

# Building Backyard Biodiversity - Blackbutt to Croom Urban Biodiversity Corridor



**Council Name:** Shellharbour City Council

**Web Address:** [www.shellharbour.nsw.gov.au](http://www.shellharbour.nsw.gov.au)

**Size:** 147.4 sq km

**Population:** 66,905



**Abstract:** An innovative environmental protection and enhancement project, Shellharbour City Council's Building Backyard Biodiversity (BBB) project actively engaged local residents and schools in creating an urban biodiversity corridor.

This biodiversity corridor spans across a highly urbanised landscape and links important remnant bushland areas. These fragmented natural areas have significantly high biodiversity values, containing a number of endangered ecological communities and threatened flora and fauna. Key project objectives included raising awareness of local biodiversity and encouraging residents and schools to undertake actions to support the biodiversity corridor by planting native vegetation and creating habitat for wildlife in residential yards and school grounds.

## **Background:**

In 2002, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service published the innovative research paper 'Urban Wildlife Renewal - Growing Conservation in Urban Communities.' A key finding of this social research was that though urban residents were highly supportive of wildlife being 'definitely encouraged' into 'unspoilt bushland' and 'local bushland' (87% and 65% respectively), only 14% of respondents felt that wildlife should 'definitely be encouraged' in suburban backyards. It was also found that few participants expressed interest in urban wildlife, that concepts such as biodiversity, natural ecosystems, wildlife, and the natural environment were distant issues, and there was little or no knowledge of the existence of particular native trees or particular native animals that were only able to survive in their local area. Findings also highlighted respondents felt the local council was most responsible for taking an active role in conserving native plants and animals.

In 2005, Shellharbour Council partnered with the University of Wollongong and supported an Environmental Science student to undertake a research project on urban biodiversity corridors. This research highlighted how residential and school spaces can serve an important role in increasing ecological connectivity and available habitat for wildlife within urban landscapes. It also determined an optimal urban biodiversity corridor linking Blackbutt and Croom Reserves in the Shellharbour LGA.

## **Implementation:**

Following a successful application for \$91,000 of funding from the NSW Environmental Trust, Shellharbour City Council committed \$69,000 to implement the BBB project over two years (total project budget \$160,000).

The target audience was the 67,000 residents plus schools in the Shellharbour LGA, particularly the 2,500 residents and three schools within the biodiversity corridor. While most activities were open to all residents, specific sectors of the community were targeted through events held in association with Seniors Week (for people over 55 years of age), Youth Week (for people aged 12 - 25) and KidsFest (for children under 12 and



their parents).

The project began in late September 2009 with the appointment of a project officer. Stage one focused on planning to ensure the project was tailored to community needs, and developing appropriate resources. Stage one involved:

- Creating a project scoping report. This included identifying how the project will contribute towards strategies identified in Councils Strategic Plan and Environmental Policy, the NSW State Plan and other plans and policies.
- Distributing a survey to residents in the biodiversity corridor. This identified their needs and understanding of biodiversity conservation issues and informed the project development.
- Hosting a free community BBQ to provide residents with the opportunity to learn more about the project and the biodiversity corridor.
- Developing lesson plans and workshops for school students.
- Developing educational materials including the project brochure, fact sheets and web pages.
- Planning workshops, bushwalks and community activities.

The majority of the 'on-the-ground' works and community education initiatives were delivered in the 2010/11 financial year, with the project concluding in June 2011. Initiatives included:

- Delivering community workshops, guided bushwalks and festival events.
- Involving schools in habitat creation workshops and installing frog ponds and educational signage.
- Running a backyard wildlife photography competition across the LGA, and a 'my backyard biodiversity' competition for workshop participants.
- Offering a native plant giveaway for residents in the corridor.

A total of 16 biodiversity workshops, guided bushwalks and festival events were delivered. Workshops covered specific topics such as 'creating a frog habitat in your garden' and 'attracting native birds to your garden.' Daytime guided bushwalks were held in the two major bushland reserves in the biodiversity corridor, Croom and Blackbutt Reserves. In addition, very popular guided spotlight tours were held at night in Blackbutt Forest, in partnership with a licensed National Parks and Wildlife Officer.

### **Outcomes:**

The project achieved notable community involvement, with 800 residents participating in biodiversity activities, 90 competition entries being received, and 40 corridor residents taking up the native plant giveaway. Four schools participated, with 270 students involved in biodiversity workshops.

On-the-ground outcomes achieving the objective 'Improve backyard and schoolyard biodiversity within targeted areas to establish ecological connectivity' included:

- Creating four school habitat gardens with 900 native plants, four frog ponds and educational signage.
- Installing two frog ponds with habitat gardens at a community centre and community garden.
- Distributing 375 native plants to 40 corridor residents through the native plant giveaway and over 100 native plants during a potting up activity at festival events.
- 'My backyard habitat' entries demonstrated workshop participants had improved their backyard habitat by actions including installing frog ponds, native garden beds, nesting boxes and bird baths.

Achievements for the project objectives of improving awareness of backyard biodiversity and community understanding of how to support native species included:

- 98% of surveyed workshop participants and 97% of bushwalk participants said the event encouraged them to consider doing something at home to help wildlife.
- 81% of surveyed workshop participants said the event increased their awareness of the importance of supporting native wildlife in their yard 'a lot' and 70% of bushwalk participants said the walk improved their knowledge of plants and animals.

- 16 newspaper articles were published and 18 Council advertisements. In addition 6 radio features helped promote the project to the wider community.

This increase in community understanding and aspirations to support local biodiversity will have long term biodiversity benefits, as will having involved students in the habitat creation workshops. Over time the habitat gardens, frog ponds and native plants established during the project will only increase the level of value they provide to supporting the biodiversity corridor and movement of wildlife between Blackbutt and Croom Reserves.

### **Future:**

In engaging the community in biodiversity enhancement activities, key learnings were:

- It's important to have a diversity of opportunities to engage a wide range of community members. Activities at festival events and the wildlife photography competition provided opportunities to engage a large number of residents, many who would not normally attend workshops.
- Linking in with established events such as Seniors week, Youth Week and Kidsfest was successful in targeting specific community sectors.
- Guided spotlight tours and frog habitat workshops proved exceptionally popular.
- People can be reluctant to commit to a workshop series and prefer to attend individual events of particular interest to them.

The resources developed through the program will continue to be made available to residents, and the images from the wildlife photography competition will be used in various biodiversity education materials. Learnings from the project have also been integrated into another regional biodiversity project. As an example following feedback from BBB workshop participants and schools for further information on local frogs, a new 'Frogs of the Illawarra' brochure was developed through the regional biodiversity project.

Council's bush regeneration team will support the ongoing development of the biodiversity corridor. As an example following the BBB project completion, 1,000 trees were planted in the corridor with school children as part of Council's National Tree Day celebrations. Council also supports a BushCare group at Blackbutt Reserve and has been undertaking bush restoration work at Blackbutt Reserve and Croom Reserve through a regional biodiversity project.

In engaging schools, it proved challenging at times to receive commitment from schools to engage in the program. Key learnings for engaging schools included:

- Ensure contact is made with the most appropriate teachers (i.e. the 'environmental champions').
- Allow plenty of time for organising activities, and contact teachers early in the teaching sessions, being aware of school holiday periods.
- Curriculum materials must be targeted, relevant and straightforward to use; engaging the services of an educational consultant and/or consulting with teachers may be worth considering for future such programs.

**References:** [www.shellharbour.nsw.gov.au](http://www.shellharbour.nsw.gov.au)

**Name:** Tuesday Heather

**Position:** Environment Officer

**Phone:** 02 4221 6111

**Email:** [tuesday.heather@shellharbour.nsw.gov.au](mailto:tuesday.heather@shellharbour.nsw.gov.au)