

High Country Urban Biodiversity Project



Council Name: Armidale - Dumaresq, Uralla Shire, Guyra Shire and Walcha Councils

Web Address: www.hicub.org.au

Size: 18,124 square kilometres

Population: 38,660



Abstract: The HiCUB Project is one of the largest environmental projects to be run on the Northern Tablelands of NSW. The project focused on improving the condition of urban riparian and bush areas; improving collaboration between council and community groups; and building engagement between the urban community and their local biodiversity. The effective partnership between local governments, Landcare, community groups and businesses led to significant environmental works including revegetation, in-stream erosion control works, interpretive material, bush regeneration and weed control and education and capacity-building. The most significant outcome of HiCUB was the strong partnerships built between Councils and community organisations, with Landcare acting as the intermediary.

Background:

On the New England Tablelands urban creek and bushland within town limits is traditionally overlooked for natural resource management investment and generally not actively managed by local authorities. Despite this, these areas hold significant value to urban residents who often attempt, through their own initiative or through the auspices of Landcare, to improve the ecological or amenity value of these areas. Recognising the regional commonality of the issues and challenges, the combined catchment benefits, and scale of investment required to generate an appropriate ecosystem response, regional Councils developed the High Country Urban Biodiversity concept.

Project Objectives:

1. Improve the ecological health of urban riparian lands and bush lands including Ecologically Endangered Communities; reduce weeds; increase in area and quality of native vegetation; erosion remediation; and improve habitat linkages at landscape scale.
2. Improve the effectiveness of councils and community effort toward environmental rehabilitation through improved integration, collaboration and greater knowledge transfer between councils and stakeholders.
3. Monitor, evaluate and implement improvement in approaches to rehabilitation of urban areas.
4. Increase long-term participation in urban ecosystem rehabilitation specifically targeting community volunteerism and investment from private and government sources.
5. Improve resource use efficiency – increase utilisation of council mulch; increase uptake of rebates for rainwater tanks, and alternative energy technology; and decrease the nutrient load in the town water supply.

Implementation:

The project management team was guided by a Steering Committee and an Advisory Committee plus a network of Working Groups in each region. Working Groups proposed and discussed project plans. In addition, a strong network of community groups and individuals attended and supported the project through



direct participation. Project partners included private landholders, urban residents, Aboriginal communities, schools, local businesses, community groups, Catchment Management Authorities and other state and local government authorities.

A project website www.hicub.org was established as a public portal into the project, to share information and opinion and views on regional issues. HiCUB established 12 local project sites within the region. These sites represent a mix of bush and creek lands and private and public land management. Works typically included a combination of intervention measures such as engineering works, revegetation or weed control. Expert advice and technical site assessments guided best rehabilitation and restoration practice at each site.

Over 1000 m³ of Council-generated mulch was used on revegetation sites. Most works were located on public lands with a high degree of public involvement in planning and implementing works. Apart from the local project sites, other projects addressed common regional issues: control of Indian Myna birds (a threat to local avian species), options for a regional environmental education centre and a Pellet Heater Research project. Technical and scientific expertise was provided through a voluntary Technical Advisory Panel and by project staff. With the aid of expert consultants, HiCUB implemented a major M&E program that tracked water quality, flora, fauna and community values and opinions.

The HiCUB project was funded by a \$2 million Urban Sustainability Project grant provided by the NSW Environmental Trust in 2008, and the project commenced in early 2009. The project was completed in June 2012. The grant was awarded to an alliance of four local councils: Guyra, Armidale, Uralla and Walcha, and is implemented by Southern New England Landcare.

Outcomes:

From February 2010 to June 2012 HiCUB worked with community and local government to:

- Plant 70,000 seedlings of local native plants. These planting will, in the long run, decrease the amount of sediment and autumn leaves entering urban waterways, with a direct outcome of improved water quality. Riparian habitat and connectivity was also improved.
- Manage 25ha of bushland to reduce threats and enhance ecological values, 22ha of which is classed Threatened Ecological Communities, supporting five threatened plant species.
- Remediate riparian erosion and improve fish passage at four sites across the region.
- Develop management plans for four significant bushland sites in Armidale and Uralla.
- Develop rehabilitation plans for three urban waterways.
- Develop land management experience programs for school students.
- Conduct research into wood pellet burning.
- Establish a network of residents engaged in Indian Myna control.
- Engaged a minimum of 12,000 residents in education and awareness regarding local ecology. Weekly articles about local biodiversity and urban sustainability topics appear in the Armidale Independent newspaper which circulates 15000 copies to Armidale its surrounding districts.
- Training for community groups and individuals.
- Develop walking tracks in all of the four towns which highlight sites of biodiversity value, including the Uralla Creek Walk and the Brothers Walk, Ben Lomond (Guyra).
- Provide technical advice and surveys to inform Local Environmental Planning.
- Hosted and supported more than 50 community events with over 1400 participants
- Expected long term outcomes include improved water quality, higher quality aquatic habitat and better public amenity.

One of HiCUB's greatest achievements has been the significant increase in communication and collaboration between councils, community sector and local businesses. This included sharing innovative ideas between towns and sectors in the project area. HiCUB has helped councils tap into the knowledge and commitment of community members to better identify and manage significant bushland areas. For example,

the Uralla Rivercare Group are beginning to adopt the weed control methods used by Armidale Urban Rivercare Group. While Armidale Dumaresq Council had had previous experience with major environmental projects, the other Council's had not, so HiCUB increased their understanding of, and access to, environmental grants programs for future works.

Future:

The High Country Urban Biodiversity project was an ambitious three year funded project. Initial project success has laid the foundations for longer term change. Securing long-term community participation was difficult across the four towns. Armidale and Uralla have existing groups like the Armidale Urban Rivercare Group (AURG) and the Uralla Rivercare Group (URG), which help to drive community participation. In Walcha and Guyra it was challenging to get initial participation from the community. Working bees in these towns had lower attendance rates, but this improved as the project gained visibility. Town working groups were useful to establish a connection with people in the community who helped to drive broader participation. As well as being a crucial link with the community, the working groups were active in developing plans for projects to be funded by HiCUB within their towns. Encouraging the working group to plan their own projects has meant that the community led many of the on-ground works, giving them ownership over the projects and making a long-term commitment to the sites more likely.

Guaranteed investment and continuing implementation is one of the major outcomes for the project. Most of the existing regeneration and revegetation work has been done by volunteer groups on public land. To sustain this activity, these groups need support from council and other organisations. It has been HiCUB's aim to build community group, council and local business collaboration. HiCUB has facilitated meetings between local native plant nurseries; bush regeneration volunteers; members of existing groups, like AURG and URG; Southern New England Landcare; council staff; local business; and community members to achieve this. These meetings have allowed for knowledge and skills-sharing between groups; and secured greater council support for volunteer group activity. HiCUB has also successfully secured sponsorship for the planting of 10 urban showcase sites by local businesses in Armidale. To raise the awareness of the broader community HiCUB is putting a series of weekly articles in the Armidale Independent newspaper (circulation 15000). By highlighting the value of urban bush land and riparian remnants HiCUB hopes to encourage continuation of existing projects, and implementation future projects.

HiCUB deliberately aimed to ensure that work to preserve and improve biodiversity continues beyond the life of the project by giving motivated community groups the skills and tools they need to do it themselves. This includes provision of training; new equipment; innovative weed control, planting and maintenance methods; and helping to build a relationship between local government, businesses and the community sectors for continued support. Project monitoring and methods were included in Biodiversity Plans to guide future council works.

A key outcome of HiCUB has been the understanding that Council and community can achieve much more together than separately. Having an organisation such as Landcare to act as an intermediary, makes this collaboration more effective.

References: www.hicub.org.au

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