

TACKLING BLACKBERRY 2

**CASE STUDY:
WHITTLESEA & SURROUNDS BLACKBERRY ACTION GROUP
VBT DIGITAL VIDEO**



VICTORIAN BLACKBERRY TASKFORCE



The Victorian Blackberry Taskforce (VBT) is committed to working with communities and partner agencies to reduce the growth and spread of blackberry in Victoria. The objectives of the Victorian Blackberry Strategy are very clear and identify education, collaboration and innovation as the basis for achieving a sustained reduction in the areas of productive land and natural areas affected by blackberry.

The Case Study featured here demonstrates the determination of communities and individual landholders, in a range of circumstances, to find a way of tackling blackberry to reclaim and restore land.

The collaborative approach highlighted in the study demonstrates the value of the support offered by the VBT through various avenues. This enables people to access and use best practice information in order to implement the most appropriate management plan for their particular situation.

This Case Study is an inspiration to those who have yet to start their journey to bring blackberry under control and use the recovered land for productive or conservation purposes. The participants demonstrate that no matter how difficult or daunting the task, having a goal and support is the key to success.



This project is funded through the Established Pest Animals and Weeds initiative, part of the Australian Government's Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper, the government's plan for stronger farmers and a stronger economy.



Economic Development,
Jobs, Transport
and Resources



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In the wake of the 2009 Black Saturday fires, blackberry has reinfested large tracts of the Whittlesea region. Since 2017, Whittlesea Council has been working with the Whittlesea and Surrounds Blackberry Action Group (W&SBAG) to tackle blackberry problems in the region. In doing so, it has supported a more integrated, landscape-scale approach to these problems and a renewal of community-based land management.



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Whittlesea lies 40 km north east of Melbourne and has a mix of urban and rural properties, including a range of vineyards and lifestyle blocks.



REINFESTATION AFTER THE FIRES

Although blackberry was previously present in the region, the disturbance created by the 2009 fires has provided it with an opportunity to reinfest the landscape, often outcompeting native regeneration.

Local resident Pam had lived among Whittlesea bushland for 30 years before her property was lost in the Black Saturday fires. While she says that the fires initially cleared the land completely, blackberry then took over in a way that she had never seen before.



There was absolutely nothing after the fire ... it was completely wiped out. All my hard work cleaning it up and making it look like a botanical garden was just gone. [Before the fire] there were never blackberries anywhere ... but in the meantime, the blackberries have gone berserk ... it's all new growth and it's outrageous now.



Blackberry has come back with a vengeance. And all kinds of issues means it has been hard to control: issues with access; landholder fatigue; lack of resources and knowledge and the terrain is difficult. We've got a hold of outlying infestations, so we recognise the need to reinvigorate the community group in this area to help tackle some of the bigger, more overwhelming issues.



FORMATION OF A BLACKBERRY ACTION GROUP – REINVIGORATING THE COMMUNITY

The Whittlesea and Surrounds Blackberry Action Group (W&SBAG) emerged from work by local concerned landholders and the City of Whittlesea. Katherine noted that when she first started in the Environment Protection Officer role in 2016 there were clear issues with blackberry, but also a need for community-led action around this and other land management issues.

“

We recognised when I first started that some sort of community group was needed. We weren't sure in what sort of capacity, but the VBT [Victorian Blackberry Taskforce] came down and did a fantastic presentation at a general weed control group and inspired us to put the feelers out.

Peter, now Chair of W&SBAG, recalls receiving a letter from Katherine about infestations of blackberry on land he helped managed. Rather than demanding compliance with weed control regulations, the letter invited him to a community meeting on blackberry management, run by the City of Whittlesea and the VBT. Attendees at this initial meeting had a broad interest in blackberry control – not just on their land, but also in other areas of the municipality that were not being managed, including waterways. After the meeting, Peter and seven other keen landholders formed W&SBAG.

While the group started small, Peter notes that it is gradually growing. The group centres on a committee of eight people who meet to discuss where there are blackberry problems and what can be done about them.

“

We're into our second year now ... we have our private landholders come, we also invite Melbourne Water, VicRoads, etcetera. We meet quarterly and, last quarter, we employed a project officer to actively sign up landholders to a three-year voluntary action plan, which was a real success. And we've now got somewhere between 20-30 landholders who are part of the broader action group.

Katherine reinforced this point, noting that simply forming a group in this area has been a big step.

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Our neighbours in Nillumbik have 60 friends groups, a huge Landcare network. But Whittlesea is the complete opposite. The last one dissipated two years ago, so we thought we need a community program. And it wasn't just that blackberries were a problem, it was that this area needed a group and they all have the blackberry problem in common.

Importantly, the approach of forming W&SBAG has been different to running standard compliance and enforcement activities. Katherine noted that while these can work well in more urbanised parts of the municipality, in the more rural, fire-affected areas a community-led approach was more seen as more appropriate.

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THERE ARE MULTIPLE WAYS YOU CAN TACKLE THIS ... AND I THINK PEOPLE REALLY RESPONDING TO THE FACT THAT COUNCIL WERE WILLING TO INITIATE THE FORMING OF A GROUP LIKE THIS ... THE COMMUNICATION HASN'T BEEN A 'STICK' ON PRINCIPLE, IT'S BEEN AN OPPORTUNITY TO DISCUSS WITH PEOPLE AND TO SUPPORT THEM. IN MANY CASES PEOPLE JUST DON'T KNOW HOW TO GO ABOUT CONTROLLING THEIR INFESTATIONS AND THEY JUST NEED SOME GUIDANCE.





ON-GROUND ACTION AND SUPPORT

In terms of on-ground action, W&SBAG received a \$10,000 grant from the VBT in 2017 to employ project officer Chris Coburn. Chris, who has a long history of working in natural resource management and Landcare, offers landholders free site visits to assess blackberry infestations on their properties. For landholders signing up to the program, Chris maps their infestation and helps them to develop three-year management plans. He also provides support and advice—whether it is about management techniques, grants or commercial weed control contractors.

Pam was full of praise for the support she'd had from Chris:

“

I met Chris through a letter in my letterbox about blackberries asking me to get in touch, so I did. He mapped the area—he walked all over the place—and he's just been so kind and attentive ... It was encouragement. It was encouragement for me to get beyond how tired I felt. I was a bit depressed by how much I had ahead of me ... having that support was everything.

For Whittlesea Council, the project officer has also provided a bridge between the community and council that sits aside from any of the potential issues that residents sometimes have with local government.

“

Chris definitely knows about the other weeds, but he focuses on blackberries. And you know it's an inroad. Many people haven't opened their farm gates to council for a really long time. - Katherine

Katherine highlighted that resources and support from the VBT were important in this. This includes initial presentations the VBT made to community members, but also hard-copy resources that can be distributed to landholders—“that's been fantastic because we're really trying not to give them lots of information that is council badged, we really want it to come from outside of council.”

LESSONS AND THE IMPACT OF THEIR WORK

Even though it is early days for W&SBAG, momentum is building. Chair of the group, Peter, acknowledged that it took some time to get everyone on board and to get a clear direction. Starting small and being patient is also important:

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Perseverance is important because it takes time. But now it's really taking off. And we needed that first season so people could see results ... people are at their letterboxes talking about this Chris guy who is walking the streets. The communication is really happening. Even now we've got a number of people lined up for next season. So over three years we might be able to make a big difference.

At an individual level, Pam also highlighted the importance of persistence and the need to have a plan. Having had contractors spray the blackberry plants on her land, she has spent considerable time hand pruning the dead thickets back to the new growth – “it's not going to kill it but next spring I can get to the shoots out of the ground and it can go into the roots. And that's the plan”.

Both Peter and Katherine noted that some of the on-ground results are already starting to show:

“

We can see the difference. The physical results are there. And the awareness is going to be ongoing ... in the particular valley I'm very involved with; we've made a remarkable difference in just 12 months. I can see the areas we've had the opportunity to have treated and you can see the benefits of removing those infestations. - Peter

Whittlesea council's role in this is one of support and facilitation. From community's perspective, Peter emphasised the value of council's expertise, resources and initiative in getting the group going. However, while council's role is clearly important, Katherine highlighted the critical need for council to listen to what people wanted. She noted that they spent a lot of time understanding these interests so that resources could be invested appropriately.

Forming the blackberry action group has thus not only been about invasive species, there has also been an element of community development and social impact. Katherine observed that the connections made and work being done through the group has:

“

It's helped people to realise they can take hold of something like this and own it. And I think now they think that it's growing into something of their own ... we get a lot of feedback from across the municipality so the message is getting out there ... people feel like it is reinvigorating.



PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

Katherine notes that now that W&SBAG has been setup, her role is now more supportive, including working on other land managers such as Melbourne Water and Parks Victoria. She identified this as being particularly important in supporting groups like W&SBAG:

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When we first started inquiring about an action group, the majority of feedback was around ‘who was doing what about parcels of long unmanaged land’. Just nutting out who was responsible for what has been tricky. Communicating that to people when we figure it out has been great. We’ve worked out who’s responsible and we’re doing our best to get some investment. And that’s really important for people to know that they’ve got that support.

For other councils considering going down this path, Katherine suggests to simply “Do it. It’s fantastic. It’s very rewarding and it’s giving people control again ... There is already that need there, the community just needs that connection and then it takes on a life of its own”.

In terms of what that life looks like for W&SBAG, Peter noted that the group is still in its growing phase. They will likely roll out a similar program as last year with the hope of demonstrating the benefits of what happened over the first 12 months. Beyond that, there is also talk about expanding the group into a broader weed action or Landcare group, but that is further down the track. From Katherine’s perspective, Whittlesea council will continue to support the group and “it’s up to the them now about where they’d like to take it”.

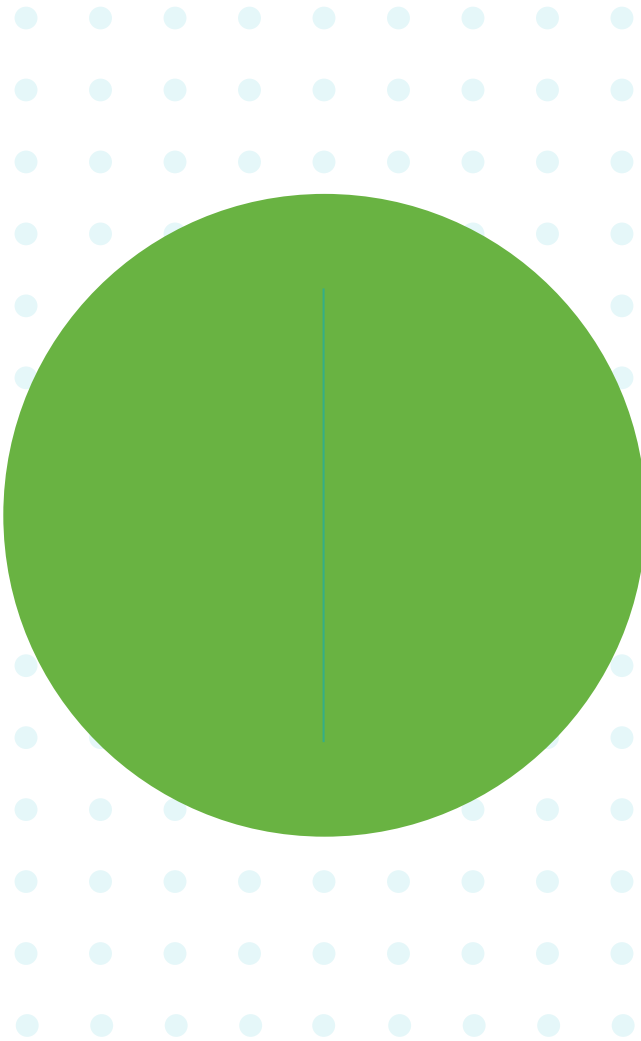
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VBT CASE STUDY VIDEO

The case study video is an encoded mp4 file. Play the file directly from the supplied USB drive or after first copying the file to a computer harddrive.



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