VCAS, BIODIVERSITY OFFSETS AND PART 5 AGREEMENTS:

Kingborough's recipe for balancing development and conservation outcomes.

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Over the past 12 months UTAS PhD candidate and Environmental Planner Nikki den Exter, and Kingborough Council NRM Coordinator Liz Quinn, have been using the Tasmanian Vegetation Condition Assessment (TasVeg VCA) methodology to make a small but important contribution to our understanding of Kingborough's natural values.

Using this rapid site-based assessment method, that compares the condition of a given vegetation community to a 'benchmark' or average patch of the same vegetation that has not been disturbed for a long time (up to 200 years for forests), the Kingborough Council Natural Resource Management team has established the relative condition of diverse vegetation communities across the municipality.

The method provides an evidence-based approach to assessing council development applications that are likely to impact on Kingborough's existing natural values and enables Nikki and Liz to compare vegetation condition across different sites, even if those sites support different vegetation communities.

The team has been applying the TasVeg VCA method across the municipality as part of a project to monitor the current extent and quality of biodiversity values protected as a requirement of development use permits under Part 5 Agreements.

Part 5 Agreement: A legal agreement between a Council and a landholder that can be used to establish conservation zones to protect biodiversity or other environmental values on private land in perpetuity.

Using Part 5 Agreements that are attached to property titles, council is able to stipulate specific requirements for the establishment and protection of conservation zones, in perpetuity, as well as outlining the associated management prescriptions such as weed control or rehabilitation works that may be needed to ensure a positive outcome for the natural values.

Kingborough Council is also using the method to determine vegetation condition at sites of proposed developments, and compare these results to the condition at sites suggested as Biodiversity offsets.

Nikki and Liz use the consistent and repeatable method to assess vegetation condition at each of the paired sites (i.e. one for the proposed site and one for a potential biodiversity offset) for both the presence and quality of the structural components of vegetation (e.g. trees, understorey, weeds, logs and litter) as well as taking into account larger, landscape-scale factors like patch size and connectivity. This assists council staff to make informed decisions in the difficult process of assessing whether or not a proposed offset represents a good conservation outcome when compared to the values likely to be impacted by a proposed development.

Biodiversity offset: A practical tool used in the assessment and determination of development proposals that involve the removal or conversion of native vegetation. An offset seeks to compensate for the long-term negative environmental impacts, when all options to avoid or minimise those impacts have been exhausted and it is still considered desirable for the action to proceed (on other social, environmental or economic grounds).

Whilst the decision to offset is inevitably a challenging one, Nikki sees merit in the approach.

"The TasVeg VCA method provides an established and transparent framework that ensures a consistent evaluation of the condition of the area to be impacted, relative to the area proposed as an offset. This is critical as it ensures that values which are in good condition are not being traded for values in poorer condition."

Whilst still in the early days of her PhD, Nikki's analysis of the Kingborough VCA data has already uncovered some interesting and potentially important results. Overall the analysis shows that vegetation protected under Part 5 Agreements is in reasonably good condition (with some variation for specific vegetation communities), suggesting that these agreements are a broadly effective conservation mechanism.

Some interesting relationships between vegetation condition and landscape context (i.e. how the site being assessed sits within the broader landscape and the degree of connectivity or fragmentation around it) have also come to light. While threatened vegetation communities are often smaller and more isolated, the health, structure and composition of these communities is not significantly different to non-threatened communities. This implies that the retention and protection of smaller and more isolated areas of threatened vegetation can be a viable and worthwhile conservation approach despite the poorer landscape context in which they exist.

Furthermore, the lack of any significant relationship between the vegetation condition and the presence of threatened species habitat suggests that Part 5 Agreements can serve as useful instruments for maintaining significant ecological values even where the condition of a patch may be poor.

In addition to supporting improved decision-making at the site scale, the uptake and use of the TasVeg VCA method also has broader implications. The application of a consistent methodology means that each assessment contributes to a growing resource of baseline information on vegetation condition across the entire state. Over time this will provide invaluable insight into the health and diversity of native vegetation (as well as the impacts of threatening processes and weeds) across the state, giving a baseline of vegetation condition at a particular site at a given moment in time. In turn this will improve our ability to monitor and evaluate changes to natural resource condition, identify trends and adapt management actions accordingly.

Meanwhile, NRM South has been working closely with DPIPWE's Tasmanian Vegetation Monitoring and Mapping Program and Natural Values Atlas (NVA) teams to document potential improvements to the method, develop centralised data storage to support the TasVeg VCA methodology and encourage broader use of this state-approved method. Recent work has included a revision of the TasVeg Benchmarks (Version 3 released on the DPIPWE website in May 2015), increasing functionality of the NVA to accept direct entry of VCA information (coming soon), as well as building capacity for the application of VCAs by provision of accredited training courses.

For more information about the TasVeg VCA method, upcoming training opportunities or other general assistance contact NRM South using the details listed below or DPIPWE's Tasmanian Vegetation Monitoring and Mapping Program team through DPIPWE's website at http://dpipwe.tas.gov.au/conservation and search for "Vegetation Monitoring in Tasmania".

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