vegetation. Whether by accident or lack of communication however, these were largely supplied as a contribution from the south pine area parks budget by Pine Rivers Shire Council, leaving nearly all the funding to pay for the project coordinator's wages. This ensured that the project had an excellent start, and it was still operational for sometime after its projected finish.

With plants taken care of, the project would not have achieved what it did without the input of the dedicated volunteers. This started with a handful of dedicated

souls from all walks of life – some keenly interested in the environment, others just keen to get outdoors, meet some new faces and share a morning tea with other volunteers as part of the Wednesday Warriors.

The call went out for more volunteers and before long a number of local custodians were established, each looking after their patch of the river. The river was, at that stage, quite a wild place – covered in head high guinea grass in places and dense lantana in others, with tenuously small remnants of the riparian rainforest that once grew along the creek. Old trucks, rubbish dumps, fences and massive fallen trees were uncovered. No matter what vegetation was present, one common theme was present throughout – ticks!.

Gradually tracks were hacked and access to the existing Council maintained tracks was established. The river became more accessible. A targeted program to remove ‘old growth’ cats claw creeper was implemented, with vines thicker than your forearm not uncommon.

With Council support in the form of mulch and machinery to undertake the heavy weed clearing, volunteer hours were recorded in working bee ‘sign on sheets’ and meticulously entered into the ‘database’ to help attract the next years funding. At the same time, the change along the river was becoming noticeable with areas that were only months earlier covered in weeds, now supporting healthy rainforest saplings.

When Peter Hayes left the association to join the DPI Fire Ant team, Nathan applied for and achieved the coordinator’s position. Jann McArthur and Cheryl Macleod were then both appointed as a part time team to engage with the communities on the north and south banks, to encourage local volunteers to carry on with the work. Initially Cheryl worked the north bank and Jann the south, but with Cheryl’s departure, Jann assumed responsibility for the whole project, and was with us until May 2015.

Initially, supplementary resources for the project were available through the Green Corps, and at least four consecutive teams were mobilised to maximise the roll out of the project. With the cessation of the Green Corps program, the local area volunteers were supplemented by Newstart recipients looking to satisfy their “mutual obligations.”

The project was always a partnership between the association and the then Pine Rivers Shire (and now the Moreton Bay Regional) Council. Originally, the grant funds were held by the Shire, who then paid the project officer using its HR systems. When the initial grant funding ran out, the Pine Rivers Shire generously provided additional funds to support the continued employment of the project leader, who at the time was operating under the direction of the association and the coordinator of the time.



Plate 1 Early Plantings at Sargents Reserve

This arrangement worked for a while until it became apparent that the Shire was no longer comfortable to continue in this way, and the responsibility for wages payments was transferred to the association together with an annual sum to use for this purpose.

This subsequent arrangement worked only for short period because the funding supplementation for the project usually arrived some time after it was required, necessitating that the association dip into its coordinator funding to carry the project through.

It was eventually agreed that the shire would employ the project officer on a temporary basis, and that the association would seek grant funding for the operational expenses of the project, which included the provision of a vehicle. Indeed this arrangement worked well for quite a number of years while the project was able to attract regular grants from various state and federal environmental programs.

Faced with these organisational issues, many projects might otherwise have folded long ago, but it is testament to the shared vision of the shire and the association, that a solution was eventually found to ensure that the South Pine River project has continued to this day.

LOCAL LAND USE CHANGES

When Bunya Wildlife Sanctuary closed its doors in 1994, much of the area was converted to a housing development, and the future of the more environmentally sensitive land along the Eatons Hill reach of the South Pine River was uncertain.

In 1997 the then Pine Rivers Shire Council acquired approximately 6 hectares of this land including the sanctuary premises, following strong representations from the local community synergised through the efforts of Kim Pantano. The site was eventually renamed Kumbartcho Sanctuary, and under the direction and energies of Kim and other members of the Bunya Community Environmental Association Inc. with the early support of Pine Rivers Shire (and later Moreton Bay Regional) Council, the site was cleaned up and a community nursery established.

With the creation progressive development of Kumbartcho Sanctuary from the remnants of the old Bunya Park Wildlife Sanctuary and the recent acquisition by Moreton Bay Regional Council of the old Riverwood Conference Centre from the Uniting Church (now the Yuraba Conference Centre), scope exists to create a major recreational and educational facility(s), joined by a unique walking experience along the river.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE AREA

The Eatons Hill reach of the South Pine River is relatively unique in so far that sections of its banks support what is often described in the literature as a “gallery” rainforest. This regional ecosystem is recognised as endangered due to its limited area of occurrence coupled with the contemporary pressures of weed invasion, grazing and gravel extraction. It was classified as RE12.3.1 by Sattler and Williams (1999).

Fortunately gravel extraction from the downstream part of the reach in the area of Cash’s Crossing ceased in the 1970’s, allowing the stream bed gradient to stabilise. This stabilisation was accompanied by an influx of weeds, not the least being guinea grass, castor oil bush, cats claw creeper, balloon and madeira vine. The cessation of gravel extraction was accompanied by the development of the suburbs of Eatons Hill, Bunya Riverside and Albany Creek. These developments brought their own problems with increased peak inflow rates attributable to the hardening of the catchment, and the practice of some riverbank residents of throwing their garden clippings over the banks. Certain exotic species were able to then colonise the ecosystem to its detriment.



Plate 2 Madeira Vine - Sargent's Reserve 2001



Plate 3 Sargent's Reserve 2002

In the early days before the construction of the current high-level bridge, Cash's Crossing was a popular weekend picnic destination in its rural setting of the time. It is less so these days with housing development, and the proliferation of guinea grass and castor oil bush that has virtually covered what is left of the sand bars in this section of the river. Upstream of the Cash's Crossing however the essential structure of the galleries still exist interwoven with stands of *Casuarina cunninghamiana* and *Callistemon viminalis* forest.

Suburban development has made access to these riparian forests much easier, and it has been evident over the life of the project that there has been a significant increase in passive recreation using the largely unformed pathways that have resulted from the work activities.

Recently, a group of like-minded people formed a bird watching group – *Birders of the South Pine*. The group has been recording its sightings on a regular basis for over four years, which has manifested into the publication of a book *Birds of the South Pine River*.

The group is now looking to engage students from local schools with short tours, with a view to increasing environmental awareness in young people.

Without the project and the enhancement of the gallery forest/sheoak interfaces over the past 14 years, it is doubtful that the full avifaunal populations would have been as apparent or accessible for study.

THE FUTURE OF THE PROJECT

With Jann McArthur's departure in May 2015, work on the project has reduced to one morning per week, under the supervision of Moreton Bay Regional Council's bushcare team. Pine Rivers Catchment Association has undertaken to seek operational funding for the project by applying for grant monies when such might be needed.

Ultimately the vision is to fully rehabilitate the reach between Kumbartcho and Yuraba to the extent of moving beyond the extremities of the gallery rainforest and into the open forest country. Currently much of this area is mown on a regular basis by Council and local residents.

Completely treeing up this area as part of the walking trail would eliminate the need for this regular maintenance, and substantially improve the walking trail experience between the two centres.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Sattler, P and Williams, R. eds (1999) *The Conservation Status of Queensland's Bioregional Ecosystems*, Environmental Protection Agency, Brisbane.
Queensland, Department of Primary Industries (1991) *Integrated Catchment Management Strategy*

APPENDIX 1 PAST AND PRESENT COORDINATORS



Plate 3 Sargent's Reserve plantings and weed control June 2002



Plate 4 Carter Court Bunya Riverside June 2002



Plate 5 Carter Court January 2003