

Eel Festival 2008 – Debbie Shea

Thank you for the opportunity to be involved with the Eel Festival for 2008. My involvement began when as a land holder in the Upper Hopkins area I joined a group of people to commence this years Healing Walk. This was the start of their journey along the Hopkins River from its beginnings to Wickcliffe. My short talk today I would like you to join me on a journey over time and changes.

The area I want you to journey through with me is the same area of the Upper Hopkins in which the Healing Walk began last week. There are a series of small creeks that come together to form the head of the Hopkins River. Surrounding this valley are steep hills used predominately for grazing sheep. These hills are locally known as the Skeleton Hills.

Around 25 years ago the Skeleton hills had bare tops caused by over grazing from sheep and rabbits, large wind and water erosion issues and very low commercial productivity. These environmental issues resulted in heavy silt contamination of the creeks and therefore the water quality of the Hopkins River. The wool of the sheep grazing these hills was full of dust and felt dry and harsh to handle. There remained one area ungrazed, along the verge of the Hopkins River Road where there was large diversity of healthy native vegetation.

The land holders firstly took control over the rabbit population, drastically reducing their numbers. Land class fencing was also implemented where the steeper slopes are fenced out from permanent grazing and are grazed only during the cooler times of the year. This protects the vulnerable hill tops, maintains ground cover all year reducing the risk of erosion.

On our land we began earth works on large gullies turning them from unproductive rabbit and fox harbor to just a gentle concave in a productive pasture paddock. We built cement drop structures at strategic places along the Hopkins River to allow run off rain water to move from the paddock to the river bed without taking part of the bank and paddock soil with it. To stabilize the river bank we planted trees. We fenced out and planted trees on the sheep camps and rocky outcrops. We joined these scattered patches together to create natural corridors for native birds and animals. Thus providing shade and shelter to protect our sheep resulting in cleaner, higher valued wool.

Our neighbors had not been idle either. One couple have taken to heart replacing the trees and under storey on their land. Promoting tree planting days. Another has taken the approach of fencing off the creek and river to remove permanent grazing. During the summer this land holder moves his stock onto stubbles to the south of Ararat, probably close to where we are today. Yet another has recognized the value of a paddock of Kangaroo Grass (*Themeda triandra*) and has twice harvested seed.

All the land holders and their families have traveled their own journey to improve their understanding and skills to manage the needs of the environment and stock. They have been joined for short periods of time by others that have guided and assisted them in making their ideas a reality. These people are from dept agencies, private corporations, the land care movement, the local prison (providing labour

through the landmate program), the regions catchment management authority and agriculture consultants.

The Skeleton Hills has traveled along its own Healing Walk it has played a large role in research projects investigating the balance between wool production and native biodiversity. Research into the timing of deferred grazing techniques to control annual weeds and promote summer active native perennial grasses.

Current research in the area is looking at the concept of the right plant for the right place for productive grazing, reducing erosion and improving soil health. The area is included in a study to determine the spread of the native phascogale.

The journey I have outlined is an example of people repairing mistakes from the past, such as: rabbits and clearing, in a difficult environment, increasing production and enhancing the native biodiversity in the area. The Skeleton Hills are in a much healthier and sustainable state that when we started. We are proud of what we have achieved and hope by sharing our story that others will learn and be helped along their own path.

Looking towards the future, there is a proposal for a wind farm in the area. So the journey will continue.