

WILLOW WARRIORS AND FRIENDS OF THE COLO

Fred Wood and Joanna Willmott met on a train coming home from work a few years ago and discovered a shared passion for Landcare. Fred was working with the Friends of the Colo Landcare group in Wollemi National Park and so inspired Joanna that she also joined the group. Together with an enthusiastic band of Landcare volunteers and National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) staff, they worked their way down the Colo River eradicating willows. While this sounds straightforward, this world-heritage listed area is steep gorge country and really hard to get to! Joanna recalls '[NPWS] helicopters lifted us in and then we would raft down the river treating willows'.

This intrepid spirit has carried the group forward over the last six years through an ever evolving work area. After they had treated around 5,000 willows in Wollemi National Park, the Friends of the Colo Landcare group continued working in the Colo catchment to prevent willow reinfestation in the national park by crack willow floating downstream along the river or by wind-blown seed from black willows growing downstream. With the shift in emphasis from willow control to monitoring for willow reinfestation, the group's weed portfolio expanded to include lantana, moth vine, gleditsia, cape ivy and tree of heaven but their enthusiasm was

unabated. Landcare activities keep them fit and active as they bushwalk or travel by canoe or inflatable raft to hunt down and treat willows. They joke that their Landcare site is 95 km from east to west and 100 km from north to south, covering 160kms of river, but they revel in exploring the dramatic gorges and forests of this beautiful wilderness area and doing their bit to protect it. And they enjoy many a delightful evening sitting round the campfire under a full moon and days walking, swimming and paddling in this pristine wilderness area, home of the Wollemi pine.

Recognising that it was sometimes necessary to revegetate weeded areas outside the national park, the group also established a small nursery near Glenbrook in the Blue Mountains and began collecting local native seed and growing longstem native seedlings that withstand the rigours of riparian planting. In spite of numerous lightning strikes that play havoc with the watering system and a little meddling from local possums, they now grow 3,000 local provenance tubestock each year and sell them to other community groups and landholders for riparian revegetation projects. The nursery is managed by Fred Wood who also started another Landcare group on Clarks Island in the Hawkesbury River.

So where do the Willow Warriors come in? Most of the willow eradication has been completed along the Colo River and the Friends of the Colo are now focusing on other weeds mapped inside the national park and monitoring the river for willow reinfestation. Driven by their passion for the environment, the desire to not leave Willows out of Wollemi equipment sitting in a shed and their growing expertise in willow control, they looked for new projects and a new Landcare group, the Willow Warriors, was born in 2005. Members travel to other rivers in south-eastern NSW to help landholders undertake willow control projects. Chairperson of the group, Jeff Cottrell, avidly keeps up with current research on willow mapping and eradication techniques and spends hours each month planning activities, organising gear and keeping maps up to date – though he says he's 'getting better at it' and was pleased to be asked to join the National Willows Taskforce as a community member.

Today the Willow Warriors have a bi-annual calendar of events planned. They meet one day a month to work on Clarks Island, spend another day at the Friends of the Colo Nursery and a third day on a river near Sydney treating willows. They also spend some weekends on a river somewhere mapping willows by species or treating



'Filling and filling' - treating willows. Photo: J. Cottrell



Mapping willow infestations along NSW rivers. Photo: J. Cottrell

isolated willows. Joanna says ‘we enjoy paddling and whitewater activities and we are basically taking our experience of remote access willow treatment to rivers throughout NSW’. They are committed to helping landholders eradicate invasive willow species from rivers in south-eastern Australia by mapping willows to provide information for willow control programs and treating willows in isolated sections of rivers. They also undertake follow-up monitoring and community education about willows and their control, sending data collected on trips to local Landcare groups, catchment management agencies and the National Willows Taskforce.

The group has built partnerships with various local governments and NSW government agencies as well as the National Willows Taskforce and landholders. They enjoy landholder support for their projects because they are Landcare volunteers and have developed a pool of equipment and expertise to undertake willow control projects particularly in remote areas. So far they have worked along the Colo, Grose, Hawkesbury and Wingecarribee rivers in the Hawkesbury-Nepean catchment and are spreading their wings to the Upper Murrumbidgee, Goobarragandra and Goodradigbee rivers in the Murrumbidgee catchment;

the Shoalhaven, Snowy and other coastal rivers in the Southern Rivers catchment; and the Indi in the Murray catchment. Mapping and treating invasive willows including cinerea, black, crack, alba and all their hybrids, they are learning more all the time and passing this information on to new volunteers and interested landholders. They are proud of their role as custodians of the land; more than that they have a lot of fun and see some amazing places!

Willow Warriors – contribution over the last year

Number of volunteer hours	Number of plants planted	Value of grants / sponsorship (\$)	In-kind contribution (\$)	Total value of works
2,280	n/a	\$17,000	\$45,600.00	\$62,600



Weed control can take you to some beautiful places – Friends of the Colo in the Colo Gorge. Photo: S. Cottrell