



Planting For Giant Gippsland Earthworms Along Creeks

ALAN & BEV GREGG

- Poowong
- Retired dairy farmers
- 400 acres
- Family farmed in district for almost 100 years
- Undulating “blue gum” country



“Dad knew about them and pointed out a few spots where they were, but we didn't hear anything for a long time ... I thought they had gone.”

ALAN Gregg has spent his entire life living on the habitat of one of the world's most unusual animals – and he had never even caught a glimpse of one.

Giant Gippsland Earthworms have been spending their mysterious lives beneath Alan's feet since he was a boy growing up on his Poowong farm.

He's heard the odd sound - a liquid “squishing” noise - but never seen the iconic worms in the flesh. It was only when Alan went to fix a fence that was a regular victim of passing traffic that he started to become sure that the Giant Gippsland Earthworms were living in his soil.

“I just thought they had gone, then we were pulling out a fence near the creek and walking along the edge of the bank when I heard one and thought, oh, they are here,” he said.

“It's like a sucking, gurgling noise.”

“I heard them in a few spots and was quite excited.”

It was an excitement shared by plenty of other people in the local community, local and regional Landcare networks and the scientific world.

When word got out, Triholm Landcare Group and South Gippsland Landcare Network became involved, as did Dr. Beverley Van Praagh who has been studying the rare creatures for the past 25 years.

A recent conundrum that has baffled scientists is the knowledge that the worms once lived amid huge forests, a habitat all but gone with colonies now found mostly under pasture along creek banks and south facing hills. While the complexity of their habitat requirements remains a mystery, their need for the correct recipe of soil type and moisture is certain.

“We want landowners to revegetate but we also want them to take into account the needs of Giant Gippsland Earthworms” says Dr Van Praagh. *“This means we need to protect the soil moisture around the earthworm colonies.”*

Dr Van Praagh and her team have come up with a planting design for earthworm habitat that hopefully achieves this.

Intensive field surveys on Alan and Bev's property revealed a worm “hot spot” along the banks of a small creek, with the distinctive gurgling sound heard often and in many locations.

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The 1.1 hectare site was fenced, sprayed and will be planted out using the trial planting design with 1870 plants ranging from trees to native grasses. The areas with worm colonies are planted with native grasses and sedges that don't use as much water as growing trees. Trees and larger shrubs are planted at least 30 m away from worm colonies. The site will also serve as a "demonstration site" for other landowners wanting to protect earthworm habitat on their properties.



Giving up the land was a small sacrifice for Alan and wife Bev, who believe being custodians to the unique animals is a honour and a responsibility.

For Bev, who only heard her first worm sounds earlier this year after more than four decades on the farm, choosing to become part of the Building Capability to Manage Giant Gippsland Earthworm Habitat on Farms project was a simple decision to make.

"If they are there and we can protect them, it's a great way to preserve what we've got," she said.

The 18-month long project is supported by the South Gippsland Landcare Network, Dairy Australia, GippsDairy, DEPI and VEPP.

Giant Gippsland Earthworm Facts

- When European settlers first found the GGE in 1870 north of Warragul, they believed it was a snake.
- They can live for a long time - possibly more than 15 years.
- Researchers measure them by weight rather than by length, because of variations in how stretched or coiled the animals are. A relaxed, non-stretched adult worm can measure up to 1.5m and weigh up to 400 g.

- They may take as long as three years to mature sexually and only lay one egg cocoon at a time.

For more information on the project, go to www.giantearthworm.org.au

TAKE a walk with Alan and Bev to their Giant Gippsland Earthworm sanctuary and the sense of anticipation is palpable.

Will the gentle giants make their presence known or will they remain hidden in their underground realm.

At first glance, the new fencing and a number of painted stakes are all that show this land is any different to the thousands of acres of prime farming land around Poowong on the edge of the Strzelecki Ranges.

Look closer and the signs of worm life are there.

Alan points to a number of holes which he believes have been made by the Giant Gippsland Earthworm as they move around the soggy 1.1 hectares.

With a good drop of rain in proceeding days, Alan was confident the worms would be close by - and his faith was rewarded.

A gurgling sound, like water moving through an S-bend put instant smiles on Alan and Bev's faces.

"That's the longest one I've ever heard," Bev said.

A few minutes later a very different, but equally liquid sound confirmed the small patch of land is riddled with worms.

The noise is clearly music to the ears of Alan and Bev, who consider themselves as trustees of some of the world's rarest and most unusual creatures.

"Dad knew about them and pointed out a few spots where they were - but we didn't hear anything for a long time ... I thought they had gone," he said.

"It's a thrill to know they are still here."



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