

Slippery Slopes, Creek Banks and Giant Earthworms - Field Day

Dr B. Van Praagh

The rolling hills of South and West Gippsland are not alive with the sound of music but rather the sound of gurgles made by giant earthworms going about their business underground. Most farmers are aware of these creatures on their land as they have heard them while working their farms or have seen the bloody entrails left when worm and excavator sometimes meet. They are treated with a good deal of reverence and pride by most landowners who know they are lucky to have them working away underground to help keep their soils fertile. Two such landowners are Alan and Bev Gregg and Glenn and Wendy Duncan who have volunteered their properties at Poowong and Hallora as demonstration sites for the **“Building Capacity to Manage Earthworm Habitat on Farms project”**. This 18 month long project, supported by the South Gippsland Landcare Network, DEPI, Dairy Australia and Melbourne Water, culminated in a field day held on 20th October 2014, showcasing two sites that demonstrate how to sensitively revegetate Giant Gippsland Earthworm (GGE) habitat.



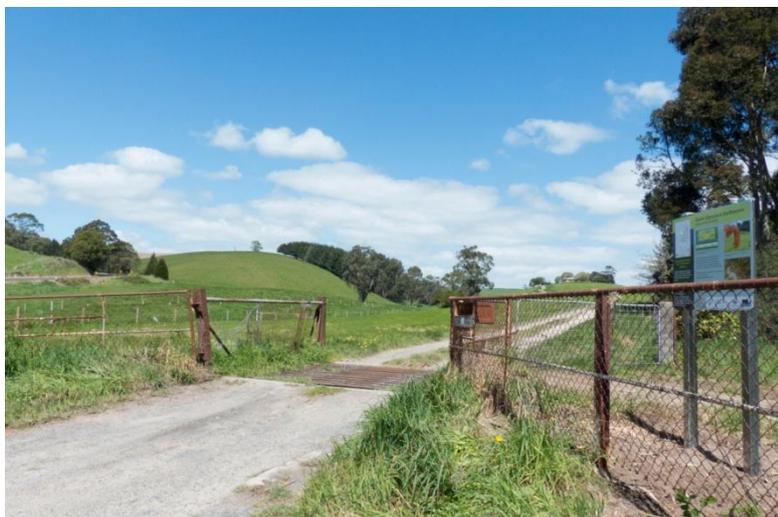
Over 20 people attended the day with speakers including Dr. Beverley Van Praagh (GGE expert Invert-Eco), Nick Dudley (DEPI), Rob Waddell (Grand Ridge Nursery) and Nicole Walsh (SGLN). Eager participants learnt about the importance of soil moisture for the survival of GGE and how landowners are encouraged to modify their revegetation techniques around GGE colonies to help protect the soil moisture. The two demonstration sites were chosen to represent the most common types of habitat occupied by these worms; a wet, south facing hillslope and a creek bank.

After the presentations, the group boarded a bus and headed out into the sunshine to visit the first site on Mr Duncan's property which provided some hearty exercise and views of the surrounding landscape. This property has been in Mr Duncan's family since 1939 but nothing prepared Glenn for events of 2011. After a wet winter and spring, followed by more rain in summer, an enormous crack appeared in a steep, south facing slope which preceded a major landslip described by Glenn as akin to a glacier moving downslope. Nick Dudley spoke of the mechanics of landslips that are a common occurrence in Gippsland and the challenges the group faced trying to stabilise the landslip with vegetation while protecting the soil moisture conditions around the three GGE colonies



found at the site. Rob Waddell prepared the site by spot spraying and planted 8,500 plants, a major accomplishment given the topography of the site! Following the trial planting design, Rob explained how the areas occupied by the GGE colonies were left unplanted, while grasses and sedges were planted outside a 30 m buffer around the colonies, followed by standard EVC planting, including a larger number of trees to help with slip stabilisation. Good plant growth is already obvious after two months.

After trudging back down the slope without major incident the group once again boarded the bus to the second demonstration site at Poowong. Alan and Bev Gregg's family have farmed the district for almost 100 years and are proud to share their farm with GGEs.



They have protected 1.1 ha of creek which provides a showcase for how to plant along creek banks that are home to GGEs.

The east bank of the creek was found to be a "hot spot" for GGE with worms found over 150 m reach of bank. The group walked along the site which has been fenced,

sprayed and planted using the trial planting design with 1870 plants. Areas around the GGE colonies were planted with native grasses and sedges while trees and larger plants were used on the west bank where only one small GGE colony was found. While no gurgles were heard today, plenty of burrows were observed in the grey clay soil along the creek embankment.



Back to the Poowong Hall for a well earned lunch, participants chatted about farming and worms and hopefully left with the information needed to design plantings around GGE habitat that help protect soil moisture and the worms that inhabit their farms.

While most people may never see a GGE, landowners like the Duncan's and Gregg's will still be able to hear the earthworm echoes underground on quiet meanders and know that they have protected a little piece of worm real estate.

