



# RESEARCH FINDINGS 2011

## Understanding restoration volunteering in a context of environmental change

*Talking about planting experiments: what where and how to plant?*

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**A** range of human activities have left their impact on the landscape of southwest WA, including – but not restricted to – climate change. Various experts have argued that it is impossible to return these already drastically-altered ecosystems to what they once were, and that future climatic changes may render such historical landscapes obsolete. However, it has also been suggested that society expects a return to particular (historical) ecosystem states.

There has been much debate within the field of restoration ecology surrounding questions of how humans might ‘preserve’ or ‘restore’ landscapes. These issues involve scientific interpretation of ecological processes, but are also highly bound up with social processes and values; however, there has been limited examination of how interested non-scientists engage with such debates.

### Methods & Results

Through a series of interviews, participatory observation and group discussions, we examined how academic debates around what scientists tag as ‘novel’ or ‘historical’ ecosystems figure in the ideas and practices of those who are actively engaged in environmental restoration as volunteers.

Our analyses of the discourse and activities of volunteers did not suggest that they express a misconceived or romantic, sentimental attachment to historical landscapes. We observed the expression of nuanced ideas about the state or future of ecosystems that could not be easily subsumed under a ‘historical’/‘novel’ dichotomy.

Volunteers raised questions about the notion of translocation, because of possible unforeseen consequences for ecosystems as a whole. In their choice of seed and species, volunteers recognised (often using the term ‘local provenance’) the importance of seedlings or seeds used for revegetation originating in the area where they were planting them.



*Field trip with researchers, community members and policy officials, organized by the Wandoo Recovery Group.*

However, they also identified problems with the issue of provenance, recognising that the landscapes in which they worked were continuously changing.

Their awareness of the complexities of environmental change can be seen to stem from an ongoing process of learning through hands on observations and experimentation. Despite these learning practices, however, volunteers often continue to present themselves and their knowledge in modest terms and

in accordance with a traditional model of the science-society interface that privileges scientists' knowledge above lay peoples' knowledge.

Through our analysis of the discourse and practices of this group of environmental restoration volunteers in Western Australia, we hope to have offered a starting point for further explorations into the ways in which this section of the public relate to questions around what and how to 'restore' landscapes in a rapidly changing environment. In so doing, we have highlighted what we see as a need for an appreciation of the extent to which volunteers engage in experiments and make observations that may possibly be informative for the sciences.



Weeding.

### Extract from a group interview

In this extract, taken from a more extended piece of interaction, we see how Dorothy, Harry and Barbara (pseudonyms) consider possibilities and risks in regard to introducing species adapted to harsher climates.

Dorothy: "We try and get local plants to grow. We've collected seed and we have got some interesting things growing from local seed, but I'd be inclined to think that we can bring in plants from a bit further out in harsher climates."

Barbara: "...[but] if you bring in a plant that isn't local, the local birds aren't geared to using it..."

Harry: "But they also adapt too much and cause all sorts of problems."

Dorothy: "Yeah too many of them proliferate."

Harry: "Too many of them or the wrong sort, or crowd out local species. I don't know enough about that but, well, we've had this problem with South African plants, all the boats that came out to Australia in the early days brought plants from South Africa."

Barbara: "They're all our major weeds now..."

This illustrates how a conversation amongst community members, that begins with a consideration of the possibility of translocation, ends with a reflection on the potential risk involved by referring to species that are now considered as pests. It indicates the ways in which the volunteers' constructions of what is 'appropriate' are based in dynamic, rather than static, conceptualisations of ecosystems.

### Conclusions & Recommendations

In sum, the volunteers that participated in our research did not consider the possibility of going back to historical landscapes as realistic, nor did they fully embrace the idea of 'novel ecosystems'. Rather, they recognised that the landscape in which they are working is constantly changing, which they discover through their day-to-day hands-on observations and experiments. Greater reflection on the relevance of these observations and experiments recognises volunteers as co-learners and co-producers of ideas about, and experience with, different ways to intervene in present-day ecosystems. This may potentially bring about a form of intervention ecology that involves a multitude of variables, takes account of different types of involvement with restoration, and engages with a wide variety of citizens.

### "Why focus on the already converted?"

Whatever one's theoretical orientation is, the shared reality of all who have spent time thinking about ecological interventions is that there is an absolutely enormous amount of on-ground work necessary for significant ecological outcomes. At present, volunteers undertake a large part of such on-ground restoration work. Understanding the ways in which such volunteers practice restoration and conceptualise their own activities is therefore an important intellectual and practical enterprise.

Please contact us if you have ideas, questions or would like to share your experiences: Marleen Buizer E: [m.buizer@murdoch.edu.au](mailto:m.buizer@murdoch.edu.au)

### Reference

1. This article is an excerpt from: Buizer, M., T. Kurz, and K. Ruthrof (under review at *Human Ecology*). "Understanding restoration volunteering in a context of environmental change: in pursuit of novel ecosystems or historical analogues?"



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