

ReSource RICA tree-planting project turns 'ugly' hill in central Victoria into 'paradise' over 20 years

ABC Ballarat / By [Rhiannon Stevens](#)

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The ReSource RICA group has been revegetating farmland near Moonambel since 2001.

(Rhiannon Stevens)

In the late 1990s, eight friends went looking for the most degraded, clapped-out piece of farmland they could find.

Not to live on, or to make money from, but to transform into the bushland it once was.

The reality of climate change had entered the mainstream collective consciousness, and the government had recently limited the scope of the Native Title Act, which was born out of the historic Mabo decision that capsized the myth of terra nullius.

It was against this political background that Phil Meldrum and his friends dreamt of rehabilitating a patch of land.



the early years, the group built a small hut to use as a base on the degraded property. (Supplied: ReSource RICA)

"[Land] has been degraded, exploited and used economically, we just wanted to explore a different kind of relationship to country," Mr Meldrum said.

In 2001, after three years of searching, the friends pooled together \$19,000 and purchased 134 acres near Moonambel in central Victoria.

As soon as they saw the "ugly" hill, they knew they'd found what they were looking for.

"There were four living trees on it, lots of erosion and it was an eyesore in the community," Mr Meldrum said.

"It was calling out to us."

ul O'Connor and Phil Meldrum stand beside one of the first trees planted at the ReSource RICA site near Moonambe central Victoria. *(ABC News: Rhiannon Stevens)*

An unlikely paradise

The semi-arid landscape is harsh and the block they bought is steep and craggy.

But to those who have spent two decades nursing it back to life, this hill is beautiful.

Paul O'Connor calls it paradise.

"We understood that all country is sacred, but some of that has been desacralised. You can make something ugly," Mr O'Connor said.

"You go to Gariwerd/The Grampians or Wilson's Prom, and they're beautiful and you feel this connection, you feel something special. It must be that the whole country has that possibility, so we wanted to recreate that."

Source RICA had no vehicle access so water and tools were carried by hand up the hill. *(Supplied: ReSource RICA)*

The area had been cleared and used for sheep grazing, and while it wasn't great agricultural land, it was useful for what we wanted, Mr O'Connor said.

"There were a few thistles but there wasn't actually much weedy stuff."

Fortunately, remnant native grasses and a seed population remained in the soil, he said.

The group undertook tree planting and seed collecting courses and became a community association called ReSource RICA, an acronym for Rehabilitation, Indigenous, Community, Access.

Members often gathered for meals around campfires over the decades spent revegetating the Moonambel site. *(Supplied: ReSource RICA)*

Unfortunately, Mr Meldrum said with a laugh, the group was sometimes confused for a mining company, "but our name means to re-source — as in go back to the beginning".

Members said the group's ethos was about enabling access to the site, especially for traditional owners, and anyone was welcome to be involved or visit as long as they respected the place.

"Not everyone has invested financially in caring for the land, for a lot of people it has been sweat equity or intellectual equity," Kaz Neilson said.

"It's challenging societal notions of access to land and land ownership," Ms Neilson said.

The land is Dja Dja Wurrung country, and Ms Neilson said the group engaged with traditional owners and kept them informed on the rehabilitation progress.



View from ReSource RICA in 2024 towards the Kare Kare National Park. (ABC News: Rhiannon Stevens)

The flowers and birds return

Over the years the group has experimented with different planting techniques, where to source their plants from, and destroyed countless rabbit burrows to ward off the pests.

Occasionally they made mistakes, like the time they sourced the wrong trees and planted the invasive Sydney Wattle instead of the Silver Wattle.

After lugging thousands of plants and tools up the formidable hill, the group — which now boasts about 50 members and additional supporters — believes the land has reached a point where it can mostly look after itself.

Ecologist and member Sid Larwill said the reintroduction of an ecosystem had resulted in species the group had not replanted, like native orchids, reappearing.

e ReSource RICA community has grown from a founding group of eight to more than 50 members. (Supplied: Source RICA)

But work combating the erosion created by deforestation continues.

"We can't hope to recreate what was there [because some species have been lost forever], all we can do is have a red-hot go," Mr Larwill said.

He described planting days as an "exercise for the soul as [well as] for the land".

"For me, it's an antidote to the sometimes despair that I find I'm prone to as an ecologist seeing where biodiversity decline is going, and a warming climate, and the sense of helplessness to do much about it," he said.

rly tree plantings were successful because the group sourced good advice from local land management authorities. (Supplied: ReSource RICA)

Lying in a tent at the bottom of the hill listening to a chorus of birds sing in the dawn felt restorative, Mr Larwill said.

"To know that 25 years ago, it would have been a magpie and that's about it — it's a beautiful feeling," he said.

Mr O'Connor agreed.

"We have become so much wealthier, but not in any financial terms," he said.

Habitat forever

In 2018, the group achieved its goal of placing a Trust for Nature covenant over the land, ensuring it can never again be deforested or have stock run through it.

ReSource RICA is located near other bushland reserves and a national park, and Trust for Nature's north-west area manager David Dore said there were ecological benefits to the connectivity being built between existing native forests and the site.

"[Benefits] in terms of allowing genetic diversity and gene flow across the landscape and, of course, increasing habitat extent itself," he said.

Mr Dore said after years of hard work by the group, the ecosystem was starting to function as a whole.

View of the once-degraded hill at ReSource RICA in March 2024. (ABC News: Rhiannon Stevens)

"What has been really impressive has been their persistence in doing revegetation and replanting efforts, over a lot of years now," he said.

The group anticipated issues that have become more common two decades on, such as the need to protect restored revegetation, and engaging with traditional owners, Mr Dore said.

"Welcoming traditional owners onto the site is something that Trust for Nature is now writing into its standard deed of covenant ... and that's something [ReSource RICA] were very keen on early in the piece," he said.

Among landscape rehabilitation projects, Mr Dore sees the group's intergenerational nature and willingness for hard work as unique.

"Achieving that sort of buy-in from a broad community has been really remarkable," he said.

ul O'Connor and Phil Meldrum at the ReSource RICA hut, 22 years after first setting foot on the site. (*ABC News: iannon Stevens*)

For some of the children who grew up around ReSource RICA, their parents' project has become a blueprint they'd like to replicate.

Carina Griffin, 20, remembers hot dusty afternoons playing fortresses and knights in the gullies at ReSource RICA while the adults planted trees.

"When we got older, we understood that it was a really good thing that the adults were doing up on the hill, and ...[we thought] well, maybe we'll go join them," she said.

second generation is growing up around ReSource RICA, and some are now active members of the group. (*Suppliea Source RICA*)

Now, they'd like to find a new patch of land to begin another revegetation project.

"I think it's really something to say we turned this desolate plane from sheep farming and drought and deprivation into this beautiful, lush environment full of natural plants the way it's meant to be. I want to continue that," she said.

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