

## STEP NEWSLETTER JUNE 2019



*Leucochrysum albicans*, Hoary sunray

### From the President

Forest 20 has been a venue for considerable activity over the last two months.

Our Soiree on 22 March to celebrate 10 years since the planting of the first eucalypts was a very successful event. It was wonderful that people who had planted trees back in 2009 were able to attend and see the progress from bare slopes to established forest and garden. Early in May we held our third STEP into Plein Air event to celebrate Tree Week. For some of the participants, this was their first visit to Forest 20 so little by little we are giving STEP wider public exposure.

Tuesday 21 May, the ACT Volunteering Awards were held at the Village Centre, with about 100 groups and individuals being represented. The National Arboretum Canberra nominated STEP for Volunteer Team of the year and we were thrilled to win this award among so many other deserving volunteer teams. STEP had nominated Andy Russell for the category of Senior Volunteer – he was a very deserving candidate among many others and was unlucky not to receive the award.

While all of this excitement and activity has been happening, the day to day maintenance of Forest 20 continues and more new plant signs are being put in. We have also been helping with the establishment of Stage 2 of the Bush Tucker Garden, opened 30 May in Reconciliation Week.

We have “moved house” into our new shed, wonderfully organised inside by Bill Handke and Terry Murphy and they are involved with on-going work outside to put in tanks, sink and storage for tree guards and other necessary paraphernalia.

While our maintenance activities slow down over Winter, we are planning more events such as a trip to Mt Annan Botanic Gardens in July and a Workshop for community-run Regional Botanic Gardens in late August.

To all of our volunteers and supporters, a huge thank you. We continue to thrive with your assistance, advice, expertise and enthusiasm.

Judy Smith



## Establishing Native Grasses

On Thursday 2 May, Richard Milner, ecologist from ACT Parks and Conservation Service, came to STEP to explain the activity being undertaken across the fence in the GG block.

Over the past few weeks, wide scrapes have been made at several locations, including one close to Forest 20, the soil has been scarified in bands across the slope of the scrape. Richard explained the reasoning behind the scraping away of the topsoil. The first was to remove weeds and the second was to remove the topsoil which tended to have an elevated nutrient level and was also a weed seed bank. As exotic grasses grow well in areas with high nutrients, these species outcompete the native herbs and grasses. By removing the richer soil, the competitive advantage of exotic species is lessened.



### *First scrape*

At planting time, seeds are sown “smooth” and “rough”. “Smooth” planting is done on the smooth sections of the scrape with a specialised seeder which has tyne allowing the seeds to fall into the soil. “Rough” seeding occurs in the scarified sections where soils are distributed over the broken up soil. No soil cover is applied in either method. Seeds are sown at a rate of 5g/sq m.

Grass species include *Themeda* (Kangaroo Grass), *Bothriochloa* (Red-leg grass), *Chloris* (Windmill grass), *Rytidosperma* (Wallaby grass), *Austrostipa* (Spear grass) and *Sorghum* (Native sorghum). Forbs in the mixture include *Rutodosis* (Button Wrinklewort), *Leucochrysum* (Hoary Sunray), and *Linum* (Native Flax).

Apologies to Richard Milner if I have not accurately reflected the information he gave us.



### *Second scrape, 17.4.2019 photo Judy Smith*

We believe this venture will be beneficial for STEP as it furthers the scientific interest we can offer to visitors and groups such as students from CIT who study conservation and regeneration of native plants and communities.

\* \* \* \* \*



*Richard Milner, Ecologist with ACT Parks and Conservation Service 2.5.2019 Photo Judy Smith*

Before scrapes occur, soil testing for phosphorous is conducted at 5, 10 and 15 cm. The depth of the scrape is determined by the phosphorus level appropriate for native species. The scrapes are left for some months and emergent weeds such as St John's Wort are spayed as they appear.



On an additional note, the grasses and forbs we have planted in our Grassy Meadow are becoming well established, and some careful weeding is helping keep the competitors at bay. It is interesting to see the swathes of *Bothriochloa* in flower between the Eucalypts. The pink silky seed heads add a wonderful smooth texture to the view. David has asked that no mowing be done among the Eucalypts at this time to give the grasses an opportunity to drop seeds for future plants to grow.



*Bothriochloa macra* Red-leg Grass. Photo Andy Russell

## Our Soiree – celebrating ten years since the first Eucalypts were planted

To celebrate this milestone, on 22 March we held a late afternoon gathering at The Clearing. Of the attendees, some were people who had planted the original trees, including current Legislative Assembly members Caroline LeCouter and Mick Gentleman. Chief Minister Andrew Barr attended and planted a tree to mark the occasion (*Eucalyptus melliodora*). Chief Ministers Stanhope and Gallagher have also planted trees at Forest 20.



Guests at Soiree



Judy Smith welcoming guests



Other guests were from National Arboretum administration and horticulture staff, representatives from Friends of the NAC, Friends of Grasslands and Australian Native Plant Society, and past, present and long-term members of STEP. It was our pleasure to present certificates of Life Membership to Cathy Robertson (founding President), and Tony Lawson for their contributions to STEP over the years.



*David Shorthouse, Trish Keller, Judy Smith and Chief Minister Barr*



*Chief Minister plants a tree*

After the Chief Minister planted “his” tree, we had an informal ribbon cutting ceremony to celebrate the completion of our new shed.



*Andy Russell and Chief Minister Andrew Barr*



*Ben Walcott and Max Bourke – a conversation in the Casuarinas*





It was a perfect Autumn afternoon and evening (despite some dire weather predictions) and was a very enjoyable event. Heartfelt thanks must go to all the STEP volunteers who worked so hard to get Forest 20 looking its best, and who helped on the evening in a multitude of ways. Thanks also to Daughters of Hall, our wait staff Oliver, Tivian and Hayley, and Andrew Peace Winery, Piangil.

Lainie Shorthouse and Max Bourke watch as the shed is declared open

*All photos for this article are by Mike Smith*

## Even lerps can be attractive

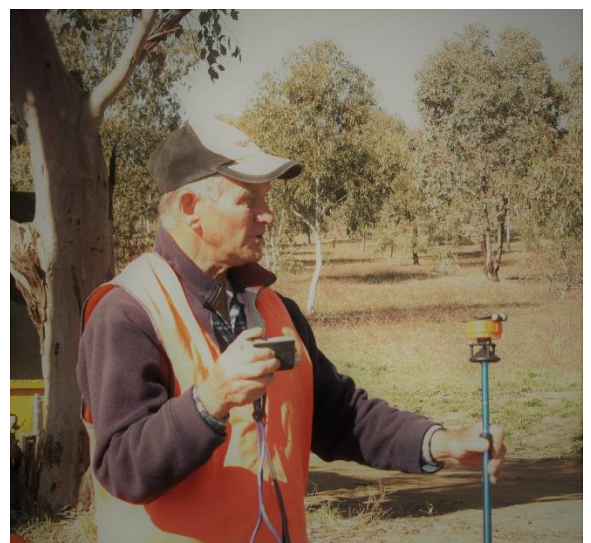
While lerps cause some distress to those who love trees, and in the short term to the trees themselves, there is beauty to be seen in this infestation, especially when early sunlight strikes the

Leaves at the right angle. This picture is of *Eucalyptus blakelyi* leaves at our morning tea gathering area.



## The Measure of a Man

Jens Svensson, our tree-measuring man, demonstrated new equipment enabling him to make accurate height reading of those trees which are now more than 10m. The Haglof height measuring device uses ultra sonic and infra red technology. Jens described it as “a high-tech Swedish measuring device” - we think that description fits Jens also.



## Tree Travels

While I have been lucky enough in my life to look closely at trees from Thursday Island to South West Tasmania, the Kimberleys to southern WA, there are a few places I have not paid enough attention to. So, when a mate suggested we (Margie and me) spend a couple of weeks doing over the national parks and forests he did not know I grabbed it.

For those of you who do not know the Coolah Tops National Park put it on your bucket list. This easily accessible and brilliant small national park in central NSW has some of the best forests I have come across including some hugely interesting 'recovering treescapes'. Situated north of Merriwa and east of Coolah it is a 'jump-up' range of an ancient volcanic hot spot in the midst of a lush agricultural region extending north into the Liverpool Plains. In geological terms it is the eastern end of the Warrumbungle Ranges.

With a rainfall of 900-1000mm pa on volcanic soils in part, it is highly productive of big trees. Among the more amazing is what is claimed to be the largest Snow Gum (*Eucalyptus pauciflora*) in Australia and at 39m I don't dispute that. But as you enter the park you go for kilometres through what had been heavily logged and milled forests of Forest Ribbon Gum (*E. nobilis*) and Silvertop Stringybark (*E. laevopinea*). These are truly magnificent stands of trees not now harvested for over 70 years. Towards the cliff edges there are stands of what I think are Brittle Gum (*E. mannifera*) but this seems out of range? The understory was alive with *Olearia* sp. and *Acacia dealbata*, both in flower when we were there in April. Photo above & below Silvertop Stryngybark *E. laevopinea* and Forest Ribbon Gum *E. nobilis* in background.



The recruitment since harvesting ceased and perhaps since more recent fires is quite extraordinary, see photo. And that was just the intermediate stop!

The real focus was to 'do over' the Pilliga! Although I had driven the long lonely road between Coonabarabran and Narrabri many times while working in western NSW, and briefly visited the Warrumbungles National Park on a couple of occasions I had not spent any real time in the Pilliga forests.

So we did several big loops through the forest as well as some walks along the Dandry Gorge in the centre of Pilliga. I am sure many of you will have read Eric Rolls' *A Million Wild Acres* which is an important look at ecological history in a very romantic way.

The Pilliga is much more diverse than 2 species of *Callitris*! But the 2 species which occur here are very prolific and demonstrate that phenomenal capacity to recruit into almost impenetrable stands, which is quite amazing in such low rainfall country.

An extremely good, and relatively new Visitor Centre is located at Baradine. There are good maps there of the detailed forest roads through the Pilliga. The main roads though sandy are good or were when we were there. Must sees are the Dandry Gorge which is quite surprising in this flat landscape. The Dandry Creek which starts near Coonabarabran manages to carve a very respectable gorge through the sandstone in the centre of the southern half of the forest and these days is the site of a really beautiful sculpture walk of indigenous art works that celebrate the local landscape, well worth the walk. As well the rather poorly signposted Sandstone Caves (on the Yamminbah Trail) surrounding some important indigenous sites just off the Newell Highway are certainly worth the short walk and even shorter detour. I have never seen such delicate structures in sandstone anywhere in Australia like these.

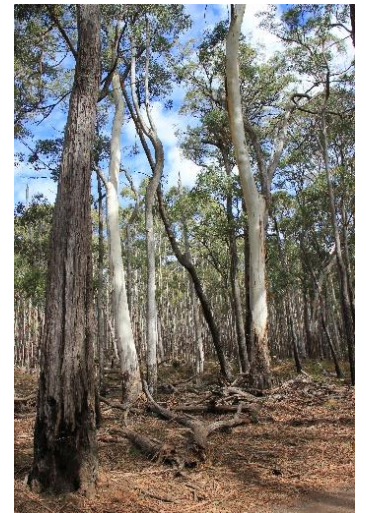


Photo Dandry Gorge in the Pilliga, Sculpture Walk.



Travelling south east we cut across the ranges dropping down the Oxley Highway from Walcha through the great forests of Oxley Wild Rivers and Cottan-Bimbang National Parks, both extraordinary collections of higher rainfall species.

Once again, we went over the back roads of the Bago Bluff National Park to the Comboyne Plateau and down into the Killabakh Valley, through further forests of *Nothofagus* and tree ferns. In Wingham is a terrific local Museum which includes much about forestry of the region of interest. And the forest walk through the Wingham Brush Nature Reserve on the Manning River just out of town is highly recommended despite the bat colony!

Coming home we spent a few nights in Gloucester so that we could more fully explore the eastern side of Barrington Tops. It is still a wonderful and rich site of magnificent stands of many eucalypts and that surprisingly tall (up to 20 metres) member of the Banksia genus *Banksia integrifolia subsp. monticola*. But when we were there the wonderful Antarctic Beech, *Nothofagus moorei*, were beginning to drop their colourful leaves and with specimens well over 50m they make extraordinary colour in the steep forest slopes. This was the tree described by Ferdinand von Mueller in 1866 which he named after RBG Sydney Director Charles Moore. The snow gums around Polblue Swamp in Barrington Tops are well worth seeing though the impact of both pigs and horses on this walk mars the experience or did for me. *Photo an almost destroyed Pilliga Grey Box Eucalyptus pillagaensis near the Sandstone Caves walk.*



But altogether a great chance to see some truly diverse eastern forests in some detail! Photos by Max Bourke

Max Bourke AM

Max wrote this article for the FACTA Newsletter

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FlagCentral.com.au E-mail [sales@flagcentral.com.au](mailto:sales@flagcentral.com.au) Phone 1300 788 891 Suppliers of promotional banners and flags of Burleigh Heads, Queensland. Flag Central donated the STEP banner that is at the She-oak Nook entrance to Forest 20.



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## Volunteers of the Year awards 2019

In late February this year, Lauren Brown (Community Engagement Officer |, National Arboretum Canberra) approached STEP with a proposal that the Arboretum prepare a nomination of STEP for the 2019 Volunteer Team of the Year award. We accepted the offer, without knowing too much about these annual awards and later decided to nominate one of our own members for another award category, that of Senior Volunteer of the Year.

In due course, a draft nomination of STEP was prepared, some minor technical changes made, and a group photo of STEPpers taken one working bee Thursday. STEP also prepared a nomination of Andy Russell for the individual award, drawing on his long association and activity with environmental, Landcare and native plant community activities, including in recent years a stalwart and very active member of STEP.



*Award certificate*

Little more thought was given to the award process, until we were sent invitations to attend the awards night. Judy and Mike Smith, Lainie and David Shorthouse, and Andy Russell attended the awards night, a splendid occasion at the NAC Village Centre. The five of us occupied one part of a row of seats, enjoyed the food and drinks on offer, and settled down to witness the awards.

The evening was managed and MC'd by staff from Volunteers and Contact ACT in a very relaxed, efficient process, as the seven awards were each described, awarded and photographed in turn. Our nomination of Andy as Senior Volunteer of the Year was not successful, but we congratulate Andy for his lengthy service to a range of environmental concerns and community groups. We are fortunate to have Andy as an active and knowledgeable STEPper.



*On stage for the presentation*

When it was time for the Volunteer Team award to be announced, we had a feeling that given the high standards of the awards so far, STEP was unlikely to be in the running, especially when the runner-up Highly Commended winner was announced. We were genuinely shocked and very surprised to hear the name of the winner of the Volunteer Team of the year was STEP, yes STEP! There was a lot of yelling and cheering from behind us, from the NAC executive team Scott Saddler, Christine Callen and Lauren Brown. We walked up to the stage, Judy received the award, and in due course multiple photos were taken for the record.

It was a shame that the whole Thursday STEP team could not have been at the ceremony and enjoyed the moment, for you are all part of the award-winning team, and all deserved a pat-on-the-back and a congratulatory hug from Scott Saddler!



*Group photo of award winners*



*Award plaque*



## STEP into plein air – for the third time

On Wednesday 8 May, STEP again hosted a group of artists who came to sketch and paint works inspired by the beauty of Forest 20. The weather was not very kind – it was cold but luckily the rain stayed away – but the 22 visitors appeared to enjoy themselves and produced some wonderful works. Megan Spiers was with us again, demonstrating and offering ideas about painting eucalypts.

She is a colleague of Julia Landford's who runs NatureArtLab, devoted to furthering an appreciation of science and nature through art.

As in previous years, STEP volunteers provided morning tea. Many thanks to all who contributed to this – it certainly adds to the quality of the experience for our visitors.



Artists join STEP volunteers for morning tea, below two painting done during the morning.



*Eucalypt oil by Andrew Smith*



*Art by Robert Peresan. Photos by Judy Smith*



## A time of the signs

The need for clear signage and naming of plants in a botanical garden is obvious, so when in 2011 we tentatively started planting the understory at STEP we had to find a way to identify the species for the public (and STEPpers).

Only botanical names were to be used and they had to be easily read by an adult standing, without having to bend or crawl under vegetation or get one's glasses out!

On one of our trips to the garden supplies capital of Australia, Monbulk, we visited Garden City Plastics and purchased a box of 350 'orchid labels'. Made in NZ they have done us well, considering the harsh Australian sun and Canberra frosts they have to put up with. Breaking off by kangaroos and people, misspelling, changes of name and fading have been hazards.

It took some experimenting with writing implements but finally I found pens with enamel paint in them and these have fared well. Over the years, the supplier has moved on from Monbulk but not before we bought another 350 signs. So that's hundreds of them.

But now the Arboretum has settled on a sign system that will be consistent throughout the site and we have many of the new metal signs in place. They show the common name and scientific one. The original large metal signs for the tree species will also be replaced and we hope to reuse them in some fashion.

Not all of the plastic ones have gone but they will go soon. And I will miss my little job. It was quick, cheap and I enjoyed having a vital part in our botanic garden. Also, our old painted flowerpots marking blocks A to I and EE etc. will soon be a thing of the past! Their replacements will not only indicate the Block letter but also note the ecological communities represented by the plants growing there.



*Pictures and text by Lainie Shorthouse*

## Our old shed goes to Queanbeyan Landcare

Our old shed which STEP recently demolished at Forest 20, has been taken by Bill Willis for Queanbeyan Landcare (who is also a STEP member and volunteer) to use. We are pleased to know that it will be put to good use.

### Vale James (Jack) Russell

STEP Member Jack Russell, from Katherine NT was killed recently in a gyrocopter accident at Timber Creek, NT. He was the eldest son of Andy Russell of Reid ACT (editor of this newsletter) and Leith Bussenschutt of Ladysmith NSW. His life was celebrated at a memorial service attended by family and friends at the Low Level Nature Reserve Katherine on Friday June 8<sup>th</sup>. STEP extends their sympathy to his family and friends.

Judy Smith





## Opening of the completed Bush Tucker Garden at Forest 20

As part of national recognition of Reconciliation Week, on 30 May the Arboretum formally opened the Bush Tucker Garden and new weaving area at Forest 20. On hand were many executive and staff from the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate (CMTDD).

In his welcoming remarks to the 50 or so CMTDD staff, Scott Saddler said:

*“The Bush Tucker Garden helps to generally support the CMTEDD Reconciliation Action Plan. On a more personal note, one of my most important roles is mentor to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees within ACT Government. As an uncle, I am able to provide cultural insights and working knowledge to help guide and shape future generations of Indigenous employees. This role is critical to the successful long-term employment of our many sisters, brothers, uncles and aunts.*

*We are currently standing in what is known as ‘The Clearing’ it is a central meeting space designed to depict the importance of gatherings and ceremonies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that encouraged sharing of knowledge and stories.*

*The new weaving area is one element within the wider Bush Tucker garden. The plants you will find here were traditionally used by the Ngunnawal people. I would like to encourage you after the speech/planting formalities to strengthen your own reconciliation journey by taking the time to observe Ngunnawal plants within the wider Bush Tucker Garden, guided by our helpful and friendly STEP volunteers (look for their yellow t-shirts!)”*

ACT Government Head of Service and Director-General, Kathy Leigh, spoke of the Government’s commitment to the reconciliation plans across the ACT’s public service Directorates and later planted a tree at the new weaving area. The tree is a *Eucalyptus pauciflora* (snow gum) and is part of the area designated for this species, at the lower elevations of Forest 20. As she planted and watered the tree, Kathy Leigh let slip that this was the first tree she had planted in this formal way!

*Kathy Leigh waters the tree that she has just planted.*





The location of the ceremony and the interest in Forest 20 shown by visitors demonstrated both the partnership between STEP and the Arboretum, but also allowed STEP guides to introduce our regional botanic garden to a wide range of visitors who had not previously known about Forest 20 or STEP.

*Right, Lainie and David Shorthouse in conversation with Kathy Leigh*



*Above, sign for the Bush Tucker Garden, photo by Judy Smith*



*Indigenous community members demonstrate weaving with local plants, photo by Judy Smith*

The next day (31 May) STEP members were also able to welcome to Forest 20 staff from Transport Canberra and City Services for another reconciliation event, with participants coming together from two directions and shaking hands in a gesture of joining, being united and 'walking together with courage'. Again, our presence enabled another group of ACT Government employees (and Canberra residents) to become aware of Forest 20 as a place for quiet recreation, education and environmental enjoyment.

Article by David Shorthouse, Photos by Andy Russell except where otherwise attributed.

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