

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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**Queensland Parliament Committees
Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland**

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Dear Sir / Madam.

I was previously an active volunteer for Logan City Council, Cornubia Forest Reserve Bushcare Group.

I had been an active member for a number of years until I withdrew as a volunteer to Logan City Council Bushcare in April 2024.

The following outlines how the Bushcare Group was when I joined as an active volunteer, and the changes that occurred from mid 2023, which caused me to eventually withdraw as a volunteer with the group.

I hope that the following observations assist in providing insight into some areas that motivates an individual to volunteer and, importantly, continue to volunteer.

1. Background – when I became a volunteer

The work I did as an individual volunteer with the Bushcare Group was more than attending the planned monthly group projects. The dynamic of the group and the enthusiasm of the team members and team leader, when I joined, encouraged that additional commitment.

The Bushcare Group volunteer members identified a major problem with large infestations of the invasive weed *Hypoestes phyllostachya*. The extent and development of these infestations was significant and larger could managed by Bushcare Group volunteers alone. The weed was rapidly choking out large areas of natural vegetation and risking the work that we were doing with site rehabilitation. It was decided that we would put a detailed package together to present to the Logan City Council officers, responsible for coordination and support of our Bushcare Group, toward establishing a united and coordinated effort between the Bushcare Group, Council and Council contractors to the benefit of the natural environment of the Cornubia Forest Reserve.

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As a result, in addition to the monthly group projects (weeding, site rehabilitation and planting), I undertook a detailed survey and mapping of the infestation of the weed *Hypoestes phyllostachya* throughout reserve. In conjunction with the survey and to assist any future control project, infestations were clearly marked on site. The detailed maps and survey results, indicating the location, size and severity of infestations, were provided to council and their contractors for a potential staged control program.

With a number of other bushcare volunteers, we undertook trials in various control measures (excluding spraying) for this specific weed. These trials were coordinated and led by an experienced botanist who was our team leader and fellow volunteer in the Bushcare Group.

After liaison with the council officers responsible at the time, the weed control programs were planned in four (4) stages, over a number of years, for budget reasons. Detailed maps and marked sites were prepared for each stage by a number of our Bushcare volunteers.

The Stage 1 control program was initiated with cooperation between the volunteers of Cornubia Forest Reserve Bushcare Group, Logan City Council and then council contractors (experienced). Stage 1 was determined by the Bushcare Group as upstream along the creek so as to control the risk of seed dispersal and re-infestation as the project progressively moved downstream. Stage 1 and Stage 2 were successfully completed, with good cooperation between the Bushcare volunteers, the Council officers current at that time and the Council (weed management) contractors engaged at that time for the site. Overall the process was a very positive experience for all those concerned and we achieved the desired result.

After the planned major coordinated control measures for *Hypoestes phyllostachya* were completed in Stages 1 & 2, all that would be required to maintain control would be visual inspection a few times a year and manual removal of any minor isolated regrowth – something within the capability of the Bushcare Group to manage.

The above was a significant amount of work by our volunteer team and was additional to the normal council coordinated monthly volunteer program (weeding, site restoration, planting etc). It was an indicator of the strength of commitment and enthusiasm of the volunteers in our group.

Further to the weed control project for *Hypoestes phyllostachya*, a group of our Bushcare Group volunteers, also undertook regular manual watering of newly planted areas throughout the drier months and when the plantings appeared

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stressed. This was willingly done to supplement the less frequent watering undertaken by Council and was an activity outside the normal scheduled Bushcare Group projects. This activity would be every 2-3 weeks in drier periods, on weekdays and utilised wheeled trolleys loaded with 20 litre buckets to transport up to 80 litres of water to various sites – with all equipment purchased by the volunteers themselves.

The Cornubia Forest Reserve Bushcare Group was lucky to have an associate professor in Botany from Griffith University as a volunteer and our team leader. Our botanist volunteer provided extensive technical knowledge in selection of the areas requiring rehabilitation and prepared detailed planting lists and site preparation instructions specifically related to the botanical characteristics and requirements of each site. She was also team leader and every monthly meeting and planting session also became an informal lesson in plant/weed identification and botanical information for any interested participants. This additional knowledge brought greater enthusiasm and common focus, particularly with younger volunteers and the children of parent volunteers also joining our group.

So for years after I first joined Cornubia Forest Reserve Bushcare Group, we were a very happy, harmonious, inclusive and successful team of older people, middle aged people, parents and teenage children.

The positive result could be seen in the success we had with our rehabilitation projects and plantings. These provided a lasting legacy which brought a sense of achievement to the members of our volunteer group and fostered our enthusiasm to continue.

The volunteer members of our Bushcare Group were predominantly local, with many members walking through the reserve track most days. Many had a high level of personal ownership and responsibility, as individuals, for the work and projects undertaken as part of Bushcare as well as the health of the environment within the reserve.

At this stage all our volunteers had a sense of worth, a sense of achievement, and the understanding that their individual knowledge, skills, initiatives and work were recognised and appreciated by other volunteer members and the Logan City Council officers involved.

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2. Background – when it changed

As we moved through 2023, the approach and attitude of some new Logan City Council officers, responsible for coordinating the Cornubia Forest Reserve Bushcare Group, changed significantly.

As a Bushcare Group, we, and council, were lucky to have the support and active involvement of a very experienced botanist as a volunteer and team leader. In the early stages of my time with the Bushcare Group, this was seen as a real benefit by ALL. The positive dynamic we had within the group encouraged the group to continue our work.

However, with the change in council officers came different personalities and a reduction in the individual experience and knowledge of those same officers. Normally, when working with an existing group, particularly one that had some very experienced people within it, you would not expect this to be any issue at all, as effective communication and cooperation would continue to provide a positive volunteer environment.

Unfortunately this was not to be the case and the communication and attitude of council officers was one focused on continually asserting their authority in any decision, rather than listen to or acknowledge the experience and contribution of the Bushcare Group volunteers.

As a result, a volunteer team comprising of senior and experienced botanist, PHDs, engineers, educators, managers, etc, (some of whom were active in the reserve since its establishment), were essentially told that they are required to do as they are directed by council officers without question or comment.

The tone of council communication with members of a volunteer group, both written and verbal, degenerated into one which was often authoritarian, aggressive and had moved toward using bluff, bluster and falsehood as tools in communication with valued group members.

Active experienced long term volunteer members, including the botanist, appeared to be treated with contempt, with their contribution often devalued or disregarded. It was as though the level of knowledge of the experienced volunteers was identified as a direct threat to the authority of the less experienced and less knowledgeable council officers that were now responsible for coordination of the group.

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The progressive staged weed control program for *Hypoestes phyllostachya*, for which so much work had gone into, was discontinued.

Planting decisions made in full liaison with previous council representatives, and in cases undertaken with their direct involvement, were reversed.

For 8-10 months, from mid 2023, the council maintenance of any reasonable weed control program, utilising experienced and knowledgeable weed management contractors, essentially ceased. Less knowledgeable contractors were engaged with a significantly abbreviated scope. Critically for our volunteer group, advice and discussion of these decisions, and the scope of these changes, was withheld from communication with the Cornubia Forest Reserve Bushcare Group. Our volunteer group only saw their earlier good work with invasive weed control programs rapidly deteriorate.

One most unfortunate result of this failure of effective communication by council representatives, was a marked increase in the number of complaints raised for issues observed within the reserve (invasive weeds, poor plant identification and destruction of native flora by less knowledgeable and less experienced contractors, etc). These issues were mainly identified and reported by Bushcare Group members and the number increased proportionally with the deterioration of the reserve through that period. In response to these complaints, council officers reacted by notching up their authoritarian approach against those individual Bushcare Group members who, as spokesperson for many group members, were directly expressing concern as to the deterioration and degeneration of all that work previously undertaken by the group.

Rather than listen, every effort appeared to be made to exclude those volunteers who reported the concerns of many of the active volunteer members of our Bushcare Group. The attempts at reasonable discussion between Council officers and the volunteer members was proceeded by the council representative reading out prepared statements reinforcing the authority of council officers. The input from the concerned volunteers was barely listened to and not actively considered as the council officers purpose remained primarily focused on asserting their authority, as Council officers.

The authoritarian position of Council officers, responsible for managing volunteer teams, even extended to threats to ban specific Bushcare volunteers from access to and use of the walking paths within the Cornubia Forest Reserve for durations of three (3) months (including the threat to mobilise council rangers to enforce that ban on individuals – including people whose names are on a plaque commemorating the work they did to establish the reserve in the first place).

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Volunteers were also advised that, despite being local residents and rate payers, we were forbidden, as Bushcare volunteers, to communicate any concerns to our local elected representative (councillor) and could only communicate with the Council officers through a standard complaint process.

The consequence of the above change in working approach by Council officers was that a number of active and experienced volunteers withdrew as volunteers of the Cornubia Forest Reserve Bushcare Group.

The prime motivation to becoming and remaining a volunteer is the personal satisfaction that you attain from the feeling that you are doing some good, achieving something worthwhile, and that your contribution, skills, experience, knowledge and effort are treated with a little respect.

Motivated and enthusiastic volunteers in a team encourage new volunteers to join.

3. Personal Observations

- Attracting and maintaining volunteers in today's environment is difficult enough, with the progressive change in focus of people toward personal endeavours, individual success and the wellbeing of their own families. We are paying high tax and high council rates, so there is an expectation the work should be done by others paid to do it, so why volunteer.
- It is more important than ever for those that are prepared to volunteer, for them to feel that their volunteer work is actively contributing to something worthwhile and their experience, knowledge and effort is acknowledged with respect. This is much more than a Council planned "volunteers lunch", it is how they, as volunteers, are treated throughout their full volunteer experience, particularly in relation to the quality of communication and interaction between the volunteer and coordinating staff, such as Council officers etc. The volunteers don't have to be there – in our society we are working in the upper levels of "Maslow's Hierarchy Of Needs", where personal satisfaction and achievement are primary drivers. If you want volunteers, its these drivers that need to be satisfied.
- Enthusiasm and motivation of individual volunteer members in a group is catching – an enthusiastic, inclusive, supporting and happy group will attract and retain volunteers. New and prospective volunteers will identify a social value to being part of that group as well as the feeling that they are doing something worthwhile as a volunteer.

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- I realised with the experience I had as a volunteer with the Cornubia Forest Reserve Bushcare Group that the strength, development, harmony and longevity of a volunteer group, can be disrupted easily through the dynamic of the individual personalities of those with authority.

Personalities are complex – lack of confidence, ambition, work security, ego, etc, can impact how a person in authority manages a team. It is further complicated when that team includes volunteers that have significant experience and where many volunteers have worked in senior positions through their working life, bringing with them a lot of knowledge and experience.

- An observation is that there seems to be little work done within local government and government bodies, to effectively train and support those government staff responsible to supervise and coordinate volunteer programs, in the actual management of the volunteers themselves.

A failure to provide this sort of training and support (or at least to identify those not suited to management of volunteers), results in some coordinators potentially focusing on their authority while discouraging contribution from experienced volunteers, due to a lack of confidence and/or lack of knowledge.

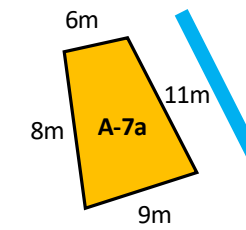
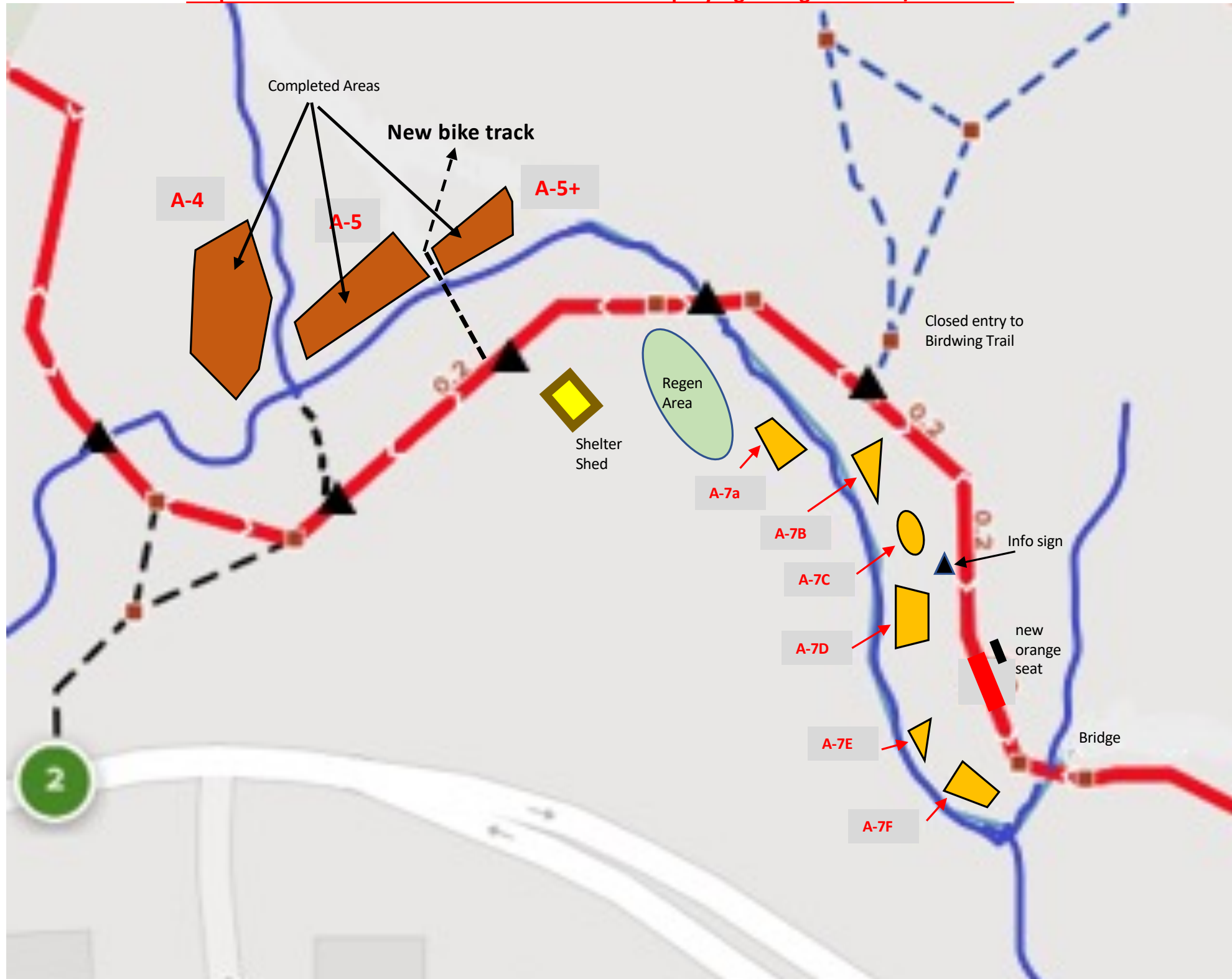
Training and support (or more effective vetting of an organisations paid officers selected for coordination of volunteer teams) would result in a volunteer group management environment where volunteers could feel included, appreciated and that their contribution of value.

My recent personal experience means that I will be very reluctant to volunteer for any local council initiative again.

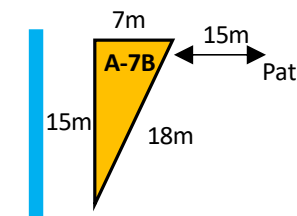
I hope that the above is of assistance.

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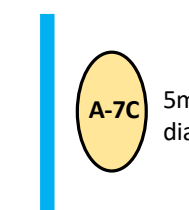
Map of Marked Out Areas of Pink Polka Dot for Spraying – Stage 2 - Nov / Dec 2022



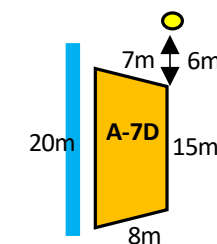
A-7A. Marked 4 corners with single strip pink tape + orange spike markers. Access is through the fenced planted area behind the shelter. 25m from bridge and across creek from the planted “informal bike jump” on path. Was partially hand weeded Oct 22.



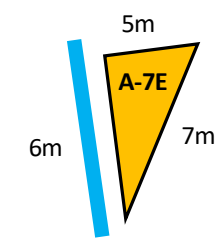
A-7B. Marked 4 corners with pink tape + orange spike markers. Moderate density. Located 15m in from path about half way between “closed bike entry” and info sign. Pink indicator marker on tree.



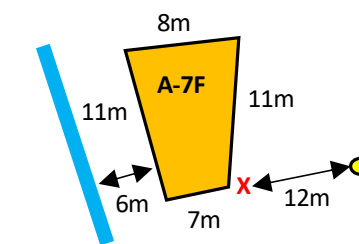
A-7C. Marked corners with pink tape + orange spike markers. This area is small with scattered pink polka dot. 10m in from path along the creek bank. Located about 7m west of the info sign. My be suited to manual weeding by BC volunteers.



A-7D. Marked 4 corners with strip pink tape + orange spike markers. Extensive area is located right on the creek bank. Pink marker is 6m from the tree with the insect box near the info sign.



A-7E. Marked 3 corners with pink tape. Pink ID marker is on dead tree 10m in from path and 20m east from the new orange seat. The infested area is along the creek bank between clumps of wild ginger.



A-7F. Marked 4 corners with single strip pink tape. ‘X’ is about 10-12m in from the yellow reflect post on west of bridge and infested area is behind a large patch of wild ginger. The patch is about 6m in from creek. Pink ID marker on Brushbox 5m in from path.