

# Dan Baird - Writing Sample (Magazine)

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## Wirra-Lo Wetland Complex: On The Road To Recovery

Situated within the lower Loddon River floodplain in North Central Victoria, the covenanted property Wirra-lo contains the most complete remaining example of the wetland system that once meandered from Kerang to the Murray River.

In 1992 Ken and Jill Hooper bought a 136 hectare property for inclusion into their dairy farm business, falling in love with the wetland and bush areas intertwined with pasture paddocks, later purchasing 18 hectares of adjoining wetland.

Covenanting the natural areas was logistically impossible until 2006 when Wirra-lo was retired from farming. This allowed the pasture paddocks to start returning to grassland. These management decisions were then formalised by a Trust for Nature Covenant in 2008.

Ken and Jill grew up with an appreciation of nature and have always felt at home in natural areas. This rapport with nature inspired them to protect Wirra-lo. Jill shows her love for the property by capturing its beauty with her camera, saying "I was dismayed at the early days of cattle impacting the natural vegetation". Ken says the wetlands are his favourite. "I spent many years duck hunting in wetlands. As well as bagging a few ducks I was observing what was going on. I was a part of it."

By restoring Wirra-lo, Ken and Jill hope to enhance biodiversity for future generations, admitting much has to be done because "this landscape has been so modified and changed, we need to actively manage it back to a more natural state."

Managing Wirra-lo has been difficult recently. Most of the wetlands were dry from the early 2000s resulting in significant decline of red gums. In early 2011 massive floods swept down the Loddon River, breaching the levees and sending a torrent of polluted water across the property. This deep and rapid flooding was devastating for invertebrates which require slow natural flooding of the landscape, however the flood germinated thousands of red gum and black box trees and introduced other indigenous plants to the property.

As a result of the flooding, the Victorian Government implemented the Lower Loddon Irrigation Recovery Package voluntary buyback scheme, allowing farmers to sell their flood damaged land to the government. This, coupled with the Goulburn-Murray Water Connections Project irrigation modernisation project, meant a reduction of irrigation in the area, with the potential loss of essential water supplies to Wirra-lo.

In 2012, with a potential future without a water supply looming, Ken and Jill approached the North Central Catchment Management Authority to assess the value of the wetlands. Thankfully, they were confirmed to be of high value and worth saving. It was considered imperative to return some water to the landscape, particularly after the floodplain was denied its natural flooding and suffering under the loss of irrigation supplies.

Proposed public environmental water options put forward to address natural flooding and irrigation were investigated by the North Central CMA, including capacity surveys and botanical assessments, to determine avenues for future water supply.

In May 2015, three years after Ken and Jill's approach to North Central CMA, water finally flowed into some of Wirra-lo's wetlands. Since then the bird life has been steadily increasing.

"Two of the thrilling aspects about the re-establishment of the wetlands are the regrowth of the stressed red gums and the amount of frogs using the habitat," said Jill.

Ken and Jill hope that one day the property will be as near as possible to its original natural conditions, and are enjoying the start of the restoration process in conjunction with Trust for Nature, the North Central CMA and other groups.

As Ken pointed out, there is now always something on the go at Wirra-lo: "Landscape restoration is incredibly satisfying."