



Kate Lee inspects a local population of snowy mint bush, a threatened species that forms part of a revegetation plan for Korong Ridge Conservation Estate, Vic.

KORONG CALLING

What happens when you bring a bunch of bush lovers together on former grazing land and empower them to restore the bush and become a community? Kate Lee and her fellow Korong Ridge landholders are the answer to that question.

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There's a big granite rock at the summit of a small hill near Kate Lee's Central Victorian bush home that draws her, even when she hasn't set out to go there. "There's just something about granite country that gets me," Kate says. "From that rock I can see pretty much a 360-degree view of the surrounding country."

Kate's granite-dotted property is nestled in the foothills of Mt Korong, near the north-west Victorian goldfields town of Wedderburn. From the lookout she can see the mountain and – when she lets her eye wander far – the surrounding farming country where generations of families have grown cereal and wheat crops, and raised cattle and sheep.

But when Kate draws her eye closer to home, she sees something different, too: young, healthy native trees and land that breathes with an absence of fences. "Straight away, you get the impression that something different is going on here," she says.

And she's right. Something different is going on here. It's not just the hundreds of thousands of young plants sending their roots deep into the ground, which is also recovering with the help of understorey plants. It's not just the robust greenhood orchid, found here in 2010 after being presumed extinct for over 70 years. Nor is it just the birdsong, which is returning here after years of grazing. It's all of these things but more than that – a community of bush lovers that has sprouted here. >

Kate is one of nine landholders on the 10,000-hectare Korong Ridge Conservation Estate, a parcel of land purchased 10 years ago by private conservationist Paul Dettman. Kate moved here in search of a lifestyle different from that of the outskirts of suburban Melbourne where she'd raised her family. She wanted – like she suspects, the other landholders did too – “just to have a quiet, natural place to live, where I wouldn't be bothered by anyone and I could just get in touch with nature”.

But Kate and her fellow landholders have surprised even themselves. Now they are socially intertwined, bound by a shared love of the land and a drive to help it heal. “We've got a lot in common and a strong desire to work together,” Kate says. Most of the owners are actively involved in the Korong Ridge Eco Watch group, which was formed early on by Kate and two other landholders. They meet regularly at Kate's table, sharing meals and lively conversation, as well as their vision for the future of the place. (Kate is the first to build and live on the estate, though many of the others have plans to do so.) The meetings and communal working bees often end with long dinners, wine and a night out under the stars.

Up until a decade ago, the land was grazed and cropped, producing sheep, cattle and cereal crops. In 2008, Paul Dettman thought he had found the setting of a vision he had long-held: a conservation community.

“In my head I saw a large area, with no fences, with eight or nine owners,” Paul says. “Each owner had their own little patch for domestic use, like a house, but with 95% of the landscape managed purely for conservation.”

Paul was so inspired that he and his wife mortgaged the family home to purchase the land and then went through the painstaking process of dividing it into nine equal titles and working with conservation covenanting group Trust for Nature to protect it in perpetuity. He set about finding eight other owners who would love the land like he did.

Paul couldn't have found a better fit than Kate Lee and her neighbours. “We didn't expect to get the buy-in from this community that we have,” Paul says. “And to be honest, Kate is really a big part of that ... she is just so caring. She's a sponge for local knowledge, a catalyst and a hub of learning for the whole community.”

In that community is a diversity of people: professionals from Melbourne; a landholder who sleeps in her caravan during visits from Gippsland; an English couple astounded at what their money >



Kate and Paul Dettmann on one of the granite outcrops overlooking Kate's property.



Paul Dettman, pioneer of the Korong Ridge Conservation Estate, with Kate Lee carrying tubestock.

could buy here; and a couple from nearby Wedderburn who work in the environment for local government.

The group is diverse, but their commitment is shared. In 2016 they met to discuss their 20-year vision for Korong Ridge. This vision included hearing the song of the rufous songlark, tripping over bettongs, having the estate recognised internationally as a new conservation model, and being valued as part of the local community.

This last goal can be challenging for conservationists working in farming regions. “The whole history of farming here is of clearing the land,” Kate says. “For some people, what we’re doing is quite confronting. But you can’t live in a farming district without having a healthy respect for families that produce our food. Australians in general have a deep-seated admiration for farmers. I feel privileged to live among them.”

Graeme Nesbitt, from the local Victorian Farmers Federation group, has worked alongside some of the landholders on community projects and says they’ve been open to the concerns of local farmers. “Most of the time they’ve had open eyes and open ears,” he says, despite some concerns about rising populations of native species that he believes impact on farming productivity. “We’re all coming from the same place.”

Well before any landholders signed up, Paul was working against the odds to realise his conservation vision. In 2009, he and his private conservation company Cassinia Environmental started direct seeding, designed to both

restore biodiversity to the area and to partially fund the project through Bendigo Bank, who paid Cassinia in return for carbon credits.

But the timing couldn’t have been worse. While Black Saturday cast devastation elsewhere, the season left its mark here too. “We planted roughly five million seedlings,” Paul says. “We lost 99% of them after three months without rain.”

But there was no going back, and by 2011, Paul’s luck had changed. His team had replanted and their efforts were quickly rewarded. “It went from one extreme to the other,” Paul says. “2011 was a really wet year – it was the year that transformed everything.”

In 2019, Korong Ridge is showing incredible conservation wins. But for Paul, it’s the success of his social empowerment model that is the biggest win. In contrast to some other joint ownership models that Paul describes as flawed, Korong Ridge has proven that a mixture of personal responsibility and collective goals can produce social cohesion and in turn, healing of the land.

“We’re so pleased with the model that we’ve since gone on to use it in two other projects I’m working on,” Paul says.

“It’s a totally transformed landscape. You look around and it’s just so rewarding to see revegetation that is part of this vast project that’s being cared for by these 10 people. They’re part of a community. There are no fences between them. Every time I go there, I know I made the right decision, all those years ago.”