

Bush For Life: a successful model for community participation

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Summary The ‘Bush For Life’ (BFL) program is one of Australia’s most successful community involvement programs focusing on the preservation and active management of native vegetation using minimal disturbance weed management methods.

BFL is a program managed by the not for profit community organisation ‘Trees For Life Inc’ which is dedicated to the revegetation of South Australia and protection of its remnant vegetation. Trees For Life began in 1981 and sought to assist landholders to revegetate their properties by linking them with mostly city-based volunteers, growing indigenous species sourced locally to the area of planting. However in a state in which less than 10% of native vegetation remains in agricultural areas, it became clear that revegetation was not enough. Preservation and management of remnant native vegetation was imperative to preserve functioning ecological systems and genetic resources from the onslaught of environmental weeds.

Since its inception in 1994, the Bush For Life program has built up a volunteer base of over 600 active bush carers working on over 319 sites spread across a wide area of South Australia. The area cared for by trained volunteers is equivalent to over 2500 ha, and each year volunteers deliver over \$800,000 in in-kind contribution to weed management on targeted remnant vegetation sites. A key feature of the program’s success is the development of a continuous learning pathway for volunteers. A series of introductory and advanced training workshops and ongoing in-field support build awareness and understanding of ecological processes and the role of minimal disturbance methodology. It empowers and inspires volunteers to take direct on-ground action by providing a number of options for active participation in on-ground activities. These range from the adopt-a-site approach (often on their own but also in pairs or families), to participation in Bush Action Teams, Bush Management Days and other

activities that involve working on different sites with other volunteers.

Relationships with volunteers are developed and nurtured through a network of skilled regional coordinators. Volunteers are provided with opportunities to further develop their skills in advanced training courses that focus on particular habitat types, weed species, techniques and herbicides. BFL also places high value in training volunteers in the safe handling of tools and chemicals, and in safe work site operation.

BFL volunteers do use herbicides, unlike in some other minimal disturbance techniques. However we have developed a number of techniques that vastly reduce the amount of chemicals used and guard against off-target or other environmental damage, seeking to work with nature and encourage natural regeneration processes. Before allowing volunteers to use chemicals or engage in other on-ground activities, we require them to study chemical safety information and obtain a satisfactory standard in an open-book chemical and safety questionnaire.

BFL operates mainly on public lands in collaboration with local governments and other authorities, but has spread its influence among private landholders who have participated in its training courses and other events. In the last ten years over 2000 people have been trained in the Bush For Life methodology.

Keywords Community education, volunteer, minimal disturbance, biodiversity.

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