

Gondwana Link: process or plan, movement or organisation?

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“...there is no more delicate matter to take in hand, nor more dangerous to conduct, nor more doubtful in its success, than to set up as a leader in the introduction of changes. For he who innovates will have for his enemies all those who are well off under the existing order of things, and only lukewarm supporters who might be better off under the new. This lukewarm temper arises partly from the fear of adversaries who have the laws on their side, and partly from the incredulity of mankind, who will never admit the merit of anything new, until they have seen it proved by the event.” (Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Chapter 6)

Gondwana Link is a 10-year-old effort proud of the on-ground change and support engendered through our approach. We started as, and largely remain, a broad collaboration across a number of global, national and local groups; supported by a small unit charged with maintaining the vision and providing the critical support for on-ground change where needed. Our collective vision has remained consistent: ‘Reconnected country, from the wet forests of the far south west to the woodland and mallee bordering the Nullarbor, in which ecosystem function and biodiversity are restored and maintained’. These words reflect more than just the restoration of ecological linkages, as connectivity is only one of the many critical ecological functions we seek to achieve.

Our work has already led to considerable improvements in the ecological wellbeing of large areas across south-western Australia (see **Figure 1**), and more importantly, has prepared the ground for much greater improvements. In launching and establishing Gondwana Link we have mainly followed a common-sense, adaptive approach that builds on the fundamental principles accepted throughout the ecological sciences. It seems this is often called ‘innovation’.

Systems not species

In many ways our mere existence is innovative. When we launched Gondwana Link in 2002, it was but a pipe dream to reverse downward trends in ecological and evolutionary function through concerted landscape scale action across multiple tenures. Australian conservation programs were still largely focused on achieving minimal protected area representation of previously widespread vegetation types, and intensive management programs focused on a selection of the rarest and most endangered species. However, we launched, we survived, we grew – and are now seeing a growing consensus on the need for large landscape ecosystem-based approaches.



Royal Haakea (*Hakea victoria*) in Fitzgerald River National Park in Western Australia. ©Photo: James Fitzsimons

A process not a plan

Many programs start with development of a grand plan. In our experience, plan development can give the general impression of a 'black box' process where scientists decide, through means only they can really understand, what the others involved should be doing. These exercises can be very expensive and often run at least a few years over schedule, by which time any willing participants have had their initial enthusiasm fade away, and the unwilling have become entrenched in their aversion to the approach.

We started with a simple strategy focused on processes which embed ongoing ecologically-focused restoration and management into visible results in a landscape. Through The Nature Conservancy we were fortunate to receive a significant donation early in the process, and chose very deliberately to allocate it to on-ground programs in two sections of the proposed Link. For these on-ground programs we had a general approach, in which each funded action was worthy in itself – its contribution to the broader goal being an additional benefit. Through the initial actions we built the momentum, support, knowledge, and additional funding which is enabling the overall program to grow and to become more ecologically and operationally fine-tuned.

This could be regarded as innovative, but it is also a sound risk minimisation strategy that guarantees good results from initial expenditure. By choosing to achieve nett progress, rather than 'neat' progress, we could be certain that the initial outcomes would be worthwhile in themselves, while also building the larger program; even if the approach faltered at some point we would have achieved much good. If we had pursued 'neat progress', by some plan of pre-determined actions, we would have risked ending up with a seemingly good plan and not much else.

Additionally, by growing big through starting small, and checking progress along the way, we ensured the program was built, as much as possible, from the on-ground realities of the areas we worked across.

Organic growth model

We have moved forward somewhat intuitively, through processes that can be likened to how mallee and woodland eucalypts grow. We have endeavoured to:

- **Start small and grow from the ground up** – As outlined above.
- **Have the right 'genetic material' to do well** – Which in this case obviously means the right people; we have not tried to include everybody or collect organisational logos along the way, rather to work directly with those who have genuine roles and preferably with a genuine passion and commitment.
- **Germinate with the right enabling conditions** – The concept of connectivity is not new, but it was not until the early 2000s that the right enabling conditions, such as the end of old growth logging and extensive agricultural clearing, were present in our part of Australia. The right 'genetic material' also took some time to assemble.
- **Grow like hell at every opportunity, and survive the dry spells** – There are peaks and troughs in every long-term effort. Our challenge has been to have a wide enough range of committed people and organisations to ride across the top of any individual or organisational troughs, along with the vision, image, and structure to carry us through. We have only started to achieve this in recent years.
- **Form comes through function** – We did not start with any pre-determined assumption of who we needed to be and how we needed to structure ourselves (apart from a principle that there would be no power pyramids). Our core roles and structures have changed more than once already; and while that unsettles some people, and does have some failings, our efforts have remained consistent with the original intent longer than achieved in most initiatives, where a lot of initial effort goes into setting up elaborate governance structures.
- **Spread through flower and seed** – We have not proselytised to any great degree, but the strength of the original vision and the flowering of the original effort have planted seeds in other minds, many of which are now working with us or on their own programs.
- **Stand together so each tree forms the forest** – We may be starting to achieve ecological improvements over large landscapes, but only because lots of smaller efforts are happening cohesively.



Figure 1. The Gondwana Link vision is 'Reconnected country, from the karri forests of the far south west to the woodland and mallee bordering the Nullarbor, in which ecosystem function and biodiversity are restored and maintained'. Work is underway in eight main areas.

The organic approach recognised that being effective over larger areas does not necessarily mean just doing more of the same. Complexity can increase exponentially with size, so the tools and techniques necessary to achieve meaningful ecological change over large areas are likely to be very different to what have been used in the past. As work to achieve Gondwana Link demonstrated, those tools and techniques can only be developed through experience.

Achieving exponential improvement in technical approaches

Exponential growth in on-ground change, and from that, exponential change across large landscapes, will not happen without innovative technical approaches that improve both efficiency and ecological effectiveness. While there are now many examples of this across Gondwana Link, both the stand-out example and the personification of many of the critical elements is the work of Justin Jonson. Justin first made contact with Gondwana Link in 2004 – long enthusiastic phone calls from the then student who readily grasped our concept and wanted to be part of the action. He first secured himself some work on the seed-picking teams and then a position with Greening Australia. When this did not work out we secured, again through The Nature Conservancy, funds for Greening Australia to re-employ him on the critically important work of determining how much carbon could be grown in biodiverse systems.

Within three years Justin had produced a definitive set of carbon sequestration rates for the main local species (Jonson and Freudenberger 2011), designed and produced a broadacre direct seeding machine, planned and implemented the first high standard ecological restoration planting (Jonson 2010) – which was also the first carbon-funded planting in Gondwana Link – and finally, set an outstanding example of a good process for monitoring restoration. Justin has now established his own business, Threshold Environmental, and has undertaken high standard restoration in Gondwana Link for Greening Australia, Carbon Neutral, Bush Heritage Australia, Fitzgerald Biosphere Group and a number of landholders, including the first significant plantings in the Ravensthorpe section of the Link.

A key element in Justin's success, and a lesson well learnt by us, is the benefit of directly linking research with implementation, with journal papers being a by-product of focused application and experience.



Sam Crowder and Justin Jonson with Justin's broad-acre direct seeding machine on Greening Australia's Peniup property in Gondwana Link.
©Photo: Danny ten Seldam

This example underscores the importance of encouraging and supporting passionate and determined contributors who want to do this work and achieve major change. Connectivity conservation, a sector where the financial rewards are generally less than in other sectors, needs to be skilled at attracting and working with passionate and talented people. The skills needed include how to identify major talent and how to provide the critical support they need to produce, recognising that we don't all fit into neat arrangements. An intense and rigorous scientific focus, combined with an innovative approach and often a non-conforming personality, can be very challenging to both colleagues and institutions comfortable with their existing modes of operating.

Don't follow the money

While large amounts of funding are obviously required to achieve ecological change at scale, we first defined our overall vision, and then developed strategies to bring various sources of funding in behind the work of achieving that vision. While this may sound like an obvious approach, and hardly innovative, for some decades Australia has had a significant number of groups who tend to follow the readily available funding, usually from governments, rather than charting their own course. There is no consistency in this approach, particularly in relation to government funding, as the speed at which a number of public sector grant programs adjust their objectives is matched only by the rapidity with which groups re-write their applications to match the adjustments. This leads not so much to mission creep as mission gallop, and any original objectives, beyond those of funding the organisations themselves, are easily lost.

Two additional elements were also integral to our original strategy. Firstly, we aimed to develop new funding sources that would have better continuity and be more ecologically focused, lessening the dependence of groups on either government grants or small-scale public fundraising. This was part of the attraction we had for some groups, particularly given the early funding provided by The Nature Conservancy. Since then, we have been a small part of an immense growth in environmental philanthropy in Australia. Nationally, this is much better evidenced by the rising importance of organisations such as the Australian Wildlife Conservancy, Bush Heritage Australia, The Nature Conservancy and the Pew Environmental Group. Whether a similar rapid growth will occur in carbon-funded restoration, or whether party politics and shifting priorities will kill the potential, is yet to be seen.

Secondly, we have focused on where the ever-changing public funding programs were not focused, in effect innovating beyond the norm to fill essential gaps in ecological protection and management. Ideally the work we supported built on existing public funding that others were accessing. Ten years on, public funding is starting to provide greater support for whole of landscape approaches and particularly for ecological restoration of whole paddocks. Where on-ground groups have more diverse funding bases, with public, private and often commercial funds involved, the private funds generally support the more innovative elements in their program.



What fosters innovation?

Critical to understanding what helped us ‘innovate’ and launch Gondwana Link is appreciating the critical role The Nature Conservancy brought in our formative and establishment years. They provided support in and encouraged:

- Thinking big, along with tangible examples of how that can work from the perspective of the private sector
- Astute minds with robust strategic thinking
- Extreme flexibility and ‘nimbleness’
- Total focus on achieving large ecological outcomes rather than organisational outcomes
- Relative freedom from Australian power structures and positioning
- Insights, mentoring and formal training in proven techniques
- Substantial early funding delivered astutely and timely
- Credibility by association
- Friendship and encouragement.

These were critical elements in helping us successfully adopt an innovative new approach, and reflect the qualities and processes we now strive to provide, when needed, to help ‘new’ groups become involved in achieving change in sections of Gondwana Link.

The additional underpinning element, of both that initial engagement with the Conservancy and ongoing innovation across Gondwana Link, is the passion and ability of committed individuals. With the Conservancy it was key individuals who first saw the potential we held,

and steered support for our vision into and through their organisation. With significant technical advances, such as the work on carbon sequestration rates in biodiverse plantings and paddock-scale restoration noted above, it has been passionate individuals who have innovated and achieved the greatest advances. While these then become, or are at least used in, ‘innovative’ programs adopted by organisations and agencies, it is important to recognise that, by and large, it is individuals who innovate and organisations that adopt innovations (or not).

What kills innovation?

Innovation cannot be controlled, ordered, budgeted for, ‘policied’ into existence or otherwise prescribed. It happens when conditions are right, and the role of management is to focus on creating those conditions, supporting the innovators, and nullifying the negative forces that diminish innovation, as well as being able to recognise and adopt useful new strategies or tools. There is considerable literature from the business world on how to create those right conditions and avoid the pitfalls (e.g. Bartlett and Ghoshal 1997, Lehrer 2012) but not much specific to the conservation sector.

In Gondwana Link’s decade of experience, key elements to be avoided include:

- Organisations unduly taking the credit for the work of individuals, which removes the impetus for further innovation
- ‘Command and control’ management systems which operate at a distance from the on-ground realities, limiting the ability of on-ground operators to develop and test ideas

- Organisational insularity, in which the extent of congratulatory back-slapping overshadows the critical scrutiny and brutal honesty which fertilises new thinking
- Homogenisation of programs which fails to recognise that “no single, detailed prescription can be of much use for more than a single system” (Holling and Meefe 1996, p. 334) – we are not in the business of making widgets, but restoring complex ecosystem processes
- Gatekeeper and competitive organisations, who fail to respect the polycentric nature of power and creativity in our society
- Acceptance of mediocre outputs rather than a willingness to drill deeper and harder
- Systems that preferentially reward the mediocre and reliable rather than the innovative, which leads to organisational and individual exhaustion of innovative talent.

It is particularly concerning that, in many cases, government funding in Australia is often delivered in such a way as to reinforce the persistence of a number of the features mentioned above. Of particular concern are the rigid, output-focused, governance systems of publicly-subsidised regional organisations, some of which compete with the smaller on-ground groups and the more innovative and outcome-focused private sector approaches.

Goethe summed it up from a different perspective: “The useful encourages itself; for the multitude produce it, and no one can dispense with it: the beautiful must be encouraged; for few can set it forth, and many need it.” (*Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795), p. 306).

Where is Gondwana Link heading?

Our initial approach is gaining greater support in Australia and we are excited by the opportunity to now work with other similarly sized and similarly ambitious programs around the country.

With the many groups involved we have made substantial progress, but are still a long way from achieving the original vision where it matters – on the ground. But the foundations are laid for a stronger effort in coming years, and the concept – that major opportunity exists to restore a connected and ecologically functioning landscape from the south-western forests to the edge of the arid inland – has escaped us and is now roaming free, igniting many largely independent efforts.

In terms of organisation, we have moved from what I earlier described as the ‘organic growth model’ to a slightly more formal structure, based pretty much on a standard off-the-shelf company model, with a few add-ons. The trick here, I feel, will be to continue the focus on supporting the achievement of high standard ecological outcomes on the ground, and not be captured, as so many organisational structures are, by our own internal needs.

We are not seeking to have control over other organisations, nor sit at the top of a hierarchy or pyramid-shaped power structure, nor claim to be a representative ‘umbrella’ organisation. We are focusing on a number of core collective functions, all of which sit under the broad heading of ‘enabling and guiding’ rather than ‘directing’.

As Tim Flannery (2010) wrote, “All this is to say that an effective governance system need not be ruthlessly centralised, but merely capable of sending messages that effectively influence the system.” (*Here on Earth*, p. 246).

Necessity is said to be the mother of invention

We are now well into the Anthropocene, that terrible time in Earth’s history where cumulative human actions, and individual inaction, are causing a rapid and massive decline in biological richness and diversity.

For those of us who can clearly see what is happening to the ecosystems around us, that reality has become a critical driver of both innovation, and the determination to implement that must go with it.



The vision of Gondwana Link includes the Great Western Woodlands – the largest temperate woodland left on Earth ©Photo: James Fitzsimons

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Biography

Keith Bradby is a long-time advocate for the ecological values of south-western Australia, starting as a community-based activist in the 1970s. He helped halt public land alienation to agriculture in the early 1980s, has since been part of some of Australia's earliest landcare groups, facilitated local enterprise development and managed a large catchment program. He worked inside government to tighten vegetation clearing controls in Western Australia during the 1990s, and for the last decade has had the privilege of working with the collaboration of private sector groups achieving Gondwana Link.