

Midlandscapes: matching actions to opportunities in landscape conservation in the Tasmanian Midlands

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Introduction

The Tasmanian Midlands (hereafter the Midlands) are one of the most significant, yet least appreciated, landscapes in Australia. Typically, priority conservation landscapes in Tasmania are seen as those with tall wet forests or remote mountains and moraines. While these are important, the grassy ecosystems of the Midlands remain as one of the most under-protected landscapes in Australia with less than 4% of the bioregion protected.

There is a long history of landscape-scale and connectivity initiatives in the Midlands, each building on the work of its predecessors. Despite these efforts, there has been a concomitant decline in the extent and integrity of the grassy ecosystems, and the species that depend on those ecosystems. The Midlandscapes project is aiming to reverse that trend, and see conservation integrated into the predominantly agricultural focus of the region.

Midlandscapes is focused on the Tasmanian Midlands Biodiversity Hotspot, one of 15 biodiversity hotspots in Australia (Australian Government 2012), which encompasses the lowland plains and foothills of the Midlands up to an altitude of ~600 m between the Eastern Tiers, North Eastern Highlands and the Western Tiers and Central Plateau (Figure 9.1). The total area of the Midlandscapes project is 640 900 ha with a total of 120 000 ha of conservation assets, priority vegetation communities outside the current reserve system, identified by the project team through a Conservation Action Planning process. The target area for protection and management is 64 050 ha by 2020.

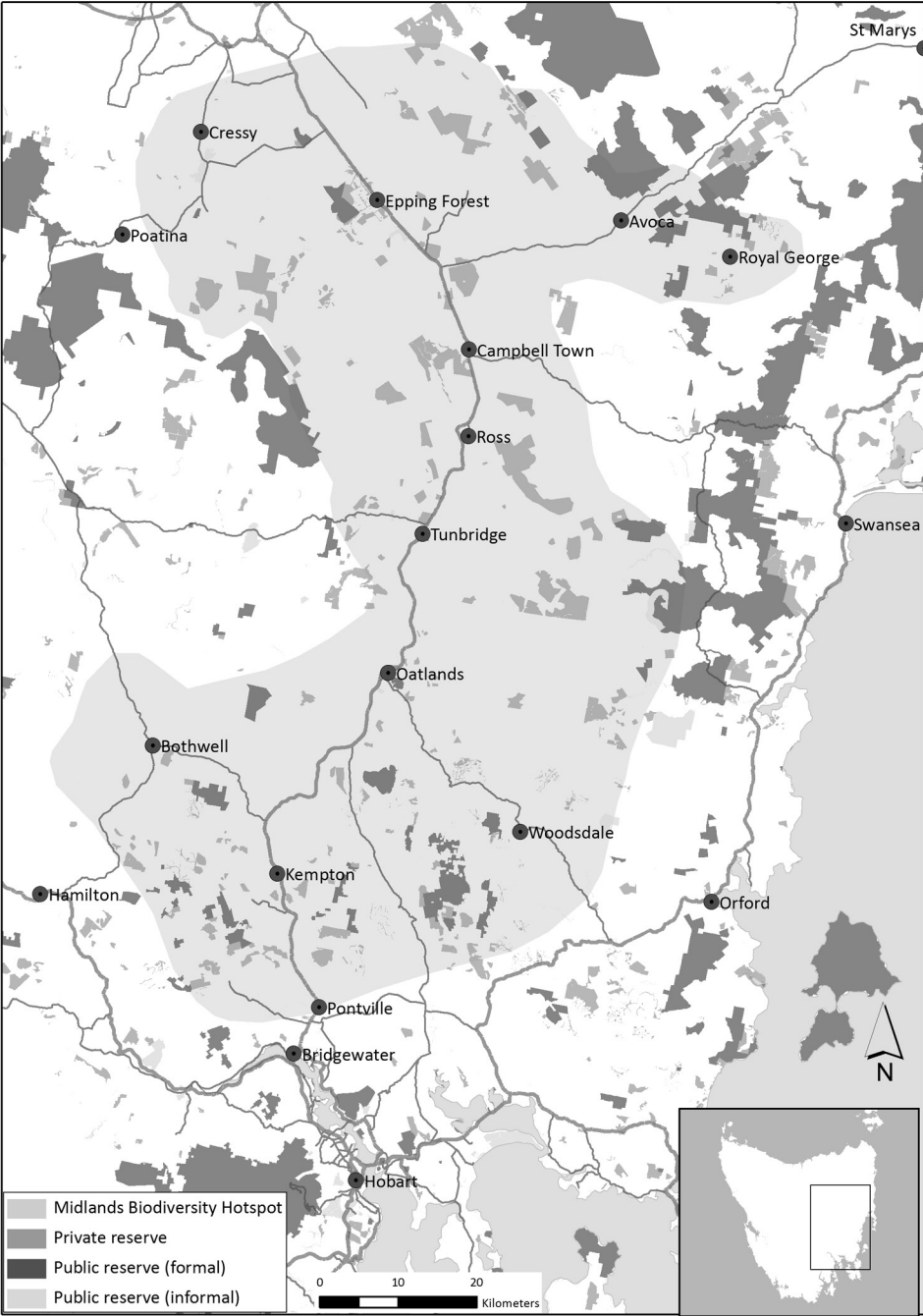


Figure 9.1 Location and conservation lands in Tasmanian Midlands region.

The landscape of the Midlands is a mosaic of cleared land, forests, grassy woodlands, wetlands and native grasslands. The areas of remaining native vegetation are recognised as important contributors to the long-term functioning ecology of the region. The Midlands

contain at least 12 endemic species, 32 nationally threatened species and more than 180 plants and animals listed as threatened at the state level – particularly daisies, lilies and orchids. Twelve wetlands are listed on the Directory of Important Wetlands in Australia and 10 wetlands are of regional significance.

The Midlands is home to one of the Australia's most endangered and least protected ecosystems: temperate grasslands (Kirkpatrick *et al.* 1995). In the Midlands these native grasslands principally occur on valley floors and have been reduced to less than 10% of their original extent. Those that remain support an astonishing array of plant diversity.

The Tasmanian Midlands is also an important cultural landscape. Aboriginal peoples managed the landscape with fire and maintained the Midlands as open woodland and native grassland (Kirkpatrick *et al.* 1995). Early colonists saw the region as ideal for pastoral and agricultural pursuits. The Tasmanian Midlands were among the earliest areas settled in Australia and were almost entirely in private ownership by 1820. Land rarely changes hands outside of the families that originally settled the area and a strong sense of place and stewardship has developed over the last 200 years. Many landowners are interested in participating in conservation activities (see for example Gilfedder and Kirkpatrick 1997).

Established in 2008, the Midlandscapes project was developed to bring together several conservation 'actors' in the Midlands landscape to work towards a coordinated approach. This approach was influenced by analogous work in the Gondwana Link (Chapter 3) and Kosciusko to Coast projects (see Chapters 13 and 18), and was seen as a way of increasing the effectiveness of conservation efforts.

A landscape-scale approach to conservation is the most appropriate approach to protecting areas of high conservation value in the Midlands. The Midlands is a 98% privately owned 'working' landscape with diverse and unique conservation assets occurring throughout. These assets, for example temperate grasslands, native fauna, and grassy woodlands, are interdependent and cannot be dealt with without considering overall ecosystem function at landscape scale.

Midlandscapes is intended to (i) facilitate the creation of a conservation vision for the Midlands including a landscape-scale conservation plan; (ii) develop an income stream for conservation management including an investment fund and market based tools; and (iii) raise awareness of biodiversity values in the region.

The vision for Midlandscapes is: *Healthy natural ecosystems within the working landscapes of the Tasmanian Midlands*. The project objective for Midlandscapes is: *10% of the Tasmanian Midlands Biodiversity Hotspot managed primarily for biodiversity conservation by 2020, comprising 64,000 ha of six ecological communities and one fauna habitat which have been identified as the Key Conservation ... Assets*.

History and structure

As previously noted, there have been many precursor projects leading to the development of the Midlandscapes initiative. Key initiatives include:

- *Whole Farm Planning* demonstration farms (1980s) supported by Greening Australia and funded through the National Soil Conservation Program to show how native vegetation could enhance a farm's sustainability;
- *Midlands Habitat Corridor* (1990s) promoted by Greening Australia and funded by Save the Bush focused on the long-term viability of native flora and fauna populations on private land by the establishment of a habitat corridor in the northern Midlands;

- *Upper South Esk Corridors and Green and Derwent Valley Corridors of Green* (also Greening Australia in the late 1990s) aimed to encourage regional-scale native vegetation management to achieve ecological and social benefits;
- *BushWeb* (late 1990s, early 2000s) funded by the Australian Government's Natural Heritage Trust and was supported by local government (the Northern Midlands, Southern Midlands and Break O'Day Councils) to help landowners protect remnant vegetation and rehabilitate vegetation in poor condition while maximising benefits for wildlife; and
- *Non-forest Vegetation Program* (mid 2000s) also funded by the Natural Heritage Trust, involved the Tasmanian Government through the then Department of Primary Industries, Water and Environment, and the Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association. The Non-forest Vegetation Program aimed to protect threatened and under-reserved, non-forest, native vegetation on private land, with a particular focus on native grasslands and working with landowners to provide benefits for conservation and primary production. The program secured over 20 000 ha under covenant.
- In 2007 and 2008, the Maintaining Australia's Biodiversity Hotspots (MABH) Program (DEWR 2007) provided funding to the Tasmanian Land Conservancy (TLC) for delivery of the Midlands Biodiversity Hotspot Tender. The Tender provided an opportunity to road-test innovations developed under Midlandscapes.

Midlandscapes is led by a partnership of the TLC, Bush Heritage Australia (BHA) and the Tasmanian Department of Primary Industry, Parks, Water and Environment (DPIPWE). There is a formalised memorandum of understanding between TLC and BHA, with DPIPWE as an agreed partner. The partners have developed and agreed a program of activities supported by the Midlands Conservation Action Plan and an accompanying Business Plan. Midlandscapes is directed by a Steering Committee comprising senior management staff from each of the partner organisations.

A Technical Working Group comprising NGO, state and research scientists provides advice to the Steering Committee on conservation prioritisation, landscape-scale mapping and identification of conservation assets, focal landscapes and potential landscape linkages. A coordinator oversees implementation and operations under direction from the Steering Committee.

The full-time coordinator is employed by TLC and jointly funded by TLC and BHA. The partner organisations make available administrative staff and specialist ecologists when required during stages of program delivery. These partner staff include operational officers for landowner liaison, on-ground site assessments, landscape ecological analysis (including site mapping), development of metrics to manage outcomes measurement, and conservation prioritisation.

Project skills are drawn from a pool of existing permanent or contract staff with working knowledge and experience with the Midlands and its community.

Major successes

The Midlandscapes project is, as with any landscape-scale conservation project in Australia today, still developing and growing. Therefore, its successes relate to the achievement of those things that are markers along the path to overall project success.

In common with many landscape connectivity projects throughout Australia (see for example Worboys and Pulsford 2011), Midlandscapes is characterised by four key features

that form the fundamental building blocks of any landscape project that is intent on success.

1. Collaboration not competition

Self-evident to many practitioners in this space, but still anathema to many policy makers and agencies in their self-serving pursuit of efficiency through competition, successful collaboration is essential to operating across multiple tenures, issues, stakeholders, resource needs and scales.

Successful collaboration requires patient investment and willingness to pursue the participation of others. Not to be confused with ‘stakeholder consultation’, where those with an interest no matter how passing or detrimental to the project goals are given an opportunity to influence the outcomes, collaboration is a focus on building mutual success (see Hoskins and Angelica 2005).

Midlandscapes has required that each of the core project partners (TLC, BHA, DPIPWE) become a successful collaborator, and significant effort has been made on relationship building, and mutual reinforcement of roles. Not without occasional tension, the collaborative nature of the partnership has allowed more open sharing of time and other resources, and increased project resilience by allowing for the cycles of organisational capacity fluctuations with the partners.

A competitive approach would not allow these opportunities.

2. A clear collective vision and action plan

Midlandscapes, as one of its early activities, invested in the development of a Conservation Action Plan and Business Plan (to guide implementation). Both were developed with active participation and input from a core group of landholders with an active interest in securing conservation investment into the region. Critically, the plans focused not just on the conservation assets and their ‘protection’, but also on developing a clear pathway for directing investment, and measuring the success of that investment.

The non-government partners in particular had previous experience with the Conservation Action Planning tools developed by The Nature Conservancy (e.g. Pasquini *et al.* 2011), and their absolute focus on pragmatic action and strategic resource allocation.

The process of developing the plan was then used to engage with landholders as a way of building a shared understanding and vision for the conservation goals of the project. The early collaborative development of the plan helped provide a common language for subsequent actions.

3. A big toolbox with willing ‘tradies’

Allied particularly to the need for collaboration is the need to have a range of conservation tools to apply in the landscape. This is essential for three key reasons:

- i No tool is applicable in all situations (e.g. acquisition), and achieving the outcome at a site and landscape scale will require different approaches;
- ii Working at the landscape scale, particularly in a production landscape, will necessarily involve dealing with different property rights and other legal instruments, that will require sometimes novel responses (for example, over 90% of the Midlands is in private hands, with some of those farms still with the original granted families); and
- iii A variety of tools and options provides a greater opportunity to access a broader range of income sources, reducing the fragility of what will be complex long-term projects.

As an example, the Midlandscapes collaborators brought together market-based tender approaches through the Midlands Biodiversity Hotspot Tender and the Forest Conservation Fund,ⁱ offsets funding, for example through the Roaring 40s Eagles Nest Protection Program,ⁱⁱ property acquisition through both 'purchase and hold' and 'revolving fund' approaches, conservation covenants, and stewardship funding through the establishment of a private perpetual fund, the Midlands Conservation Fund, to support mid-term stewardship contracts through payment for ecosystem services (see Table 9.1 for a breakdown of conservation lands in the Tasmanian Midlands Hotspot).

4. Leadership

While collaboration is essential, there is a critical leadership role required to direct and drive the overall program. In the case of the Midlands, leadership has been provided by many individuals and organisations over time. The Midlandscapes partners formalised the role through the establishment of the Midlandscapes coordinator. In addition, informal leadership for innovative approaches in the Midlands continues to be provided by key individuals (landholders, policy makers and researchers).

It is insufficient for that role to be delivered by committee, or to be assumed, and without it a complex and difficult undertaking such as a landscape project will not be able to progress.

Table 9.1. Conservation mechanisms on private and public land in the Tasmanian Midlands hotspot

Conservation on Private Land by Program	Area
Private Forest Reserves Program 1997–2006 (PFRP) ^a	10 571
Non Forest Vegetation Program (NFVP) ^a	6781
Forest Conservation Fund (FCF) ^b	7499
Forest Conservation Fund Direct Approach (FCFDA) ^c	3357
Midlands Biodiversity Hotspots Project (BHP) ^{d, 1}	1391
Midlands Biodiversity Hotspots Tender (MBHT) ^{c, 2}	6602
Protected Areas On Private Land (PAPL)	149
FCF Revolving Fund (RevFund) ^c	640
Roaring 40s Eagle Nest Protection Program (R40s) ^c	80
All conservation areas on private land	37 070
Conservation on Private Land by Tenure	Area
Private Land in perpetuity (on Tasmanian Reserve Estate TRE)	25 012
Private land Variable term Agreements (on TRE) ³	10 715
TLC Land in perpetuity (not on TRE)	580
TLC Stewardship Contracts (not on TRE) ⁴	763
All private reserves in Hotspot	37 070
All public reserves in Hotspot	32 704
Total	69 774

HOST: (a) Tasmanian Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment; (b) Australian Department of Water, Heritage and the Arts; (c) Tasmanian Land Conservancy; (d) Southern Midlands Council

NOTES: (1) Includes input from NFVP & PAPL; (2) Includes funding from NFVP & FCF; (3) 5 to 48-year covenants or Vegetation Management Agreements (VMAs); (4) MBHT 6 & 12-year contracts

Early identification of the need, and specific naming of an individual to take on the role, should be one of the first steps taken by any team wishing to pursue these approaches.

An early and sustained investment by the Midlandscapes project in the specific role of coordinator, working in collaboration with other leaders within the Midlands, has maintained a strong and consistent focus.

Major lessons

Perhaps one of the strengths of those projects that appear – at least on the surface – as more resilient to changing funding and policy trends, is that they both survive and grow from the errors they inevitably make. Midlandscapes is no exception. Although to date the project has been fortunate to avoid truly threatening crises and errors, there are several things that could have saved both time and effort had they been more thoroughly considered.

1. 'We come in peace'

It is not possible to put too much time into clarifying your objectives and intentions, and to continue to reiterate those. Several misunderstandings were precipitated, and with significant consequence, through what were misunderstandings of perspective or intent both between project partners and between partners and landholders.

This is perhaps one of the most 'over learned' lessons in collaborative conservation projects.

2. It's going to take how long?

In project terms, a landscape approach is going to take some decades to generate tangible benefit that can be seen as truly sustainable. In building support for such projects, there is a strong temptation to 'bring forward' the benefits when discussing the investment timelines required to deliver those benefits. Ultimately this hampers future success by creating a poor management impression.

The construction of a robust program logic, in the case of Midlandscapes through the Conservation Action Planning process, was critical for all parties to build confidence in the actual timelines required, and in mapping early progress towards the very distant goal.

3. Going under the bus

For some time, significant intellectual and relationship capital was resident in only one or two people involved in the project, notwithstanding broader participation by many parties. While it is inevitable that there will be some concentration of knowledge and relationships, this can create fragility. The transition of staff created significant and unnecessary relationship pauses because insufficient investment was made in ensuring the project was sustained by a more robust set of relationships.

4. Oh no, not again!

There is already a significant history of plans and planning in the Midlands. While these plans have certainly built goodwill within parts of the Midlands community, and may have slowed the rate of ecological decline (although this is untested), it is clear that the key conservation assets in the Midlands have continued to decline irrespective of this effort (see for example the advice for listing Lowland Native Grasslands of Tasmania under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*).ⁱⁱⁱ This inevitably generates

planning fatigue for both project proponents and landholders, reinforced by a certain level of plan ‘wallpapering’, whereby a new plan is simply laid over the top of the old with perhaps cursory recognition of earlier work – although some effort was made in Midlandscapes to engage and include earlier leaders and planners to maintain some continuity.

Midlandscapes was different from previous approaches in the Midlands in the scale of its vision and private sector investment in defining the opportunity and seeking to resource that opportunity. Existing plans were indeed insufficient for that need. Nevertheless, the existing palimpsest of plans for the Midlands created an understandable reluctance to participate on the part of community members and landholders.

Applying the lessons

The Midlandscapes project itself, and the current focus of activity on the establishment of sustainable finance mechanisms through the Midlands Conservation Fund, reflect a response to the opportunities and issues identified above.

The initiating conceptual model of Midlandscapes was one of establishing a conservation reserve in the landscape using the traditional tool of securing control through acquisition, and then building relationships from that base (a strategy that has worked elsewhere, see Chapters 3, 7, 12; Pasquini *et al.* 2011). The ongoing failure of the acquisition model in the Midlands, despite significant available resources to purchase land and significant resources placed into pursuing land to purchase, precipitated a reconsideration of that core conservation model.

This was further influenced through discussions with key landholders about alternative approaches to achieve a conservation result in the landscape.

The Midlandscapes project has therefore shifted focus to more actively supporting conservation management as a service on private lands not managed primarily for conservation, initially through the Midlands Conservation Fund, a sustainable finance mechanism. More recently its focus is on considering such options as funding for carbon sequestration in combination with the Midlands Conservation Fund.

Considered in purely financial terms, management of land for conservation is seen by many as a liability. There are, of course, substantial benefits that accrue to society and nature as a whole, and those benefits are, at least intrinsically, valued. Private organisations, such as TLC and BHA, exist for the purpose of translating that intrinsic value into resourced actions undertaken for their own sake (Cowell and Williams 2006). They are a financial expression of a community desire to see a greater level of conservation in the landscape than exists in the public conservation estate.

Nevertheless, the social expectation of conservation management ‘in perpetuity’ places a substantial resource burden on the manager, whether the land is managed primarily for production or for conservation. The ongoing costs of production management are of course incorporated into the price structure of the goods produced, and these are able to vary over time. The same is not typically true of conservation management, where some initial costs are provided for in funding used to secure access to the conservation resource, but even in well-run and managed agencies these costs inevitably continue to accrue beyond that provision. This can create both financial and ecological risk as resourcing fails to ‘keep up’ with management needs.

Private conservation organisations and their supporters explicitly or implicitly accept this risk as part of their business on their own lands, trading off the opportunity to increase

the extent of conservation lands against the certainty of having resources to manage an existing estate. Other landholders within a broader landscape may not be willing to also accept that risk themselves, or allow conservation organisations to, in effect, shift their own risk burden onto those landholders without compensation.

The critical issue facing landscape projects, and Midlandscapes is no exception, is to be able to sustainably resource, for all parties, the management of that risk.

Conclusions

Midlandscapes is not what might be thought of as a 'typical' landscape connectivity project in the current (at 2012) proclivity for 'corridors' and catchy alliterative titles 'from ... to ...' projects. Rather, the focus of Midlandscapes is on allowing significant biodiversity values to persist, and to be valued by landholders as part of a cultural and production landscape. Achieving this requires a focus at the landscape scale, and requires connectivity as a strategy.

Adaptation of strategy in the absence of a plan is simply 'making it up as you go along', responding to the push and pull of funding opportunities and circumstance. An explicit focus on developing a clear plan and vision has allowed the Midlandscapes project the opportunity for confident strategy revision in the face of changing circumstances while maintaining a focus on the end goal.

Without strong collaboration, a clear vision and intent, willingness and capacity to learn and adapt, and clear leadership, landscape projects such as Midlandscapes cannot succeed, even in their establishment phase.

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Biographies

Stuart Cowell has worked in many natural resource management sectors, including production, research, not-for-profit conservation and Indigenous land management over the last 25 years. He was a senior manager with Bush Heritage Australia from 2001–2010 where he led development of the Beyond the Boundaries program. He now works as a consultant supporting the development of landscape management plans and capacity.

Matt Appleby has a PhD and research background in the field of restoration ecology. Matt has worked on planning and implementation of both the Midlandscapes and Kosciuszko to Coast projects in addition to providing ecological input to management of Bush Heritage reserves across southern Australia. Matt is currently the Ecologist Coordinator for Bush Heritage Australia.

Andrew Cameron is currently the coordinator of the Midlandscapes project and has been responsible for coordinating the implementation phase of the project since 2008–09. Since 1998 Andrew has worked as a negotiator and consultant on number of private land conservation programs including – the Private Forest Reserve Program, The Non Forest Vegetation Project and the Midlands Biodiversity Hotspots Tender. Andrew lives in the Midlands and maintains a close connection with its farming community through managing his family's sheep grazing and conservation property in the Nile Valley. He was a member of the Tasmanian board of Greening Australia from 1997 to 2007.

Daniel Sprod is Landscape Ecologist for the Tasmanian Land Conservancy with special interest in landscape-scale conservation planning and prioritisation. Current research topics are modelling woodland bird distribution, carbon methodologies and modelling connectivity for vulnerable mammals and birds. He has developed conservation management plans for biodiversity and sustainability, from the farm level, through regional, catchment and state scales.

Endnotes

- i. <http://www.environment.gov.au/land/forestpolicy/fcf/index.html>
- ii. <http://www.tasland.org.au/majorprogrammes/r40s>
- iii. <http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/communities/pubs/74-listing-advice.pdf>

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