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Environmental Visionary Challenges Landcare

Why is David Holmgren, a well-known environmentalist and co-originator of the Permaculture concept¹ angry about local stream restoration programs? He is challenging those paid to manage our streams, locally or Statewide, to a public debate on the willow destruction programs.

Holmgren believes taxpayer's money has been used to degrade streams in the name of ecological restoration for many years, but it is only now that this twisted form of "nativist" environment ideology has arrived in Daylesford and Hepburn on a large scale. Major new works by excavators at the Breakneck Gorge confluence of Spring and Wombat Creeks are destroying sites of high scientific and community value and follow similar destruction below Excelsior Bridge, Shepherds Flat and at other localities in the Hepburn Shire.

If forest logging contractors were to disturb stream banks in this way, they would be banned from the forest. But this issue is not about reckless contractors. It is the advocates and bureaucrats trained in Natural Resource Management who need to be held accountable for this misuse of taxpayer's money. These publicly funded willow destruction programs are proceeding without having to undergo any independent environmental impact assessment or significant monitoring or evaluation of the results. Holmgren says they are driven by a "nativist" ideology that sees the presence of non-native species as both the primary indicator and cause of land degradation. "It is hard to resist the nativist ideology which has progressively captured the biodiversity conservation agenda over recent decades".

Facts about willows such as them being the most effective streamside trees in controlling erosion and absorbing sediment and nutrients are ignored. The shading out of blackberries to create a low fire hazard shaded corridor that is an excellent barrier to grass and even forest fire is ignored. The value of willows for drought livestock fodder and potential for management to gain even greater productive and ecological values are ignored. The history of quiet unfunded management work by community volunteers in Spring Ck over two decades and offers of consultancy input to develop win-win funded management of willows have been ignored. The role of these willow forests in slowing and filtering the increasing urban storm water from Hepburn and Daylesford is ignored. The principles of catchment management, water sensitive urban design and the precautionary principle have all been ignored.

Local landcare groups have been persuaded by evangelistic "experts", a flow of glossy propaganda combined with funding offers and contractors with accelerating capacity and precision in stream makeovers.

The burning of the willow debris piles leaves soluble ash to be washed back into streams while the decay of the poisoned willow stumps releases phosphorus and sediment back into the water previously trapped in the massive rootmats. The misguided idea that replanting with wattle and gum trees, more lashings of herbicide and fencing off the stream corridor recreates a functional ecosystem is irresponsible nonsense which inevitably results in reinvasion by blackberries and a

¹ See website www.holmgren.com.au

huge increase in fire hazard as these dense unmanaged trees strands mature in their second decade.

It is interesting that this new work is on show for the statewide gathering of the Victorian Landcare Network this week at Bellinzona Grange. This closed shop forum hosted by the local instigators of these programs from the North Central Catchment Management Authority will no doubt provide reinforcement to the fervent belief that this is “environmental best practice”.

This affront to common sense and scientific evidence would not be so bad if it were simply a farmer or two experimenting with their section of streamside. The fact that public money is wasted to massively damage catchment and ecological values and that it is promoted as landcare makes a mockery of the work of the visionary farmers and environmentalists who founded the Landcare movement in central Victoria 25 years ago.

During the 1990's the Spring Creek willow forest was extensively studied and managed by an informal group of local residents. Permaculture Design Courses and guided tours run by Holmgren Design Services attracted many visitors to the forest². In 1997 the Creswick Landcare Information Centre hosted a debate in the Daylesford Town Hall between Geoff Carr³ and David Holmgren⁴ about the more general issue of how to manage naturalised vegetation. It is ironic that Geoff Carr dismissed streamside revegetation programs (in highly modified environments) as useless in conserving indigenous biodiversity while David spoke of practical management for multiple values. In 1998 a study⁵ by local ecologist Kale Sniderman showed how these willow forests are evolving greater ecological complexity with a succession to sycamore and other deciduous trees. In 1999 the results of Michael Wilson's PhD research⁶ reinforced and quantified observations by local residents of the catchment and ecological values of these willow forests. More locals began to make use of the tracks which have been maintained over the years at no cost to the taxpayer. This latest desecration on the edge of this valuable research site rings alarm bells for many who have spent time track making, tree planting or simply enjoying this little known part of the Hepburn Regional Park.

To put the ideology behind this assault to the test, David Holmgren offers a challenge to any of those paid to manage our streams, locally or State-wide, to a public debate on the willow destruction programs, in the Daylesford Town Hall or other appropriate venue. Tours of the willow forest and its desecration for the media and interested parties can be arranged.

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² <http://www.holmgren.com.au/html/CoursesTours/coursesandtours.html>

³ leading advocate of the threats from so called environmental weeds

⁴ co-originator of the permaculture concept and leading advocate of management rather than destruction of naturalised vegetation. See www.holmgren.com.au

⁵ Sniderman, J. M. (Kale) Successional Dynamics In A Mixed Native/Introduced Riparian Forest In Central Victoria Uni of Ballarat 1998

⁶ Wilson, Michael Post gold rush Stream regeneration: implications for managing exotic and native vegetation Centre for Environmental Management, University of Ballarat (presented at the Second Australian Stream Management Conference in February 1999)