



restoring landscapes across Mount Alexander

# Strategic Plan 2014-2024

# Who we are

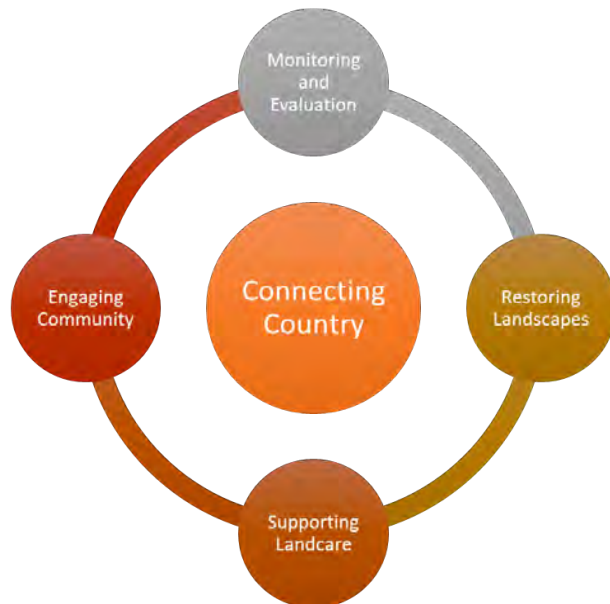
Connecting Country (Mount Alexander Region) Inc is a community-based not-for-profit organisation that operates at a landscape scale to increase, enhance and restore biodiversity across the Mount Alexander Shire and surrounds in Central Victoria. The organisation is led by the community and works together with a wide range of other groups, organisations and government agencies.

## Our vision:

*For the people of the Mount Alexander region to be proud of the beautiful, productive, healthy and diverse landscapes, habitats, forests, waterways, flora and fauna that we have supported and created in our region.*

# How we make a difference

Our mission is to connect country by drawing on the wealth of knowledge and experience in our community. We nourish and sustain the region of Mount Alexander by showcasing innovative possibilities of ecological land management. We aim to achieve this through a program of community engagement, landscape restoration, Landcare support and monitoring and evaluation.



In our approach, we are committed to the following guiding principles:

Acknowledge the **traditional owners** of the land and their **culture**.

Promote **long-term** actions that restore processes and build resilience into ecological systems.

Act at a **landscape scale** and across land tenures to improve ecological connectivity.

Support **community led** grassroots approach to action, decision-making and involvement.

Use the best-available **science** to underpin activities and approaches to monitoring and evaluation.

Engage our community and **develop capacity** by providing information, training and support.

Recognise the success of our actions depends on the **participation and goodwill** of the community.

Be **friendly, respectful and professional** in all of our activities.

**Share our knowledge** and expertise on issues related to landscape restoration in our region and contribute to relevant policy issues.

Be **accountable** to members, the community and funders and other supporters.

**Seek investment** for landscape restoration from government, trusts and foundations.

## Where we came from

With the support of the Norman Wettenhall Foundation and the Friends of the Box Ironbark Forests, Connecting Country was initiated in 2007 by local people and groups determined to create a community-based organisation address issues associated with declines in landscape health. They had a vision to connect people and landscapes to achieve a sustainable and healthy environment. Since then, Connecting Country has met these expectations through its support for landholder, Landcare groups and the wider community to undertake on-ground conservation works; by coordinating community education and other awareness-raising activities relating to landscape restoration; and by implementing a rigorous monitoring and evaluation program.



## Why we developed this strategic plan

In 2009, Connecting Country developed a *Biodiversity Blueprint* to document the current health of the local landscape, and to guide the activities of Connecting Country in its formative years. Since this time, Connecting Country has grown rapidly as an organisation. As a result, there is more knowledge about the environmental threats and opportunities in the local area. New issues have also arisen that were not considered in the original Blueprint. As such, there was an identified need to reconsider the role of Connecting Country. This Strategic Plan aims to capture and refine this information and, ultimately, set the direction for the organisation over the next 10 years.



The 2014-2024 Strategic Plan aims to guide the direction of Connecting Country and is to be reviewed periodically at the direction of the Committee of Management. It will be utilised by the committee and staff in a variety of ways including in the development of projects and application for grants. It will also be a public document that describes and promotes what Connecting Country does, and outlines future priorities and directions.



## The landscape of the Mount Alexander region

Connecting Country's area of interest is defined as the *Mount Alexander region of Central Victoria*, which encompasses the Mount Alexander Shire (an area of 152,895ha) and extends a short distance into the neighbouring shires. It includes the towns of Castlemaine, Newstead, Maldon, Harcourt and Taradale, and many others as well. The region contains a diverse range of environmental values, which have been recognised by humans for thousands of years. The Mount Alexander Region and beyond is "country" for the Dja Dja Wurrung, who are the traditional indigenous people. In using this term and concept as the name for our organisation, we hope to acknowledge and encourage the concept of stewardship for the land by all its inhabitants.

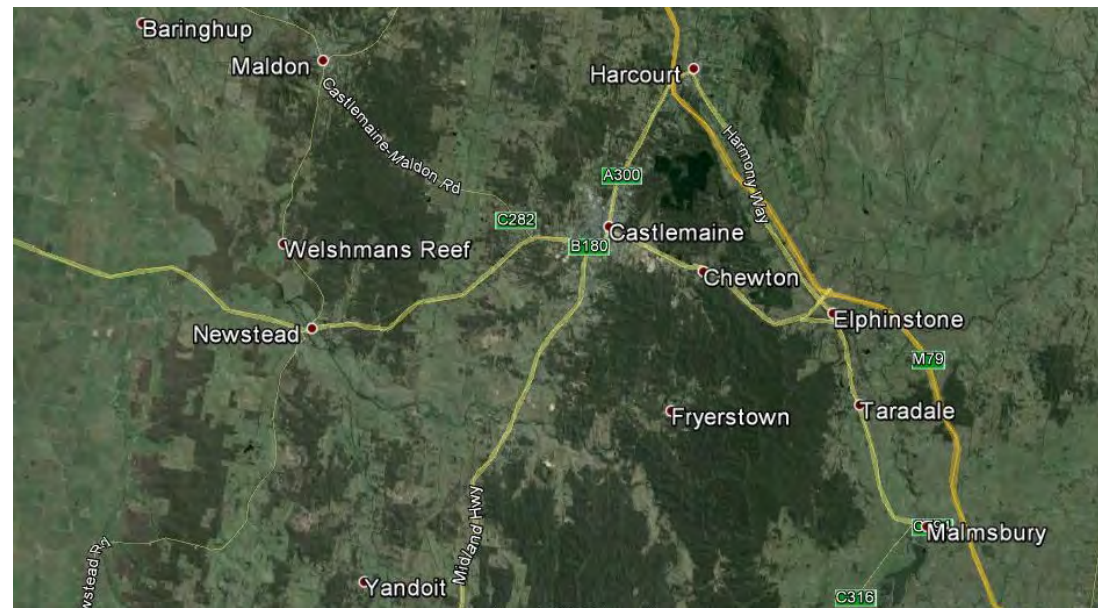




The Mount Alexander region overlaps with four separate **bioregions** – the Goldfields, Central Victorian Uplands, Victorian Volcanic Plain and Victorian Riverina – each of which has characteristic biological and geological values. The landscape is intersected by a number of waterways of historical and ecological significance (including the Loddon River in the west, and the Campaspe and Coliban Rivers in the east). There are a few prominent and well vegetated hills (including Mount Alexander and Mount Tarrengower) and some important agricultural areas.

Compared to other parts of south-eastern Australia, this region has relatively high native vegetation cover. Most of this remnant vegetation can be broadly described as ‘box-ironbark forest’. There are **numerous flora and fauna species** for which these forests are one of their few remaining strongholds, including many species threatened with extinction at the state and national level. Some of the notable taxa include the elusive and charismatic Brush-tailed Phascogale; the plant known as Southern Shepherd’s Purse (*Ballantinia antipoda*) whose worldwide distribution is confined to the Mount Alexander Regional Park; and the declining Victorian Temperate Woodland Bird Community which has become a focus for Connecting Country.

The **condition** of the box-ironbark forest is generally low-to-moderate due to the legacy of mining, wood collection, excessive grazing by native and introduced animals and weed invasion. Yellow Box Woodlands and other vegetation types in the more fertile landscape areas have been disproportionately removed – and are therefore considered to be threatened ecosystems at the local, state and national scales. The relatively small remnants of these vegetation types tend to be located on private land. Negative effects of these past activities upon local biodiversity are on-going, and there are new threats such as climate change.



**Most of the Landscape of the Mount Alexander Region**



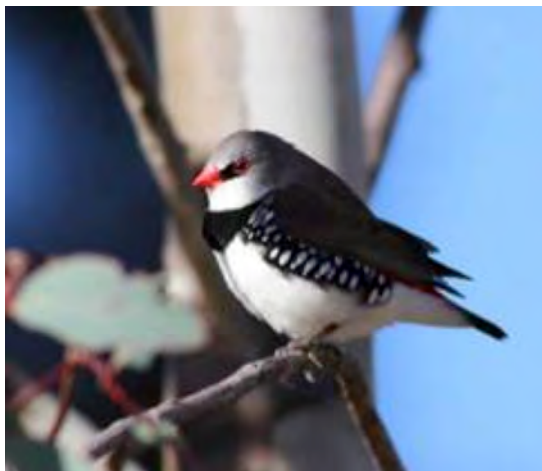


The larger remnant habitats within Connecting Country's area form important **biodiversity hotspots** within a matrix of restoration efforts across Victoria. They act as biological stepping stones, helping to maintain biological connectivity between the Great Dividing Range to the south, the Murray Riverina Plains to the north, and to mosaic of box ironbark forests and open grassy woodlands to the east and west. However, despite being relatively extensive, the habitats within the Mount Alexander region are still significantly fragmented, and there is much opportunity for their expansion and to create better linkages between them.

**European colonisation** in the Mount Alexander region commenced in the late 1830s and early 1840s, and was greatly accelerated from the early-1850s with the discovery of large gold deposits. Since then, agriculture has been the main activity undertaken on private land in the Mount Alexander region. Connecting Country has found that our local farmers are currently, or are working towards, managing their land sustainably. They also value the remnant environmental values within and surrounding their properties for their economic, social, aesthetic and intrinsic values, and for the role they play in assisting farm productivity. In many cases, Connecting Country has been able to support these farmers in their management of these biodiverse areas.



There are substantial parts of the Mount Alexander region where large farm landholdings are rapidly **transitioning** into many smaller landholdings. These smaller landholders typically have off-site income, and are not dependent upon making a living from the property through agriculture. Many are 'tree-changers' who have purchased the land for the purpose of 'living in the bush', and have no intention of stocking it with sheep or other grazing animals. Other landholdings are now farmlets or hobby farms, grazed relatively lightly by low densities of stock such as sheep, horses, goats and alpacas. As a result of this reduced farming intensity, the local ecosystem is changing. Extensive areas of native vegetation are regenerating and native animals and plants are returning. This land use change provides an opportunity for Connecting Country and other groups to facilitate lasting biodiversity gains and protection on these properties.



The Mount Alexander region is characterised by an **engaged and active community** – a high proportion of whom are 'interested' in landscape restoration. At the high end of the 'interest' spectrum, there are many people already involved and passionate – and have a good understanding of the ecological values and threats within the local area. More often than not, these people are involved with one or more of the 30 local Landcare and Friends groups. Local participation in Landcare is amongst the highest in the country. At the other end of the 'interest' spectrum, there are many people who enjoy and appreciate the local landscape, but who have little experience, involvement or understanding of it. Connecting Country's challenge is to increase the number of people interested in the local landscape and its restoration, and to move those already with an interest to become more informed and involved.



# OUR STRATEGIC PLAN 2014-2024

VISION	For the people of the Mount Alexander Region to be proud of the beautiful, productive, healthy and diverse landscapes, habitats, forests, waterways, flora and fauna that we have supported and created in our region.			
MISSION	We connect country by drawing on the wealth of knowledge and experience in our community. We nourish and sustain the region of Mount Alexander by showcasing innovative possibilities of ecological land management.			
FOCUS AREA GOALS	ENGAGING COMMUNITY	SUPPORTING LANDCARE	RESTORING LANDSCAPES	MONITORING AND EVALUATION
	The Mount Alexander Region community appreciate and understand the local landscape.	The Landcare groups of the Mount Alexander Region are healthy, with many active members and clear plans for the future of their local area.	The remnant vegetation across the Mount Alexander region is better protected and managed, connectivity between remnant habitat areas is increased, and native species are flourishing.	Landscape restoration outcomes continuously improved through a commitment to long term monitoring and evaluation of our activities.
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>ORGANISATIONAL FOUNDATIONS</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">A sustainable, well-managed, adaptable organisation recognised as a leading not-for-profit community environment group.</p>				



# ENGAGING COMMUNITY

**Goal:** The Mount Alexander Region community appreciate and understand the local landscape.

Objectives	Strategies
Landholders are connected with their land and with the wider landscape	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue our annual education program, ensuring it maintains its high quality standard, is useful to landholders, and integrated across all of our projects.</li> <li>• Support landholders to undertake on ground work projects on their properties, by becoming involved in monitoring activities and annual education events, and by providing useful information and an active website.</li> <li>• Conduct or engage research to clarify our target audience, the needs and capabilities of larger landholders, and the most effective methods of landholder engagement.</li> <li>• Information sharing to assist landholders seeking funding for ecosystem services and promote opportunities for covenanting protected areas on their properties.</li> <li>• Share, learn from, and adapt innovative and successful ideas from other similar organisations.</li> <li>• Develop a mentor program to better support landholders undertaking landscape restoration activities on their land.</li> <li>• Develop a series of ‘successful change’ or ‘lessons learnt’ stories for blog posts and evaluation purposes.</li> </ul>
Social connections are fostered.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build on our current high level of community interest by continuing to offer engaging events that bring people together.</li> <li>• Maintain an active social connection through open communication, the website/blog, local press, events and Landcare.</li> <li>• Use social media tools where appropriate to further engage the community in different ways.</li> <li>• Provide opportunities to create meaningful interactions between environmental scientists and the community.</li> </ul>
Our partnerships for landscape restoration enhanced and strengthened.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain and utilise our partnerships with Landcare, Local Government, North Central CMA, Trust for Nature, Birdlife Australia, Parks Victoria, DEPI, Norman Wettenhall Foundation, Dja Dja Wurrung, and Shire-wide NGOs, and many others.</li> <li>• Develop our annual calendar of engagement events in collaboration with other relevant groups and organisations.</li> <li>• Encourage agency cross-promotion and communication and partnering on projects with shared goals</li> </ul>
Communicate our aims and achievements in a way that builds support and participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide high quality knowledge and information in an interactive and engaging way.</li> <li>• Produce an Annual Reports highlighting Connecting Country’s achievements and landscape improvements.</li> <li>• Produce annual monitoring reports (‘benchmarks for the future’). Make annual monitoring data available on-line.</li> </ul>
Volunteer involvement encouraged and supported.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain a volunteer database and list of potential volunteer-based activities.</li> <li>• Promote volunteer opportunities as they arrive.</li> <li>• Acknowledge and thank volunteers appropriately.</li> </ul>

# SUPPORTING LANDCARE

**Goal:** The Landcare groups of the Mount Alexander Region are in a healthy condition, with many active members and clear plans for the future of their local area.

**Note:** ‘Landcare’ encompasses the formal Landcare groups in the Mount Alexander Region, as well as other land management groups and Friends groups.

Objectives	Strategies
Enthusiastic Landcare groups active throughout the Mount Alexander Region.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to support a ‘Landcare Facilitator’ role to work with the Landcare groups within the Mount Alexander Region.</li> <li>• Continue the Landcare Facilitator Steering Group to help guide the role and to provide a local forum on Landcare issues.</li> <li>• Develop an Action Plan for Landcare Support including identifying opportunities for network-scale ‘Landcare’ projects.</li> <li>• Assist groups to maintain and promote their local focus through the development of strategic documents, funding applications, actions plans and local engagement activities.</li> <li>• Maintain regular communication with groups about current funding opportunities, relevant events, group support, environmental best practice, and government information and policy.</li> <li>• Host bi-annual Landcare link-up events to share ideas and maintain connection across the region.</li> </ul>
Beneficial partnerships and on-going resources for groups.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seek information from the groups about their needs and aspirations.</li> <li>• Ensure groups are aware of funding opportunities and other news from relevant government agencies and organisations.</li> <li>• Link local groups with each other and with Connecting Country and its projects.</li> <li>• Identify opportunities for partnerships between Landcare Groups and local businesses and other organisations.</li> <li>• Support groups with sourcing funding for their local projects.</li> <li>• Support the development of a Castlemaine Creeks Action Plan and similar locally-based action plans. Where relevant, this will be done in conjunction with Mount Alexander Shire Council, the North Central CMA and other relevant agencies.</li> </ul>
A broader spectrum of the community involved in land management groups and their activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure regular advertising and promotion of Landcare groups and their activities in local media and on our website.</li> <li>• Develop and implement good and innovative ideas to engage more of the local community.</li> <li>• Create opportunities for urban residents to get involved in local Landcare projects. This could include their implementation of biodiversity projects on their own properties and gardens</li> </ul>
Access for groups to current best practice and knowledge about all relevant aspects of landscape restoration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop useful land management education materials, promote the responsibility of landholders for managing their land, and link landholders with local Landcare groups for support.</li> <li>• Run and promote education events that are accessible and appropriate for local groups and provide the latest thinking in landscape management. Maintain Connecting Country’s website resources page to provide an up to date ‘one-stop shop’ for latest research and policies.</li> </ul>



# RESTORING LANDSCAPES

**Goal:** The remnant vegetation across the Mount Alexander region is better protected and managed, connectivity between remnant habitat areas is increased, and native species are flourishing.

Objectives	Strategies
<p>The populations of the five target woodland bird species are secured and increasing across 11 priority zones and across the region as a whole.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Working in conjunction with local Landcare groups and landholders to develop detailed plans for achieving the Woodland Birds goal in each priority zone.</li> <li>Source funding to implement the large scale 10-year Woodland Bird program across eleven priority zones. Develop a series of viable projects that could be presented to potential funders and applying for all potential funding opportunities.</li> <li>Develop and maintain partnerships with relevant organisations including Landcare, Castlemaine Field Naturalists, Friends of the Box ironbark Forest, North Central CMA, Trust for Nature, Norman Wettenhall Foundation and Birdlife Australia.</li> <li>Identify and encourage landholders and groups in the priority zones to become involved.</li> <li>Undertake and support on ground habitat restoration works including protecting remnant vegetation, encouraging natural regeneration, revegetation, pest plant and animal control, and adoption of appropriate grazing regime change.</li> <li>Develop a mentoring program that supports landholders and groups to develop and implement their restoration projects.</li> </ul>
<p>Sustainable agricultural systems that enhance the natural environment are supported.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hold a forum to engage and inform the community in environmentally sustainable farming practices and to consider future programs for Connecting Country.</li> <li>Develop detailed project plans and feasibility assessments for potential projects that could be managed by Connecting Country. For example targeting the basalt/volcanic plains and their associated grassy woodland communities.</li> <li>Source funding to implement projects and develop trial project/sites.</li> </ul>
<p>Support and develop projects that lead to landscape restoration.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In addition to our woodland bird and sustainable agriculture programs, Connecting Country will continue to support and seek other opportunities to improve biodiversity across the Mount Alexander Region.</li> <li>New on ground works projects will integrate science-based rationale and community knowledge. Future projects will address threatening processes and protect, increase and/or enhance native vegetation across the region.</li> <li>Develop and maintain a prospectus of potential projects in partnership with local groups, organisations, and NGOs.</li> </ul>
<p>All landholders across the region are enthused, supported, and have opportunities to be involved in CC.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maintain capability of staff so that they can provide useful and appropriate restoration advice to landholders and groups.</li> <li>Explore the development of Gardens for Wildlife or Birds in Backyards programs in partnership with Birdlife Australia.</li> <li>Link landholders with other opportunities for support such as Landcare, Land for Wildlife and Trust for Nature.</li> <li>Continue involvement with Tree Project to enable Connecting Country to provide plants to landholders.</li> <li>Keep website up to date and providing useful information for landholders implementing their own projects.</li> </ul>

# MONITORING AND EVALUATION

**Goal:** Landscape restoration outcomes continuously improved through a commitment to long term monitoring and evaluation of our activities.

Objectives	Strategies
<p><b>Long-term Monitoring Program:</b> Gauge the environmental health of the Mount Alexander Region landscape on an ongoing basis</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to implement Connecting Country’s long-term monitoring of birds and arboreal mammals as measures of recording biodiversity change at a landscape scale. Results are provided in an annual monitoring report.</li> <li>• Continue to record baseline vegetation data (e.g. species lists, EVC maps, habitat hectares) at all on ground works project sites.</li> <li>• Implement new monitoring programs on a case-by-case basis (e.g. Sutton Grange grazing regime study).</li> <li>• Maintain our comprehensive monitoring database and provide bird survey data to Birdlife Australia’s Bird Atlas and other fauna observations to the Victorian Biodiversity Atlas.</li> <li>• Explore the use of smart phone apps and other technology to assist with data collection, storage and interpretation.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Community-based Monitoring :</b> Encourage community members to be involved in project planning and monitoring programs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide opportunities and encourage community involvement in Connecting Country’s monitoring programs.</li> <li>• Run training events and develop materials to assist community members and groups to enhance their monitoring skills.</li> <li>• Provide information on the use of current apps and how to access the Bird Atlas, Australian Living Atlas and other new technologies for documenting biodiversity information.</li> <li>• Encourage CC members and groups to lend our monitoring equipment (e.g. wildlife cameras, binoculars, field guides).</li> <li>• Support people and groups to implement their own monitoring programs - particularly within the 11 bird priority zones.</li> <li>• Provide monitoring results to the landholders upon whose properties the survey sites are located.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Evaluation:</b> Evaluate the effectiveness and impact of Connecting Country’s activities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure up-to-date and effective internal and external evaluation processes are used for each focus area. The Expert Advisory group and universities (e.g. post-grad projects, internships) to be used where appropriate.</li> <li>• Develop individual MERI<sup>1</sup> plans for each large scale project.</li> <li>• Monitor Connecting Country partnerships using stakeholder analysis tools.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Review and Improve:</b> Adapt to results of monitoring and evaluation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use the information gained to identify best practice and to indicate directions for future improvement.</li> <li>• Adapt to feedback from project partners and the community.</li> <li>• Identify and respond to emerging threats, opportunities and gaps for future monitoring and evaluation.</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> MERI – Monitoring, Evaluation, Review, Improve

# ORGANISATIONAL FOUNDATIONS

**Goal:** That Connecting Country is a sustainable, well-managed, and adaptable organisation and is recognised as a leading not-for-profit community environment group.

**Note:** Connecting Country is a not-for-profit incorporated organisation under the Victorian *Associations Incorporation Reform Act 2012*. We are listed on the federal government’s Register of Environmental Organisations, have Deductible Gift Recipient Status and are a Registered Charity. For our projects, we are accountable to our funders. As an organisation, we are accountable to our members, and we operate in accordance with our Constitution.

Objective	Strategy	Relevant CC Documents
<b>Governance:</b> Continue to develop our effective and efficient governance approach supported with sufficient capacity and expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Periodically review Connecting Country’s structure and effectiveness.</li> <li>Maintain our commitment to review and evaluate with the support of external expertise if needed.</li> <li>Ensure we have a ‘balanced’ committee with appropriate skills, experience, and diversity.</li> <li>Develop a succession plan for committee membership.</li> <li>Ensure the community is given the opportunity to respond and engage with CC goals and plans.</li> <li>Adhere to our constitution and internal policies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Constitution 2013</li> <li>Delegations Policy</li> <li>Human Resources Policy</li> <li>Creative Commons Copyright</li> <li>Standing Orders</li> </ul>
<b>Planning:</b> Have a long term plan that is regularly used and periodically reviewed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Incorporate strategic plan objectives into annual work plan and project plans.</li> <li>Monitor and evaluate strategic plan implementation through community processes.</li> <li>Formally review strategic plan after 5 years.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strategic Plan 2014-2024</li> <li>Woodland Birds Action plan</li> <li>Landcare Strategic plan</li> </ul>
<b>People:</b> Attract and retain good contributors– paid and unpaid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Implement contemporary human resources policy and practice within the legal framework.</li> <li>Promote a creative and cohesive organisational culture with teamwork, cooperation and fun.</li> <li>Support skills and knowledge development for staff and volunteers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Human Resources Policy</li> <li>Delegations Policy</li> </ul>
<b>Partnerships:</b> Be outward focussed and work with others to increase capacity and impact.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seek new opportunities to work collaboratively with partner organisations and community.</li> <li>Maintain important relationships with government, organisations, individuals and groups.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Potential Project Policy</li> <li>Human Resources Policy</li> <li>Memorandum of Understandings</li> </ul>
<b>Financial:</b> Develop funding diversification and sustainability with sound financial management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop strategic partnerships with funders – government, CMAs, NGOs, philanthropic bodies.</li> <li>Continue to take a pro-active approach to funding opportunities including ‘ready-to-go’ projects and maintaining a future “projects” pipeline or prospectus.</li> <li>Maintain our good financial systems and fiduciary duty (e.g. transparency, accountability).</li> <li>Actively research and respond to upcoming funding opportunities and consider alternative sources (such as crowdsourcing, membership, sponsorship).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Financial Policy</li> <li>Potential Project Policy</li> <li>Credit Card Policy</li> <li>Fund Management Policy</li> <li>Delegation Manual</li> <li>Annual financial audit</li> </ul>



Final Version – 10 October 2014.

**Connecting Country (Mount Alexander Region) Inc.**

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