

Principles in Practice - Ecological Restoration comes of age

In 1976 the Merri Creek Coordinating Committee began coordination of groundworks, planning and advocacy. This body was the precursor to Friends of Merri Creek (FoMC) and Merri Creek Management Committee (MCMC). Thus 'Ecological Restoration' on the Merri Creek may be said to be 40 years old this year.

The practice of Ecological Restoration on the Merri began as 'intelligent tinkering' guided by our rudimentary understanding of the processes involved in bringing nature back to life. However, over the years a body of research, experience and processes accumulated. Allied organisations across Australia and the world have been on a similar journey towards gathering their own toolkit of proven approaches. Gathering these many strands of discovery has been a long time coming and the practice of ecological restoration is only now emerging from a grey zone between horticulture and ecology, between science and art.

Ecological Restoration in Australia is on the verge of evolving into a recognised profession, a vital step for how the work is recognised and valued in the future. Agreed national principles and standards are an important step for making this happen.

The Society for Ecological Restoration Australasia (SERA) was established in 2008 as the local chapter of the Society for Ecological Restoration International (SERI). Their proposed national principles and standards were launched in July (see <http://www.seraustralasia.com/standards/contents.html>). MCMC has contributed to these draft standards along with organisations from across Australia. They are aimed at both professional and community volunteer restoration as a resource to increase the quality and consistency of ecological restoration. Adherence to the principles is voluntary. They will be reviewed periodically based on feedback from practitioners. The Principles don't preclude a continued role for the empathy, craft and creativity that have been so instrumental in evolving the field to date.

In late July, MCMC presented at a launch of the Standards at the conference of Australian Association of Bush Regenerators in Sydney. We illustrated how we have applied the Principles, the outcomes and associated challenges. We chose from among hundreds of MCMC activities to demonstrate the six principles. The exercise was instructive for identifying where we can do better. It was a pleasure to access the newly digitised MCMC slide collection for this presentation. FOMC stalwart, Leslie Fraser's many months of voluntary work as MCMC's archivist has made thousands of images accessible that allow us to bring to life the astonishing changes on the Merri.



MCMC's experience took its place alongside inspiring projects in coastal wetlands, rainforests, inland stock routes, Lord Howe Island and even the reintroduction of a seaweed to Sydney Harbour. Other speakers illustrated how we might engage with genetic issues, climate change and other thorny aspects the Principles address.

These principles are a valuable common language we might use to share our experience. The talk illustrated how MCMC has an important role as a case study for best practice ecological restoration and as an advocate for these standards in its own catchment and across Australia.

The six principles of Ecological Restoration are:

Principle 1: Ecological restoration practice is based on an appropriate local indigenous reference ecosystem.

Principle 2: Restoration inputs will be dictated by level of resilience and degradation.

Principle 3: Recovery of ecosystem attributes is facilitated by identifying clear targets, goals and objectives.

Principle 4: Full recovery is the goal of ecological restoration, but outcomes may take long timeframes.

Principle 5: Restoration science and practice are synergistic.

Principle 6: Social aspects are critical to successful ecological restoration.

The above photos show our application of the first principle of ecological restoration:

In 1999, a guided excursion to a wetland on the Plenty River at South Morang (top photo) formed the 'reference ecosystem,' a template on which we based the design of Merri Park Wetland in Northcote, shown in 2013 (bottom photo).