



ENVIRONMENTAL VISIONARY CHALLENGES LANDCARE

*This press release represented an increase in my public advocacy on the value of naturalised vegetation, especially willows in response to the widespread and now local, willow destruction programs. The angry and evangelistic tone of this piece is unusual in my writing but reflects the fact that I tend to get worked up about issues that others ignore while I have little enthusiasm for outrage when many others are adequately articulating the case. Apart from a few letters in the local paper and some informal discussions with the Catchment Management Authority, there was no public response to my challenge for a debate at the time. As a result of these events we added the **Spring Creek Community Forest page** to our website and more recently my views on the value of wild willows were aired on ABC TV's Landline (25th June 2006) in a program that mostly shed the rosy glow of a human interest story on the subject of willow removal. The reissue of **Trees On The Treeless Plains: A revegetation manual for the Volcanic Landscapes of Central Victoria** as an eBook in July 2006 is significant in that it includes a section on willow management. Originally published in 1994 and based on research and design work in the mid 1980's it*



provides the more balanced valuing of indigenous and naturalised biodiversity, before the extreme domination of the biodiversity debate by nativist ideology forced me to more strongly advocate the value of naturalised vegetation. This tendency to play the devil's advocate and a deep distrust of populist dogmas is a recurring theme in my work.



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Why is David Holmgren, a well-known environmentalist and co-originator of the Permaculture concept¹ angry about local stream restoration programs? He is challenging those paid to manage our streams, locally or Statewide, to a public debate on the willow destruction programs.

Holmgren believes taxpayer's money has been used to degrade streams in the name of ecological restoration for many years, but it is only now that this twisted form of "nativist" environment ideology has arrived in Daylesford and Hepburn on a large scale. Major new works by excavators at the Breakneck Gorge confluence of Spring and Wombat Creeks are destroying sites of high scientific and community value and follow similar destruction below Excelsior Bridge, Shepherds Flat and at other localities in the Hepburn Shire.

If forest logging contractors were to disturb stream banks in this way, they would be banned from the forest. But this issue is not about reckless contractors. It is the advocates and bureaucrats trained in Natural Resource Management who need to be held accountable for this misuse of taxpayer's money. These publicly funded willow destruction programs are proceeding without having to undergo any independent environmental impact assessment or significant monitoring or evaluation of the results. Holmgren says they are driven by a "nativist" ideology that sees the presence of non-native species as both the primary indicator and cause of land degradation. "It is hard to resist the nativist ideology which has progressively captured the biodiversity conservation agenda over recent decades".

Facts about willows, such as that they are the most effective streamside trees in controlling erosion and absorbing sediment and nutrients, are ignored. The shading out of blackberries to create a low fire hazard shaded corridor that is an excellent barrier to grass and even forest fire is ignored. The value of willows for drought livestock fodder and potential for management to gain even greater productive and ecological values are ignored. The history of quiet unfunded management work by community volunteers in Spring Creek over two decades, and offers of consultancy input to develop win-win funded management of willows, have been ignored. The role of these willow forests in slowing and filtering the increasing urban storm water from Hepburn and Daylesford is ignored. The principles of catchment management, water sensitive urban design, and the precautionary principle have all been ignored.

Local landcare groups have been persuaded by evangelistic "experts", a flow of glossy propaganda, combined with funding offers and contractors with accelerating capacity and precision in stream makeovers.

The burning of the willow debris piles leaves soluble ash to be washed back into streams while the decay of the poisoned willow stumps releases phosphorus and sediment back into the water previously trapped in the massive rootmats. The misguided idea that replanting with wattle and gum trees, more lashings of herbicide, and fencing off

¹ See website www.holmgren.com.au

the stream corridor, recreates a functional ecosystem is irresponsible nonsense which inevitably results in reinvasion by blackberries and a huge increase in fire hazard as these dense unmanaged trees strands mature in their second decade.

It is interesting that this new work is on show for the statewide gathering of the Victorian Landcare Network this week at Bellinzona Grange. This closed-shop forum hosted by the local instigators of these programs from the North Central Catchment Management Authority will no doubt provide reinforcement to the fervent belief that this is “environmental best practice”.

This affront to common sense and scientific evidence would not be so bad if it were simply a farmer or two experimenting with their section of streamside. The fact that public money is wasted to massively damage catchment and ecological values, and that it is promoted as landcare makes a mockery of the work of the visionary farmers and environmentalists who founded the Landcare movement in central Victoria 25 years ago.

During the 1990's the Spring Creek willow forest was extensively studied and managed by an informal group of local residents. Many more people experienced and heard about the value of the forest through study courses and tours while more locals began to make use of the tracks which have been maintained over the years at no cost to the taxpayer. This latest desecration on the edge of this valuable research site rings alarm bells for many who have spent time track making, tree planting or simply enjoying this little known part of the Hepburn Regional Park.

To put the ideology behind this assault, to the test, David Holmgren offers a challenge to any of those paid to manage our streams, locally or State-wide, to a public debate on the willow destruction programs, in the Daylesford Town Hall, or other appropriate venue. Tours of the willow forest and its desecration for the media and interested parties can be arranged.

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