

Tree change benefits nature conservation

LOUISE LEIGH | NATIONAL TRUST (WA)

The tree change has never been more popular and for some, the peace and harmony of the bush can be hard to resist.

However, paradise is often not found but nurtured and created through hard work and enthusiasm for the bushland which, as many tree changers know, can be friend or foe.

One small town in the heart of the south west of Western Australia has seen its fair share of travellers arrive in search of a new life.

From dairy farmers in the 1920s to alternative lifestyleers of the 1970s and 80s, the town of Northcliffe has seen an influx of settlers come and go.

Traditional Aboriginal land management practices preserved the landscape for 50 000 years prior to European settlement; however, as many settlers would come to realise, the same landscape would refuse to yield in favour of European methods of land use.

From the 1920s, the bushland of the south west was divided up into dairy farms as part of the 1921 government Group Settlement Scheme, an Anglo-Australian initiative to assist in the development of the pastoral industry. Bush life was extraordinarily hard for these early settlers many of whom, despite their labour, by the mid 1930s were unable to make the soil produce a sustainable crop.

Timber took over where the failed Group Settlement Scheme left off with a small timber mill being built. Such richness of forests in the region made this a logical option to many who battled on in spite of failing pastoral efforts. Timber would later polarise the community of Northcliffe with those in favour of economic gain at the fall of an axe being met by opposition from conservationists.

In the 1970s and 80s a new wave of settlers arrived in Northcliffe, many of whom felt compelled to oppose large scale clear felling in a region of Western Australia so diverse in flora and fauna.

Carole Perry, National Trust of Australia (WA) conservation covenantor made a decision in the 1980s to leave Victoria and move to Western Australia in search of open space and a lifelong dream. Carole's tree change led her to Kwokaup, an exquisite piece of land just north of the town of Northcliffe.

"A home in the midst of the magic and majesty of the towering south west forests was only a dream when I moved from Victoria to Western Australia. That was until I discovered something called purple title," says Carole. The influx of alternative lifestyleers and their communal attitude to conservation led to the creation of this unusual method of land ownership.

Purple title was introduced to allow more than one person to share a freehold title. The ability to share the purchase price for one lot of land and each retain separate title interests, dependent upon a shareholding, gave later tree changers the chance to buy property which, as individuals, would otherwise have exceeded their budget.

Carole explains "there was no way I could purchase a forested paradise of some 60 ha but I could sell my city house and buy 20 hectares." Later acquiring a further 20 hectares of Kwokaup,

Carole set about discussing with her fellow landowners concerns for the bushland.

Purple title meant consent from all landowners was necessary before taking any legal conservation action. At the time, all four owners of Kwokaup were in agreement that the regenerated Karri, Blackbutt, Bullich and Marri and ancient strands of Jarrah should be left to grow back into what Carole describes as "the once beautiful forest it was before Group Settlement."

Carole's fellow landowners were supportive from the start of her altruistic reasons for wanting to protect the bushland believing, as she does, that "habitat loss is the single greatest threat to our fauna, with invasive animals and weeds a close second."

Carole's passion for 'Kwokaup' caught the attention of the National Trust's natural heritage team in 2005 when she, with the approval of her neighbours, invited the conservation covenant program to enter negotiations for the registration of a conservation covenant over the land.

The National Trust takes the view that any landholding, large or small, which consists of remnant native vegetation is of high ecological value, particularly if it adjoins other areas of protected remnant vegetation or reserves.

The National Trust agreed with Carole that some form of legal protection, such as a conservation covenant, would ensure such diversity of flora and fauna would be protected in the long term. A conservation

covenant is an agreement between a landowner and the National Trust, which protects and enhances the natural, cultural and/or scientific values of the land. The covenant is registered on the property and binds all future owners to conserve the bushland.

It was with great pleasure that the National Trust celebrated the registration of a conservation covenant over Kwokaup in April this year, representing the National Trust's 113th National Trust conservation covenant in Western Australia.

Carole understands however that the covenant comes with serious land management responsibilities. As custodian of native bushland, when it comes to tackling issues such as invasive species such as weeds and feral animals, Carole acknowledges the "need to be ever vigilant."

As to the significance of a conservation covenant, Carole is resolute when she says "the extent of our indigenous native forest is shrinking by the day, as threats to the existence of our fauna and flora continue. I implore anyone with bushland to place a National Trust conservation covenant on title as soon as possible."

From land which was originally split, cleared and fenced to service the needs of a transient generation of settlers, Kwokaup now rests in the hands of landowners united rather than divided in their efforts to preserve our natural heritage. For Carole Perry, her tree change has made a difference. "We covenantors feel we are accomplishing something, that the careful management of our protected land in conjunction with the National Trust is reflecting a very practical method of taking our rare or vulnerable species one day off the endangered list."



ABOVE | Carole Perry with Conservation Covenant Coordinator Louise Leigh. National Trust (WA).