



Looking After Your Neighbours (worms and crayfish)

MARK & JANET PILKINGTON

- Trida - South Gippsland
- 60 acres
- Farmers with a love of the environment

Even though Giant Gippsland Earthworms (GGE) and Narracan Burrowing Crayfish (NBC) can be close neighbours, they live in very different places. Mark and Janet Pilkington hit the jackpot when they discovered that their property hosted both threatened species. One lives under remnant forest in gullies of the western Strzeleckis. The other lives underneath agricultural pastures.

After spending several years motoring around Victoria looking for a rural property, Mark and Janet kept returning to the lush beauty of Gippsland.

“One of the biggest drawcards of the Trida property was the advertised eight acres of remnant forest.”

Then Mark began his journey into the principles of revegetation. Much of this information was gleaned by joining the Mount Worth Landcare Group.

“Through this group we learnt about initiatives to care for the land by fencing off gullies and vegetating these with native vegetation.”

Armed with this new knowledge, Mark fenced off and revegetated several small gullies. However, fencing off the larger areas of remnant forest was a challenge. So, when Mark heard about the project **‘Landscape-scale conservation of threatened invertebrates of the Western Strzeleckis’** he wasted no time in submitting an expression of interest.

“We really did want to do more to protect the endangered species on our farm. We were aware that the cattle on the property wandered into the remnant forests and were damaging the vegetation in the process. The thought that we might obtain help to protect these forests prompted us to express interest in the project.”

Mark became familiar with a distinct gurgling sound as he walked over pasture on parts of his property. Like many people, he mistakenly associated the noise as coming from the crayfish chimneys nearby. While Mark knew he had some interesting creatures sharing his property, he was not aware of exactly which ones were producing this sound.

On a cool winter’s day in June, invertebrate ecologist Dr Beverley Van Praagh was joined by Cassie Wright from the South Gippsland Landcare Network (SGLN) on a visit to the Pilkington’s property. Their aim was to identify GGE and NBC habitats, provide advice on the best ways to protect them and offer support in achieving this goal.



It wasn’t long before a chorus of worm gurgles were heard as the worms moved in their wet burrows below the feet of Cassie and Mark.

Web: www.burrowingcrayfish.com.au
www.giantearthworm.org.au
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Mark was fascinated as Dr Van Praagh showed him the earthworm imprints found on the inside of GGE burrows.

Two colonies of GGE were found, both occurring in open pasture at the top of a north and south facing ridge.

It is vital to protect GGE and NBC colonies where they occur. Both can be found in very small areas of suitable habitat. If this habitat is damaged or destroyed, they cannot move away to a new area, and may die out.

Now that the earthworm colonies had been confirmed, the next task was to investigate the remnant forest in the gullies for NBC habitat. The excitement of the day was not over yet! After slipping and sliding down into the wet gully of Jubilee Creek, the group were greeted by a variety of elegantly constructed crayfish chimneys, arising from the muddy creek bed.

Crayfish chimneys and the fern-dominated vegetation and wide-flood beds - perfect NBC habitat



What Were The Threats?

The main threat identified at this site was pugging by cattle.

If not managed properly, cattle can churn up the soil in GGE habitat, particularly in winter. Their access to the NBC habitat in the gullies destroys vegetation and crayfish chimneys.

SGLN was able to support the Pilkingtons' through this project by fencing both the GGE and NBC habitat to restrict cattle access to the embankments and creeks. The GGE site will be revegetated using replanting guidelines developed for GGE sites to prevent drying out of the soils surrounding the colonies.

Two steers have died on the property when they got stuck in mud in the gullies. The fencing that is now completed means these gullies are no longer accessible. This not only protects the habitat of the threatened species but also ensures there will be no more livestock deaths in this way.

"We have been blessed by this project which has allowed us to fence 8 ha of bush, revegetate another 1 ha, protecting and enhancing all the remnant forest and remaining gullies.

This project has enabled us to fulfil a long-held desire to protect this precious heritage."

Further information about the species and project can be found at:

www.giantearthworm.org.au

www.burrowingcrayfish.com.au

This project has been funded by the Victorian Government's Biodiversity Response Planning program and is helping to ensure that Victoria's natural environment is healthy, valued and actively cared for.