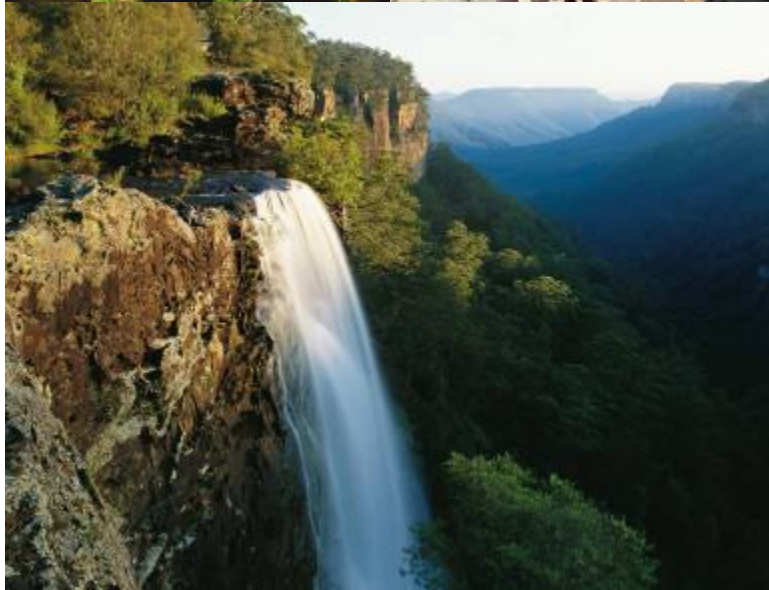


Great Eastern Ranges Initiative

A continental-scale lifeline
connecting people with nature



A Report to the NSW Environmental Trust describing funded activities
from 2007 to 2011



- ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS -

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- EXECUTIVE SUMMARY -

The Great Eastern Ranges (GER) Initiative aims to maintain and enhance the connectivity of wildlife habitats in eastern Australia. The GER Initiative covers an area extending for more than 3,600 kilometres from central Victoria, through the Australian Capital Territory and New South Wales, to far north Queensland. The region comprises the most biologically diverse landscapes on the continent, and includes the most extensive network of protected areas and natural habitats in eastern Australia.

Scope of Investment

From July 2007 to September 2011, the NSW Environmental Trust invested \$6.7 million to establish the GER Initiative through a broad program of community and 'partner' engagement. Particular emphasis was given to:

- **Implementing connectivity conservation** – Delivering of a range of conservation incentives and voluntary management agreements as part of a 'whole of landscape' approach to improving the connectivity of habitats in priority landscapes.
- **Communicating with the community** – Developing the messages and communications 'infrastructure' needed to engage, motivate and influence partners, stakeholders and the wider community.
- **People working together** - Development of partnership networks in five priority regions: the Border Ranges, Hunter Valley, Southern Highlands, south coast (Kosciuszko to Coast), and southwest slopes (Slopes to Summit).
- **Effective administration** – Implementing transparent and efficient administration processes, to support efforts to build long term financial sustainability.
- **Applying knowledge and skills** – Working with scientists and regional partners to use the best available research, data and analysis techniques to develop agreed goals for action.

Major Achievements

The first four years of the GER Initiative involved foundational activities – developing, testing, refining and consolidating effective approaches. Successes have been demonstrated through:

1. Over 150 voluntary agreements established with landholders, to improve the protection and management of 16,195 hectares of habitat in the most important places.
2. Projects successfully completed with partners, delivering \$3.555 million in funds to grantees.
3. \$15.861 million leveraged from partners contributions, with in-kind contributions of 4:1 for Trust investment (\$12.318 million) and new cash contributions of 1:1 (\$3.553 million).
4. New partnerships and widespread involvement from a diverse range of local, regional, State and national organisations – over 120 organisations are now recognised as 'partners' in the GER Initiative.
5. An extraordinarily high level of goodwill, with the GER Initiative received positively by all communities and potential partner organisations approached.
6. Influencing NSW policy (eg draft NSW Biodiversity Strategy 2010) and the emerging National Wildlife Corridors Plan, providing one of the leading examples of collaborative large scale initiatives in Australia.

7. Demonstrated capacity to reach a broad audience and deliver on-ground outcomes, with a network of partners supported by skilled and motivated Regional Partnership Facilitators
8. Successful transition for the GER Initiative as a Government led program within NSW, to a community-based, NGO-led initiative with a growing presence in Victoria, the ACT and Queensland.

Legacy for Biodiversity Conservation in NSW

The progress of the GER Initiative in its first four years has been a considerable achievement, made all the more impressive by having been achieved over such a short period of time. Investment by the NSW Environmental Trust provided an essential foundation, without which the GER Initiative would have achieved a fraction of the outcomes so far.

This success highlights the potential for wider application of the model for effective conservation elsewhere across the GER, and Australia more widely.

Priorities for the Future

An ongoing challenge will be the need to maintain the momentum achieved so far. Emphasis for future investment is recommended for:

1. **Growing the Initiative** – Work with community-based organisations and inter-governmental partners to extend coverage of the GER Initiative within NSW, and realise the national vision for a connectivity corridor from central Victoria to far north Queensland.
2. **Increasing emphasis on targeted threat management** – Link with existing programs to manage weeds, feral animals, fire and other threats to areas and landscapes with high conservation value or significance to the community.
3. **Building on community values and support** – Leverage new and emerging partnerships, with a growing number and diversity of organisations, to engage landholders and recognise voluntary contributions.
4. **Aligning with Government priorities** – Work with Government agencies to deliver outcomes for priority programs:
 - NSW Biodiversity Strategy – targeted investment in priority areas
 - NSW Green Corridors Program – supporting bush regeneration and partnership approaches to delivering corridor outcomes through voluntary contributions; and
 - National priorities - delivering outcomes under the Caring for our Country program, Carbon Biodiversity Fund and National Wildlife Corridors Plan.
5. **Diversifying the range of financial contributions** - Leverage partnerships with new potential contributors to expand cash and in-kind contributions made beyond Government.



- BACKGROUND -

The Great Eastern Ranges Initiative is a national effort which aims to maintain and improve connectivity of the mountainous ecosystems of eastern Australia. The Great Dividing Range and Great Escarpment extend for more than 3,600 kilometres from central Victoria, through the Australian Capital Territory and New South Wales, to far north Queensland. The region comprises the most biologically diverse landscapes on the continent, and includes the most extensive network of protected areas and natural habitats in eastern Australia.

Introduction

The GER Initiative is one of a growing number of internationally recognised connectivity conservation programs developed in response to the ongoing decline and mass extinction of species due to past and current land-use. Since commencing activities in July 2007, the GER Initiative has been highly effective in laying the foundations for one of the largest conservation programs in Australia.

In the face of an increasingly variable climate, the GER Initiative is working to strengthen the resilience of natural ecosystems and the native plant and animal species they support. Improved resilience is achieved by drawing together the efforts of various community, industry, government and non-government organisations and individuals already working in eastern Australia to concentrate their efforts in the highest priority places.

Maintaining the ecosystems and the connectivity of the GER is essential for sustaining the health and well-being of eastern Australia's rapidly growing population and economy. The targeted approach taken by the GER Initiative will help protect water supplies for over three-quarters of the population of eastern Australia, and help sustain the rich assemblage of plants and animals, and the area's significant nature-based tourism assets.

Purpose of this Report

This report describes the investment of \$6.7 million by the NSW Environmental Trust from 2007 to 2011. During this period, the Office of Environment and Heritage¹ worked with an extraordinarily diverse range of public, non-government and community partners to establish the GER Initiative.

The GER Initiative has been both broad and complex, involving a diverse range of activities, from delivery of on-ground conservation mechanisms to community awareness raising and capacity building, and social research. Detailed accounts of activities are documented in progress and annual reports developed each year from 2007 to 2011. This report provides a higher level overview, describing the approach to implementation, major achievements and key lessons learned for the future.

Where possible, the report qualitatively describes 'attracted' and 'additional' benefits. They include benefits from projects that existed before the Initiative commenced, as well as unexpected additional outcomes that happened because of the project. It reveals those who were inspired to invest or participate who would not have otherwise been involved. It also reviews the lessons learned and suggests opportunities for improvement in the GER Initiative and other programs in the future.

¹ Note - The Office of Environment and Heritage, Department of Premier and Cabinet was formerly referred to as the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water. To avoid confusion, the organisation is referred to by its current title in this report

Report Structure

The report is structured in accordance with reporting requirements by the NSW Environmental Trust:

- **Main report** – an outline of the program, methods, deliverables and evaluation of effectiveness of investment.
- **Appendices** – additional detail, including demonstrated delivery relative to original business plan commitments.
- **Materials produced** – an accompanying CD has been prepared containing an electronic copy of major products, reports and materials developed by the GER Initiative.
- **Financial report** – a separate statement of expenditure, including certified record approved by OEH chief financial controller.

The Great Eastern Ranges of Australia

The great eastern ranges comprise the mountainous watershed that separates the east coast of Australia from inland eastern Australia (see Figure 1).

The ranges extend for more than 3,600 kilometres from central Victoria, through the Australian Capital Territory and New South Wales, to far north Queensland. Along its route, they trace the landscapes of the Great Dividing Range and Great Escarpment. The region comprises the most biologically diverse landscapes on the continent, and includes the most extensive network of protected areas and natural habitats in eastern Australia.

The ranges form the watershed and headwaters for the major rivers in eastern Australia, directing runoff either towards the coast or inland. It ranges widely in elevation, and includes Australia's highest mountain (Mt Kosciuszko – 2228 metres) in southern NSW. Here, the ranges receive over 3000 millimetres of rainfall annually. In some areas, there are rugged mountains and in other areas the terrain is barely

distinguishable from the surrounding landscape.

The GER Initiative covers an area that is arguably the terrestrial equivalent of the Great Barrier Reef: a linked series of biodiversity hotspots interconnected by a wide diversity of native vegetation.

Within NSW, the ranges comprise examples of most land tenures. Public protected areas (national parks, nature reserves, etc) occupy 39% of the area, with other public lands (State forests, military reserves, travelling stock reserves, etc) covering a further 20%. The remainder of the ranges comprise of private lands.

Connectivity of protected areas is greatest in the southern sections of NSW, the Australian Capital Territory and Victoria. However, parts of the corridor have been cleared and fragmented and are subject to ongoing significant land-use pressures

Figure 1 - The Great Eastern Ranges in eastern Australia



- APPROACH TO DELIVERY IN NSW -

A major strength of the GER Initiative has been its ability to motivate the involvement and commitment of a diverse range of partners. To achieve this, the original 2007-10 Business Plan (Appendix 7) established a simple vision and mission statement, supported by goals which provided a logical basis for implementation.

The Vision

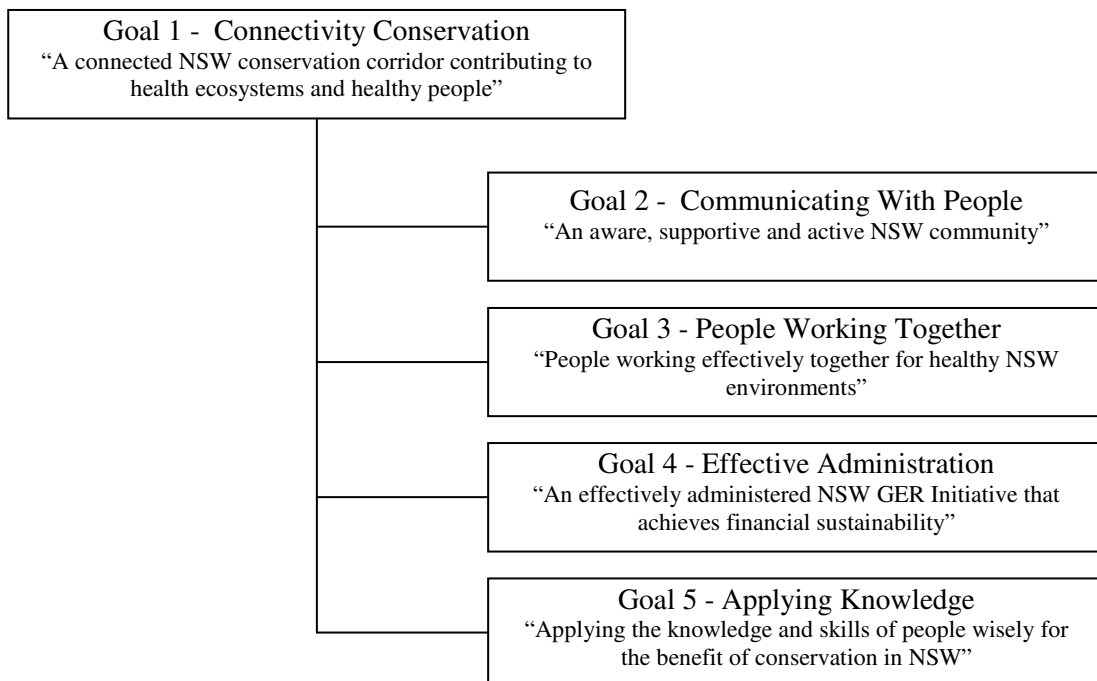
“Our vision is for the ecosystems of Australia’s great eastern ranges to be healthy and connected from the Australian Alps to the Atherton Tablelands (and beyond), which will contribute to the long-term economic, social, cultural and spiritual wellbeing of the community, and of native plants and animals.”

(DECC, 2007)

Goals in NSW

The structure and activities adopted from 2007-2011 were guided by a primary goal to achieve a network of interconnected habitats through connectivity conservation, in turn, supported and further realised by four complementary and enabling goals (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Goals adopted for the GER Initiative 2007 to 2011



The Role of Partnerships in Priority Regions

Experiences in the GER Initiative and elsewhere demonstrate the importance of local involvement and coordination. From 2007 to 2011, the GER Initiative actively supported delivery of a wide range of projects in partnership with regional organisations. Facilitators were employed in each of the five regional partnership areas. Their priorities during the first four years have been:

- Agree common values and objectives as the basis for collaborative local action, and develop plans to prioritise and schedule actions;
- Develop locally appropriate governance structures and frameworks to enable the involvement of a diverse range of contributors and supporters from all sectors;
- Use existing networks and innovative media to communicate the importance of local landscapes and the conservation values they comprise as part of the ranges; and
- Implement collaborative actions that link and add value to the activities of organisations and individuals at local, regional and 'whole of GER' scales.

Basis for Selecting Priority Regions

All areas are *not* equal in terms of their potential to contribute to maintaining the connectivity of the GER. With around 60% of the area occupying lands other than protected areas, there are multiple options for action. A targeted approach to working in priority areas was adopted to ensure resources were not too thinly spread. Having a clear rationale for why certain regions were targeted was essential for confirming the scope and direction for activities to partners in priority regions, and demonstrating

transparency in program-level investment decisions to people in other regions.

An initial desk-top analysis of connectivity priorities considered four variables:

1. Biological values - regional distinctiveness and species diversity
2. Connectivity need - apparent discontinuity in connectedness of habitat and protected areas
3. Conservation and social opportunity - active organisations present with the capacity and interest in delivering collaborative programs
4. Program contribution - opportunity presented to develop and test approaches that contribute to implementing an effective GER Initiative

The desktop assessment identified five regions (Figure 3) as the basis for intended effort:

- Border Ranges;
- Hunter Valley;
- Southern Highlands;
- South coast (Kosciuszko to Coast) ;
- Southwest slopes (Slopes to Summit).



Figure 3 – Priority Partnership Regions and the GER Initiative in New South Wales



Management Framework

The operational structure adopted by the GER Initiative was based on the model described by Knight *et al* (2006)², and refined by Worboys *et al* (2010)³ based on examples of continental-scale connectivity conservation initiatives worldwide.

Implementation was at both a local and 'NSW' scales, so as to support and empower partners and stakeholders to maintain ownership and be the drivers and deliverers of the Initiative's goals. As described later (see 'People Working Together') this model was particularly effective in harnessing local knowledge, providing the best available and most scientifically-defensible information, providing innovative institutional arrangements, and assisting people to engage with the vision.

Program Governance

Arrangements for funding delivery

Implementation drew on the collective knowledge and skills of a large number of organisations and individuals for guidance:

- **NSW Environmental Trust subcommittee** - Advice on expenditure from the NSW Environmental Trust was provided by a subcommittee established in 2007. The subcommittee comprised members from key stakeholder organisations, with Terms of Reference ratified at the outset.
- **NSW program team** - From 2007 to 2010, the GER Initiative was delivered on a day-to-day basis by a small project team within the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage, DPC (OEH). In July 2010, management of the Initiative transferred to a Lead Partners Group, comprised of four non-government organizations (Greening

Australia NSW, OzGREEN, Nature Conservation Trust of NSW, National Parks Association of NSW) working with OEH. The governance arrangements for the Group were covered in a Memorandum of Understanding. The Group is supported by a Director/CEO position.

- **Ongoing OEH support** – As recipient of the original NSW Environmental Trust funding, the OEH has continued to provide direct support to the NGO partners during 2010-11 through consolidating delivery of information products (research, mapping and communications materials), loan of computer hardware and assistance with planning, reporting and alignment of OEH regional programs.

Thematic working groups

Working groups were established to guide decision-making, assist with application of best practice and support increased collaboration between experts.

- **Interstate Working Group** - The Environment Protection and Heritage Council of Australia and New Zealand enthusiastically supported the concept of the GER Initiative and in 2007 established an interstate working group to advise on implementation along its full length.
- **Science and Technical Reference Group** – commenced in 2008, this group provided specialist knowledge on ecological issues, systematic conservation planning, and consultation on economic and social issues..
- **Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Reference Group** – Operating from 2007 to 2009, this group provided specialist input on matters of importance to indigenous Australians. This role was taken over by the LandAlive Sub-committee of the NSW Environmental Trust from 2009 until its conclusion in June 2011.

² Knight AT, Cowling RM and Campbell BM (2006) An operational model for implementing conservation action. *Conservation Biology* 20(2): 408-419

³ Worboys GL, Francis WL and Lockwood M. Editors.(2010) *Connectivity conservation management: a global guide*. Earthscan, London.

- **Communications Working Group** – Operating from 2008 to 2009, this group provided oversight to the development and implementation of a planned major community awareness campaign.
- **Lead Partners Visioning Group** – The Lead Partners Visioning Group was formed to guide the future direction of efforts to communicate and transition the GER Initiative to a community led enterprise. Over time, the group evolved to comprise the Lead Partners Working Group, which at the time of reporting provides oversight to the GER Initiative under arrangements outlined in the Lead Partners' MOU.
- **Regional Partnership Steering Committees** – The strategic direction, activities and ongoing evolution of each of the five regional partnerships is led by a core group of committed organisations representing a range of interests.



Projects were designed to deliver the five goals of the Initiative. The emphasis on investment generally shifted in each of the regional partnership areas from greater emphasis on community consultation in the early stages of the program, through delivery of onground works and activities, to emphasis on future financial sustainability towards the latter part of the program (see Figure 4). This approach ensured an effective transition from start-up to ongoing delivery.



Program Deliverables

A detailed record of key outputs deliverables and milestones (reports, communications products, etc) is provided in Appendix 4.

Program Investment Model

More than \$3.555 million in program funds were directed to a wide range of activities as described in the original business plan approved by the NSW Environmental Trust (DECC, 2007). These funds were delivered through partnership grants agreed with partner organisations. Grants followed a standard format provided by the Trust, and provided an opportunity to record partners intended cash and inkind contributions.

Figure 4 – Summary of investments and outcomes

	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	Outcomes
Voluntary landholder agreements*	4 5	1 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	Protection and management of 16,195ha of native habitat
Devolved grants scheme (Pilot)		4	1 4		Demonstrated role of regional partnerships in funding delivery
Aboriginal property management plans		1	1		Improved capacity, with traditional knowledge recorded and collated
Community wildlife survey			1 4 5	1 5	Raised awareness of habitat values of NCT covenanted properties
Youth engagement			2 5	2 5	Tested the use of community bird survey and youth involvement programs
Field days, forums and workshops	4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	Increased awareness of natural and cultural heritage values
Brand development and testing	6	6			Clarity in presentation of the GER Initiative
Website creation and maintenance	4	4	1 4 5 6	1 4 5 6	Enhanced capacity to develop and implement plans
Brochures and other materials	4	3 4 5	1 2 4 5 6	5 6	Improved understanding of the GER Initiative
Conservation planning	4 5 6	3	2 4 5		Long term cross-sector partnerships established and growing
Partnership facilitation & support	4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	More than 120 organisation participating
Aboriginal community capacity building		1	1 4	4	Improved capacity to participate in partnerships
Review of income sources		3 6	1 2 4 5 6	2	Progress made on securing a funding from new sources
Business development			6	6	Alignment of goals, activities and investments of partners
Inventory of natural and human values	6		6		Values of the GER presented in accessible form
Social research		3	3	3	Improved understanding of social drivers for involvement
Spatial analysis of priorities	4 5		2 4 5 6		Best science, information and data available to GER partners
Mapping baseline conditions			1 2 3 4 5 6	5	Improved capacity to predict and monitor change

1 Border Ranges 2 Hunter Valley 3 Southern Highlands 4 Kosciuszko to Coast 5 Slopes to Summit 6 Whole of GER

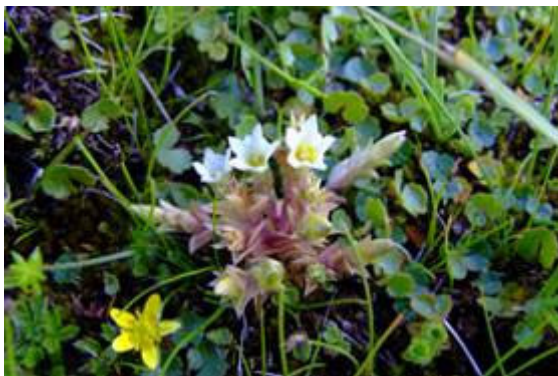
- OUTPUTS & MILESTONES -

The intention to establish the GER Initiative over four years necessitated a rapid evolution from partnership formation to self-sufficiency. Emphasis changed each year (Figure 5) to ensure lessons learned from pilot activities in 2007-08 were strengthened and translated for use elsewhere.

Implementing a Regional Partnership Model

Each regional partnership progressed along similar pathways, but emerged from very different backgrounds. For example, the existence of a network of already collaborating partners in Kosciuszko to Coast (K2C) and Border Ranges, and the high level of receptivity to the GER concept in Slopes to Summit (S2S) allowed for rapid early progress. Efforts in the Hunter Valley required a more active effort. The region was recognised as a significant opportunity, but no efforts had previously been made to bring together partners there to explore opportunities for collaboration.

The K2C and S2S pilot partnerships proved particularly successful. A series of workshops were subsequently held in the Hunter Valley, Border Ranges and Southern Highlands leading to the establishment of active community partnerships in those landscapes towards the end of 2007-08. External consultants worked closely with the OEH Principal Conservation Analyst to identify likely participants, and plan intensive consultation in preparing the groundwork for a regional partnership to be formed.



During 2008-09, Regional Partnership Facilitators proved essential to ensuring capacity to develop and establish networks of active and interested groups locally. The central GER team provided guidance and advice on conservation priorities, suggested a pathway for exploration of opportunities for partnership development, mentored development of projects and helped build the skills needed to ensure long term capacity for local leadership.

Focus in 2009-10 shifted to a dual emphasis on supporting regional skills and delivery capacity and building a portfolio of information and governance capacity at the whole of GER level. Leading NGO partners were involved in discussions about how the Initiative might adapt and persist beyond the period of the original NSW Environmental Trust funding. The role of Facilitators, the need to expand beyond a NSW-focused delivery effort, and a more sophisticated funding model were recognised as essential.

By this stage, conservation priorities had been agreed in all regions and partnerships had developed to take on a more active role in guiding investment of grants.

The agreement of Lead Partners to deliver the GER Initiative under a Lead Partners' MOU was a key milestone. The Lead Partners agreed to take on collaborative responsibility for providing leadership, aligning existing programs, skills and capacity to deliver essential activities and coordination capacity, and actively lobby for future funding. Funding from the original NSW Environmental Trust allocation was extended into 2010-11. This proved vital for supporting the transition under the Lead Partners' MOU.

Figure 5 – Activities and achievements comprising the establishment phase of the GER Initiative

Year	Focus	Activities and Achievements
2007-08	Developing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Governance framework and central coordination team established ○ Two pilot regional partnerships and conservation covenant programs established; ○ Consultation (national and within priority regions) commenced
2008-09	Testing and refining	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Data and information collation ○ Conservation planning and project development procedures developed and implemented ○ Partnerships established in three additional regions ○ Implementing a marketing, branding and awareness program to enhance sustainability and engage the NSW community; ○ Investing in the scientific basis for decision making (biological, social and economic priorities) and future governance arrangements ○ Piloting the integrated delivery of conservation mechanisms on private land
2009-10	Consolidation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Conservation analysis and prioritisation refined at whole of GER and regional scales ○ Capacity building of regional partnerships and facilitators ○ Consultation on future governance arrangements
2010-11	Transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Responsibility for management transferred to Lead Partners ○ Central coordination function repositioned ○ Funding and major projects sought for ongoing regional and GER projects ○ Consultation on expansion in Victoria and Queensland



- EVALUATION OF EFFECTIVENESS - Lasting Outcomes

The GER Initiative has been enormously influential in establishing the foundations needed to achieve the long term vision, and helping to frame understanding of connectivity conservation both nationally and globally. The activities, achievements and experiences of the first four years are documented in the following sections. However, three areas in particular are highlighted as major achievements with lasting benefit.

Social Capital

The NSW Environmental Trust's investment in the GER Initiative has primed the conditions needed to harness community involvement and make real progress by establishing:

- Goodwill from partners and the community;
- Widespread acceptance and a positive reception from landholders and land managers;
- Demonstrated success in targeting conservation instruments towards priority areas;
- An effective model for integrated delivery of a suite of available conservation instruments; and
- Success in encouraging alignment of partners programs with GER outcomes and ability to leverage co-investment.

A Program for the Future

The GER Initiative established the first successful Government-private sector partnership for delivery of cross-regional, whole of landscape conservation in NSW. The needs of such an approach are diverse and complex, and required the development of systems, approaches and processes so that partners could have confidence that their efforts would have positive impact.

The GER Initiative:

- Developed partnerships with active regional delivery partners;
- Delivered a proven model for aligning existing programs based on a shared vision; and
- Transferred leadership of regional partnerships and the wider GER Initiative from Government to the community.

Triggering a National Response

The GER Initiative greatly influenced the national agenda for connectivity conservation, demonstrating the basis for a model for linking landscapes on a national scale. It succeeded in this by achieving:

- Widespread scientific acceptance of the GER as a national priority for attention;
- Adoption of the Mackey Report (Mackey et al, 2010) as the basis for considering connectivity conservation in the Australian context;
- Agenda setting contributions to the Kingscliffe Conference (2009) and Linking Landscapes Coalition workshop at Aitken Hill (2010), leading to the National Wildlife Corridors Plan; and
- Stimulating a number of large scale or continental scale initiatives on other parts of the continent.

Connectivity Conservation (Goal 1)

Connectivity conservation is a socially inclusive approach to addressing conservation on a large-landscape scale. Past expectations that we might adequately conserve nature in protected areas has been replaced by recognition that even the largest protected areas act as 'islands' of habitat surrounded by lands managed for agriculture, industry or human settlement. A broader perspective is needed which accommodates the whole landscape.

Approach

Connectivity conservation works encourages landholders, industry groups, traditional owners, Governments, non-government organisations and others to collaborate in delivering their respective skills and programs. The combined effort serves to create 'corridors of effort' in priority areas, which in turn combine to influence connectivity on a wider scale.

The GER Initiative has promoted a holistic approach that uses science to identify where, why and how 'gaps' in native habitat can be restored to provide functional links. It integrates many features including local wildlife corridors, habitat stepping stones and may even include introduced vegetation with similar characteristics to native vegetation.

At its heart, the GER Initiative seeks to increase the connectedness of habitat by encouraging management to maintain an area's condition. Partners deliver a range of conservation instruments which reflect the spectrum of activities from education and awareness raising, to improved management and medium to long-term protection.

Priority areas for investment were identified through conservation action plans in each region, (except the Border Ranges, where partners rely on the Border Ranges Rainforest Biodiversity Management Plan). Conservation mechanisms and incentives for landholders covered the spectrum of potential assistance. They included:

- Property purchase, for inclusion in the network of Bush Heritage Australia reserves, or by Nature Conservation Trust of NSW (NCT) under their revolving fund programs.
- In-perpetuity Trust agreements (NCT) and conservation agreements (OEH) targeted high conservation-value remnants and habitat linkages.
- Medium-term (15–25 year) property vegetation plans delivered by Catchment Management Authorities supported habitat management, restoration of strategic local connections, and improved condition through fencing, stock management, and assisted natural regeneration.
- Short-term (1-5 year) restoration incentives were offered to landholders to manage conservation threats and protect habitat, including weed management, fencing and stock management, and habitat improvement in the priority locations.

Strong preference was given to direct investment in mechanisms with the greatest security, so that NSW Environmental Trust funds available for on-ground activities were largely directed to in-perpetuity agreements.

Outcomes & Impact

In all landscapes, the GER Initiative demonstrated the effect achieved by having multiple instruments delivered in concert to demonstrate improved outcomes in terms of:

- A mosaic of connected habitats managed under complementary instruments; and
- A longer term approach to increasing landholder participation.

A mosaic of connected habitats managed under complementary instruments

A cross-tenure approach to delivery of conservation instruments was implemented to ensure efforts and multiple instruments link to create corridors of effort across the landscape. Examples include the case study presented for Slopes to Summit (see Case Study 9, Appendix 1).

A long term approach to increasing landholder participation

In landscapes with initially low levels of landholder uptake of conservation instruments, a longer term approach was

taken to increase interest and involvement. Awareness raising and entry-level instruments are often essential to encourage landholder interest, and set participants on a path towards increased commitment over time. For example, in the Southern Highlands Link and Upper Hunter Link, OEH Conservation Partners Program worked with the relevant CMA, GER Facilitator, and others to deliver workshops outlining conservation support options and encourage 'grassroots' involvement in entry level programs.

Improved conservation through available mechanisms

The result was a greater awareness of, and interest in uptake of, available mechanisms. The result was increased protection and improved management of 16,195 hectares of native habitat in *the most important locations* through conservation agreements, wildlife refuge agreements and Property Vegetation Plans, each complementing additions to the public and private protected areas network (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Number and area of voluntary agreements funded the GER from 2007–11

<i>Type</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Area (hectares)</i>
Property purchase (Bush Heritage Australia, Nature Conservation Trust)	6	4,989
In-perpetuity (conservation agreements, NCT agreements)	86	9,526
Long-term (15-year property vegetation plan (PVP), wildlife refuge)	34	1,220
Other (whole-of-paddock restoration, Landcare agreements)	30	460
TOTAL	156	16,195

Changed investment behaviour

The inclusive model adopted led to a change in behaviour of many partner organisations involved. In the Hunter Valley, for example, it brought together a diverse range of opposing players who had not previously met to discuss achieving shared goals for the valley's future landscape. Agreement on conservation enabled partners to target their efforts into areas where a common interest was shared with others. Targeted effort, adopted in preference to previous 'scattered' investments, was essential to provide places where collaboration could occur.

Opportunities for Future Improvement

1. Account more explicitly for partners' aligned efforts

Explore options for tools to allow partner organisations to voluntarily record and report activities and on-ground works in the GER, to allow for more explicit acknowledgement of the wealth of investment and activity being made. The Atlas of Living Australia provides opportunities to explore this need.

2. Build stronger links with activities that manage threats to core values of the GER

The considerable investment by many in society in widespread activities and establishing protected areas in NSW present a significant opportunity. Future efforts should explore opportunities to involve:

- **The existing protected areas network** – accounting for the contribution of public and private protected areas, and opportunities for strategic acquisitions to adopt and align with GER priorities.
- **Management of feral species, native pests, weeds and fire** – in addition to managing principal threats to biodiversity, connectivity and human values, provides an opportunity to engage with landholders and encourage

cross-tenure, whole of landscape projects.

- **Landholder efforts** - Voluntary activities undertaken by landholders and managers who retain and protect habitat on their property without recourse to public incentives.

3. Account for 'matrix' and integrated investments

All lands with native vegetation (even in poor condition) have potential to contribute and be acknowledged. Metrics and activity reporting systems should be developed to help people voluntarily record their efforts and celebrate involvement.

4. Expand role in bush regeneration

Delivery of a pilot devolved grants scheme in the Border Ranges and roadside revegetation projects in S2S demonstrated the importance of supporting local bush regeneration efforts. The GER Initiative is well placed to expand its role in bush regeneration and revegetation in priority areas, and deliver peri-urban programs in western Sydney and other major centres. Greater emphasis on regeneration and revegetation would expand the options available for participation and support delivery of a fuller range of management interventions, and provide future links with carbon market opportunities.

5. Deliver a spectrum of voluntary conservation instruments

Integrated delivery of a range of voluntary conservation instruments has proved effective, and the growing number of local community groups continues to expand the capacity and skills of GER partnerships. Continued growth in emphasis on voluntary instruments would expand the options available for participation and ensure delivery of a full range of management interventions.

Communicating With People (Goal 2)

Involvement of a broad cross-section of society is essential to achieve connectivity conservation in a practical way. Cross-tenure approaches rely on the involvement of land managers – from farmers, to power generators and infrastructure managers, to public land administration agencies. These in turn require an aware and supportive community, with understanding across a broad cross-section of the media, academia and policy makers. From the outset, the GER Initiative recognised good communication as essential to ensuring the awareness, understanding and support of a wide and diverse audience.

Approach

The communications strategy was strongly influenced by four significant developments and opportunities not originally anticipated:

- Renaming as the ‘Great Eastern Ranges Initiative’;
- A shift away from broad advertising as the basis for raising awareness;
- Exploration of innovative partnerships with the tourism sector; and
- Increased emphasis on web-based tools to engage, and support collaboration between, partners.

‘Re-branding’ the Initiative

A major decision during the first 12 months saw the adoption of “Great Eastern Ranges” as the preferred name for the Initiative. This decision was based on market research and focus group testing, which indicated that “Great Eastern Ranges” had greater resonance than did the original title, “Alps to Atherton”.

Strategic Approach to Marketing & Promotions

Preliminary work was undertaken towards implement an awareness campaign based on advertising. The campaign was intended to establish a brand and promote community the ‘iconic status’ of the ranges. Late approval of the budget and a change in government policy on advertising resulted in a significant change in the direction of the proposed marketing/TV campaign. Delivery of the GER messages instead shifted to the use of web-based tools and increased reliance on partners’ communication

networks. The creative content of the communication strategy remained unchanged, but was modified to suit the changed delivery modes.

Innovative industry partnerships - tourism

Tourism was introduced as a new direction in the 2008–09 business plan. The industry was recognised as a source of potential support with potential to raise awareness with a broad audience.

Traditional communications

- **Media and popular publications** - Significant interest was stimulated by coverage in publications, such as the *Sydney Morning Herald* (July 2010) and popular magazines including; *Cosmos* (Australian Science magazine; August/September 2009); *Australian Traveller* (April/May 2010); and the 100th edition of *Australian Geographic* (October 2010).
- **Field days** - Community field days, planting events and information sessions were used to provide a cost effective way to attract and communicate consistently with a large number of people. These include:
 - K2C Launch and Farming and Biodiversity Fair (in Bredbo May 2008 and October 2010);
 - NSW Landcare conference (Port Macquarie, August 2009);
 - Big Scrub Rainforest Day (Bangalow, annually in September 2009, 2010 and 2011);

- Inaugural National Linking Landscapes Summit (Kingscliff, October 2009);
- Healthy People Healthy Parks Congress (Melbourne, April 2010);
- Slopes to Summit Wattle Planting Day and Launch (Woomargama, May 2010).
- **Public presentations** - Over 100++ oral presentations to meetings, scientific and community symposia, conferences and workshops have been conducted.
- **Web-based communications** - An interactive website was launched in December 2009. The site is increasingly used as a vehicle to stimulate partners' interactions and showcase successes. The website can be viewed at: www.greasternranges.org.au.
- **Photographic competition** - Awareness of the ranges as a destination was raised in a photographic competition campaign in Australian Traveller magazine during 2009. The competition generated widespread interest, and yielded a large number of images which showcased the natural and community values people associate with the ranges.
- **National Parks Visitor Exhibition** - The GER Touring Exhibition was displayed for varying periods at Tumut, Jindabyne, Fitzroy Falls, Scone, Byron Bay and Minnamurra Falls, attracting significant media attention. OEH staff co-ordinated the program and arranged events and media in conjunction with the Regional Facilitators. A video developed for the exhibition has also been used widely as an awareness-raising tool for presentations and meetings. The exhibition has returned to Tumut where it will remain until future program can be arranged.

Outcomes & Impact

Appropriate frameworks for communications

The shift in the communications strategy proved advantageous. A key lesson from attempts to implement a major communications campaign highlighted the critical importance of ensuring that there is first clarity in expression of what is being communicated, and ensuring that the program being promoted is fully operational and able to respond to the high level of community interest generated.

A revised communications strategy was adopted to ensure good long-term foundations for communications. It emphasised the importance of well developed internal communications as a precursor to a high public profile, for a project of this scale and scope.

Collaboration in communications

The large number and broad range of interests involved demonstrates the power and capacity to engage more widely with the community than would be feasible for a small team. Successes and changed directions demonstrated the importance of partnership-based programs conducting communications on two levels to ensure:

- the support and resourcing needed by regional facilitators to conduct communications at a local level; and
- communications for the Initiative as a whole, within Government and to the wider community.

Addressing community desire for action on 'global' issues

The enthusiasm of the response from community groups, councils, industry and conservation groups exceeds the resources currently available. The key factors driving this support unique are seemingly unique within the eastern Australian context, and include:

- community concern about the impacts of climate change on biodiversity;

- community readiness to accept 'big picture' strategies;
- the simple and understandable message that underpins the GER vision; and
- the GER Initiative's cohesive logical approach that aims to maximise the wise use of limited available resources to mitigate the impacts of climate change on our biologically diverse ecosystems.

Materials and personal stories to motivate involvement

A variety of downloadable resource materials including fact sheets, video stories, news and partnership activities were published on the website. Story-based material from involved landholders and other GER activities was also developed, both in video and written form. It was used for the website and to pitch content for editorial coverage.

Opportunities for Future Improvement

The GER Initiative has extraordinary ability to enthuse and mobilise a diverse cross-section of interests. The greatest communications opportunity and challenge will be to convey a simple and united face and vision to the public, despite the program being (in reality) complex.

1. Maintain clarity on the vision and approach

The GER Initiative was challenged throughout by mixed perceptions and interpretations of its purpose, and potential to achieve parallel or divergent objectives. The need to maintain clarity and consistency on messaging about the vision, goals and key strategies will continue as the Initiative expands into new regions.

2. Communicate achievements and the value proposition

Delays in the communications strategy combined with intensive workloads for the

GER team to limit the amount of attention paid to clearly communicating achievements. A number of observers have queried the Initiative's contribution to conservation. It is essential that the successes and achievements made to date and how this differs from and adds value to others' efforts are celebrated. Clear messages need to be maintained on how the Initiative adds value to more 'traditional' approaches.

3. Establish realistic goals and appropriate frameworks for communications

The original intended emphasis on advertising had merits, but demonstrated the importance of first establishing a brand and program success. As the Initiative expands, it should maintain a strategy in which coordination, realistic goals setting and agreed branding conventions are used to first ensure excellence in internal communications, and then present a unified public face.

4. Empower a network of partners to harness inspired enthusiasm

Community engagement requires a strong education component and should seek to engage a wide section of local communities in the long term. Messaging must be audience appropriate and consistent both within partnership networks and across the wider program. A wide range of products and media should be engaged as appropriate to educate and engage the wider audience.

5. Expand the role and involvement of tourism where this contributes to a managed partnership development agenda

Tourism remains an important but largely untapped, potential contributor. Particular opportunities exist in landscapes such as the Border Ranges (to link with the National Landscapes Initiative), Hunter Valley (wine industry), Southern Highlands and Blue Mountains (proximity to Sydney) and the Alps and south coast (ski industry and proximity to Canberra).

People Working Together (Goal 3)

The GER Initiative is grounded in thinking on whole-of-landscape conservation, and a recognition that all land tenures contribute to a wider landscape outcome. Field margins and roadsides adjacent to production paddocks, travelling stock routes, land owned by industry and utility providers all have a greater or lesser potential to complement protected areas as part of a network of connected habitats.

Approach

The GER Initiative accommodated consideration of varied land tenures and uses, and implemented collaborative efforts at three scales:

- national – support for collaborative efforts by organisations and governments working across state and regional boundaries
- regional – partnerships developed with a range of stakeholders working towards a common outcome in a particular region
- focus areas – working in partnership with one or more organisations on a specific project to deliver a specific outcome.

Conservation planning as a basis for collaboration

Conservation planning provided an important early focus for each regional partnership, and acted as a catalyst for new thinking on approaches to understanding priorities for collaborative projects.

Each of the regional partnerships, (apart from the Border Ranges), were helped to undertake a conservation action planning process, based on methods developed by The Nature Conservancy. The process involved scoping regional conservation attributes and values, agreement on assets that would form the basis for planning, assessment of status and threats, and development of strategies and scheduled actions to address priorities.

Each partnership arose from varied circumstances, ranging from pre-existing networks to partnerships stimulated by the GER. In the Border Ranges, a 'Rainforest Biodiversity Management Plan' was nearing

completion after two years of work by 18 organisations from NSW and Queensland. The GER Initiative provided further impetus for activities that would consolidate the network through implementation and funding opportunities.

Transition to non-government leadership

On 26 May 2010, a Lead Partners' Memorandum of Understanding was signed by the heads of four conservation NGOs (Greening Australia NSW, Nature Conservation Trust of NSW, National Parks Association of NSW, OzGREEN) and OEH. The MOU outlines a commitment to work together to deliver the GER Initiative into the future, transitioning from primary reliance on funds from the NSW Environmental Trust to being supported by a wider consortium of contributors. The MOU heralded a shift in project leadership from OEH to a collective of key conservation NGOs, with OEH as one partner.

The Lead Partners' MOU was revised and recommitted to in September 2011 to enable new partnerships and expansion in other states.

Other whole of GER collaborations

- **Inter-governmental MOU** – Members of the GER Inter-governmental Working Group have developed a draft MOU which was canvassed with the other States in late 2010. At the time of reporting, the NSW Government has reconfirmed its commitment to collaborate with the ACT, Queensland and Victorian Governments on supporting the Initiative. Completion of the MOU provides an important

opportunity to establish the GER Initiative as a national program in practice, as well as in vision.

- **Atlas of Living Australia (ALA)** - The ALA provides a powerful tool to improve accessibility for the extensive range of the GER mapping and data and expand the profile of the Initiative. Importantly the project will showcase the Initiative at a continental scale, while still allowing the Regional Partnerships to develop their own projects. The project has involved the collaboration of the Regional Facilitators, partners and OEH staff.
- **National Wildlife Corridors Plan** - The GER Initiative has been involved in the process to develop the National Wildlife Corridor Plan to be approved by Minister Burke in December 2011. Early investment in the prioritisation of focus areas and science by the GER Initiative, combined with the growing partnership with the Atlas of Living Australia, have raised great interest from the Advisory Group. The GER Initiative is well placed to take advantage of this shift in focus by the Australian Government.

Outcomes & Impact

Throughout the project, the partnership approach adopted by the GER Initiative has stimulated collaborative activity far beyond what would have been undertaken without the catalytic influence of the GER Initiative. This required substantial commitment of time and resources to build strong relationships and common understandings with the key partners. However, the response of partners and outcomes demonstrate the extraordinarily high rate of return achievable by this model.

Assessment of additionality: value-adding the Trust's investment

The larger number and broader range of interests involved provides considerable power and capacity to engage widely with the community than would be feasible for one organisation alone.

Significant new investment was attracted to value-add funding from the NSW Environmental Trust: \$3.555 million was invested through grants to regional, State and national implementation partners. This funding in turn leveraged an estimated \$12.318 million of in-kind contribution to the GER Initiative. An additional \$3.553 million in new cash contributions were made to projects (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Cash and in-kind co-contributions leveraged by NSW Environmental Trust grant and project allocations for the GER Initiative

Year	NSW Environmental Trust Grants	Leveraged co-investment from partners		
		In-kind Contributions	New Cash Contributions	Total annual co-contributions
2007-08	216,000	2,654,000	104,000	2,748,000
2008-09	1,243,170	2,653,300	1,571,400	4,224,700
2009-10	1,289,033	4,784,900	1,159,000	5,943,900
2010-11	807,500	2,226,000	719,000	2,945,000
TOTAL	<u>3,555,703</u>	<u>12,318,200</u>	<u>3,553,400</u>	<u>15,861,600</u>

Cross-sector involvement

Over 120 partner organisations are now working together to plan and implement a range of voluntary conservation activities with private and other public landholders and managers in the five priority landscape areas.

The GER Initiative has proved effective in reaching beyond the traditional 'conservation' and 'natural resource management' sectors to encourage involvement from other interests, including heavy industry (mining, electricity generation), horticulture and agriculture, tourism (including ecotourism and hoteliers' networks), research and academic, Government (local, State and national), and both local and peak national conservation groups. Aboriginal communities are increasingly involved, with representation on partnership working groups, and ongoing activities in several regions.

Growing maturity of partnership networks

The successful establishment and evolution of the five GER regional partnerships is described earlier ('Implementing a Regional Partnership Model', pg. 13) The GER team has observed growing commitment from community, agencies and CMAs. This includes collaborative planning, information sharing, data collection and conservation analysis. OEH programs are being reviewed to identify those intersecting with the GER Initiative. This will be the first step in understanding how existing government conservation programs contribute to delivering connectivity conservation.

Confirmation of the need for regional partnership facilitation

Throughout the funded period, Facilitators were found to be essential to providing the conditions needed to ensure effective delivery of the Initiative:

- Provide impetus, capacity and enthusiasm to maintain local action.
- Develop and maintain local contacts and networks, and provide a central point for

information and enquiries about the partnership.

- Identify new potential partners and funding opportunities.
- Develop, implement, evaluate and review local conservation priorities and plans.

Experiences shared beyond the GER

As a recognised leader in connectivity conservation, the GER Initiative has been able to share experiences with members of the other major corridor project in Australia (Gondwana Link, Habitat 141 and Tasmanian Midlandscapes.) The Initiative is included as a case study in several publications on connectivity conservation, contributes to leadership of the National Linking Landscapes Coalition, and has been showcased in several major international conferences.

Opportunities for Future Improvement

Arguably, the greatest achievement has been to establish the social capital needed to realize the potential from investment in conservation instruments, communications, science and coordination.

1. Expand upon the leverage of the social capital created to date

Existing project activities, willingness to participate in collaborative activities and acceptance of the wider premise of a connectivity conservation initiative opens up many opportunities to expand the reach of the Initiative.

2. Expand on the proven model and communicate lessons learned to emerging partnership areas

The model demonstrated so far proves the critical importance of:

- Regional Facilitators – to provide the capacity to enthuse and coordinate local efforts;

- Seed funding – to provide a pool of funds for collaborative decisions and to provide a core of activities that partners can align their efforts with; and
- A higher level coordination capacity to provide the ‘glue’ to hold the Initiative together by maintaining the vision, and link local efforts with the wider endeavour.

Investment in these aspects of core capacity is the minimum needed as the basis for success in future efforts to establish and grow collaborative projects.

3. Combine emerging partnership opportunities with a strategic plan for expansion and growth

There is a need to rationalise and manage future expansion and growth by improving understanding of priorities relative to

opportunities, engaging directly with suitable strategic opportunities, and provide a context for other groups to connect with the GER Initiative as part of its organic growth.

4. Strengthen alignment of core Government programs

OEH has also continued to promote the Initiative through policy instruments and mechanisms, including the Draft NSW Biodiversity Strategy 2010-15 and Priorities for Biodiversity Adaptation to Climate Change. Considerable potential exists for a broad range of OEH core programs to be modified to more closely support and strengthen the GER Initiative, in turn leveraging the support and community engagement skills of the NGO and business sectors.



Effective Administration (Goal 4)

The investment by the NSW Environmental Trust and partner organisations required OEH to establish transparent and accountable procedures for making decisions about the allocation of funds to projects, tracking and reporting progress and reporting outcomes to the Trust and wider community.

Approach

A range of best practice project management and reporting systems were established by OEH from the outset. These have been monitored and improved upon, based on advice from the NSW Environmental Trust and its GER Sub-committee, the OEH executive, and more recently the Lead Partners Working Group. All have been provided with regular progress reports.

In 2008–09, the NSW Environmental Trust decided to reduce the overall budget for the GER Initiative by \$300,000 to \$6.7 million overall. The Trust also decided to hold over \$665,000 or \$807,500?? to 2010–11 to allow the Initiative to continue into its fourth year. This decision resulted in a small number of changes to the delivery of previously planned projects. Several projects, including an intended performance evaluation project, did not proceed as originally planned.

Efficient use of available funds

Over four years, budgets have been implemented annually, meeting approved business plans. The funds have been managed effectively within approved budget parameters, with variances of less than four per cent in 2007–08 and less than one per cent in 2008–09 and 2009–10. Savings made in 2009-10 enabled an additional year of operations, while the altered program structure and investment priorities adopted by the Lead Partners in 2010-11 contributed to the GER Initiative remaining funded to 30 September 2011.

An approved financial statement has been provided to accompany this report, and includes a breakdown of expenditure and

any variances relative to the original approved budget.

Program governance arrangements

The project governance requirements established by the NSW Environmental Trust involved significant emphasis on records-keeping and reporting. The Sub-committee noted in its final meeting that few non-government organisations had the same capacity to perform the necessary governance role for such a large and complex program. Agency involvement to support this aspect of large initiatives would likely prove important in the future.

Outcomes & Impact

Basis for future income sources established

An important objective of the GER Initiative has been to attract sufficient resources to sustain an ongoing program beyond June 2011. The establishment phase included several strategies, including:

- **Effective networks** - Development and consolidation of networks of motivated and engaged partner organisations to attract ongoing support of funding bodies;
- **Community ownership** - A community visioning process involved partners in developing a long term vision and agree a governance framework for the Initiative to persist beyond 2011;
- **Tourism strategy** - Development of a draft tourism engagement strategy to consider and realize the potential role of the tourism sector in promoting the GER

Initiative and its objectives, and to provide a basis for the tourism industry to engage with the GER Initiative in a mutually (including financially) beneficial way.

Opportunities for Future Improvement

1. Periodically review opportunities previously highlighted by partner organizations to leverage new funding.

Key tasks involved in this exercise should include:

1. synthesise recommendations on likely sources of program income;
2. describe suggested models for trialling the application of these opportunities in the GER program context, and
3. identify gaps in investigations and target opportunities for further investigation of income sources specific to the GER Initiative.

2. Obtain expert advice on establishing pilot projects (including appropriate governance frameworks) that satisfy the potential for income

This will involve seeking advice on governance and sustainable investment frameworks from experts with experience in similar conservation initiatives, such as the Yellowstone to Yukon Initiative in North America, and in particular how current strategies employed by the GER Initiative to promote awareness, support and ownership of the program by partners (e.g. the 'community visioning process') might be utilized to best effect.

3. Work with existing and prospective partners to identify potential locations for collaborative pilot projects

Develop proposals to establish pilot projects in the most likely viable locations. The full value proposition lies in the national endeavour.



Applying Knowledge (Goal 5)

The original Business Plan placed strong emphasis on the need to gather, collate and synthesise data and knowledge to guide implementation. Success was achieved through development of a Science and Information Delivery Plan with guidance provided by the GER Science and Technical Working Group.

Approach

The wealth of data, published and grey literature exists to describe the natural and cultural heritage values of the eastern ranges. Four projects commissioned in 2007-08 addressed the need to synthesise and improve the accessibility of essential information, and translate the relationship between natural, cultural and ongoing socio-economic values into design of the GER Initiative. The program resulted in the several important reports:

- **Natural Heritage Values** (Hyder, 2008) – The vegetation and habitats which form the ‘fabric’ of the GER, and along with the unique or iconic features that highlight the significance of this part of the State.
- **Cultural Heritage Values** (Umwelt, 2008) – Traditional use and management of the eastern ranges by indigenous people, the role of the ranges in the European settlement and development of the Australian identity since the eighteenth century.
- **Socio-economic values** (Morrison, 2008) – Key determinants of landholders involvement in managing the vegetation and habitats of the ranges through voluntary and incentivised conservation instruments.

Knowledge applied through conservation planning

Conservation planning gave a strong early focus for collaboration and stimulated several other processes:

- **Mapping regional biodiversity assets** – A broad range of maps and information products were developed to support planning and help with future communications (see Appendix 2).
- **Analysis of conservation opportunities and constraints** – Mapping layers were analysed to explore conservation opportunities based on distribution of assets, patterns of land tenure (reserves, stock routes, roadside, private efforts, etc) and threats (mining, infrastructure developments, etc).
- **Analysis of connectivity values and regional priorities** – New techniques in were developed to model core habitat and potential connectivity values, and correlate these as drivers of bird migration (see Case Study, Appendix 1).

Priorities for connectivity at continental scales

Principles for continental scale connectivity conservation - A landmark report by Mackey *et al* (2010), provided the first evaluation of connectivity conservation as an approach in Australia. Aspects of its principles have been incorporated into the national Caring for Our Country Program, and the Australian and NSW Biodiversity Strategies. More recently, the Australian Government has adopted the report in development of the National Wildlife Corridors Plan.

Continental scale ecological processes and conservation priorities - A ‘compendium’ project comprising five discrete components was commissioned, supplemented by funds from the CSIRO Climate Adaptation Program, to develop techniques to prioritise management of continental scale ecological processes.

Outcomes & Impact

The GER Initiative has positively impacted the collective understanding of conservation priorities in eastern NSW by providing:

1. Increased knowledge and understanding of the biological attributes of the GER and of their significance in the context of broader continental ecosystems;
2. Greater awareness and understanding of biological, human and existence values of the great eastern ranges, threats to these values, and opportunities and priorities for action to address these.
3. Increased recognition of the scientific credibility and validity of connectivity conservation in the eastern ranges and the importance of continued investment to understand and address conservation priorities.
4. Increased adoption of advice from scientists and researchers by public and private land managers, and mainstreaming of GER-focussed conservation priorities in partners' strategic planning and program implementation.

New approaches to social research used to frame messaging

From 2008-2010, the GER Initiative invested significantly in understanding the major community drivers involved in landholder uptake of instruments and involvement in programs at deliver on-ground connectivity conservation outcomes. Social research by Charles Sturt University and the University of Tasmania in the Southern Highlands Link partnership explored:

- Socio-economic segmentation of the local community, and how this influences likelihood of participating in conservation mechanisms;
- Key messages and media relevant to increasing effectiveness in encouraging uptake of available mechanisms; and

- Characteristics and delivery of incentives programs to maximise landholder uptake across socio-economic segments.

The results of the research have had immediate influence by guiding Hawkesbury-Nepean CMA on how best to promote available incentives and will be used by them to guide operational planning and delivery of a Caring for our Country funded project.

Baseline mapping of activity to assist future monitoring

A major data collation and spatial analysis project in 2009-10 helped to provide an understanding of how public and private efforts align and contribute to achieving a conservation corridor along the GER (see Appendix 2). For the first time, data from a variety of disparate government agencies, CMAs and non-government partner organisations was collated to depict the spread of effort over public and private lands.

The exercise highlighted a number of limitations in current project tracking databases, with data recording found to be both patchy and inconsistent. The need for a simple but cost-effective tool to allow NGO and public land management activities to be recorded and their details collated for monitoring purposes, was strongly highlighted.

Leadership on the science of connectivity conservation

The scientific agenda adopted has allowed the GER Initiative to establish a reputation for leadership on science of connectivity conservation through:

- Consolidation of existing knowledge to establish foundational principles for connectivity conservation in the Australian context, as outlined by Mackey et al (2010);
- Collation of data and published information to define the biological values, processes and threats to biodiversity operating at continental scales;

- Development of a framework to enable high level visioning to be translated into practical decision support at key operational scales (State, regional, local, project);
- Refinement of techniques to analyse and priorities connectivity priorities at regional and local landscape scales;
- New thinking and analytical techniques to describe and analyse ecological processes at continental scales as the basis for developing high level program priorities.

Opportunities for Future Improvement

1. Review and refine natural and cultural heritage values reports

The content of the draft reports should be made more widely available to a broader audience through major partners.

2. Demonstrate success and support adaptation

Demonstrating the quantifiable improvements in species persistence was not possible during the timeframes of the NSW Environmental Trust funding. However, increased availability of remote sensed data, evolving techniques in spatial analysis and potential to link with data sourced from a network of citizen scientists all provide opportunities to overcome limitations in this aspect of the Initiative.

During the latter half of 2008-09, significant progress was made on developing a Performance Evaluation and MER Plan to establish a framework and program for well-targeted and cost-efficient monitoring. The plan should be revisited, to explore options for cost effective monitoring of actions and success in the future, in the light of experiences in baseline activities reporting, data available from long term monitoring, and emerging tools from the collaboration with Atlas of Living Australia.

3. Quantify the value proposition

The GER Initiative has enormous community appeal. However, its benefits extend beyond the 'feel good' that stems from collaboration. Long term support will increasingly demand demonstration of the tangible benefits provided, including:

- Economic contribution made through maintenance of ecosystem services (carbon sequestration, catchment protection, benefits of biodiverse landscapes) and provision of employment and economic products (tourism, sustainable forest yield, etc)
- Social and institutional benefits provided through recreation, visual amenity, existence values', increased cost effectiveness of collaborative programs; and

4. Promote wider use of GER data, analyses and techniques

Potential exists to leverage the growing reputation of the GER Initiative as a focus for scientific excellence and leadership on connectivity conservation. Techniques and analyses made available to others would strengthen opportunities for their implementation.

5. Priorities for connectivity conservation research

The Science and Information Reference Group in August 2010 considered key messages from the four 'whole of GER spatial analysis' projects undertaken in 2009-10, and implications of the work for how the Initiative might operate in future. The workshop concluded:

- The consideration of continental context and 'large scale' ecological processes is essential to provide understanding of context for regional connectivity conservation projects
- Further analysis is needed to consider essential processes and threats to resilience along the ranges beyond NSW, including:
 - distribution and implications of weeds and feral pests,

- changing fire regimes,
- shifting rainfall patterns, and
- species and ecosystem response to altered bioclimatic conditions.

Such information will become increasingly important at the whole of GER level to support growing efforts in Victoria, the ACT and Queensland.

6. Review the structure and operations of the Science and Technical Reference Group to increase its efficiency

Significant opportunities exist to link with research projects as part of a wider effort to address the broader GER research agenda, but will require more nimble coordination than the current annual forum/workshop model permits.



- GENERAL FINDINGS, CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES -

Connectivity conservation is still a relatively new approach to conservation planning and management and it is still in its infancy in Australia. It seeks to integrate efforts across all land tenures, bringing together the contributions of all public and private sectors. In Australia and globally, conservation planners and managers are still learning how to implement this new approach most effectively.

General Findings

- The success of partnership formation highlights the potential for wider application of this model for building effective conservation projects in the GER. Continuation of this investment is essential to ensure that a series of high profile collaborative programmes are in place along the length of the GER, to ensure that the Initiative provides an attractive programme supported by all industry, Government and community sectors, and is sustained beyond the life of the current NSW Environmental Trust funding.
- Success depends substantially on the quality and skills of the Regional Facilitators. An organising approach involving Facilitators must also have sufficient funding or collective action to enable communities to see tangible action on the ground in the short term.
- There is no one organisation model that works in all environments. The people who are involved are the key. In each regional partnership area, the local communities and the people who work with them are best able to advise what will work in their region.
- The Initiative needs specialist skills in a very broad range of areas, like any NGO. Skills in management, conservation analysis, business development, fund raising, communications, project and event management, finance and governance are all vital. Due to the lack of funding, this has not been an option. Without this

broad range of skills the full potential for the Initiative is being compromised.

- Timely on-ground successes are vital for sustaining community interest and involvement. In some locations, such as the Hunter Valley, there had previously been insufficient action on the ground. This was due to the limited time available for the massive task of conservation data assemblage, analysis, prioritisation and consultation required to reach agreement on areas to be targeted for on-ground conservation activities and investment. The GER Initiative has been able to reverse this problem and planning has been completed to allow prioritisation in the area to make required progress.

General Challenges

- The increased number of non-government partners can place increasing demands on the GER Initiative to provide strategic programme oversight and leadership in key aspects, such as consolidating and expanding partnerships with industry groups.
- Significant risks remain that available funds will fall short of bridging the gap to secure the long term future of the Initiative and to ensure we can continue to:
 - Maintain the drive shown by our regional partners
 - Expand our partnerships and meet the increasing calls for expansion in NSW, Queensland and Victoria

- Build new partnerships and sponsorship opportunities with industry
 - Develop data analysis, project reporting and monitoring tools
 - Realise the many research funding opportunities that are increasingly open to us
 - Leverage increasing media opportunities, as the general awareness of connectivity conservation grows
- A MOU between the four environment Ministers of Victoria, NSW, ACT and Queensland remains unsigned. This will impact the efficient management, sharing of information and promotion of the Initiative, especially with expansion into the other States.
 - Social capital will rapidly evaporate without further sustained investment. Finding sustainable sources of funding to maintain momentum is the most pressing and challenging issue for the Lead Partners Working Group. Failure to support any new programs that have been successful in gaining community commitment, such as the GER Initiative, creates a liability for future efforts. The community wants the programs they are involved in to be supported over time.
 - As the Initiative expands with more partners and activities, it is increasingly difficult to collect and collate data and outcomes at the whole of GER level. This inevitably means that we are potentially 'under-selling' our achievements.
 - As the Initiative is not a legal entity, it cannot enter into contracts in its own right. Potential investors are then required to contract with a partner organisation, who has to enter into sub-contracts with other partners. This is time-consuming and is likely to be seen as a risk for investors. This is the main reason that Gondwana Link moved to an incorporated entity. The Initiative will

need to consider this as the next step in its evolution.

General Opportunities

- The potential to expand the Initiative into new parts of NSW, Victoria, the ACT and Queensland exists with increasing interest from other organisations and corridor projects across all States.
- The alignment of the partners' programs can maintain the delivery of conservation outcomes, while mitigating the risk of loss of funding for new projects.
- The Atlas of Living Australia project provides multiple benefits for the Initiative across all existing and future Regional Partnerships and will enhance the potential for further funding.
- The National Wildlife Corridors Plan provides the potential for significant funding for connectivity conservation by the Australian Government through the Clean Energy Future Biodiversity Fund, Caring for our Country and Stewardship Programs. The NSW Government election commitment to deliver a network of 'green corridors' similarly suggested potential for continued support and partnership of NGOs, local community networks and landholders to work in partnership with Government to deliver effective local projects.
- The Draft NSW Biodiversity Strategy 2010-15 highlighted the importance of the Initiative and the Coalition Party's Environment Policy also expressed the party's strong support in the lead up to the NSW Government Election. This mainstreaming of connectivity conservation in NSW is likely to improve the potential for funding.

- CONCLUSIONS -

The GER Initiative has been highly effective in laying the foundations for one of the largest conservation programs in Australia. The success of the Great Eastern Ranges Initiative has depended substantially on the quality and skills of Regional Facilitators to harness the energies and resources of the partner organisations. Equally important has been a central management, science and communications team that takes a 'whole of GER' perspective, with a focus on future funding, support for the Facilitators, expanding the body of research and building public awareness.

The increasing maturity of the five partnerships is proven in the expansion of the organisations wanting to become involved. The Slopes to Summit partnership has transitioned from a largely science-community membership to active involvement of Landcare networks. The partnership is now expanding into peri-urban projects. Similarly, the Hunter Valley Working Group has grown in the last 12 months to involve a national volunteer organisation, local government, heavy industry and a university, expanding the range of skills and perspectives actively involved in leading efforts in that region.

The Initiative's growing public visibility has stimulated a ground-swell of interest from outside the initial focus areas in NSW. This has come from existing networks at a local and regional level, individual community groups and state-wide and national conservation organisations. All have been inspired to align their own activities with those of the Initiative. This interest has been spontaneous and demonstrates the Initiative's success in building credibility and respect among a wide range of interest groups.

The inclusive approach adopted for the GER Initiative continues to bring together a

diverse range of players, many of whom have not previously met, to deliver shared connectivity conservation goals. The increasing maturity of the existing five partnerships has been proven by the increase in the organisations wanting to become involved. These have included agencies and public land managers, community organisations, researchers, landholders, industries and Aboriginal groups.

The progress of the Great Eastern Ranges Initiative in its first four years was proved a considerable achievement, made all the more impressive by its having been achieved over such a short period of time. Investment by the NSW Environmental Trust provided an essential foundation, without which the GER Initiative would not have achieved more than a fraction of the outcomes so far. This foundation allowed the Initiative to not only be established, but evolve and transition into a community-driven endeavour during 2010-11.

The ongoing challenge will continue to be the need to generate sufficient funding on an ongoing basis to maintain the momentum into the future.

* END *

Photo credits

Front cover: (clockwise from top left) Members of the Border Ranges GER Alliance (S Cohen); Filming 'Two Men on the Divide', Upper Hunter, 2011 (G Anderson); Southern Highlands Link partners exploring the Canyonleigh district (OEH); S2S members partnership explaining connectivity conservation, S2S Open Day (S Hartvigsen); Fitzroy Falls, Morton National Park (J Winters)

Pg 4: (left to right) Georgia Beyer, Border Ranges GER Facilitator (OEH); Main Range, Kosciuszko National Park (OEH); Bow Wow Gorge Conservation Agreement, Hunter Valley (L Ransom)

Pg 9: Bunhybee Grasslands NCT Covenant Agreement, K2C (OEH)

Pg 12: (left to right) Eastern Water Dragon (OEH); Macleah's Monarch Butterfly (OEH)

Pg 14: Bredbo Gentian (R Rehwinkel)

Pg 15: Members of the Southern Highlands Link partnership and GER staff 'planning in the field' (I Pulsford)

Pg 26: Hiking in Mount Royal National Park (OEH)

Pg 28: Powerful Owl (OEH); Bracket fungi (OEH)