



New Leaf

A new way to conserve Tasmanian biodiversity

A narrow wombat track leads me through the bush and into a sphagnum garden of incredible colour. All shades of green are here – from the sphagnum spores to the richest greens of the shaded, wet *Scoparia* spikes. On this late spring day, the whole marsh is in flower and punctuated by little tadpole ponds. And everywhere there are the white- and red-lichen-covered ‘skulls’ – rocks that lend their name to this place. Skullbone Plains are soon to be the newest reserve of the not-for-profit community-based land conservation organisation, the Tasmanian Land Conservancy (TLC).

Skullbone Plains are close to the southern end of the world-renowned Overland Track and feature some of the world’s unique and most pristine areas. The plains share a 16-kilometre boundary with the Tasmanian Wilderness World

Heritage Area and, together with the adjoining land, they have the largest expanse of sphagnum moss beds in the state. This endangered moss has fascinating ‘standing wave’ structures not found anywhere else in the world. The area is also the only known habitat of the Clarence galaxias, (*Galaxias johnstoni*), an endangered fish.

This mosaic of wetlands, lakes and streams has a rich and diverse history. Since 1996 Gunns area forester Bruce Hay has been working at Skullbone Plains. As we talk it is obvious he has a deep love of the place.

He told me that the Big River Tribe used a spot on the plains as a transition camp: artefact scatters and remains of campfires are still evident. They represent perhaps 36,000 years of land use so it is no surprise the location is kept secret to prevent vandalism. He also told of the shepherds

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who, in the early 1800s, used to run sheep on the plains. Their hut chimneys can still be seen and these huts were visited more than once by bushrangers on the run from troopers.

Now Skullbone Plains are entering a new era. This soon to be flagship reserve is only one part of an audacious conservation project led by the TLC. Called the 'New Leaf Project' this is the largest private conservation agreement in Australia's history.

The TLC acquired a total of 27,390 ha of Tasmanian private land in October 2010 with the aid of a \$23 million gift and loan package from a group of Australian environmental philanthropists.

Leading those was Australian-born and, since 2006, Tasmanian-based businesswoman, Jan Cameron. The founder of Kathmandu donated \$4.7 million from her Elsie Cameron Foundation and lent \$13 million for the purchase of 94 native forest property titles previously owned by timber company Gunns Ltd. Rob Purves, founder of the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, and his sister, Sandy Purves, provided \$500,000 through their Purves Environmental Fund to make the purchase possible. Graeme Wood, co-founder of wotif.com has also made an extremely generous gift.

Before these philanthropists gifted and lent the TLC the funds to make this monumental purchase a reality, conservancy staff had to assess the value of the properties in the space of a few weeks. That involved talking to and meeting foresters, fishers and conservation experts throughout Tasmania to assess ecological and commercial values. The TLC compiled a report and presented it to Jan. The outcome was that she bought almost everything Gunns had for sale.

The areas that make up New Leaf are in four distinct geographical locations: the North-East, the Launceston region, the Lakes, and the Bronte districts – the latter the location of Skullbone Plains. They offer incredible diversity: ancient, old-growth forests; open moorland; upland watersheds; sub-alpine forests; wetlands; grasslands; and endangered sphagnum moss beds.

What makes New Leaf a monumental achievement is not only its size but also its approach to conservation in Tasmania. The project is a holistic way of approaching conservation. Protecting habitat offers a better chance of protecting individual species. Under New Leaf complete






ecosystems are protected providing space for movement of wide-ranging species. A critical part of this approach is community involvement.

It is community involvement that is the real success story of the Tasmanian Land Conservancy. The TLC has become one of the largest private freehold landowners in Tasmania, precisely because it is a community-based organisation. The TLC actively engages with farmers, conservationists, private landholders, the general public, business people and politicians – all sectors

of the community of all political persuasions. And without the weed eradication, fencing and asset inventory volunteers and the many people who have made gifts and pledges, the organisation would be unable to achieve its impressive conservation results. The organisation has a 10-year history of very profitable partnerships from the environment's *and* the community's point of view. (See Issues 38, 47 and 51.)

Now for \$735 can buy 'your very own hectare' of Skullbone Plains! And play a vital role in helping to protect this magnificent area for ever. Under the New Leaf agreement, the Tasmanian Land Conservancy will repay \$13 million over five years and aims to raise by 2012 a crucial \$3 million from the general public. For every hectare funded by supporters another two will be funded by Jan Cameron and Rob and Sandy Purves. 

Further information

www.tasland.org.au