

Box-Gum Grassy Woodland in the Merriwa Plateau

Survey Results

October 2019



The survey, and why we did it...

During June/July 2019, Hunter Local Land Services conducted a comprehensive survey (70 Questions) with landholders across the Merriwa plateau to better understand local communities management and understanding of native vegetation.

We wanted to know more about current management practices in particular for the nationally endangered Box-Gum Grassy Woodland vegetation type, what the key challenges and priorities were in restoration, and what values local communities have towards it.

By gaining local knowledge and insight, we can better work with community on the issues that matter most.

We sent out 565 surveys and received 150 responses (**27% response rate**) from across the Merriwa Plateau about what matters most on native vegetation issues.

Hunter Local Land Services is supported with funding from MACH Energy Australia, and the Australian Government's National Landcare program, over several years, to protect, enhance and improve the health of Box-Gum Grassy Woodland and associated fauna and habitats in the Upper Hunter.

Survey Area



What is Box-Gum Grassy Woodland and why is it important?

"White Box-Yellow Box-Blakely's Red Gum Grassy Woodland and Derived Native Grassland" (Box-Gum Grassy Woodland) is a Critically Endangered vegetation type across eastern Australia, and Endangered in NSW.

Box-Gum Grassy Woodlands support more than 400 plant species with the highest diversity present in the grasses and forbs. The woodlands are primary habitat for a range of native fauna, including woodland birds such as the critically endangered Regent Honeyeater and Swift Parrot.

Box-Gum Grassy Woodland was once widespread across the western slopes of the Great Dividing Range. These woodlands have been extensively cleared for agriculture with remnant vegetation frequently in poor to moderate condition. Most remnants are found in private property.

These woodlands and derived grasslands (shrub/tree layer cleared) are important because they:

- are habitat for our significant flora and fauna
- support productive agriculture based on native pastures, and provide shade and shelter for stock
- are habitat for natural predators that can assist control of crop pests
- control erosion and dryland salinity and support nutrient/water cycling and soil formation

Box-Gum Grassy Woodland is threatened due to a range of impacts including fragmentation from clearing, degradation causing loss of understorey and loss associated important species (such as woodland birds), increased weeds from increased fertiliser/nutrient loads or disturbance, altered fire regimes, loss of canopy trees due to old age and lack of seedling recruitment.

What will Hunter Local Land Services do with the results?

Thank-you to individuals for completing the survey. The survey results have given us valuable information on the level of knowledge, awareness, challenges and goals that community in the Merriwa Plateau face to manage native vegetation, including Box-Gum Grassy Woodland.

The results will help us prioritise how we support landholders in the Merriwa Plateau through our existing programs, and we will focus on some of the issues raised and work with community to manage them. We will also adapt some existing activities in line with responses and **also directly contact some survey respondents.**

Overall responses and ideas were positive and future thinking, and we want to support you to achieve your goals, to enhance and protect native vegetation for all the reasons you have identified.



Local Land
Services

Hunter Local Land Services
www.hunter.lls.nsw.gov.au

We help secure the future of agriculture and the environment for NSW communities

Survey Results: *how do your views compare?*

Data below represents highlights from the survey results. For the complete survey go to hunter.ils.nsw.gov.au

What you told us about Box-Gum Grassy Woodland

More than **half** of you have heard of Box-Gum Grassy Woodland.

If you are 'production' based, you are more likely to have heard of it compared to 'lifestyle' landholders.

You also told us that you can identify native pasture species (**37%**) which are representative of Box-Gum Grassy Woodlands understorey and iconic tree species "Yellow Box" and "White Box" canopy trees (**37%**) that dominate the woodlands.

You felt the main threats locally to Box-Gum Grassy Woodland in your patch were:

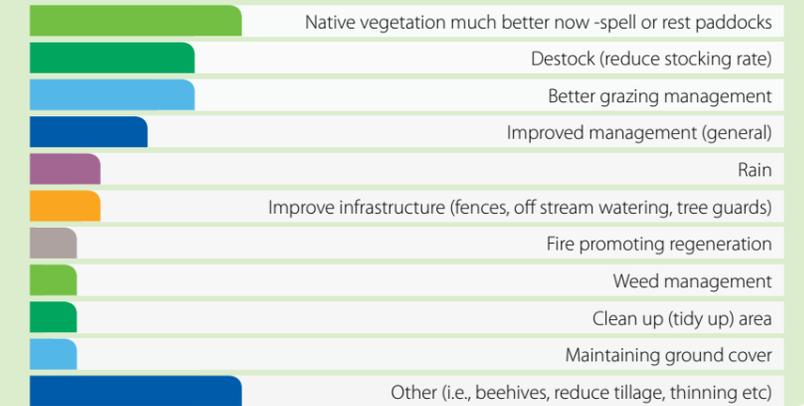
1. Pest animals and associated impacts
2. Presence of weeds
3. Livestock overgrazing more palatable species and trampling vegetation.

Many of you (**84%**) indicated you have some native vegetation on your land, and much of this would be remnant Box-Gum Grassy Woodlands on the plateau. When asked about change in condition over the last five years **42%** indicated there was no change, **24%** indicated the condition was worse now and **30%** of you thought it was in a better state now when compared to five years ago (drought conditions aside).

Improvement in condition was attributed to: change in stock management practices including spelling or resting paddocks (**28%**), destocking (**22%**) and grazing management (**22%**). Worsening of condition was mainly linked to drought conditions (**72%**).

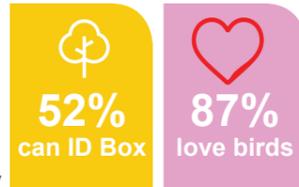


What you felt improved the condition of Box-Gum Grassy Woodlands



What you value in the landscape

Almost all of you (**97%**) stated that native vegetation was important for a range of reasons including that it controlled erosion (**86%**), reduced land degradation (**81%**) and provided habitat for native animals (**77%**). You also told us you managed native vegetation on your property within the last three years.



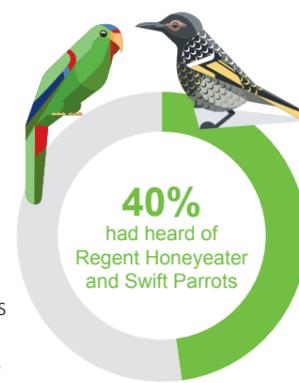
When asked about how you managed native vegetation, you said the top control methods were:

1. Weed control
2. Grazing management
3. Pest animal control



It's also clear that you have a strong love of birds! Over **87%** of you told us so.

40% of you also have heard or know about the Critically Endangered Regent Honeyeater and Swift Parrot. These, and other woodland birds, rely on Box-Gum Grassy Woodland habitats.



Your goals and aspirations

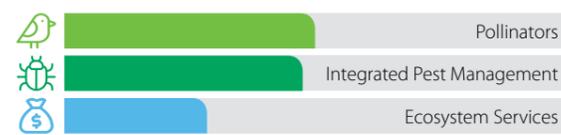
Almost half (**45%**) of you have goals to improve or manage native vegetation on your property. It's the worst drought we have seen for some time, but those of you who have these goals (**64%**) are thinking about native revegetation, and fencing/protection of native vegetation (**49%**) and this tells us what your aspirations are for the near future.

You also told us you are keen to have support with identification and mapping the existing remnant vegetation on your land.



What else you told us about native vegetation

You told us that you have an understanding of what native vegetation in general is and how to identify it. More specifically that you have a good understanding of what pollinators are (**46%**), and what integrated pest management (**44%**) and ecosystem services means (**25%**).



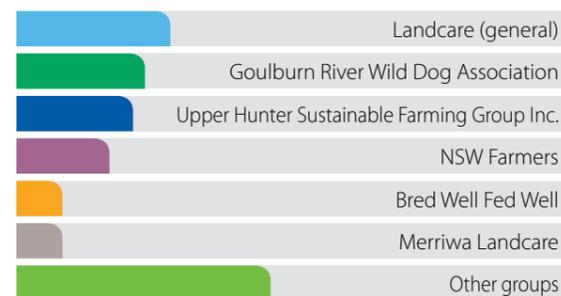
You also indicated a moderate (**26%**) interest in cultural or cool burning and other burning practices in regards to native vegetation management.

How you learn and connect with others

More than half of you sought Hunter Local Land Services staff support in the last 3 years, and (**15%**) applied to our grant or incentives, of those who did, **3/4** were successful with funding for on ground projects.

Finally, you said that you learnt best from others around you (neighbours and friends), from fact sheets or from field days, but only a small group of you (**16%**) were members of local networks and groups such as landcare /industry groups.

Local industry, producer, conservation or other groups you told us you belong to

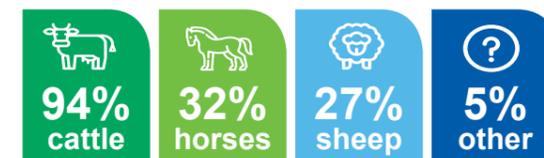


What else we learnt about you

Of the 150 respondents, responses came from individuals aged between 29 and 88 years with the average age being 64. The majority of you sit in the 51-75 year age bracket.

Over half (**59%**) of you have lived on your property with **42%** primarily living off-property. You also told us that many (**46%**) are experienced rural land managers, managing your land for more than 30 years.

You also have a very diverse production industry, most of you have livestock on your land (**68%**), and this includes sheep, cattle, horse or other livestock.



The majority (**55%**) of you used a rotational grazing strategy, with approximately a quarter (**26%**) using set or fixed stocking rates.

While many of you reported to have moderate remnants Box-Gum Grassy Woodland on your land, **only 5%** of you currently have a conservation or other covenant on your property.

But, almost half (**44%**) of you said you are or may be interested in formally conserving native vegetation on your property in the future. This bodes well, as it's a priority vegetation type for such agreements in NSW.

Conservation agreement interest

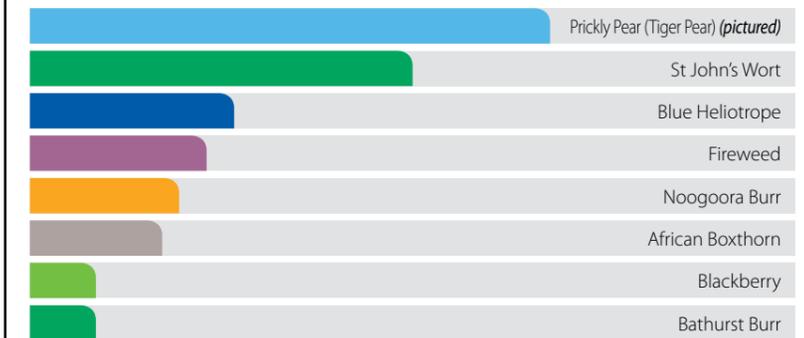


How you felt about weeds

We asked some specific questions about St John's Wort, a weed that impacts Box-Gum Grassy Woodlands. Most of you indicated that weeds in an average season occurred on less than **10%** of your land, but about half of you have St John's Wort. **Over half (55%)** of you indicated that it was a moderate or major concern.

You told us that how you managed St John's wort was mainly by chemical application followed by hand removal. Chemical application was seen as being cost effective and had been very successful (**60%**).

At this point in time, the most common weeds of concern are:



You told us weed impacts and key concerns were that they competed with native plants and vegetation (**53%**), had a high cost for weed control (**44%**), promoted the loss of desirable pasture plants (**37%**) and that they were 'harmful to livestock' (**32%**).

The successful management of weeds you achieved is through herbicide control (**86%**).

The main reasons for unsuccessful management were put down to lack of resources (financial and labour).

Successful management of weeds





Our projects and support to you

Hunter Local Land Services currently has a broad range of targeted projects relevant to native vegetation, pasture and pest management, in the Upper Hunter. Some of the key services that Hunter Local Land Services can provide through incentives, planning or other support to you include:

- **Property/Project planning support, property inspection and advice**
- **Fencing (and stock watering if relevant) for protection Box Gum Grassy Woodland or riparian zones**
- **Weed control for protection of Box Gum Grassy Woodland**
- **Grazing plans**
- **Revegetation plans, and support with resources to restore native vegetation**
- **Professional support with pest animal control through coordinated programs**
- **River management advice**

For on ground works, our incentives program is open to land managers in priority areas of the Upper Hunter.

It's easy to register your interest by going to our page below, and submitting a simple online **Expression of Interest (EOI) form** (or a hard copy if you prefer).

<https://hunter.lls.nsw.gov.au/our-region/grants-funding-scholarships>

Hunter Local Land Services staff will then get in touch and provide support to you depending on your project, how it fits in with our project goals, and potentially support you to develop a project to submit to our regular incentive rounds*

* Eligible landholders who have submitted an EOI, will be invited to submit an application. If you are not eligible for funding, you will receive technical advice and support, and invitation to upcoming training.

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We invite you to events in the upper Hunter in 2020



- March 2020 Revegetation and planting workshop, Paterson (Transport may be available)
- March 2020 Upper Hunter Merriwa Landcare Direct Seeding Trial Site field day (Box Gum Grassy Woodland)
- March 2020 Tackling emerging weed threats Cassilis



- 4 April 2020 Mistletoe Myths Woodland Birds and Habitats field day Merriwa



- 18 April 2020 What is Box Gum Grassy Woodland? Why is it important?
- May 2019 Fairy Bell community survey field day Find out more about local threatened plants



- 26 June 2020 Hunter Livestock Forum Regional event



- July 2020 (TBC as conditions allow) Cultural and Cool Burning and Farmer Demonstration event

Register to other upcoming courses

Register your interest **grazing and property planning courses**. Register here:

<https://hunterlls.wufoo.com/forms/eoi-courses-merriwa-plateau/>

Small landholders network this EOI is open for <20Ha properties. **Register here:**

<https://hunterlls.wufoo.com/forms/every-bit-counts-small-landholder-network/>

For more information on our events including confirmed dates, times and venues – check the Hunter Local Land Services web page, or register to receive our quarterly **“Regional Outlook Newsletter”** by visiting <https://hunter.lls.nsw.gov.au/>.

Also, look for updates in the **Merriwa Ringer Community Newsletter**.

Contact Us

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Other Agencies

NSW Biodiversity Conservation Trust

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Birdlife Australia

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Upper Hunter Weeds Authority

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Landcare and other Networks

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Photo: Vulnerable Hooded Robin, M.Roderick, BirdLife Australia