

BUSHLAND IN KU-RING-GAI

A summary of progress made in bushland management, of the present position, and of the challenge for the future.

Prepared by the Bushland Management Working Party for Aldermen and Senior Management.

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INTRODUCTION

The Municipality of Ku-ring-gai contains many natural areas which can be described as bushland. These range from large tracts to tiny enclaves - from pristine areas which have changed little over the past 200 years to areas so degraded that they only just earn the title of bushland.

Council has the obligation to manage these areas and in 1981 appointed a Bushland Management Working Party to advise it on proper management policies and techniques. A Plan of Management has been prepared by the Working Party and has been endorsed by Council. The Working Party believes that good progress has been made since its inception and recognises that Aldermen and Council executives have contributed greatly by accepting advice, by allocating funds, and by being generally supportive.

The Working Party believes, however, that it has not made Aldermen and senior staff fully aware of the social, commercial and ecological gains which can follow from proper management techniques. There is, in some quarters, a view that money spent on bushland is money wasted.

The purpose of this submission is to present the arguments for bushland management as they relate to Ku-ring-gai.

A SHORT HISTORY

Bushland within the Sydney metropolitan area was relatively plentiful up until the 1950s. The massive urban growth after the war, however, saw natural areas disappearing at greatly increased rates. This process overlapped the emerging community environmental awareness of the 60s and 70s and set the scene for conflict within the community which was evident throughout the metropolitan area. In Ku-ring-gai the furore which exploded over the Canoon Rd. netball courts was a classic example. It came as a surprise to all involved that previously politically docile, middle class ratepayers were prepared to stand in front of bulldozers and to contribute large amounts of time and money to stop the destruction of bushland. These affluent suburbanites - churchgoers, businessmen, community minded people, could not be dismissed as radicals or paid agitators.

It is to the great credit of Council that it adapted to the new community mood by modifying its attitude to uses to which bushland could be put and as part of that process initiated the formation of the Bushland Management Working Party. A measure of this responsiveness is that aldermen who were protagonists in the Canoon Rd. episode were amongst those who supported the formation of the Working Party.

Since 1981 progress made includes the following landmarks;

1982/83 Production of The Bushland Management Survey by R.A. Buchanan. This survey classified all the major bush reserves under Council's control and provided a data base to assist with decision making.

Production of a pamphlet for residents.

1983 Production of the film The Bush Beyond Your Garden. This film has been widely commended, shown throughout the Municipality, and has recovered significant revenue in sales and hire as well as bringing Council recognition and respect.

1984 Production of the Plan of Management for Bushland Areas. This Plan is the first (of which we are aware) adopted by any Metropolitan Council and has set Ku-ring-gai apart as a leader in this field.

1985 The employment by Council of a team of qualified regenerators, for the second half of 1985 and then for the whole of 1986.

THE VALUE OF BUSHLAND

In order to justify spending money on bushland it must have a value to protect or enhance. In some respects this value is subjective and a matter of individual taste - much like a painting or a style of architecture. In many other respects, however, there are more tangible aspects to the valuation.

- * Bushland areas are important for the Municipality's recreations such as bushwalking, the study of natural history or simply allowing city dwellers ready access to natural areas for passive purposes. Bushland is important as a playground for children and allows opportunity for adventure and nature appreciation.
- * The aesthetic value of natural bushland in an urban environment cannot be underestimated. Natural areas improve the cityscape, and act as a buffer between residential and other land uses.
- * The presence of good bushland improves property values in much the same way as a view or lack of traffic. Residents perceive degraded bushland as being of lower value and make constant requests for Council to improve its appearance.
- * Remnant bushland areas help conserve animal and plant species. They provide habitat for wildlife, especially birds, and where smaller bushland areas are linked together, they act as wildlife corridors thus allowing the free movement of many species.
- * Urban bushland areas are located within the community close to homes, schools and universities. They are valuable for educational purposes, acting as living laboratories for the study of subjects such as biology, ecology, zoology and biogeography.
- * Many urban bushland areas have important historical and archaeological value.
- * Bushland helps to stabilise soils, preventing erosion and the siltation of streams and estuaries and so protects the delicate ecology of these areas.
- * Bushland provides one of the few tangible links with Sydney's natural environment before the arrival of European settlers.

THE OPTIONS

In order to illustrate the rationale behind the recommendations of the Working Party the consequences of various courses of action are summarised below.

Had Nothing Been Done.

The consequences, had Council not reviewed the policies which existed up until 1980, would have included;

- * The continued loss of bushland to weeds and degradation caused by Council and resident dumping, spraying, "firebreak" clearing, and annexation of bushland.
- * The loss of whole species (such as *Banksia ericifolia*) from the municipality due to poorly planned control burning.
- * Greatly increased expense due to the increased maintenance costs incurred when bushland is converted into mown parkland, or continually treated for major weed infestation.
- * A gradual shift from typical Australian bush settings for much of the Municipality to the "...ordered woods and gardens" typical of European city landscapes.

If The Plan of Management is Implemented.

- * Implementation of the Plan will, through its education provisions, bring about a change in public behaviour towards bushland and thus reduce dumping, annexation, and other harmful practices. One effect of this will be lower maintenance costs for Council.
- * Implementation of the Plan will ensure that Council staff become versed in proper management practices so that all Council activities affecting bushland will cause least damage and therefore least maintenance cost.
- * Implementation of the Plan will ensure that new developments in the Municipality are carried out with the least detriment to bushland.

- * Implementation of the Plan will put in motion the gradual prevention of degradation and the restoration of degraded areas in such a way that future maintenance is minimised and the aesthetic qualities of the bush are restored. This is consistent with Council's responsibility for the long term conservation of recreational bushland.

THE CURRENT POSITION

Council has made some progress in implementation of the Plan. Some of this progress has been in the education area through such initiatives as the film, letters to residents etc. Of particular benefit has been the fire hazard control aspects where a previously divisive and troublesome subject has been resolved to the reasonable satisfaction of all interested parties.

If the physical damage which has been done over the years is to be rectified and further degradation halted, however, it will be necessary for Council to implement those sections of the Plan dealing with regeneration work, drainage rationalisation, nutrient control and the like.

Progress has been made by the employment of a regeneration team under the leadership of a qualified regenerator. Results from this team have been quite spectacular in Fraser Park and at East Killara. Work is proceeding at Mona St. Wahroonga and the team will then move on to other priority sites. **Funding for this team runs out in late 1986, however, and unless funding is continued many of the gains, hard won in the field, will be lost.**

There are some areas of Council field activities in which the the principles laid down in the Plan are being ignored. Insofar as this is happening a future liability in maintainance expense is being created.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF BUSH REGENERATION

The Working Party believes that many observers equate bush regeneration with gardening in that they expect the labour input into a bush area to be similar to a formal park-garden setting and to remain constant year after year. **Nothing could be further from the truth.** Every aspect of bushland management advocated by the Working Party is designed to return the bush to a self sustaining condition requiring minimal maintenance.

Experience gained to date with the Fraser Park site supports the low maintenance contention. The initial condition of this site is shown in Photo 1 . Regeneration work was commenced here in 1984 with funds provided by CEP. 13,230 labour hours were expended to treat 3.3 hectares of this heavily degraded site. The appearance after treatment is shown in Photo 2 . Since that time a total of 1,110 labour hours were spent in consolidation work in 1985 and 800 hours are estimated for 1986. Photo 3 shows the extent of regeneration of native species. It is estimated that the hours required to maintain this reserve will reduce to 530 in 1987, 260 in 1988 and a mere 66 per year in 1989 and thereafter.

It is interesting to speculate on the future Fraser Park would have had if treated by traditional council methods. It would either have been left in an overgrown, unsightly and useless state or subjected to a clearing and replanting programme which would have involved prohibitive maintenance or a swift return to an even more degraded and useless condition.

The response from the residents adjoining Fraser Park has been positive with many letters of appreciation being received by Council. Typical letters are appended.

THE FUTURE

Ku-ring-gai is responsible for large areas of valuable urban bushland. At present it is probably the leading metropolitan council in terms of the effort it has made to implement a coherent management programme. The continuity of that programme is threatened, however, by the fragile nature of the funding arrangements. The Working Party submits that staff for managing our bushland resources is at least as important as staff to mow lawns and to weed garden beds and that the existing regeneration team should be made permanent, future staffing and funding needs assessed from year to year and measures taken to implement progressively the whole Plan of Management.

It is difficult to implement any methodical management programme for bushland, however, without the ability to plan some years ahead and effective planning is impossible without permanent staff.

If the major bushland problems which exist can be tackled before too many more years have passed the total cost to Council will be minimised. If those problems are ignored then a huge liability will accrue and a major asset, Ku-ring-gai's bushland, will be irrevocably lost.

SUMMARY

Ku-ring-gai's bushland is highly valued by the Municipality's residents who generally support its retention and maintenance. Rapid urbanisation and inappropriate management techniques have placed it under stress and in some areas degradation has occurred or is in progress. Long term problems are now becoming apparent and, if not pre-empted now, will become a burden and embarrassment for future Council administrations.

Management techniques developed over the past 15 years provide a reliable means of halting and reversing the degradation process and have proved effective in Ku-ring-gai. Further management techniques are being developed but all have the common aim of providing the bush with the means to become self sustaining and hence low in maintenance cost. Thus the programme put forward in the Plan of Management offers Council the opportunity to turn a major contingent liability into an asset at in the most cost effective manner.

It is particularly important that the bush regeneration team be retained so that progress will continue to be made in reclaiming degraded bush, so that the gains already made can be consolidated and so that proper planning can occur.