



Slippery Slopes and Giant Earthworms

GLENN & WENDY DUNCAN

- Hallora
- 320 cow diary farm
- Duncan family Farm since 1939
- Undulating to steep “Blue Gum” country on rich grey loam soils



“I've known they've been here all my life ...you can hear them all the time.”

WATCHING one of his paddocks slipping away past his boundary fence didn't make Glenn Duncan a very happy dairy farmer.

A couple of years later, the massive landslip has him smiling from ear to ear as he talks about the unexpected benefits that came from clearing up the mess.

The 10 acre landslip has inadvertently revealed a stronghold of the mysterious Giant Gippsland Earthworm, which is native to a small area of South and West Gippsland.

At Glenn's dairy property at nearby Hallora, the worms had always been talked about, sometimes heard but rarely seen.

It was only when a record wet period became too much for the land that the gentle giants of the underworld finally revealed themselves.

“In 2011, after a wet winter and wet spring, we had more heavy rain in the late summer period,” Glenn said.

“Soon afterwards, a large crack appeared. I couldn't believe my eyes, it was a 100 metre long crack in the hill that just appeared overnight.

“Within a week, a 100 year old Manna Gum had fallen over because all this land had moved like a giant glacier.”

Glenn, an active long term member of the Triholm Landcare Group, knew what he had to do to save the land from further degradation.

“I had a plan to fence it off and tree it, earthworms weren't even involved at this point. I just wanted to stabilise it over time, which was obviously going to take a long, long time.”

A visit by Australia's foremost Giant Gippsland Earthworm researcher Dr. Beverley Van Praagh and her team, saw unexpectedly positive results.

“I was late to meet them, and in the meantime they had already found some worm castings or eggs down near the road,” he said.

“We were digging a few holes, but we weren't really sure. Then out of the blue we heard the gurgling noise underneath. Straight away Beverley was very excited.”

With three large earthworm colonies identified, funding was sourced from the “Building Capability to Manage GGE Habitat on Farms” project.

The aim of this project is to help farmers undertaking revegetation works to design plantings to protect the soil moisture around the earthworm colonies.

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"The tricky part on Glenn's property was trying to get the balance right between planting trees to stabilise the landslip but not dry out the soil too much where the earthworm colonies are found" Beverley said.

"There is a very close relationship between Giant Gippsland Earthworms and soil moisture and they love living in clay soils around underground soaks and springs. Glenn's property has all the right ingredients". "We have designed the planting to protect the soil moisture by keeping the pasture grass and planting native grasses and sedges around the earthworm colonies and planting larger shrubs and trees at least 30 m away. Hopefully this will keep the landslip at bay while allowing the earthworms to thrive."



Fencing and planting of 8500 native grasses and trees has started the long process of changing the post-landslip moonscape into a stable area that's a haven for the rare worms. The site will serve as a demonstration site to help other farmers who want to plant up hillslopes where Giant Gippsland Earthworms occur.

From the first rains of winter 2011 to today's completed project, the process of protecting the Giant Gippsland Earthworms has been fuelled by a spirit of co-operation and a passion for protecting the unique creatures.

"When I met Beverley she was so passionate that I got really excited about it," Glenn said.

"This is a great project."

The 18-month long project is supported by the South Gippsland Landcare Network, Dairy Australia, GippsDairy, DEPI and VEPP. Additional assistance from Melbourne Water allowed Glenn to fence the 7.7 ha site.

Giant Gippsland Earthworm Facts

- The only place in the world Giant Gippsland Earthworms are found is within an area of 40 km by 30 km of south and west Gippsland.

- The worms live underground in colonies and are rarely seen above ground.
- Two worms are required for mating, although each worm has both male and female sex organs.
- They lay large, amber coloured egg cocoons that may take 12 months to hatch.

For more information on the project, go to

www.giantearthworm.org.au

WHEN Glenn Duncan first told his New Zealand employee about the farm's subterranean wildlife, his new worker was quite concerned.

"I had a Kiwi working here, and I started telling him about the Giant Gippsland Earthworm, and he started to get quite worried," he laughed.

The chances of being surprised by one of the worms are very slim, being among the most hard to find large animals in the world.

Growing to around 75cm in length - reports of larger animals probably involve lethal stretching - the worms can rival a good sized snake.

But spending their entire lives below the ground means that little is known about their lifestyle and even local farmers have had little contact with them.

"I've known they've been here all my life," Glenn said.

"But saying that, I've only once seen part of one worm. You can hear them all the time though."

A distinct flushing or gurgling noise is the signature tune of the earthworms, which seem to thrive in the pastures of dairy farms on the south west edge of the Strzelecki range.

The Building Capability to Manage Giant Gippsland Earthworm Habitat on Farms project has captured the imagination of Glenn and many other farmers in the region, helping them to make a tangible contribution to the protection of the endangered animal.

"I am excited," he said.

"It was all about the funding to fix the land to start with, but then I thought 'stuff the funding', I'm excited about this."



*Written by Danny Buttler with contributions from B. Van Praagh
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