

VRAN CASE STUDY

AARON STEPHENS -BASS COAST LANDCARE NETWORK

PHILLIP ISLAND COMMUNITY 2022

The Victorian Rabbit Action Network (VRAN) promotes community-led action on rabbit management in Victoria, supporting people to work together for more effective and sustainable rabbit control. The following case study is one of a series profiling the impacts of VRAN and its programs on people, communities and organisations.

Aaron Stephens serves as the Invasive Species Coordinator for the Bass Coast Landcare Network (BCLN), where his primary focus is on rabbit control. In this role, he manages large-scale rabbit control programs across several key areas, including Phillip Island, French Island, Kilcunda, and the Corinella regions.

In 2022, Aaron attended the VRAN Bootcamp in Queenscliff alongside his colleague and Project Officer, Jack Harriss, with the goal of enhancing the efficiency of their programs. The Bootcamp provided comprehensive training on advanced rabbit management techniques, including the latest control methods, monitoring strategies, and community engagement practices. By participating in this intensive course, Aaron aimed to deepen his knowledge of rabbit management, enabling him to more effectively communicate with the public, project stakeholders, and his colleagues.



Above image - VRAN's Bootcamp warren modification demonstration

AARON'S TOP 3 BOOTCAMP REFLECTIONS

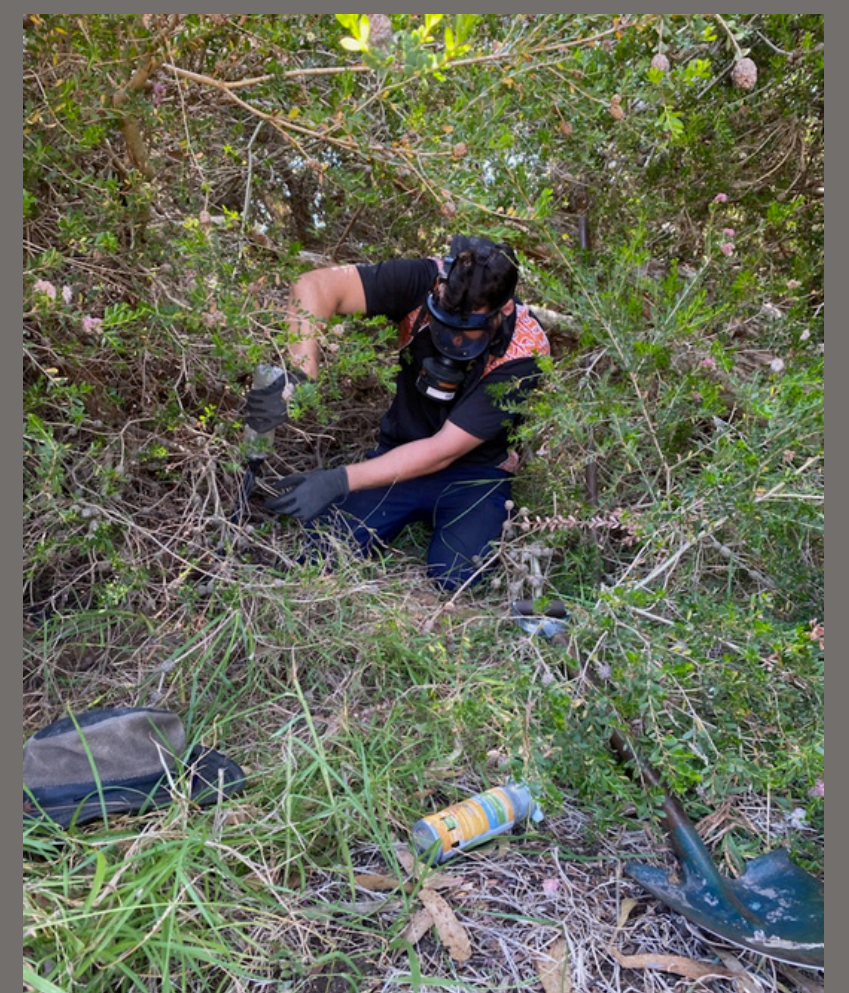
1. In depth knowledge from experienced mentors with proven results.
2. All rabbit control techniques demonstrated in person.
3. Establishing a support network we can engage with after the Bootcamp.

“VRAN has helped greatly in informing all our rabbit control at BCLN. The experienced mentors were instrumental at training us both in the classroom with theory and in the field with applied rabbit control techniques”.

BEFORE THE VRAN BOOTCAMP

“Before the VRAN Bootcamp, Bass Coast had done rabbit control in a variety of locations and with varying levels of success, often leaving us confused as to what was the best way to increase our effectiveness”.

Aaron reflects that he entered the Bootcamp with a moderate understanding and some experience in rabbit control. However, after completing the intensive program, his knowledge and confidence in managing rabbit populations increased exponentially.



Above image - BCLN undertaking rabbit fumigation

LEVERAGING VRAN BOOTCAMP LEARNINGS

Aaron believes that from the valuable insights on rabbit management gained from the Bootcamp, he can more effectively engage, educate, and share this knowledge. His work involves daily interactions with stakeholders and members of the public, allowing him to apply this new understanding to enhance these engagements.

Following the Bootcamp, Aaron actively engages with the community and has developed several impactful programs, including:

- As part of a large three-year grant project, BCLN implemented an incentives program for 100 properties on Phillip Island. Landholders were engaged and offered either a 50% subsidy on rabbit control works by BCLN or free rabbit-proof fencing materials
- French Island rabbit control program (monitoring, fumigation, warren destruction and follow-up) in a partnership with French Island Landcare Group.
- Community led program of rabbit control in Kilcunda. The council funded a community-led initiative for rabbit management on adjacent lands. The project successfully controlled the rabbit population by using excavators to modify warrens across 300m of land, resulting in minimal reopening.



Above image: BCLN have implemented rabbit proof fencing to prevent rabbit movement in areas.

Aaron has worked with the VRAN Mentors to continue to refine his knowledge of community led action programs. He has also contributed to the planning and implementation of the 2023 VRAN Bootcamp. Aaron has delivered several community talks on rabbit control for South Gippsland Landcare Network, Tenby Point Residents Association and countless members of the public.

The new approach and knowledge of rabbits has allowed BCLN to leverage more money and community action, thus giving them access to new sources of work to grow their team. BCLN has also built a powerful network with access to trained excavator operators in rabbit control, tight knit community groups, councils, landcare groups, foreshore committees and organisations such as Parks Victoria and Melbourne Water. All of whom, contract BCLN to control rabbits.

VRAN is led by a group of community, industry and government leaders, and was established through funding from the Invasive Animals Cooperative Research Centre and the Victorian Government in 2014. Today VRAN run training and mentoring programs, deliver workshops on best-practice rabbit control, and support people and organisations to collaborate on rabbit action.



Above image: BCLN undertaking warren modification to collapse a rabbit warren structure.

NEW VALUABLE NETWORKS AND CONNECTIONS

Through the Bootcamp, Aaron has built valuable connections with some of the mentors involved.

“Tim Bloomfield, Brad Spear and Neil Devanny have been valuable sources of information whenever we need their opinions on control and will no doubt continue to be going forward”.

“Heidi Kleinert has also been instrumental in keeping contact with us and following up on some of our great successes we have been able to achieve thanks to VRAN”.