

Growing together at Euroa Arboretum

Committed staff like Cath Olive are working with traditional owners at the Euroa Arboretum to restore the natural environment and ensure it is preserved for future generations.



STAYING INFORMED / The new signs at the Euroa Arboretum are a collaboration between committee members, Taungurung artists, linguists and Taungurung writer and researcher, Aunty Angela ten Burren, with imagery (as above) by local artist Janet Fogarty. Each Taungurung artist compiled images for two signs each, and there are still more to come.

words Clemence Carayol photos Clemence Carayol/Euora Arboretum

GROWING back the bush is everyone's motto at the Euroa Arboretum, where it is good to walk under the aromatic leaves of the Eucalyptus and other plants that compose the 28 hectares of the park. The Euroa Arboretum is composed of grassy woodland, the fertile valleys and plains of our landscape characterised by those big old monarch River Red Gums, Yellow and Grey Box or perhaps Buloke with a diverse native grassy groundcover and introduced grasses.

Originally, the arboretum was a site for VicRoads when they were building the Hume Freeway bypass; the arboretum was created in 1992 initially as a place to showcase trees, but more recently specialising in grassland restoration. Cath Olive is one of the eight employees working at the arboretum; she's got her hands on every seed and tree around here and has been working at the arboretum for 11 years.

"The Euroa Arboretum is one of a kind," Ms Olive said.

"Our way of working is unique, because traditionally arboretums are a place of trees."

Grassy woodlands were once described as a 'gentleman's park' - the trees having grown with space around them. Their crowns spread, and as the branches get bigger and heavier, they droop to the ground and provide a great sprawling canopy. Herbs, lilies and grasses would have once dominated the ground and it would have been quite feasible to canter your horse through this country.

This part of our landscape has been highly prized for farming. It is typically gently sloping, fertile and ideal for grazing or cropping. It took a very short period for the herbs and lilies to be grazed out of existence from early settlement, and with the advent of super-phosphate, many of the native grasses have dropped out and been replaced by productive, introduced grasses.

"We are interested in restoring our landscape - we have a seedbank, an education program, a bush crew and a nursery," Ms Olive said.

"We manage to grow 70,000 plants every year thanks to our nursery staff and our wonderful volunteers that work there."

Ms Olive said that everyone should be reminded that when it comes to the environment, we have to think for the long term, like Aboriginal people do.

"I love working in partnership with the Taungurung mob at the arboretum," she said.

"Aboriginal people think about the environment in the long run - they think in terms of generations, not in terms of funding cycles. If we are to rehabilitate our landscape, particularly grassy woodlands that have been managed for millennia by traditional owners, I think we need to learn together with traditional owners. Working with Taungurung people is important because we are tapping into 60,000 years of knowledge and land management. We learn from each other." >>



PRESERVATION / Euroa Arboretum's Lyn Ingoldsby and Cath Olive (above) mix seed in readiness for sowing into grassland areas, while proud Taungurung men Shane Monk and Darren Detez (right) cool burn a patch to encourage planted yam daisies with some ash and reduce weed growth.

Grassy woodlands were managed by traditional owners for thousands of years with fire. Burning sessions are thus organised hand in hand with the Taungurung people at the arboretum. Herbs, medicines and food plants were increased through the careful use of fire and maintained an open structure of grassland with large, old trees scattered in the landscape.

"For us at the arboretum, we are using fire to promote native grasslands and reduce the weedy grasses - using an old, cultural technique to meet new land management challenges," Ms Olive said.

Uncle Shane Monk from the Taungurung mob led the burning process at the arboretum last autumn.

"We have been working in a patch to reduce the weedy Veldt grass and stimulating a patch of Myrnong or Yam Daisy that had been planted last year," Ms Olive said.

"We have continued burning after the autumn break each year in the last couple of weeks of April - trickling a low flame through dead grass and newly germinated weedy grass to manage weeds and stimulate germination of native plants. We hope to reduce our use of chemicals to control Veldt grass using this technique, and are seeing improvements every year with repeated burning in weedy patches."

Recently a new collaboration between the Taungurung people and the arboretum saw the light of the day: informative panels, with drawings by artists Cassie Leatham, Sammy Trist, Uncle Mick Harding and Mitch Harding and Janet Fogarty. The instructive texts on the panels were written by Aunty Angela Burren, with Libby Woodhouse, Carolena Helderma, Shirley

Saywell, Trent Howard and Cath Olive. The panels are a way of educating every visitor to the arboretum. Some of the signs are also in Taungurung language. Uncle Shane Monk from the Taungurung people said the collaboration with the arboretum and Cathy Olive had really been fulfilling.

"I've been working with Cath for a fair few years, we have done burning sessions, a few cultural workshops, and we have been working around growing cuttings of mountain pepper among other things," Mr Monk said.

"I'm really happy to work with the arboretum and with Cath - her team has given us a lot of support around how to grow our bush tucker food. We benefit from a really good relationship with Cath, she has been doing a lot for us Taungurung people."

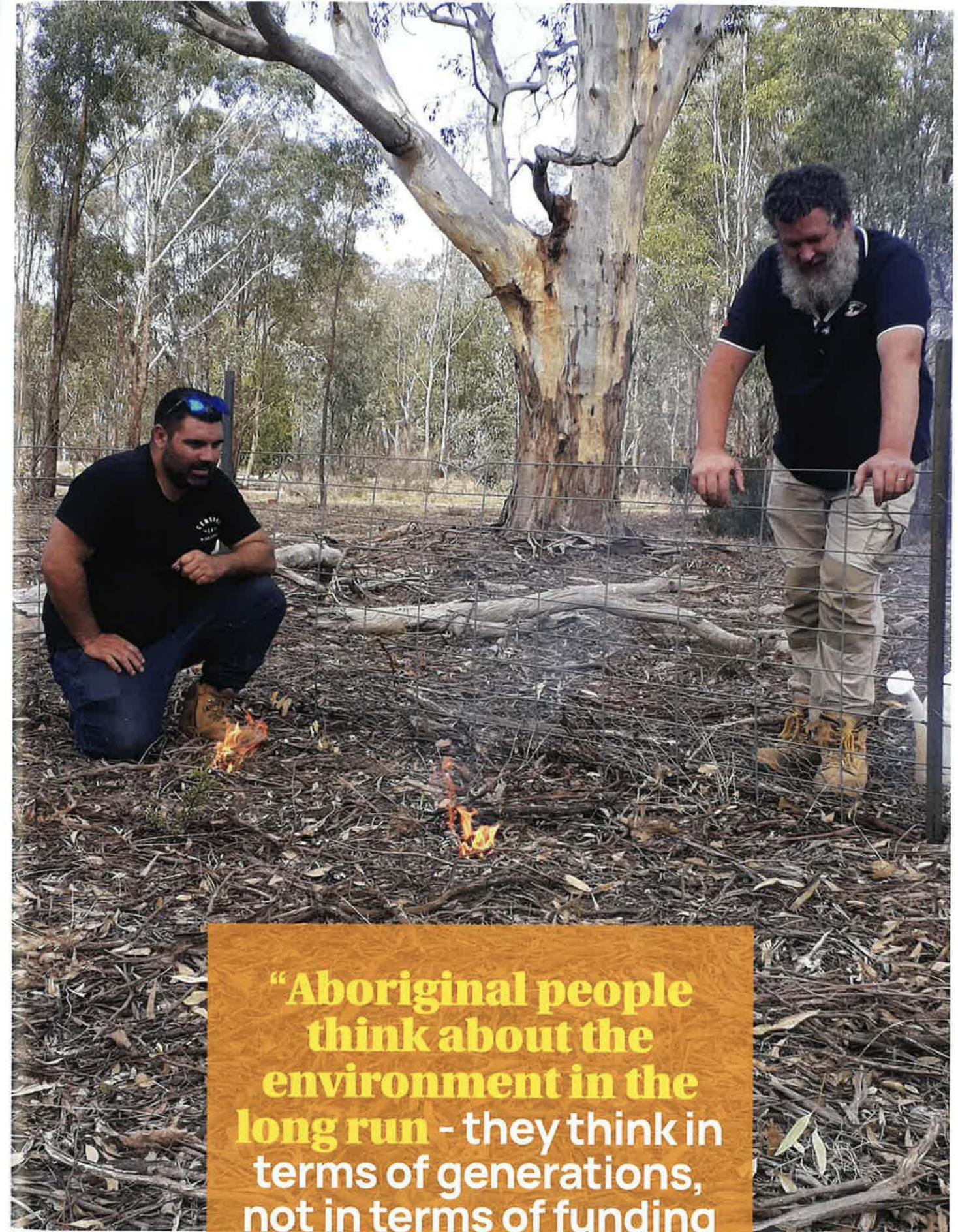
Mr Monk said it was important to have Ms Olive around, with her knowledge and cultural respect, to help Taungurung manage their land.

"She has got expertise, a lot of cultural respect - I cherish this really important relationship as a Taungurung man," Mr Monk said.

"Cath has been so helpful for us, for me, she's always there for us. I love working with Cath, she's got a broad knowledge which she loves to share."

He said the relationship went both ways.

"We both learn from each side, from each other; she learns a lot about native plants with us, she learns from us about our history and culture. There is a huge respect from both sides; from the arboretum to the Taungurung and from the Taungurung to the arboretum as they help us out as traditional owners of the land." ■



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