

Friends of the Aranda Bushland Convenor's report AGM 2016

This year marks the third year of my Convenorship, and in line with our policy I will not stand for re-election. Mary and I have both been Convenors previously at intervals over the last 16 years, and feel that the role now needs to pass on to others.

Friends of the Aranda Bushland have a steady record of progress both in increasing the area designated as Canberra Nature Park, and in improving the natural biodiversity and quality of the area. Since the first land transfers of the forest area from Rural Lease to Park took place, the Snow Gums frost hollow grasslands have been incorporated as a Natural Heritage Area, and most recently the south Aranda woodlands were transferred to Canberra Nature Park as part of the offset program for the Molonglo suburb development. With the exception of the Bindubi St. corner block, the whole rectangle of land of about 200 ha, enclosed by the suburb, Bindubi St, William Hovell Drive and Caswell Drive is now in Aranda Bushland.

With the incorporation of the land areas came challenges in management, with areas of woody weeds (hawthorns, cotoneaster etc), grassland weeds like St. John's Wort, Patterson's Curse and saffron thistle, and now with a larger wetland area came a big patch of Japanese Honeysuckle. Two areas of extensive gully erosion are in Aranda Bushland, one in the Snow Gums area, and now a second in the south Aranda woodland, with adjacent areas of surface erosion. All these adverse changes were the result of lack of effective land management in the past.

The Friends of the Aranda Bushland have spent thousands of hours weeding, controlling erosion and planting locally-derived native plants. The Snow Gums patch has been reinvigorated by two groups of trees grown from seed collected from the old snow gums, which now stand 3 metres high. Shallow gullies have been stabilised by planting tussock grass, and the deep gullies by use of local brushwood and pine to control edge erosion, with coir and wood logs forming 'leaky weirs' in the gully bottom.. Gully heads have been blocked with fabric, wood and rock.

These activities demonstrate how a committed group of volunteers can transform degraded land into natural biodiversity of quality over twenty years of consistent hard work. Without the work of the Friends, the area would be neglected, degraded weed infested landscape.

The Aranda Bushland is much loved by the community, and the Friends have enhanced its educational value by a signposted interpretative trail and continual

walking track maintenance. Guided walks are held in spring to demonstrate the abundance and variety of ground orchids, and at other times to demonstrate the eucalypts. The website www.friendsofarandabushland.org.au has details of flora, birds, frogs, reptiles, soils and geology for use by the community and schools, as well as our current activities.

We have carried out vegetation monitoring for ten years to study the outcomes of our activities and the influence of weather, and more recently the effects of kangaroo grazing on the flora. The 'roo exclosures are a dramatic demonstration of grazing impact, and are an approach to slowing the deterioration of a once valued Themida grassland which was present when hunting and dingos controlled the population of marsupials.

An on-going area of contention is the program of fire fuel reduction burning in progress in Aranda Bushland. Over about 15 years the whole forested area is scheduled to be burned. The year before last the southern end of the forested area was burned, with a subsequent weed invasion. Our interpretative walk runs through the area, and the appearance is radically worse. This autumn the northern end adjacent to the suburb, where the preponderance of the orchids occur, will be burned. This is currently a delightful vegetated area with many popular tracks, which will become a burned scar. We appreciate the issues of fire safety for the suburb and realise the value of fuel reduction in the inner asset protection zone but doubt whether burning further into the forest would actually confer any increased protection. We ask that consideration be given to the aesthetic value of flora when choosing burning locations and timing.

The work of the Friends is done by a modest sized group of members, with about 20 individuals carrying most of the load. Particular thanks go to Jenny Andrews our Secretary, Diana Brown our Minutes Secretary, Peter Mellor our Treasurer, Kevin Mc Cue who coordinates our erosion work, Jim Arnold who does most of the knapsack spraying, Mary Falconer who coordinates our vegetation monitoring, and Pam MacDonald and Sheridan Maher on our committee. Keith Pantlin does a splendid job with our website and member notifications and we thank him for his special skills. Our members who attend work parties are very much appreciated, and put in hours of hard labour to improve the quality of the Aranda Bushland, thanks indeed.

We are especially grateful to Craig Wainwright from Canberra Nature Park staff, who has consistently helped us in many ways, and Anthony Hart and Nick Haines our rangers who erected the new kangaroo exclosures and helped with erosion and weed control. Ian Falconer, Convenor, January 2016