

OPINION: Campaign connects environmental dots

By BRIAN PURDUE Nov. 4, 2014, 9:30 p.m.



THE importance of biodiversity corridors, when considered in the light of society's environmental impacts, cannot be overstated.

As development and infrastructure continue to spread, the environment is being fragmented into pockets of unsustainable habitat for flora and fauna that are critical to the functioning of ecosystems.

Corridors of undeveloped and rehabilitated land have long been recognised as essential to retaining connectivity between isolated ecosystems. We allow the loss of these species and ecosystems at our peril.

Biodiversity corridors are found at a continental, regional and local scale; the 60-kilometre Stockton Bight to Watagans corridor is regional, passing through four local government areas.

This corridor had long been identified, and by good fortune had remained intact but unprotected. This was tenuous because of its location on the edge of rapidly expanding urban areas, which makes the land valuable.



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Fifteen years ago, this good fortune appeared to run out when a large housing subdivision was about to be approved on Tank Paddock at Minmi. This was the narrowest part of the corridor, and the last forested area on the edge of the internationally recognised Hexham Swamp. A five-year battle ensued, stopping the development, but 147 hectares were still unprotected.

It was then realised that the only way the whole corridor could survive long-term was to gain protection as a national park.

Buoyed by the Tank Paddock success, the Green Corridor campaign began in November 2003.

In June 2004, a presentation was made to State Parliament, and for the following two years the campaign went into top gear – including lobbying politicians and government departments, attending meetings and workshops, getting petitions signed, presenting to organisations and media, producing maps, display and advertising material, and walks in the corridors of Parliament House. The campaign won awards for this work and more.

In 2006 the state government finalised the Lower Hunter Regional Strategy, and the green corridor was made the cornerstone of the conservation component.

About 16,000 hectares were included in the national parks estate, and in July 2007 a dedication ceremony was held on Mt Sugarloaf, which was also transferred to national parks.

One large gap remained in the corridor, which was owned by Coal & Allied and included the Tank Paddock. This 2500-odd hectare parcel was also part of the regional strategy, with an offset agreement being signed that would see the land transferred to national parks. Little did we know this would take a further eight years.

So in total it took 15 years to save the Tank Paddock.

With the inclusion of 4000 hectares of existing national parks and other government-owned lands being transferred to national parks, the green corridor now comprises 23,000 hectares of national parks, with a further 1500 hectares being pledged.

The green corridor campaign has exceeded all of our expectations but there are still unresolved issues and key parts of what have been protected, including the Tank Paddock, are under threat from high-impact infrastructure.

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