YUROL RINGTAIL CONSERVATION PROJECT

The story so far

ABSTRACT

This report outlines the story of the Yurol Ringtail conservation project to date and identifies why the project has been successful, its history and next steps.

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Introduction

The Yurol Ringtail conservation project is one of the most significant environmental projects ever undertaken in Noosa. While complex in terms of its project arrangements, this project has ultimately resulted in approximately 2,400 hectares of land being transferred into National Park. This land is protected for future generations.

The purpose of this report is to tell the story of this project – how it came into being, how it was managed and why it has been so successful. This report reflects on the project successes and identifies the reasons for that success. The lessons from this project may assist others who wish to undertake a similar project.

It is opportune to tell the story of this project at this point in time, as May 2024 is a milestone date in this project. The Transition Committee which has been overseeing this project for 5 years has completed its role and the process for all of the land to become National Park tenure is also complete.

The problem to be solved

All great projects start with a problem that needs to be solved. In the context of conserving land for environmental purposes in the Noosa Shire, the problems to be solved were:-

- **Scale** – due to a range of reasons including cost and the availability of relevant size parcels of land, many conservation efforts are hampered by a lack of scale. Acquisitions are often made on a piecemeal basis (5 ha here, 40 ha there etc) in an endeavour to add to the conservation estate over time. This results in a piecemeal approach and takes many years to build a patchwork of interconnected parcels of land that can achieve the scale required to make a real difference. Often, it is the multiple ownership of different parcels of land in a locality which make it difficult to piece together a conservation project at scale. This is especially the case in South East Queensland. How can a large conservation estate be established in SEQ where most land has already been subdivided and developed?

- **Connectivity** – conservation estates work best when they are connected to other conservation estates. On a regional perspective, the broader Noosa National Park needs to be connected to the Cooloola National Park to create connectivity for wildlife corridors. Is it possible to connect, at a regional level, the Noosa and Cooloola National Parks?

- **Cost** – land in the Noosa region is some of the most expensive land (on a per hectare basis) outside of the SEQ inner urban areas. This means that acquisition costs can be prohibitive to establish conservation estates of any scale. As an example, Noosa Council has previously acquired parcels of land of 40 ha in the rural areas of the Shire using its Environmental Levy at a cost of approximately $1 million. To achieve scale (1,000 ha or more) is cost prohibitive using traditional approaches. How is it possible to put together a large conservation estate without “breaking the bank”?

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- **Holding the line** - traditionally, acquiring and protecting land for environmental purposes has focused on "saving" parcels of land which still have high environmental values and have not been developed. This approach endeavours to "hold the line" by preserving land with those high environmental values. However, it does not address the opportunity to "push back" and restore land which has been cleared and used for other purposes. Is it possible to restore such land to its original environmental state over time?

Origins of the Yurol Ringtail Conservation Project

The concept of establishing a large national park in the Noosa Hinterland that linked the Cooloola and Noosa National Parks has been a long held aspiration of the Noosa Parks Association. While the concept of this regional scale linkage had been a desired outcome from an environmental perspective, the practical difficulties of multiple stakeholders and complex land tenures meant that this was not an easy outcome to achieve.

In early 2017, the planets began to align. HQ Plantations which owned and operated the pine plantations in the Yurol Ringtail area, had adopted a series of sustainability and stewardship principles at a Board level.[1] Informal discussions between Noosa Parks Association and HQP identified that HQP may be open to negotiations to exit their plantation holdings in the Noosa area. NPA then began to lay the foundations for the project by holding a series of one on one meetings with key government agencies at a senior bureaucrat level and also at Ministerial level. NPA also briefed Noosa Council on the project. Both the Council and relevant government agencies evidenced an appetite to enter negotiations to acquire HQP's interest in its pine plantations and also transfer State forest areas to National Park.

Award Winner

The Yurol Ringtail Conservation Project has won multiple awards including:-

- Local Government Managers (Queensland) award for best Collaborative Project in Queensland 2019.
- Local Government Professionals Australia 2019 Federation Award for best Partnership and Collaboration Project in Australia.

In April 2017, all of the potential parties met for the first time in Brisbane. This was the first time where all stakeholders realised that it may be possible to forge an agreement. This was largely due to the work undertaken by NPA prior to that meeting to garner commitments on an individual stakeholder basis to work towards a common goal.

[1] See HQ Plantations website - Stewardship | HQPlantations

Complexity of stakeholders and land tenure

At this early stage of the project, there were 6 distinct stakeholders involved - 3 different government departments[2], a private sector forestry company, a local government and a community based not-for-profit environment group. The stakeholders were:

1. HQ Plantations (HQP) - a private sector plantation forestry company which held the licenses for plantation areas in the Yurol Ringtail area (1,495 ha). This company also managed approximately 340,000 ha of forestry areas throughout Queensland including both softwoods (pine) and hardwood areas.
2. Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF) - the Forestry Division of this Department has oversight of the State government's interest in both Plantation Licence Areas (PLAs) and other state forests that have timber extraction rights.
3. Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS) – QPWS has responsibility for the day-to-day management of National Parks in Queensland.
4. Department of Environment and Heritage Protection (now known as DES) – DES has policy and funding oversight of environmental matters including decisions about and the funding for the acquisition of the conservation estate.
5. Noosa Parks Association (NPA) – NPA is a not-for-profit community group based in Noosa incorporated under the Associations Incorporation Act. They have a range of objectives including the protection of the natural environment in the greater Noosa – Cooloola region.
6. Noosa Shire Council (Council) - this is the local government for the Shire of Noosa.

All of the stakeholders initially had different ideas about this project based upon their own individual perspectives. It is important to acknowledge the critical role of HQ Plantations in being willing to negotiate an outcome that was both commercially realistic and also met their sustainability and stewardship guidelines. Their CEO at the time (Mr Brian Farmer) played a very important role in establishing a cooperative tone within the working group at its inception.

The complexity of the land holdings also bought some challenges to the project. Some of the land in the locality included:

- some small areas of existing National Park (generally not connected to other National Park areas).
- State Forest areas that had not been previously logged and were in a pristine state.
- State forest areas that had specifically been planted with hardwood species (particularly Gympie Messmate) for future harvesting.
- Plantation Licence Areas with HQP holding the balance of a 99-year licence (approximately 90 years of the license remaining). These areas were primarily pine areas yet to be harvested but also some fallow areas awaiting replanting and also some smaller areas of hardwood forest.

Establishing a Memorandum of Understanding

After 6 months of discussion, in late 2017, all the parties signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to commit to a series of principles that would ultimately allow negotiation of detailed

[2] State government departments names, department structures and responsibilities change from time to time. This description of the State government departments was relevant in 2017 when the project commenced.

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agreements. This MOU allowed the parties to move from looking at the issues from their own perspective, to agreeing on joint outcomes. Importantly, that MOU established a Transition Committee which would act as a clearing house and coordinating group for the project management. That Transition Committee was chaired by the Noosa Council Chief Executive Officer (CEO).

An MOU approach was used to establish the common ground between the parties and to make a commitment to negotiate further in good faith. The MOU was also used to gain commitment at a political level prior to the State election which was to be held shortly thereafter.

The Project in a Nutshell

Following further negotiations, the parties entered into a series of formal contracts in September 2018 which achieved the following:

- HQP would surrender its harvesting rights in the Yurol Ringtail area in exchange for $3.5M in compensation. HQP would have 5 years to complete its final harvest of all commercial pine in that area - effectively, a "cut and carry" of its commercial pine forest areas. HQP agreed to use its best endeavours to leave those harvested areas in a good condition. Discussions and negotiations with HQP to have them agree to a 5-year timeframe was critical to a successful arrangement.
- The compensation for HQP would be funded by DES, Noosa Council and NPA on an equal share basis. NPA also had an agreement with Noosa Council to pay their one third share over a five-year period ($541,666 upfront and 5 subsequent payments of $125,000 per year). All of those financial obligations have been met.
- Land parcels were to be transferred into National Park over the next 5 years in a series of tranches as forestry activities were completed.
- All of the parties agreed to work co-operatively via the Transition Committee to achieve the outcomes that all parties were after.
- In the initial agreements, there was also a requirement for Noosa Council and NPA to fund remediation work in the harvested pine areas for 5 years once the pine harvesting had been completed ($125,000 per year for 5 years each for both Council and NPA).[3] However, the agreement also recognised that Noosa Council and NPA could seek to find other parties who would contribute funding for restoration and if that was to occur, the Council and NPA could seek relief from their restoration obligations.

An example of complexity

One of the technical challenges to be overcome was the legal concept of "not fettering Ministerial discretion". At law, it is not possible to contractually bind a Minister to exercise a discretionary power in the future.

This included binding a Minister via a contract to enter into the process of converting land into National Park tenure.

This put Noosa Council and Noosa Parks Association in a difficult position during negotiations as they were required to contribute up front, two thirds of the $3.5M acquisition cost for HQP's Pine Plantation Licence. However, they needed to wait for up to 5 years for harvesting to be complete and for a future Minister to decide to exercise their discretion to transfer that land to National Park.

The solution to this problem was to have their contribution held in trust by the State Government until the last of the land was converted into National Park. If that did not occur within a certain timeframe (approximately 7 years) the funds would be returned to Council and NPA. Further, interest on the funds held in trust would be applied to Koala projects in Noosa Shire. The timeframe to transfer all of the land into National Park was met.

[3] Note that this restoration obligation was not required once Greenfleet assumed responsibility for tree planting in both the PLA area and the State Forest areas.

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This process led to parcels of land being transferred into National Park over a 5 year period.

Date of Dedication as National Park	Area of Land transfer
15/11/2019	357.39 ha
10/11/2022	664.07 ha
XXXX TBC	1,368.23 ha
Total	**2,389.69 ha**

Harvesting Existing Forest Resources

Both HQP and DAF undertook harvesting of their respective forestry areas from 2018 to 2023. Both finalised their harvesting activities well before the 5 year timeframe envisaged by the formal contracts. This was despite significant rain events restricting access at certain times (particularly in early 2022). Both DAF and HQP took particular care with ensuring that their harvesting was done in a way that minimised the impact on the environment while maintaining safe work practices for their contractors. This included:

- DAF using Koala detection dogs from the University of the Sunshine Coast to identify areas where koalas may be present and taking extra steps where koala activity was present.
- Both DAF and HQP working closely with their contractors to ensure that existing remnant forest areas were not impacted and that access tracks had minimal impact on the environment.
- Ensuring that contractors took extra care with natural vegetation growing within the harvest area to maximise opportunities for natural regrowth following harvest. This resulted in better than expected natural regrowth in the cleared harvest areas. HQP's contractors were particularly good at retaining natural regrowth occurring within pine planation areas.
- DAF worked to remove non-endemic hardwood species to promote long term biodiversity. As a result of hardwood plantings over the years, there were many mono-culture areas i.e. areas where there was only one species of tree (mainly Gympie Messmate) and DAF worked to remove as much of this as possible. Other species such as Flooded Gums and Swamp Mahogany were identified as endemic to the area and also a food source for koalas. These hardwood areas were retained by DAF in many areas to assist in achieving better environmental outcomes.

By harvesting hardwood areas that were specifically planted for that purpose, DAF were able to ensure that that valuable resources were obtained for the Queensland timber industry including:

- 7,400 cubic metres of hardwood sawlogs for sawmills
- 10,400 power poles
- 4,500 piles and
- 16,000 cubic metres of low grade log material.

Similarly, HQP were able to finalise the removal of all commercial pine from the Plantation Licence Area well within the timeframe envisaged by the agreements. HQP harvested:

- 84,000 m3 of pine plantation timber from the Ringtail area; and
- 51,000 m3 of pine plantation timber from the Yurol area.

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Making a good project even better – Greenfleet and Kabi Kabi

This project garnered a lot of attention when it was initiated, particularly in environmental circles. The project came to the attention of Greenfleet CEO, Mr Wayne Wescott. Greenfleet is a long standing NFP which attracts funding from the corporate sector and individuals who wish to offset their carbon emissions. This funding is used to plant trees and remediate land from an environmental perspective. More information on the impact Greenfleet has had on restoring forest areas can be found on their website.[4]

Greenfleet indicated that they were keen to be involved in this project and began several years of very patient negotiations with the State Government (primarily DES) and the Kabi Kabi representative group to bring this to fruition. Greenfleet also entered discussions with Council and NPA as they needed to be parties to any variation to the previous agreement.

Ultimately, Greenfleet, DES, the Kabi Kabi representative group, Council and NPA agreed that:

- Greenfleet would assume restoration responsibilities for the Yurol Ringtail project land that had been subject to harvesting – both the pine and hardwood areas. On that basis, Council and NPA would not need to undertake any of their restoration work.
- By doing so, the State would grant Greenfleet the rights to carbon credits generated by their work and would be able to attract funding from organisations and individuals who wished to purchase those carbon credits.
- As part of their commitment, Greenfleet also agreed to provide funding and job opportunities to the local Kabi Kabi representative group and also made commitments to undertake cultural surveys on the land. This included reaching an Indigenous Land Use Agreement with the Kabi Kabi in relation to the subject land in September 2021.
- This approach would result in a significant increase in restoration work on the subject land that would otherwise have been achieved. The Greenfleet agreement covered restoration of the hardwood harvesting areas which were not previously subject to specific restoration works.
- Greenfleet also agreed to use the Noosa and District Landcare Group as its local partner to undertake tree planting activities.

The Environment Outcomes

At its heart, this is an environmental protect project. From studies undertaken in the initial assessment stage, there were 23 threatened species in this locality that were identified as endangered, ranging from the Richmond Birdwing Butterfly and Giant Barred Frog through to the iconic koala. Nine of those 23 threatened species were endemic to the SEQ Bioregion.

[4] See Greenfleet website - https://www.greenfleet.com.au/pages/our-impact

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For astute political and marketing reasons, the koala became the signature species to be protected in this project. It enabled additional funding and support to be received due to that iconic species garnering more publicity. For example, the Body Shop philanthropic arm provided funding for tree planting including koala specific food trees and at those community tree planting days, the volunteer cohort was much younger than usual. There were a lot of "selfies" taken with a koala at the community tree planting day and using the koala as the signature species was beneficial in engaging with corporate supporters and community volunteers, particularly younger volunteers.

By the end of this project, almost 2, 400 ha of land will be protected forever as National Park. This land will be preserved for future generations and create regional connectivity between the Cooloola National Park and the Noosa National Park. It will provide important habitat for both the koala and 23 other threatened species across our region.

Natural Regrowth and Restoration work

One of the unknowns at the beginning of this project was how much natural regrowth would occur and how much restoration (tree planting) would be required. To some extent, this issue related to one of timing – more tree planting would accelerate the restoration of harvested areas to natural regrowth and also assist in ensuring sufficient species variation but potentially, mother nature may achieve the same outcome over a longer period of time.

After 5 years, it is clear that the levels of natural regrowth are higher than first envisaged. This has no doubt been assisted by several years of wet weather (particularly 2022) which have accelerated natural regrowth in those areas harvested by that time. Council environment staff have physically inspected all of the areas on a regular basis and have been clearly surprised as to the level of natural regrowth. They have also found plant species re-emerging which were on the endangered list.

Nevertheless, tree planting undertaken to date and over the next few years will accelerate the restoration of vegetation cover and also assist with diversifying the types of vegetation. This is particularly the case in some drier areas (mainly in the Ringtail area) where regrowth is not as rapid as other areas where soil type and moisture levels are more suitable.

Natural Regrowth

Post pine harvesting – mid 2000

Same location – Late 2023 (no replanting undertaken on this site at that stage)

(Source – Brett de Chastel. Photos taken near corner of Yurol Forrest Drive and Elm Street)

The Restoration program is not just about tree planting. It also deals with:

- managing any regrowth of Gympie Messmate which naturally coppices when cut. This requires treatment to ensure that it does not regrow and inhibit other vegetation species.
- removal of invasive weeds (e.g. Lantana) that may have been present in the harvest areas.

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- developing fire management plans and planning fire access roads for dealing with future fires.
- removing pine wildlings which can emerge in former pine plantation areas.

While the Greenfleet contribution to restoration is clearly the most significant, the project also acknowledges contributions made by the Body Shop, Peppers Noosa and the Burnett Mary Regional Group who have made financial contributions to tree planning activities within this project. Similarly, it is important to acknowledge the important role that Noosa Parks Association has provided in assisting with volunteers in community tree planting days.

It is also important to acknowledge the work undertaken by Noosa and District Landcare. This organisation has provided the practical "boots on the ground" support in terms of facilitating community tree planning days and also undertaking direct tree planting.

To date, 131,038 trees have already been planted in the Yurol Ringtail Conservation Project area (50,750 trees in Yurol and 80,288 trees in Ringtail). **A further 186,156 trees are proposed to be planted in the next few years** (38,400 trees in Yurol and 147,756 trees in Ringtail).

Financial Year	Plantings in Yurol	Plantings in Ringtail	Funding provided by
Actual			
2018/19		1ha (2,000 plants)	Bodyshop
2018/19		81.8ha (24,180 plants)	Bodyshop
2019/20		19.1ha (7,640 plants)	Peppers Noosa
2020/2021	15.1ha (6750 plants)		BMRG
2021/2022	38ha (15,205 plants)		GreenFleet
2022/2023	72ha (28,795 plants)	56.16 ha (22,468 plants)	Greenfleet
2023/2024		60ha (24,000 plants)	Greenfleet
Planned			
Late 2023/4 & 2024/2025	96ha (38,400 plants)	169ha (67,620 plants)	Greenfleet
2025/2026	0	158.5ha (63,336 plants)	Greenfleet
2026/2027	0	42ha (16,800 plants)	Greenfleet

Why has this project been so successful?

It is useful to analyse why this project has been so successful. This may assist others in learning about this project and also help to replicate other similar types of projects. In no particular order, the reasons for this projects success were:

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- **Relationships and trust** - Through the structure of regular Transition Committee meetings, the parties were able to build very good working relationships leading to trust. This was made easier by the fact that the individuals representing each of the stakeholders maintained their involvement in the project throughout the 5 plus years of meetings. Strong working relationships meant that any problems or differences could be resolved, and all of the stakeholders realised that they could work well together. One of the benefits of the trust established was that none of the parties ever had to resort to referring to existing contracts to assert their point of view.

- **Establishing individual commitments before agreeing on a shared outcome** – the first meeting of all parties in the same room in April 2017 was a critical milestone in this project. It was the first opportunity for all parties to commit in principle to shared goals. However, achieving that outcome was not a matter of luck. Critical to success was a series of one-on-one meetings with the individual stakeholders undertaken by NPA in the lead up to that meeting to elicit support and understand the key issues from each party prior that meeting. This ensured "no surprises" and an opportunity to reach consensus on key issues.

- **Recognise and respect differences** - Each of the stakeholders recognised and respected the different perspectives of other parties. For example, the expectations of stakeholders interested in forestry activities were very different from those stakeholders focused on environmental outcomes, but they found a way to work well together. All parties looked to achieve a win-win wherever possible and agreed to work through any issues together.

- **Balancing short and long term goals** – One of the ways that all of the parties were able to achieve their objectives was an acceptance that all needs could be met over time. Thus, DAF and HQP would be able to achieve their objective of extracting existing timber resources while the environmental stakeholders were happy to wait for 5 years for that to occur before their aims were met. The parties recognised that each had different goals, but they could work together to help each other achieve those goals. For example, while HQP and DAF were undertaking harvesting, the other parties assisted with public messaging to the local community to support those organisations and conversely, DAF and HQP requested their harvesting contractors to take extra care in the harvesting process to optimise potential natural regrowth.

- **Regular communication** – the stakeholders operated on a "no surprises" basis. While the Transition Committee met formally at least every 6 months, there was a lot of informal communication between the parties to take advantage of opportunities. For example, while undertaking harvesting in the northeastern Ringtail area, HQP realised that there was an uncommercial stand of immature pine trees and liaised with Noosa Council to have those mulched in situ by the HQP contractor at Noosa Council's cost while the contractor was onsite saving future remediation costs.

- **Consistent Transition Committee Chair** (the CEO of Noosa Council) chaired the Transition Committee and built strong working relationships with all stakeholders. Upon his retirement from the Council CEO role in 2021, he continued to fulfill the role of

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Transition Committee Chair on a pro bono basis post-retirement. This ensured continuity as Chairperson of the Joint Transition Committee throughout the life of the project. Similarly, the administrative support to the Committee was provided by Council and was the same staff member throughout which bought consistency to the process. The Council was seen as a trusted partner by the other parties to act as the independent Chair.

- **Being flexible – from good to great** – the stakeholders didn't originally envisage taking on further partners during the duration of the project, but when Greenfleet sought to bring their expertise in carbon credits to the project, together with involvement of the Kabi Kabi First Nation people, the existing stakeholders saw the benefits and embraced the opportunity. For multi-year projects, it is inevitable that things can change and new opportunities arise. Flexibility was paramount and in terms of the introduction of Greenfleet, it was DES and QPWS who were flexible enough to develop a new carbon credit model for Queensland.

- **Innovative solutions to manage risk** – Any project that has a long duration will inevitably have risks to be managed. In this project, the most significant of these was the legal impediment that the State could not guarantee that land would be transferred into National Park in the future due the legal concept of "fettering a discretion". This legal doctrine meant that there were risks for Council and NPA in agreeing to contribute upfront to the acquisition of HQP's plantation rights without being able to guarantee that the land would become National Park. The solution to this risk was elegant – the retention of those funds in a trust account to be returned to Noosa Council and NPA if all of the land was not ultimately transferred into National Park. Further, those funds would accrue interest which was to be used on koala projects in the Noosa Shire. This solution was innovative for the State but allowed the outcome to be achieved.

- **Being open to different thinking** – Land is normally placed into National Park because it is in pristine condition and has outstanding conservation values. That is certainly the case for a significant amount of the land in this project. However, QPWS was prepared to consider the transfer of land into National Park of land that was former pine or hardwood plantation land. They recognised that this land would be restored and together with natural regrowth, in 20 to 30 years' time, would form an important part of the regional environmental estate.

What next?

Greenfleet will be working with Noosa and District Landcare to complete their planting program over the next few years. This will see an additional 186,156 trees planted in addition to the 131,038 trees already planted. QPWS has also taken over responsibility for the land as National Park and will implement management practices including fire management in conjunction with the ongoing work by Greenfleet. An Operations Coordination Group has been established between QPWS, Greenfleet and Landcare to assist in that process.

This project can also stand as an exemplar for other communities as to how stakeholders with very different constituencies and perspectives can successfully work together to achieve outcomes that benefit all parties.

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