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Connect with Nature



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Connect with Nature 24-25

Project Brief. Prepared by Trudy Nelsson

Connect with Nature 24-25.....	1
Who – we are, Background	2
What we would like to do.....	2
Where:	3
Why:.....	4
How.....	5
Plant ID, common and not so common species, Field Day workshop	5
Description:	5
Seed bombs and Collection - Field day workshop	5
Description	5
Host TAFE applied science camps	6
Description	6
Lifely, Field activity days	6
Description	6
Weed control Field Day workshop.....	7
Description	7
Campfires and Science	7
Description	7
Outcomes	8
Monitoring.....	9
Budget.....	9

Who – we are, Background

The WCMN (established 2006, incorporated 2011) has a core committee of 10 members, we have a mailing list of 50+ our events are oversubscribed. The CMN covers approximately 170,000 ha around the Wedderburn District, in the NCCMA catchment area. This includes fragmented public and freehold properties important for conservation of Box-Ironbark forests and Mallee woodlands. The Malleefowl is the signature species of this CMN.

We undertake site-based activities like: threatened species monitoring, revegetation, nest box observations, Spring-soak vegetation surveys, and addressing landscape-wide problems like, weeds and foxes, and importantly community education. We work closely with locals, traditional owners, government agencies and non-government organizations.

We're committed to creating a future where natural and cultural landscapes are cherished, protected, and thriving. We believe in the power of collective action and the importance of an inclusive approach to conservation. Together, we nurture a legacy of stewardship that benefits both current and future generations.

What we would like to do

This project aims to enhance the capabilities of volunteers and community members, by equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and tools to effectively contribute to local conservation efforts. Through education, technology, and citizen science, we seek to foster a culture of environmental stewardship, building a more engaged and informed community, dedicated to protecting the natural and cultural heritage of our environment, showcasing Wedderburn and its surrounding ecosystems.

An objective is to restore and protect the natural habitat of the culturally significant Malleefowl (*Leipoa ocellata*), an endangered bird native to the region, and to address severe land degradation resulting from native vegetation clearing. This resulted in altered hydrology, increased erosion, salinity, weed infestations, invasive species, and is exacerbated by climate change. Our coordinated environmental education program will help tackle these issues by educating, inspiring, and empowering participants about the importance of conservation and sustainable land management practices and how they can be involved.

The project will:

- Strengthen knowledge of common, rare, and threatened species in local areas.
- Provide an understanding of habitat and dietary needs for threatened fauna and flora.
- Enhance ecological literacy and project skills for protecting local species.
- Train participants in monitoring and documenting rare or threatened species.
- Encourage active involvement in native fauna monitoring and protection.
- Create a safe space for innovative ideas to improve program effectiveness.
- Collect data to evaluate resource management practices and support ongoing programs.
- Promote ongoing volunteering and positive engagement with our natural surroundings, fostering a deeper connection and appreciation for the environment.

Where:

The Wedderburn and Wychitella Districts encompass 170,000 hectares of fragmented public and private land, featuring Box-Ironbark forests, Granitic outcrops, and Mallee woodlands. Since European settlement, land clearing and fragmentation have exposed native ground-dwelling species like the Malleefowl and Bush Stone-curlew to predation by feral cats and foxes, leading to significant population declines. Today, the area is used for competing activities such as farming, eucalyptus distillery, tourism, conservation and gold detecting, but it still retains valuable native vegetation. These remnant bushlands provide vital habitat for declining woodland birds such as the Hooded Robin, Diamond Firetail, and Brown Treecreeper. The region is also a key refuge for the critically endangered Swift Parrot. In addition to its environmental significance, the landscape holds important cultural heritage, with scar trees, shelters, and middens offering physical traces of Traditional Owners' ancestors amidst a broader decline in cultural awareness and practices.

Why:

This project aims to increase environmental awareness and literacy of participants, through a series of workshops (one day, weekends, and week-long camps), teaching participants about local ecosystems, the flora and fauna, their ecological roles, and the impacts of invasive species, and how we all can have positive and meaningful impacts, in practical ways. This knowledge will encourage sustainable behaviours and a greater connection with our natural environment and each other.

Enhanced community involvement in conservation efforts is achieved by engaging schools, TAFEs, community groups, and families in hands-on activities, such as plant identification workshops, understory planting days, weed management techniques, native seed (collecting and cleaning), and wildlife monitoring. These activities foster a sense of ownership and responsibility, promoting ongoing volunteerism and stewardship. The training provided will empower community members to contribute meaningfully to citizen science projects, enhancing conservation efforts, and providing opportunities for lifelong learning and connection to nature.

These outcomes will be achieved through inclusive educational programs, hands-on activities, ongoing volunteer opportunities, and strong community partnerships. We bring together diverse groups, collaborating with schools, girl guides, traditional owners, community houses, disability support services, and other organizations, to work toward common environmental goals, the project helps strengthen community cohesion and collaboration, by building stronger social bonds and networks, and that peace from being in nature.

Finally, by encouraging feedback and innovative ideas, the project fosters a culture of continuous improvement and adaptation in the project's delivery, and in the conservation practices we showcase, ensuring its long-term success and relevance.

How

Each activity will include a cultural heritage component.

Plant ID, common and not so common species, Field Day workshop

Activity Quantity: 2

Description:

Tour of Wetlands, Gatjin Dja, Assessing plant communities

Plant Identification/familiarisation of common Eucalypt, Acacia and Melaleuca species identification, Field worksheet, Group discussion,

Participants gain basic skills and knowledge required to recognise and identify commonly encountered native plants and weeds, including desired species for seed collection to use in revegetation projects.

Resources: OH&S Field worksheet, Magnifying glass, Leon Costermans' Native Trees and Shrubs of South-Eastern Victoria, Flora of Melbourne, Weeds of the South East, Bush invaders of the South East, etc.

Collaborators/Partners: Cassinia(?), Bendigo TAFE, seeding Vic(?) Paul Foreman(?) Gary Cheers(?)

Costs:

Seed bombs and Collection - Field day workshop

Half to One day Seed Collection and seed bombs workshop

Activity Quantity: May be done in conjunction with other activity days

Description

Hands-on workshop demonstrating how to collect native seeds. Participants gain basic skills and knowledge required for seed collection including harvesting, sorting, storing, treating, and the tools needed. Create seed bombs of local acacia and melaleuca species to restore and protect habitats, stabilize ecosystems, and support the recovery of threatened Malleefowl.

Resources: Smoke water, Ball clay, appropriate native seed, seed raising mix, paper bags

Collaborators/Partners: Lively, home school network, guides (?)

Host TAFE applied science camps

Activity Option: 3 – 5-day TAFE Camps, and field days

Activity Quantity: 2

Description

Develop and acquire specialized knowledge, skills and techniques to survey animals and plants, add observations to the VBA and ALA, monitor waterways, assess and restore natural sites, and create respectful awareness of culturally significant sites within the land management areas of the Wedderburn district. Participants explore environmental issues, engage in problem solving, and take action to improve the environment. As a result, individuals develop a deeper understanding of environmental issues and have the skills to make informed and responsible decisions.

These students then contribute to the growth of a workforce dedicated to preserving and restoring our natural environment. This, in turn, will positively impact our region's ecological health. It will empower individuals to pursue their passion for conservation and enable them to contribute meaningfully to our society's well-being.

Resources: OH&S Portable toilet hire, Venue hire, catering,

Expected completion date * 31st July 2025

Collaborators/Partners: Bendigo Tafe, Holmesglen Tafe, Parks Vic,

Lifely, Field activity days

Various Season based activities (planting, seed propagation, making seed bombs, activity-based nature walks, pollination, explore hunts)

Activity Quantity: 10 per year

Description

Lifely is a disability service provider operating in the Loddon Mallee region and they partner with the WCMN to deliver activity days in nature. These days have occurred at Mt Korong NCR, Kooyoora State Park, conservation properties, and other reserves in the Wedderburn district. Participants can try nature photography, Bird Watching, bug collecting, making seed bombs, participate in revegetation and weed control projects, and learn about the local wildlife and ecosystems.

Resources: OH&S Catering, bus(?),

Expected completion date: * 31st July 2025

Collaborator/Partners: Lifely, Disability support staff, Parks Victoria,

Weed control Field Day workshop

Locally common and emerging weeds, identification and control options

Activity Quantity: 1

Description

The workshop will clearly identify the issues the target weed poses to our farming and ecosystem systems. Participants will observe the biology and ecology of the weed. Management options, informed by both participants' and industry experiences as well as research outcomes, will be discussed. Additionally, sessions focused on assessing failed management tools and brainstorming new ideas will help in developing and integrating effective management strategies

Case study: Wheel Cactus, biology, various techniques trialled, cochineal, Stem injection, cladode injection, Glyphosate, Daconate (Organoarsenicals group of herbicides), mulching, burying, goats and drones.

Resources: OH&S Literature, bus hire, herbicide, equipment maintenance,

Expected completion date * 31st July 2025

Collaborators/Partners: Bush Heritage, Djaara, Cassinia, Loddon Shire, and Buloke shire

Campfires and Science

Activity Option: Weekend camp where we present on the various topics with subject matter experts

Activity Quantity: 1 autumn

Description

The workshop will showcase the district's flora and fauna, through guided spring wildflower nature walks, arboreal mammal spotlight tour, ecologist talks, and campfire chats.

Resources: OH&S Venue, bus hire, toilet hire, Literature, Presenters' fees,

Expected completion date * 31st July 2025

Collaborators/Partners: Bush Heritage, Djaara, Cassinia, VMRG, Wettenhall, Paul Foreman(?) Gary Cheers(?) Julie Whitfield

Outcomes

This project aims to significantly improve local environmental health, through various conservation based educational activities and workshops. We focus on weed control, revegetation, landscape restoration, and ongoing monitoring of Central Victoria's last remaining Malleefowl population. The project's activities will help mitigate land degradation, reduce erosion, improve soil quality, add to the biodiversity and water retention in the landscape.

Our district has seen unmitigated growth of Wheel Cactus *Opuntia robusta* (WONS), by providing education on what we've done in the past, best practice methods, where to obtain equipment, and how to use it, to reduce cactus infestations, which will improve local habitat.

The seed collection supports on-going revegetation projects and provides seeds for the seed bombs. These provide another vector for seed dispersal, which assists in improving plant diversity. Enhancing these habitats supports species recovery and helps increase ecological health in the area, providing essential habitats and food sources for local wildlife, including threatened and endangered species.

Monitoring activities, such as wildlife surveys and data collection on flora and fauna, all contribute to a better understanding of our local ecosystems. This data informs future conservation efforts, ensuring targeted, effective management strategies, that address specific environmental challenges.

These outcomes will be achieved through a combination of hands-on restoration activities, weed control days, seed collecting, and educational workshops that promote sustainable land management practices. Engaging the community in ongoing conservation efforts and citizen science projects, the project builds local capacity for environmental stewardship and ensures the longevity of these positive environmental impacts.

Monitoring

To monitor and measure the success of this project, we will focus on key indicators related to volunteer involvement, education, and biodiversity monitoring.

Volunteer Involvement: We will track volunteer participation by recording the number of volunteers, hours contributed, and specific activities completed. Sign-in sheets, online registration forms, and digital check-ins will be used to gather this data. Additionally, volunteer retention rates will be monitored to assess ongoing engagement. Feedback from volunteers will be collected through surveys and informal interviews to understand their experiences and identify areas for improvement.

Education: Success in educational outcomes will be measured through pre- and post-activity surveys to assess changes in participants' knowledge and awareness of environmental issues. Workshops and field activities will include interactive assessments, such as quizzes or group discussions, to evaluate learning in real-time and to pace it according to participants needs. We will also track the number of educational sessions delivered and the diversity of participants to ensure broad community reach and impact.

Biodiversity Monitoring: Biodiversity outcomes will be monitored by conducting regular surveys of local flora and fauna before, during, and after project activities. Techniques such as bird counts, and flora species richness and abundance surveys will be used to assess species presence and diversity. This data will help evaluate the effectiveness of habitat restoration efforts and inform future conservation strategies.

Budget (refer excel spreadsheet)

Funding to be applied for \$20,000, In Kind Support field surveys, data collection, equipment usage, project management, coordination, advertising, workshop support, catering, printing, internet, phone usage, committee meetings, knowledge sharing, teachers, presenters.