



Conservation in Tasmania's Midlands needs to fit with agriculture. Photo: Michael Lockwood, at 'Beaufront'.

Social and economic status: the implications for conservation in the Tasmanian Midlands

- Protecting ecological communities of national significance will increasingly require partnerships between landholders, governments and non-government organisations.
- This is particularly true for the native grasslands in the Tasmanian Midlands, nearly all of which are on private property.
- Conservation of these grasslands will have more chance of success if farmers can integrate it with their farming activities.

Research summary

The Tasmanian Midlands region has a long history of grazing and, more recently, irrigated cropping. Native vegetation in the region is now fragmented, paddock trees are disappearing and native grassland, nearly all of which is on private lands, is listed as critically endangered.

We compiled a socio-economic profile of the Tasmanian Midlands and assessed the implications for conserving the region's biodiversity — in particular, the native grasslands on private farmland.

We found that the region, and Tasmania as a whole, is economically disadvantaged compared with the Australian average, which limits the state's capacity to carry all the costs of conservation.

Protecting ecological communities of national significance will increasingly require partnerships between landholders, governments and non-government organisations.

Private landholders hold the key to conservation

The Tasmanian Midlands is one of the oldest grazing regions in Australia, with a wool-growing industry dating back to the 1820s. Wool continues to be the largest enterprise in the region but farmers have diversified to include crops such as peas, cereals, potatoes and poppies, some of which are irrigated.

As a result of this history of land use, native vegetation is fragmented, paddock trees are disappearing and lowland native grasslands are listed as critically endangered under national environmental legislation. The remaining small fragments of these grasslands are vital habitat for a wide range of plants and animals, many of which are threatened with extinction. Fifteen plant species are found nowhere else but in this region.

While small remnants of native grass are found on roadsides, in local reserves and in some cemeteries, most native grassland is on private property, so its survival relies on private landholders committing to conserve it and knowing how to manage it.

The region is economically disadvantaged

Major policy initiatives are underpinned by assumptions about how individuals, families and firms make decisions about the environment. Social and economic data can inform these assumptions.

We compiled a socio-economic profile of the Tasmanian Midlands and assessed its implications for conserving the region's biodiversity — in particular, the native grasslands on private farmland.

The data we used to construct the socio-economic profile was primarily from the Australian Bureau of Statistics Population and Housing Census of 2001, 2006 and 2011. The social capital of communities in the Tasmanian Midlands has not been formally documented, so we used social-disadvantage data as an indicator.

The profile shows that the Tasmanian Midlands, and Tasmania as a whole, are economically disadvantaged compared with the Australian average.

Social and economic data can be categorised into three types of capacity, or 'capital':

Human capital

This is the knowledge, skills and ability of individuals, through leadership and problem solving, to contribute to good land-management practices.

Human-produced economic capital

Whether through ingenuity or technology, people's ability to create commodities is a fundamental contributor to the wellbeing and capacity of a community.

Social and institutional capital

The ability of land-management agencies to engage with a local community is influenced by the level of social capital in the community, which includes trust, connectedness and leadership. Communities where these characteristics are evident are more responsive to environmental programs.



Conservation meets agriculture: Most native grassland is on private property, so its survival relies on private landholders committing to conserve it and knowing how to manage it. Photo: Suzie Gaynor

Implications for biodiversity conservation

The Tasmanian Midlands' socio-economic status has implications for biodiversity conservation. We assessed these implications, taking into account the region's population, education levels, health, cultural diversity, workforce, income levels, agricultural holdings, infrastructure and socio-economic disadvantage.

Conservation needs to fit in with agriculture

Agriculture is part of the character and identity of the Tasmanian Midlands, and 30% of the population is employed in the agriculture, fisheries and forestry sector. As such, if conservation can be carried out as part of farming it will have more chance of success.

Directly assisting landholders is feasible

Because the number of landholders with native grasslands on their properties is small, it is practical and feasible to assist individual landholders to protect and manage the grasslands.

Relative to other farmers in the state, Tasmanian Midlands' farmers are better educated and more of them use the internet. They are likely to be more aware of management options for protecting native grasslands as part of their farming activities, and may be open to innovative approaches that could be communicated via the internet.

However, the number of farmers and farm managers in the region dropped by 23.5% between 2006 and 2011, which was much higher than for the state as a whole (8.1%). This decline is cause for concern because local knowledge and capacity to manage the land is being lost.

Funding needs to come from partnerships

Due to Tasmania's relative economic disadvantage, the state's capacity to carry all the costs of conserving native grasslands on private property is limited. Protecting ecological communities of national significance, such as these grasslands, will increasingly require partnerships between landholders, governments and non-government organisations.

The Midlands Conservation Fund is a recent innovative example that may well set a precedent for other regions. Initiated by a group of landholders, the fund was developed by Bush Heritage Australia and the Tasmanian Land Conservancy with funding mainly from a philanthropic organisation and support from the Australian Government. This perpetual fund offers farmers stewardship payments for conserving biodiversity on their farms.

Volunteers may be able to contribute

The amount of volunteering in the Tasmanian Midlands is almost twice the state average. Volunteers could potentially contribute to the protection of native grasslands.

Where to from here?

The social and economic profile for the Tasmanian Midlands is being used by hub researchers to inform the development of policy reform options.

Who are the researchers?

Dr Michael Lockwood



Michael is an environmental social scientist at the University of Tasmania and a co-leader of the Social and Institutional Futures Project at the hub. He specialises in the social and institutional dimensions of biodiversity conservation.

Dr Michael Lockwood
P: 03 6226 2834
E: Michael.Lockwood@utas.edu.au

Samantha Gadsby



Samantha is a natural resource management consultant for AK Consultants.

Samantha Gadsby
P: 0400 143 772
E: samantha.gadsby01@gmail.com

About the NERP Landscapes and Policy Hub

The Landscapes and Policy Hub is one of five research hubs funded by the National Environmental Research Program (NERP) for four years (2011–2014) to study biodiversity conservation.

We integrate ecology and social science to provide guidance for policymakers on planning and managing biodiversity at a regional scale. We develop tools, techniques and policy options to integrate biodiversity into regional-scale planning.

The University of Tasmania hosts the hub.

www.nerplandscapes.edu.au



National Environmental Research Program

Collaborators

Prof Sue Moore (Murdoch University), Prof Allan Curtis (Charles Sturt University)

Further reading

Gadsby S, Lockwood M, Moore SA & Curtis A (2013) *Tasmanian Midlands Socio-Economic Profile*. Landscapes and Policy Hub, University of Tasmania, Hobart.



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