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MEDIA RELEASE

GREENING AUSTRALIA RECOGNISED FOR PIONEERING BIODIVERSITY PROGRAM ***Awarded for development of Australia's largest Environmental Restoration Project***

Greening Australia, as part of a group of community and environment organizations, has been awarded the 2008 Landcare Australia Nature Conservation Award for Project Hindmarsh, a pioneering biodiversity program in Victoria that has seen the successful planting of more than 1.5 million trees.

One of the biggest environmental restoration programs ever tackled in Australia, Project Hindmarsh began in 1998 as a hugely ambitious, large scale revegetation project, aimed at linking the Big and Little Desert National Parks in southwest Victoria through a network of roadside reserves.

The project's original target was to replant 100 kilometres of native trees and shrubs along of roadside stock routes, creating a wildlife corridor to provide habitat for endangered birds and wildlife. At the time, even the most optimistic estimates quoted the job would take about 25 years.

However, through the formation of the Hindmarsh Landcare Network - a network of 14 landcare and environment groups – including Greening Australia - Project Hindmarsh achieved its goal in just five years.

“Through the extraordinary support of more than 3,000 volunteers - including a convoy of more than 300 volunteers from Melbourne for the annual tree planting weekend - more than 1.5 million new trees and shrubs have been established, and we have linked the Big and Little deserts with more than 2,000kms of high-quality roadside native bush, 80% of which is on district properties,” said Ron Dodds Greening Australia's South West Victorian Regional Manager..

The impetus for Project Hindmarsh began in 1983, when Melbourne was engulfed by a massive dust storm, caused by more than 250,000 tonnes of topsoil from drought-stricken farms in north-western Victoria, being dumped on the city. In the first hour alone, the storm deposited an average of 10 kilograms of soil on each suburban block in Melbourne.

This was an epiphany for many Hindmarsh farmers. Widespread land clearing in the area had left only three percent of native vegetation between the wilderness areas of the Big and Little Desert National Parks. The landholders realised that if they were to continue farming, they had to start doing things differently.

Dodds, a former farmer, stated the devastation was a life-changing moment for land owners in the region. “Victoria is the most cleared state in the country with 70 percent of native vegetation lost, while on private land that figure jumps to 92 percent. Such massive land clearance has had a devastating impact on native flora and fauna, with almost a third of native animals either extinct or threatened, with indigenous plants faring even worse.

“A key goal of the project was to create a sustainable agricultural region spanning the entire Hindmarsh shire where native vegetation was valued and managed by district farmers, and where blocks and belts of vegetation were incorporated into farm management for productive and conservation benefits,” said Mr Dodds.

Central to the success of Project Hindmarsh was securing the participation of local landholders. In the first year of the project, only seven landholders were involved. This number has now grown to 300, a third of all landholders in the shire.

With annual outputs of hundreds of hectares of enhanced or new vegetation, Project Hindmarsh has provided habitat for endangered birds and other fauna, while contributing to farm productivity by providing shade and shelter, reducing soil loss, and ameliorating the effects of salinity.

“Private landholders have become an integral part of the Hindmarsh Landcare Network, assisting in the protection and enhancement of more than 2,700 hectares of remnant vegetation, and the establishment of 500 hectares of native bush, with plants grown from locally collected seed.

“The project could not have succeeded in its central aim of restoring biodiverse vegetation without the commitment of these people to go out and collect seed when it is ready, which has enabled us to develop a dedicated seed bank that exceeds the volume of activity of most seed banks in the state.”

Over the past 10 years, Project Hindmarsh has experienced a massive ground swell of community support, and shows no sign of slowing down.

Project Hindmarsh has inspired the creation of Habitat 141, which will be the largest environmental restoration project ever attempted in Victoria. “*Habitat 141* is the sort of bold, strategic vision required if we are to address the many challenges facing our natural environment including climate change, loss of biodiversity, salinity, reduced water quality and weeds,” said Mr Dodds.

“It aims to restore the links between major national parks and nature reserves over a 700 km stretch straddling the SA, NSW and Victorian border region, which encompasses a diverse range of ecosystems including rangelands, heath, mallee, red gum forests and floodplains, grassy woodlands through to the limestone rich coastal plain.”

Greening Australia has forged strong links with government agencies, Natural Resource Management authorities, non-government organisations and philanthropic sponsors to maintain the long-term commitment necessary to achieving a vision of this scale. Restoration activities focus on linking patches of existing vegetation through direct seeding and tree planting.

“These landscape scale works are guided by the latest conservation planning expertise and science, and will build on the work of Project Hindmarsh,” said Mr Dodds.

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