

The Great Eastern Ranges Initiative

Mobilising the community and sustaining the momentum for continental-scale conservation

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WHAT IS THE GREAT EASTERN RANGES INITIATIVE?

The Great Eastern Ranges Initiative (GER) brings people and organisations together to maintain and improve the health and resilience of the mountainous ecosystems of eastern Australia over 3,600km. from the Grampians in Victoria to far North Queensland. The GER is a response to the ongoing decline and mass extinction of species due to past and current land-use and climate change. It delivers an holistic approach that uses science to identify and assess the significance of 'gaps' in native habitat and works with regional partners to determine how these 'gaps' can be restored to enhance the functional connectivity of the GER corridor.

The GER corridor follows the Great Dividing Range and Great Escarpment, as well as landscape scale connections with adjacent coastal and inland slopes environments. It comprises the most biologically diverse landscapes on the continent and includes the most extensive network of protected areas and natural habitats in Australia. The topography of the landscape means the GER corridor provides refuge for species and ecosystems which have been lost over a large part of their former distribution. Today the GER corridor contains two thirds of species listed as threatened in NSW. The GER vision is to conserve and manage this 'continental lifeline' and maintain the natural processes on which it depends.

The GER relies on a program of education, information and relationship building to deliver its aims. Local landholders, government agencies, non-government organisations (NGOs), community and indigenous groups, researchers, councils and industry have been mobilised to collaborate in the planning and delivery of projects on a voluntary basis.

The GER has evolved through three periods: foundation, transition and now expansion. Each of these phases has involved innovation to build, maintain momentum and capitalise on an increasing number of opportunities.

THE FOUNDATION YEARS– 2007-2010

The GER was officially launched in 2007 with \$6.7m. funding from the NSW Government allocated over three years. This allowed the recruitment of six staff with expertise in science, research, spatial analysis, communications, tourism and project management. This team undertook a number of foundational tasks in the areas of science, branding and the establishment of five regional partnerships.

From the outset, strong emphasis was placed on the need to gather and synthesise knowledge to guide strategic delivery. Leadership by the NSW Government was important at this stage as it facilitated access to the extensive spatial data and mapping resources available within government. A number of resources were developed to describe the natural and cultural heritage and socio-economic values of the GER, including:

- Principles for continental scale connectivity conservation
- Mapping of regional biodiversity assets
- Analysis of conservation opportunities and constraints
- Analysis of connectivity values and regional priorities
- Continental scale ecological processes and conservation priorities

This underpinning of science was and continues to be a key strength of the GER.

The GER also recognised good communications as essential to ensuring the awareness, understanding and support of a diverse audience. This involved developing the messages and communications 'infrastructure' needed to engage, motivate and influence partners, stakeholders and the wider community. The development of the brand played an important part in connecting people with the GER vision.

A targeted approach to working in priority areas was adopted to maximise outcomes and ensure resources were not thinly spread. An initial analysis of connectivity priorities considered the following variables:

- Biological values – regional distinctiveness and species diversity
- Connectivity need – lack of connectivity of habitat and between protected areas
- Social opportunity – organisations with the capacity and interest to become involved

This assessment identified five regions as the focus for effort during the early stages: the Border Ranges in northern NSW and south-east Queensland, the Hunter Valley, the Southern Highlands Link, Kosciuszko to Coast in southern NSW and ACT and Slopes to Summit covering the South West Slopes of NSW.

While the GER team supported the establishment of each of these partnerships, a critical role was played by regional partnership facilitators, whose priorities were to:

- Draw up conservation action plans to identify common objectives
- Develop governance arrangements to enable the involvement of a diverse range of stakeholders
- Use existing networks, media and events to promote the emerging partnership
- Oversee project delivery and promote and leverage partners' programs

This process brought together many organisations for the first time and acted as a catalyst for new thinking on approaches to understanding priorities for collaborative projects.

The GER was able to make impressive progress over its first three years. By the end of the period over 100 organisations were actively involved and \$12.9m. in cash and in-kind contributions had been leveraged for conservation projects from the NSW Government's \$2.7m. in project grants. Perhaps the best proof of success was the enthusiasm with which the GER had been received by organisations and the community. Indeed this was the critical component that maintained the GER's momentum through the uncertain period of transition that followed.

TRANSITION – 2010-12

In 2010 with the initial period of NSW Government funding about to end, a group of organisations discussed how the GER might continue into the future. Maintaining the facilitator positions, the need to expand beyond NSW and a more sustainable funding model were all recognised as essential.

These discussions resulted in five lead partners, (Greening Australia NSW, National Parks Association of NSW, Nature Conservation Trust of NSW, OzGREEN and the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH)¹), entering into a memorandum of understanding (MOU). Under the MOU the parties agreed to provide leadership, deliver essential activities and coordination and source future funding. The MOU identifies the governance arrangement as a 'partnership in spirit not in law' and is an important example of a NSW Government program transitioning to an NGO-led partnership.

The MOU allowed the NSW Government to extend the remaining funds for a further year. Though the six person GER team had to be disbanded, there was still funding for the five facilitators, a new CEO position and continued access to OEH resources. However future funding remained uncertain, while the NSW Government considered providing longer term support.

Despite these uncertainties the commitment of the members of the partners continued. Four new organisations joined the Hunter Valley partnership's management group membership, each from very different sectors: Conservation Volunteers, Muswellbrook Council, University of Newcastle and Xstrata Coal. The Border Ranges Alliance continued to focus on key regional priority areas. Kosciuszko to Coast became an incorporated association and won the Murrumbidgee CMA Landcare Award. Slopes to Summit expanded its reach into peri-urban areas with new funding. Work in the Southern Highlands continued with a Caring for our Country project led by Hawkesbury-Nepean CMA. In addition a project with CSIRO's Atlas of Living Australia program included funding for the GER team and the five facilitators until late 2011.

At this time, the lead partners' MOU was revised to enable the involvement of national, state and regional partners in addition to the existing partnerships.

EXPANSION – 2012 & BEYOND – NEW FUNDING SUCCESS

Funding certainty was finally realised with the announcement in December 2012 of a further \$4.4m. in funding from the NSW Government through to 30 June 2015. This was allocated to:

- an expanded GER team with increased capacity in science, communications and partner relationships
- the five existing facilitators to leverage increasing opportunities and interest
- two new partnerships in priority focus areas each with new facilitator positions
- significant project funding to expand the reach of the GER corridor in NSW

The two new partnerships were selected using a refinement of the assessment process used for the five original partnerships. The approach was enriched by the consideration of recently published data on drought refugia, connectivity and habitat management benefits. The first new landscape encompasses the geographic area of Coffs Harbour, Bellingen and the Upper Nymboida -Dorrigo Plateau. The Jaliigirr Biodiversity Alliance is made up of non-government, Landcare and Aboriginal groups, agencies and public authorities and business. In just its first six months the Alliance agreed on its governance structure, completed an operating plan and the Northern Rivers CMA, with other members of the Alliance, was successful in obtaining \$3m. funding under the Australian Government's Carbon Futures Initiative Biodiversity Fund.

The second partnership will cover the Illawarra and Shoalhaven region, linking the Royal National Park with the Sydney Catchment and south to Budderoo and Minnamurra National Parks and

¹ Formerly the NSW Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water

Kangaroo Valley. An early task will be to hold workshops for stakeholders from a range of sectors to contribute to the partnership's strategic direction and assess how they can best contribute.

A number of other Biodiversity Fund bids which directly contributed to the GER were also successful, including applications from the Hunter Valley and Slopes to Summit partnerships. One of these covers the forested and cleared hills linking protected areas from Kanangra Boyd to Wyangala, including Abercrombie River National Park and remnant woodlands in the Southern Tablelands and Western Slopes. The project is designed to provide a model to guide investment in other parts of the GER corridor. This recent funding success is further evidence of the broad recognition of the GER's potential to leverage the capacity and community support that has been built up since 2007.

EXPANSION – 2012 & BEYOND - WORKING WITH OTHER NATIONAL, STATE AND REGIONAL PARTNERS

An important lesson in implementation of the GER so far is the recognition of the level of investment needed to establish regional partnerships. While so far successful, the heavy investment in establishing flagship partnerships suggests the need for alternative models that can prove similarly successful without the associated upfront costs.

While the GER corridor contains a major part of the Australian population, it is unrealistic to expand too widely with a small GER team. Our approach to this potential is to form partnerships with national, state and regional organisations whose work already contributes to the GER, but may not be identified as such. The GER is able to offer a clear value proposition to potential partners:

- They will be part of one of the largest conservation corridors in the world, which is widely recognised for its innovation and achievements.
- Participation allows them to promote themselves to the community and to sponsors as part of this much bigger effort.
- New funding opportunities may occur or applications have a greater chance of success if aligned with the GER.

To date new partners have included Conservation Volunteers, BirdLife Australia, Wildlife Land Trust, Land for Wildlife NSW, Trust for Nature Victoria, Western Sydney Parklands Trust and Hinterland Bush Links (near Sunshine Coast). Just with these organisations and the five GER lead partners, there is considerable expertise and capacity in volunteerism, research, landowner conservation support, in-perpetuity protection of private and public land, advocacy, recreation, youth engagement, bush rehabilitation and regeneration. By working with partners to identify new opportunities, we can engage more Australians and build and sustain momentum at a continental-scale. This will allow us to expand our reach across all States without the need for additional resources.

THE GER VISION – THE ULTIMATE INNOVATION

The GER was able to establish itself initially through the investment of the NSW Government in the science, brand and establishment of five partnerships in priority areas.

The transition to a NGO led program and its subsequent expansion was the response and enthusiasm that was engendered within and beyond its initial focus areas and the community's readiness to accept 'big picture' strategies.

This has now led to increasing funding support and the interest of other national, state and regional organisations to become involved.

The GER brings people together around a shared vision and is forging conservation outcomes at a continental scale. It is this vision which is the ultimate innovation of the Great Eastern Ranges Initiative.

Rob Dunn has been the CEO of the Great Eastern Ranges Initiative since 2010, working closely with a range of community groups, non-government organisations, universities, government agencies and industry. Prior to this Rob was the CEO of the Nature Conservation Trust of NSW for four years and from 2000 to 2004 Rob was the Company Secretary of Landcare Australia. Rob is a Chartered Accountant with broad commercial experience over 20 years prior to working in the not for profit sector. He has a Masters in Environmental Management from Charles Sturt University and is a current Board member of BirdLife Australia.

Gary Howling is a senior policy officer with the NSW Government. Since early 2008, Gary worked as the GER principal conservation analyst. In this role, he has provided government agencies, non-government organisations and private conservation partners with specialist scientific, technical, and conservation assessment advice to guide the development of a wide-ranging portfolio of projects. Gary has a wide background in regional planning and landscape-scale conservation programs, biodiversity and native vegetation conservation policy, community engagement, and conservation science brokering.

Alison Totterdell is the GER Communications Officer with a strong conservation background and expertise in social media. She has a Graduate Certificate in Natural Resources from the University of New England and is currently working towards a Masters in Environmental Science and Management.