

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Submitted by:	Margaret Greenway
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Queensland Parliament Committees Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland

I was an active volunteer with Cornubia Forest Park Bushcare Group- Logan City Council for 7 years and Team Leader for the latter 5 years until I was coerced to resign by the Council's Natural Areas Coordinator (Parks Branch) in March 2024.

This is my story.

I was a university academic for 30 years in environmental engineering and have always been a keen botanist. After my retirement I joined Cornubia Forest Park Bushcare Group in 2017. There were only 3 volunteers including me! In 2019 I took over as Team Leader. Volunteer numbers increased to 10 regulars (up to 20 at times). This was because I was proactive in promoting the activities of the Bushcare group. I would place signs in the park along the walkway advertising the next 'Working Bee'-Date, Time, Activity. Most of the volunteers were local residents who enjoyed the forested park and walkways, so were keen to assist with revegetation and weeding. Our local Councillor (elected member) also joined the group and was instrumental in installing a large shelter with seats and tables in an open grassed section of the park. Another local had a mobile coffee van and his contribution was to provide us all with hot beverages for morning tea. Others brought along cakes and biscuits. Our working bees were held once a month for 2 hours.

As a botanist with good local knowledge of the forest ecology and plant communities I was able to provide guidance on plant identification, planting lists for revegetation, planting strategies/ techniques, weeding identification and removal strategies/techniques.

Our group of volunteers were passionate about our bush care efforts. We had a sense of worth, a sense of achievement, we had ownership. We had a harmonious and productive few years. In 2022 we revegetated 7 sites and planted 700 trees.

Importantly, our bush care efforts were appreciated by other public users of the park. The then Parks Management Team also appreciated the knowledge and contributions made by me and the other volunteers.

Then in 2023 things changed.

Firstly: Logan City Council's Parks Management Team changed. The Parks Communities BushCare Officer resigned (she would not give us the reason- probably sworn to confidentiality by Logan City Council). She was a mature aged lady and had worked within the Parks Management Team for some 15 years. She had always been highly supportive of Cornubia Forest Park Bushcare Group, she respected everyone and appreciated the diverse expertise and any advice that we had to offer. She was well regarded by the group. She was replaced by a young 'know -it -all' male (who didn't know it all). The new officer didn't need my advice as a knowledgeable local botanist nor the advice of anyone else in the group.

Secondly: Logan City Council's externally paid Contractors for vegetation management within the park changed. The previous contractors had a good knowledge of plant identification, were passionate about their work and had ownership for Cornubia Forest Park. They did an amazing job of weed management. The newly appointed contractors had none of these attributes. They did not carry out routine maintenance for several months. Weeds grew prolifically. I made a complaint to Council (the new Parks Communities Officer, then to the Natural Areas Coordinator) about this lack of vegetation management by the contractors but never got a reply. Nor was there any maintenance action.

I then forwarded my complaint to our local Councillor (also a Bushcare volunteer) to follow up for me/us on this lack of maintenance issue. Next, and very unexpectedly, I was severely reprimanded by the Natural Areas Coordinator (Parks Branch), both verbally and in writing. I was told that as a volunteer under Council's 'Code of Conduct' I was NOT allowed to contact our Councillor.

Due to the wet weather exotic grasses and weeds grew prolifically. Then, other users of the forest park complained to Council about overgrowth along the walkway. Suddenly there was a response from Council !!! The new Parks Communities Officer informed the Bushcare Group that Council would reinstate the mowing of Parkview path network and that all vegetation 1m either side of the path (including the native grasses and blue wandering jew) will be mown on a regular schedule effective immediately. He also told us that all our previous revegetation plantings within 1m of the path would also be removed, even though these plantings had been approved by the previous Parks Communities Officer. We (the bushcare volunteers) were shocked by this decision of Council Parks management.

Again, I protested, and made a formal complaint after all I/we (the Bushcare Group) had spent the past 5 years revegetating these areas.

Another reprimand and chastising email from Council Parks Branch management. **I then RESIGNED as a volunteer.**

Parks Branch management, in particular the new officer/s appeared to show little regard for my previous revegetation efforts, my past team leadership, my extensive botanical knowledge of the area.

This is NOT how to treat volunteers

Those responsible in an organisation for coordinating volunteers eg Council officers, must have the personality to encourage and praise the efforts of volunteers, rather than focus on their own authoritarianism.

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