How and why community-based environmental groups are integral to recovering and protecting threatened plant species

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Background

For decades, environmental groups have been integral to recovering threatened plants. This paper explores this role, using this analysis to describe some of the key activities of the Queensland Threatened Plant Network (QTPN). The QTPN is a collaborative project established by the Queensland Government and the Australian Network for Plant Conservation (ANPC) that provides support to stakeholders contributing to threatened plant recovery in Queensland. The Network actively facilitates the formation of partnerships amongst interested parties working to conserve Queensland's threatened flora. QTPN seeks to elevate the vital role that these groups play in the protection and conservation of some of the rarest flora in Queensland.

Working with community-based environmental groups involves many considerations, some of which include:

- Understanding the nature of the group (who are the decision makers, what are their major issues, what is their current and potential capacity).
- Negotiating and gaining entry (moving from outside the group to inside, a process that takes time because it is reliant on trust and mutual respect).
- Identifying official and unofficial power (many groups have substantial unofficial power in the communities that they operate, but few have official power).
- Building relationships and finding convergence (aligned opportunities).
- Acting locally and thinking regionally.
- Making time for innovation and experimentation, and avoiding minefields.

So with this in mind, what do community-based environmental groups bring to the conservation table?

1. Connection to place: They are connected to, and embedded within, their local community, and they have ownership of what happens locally. They bring a local perspective to threatened plant conservation that is uniquely informed by often a lifetime of living locally and dealing with local issues, species and habitats.
2. They nurture and sustain relationships within their community: that is, they know and work with local land managers and landholders, Traditional Owners, community leaders and philanthropists; they create community education opportunities in schools, access to local community events and local social media groups; and they can call upon these relationships to undertake conservation works. In this regard they are able to create a legacy of engagement and on-ground works that often spans decades. They are also able to represent, include and balance the needs of sectorial interests.
3. They are there for the long-term (they don't come and go like project managers).
4. They provide sustained voluntary input into projects over long periods of time (e.g. the Stanthorpe Rare Wildflower Consortium (SRWC) initiated in 2004, and Trees for the Evelyn and Atherton Tablelands which started over 40 years ago).
5. They provide the perfect vehicle to conduct long-term monitoring of the trajectory of threatened plant populations (because they are on site and live locally).
6. They bring substantial local knowledge to the creation and implementation of management actions designed to recover threatened flora populations (such as changes in flowering and fruiting times, plant responses to fire, observations of pollinating species, or changes in grazing pressure).
7. They bring a broad range of skills required to co-design and implement recovery plans. I have worked with community-based environmental groups whose members are skilled in advocacy, small group facilitation, land management, publishing field guides, social media, plant identification, ecology and fire management.

What do community-based environmental groups need?

In summary, community-based environmental groups provide the perfect conduit to develop and implement on-ground programs to conserve our rarest plants. So, what do they need to get the job done?

1. Training (especially training that underpins and strengthens their capacity to implement recovery actions that are fundamental to conserving threatened plants, e.g. Figure 1).
2. Occasional guidance and direction (when QTPN is invited to provide this; and when community groups are ready to receive it).
3. An opportunity to contribute to a wider goal (to make a difference, to do something meaningful, to contribute to a wider cause).
4. To see their efforts recognised (to be valued, and taken seriously, as partners in the conservation effort).
5. Access to resources including the latest conservation science and practice.
6. Access to information including expert information on species ecology, taxonomy, ecological restoration, spatial records of threatened species, temporal records of disturbance events such as wildfire, and training facilitators.
7. Renewal, especially new members (to ensure that community-based environmental groups are there for the long-term).
8. Time: community-based environmental groups are made up of volunteers, often retired or working full-time, and don't operate under the same timeframes as governments or NGOs.

How does QTPN meet these needs?

Many of the above eight needs provide important entry and connection points for the QTPN, contributing to what it does, and how it can bring about a coordinated response to threatened plant conservation. For example:

1. Currently the QTPN provides training in threatened flora surveys, negotiating the permitting process and plant identification. Recently the QTPN worked with Native Plants Capricornia to provide a Survey Training workshop to interested groups in the Rockhampton region. Participants got to connect with the Capricorn Caves and their conservation work on the rare fern *Tectaria devexa* and then get out in the field and expand the number of known individuals of an undescribed *Comesperma* species. While the mainstay of these workshops is skilling up participants, they are a real opportunity for community groups to connect with new members in their local community. Training is also being tailored to the needs of organisations to implement specific recovery action plans.
2. Recognising effort: many threatened flora species in Queensland are under-surveyed. In addition, baseline data on population size and trajectory is fundamental to being able to implement strategic recovery actions for select species. A core component of the QTPN's activities is to organise and coordinate survey effort that provides information on data deficient species, new threatened flora populations and threat-based information that can be used to improve and refine actions in Recovery Plans. For example, in July 2024 the QTPN worked with the SRWC and Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service to resurvey the listed *Phebalium glandulosum* subsp. *eglandulosum* (Figure 2) that was thought to be extinct in Queensland until 2009.

Figure 1. Attendees at the Currumbin Flora Survey Training workshop on the Gold Coast in late 2024. Photo: Paul Donatiu

Almost 1000 plants were found, providing critical information for the Conservation Assessment Method (CAM) assessment of this species.

3. Providing access to resources: for example, the QTPN is currently working with Quandamooka Yoolooburrabee Aboriginal Corporation on Minjerribah (North Stradbroke Island) to develop a Recovery Plan for the critically endangered Swamp Daisy (*Olearia hygrophila*, Figure 3), a species endemic to the Island with <10 individuals remaining. The Swamp Daisy faces a myriad of threats, but by working in collaboration with local Traditional Owners, the QTPN can integrate the historical hydrological, fire management and ecological studies that are key to addressing these threats.
4. Providing access to information: the QTPN is currently working with the Australian Tropical Herbarium to develop a Recovery Plan for Tassel Ferns found in North Queensland. Many of these species are so rare that the managers responsible for looking after their habitats often know little about them.

What are the implications for the growth and expansion of the QTPN, and other like-minded community groups?

Firstly, effective communication and extension support is the key to lasting relationships and cooperation. As an absolute minimum, this needs to be sustained for the same periods of time that we set for implementing recovery action plans. Secondly, you cannot fast track the development of environmental consciousness. Yes, groups like the SRWC are a great model for recovery efforts in other locations, but assessing where groups are at in terms of their preparedness to take on new activities or roles is critical. Thirdly, developing a connection to people and place is equally important. For me, connection is measured by honesty, practical support, the sharing of expertise, and a sensitivity to the community's specific conservation concerns. And finally, maintaining community ownership of conservation outcomes is critical, not just for preserving the longevity of these outcomes, but as a basis for developing activities that are consistently seen as relevant and beneficial locally.

To find out more on the QTPN, please go to https://www.anpc.asn.au/queensland-threatened-plant-network/

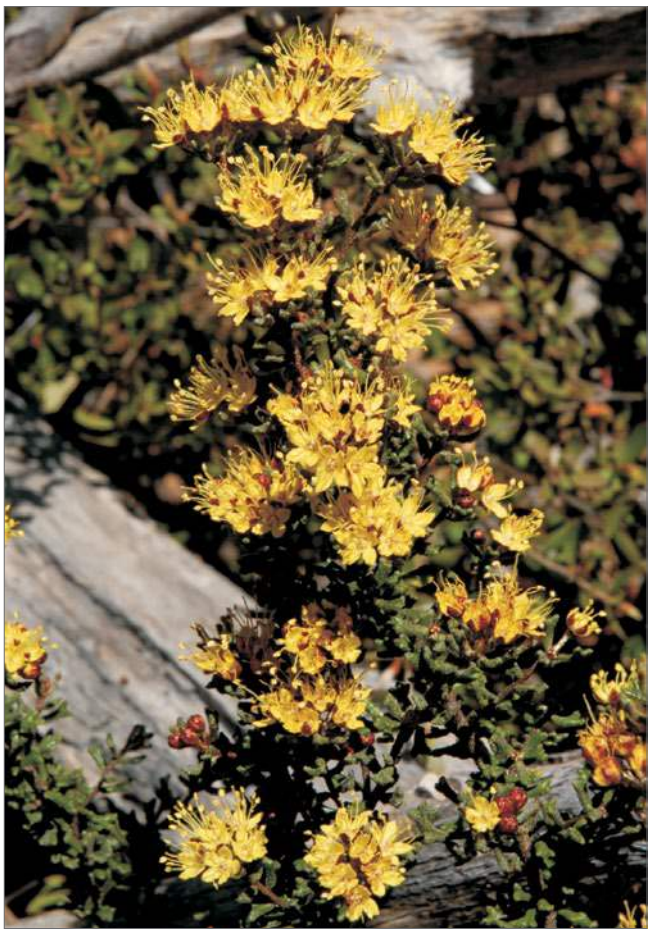

Figure 2. *Phebalium glandulosum* subsp. *eglandulosum* in flower: originally thought extinct in Queensland, this species was rediscovered by an amateur botanist in 2009 and is now the subject of much interest by the Stanthorpe Rare Wildflower Consortium. Almost 1000 individuals can be found in the northern parts of Girraween National Park. Photo: Paul Donatiu

Figure 3. The flowers of *Olearia hygrophila*, a critically endangered species found only on Minjerribah (North Stradbroke Island) in Southeast Queensland. Photo: Paul Donatiu