

# “Gnowing is Believing”

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## Abstract:

The *Malleefowl Preservation Group* operates on a 95% volunteer basis from a small isolated and primarily agricultural community in South Western Australia. It was formed in response to concerns for the heritage values of the malleefowl or “gnow” (Noongar Aboriginal word) as the *Gnowangerup* Shire faunal emblem. Through leading by example the *Malleefowl Preservation Group* has won five state environment awards through on-ground investments elevating the malleefowl’s status to an iconic species now driving landscape changes.

Long-term malleefowl conservation relies heavily on the support and commitment of landowners, volunteers, community groups, corporate sector and networks. Managing a successful volunteer environmental organisation in the rural sector is not without many challenges. These include serious economic and social structure rural town declines and the need for an independent well-resourced advisory support network.

Biodiversity conservation stakeholders at all levels stand to gain through increased understanding of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for future community conservation group programs across regional Australia.

## Author’s Note:

As current Chairperson/founding member of the *Malleefowl Preservation Group Inc* (MPG), fourth generation on my family wheat and sheep property and the owner of covenanted farm bushland, I proudly represent the grass roots agricultural and pastoral property *Malleefowl Preservation Group* members.

## Malleefowl Preservation Group Background

The MPG was formed in 1992 as a Gnowangerup Land Conservation District Committee (LCDC) sub-group in response to community concerns for the decline of the *Gnowangerup* Shire faunal emblem, the “gnow” (Noongar Aboriginal name) or malleefowl (figure 1). Its slogan, “It’s Gnow or Never” is widely advertised on merchandise and brochures. The group’s achievements have earned the organisation five state environment awards over the past 7 years.



Figure 1 Gnowangerup Shire Coat of Arms and Vehicle Registration Plate

The *Malleefowl Preservation Group's* headquarters are in Ongerup, a small wheat and sheep farming community of 120 residents situated some 400 kms south east of Perth, Western Australia. Its 656 State, Interstate and International membership (approximately 1,800 individuals) represents all sectors of the community particularly farmers, pastoralists and similar interest groups (figure 2).

In response to the growth and success of the *Malleefowl Preservation Group*, the Ongerup Community Development Committee has raised \$1.3m to construct a Malleefowl Research and Environment Information Centre (see “Survival on the Land, the Mallee, the Malleefowl, the Community” poster this publication). An ambitious and innovative project to address the region’s economic diversification and sustainability needs.



Figure 2 - \* West Australian membership distribution

## Planning

In developing the *Malleefowl Preservation Group's* Strategic and Business Plans (1999), members held a workshop weekend to thrash out the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT analysis). A further workshop is planned in March 2004 providing an opportunity to incorporate important outcomes from this National Forum.

The majority of the challenges identified in 1999 have been addressed however some still remain. Does this mean that we have failed or are those challenges beyond the *Malleefowl Preservation Group's* capacity to influence and change for the better?

## Workshop SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Reason	Actions taken/ planned
Grass roots membership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Real ownership</li> <li>• On-ground focus</li> </ul>	On-going
Clear Conservation Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focal Species Action plans provide clear direction for on-ground activities</li> </ul>	Working to Community and National Recovery Action Plans
Group Profile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Action based – “doers”</li> <li>• Five State Environment Awards</li> <li>• John Williamson as Patron</li> <li>• Centenary Medal to volunteer Group Coordinator</li> <li>• Extensive media, education and awareness campaigns</li> </ul>	On-going
Flagship Value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Well promoted and easily recognised indicator species for the benefit of broader biodiversity conservation</li> </ul>	Concept of broader biodiversity benefits incorporated into other awareness and education programs
Diverse Management Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Farmers, Teachers, Landcare, Conservationists, Rural businesses, tourism, and research expertise</li> </ul>	Audio Link meetings established to encourage input from diverse expertise and agency representatives
Professional approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Well run administrative operation</li> <li>• Staff Instruction manual</li> <li>• Well managed volunteer network</li> </ul>	Regular assessment on operational and volunteer needs. Monthly staff/volunteer meetings
A willingness to link with other organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invitations extended to Greening Australia, Dept Conservation &amp; Land Management (DCLM), National Trust of Aust. (WA), World Wide Fund for Nature/Threatened Species Network, Regional Groups (SCRIPT/ ACC), Agriculture Western Australia and West Aust. Farmers Federation</li> </ul>	On-going
Susanne Dennings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tireless dedication to biodiversity conservation and MPG Management</li> <li>• Ten year's learning</li> <li>• Good communication skills</li> <li>• Ability to hand on skills and assist with succession planning</li> </ul>	Committed
Volunteer base	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diverse skills</li> </ul>	Retain and improve volunteer skills
“Vulnerable” status of malleefowl	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sufficient populations to achieve positive outcomes and project success</li> </ul>	On-going

Isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less human impacts on malleefowl populations</li> <li>• “Outback” adventure for urban based volunteers</li> <li>• Development of genuine long-lasting friendships</li> </ul>	Promoting benefits
<b>Weaknesses/ Threats</b>	<b>Reason</b>	<b>Actions Taken</b>
“Threatened” status of malleefowl	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not a “critically endangered” species – does not qualify for priority focus funding through some agency conservation programs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appointment of Scientific Advisor – Jack Kinnear</li> <li>• Encourage “Gnow or Never” conservation action values BEFORE species reaches critically endangered status</li> </ul>
Member commitments and input to MPG direction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Once only membership</li> <li>• Wide membership distribution (State, Interstate and International)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Annual membership introduced in 2001</li> <li>• Strategic Plan Priorities questionnaire posted out in 2001</li> </ul>
Declining Govt. Agency Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No coordinated feral animal (fox and rabbit) controls</li> <li>• Closing of Agwest 1080 bait factory in WA</li> <li>• No DCLM support network</li> <li>• Increasing “User Pays” government ideology</li> <li>• Declining element of “trust”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lobbying Minister for Agriculture, Farmers Federation and LCDC’s for support to re-establish coordinated feral animal control programs</li> <li>• Building improved relationships</li> <li>• Appointed DCLM/Agwest rep. to committee</li> </ul>
Financial constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Isolation and limited networking/promotional opportunities</li> <li>• Office administration cost gaps (funding guidelines)</li> <li>• Declining rural economies/support ability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volunteer system being implemented in MPG office</li> <li>• Seeking full time project development/ management officer</li> <li>• Support to new Malleefowl Information/ Research Centre</li> </ul>
Isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited local skills and availability for managerial and project development</li> <li>• Increased operational costs (administration, travel and time)</li> <li>• Additional networking, promotion and fund raising campaign challenges</li> <li>• Restricted income source in local community</li> <li>• Low voting numbers and politically “safe” seat</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audio conference meetings to allow appointment of distant committee members</li> <li>• Diverse committee appointments</li> <li>• Web site completed and regularly updated</li> <li>• Lobbying Environment and Agriculture Ministers</li> <li>• Advertise isolation as a plus for Malleefowl populations</li> <li>• Support to new Malleefowl Information/ Research Centre</li> </ul>
Declining Rural Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Current economic downturn</li> <li>• Less people to do more voluntary work</li> <li>• Limited diversification (from farming)</li> <li>• Aging population</li> <li>• Additional stress due to economic downturns and declining govt. support</li> <li>• Loss of skilled personnel</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Source city based volunteers</li> <li>• Spread committee loads (outside Ongerup community)</li> <li>• Involve school children (Malleefowl Magic Education Package)</li> <li>• Support to new Malleefowl Information/ Research Centre</li> </ul>
Public Apathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concentration on today’s dollar rather than tomorrow’s long-term sustainability</li> <li>• “She’ll be right mate” ethic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase Awareness</li> <li>• Malleefowl Magic education Program</li> </ul>
Limited local skills &	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of local management and project</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeking full time project</li> </ul>

resources	<p>development expertise</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No state or national support network</li> </ul>	<p>development/ management officer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audio conference meetings to allow appointment of distant committee members</li> </ul>
Susanne Dennings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Susanne's strength in the organisation is also a weakness because the organisation is dependent on her.</li> <li>• Burn out</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volunteer work-shop and plan developed Succession Planning with Peg Olsen - Nature Conservancy (USA)</li> <li>• Full time Project Development and Management officer funding being sought</li> <li>• Part time office assistant appointed</li> <li>• Volunteer team appointed for Administration operation</li> <li>• Malleefowl Matter editor appointed</li> </ul>
Tourism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impacts on malleefowl and associated habitat</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support and guide land managers to establish protection zones and visitor plans</li> </ul>
Office facilities and equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Operates from home spare bedroom</li> <li>• Need for upgrading of equipment and office furniture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Office centre established and equipment upgraded</li> <li>• Support to new Malleefowl Information/ Research Centre</li> </ul>
<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Reasons</b>	<b>Actions</b>
Changes in Landcare to more agricultural focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increases MPG's opportunities for biodiversity conservation projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seek Australian biodiversity conservation funding/ sponsorship partners</li> </ul>
Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Efficient recording and reporting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include research collation in Full time Project Management role</li> </ul>
Tourism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Malleefowl as a flagship species</li> <li>• Increased profile and support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support to new Malleefowl Information/ Research Centre</li> </ul>
Patron and Sponsors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High profile Patron, John Williamson</li> <li>• Large Corporate Sponsor connections</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote and "lean on" supporters and partners</li> </ul>
CCT Fund	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tax deductible donations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote tax deductible fund</li> </ul>
Shift in DCLM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New DCLM Strategic Plan identifying community group support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approach dept for support</li> </ul>
World interest in WA's biodiversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• WA's south west identified as one of the world's 25 "biodiversity hot spots"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Linking opportunities with International Organisations</li> </ul>
Influence private landholders and Government policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grass roots initiative</li> <li>• Act as a go-between</li> <li>• Catalytic benefits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Birds of a Feather, Let's Work Together" brochure produced</li> <li>• Involve politicians</li> </ul>
Role model for similar organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MPG has developed beyond a local community group to a state-wide organisation</li> <li>• Has little competition at this level</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote "role model" to other rural communities</li> <li>• Provide guidance to Politicians and government agencies</li> </ul>

## In summarising the workshop results:

### Strengths

## Networks and Volunteers

Developing its own support network and volunteer database has contributed to member/volunteer ownership.



Figure 3 Human Chain Survey volunteers – Foster Road

To ensure volunteer satisfaction and project aim outcomes, we need to ask:-

- What projects are achievable on a volunteer basis
- Are the training skills, management and infrastructure in place to support and manage volunteers
- What motivates individuals to register as a volunteer
- What skills do they have and want to contribute
- The targeted age group
- How do we retain their interest and commitment

## Weaknesses

*Isolation:* The *Malleefowl Preservation Group* and many other malleefowl interest groups are based in “malleefowl country” that traditionally face:-

- long distances from support networks
- declining rural communities (age, economic and social)
- increased travel and administration costs
- limited community skills
- reduced access to “needed now” volunteers (declining population)
- Communication challenges (poor telephone line and mobile services, regular power cuts)

“The problem for many declining wheatbelt communities, however, has been that economic restructuring has eroded the economic, human and social capital required to make self-determination possible and local strategies viable. The withdrawal of state and federal government services in rural areas, in line with the politics of economic rationalism, will only make the struggle for sustainable rural communities more difficult.” (Matthew Tonts, Centre for Rural Social Research 1996).

	1971	1981	1991	Percentage Change 1971-1991
Cunderdin	873	731	688	-21.2
Dalwallinu	724	639	597	-17.5
Dowerin	351	410	374	6.6
Goomalling	757	600	535	-29.3
Koorda	411	378	344	-16.3
Quairading	856	741	696	-18.7
Tammin	360	254	226	-37.2
Wongan Hills	888	947	890	0.2
Wyalkatchem	573	453	419	-26.8
Meckering	176	144	116	-34.1
Ballidu	153	137	125	-18.3

Figure 4: Population Change in WA Settlements with a Population Exceeding 100, 1971-1991 (Source: ABS Census Reports)

*Declining Regional Support Networks:* The loss of agency infrastructure (figure 5) providing one-to-one support, coupled with employment insecurity for regional staff and Community Landcare Coordinators, has resulted in reduced participation in Landcare Natural Resource Management (NRM) programs. Farmers and pastoralists work on long-term programs that require long-term support in return for trust and friendship as an outcome from their invested time. They are tiring of “training up” new Community Landcare Coordinators (CLC’s) in their regions only to see them leave after relatively short employment contracts. The enthusiasm of CLC’s often without hand-over training is one to be admired, however with huge social challenges, isolation and landholder empathy, the communities’ expectations of CLC’s are in most instances beyond short-term employment contract capacities. As an example, the neighbouring Landcare Groups in my region were without Coordinators for 3-4 months in 2003. The result is an increase in requests for support to the *Malleefowl Preservation Group* as a replacement service provider.

	1966	1980	1994	Total Change 1966-1980	Total Change 1980-1994
Ballidu	12	11	8	-1	-3
Meckering	13	8	7	-5	-1
Wubin	11	9	7	-2	-2
Kalannie	5	9	7	4	-2
Pithara	7	4	3	-3	-1
Buntine	4	3	2	-1	-1
Cadoux	5	3	2	-2	-1
Jennacubbine	2	2	1	0	-1
Minnivale	3	2	0	-1	-2
Ejanding	3	3	0	0	-3
Korrelocking	2	1	0	-1	-1
Manmanning	2	1	0	-1	-1
Konnonong	2	0	0	-2	0
Dangin	2	0	0	-2	0
Yorkrakine	1	1	0	0	0

Figure 5 Total Number of Public and Private Services in Non-Shire Headquarters Towns, 1966-1994 (Source: ABS Census Reports)

*Funding Restrictions & Responsibilities:* Declining rural infrastructures, increasing volunteer and liability insurance, auditing costs, associated administration overloads (eg BAS treasury statements) and increased legal obligations have all contributed to the winding up of many volunteer based community groups. Such insurance and audits are compulsory before funding grants eg Natural Heritage Trust and Environfunds are disbursed. The most valuable administration funding support program through Environment Australia for Voluntary Environment and Heritage Organisations (GVEHO) was withdrawn from MPG in 2003/4.

## Opportunities

“Big Picture” verses “Little Picture”

Landholders’ circle of concern is their patch, their catchment and their town. They hold the key to community social and economic wellbeing. In as much as being part of the “big picture” can motivate us all, it is also important for community groups, property owners and volunteers to have real support at a coordinated grass-roots level to develop the “little picture” as “big picture” achievable goals. Without this commitment, the “bigger picture” might happen but unless there are unlimited resources, it’s long-term future is questionable.

Survey Results - Assessment and Use: In response to years of monitoring, community groups are now asking for feedback such as a) malleefowl population trends [regional, state and national] b) feral animal impacts c) seasonal responses to breeding densities d) dispersal and survival of chicks from isolated remnants e) corridor values and f) best practice remnant vegetation management.

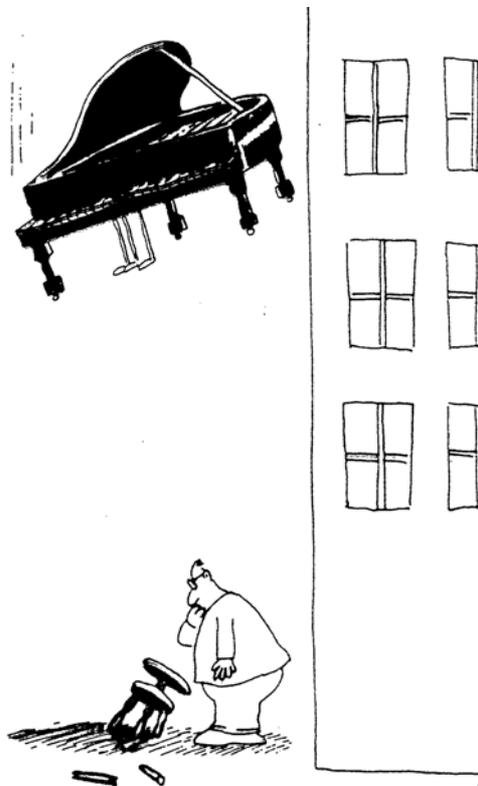


Figure 6 Understanding big and little picture needs – most of us work better on achievable “piano stool” goals as contributions to bigger picture “grand piano” visions.

Australia Wide Communication: Considering the isolated location of many groups, modern communication (eg video and audio conferencing, emails and web sites) is now providing easy access to expand and improve communication. The Threatened Species Network's "Around the Mounds" (is this still being produced?) and group newsletters such as the "Malleefowl Matter" are contributing to broader community awareness however this is primarily one-way communication. Good communication leads to better performance and increased ownership.

Thinking Nationally, Linking Nationally (or even Globally): Our sponsors and members would value being part of a National or even global plan. Program planning at the National Recovery Group level supported by officers in each state would contribute to linking on-ground malleefowl conservation actions to regional, state and national biodiversity priorities throughout Australia.

Developing Partnerships: Community groups have a lot to offer and a lot to gain from successful partnerships that demonstrate "gains not drains". We don't just want to be added to another partnership list to convince funding bodies that the project has community support, we want to be part of the action and have a slice of the cake too. Within a world of Natural Resource Management partnerships, we are all facing the same sustainability issues and biodiversity decline. This forum's endorsement of incorporating the National Recovery Plan for Malleefowl Actions into regional group planning will provide community groups with links and justification for on-ground regional group funding support.

## Conclusion & Recommendations

As a National iconic species facing National threats, the malleefowl deserves a National conservation effort. Fragmentation is not only a threat to our remnants, it is a very real threat to conservation projects and community groups.

Our diverse network combined strengths throughout Australia are enormous and have the potential to play a major role in conserving Australia's biodiversity. The appointment of effective State/National coordinators will further strengthen the networks and link the National Recovery Group with Regional Groups, community groups, individual landholders, students and researchers. Western Australia in particular is well placed to appoint such a state coordinator.

With an eleven-year "leading by example" history in capitalising on a wealth of opportunities, the MPG has overcome many obstacles and will no doubt face many more in the future. As a committed team member, the *Malleefowl Preservation Group* aims to reduce these obstacles so that all groups and individual landholders may continue to play their part in conserving the "malleefowl", an indicator species representing whole ecosystem assets across regional Australia.

## References

- Tonts, M. (1996) "Economic Restructuring and Small Town Adjustment: Evidence from the Western Australian Central Wheatbelt", *Rural Society* 6 (2):24-33.
- Harold, Greg & Dennings, Susanne (1998) "The First Five Years" published by the Malleefowl Preservation Group ISBN 0 646 321005