

Native grassland conservation in the rural landscape

David Eddy

*World Wide Fund For Nature Australia
11 Gurrubun Close, Ngunnawal ACT 2913*

Native grasslands are complex communities containing a unique suite of native plants and animals. They often contain a very rich array of species within a relatively small area in comparison with other communities. Many of these species are found only or predominantly in grassy vegetation and, therefore, rely on the retention of grasslands for their existence. Over 700 species of native plants have been recorded in the grassy communities of south-eastern Australia.

By comparison with other vegetation types, grasslands have attracted little conservation interest or attention since European settlement. The primary focus of scientists, conservationists and the community, has tended toward the larger woody plants and the communities they dominate. This is probably because grasses and other herbs are small in stature, they are not well recognised, and because treeless areas were settled early and regarded principally as an agricultural resource. Grassy rural landscapes are also typically regarded by the wider community as having been cleared, and the understorey replaced or at least modified.

Examples of native grassland in a largely unmodified condition are now uncommon in south-eastern Australia (Kirkpatrick *et al.* 1995). In place of the original sweeping expanses of native grassland, the remaining areas of high conservation value are now isolated from each other within a mosaic of grassy vegetation which includes sown exotic pastures, some crops, and more or less modified native pastures. Because of the dramatic reduction in the area of native grassland, the fragmentation of much of the remainder and their reliance upon grassy habitat, a number of plant and animal species have become threatened.

Natural grasslands were created by natural conditions and processes including soils, temperature and rainfall regimes, fire, grazing and soil disturbance by native animals. Some of these conditions prevented areas from becoming dominated by trees or shrubs. Regular defoliation of herbage, high turnover of organic matter and the creation of openings in the sward for recruitment of new plants are all

necessary to maintain grassland structure and species composition. Grasslands are highly dynamic, and therefore susceptible to change when one or more processes is altered. Since European settlement, many of these processes have been altered markedly, causing significant change in the composition of our grasslands. Therefore, to conserve or enhance our remaining grassland areas, a good understanding and active management of these processes is essential.

Retention and appropriate management of the remaining native grasslands is important to present and future generations to conserve our soils, watercourses and landscapes, to protect hundreds of native plant and animal species, and to protect the yet unknown value of their many species to agriculture, tourism and medicine.

WWF Australia has been actively involved in grassland conservation in south-eastern Australia for

about 10 years. Its Monaro Remnant Native Grasslands Project began in 1995. Phase I focussed on improving the recognition, conservation and management of native grassland on public land such as rural cemeteries, road verges and travelling stock reserves. Phase II will assist private landholders to identify and appreciate their native grasslands, and manage these areas for multiple uses, including conservation.

Private landholders interested in native grassland conservation on their land, are invited to be a part of the Monaro Remnant Native Grasslands Project by contacting David Eddy on 02 6242 8484.

Reference

- Kirkpatrick, J., McDougall, K. and Hyde, M. (1995). "Australia's most threatened ecosystems: the southeastern lowland native grasslands". (World Wide Fund For Nature Australia and Surrey Beatty & Sons, Sydney).