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The greening of Australia

A ribbon of green along the York-Quairading Road. The remains of an old stock route is on the left.

By Martine Scheltema, Project Officer, Greening Australia (W.A.), Leederville

Many urban Australians have little understanding of the problems of land degradation because it's an extremely slow process that doesn't directly influence their day-to-day lives.

Understandably, they would have trouble relating to sub-soil compaction, waterlogging, increased soil acidity and salinity.

They also have trouble comprehending why fencing according to soil type is an important management tool for farmers, or what role contour banks, drainage systems, the addition of gypsum and planting trees have in reversing land degradation.

But given that tree loss “has been at the core of almost every aspect of land degradation in Australia”, and that “tree replacement will be essential if we are to redevelop the fertility of many of our degraded soils and maintain sustainable systems of agriculture” (1), urban Australians do have a role in helping to revegetate our farm lands and in making ‘growing trees’ a community issue.
About Greening Australia

Greening Australia is a national, non profit organisation. It starts and supports projects for the retention, restoration and increase in tree and shrub cover for the environmental, economic and social benefit of the community.

Greening Australia was formed in 1982, the Year of the Tree. It has since become an umbrella organisation that collectively represents individuals, groups and institutions interested in overcoming tree loss and land degradation.

Landholders, industry, conservation groups, community groups, professional associations and relevant government agencies (both local and state) are represented on the Board of Greening Australia (W.A.).

The principle for all projects designed or helped by Greening Australia is: The right tree in the right place for the right reasons at the right time, with the right preparation and care (see 'Getting it right' on page 60).

One Billion Trees

During the Decade of Landcare (1990 to 2000) Greening Australia will administer the national One Billion Trees programme. The objective is to establish at least a billion new trees by the year 2000, mainly in areas experiencing land degradation.

Another objective of the One Billion Trees programme is to develop a much greater community awareness and knowledge of the value of trees and the ability to conserve and care for them.

The Federal Government's targets for the One Billion Trees programme are the establishment of at least 400 million trees through community plantings of tree seedlings, and at least 600 million trees through direct seeding and natural regeneration.

This will be done by:

- Major revegetation projects involving community, corporate and government organisations.
- School projects to provide learning experiences for young people.
- Financial grants to community groups, local government and landholders to help with revegetation projects in rural and urban areas.
- Supporting information and educational activities.

Revegetating agricultural areas

Greening Australia (W.A.) has several programmes that help landholders, Land Conservation District Committees and community groups to re-establish trees and shrubs and to protect existing vegetation in rural areas.

Community grants

As part of the One Billion Trees programme, community grants are available to landholders and community groups for projects involving land or nature conservation or both, in rural and urban areas. In 1989-90, 85 per cent of the projects funded in the State were in the wheatbelt.

Preferred projects are those that are part of a farm, district or catchment management plan and that include plantings of local species of trees and shrubs. Each applicant should have a project plan showing that the "right tree will be planted in the right place" (including plans for the proper maintenance of the planted trees), and be able to contribute substantially to the total cost of the project, either in cash or in kind.

Direct seeding

Direct seeding is a cheaper alternative to planting tree seedlings. Greening Australia (W.A.) is reviewing the knowledge and landholders' experiences of direct seeding techniques to develop a strategy to encourage the successful use of direct seeding for revegetation.

Project officer Helen Runciman will be liaising with people studying and practising direct seeding, and will help spread this information.
throughout the rural sector. In 1989-90, the One Billion Trees programme funded four projects on developing techniques for direct seeding of trees.

Schools Greening programme

The objective of the Schools Greening Programme is to increase urban and rural children's understanding of the value of vegetation.

Getting it right

"The right tree in the right place for the right reasons at the right time, with the right preparation and care" is a short-hand way of saying that revegetation projects should be properly planned. This involves:

- Good, early site preparation (for example deep ripping, weed control).
- The right mix of trees and shrubs for the site and purpose; use local native species where possible.
- The best time for planting or sowing.
- Protecting trees and shrubs with fences and tree guards.
- Proper maintenance (spot weed control, pest control, watering if necessary).

Eighty per cent of trees planted will survive, even in difficult sites, if these guidelines are followed.

Greening Australia, in association with the Ministry of Education, is developing curricula for use in primary and secondary schools. Revegetation projects, PLANTSCAN (a planting testing programme) and School Greening Centres (educational and propagation areas) give children hands-on experiences about vegetation. Eight rural schools received funding from Greening Australia under this programme in 1989-90.

Greening Australia also acts as the link between the Department of Agriculture and the 50 schools involved in PLANTSCAN. Under the PLANTSCAN scheme students help the Department screen plantings of selected shrubs and trees for use in the reclamation of degraded wheatbelt farm land. The test sites are located in areas receiving from 350 to 420 mm of rain a year.

John Tonkin Tree Awards

The John Tonkin Tree Awards are sponsored by the State Government. They recognise outstanding efforts in planting, rehabilitating or restoring the State's native vegetation.

Awards are made in eight categories (media, local government, student activity, industry, individual endeavour, farmer community group and government department) with most of the
categories having a prize of $1,000. Winners of six of the eight categories in 1989-90 were individuals or groups from the wheatbelt.

Ribbons of Green

The idea of ‘Ribbons of Green’ stretching along road and rail reserves around the State was just that in 1988. The concept was inspired by Edna Walling’s comment in 1952 that “the roadside is the front garden of the nation” (2). The idea became a reality in the State in 1989 when 1,000 volunteers helped plant 150,000 seedlings along the Great Eastern Highway between Northam and Merredin.

In 1990, ‘Ribbons of Green’ had spread along the Great Eastern Highway to Southern Cross, and also to 21 wheatbelt towns.

Some people believe the Ribbons of Green projects are a cosmetic exercise, but these revegetated corridors help protect our native flora and fauna. Revegetating road and rail reserves may contribute only slightly to land conservation, but they are important for the conservation of our wildlife by providing bush corridors.

Another equally important role of Ribbons of Green is to develop urban-rural links as people living in urban areas trek to the country to plant trees along roadsides.

Community co-ordinators

Six part-time community co-ordinators in Geraldton, Dumbleyung, Pinjarra, Moora, Bunbury and Esperance act as local representatives of Greening Australia. They provide information and organise community tree plantings.

The future

There is a wide range of reasons for planting trees and shrubs, including conservation of flora and fauna, land conservation and reclamation, and production of timber. Greening Australia focuses its activities on the replacement and retention of native vegetation for land and nature conservation. It also wants to increase community support and involvement in the revegetation of Western Australia.

References