



Rabbit management in culturally sensitive areas



Victorian
Rabbit Action
Network

A large, open landscape with a dead tree in the foreground and a blue sky with clouds in the background. The ground is covered in dry, brownish vegetation and red soil. The sky is a deep blue with scattered white clouds. The overall scene is arid and desolate.

“

It's really important to bring everyone together, to share learning, hear stories, hear ideas and see how things are done in these sensitive landscapes. ”

Heidi Kleinert, VRAN Executive Officer

Acknowledgment

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands and waters on which we live and work, and pay our respect to their Elders past, present and emerging.



LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER:
The following case study profiles the experience of participants at a VRAN Cultural Heritage Workshop.

A SACRED SITE

In north-west Victoria lies one of the most extensive, concentrated areas of Aboriginal burial dunes in Australia. These ancient burial sites are thousands of years old and of global significance, however, they are deteriorating as the land becomes increasingly dry and eroded. Ancestral remains, once protected by Indigenous grasses, lie exposed to the elements, degraded by cattle grazing, pests and vehicles.

Parks Victoria is working in close partnership with the First Peoples of the Millewa-Mallee and other stakeholders to rebury ancestral remains and restore the landscape that protects these sacred Resting Places.

However, one of the key and ongoing threats to the restoration of this landscape is rabbits. Rabbits burrow into the soft ground, de-stabilise the soil and sand dunes, resurface remains and prevent the natural regeneration of the property.

Managing rabbits is therefore imperative to protect these significant sites however, their existence is also what makes rabbit management incredibly complex.

Navigating these complexities can't be done in isolation and it is important all stakeholders work together to look for innovative and collaborative solutions to achieve best practice management in culturally sensitive landscapes.



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Rabbits are one of our biggest issues, up in the north-west because they are a burrowing creature, they burrow down and unfortunately dig into ancestral remains, and they are affecting those sites quite significantly.

”

Damien Jackson, Parks Victoria

BUILDING CULTURAL AWARENESS

Acknowledging that delivering rabbit control in Aboriginal sensitive landscapes can be a challenge for land managers and community, the Victorian Rabbit Action Network (VRAN) secured funding from the Australian Government's White Paper project to host a 'Building Cultural Awareness Workshop'.

The two-day workshop was held at Neds Corner Station, a Trust for Nature property, located in Victoria (near Cullulleraine) from October 21-23, 2019.

The workshop aimed to:

- build awareness of Aboriginal Heritage and Aboriginal Heritage legislation;
- showcase Parks Victoria's work on rabbit management in highly sensitive areas; and
- build partnerships between VRAN, First People of Millewa-Mallee, Parks Victoria, Aboriginal Victoria, Agriculture Victoria, Department of Land, Water and Environment, Trust for Nature, Mallee Catchment Management Authority and Mildura City.

Thirty people, from a cross-section of the stakeholder groups, attended the workshop which included presentations on *'a landscape without rabbits'*, *'working with the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006'* and *'Landcare and Aboriginal Inclusion'*.

It provided participants with the opportunity to see first-hand how various Indigenous, government and Landcare/community groups are contributing to successfully meet the challenges that are faced with rabbit management in Aboriginal sensitive landscapes.

It also provided a platform for participants to listen and learn from each other about best practice rabbit management in sensitive landscapes and feel self-motivated to work together for more effective and sustainable rabbit control into the future.

By helping people, help the land, VRAN aims to build expertise and create a strong collaborative culture whereby local communities can successfully manage rabbits through partnerships with Traditional Owners, land managers, government and industry.



“

The more you share with each other on strategies, performance indicators, and do it, you learn more.

”

Uncle Norm, Aboriginal Elder

THE PROBLEM WITH RABBITS ON COUNTRY

To help understand the complexities of the Mallee landscape, Parks Victoria staff and Aboriginal Elders of the First Peoples of Millewa-Mallee, took the group on a walk of the property to share their knowledge, highlight significant landmarks and explain how the ancestors would have utilised the landscape for food, shelter and trade.

Parks Victoria also shared the approaches they are currently using to protect Aboriginal Ancestral Remains and Trust for Nature showcased how fragile Mallee landscapes can be transformed without rabbits.

But dealing with rabbits in culturally sensitive landscapes is no easy feat. Many traditional methods of rabbit control, such as mechanical warren ripping, are not possible because they cause too much damage to the site.

Instead, land managers in these areas need to adapt and find more sensitive ways of making rabbit warrens unusable, which can be more time consuming and less effective.

Local staff in this area have had to deploy techniques such as covering entrances or collapsing warrens by hand. Five hundred hectares of the property has also been fenced to keep predators and rabbits out. Even though they are doing an impressive job and seeing some positive results, there is still considerable work to be done and they can't do it alone.

Workshops like this are vital as they help people to appreciate the different landscapes that people have to deal with rabbit management. They get to see first-hand the different barriers or opportunities in delivering rabbit programs and can identify areas where they can learn from each other and assist each other.



BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Not only was the workshop important to raise awareness but also to build relationships between stakeholders and empower them with the knowledge to work in collaboration towards a common purpose and ultimately achieve more effective and sustainable rabbit management solutions.



Rabbit management is extraordinarily complex. It requires lots of players, lots of community engagement and lots of partnerships. This country is just another step beyond – it's so complex, it's so fragile. The community here is trying so hard not to impact on cultural heritage. It's really important we learn as much as we can about how we can support them in doing that in a culturally sensitive way.

Kaye Rodden, VRAN



“

Now when Aboriginal people go out to these sites to look at their uncles or great, great-grandfather and see them being dug up out of the ground by rabbits, that's very disturbing. When you can't do anything about it there is no closure... when you are dealing with rabbits and ancestral remains it can be emotional but when we cover them back up and deal with the rabbits then there is closure for us and the Traditional Owners.”

Damien Jackson, Parks Victoria



RABBIT PROBLEM = PEOPLE SOLUTION

The role of VRAN is to promote community-led action on rabbit management in Victoria and to support people to work together for more effective and sustainable rabbit control.

Working together encourages growth and learning through exposure to different perspectives and experiences. Even though everyone's situation is unique, their goal is ultimately the same – to protect the landscape and see the regeneration of native flora, fauna and wildlife. The collaboration of all players who have a stake in rabbit management increases self-determination and fosters more comprehensive strategies to enable better outcomes, not only for the landscape but also for communities and industries.

Events like this provide the space for people to engage in conversations that may feel challenging or overwhelming but by sharing their problems they can also share their solutions and reduce the impacts of rabbits on a much broader scale.

KEY LEARNINGS

All participants thoroughly enjoyed the workshop and as a result of coming together have developed:

- a greater understanding of the challenges and amount of work required to achieve success in culturally rich landscapes;
- a greater appreciation of the value in working collaboratively with all players who have a stake in rabbit management; and
- a desire to share their learnings within their networks and the broader community.

Participants also walked away with an increased level of motivation to continue engaging with each other towards a common goal and recommended future workshops in different areas across the state to keep the partnerships active. Most importantly, they now acknowledge that despite their differences, people from diverse backgrounds can come together in situations that are complex and challenging and achieve success if they work together.



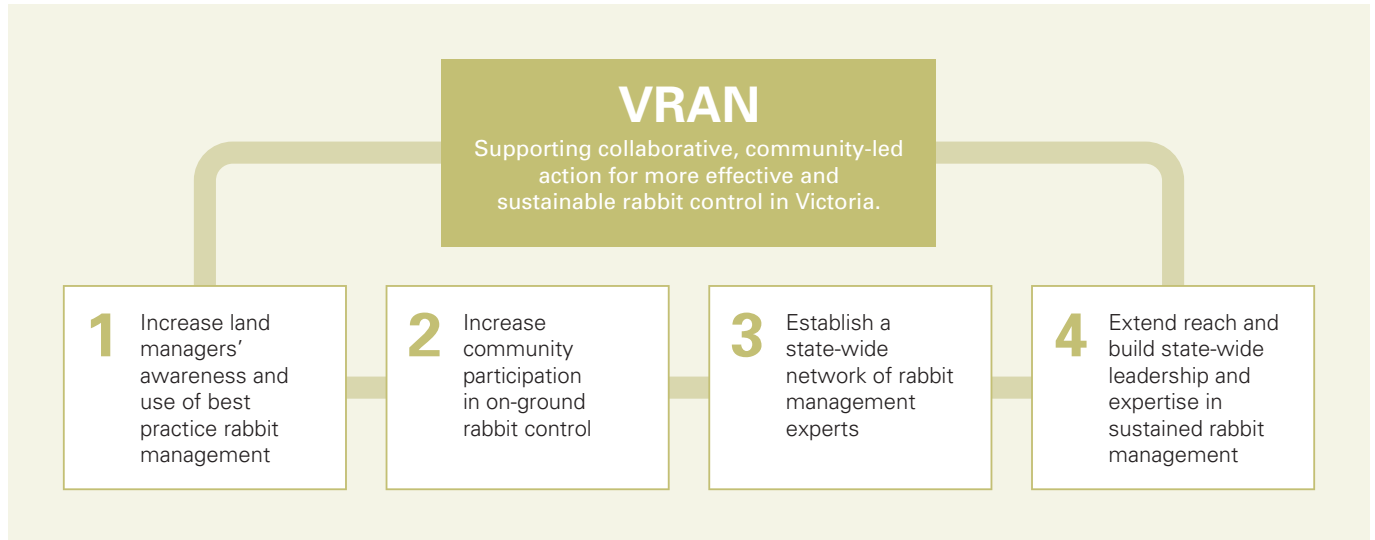
VRAN isn't just about rabbits. VRAN is very much about people. It's about helping people overcome the problems that they have with rabbits. It's about bringing people and ideas together, learning from each other and helping overcome the challenges and also most importantly empowering people to make decisions that they are able to carry through themselves.



Gerald Leach, VRAN Committee Chair

OUR GOALS

The workshop was part of a number of activities VRAN hosts across the state to support people, communities and organisations to collaborate and implement best practice rabbit management.



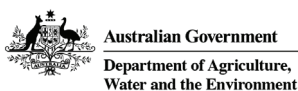
MORE INFORMATION

- Do you have a question in relation to rabbit management and working in sensitive landscapes? Contact Heidi Kleinert, VRAN Executive Officer, heidi.kleinert@agriculture.vic.gov.au
- Want to know more about Aboriginal Cultural Heritage? Visit www.aboriginalvictoria.vic.gov.au
- To learn more about VRAN head to www.rabbitaction.com



I think there is going to be a lot of support behind VRAN in terms of bringing people together because it's not just Aboriginal people's issues, it's not my issue, it's not my team's issue. It's everyone's issue. It's the government, the landowners, it's everyone.

Damien Jackson, Parks Victoria



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