

## CASE STUDY: HAWKEVALE BUSHLAND BUSH FOREVER SITE #122

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Hawkevale Bushland is situated in the Perth foothills, near the corner of Kalamunda Road and the Roe Highway, in the High Wycombe area.

My brief summary highlights the complexity of land management in urbanising areas and how, when it comes to what we do with the legacy of nature, there are so many competing interests.

My colleague Tony Fowler and I were members of the Nature Reserves Preservation Group (NRPG) in the late 1990s when we discovered that a 37 hectare area, containing a big swathe of Jarrah/Banksia woodland, was about to be obliterated to make way for housing.

As Bronwen and Greg Keighery have explained, Jarrah/Banksia woodland is a disappearing habitat on the Swan Coastal Plain. Yet it is extremely beautiful. Hawkevale was a quiet woodland, disturbed only by trail bikes and people dumping rubbish on its margins. It had no local advocates, no Friends Group, since few people lived right on its doorstep.

We were concerned that almost all of this relatively large area was going to be lost. Our group, the Nature Reserves Preservation Group, is – as the name suggests – all about preserving bushland in the Kalamunda Shire and local hills area. It was formed by Tony Fowler and others when the shire announced plans to sell off local nature reserves that were ‘surplus to requirements’.

At Hawkevale, we faced an uphill battle, because the land in question was owned by the ACTIV Foundation, which assists people with intellectual disabilities and their families. ACTIV had been given parcels of land in the 1950s, then far out of the urban area but now swallowed up by urbanisation.

This patch of Banksia woodland had been left standing on the north side of a housing estate. In 1992, CALM (now DEC) (see glossary), recommended its conservation. In 1993, the State Planning Commission rezoned the area as ‘Urban’ under the Metropolitan Region Scheme, but noted that if further studies

revealed a need to reserve significant areas for conservation this would be done.

That same year, the Liberal Coalition government released its ‘Policies for the Nineties’ statement which contained a promise. It would ... “offer financial incentives to private land owners to preserve Banksia woodlands” because of the urgent threat to this vegetation type.

In 1995, the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) nominated the area as one of the most species-rich sites out of 700 surveyed. So far, so good.

In September 1996, ACTIV announced it wished to use all 37 hectares of land for 270 homes, 37 duplexes, a retirement village and aged care unit. They called it Australia’s first integrated community for the intellectually disabled. Several blocks would be sold to general residential buyers to fund the development. Some 3.12 hectares of bush would be left.

So began just one of so many clashes between planning for people and environmental protection.

Hawkevale Bushland had already been recognised as containing one of three most threatened plant communities remaining on the Swan Coastal Plain. There had been a DEP recommendation that 20 hectares, the best bush areas, needed to be conserved to maintain its environmental value. Other government departments, the WA Conservation Council and bushland advisory groups like us advised the bush should be kept.

Things got fairly heated; ACTIV understandably felt they were being thwarted in valid ambitions. Ian Taylor, the former Opposition member, weighed in. His wife was on the ACTIV board. He attacked the Conservation Council and hills-based greenies ‘who know no bounds’, he declared, in throwing up obstacles in ACTIV’s way.

In October 1996, the Kalamunda shire, which also had a role in approving the housing estate, debated the issue. It was compelled to comply

with the State Planning Commission in its town planning scheme. But several councillors came and saw the bushland, and vowed to help find a solution for all parties. Could they swap an existing shire reserve in exchange for conserving Hawkevale?

Such talk did not go down well. One furious ACTIV executive rang my colleague Tony after the NRPG publicly criticised the sudden and, we felt, suspicious appearance of wide firebreaks that had been bulldozed right through the middle of the bushland. ACTIV said the fire authorities had demanded it. The executive said to Tony: "I like to fight by Queensberry rules, but if push comes to shove, I'm prepared to fight dirty."

In November 1996, John Day, our local member for Darling Range, and now Minister in the Barnett government, said he would support Kalamunda Shire in its bid to seek the retention of 20 hectares of high conservation value bushland. John Day was one of the primary architects of the Bush Forever plan and was heavily involved in drawing up its content right at the time of the Hawkevale controversy.

He said publicly: "In view of the government's Urban Bushland Strategy (the working title for Bush Forever) and the regional significance of the High Wycombe bushland, I believe there is no realistic alternative other than to conserve the area. To do otherwise would be to go against the government's policy of protecting threatened ecosystems". He had written to the Minister for Planning in these terms.

He went on: "The Urban Bushland Strategy has established a target of retaining 10% of the original bushland of each type of vegetation complex in the metropolitan area. It is estimated that only 8% of the vegetation type of which this land is part now remains."

In November 1996, the Kalamunda shire councillors voted eight to four in favour of preserving the bushland that had been recognised as 'significant' in a number of reports.

Just to complicate things further, there was a State election in December that year. We in the NRPG had to keep abreast of each party's promises, lobby the candidates, and send introductory letters to the next person who

might have the fate of Hawkevale in their hands.

In May 1997, we had a personal assurance from Graham Keirath, Minister for Planning, that he was trying to find solutions, like a land swap. We wrote to Cheryl Edwardes, then Minister for Environment; we said how pleased we were that the Hawkevale bushland had just been singled out as worthy of conservation under the Perth Bush Plan, "which your government has admirably undertaken in order to save just such metropolitan bush areas." We added; "All in all, what more credentials does a bit of bush need to be saved?!"

We also urged that there be compensation provided for ACTIV as the landholder, reminding Mrs Edwardes that the Liberal government in 1993 had made a specific promise to compensate owners of land containing rare Banksia woodland. "ACTIV would appear to fall right into that category, a certain amount of compensation being one part of a compromise package."

Our letter went on: "When the Hawkevale bushland has been recognised by every environment agency in government as worth preserving for posterity, it would be of great credit to your government if it could resolve the matter in favour of development on non-bush areas. So much native bush has been lost in the metropolitan area already; please help us conserve this beautiful twenty hectares. Thanking you sincerely for your consideration."

Kings Park botanical expert Kingsley Dixon had noted Hawkevale's remarkable plant diversity, including rare species, as "excellent to outstanding." It was a "mini-Kings Park", he said. He noted that a rare Smokebush, *Conospermum undulatum*, was growing all over the site. It was a declared rare flora (which means Minister's permission is needed to clear land on which it lives).

However, in December 1997, Planning Minister Kierath decided that ACTIV could go ahead. The compromise deal was that, under an agreement reached between the government and Activ Foundation, 10.4 hectares of the northern section of the bush would be preserved.

In return, ACTIV would get its plant nursery moved at government expense and a land swap of DOLA land. A bit of shire reserve land in the vicinity of ACTIV's proposed housing site would be handed over to them, a concession would be given on land density on the proposed housing estate along with a sum of money from the Planning Commission as the balance of what's owed to ACTIV for its concessions.

Our group, the Nature Reserves Preservation Group, noted 'with regret' the reality of the loss of land in a public statement. "It seems so sad that this small surviving stand of Banksia woodland, which has now shrunk to less than 9% of what was originally here on the Swan Coastal Plain, will now shrink even further," said Gladys Lourvanij, president of the NRP.

Ironically, she said, Hawkevale had "every conservation tick it could possibly get, and is identified by all government conservation agencies as deserving the highest priority for preservation. The government has set itself a target of saving a minimum of 10% of all bushland types in wider Perth; we are already below that here. And still Hawkevale can't be saved in its entirety."

She went on: "Commendably, Minister Kierath himself ordered a further biological survey in recent weeks, and apart from already known species on site, a rare Smokebush *Conospermum undulatum* was found growing by Dr Kingsley Dixon, one of the State's top botanical experts. This plant is protected by legislation and yet half of it must now be sacrificed in the proposed compromise deal over Hawkevale."

Mrs. Lourvanij said although the Minister's efforts are acknowledged in trying to resolve this difficult issue, "it gets back to whether our community is really serious about wanting to stop destroying our natural heritage. When will we say 'Enough is enough' and put in the resources to help landowners save bush?"

With gritted teeth, we then set about mitigating the damage, arguing for wide buffer zones, fencing, drainage systems that caused least impact on the bush. We asked that all large trees in the proposed development area be retained.

An intervening period saw the bush further degraded while ACTIV prepared its plans. In September 2004 I wrote to CALM to plea for fencing to stop four-wheel drivers careering through the 'saved' portion of bush, and causing a menace to neighbours. CALM would not pay for it because the land had not yet been transferred to them.

What we found so perplexing in our protracted and time-consuming campaign was that, throughout the whole affair, Perth Bush Plan was being drawn up jointly by CALM, Ministry for Planning, Water and Rivers and DEP. It was a detailed and laudable attempt to identify all our remaining bushland in the metropolitan area and save it before it was too late.

Here was a plan to save precisely the kind of valuable bush that Hawkevale was. It was a prime candidate for top-priority rescue. Yet the same government shaping Bush Plan was telling us that it hadn't the funds to buy the land outright. Ultimately it could save less than half the bush and then only because we had lobbied so hard and brought the issue to the attention of government.

Today, Hawkevale is under the control of DEC, which does periodic work in it. There was a fire in the bush a year or so ago, and a DEC spokesman told me this week, that weed mitigation will be carried out soon. A rare flora survey has just been completed. Meanwhile, there are many, many weeds, and trail bikes are still a problem. If you stand on a manicured lawn in the Hawkevale estate and look at the bush, it looks scruffy, neglected and uninviting – until you walk into it in spring. Kangaroo Paw stand shoulder high in thick colourful stands, in the midst of yellow Hibbertia, *Lambertia multiflora*, Star of Bethlehem (*Calectasia narragara*) and red *Blancoa canescens*. Some Banksia are several metres high and very old.

There is funding from government for Regional Parks and Bush Forever sites, a total of \$1.53 million from the Environmental Community Grants Program during 2012. It is "for projects that rehabilitate, conserve, enhance or restore natural areas or values within areas that are designated as regional parks or Bush Forever sites, as well as for activities that raise public awareness for nature conservation within Regional Parks and Bush Forever sites."

Neither the Kalamunda shire nor any community group is available to apply for money. Hawkevale bushland has no Friends Group supported by Kalamunda Shire, as many areas of bush do, because the shire has no role at all in the area's management.

Finally, there are other Bush Forever sites within Kalamunda Shire. There are 13 within the area, of which 6 are under the Shire's management. They duly appear in the Shire's inventory of rare flora and its wildlife corridor plan. There's a bit of weed control and some Dieback control but it is very scarce, because there is no budget for it.

Poison Gully, one of the Bush Forever sites, is often vandalised and has two female carers, both splendid members of NRPG, who have battled for years to care for their bush. It has no regular budget for any bush care.

Another Bush Forever site, Maida Vale Reserve, got some work done this year, because both the Eastern Metropolitan Region Council and

DEC applied for money and received about \$10,000 each. Yet another Bush Forever site, at Hartfield Park, is under threat of demolition to make way for more playing fields.

A Kalamunda Shire employee with conservation duties told me that the Bush Forever system is commendable, but limited. "It's a planning tool, and occasionally mentioning that it is a Bush Forever site helps us to get the odd grant," the person said. "But there's no continuity and no funding, so how can we do a lot?" The person had also heard a rumour that DEC funding for bush grants might dwindle next year.

If I had to say what the underlying message is in our experience of trying to save a patch of bush, it is that human need for built infrastructure will always outrank the need to conserve bush. Until, that is, we decide as a society that bushland corridors and recreational wild places are as fundamentally, uncompromisingly important as bricks, mortar and concrete.



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**Letters to the Editor**

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