

Efforts to engage the corporate world in conservation are on song

By Rod Myer

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DOUG Humann, chief executive of the Australian Bush Heritage Fund, is building new alliances with city businesspeople, the agricultural and wider community to boost the organisation's clout in protecting Australia's unique ecosystems.

Among those new relationships are some with high-profile members of the business community who can give backing themselves as well as providing Humann with forums to reach new supporters.

Flight Centre chief executive Graham Turner is one business leader with a strong relationship with Bush Heritage. "I've been involved for five or six years and you could say I'm both a donor and an ambassador," Turner says. "What they do is pretty unique."

Investment banker with the Caliburn Partnership, Simon Mordant, another supporter, describes himself as a "new Australian from London" who "never had a connection with the bush". Spending time in the country in recent years resulted in a growing consciousness of the importance of conservation and "the impact of man and animals on the environment started to concern me".

After some investigation of the fund, Mordant was impressed by the way it was doing a "challenging job". He became a supporter and spent a weekend on the fund's Canarvon property in central Queensland with his family, an experience he describes as seminal.

Formed by Greens senator Bob Brown in 1990, when he donated a \$50,000 environmental prize to back it, the fund has since spent \$7 million buying 21 properties across Australia to preserve unique habitats and ecosystems. Three more contracts are now under negotiation and Humann has launched a campaign to raise another \$20 million in three years. The fund's most recent purchase was the 233,000-hectare Cravens Peak property, west of Boulia in Queensland's Channel Country. It covers a range of ecosystems, from the Simpson Desert to rocky ranges and grassy plains. The fund is in the early stages of implementing its conservation plan.

Turner says his interest in the bush is partly fired by his boyhood experiences on a Queensland apple orchard as well as an understanding that "there's only a short time left to preserve unique ecosystems, especially in accessible areas."

Humann says the fund's long-term goal is to buy more property but "it's not always about land ownership, it's about how we work on the land with other people to get the outcomes we are seeking". His "beyond the boundaries" strategy reflects that aim and involves tie-ups with neighbours and local communities to get a stake in the land and influence outcomes for conservation and natural systems.

The most advanced formal relationship at this stage is a two-year tie-up with the Indigenous Land Corporation. "We have people on the ground who can work with them to identify properties. We're also working with them on conservation management of properties they already own," he says.

The fund is also developing partnerships with pastoralists, including major corporate landowners such as Kidman and the Australian Agricultural Group. "We own properties and work in the same landscapes they do. They have commercial responsibilities but they also have great concern with sustaining natural systems."

The fund is working with pastoralists already to identify places of conservation value, especially where both have holdings in the same drainage basin. "We are looking at ways we can work together for conservation across the whole landscape," Humann says.

Conservation of landscapes demands a long-term effort, and coming up with the funds to make purchases is only the beginning. After purchase, a reserve management plan and a business plan are developed and a reserve management team is employed, generally a couple. They implement initial works like feral animal and plant pest control, and an appropriate fire regime to "maintain biodiversity and protect property and life", Humann says.

"We try to set properties up with good infrastructure so in the first five years there is spending to provide a power source, equipment and vehicles. Then spending is wound back gradually," he says.

Nonetheless, the commitment totals \$2.09 million a year and requires continual

fund-raising. In some areas low-impact tourism is being examined to help provide income and allow the public access to the land.

Humann's partnerships program is also looking to expand relationships with research and educational institutions already conducting research on some fund reserves.

Volunteer labour already has a big role in maintenance and conservation works. At the moment volunteers, generally retired people in their 50s and 60s, travel to reserves and work with managers for between one and four weeks, helping with a vast range of tasks involving labouring and skilled work. "We hope to expand volunteering to the point we can wind back paid staff on some reserves," Humann says.

Volunteers make an important contribution. One couple returned to a reserve several times to carry out botanical surveys and another used two visits to build a feral-proof fence around a spring in central Queensland. "As a result of their labours, the water changes colour, the pigs are out of the stream and they can see an immediate effect," he says.

The Federal Government has supported the fund, providing about 10 per cent of the money invested in land through its Natural Heritage Trust. This includes a \$1.89 million grant last year to buy Cravens Peak.

The fund has a longstanding tax-deductibility status for donations but this has been expanded in recent years. Now gifts of property such as shares and rural properties are tax deductible and the tax benefit can be spread over five years if the donor requires it.

The 53-year-old US organisation, The Nature Conservancy, which has provided a model for the fund, has adopted a global strategy that allows it to support overseas conservation groups

financially and invest directly itself. Humann has just returned from two weeks in the US where he found considerable support among TNC members and believes this will lead to investment flows. Already TNC has invested in some of the fund's projects.