

Lessons from the frontline: The highs and lows of success and failure

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Key points

- Large Projects can provide optimism but also risk.
- Planning and consultation can be a difficult and prolonged process.
- The accumulation of challenges can lead to a less than successful outcome.
- Expectations need to be tempered by local reality.

Abstract

In November 2024 the Australian Trout Foundation (ATF) partnered with the North East Catchment Management Authority (NECMA) in a bold bid to begin the long and difficult restoration of a waterway in East Gippsland, Livingstone Creek. This creek had long suffered from the effects of dredge mining (Lawrence & Davies, 2019), forestry and intensive agriculture. The project was funded by Victorian Government's "Nature Fund Program" and supported by the Victorian Fisheries Authority. The program titled "Bringing back the Maccas to Livingstone Creek" was part of a statewide effort to recover the Macquarie perch population listed as an endangered species.

The intent of the project was to complement existing programs supporting environmental recovery of the Omeo Valley, such as Greening Australia's recently completed large-scale hilltop revegetation of the surrounding valleys with direct seeding of native trees together with stock exclusion fencing.

NECMA supported this project by undertaking waterway restoration works including battering eroded sections of the creek, weed control fencing and riparian replanting. These works were a precursor to releasing captive bred Macquarie perch fingerlings into Livingstone Creek.

The ATF was asked by NECMA staff to provide volunteer support to plant 40,000 plus trees and sedges in the riparian zone of over four kilometres of Livingstone Creek.

The planting was undertaken over two weeks in November 2024 and approximately 40 volunteers planted 42,000 plants.

Regrettably, the success of the efforts was not to last. Management of the private property changed hands, watering was neglected, severe drought impacted growth, fence gates were opened for cattle and plants failed to take.

Initially celebrated as a great outcome, over time the project became a source of despair for the road to recovery. The presentation will explore the reasons for the initial failure and follow-up actions, including both environmental and social impacts on volunteers and stakeholders.

Keywords

Timing and project extension, risk, consultation process, volunteer effort and expectations, financial impact, environmental impact, compromised outcomes

Introduction

In November 2024 the Australian Trout Foundation (ATF) partnered with the North East Catchment Authority Management (NECMA) in a bold bid to begin the long and difficult restoration of a waterway in East Gippsland, Livingstone Creek. This creek had long suffered from the effects of dredge mining (Lawrence & Davies, 2019), forestry and intensive agriculture. The project was funded in part by the

Victorian Fisheries Authority program titled “Bring back the Maccas”, an attempt to recover the Macquarie Perch population designated as a threatened species.

The lower reaches the creek were completely absent of riparian vegetation, save for some ‘historical’ poplars, so designated by one of the landholders involved in the project. The project promised to provide the opportunity for landscape alteration on a significant scale. Over four kilometres of creek was to be restored. Direct seeding of uphill regions of the Omeo Valley, funded by Greening Australia, and riparian planting, bank battering and in-stream rock seeding and fencing were all part of the broader project plan. Unfortunately, there were some aspects of the implementation that contributed to a less than satisfactory outcome of the project. This paper seeks to lay bare the learnings from this significant project.

Omeo has historically been a difficult area to get landholder participation and buy-in to projects, with landholders generally applying conventional farming methods (non-rotational grazing, lack of off-stream water, lack of shade and shelter) on their properties. Despite these challenges, NECMA staff have been working in the Omeo area for many years, primarily focusing on flood and fire recovery, and weed removal. NECMA sought to progress from reactionary to proactive intervention with this project.

Project planning and delivery

There were two distinct phases of this project, **Planning** (site selection and management agreement design) and **Project Delivery**. NECMA undertook all the project planning while the ATF were involved in the project delivery through riparian planting. Challenges and learnings from each phase of the project are detailed below.

Project planning

Site selection

Challenges

- While there was landholder willingness to participate in the project, there has been a strong history of landholder reluctance in agreeing to fence offsets and ongoing management requirements of sites. This contributed to the lengthy negotiation period and redesign of fences.
- Sites had very difficult terrain in remote areas of the farm, especially for fencing and maintenance. This resulted in the project being revised down to only include the most accessible river frontage.

Outcomes in this phase that were positive included:

- CMA staff being able to negotiate wide corridors off waterway.
- The fencing provided most of the corridors with logical entry and exit for moving stock with one person.

It was noted that things would have been easier if landholders were in constant contact with farm managers in the early stages of planning, potentially having a ‘sign off’ stage built into the agreement development. However, there is a “Catch 22” element to this since landholders in the area were initially resistant to the project, given its scale and intended impact.

The impact of these negotiations and delays as indicated above was critical for the project delivery phase. A reduced window for project implementation, particularly planting, meant a greater number of plants to be planted in a shorter period and without flexibility for choosing ideal conditions. This increased the risks of possible large-scale impact of adverse planting and growing conditions.

Project delivery

As noted above the prolonged negotiations for project contracts and agreements meant that the project delivery time was truncated. This truncation meant the scale of riparian planting could not be spread over a couple of seasons, thus increasing the risk of plant failure in the event of adverse growing conditions.

The delay also meant volunteers had to be onsite for two weeks without a break to achieve the intended outcome of 40,000+ plantings to meet the funding deadline. Early stages of planning had the project working on smaller sites each year so that large tasks, particularly the revegetation component could better utilise volunteers and wouldn't be impacted by machinery damaging previous work. With the delays, other challenges began to emerge, including:

- The increasing cost of materials. It was estimated that timber rock and fencing materials had more than doubled since the project budget was submitted. This produced further delays for project delivery and required redesign to remain within budget.
- Inclement weather in the early part of delivery meant machinery could not access sites to prepare them thus reducing time for planting regimes. This could have been a trigger for request for a review and possible project extension.
- Grow out time for plants was increased and some of the plants were too advanced to really take without significant care, particularly watering.
- From the ATF's perspective, coordinating such a large-scale planting over two weeks was challenging. The volunteer team was required to plant 4,000 trees and shrubs per day for ten days. Pressure was felt within the ATF management team to ensure targets were met. The lack of presence of additional NECMA staff beyond the NECMA Project Manager induced a sense to the volunteers that they were 'on their own' to a large extent.

Due to the need to plant so many shrubs and trees over the fortnight the ATF refined the planting process to a highly efficient process. Teams of drillers would drill ahead of the planters. Holes would then be watered, plants dropped by the distribution team and planters would move across the landscape dropping plants and backfilling. Follow-up watering would occur in the afternoon of the mornings planting. Although the work was demanding and the planting crew mostly over 70, planting quotas were maintained with great celebration each day.

The **greatest challenge** to emerge was caused by the delays in the project planning and delivery as noted above. Planting 40,000 trees and shrubs is not only a very big task undertaken by volunteers, but it also meant the risk to plant mortality was increased due to planting late in the season. An inch of rain fell only a few days after the planting was completed and all the volunteer crew were celebrating.

Regrettably this celebration was short lived as the region settled into a long hot and dry summer of drought conditions. Compounding this big dry was the impossibility to provide adequate watering by the two stations involved and the change of manager on one of the properties. The new manager was not supportive of the project and cattle infiltrated the sites despite the agreement stating no livestock access. Additional impacts include grazing pressure from feral deer migrating towards the creek.

While the disappointment at apparent mortality rate of most of the riparian plantings was keenly felt by the ATF volunteers, they were reassured by other success in the project and what is yet to come.

CMA staff are committed to ensuring these sites are successful (albeit long term). The project now includes a large direct seeding component following the initial tube stock failure as well as maintenance activities in coming years. While direct seeding is not new to NECMA, the design and timing in the Omeo area is. Greening Australia plots with deeper trenches have had the most success in surrounding areas and NECMA are keen to replicate this on riparian zones where it has been notoriously difficult to establish vegetation. Native seed has already been purchased, and negotiations are underway for getting machinery on ground to carry out works in autumn 2026. At time of writing this seeding had been undertaken and we await the results.

May 2026 update

Following the initial investment through the "Bringing Back the Maccas" project, the NECMA continue to work in the Omeo area, with significant investment from the Victorian Government Funded Environmental Contribution⁶ Upper Mitta Flagship Program and Asset Maintenance Program and the 2023 Recovery from Summer Storm and Flood Program. This investment area spans approximately

12.5km of riparian works along the Livingstone Creek from the township of Omeo to the confluence with the Mitta Mitta River.

CMA staff acknowledge the need for ongoing works, particularly follow-up on revegetation works and weed control sites. Staff have recently completed 3.5 ha of direct seeding (similar to the Greening Australia sites) following the failure of the initial plantings after the trial in Autumn 2025 which has been very successful.

The trial sites have been excluded from grazing for 18 months and are showing significant difference to grazed sections of the creek. This pronounced difference has gained the attention of farm managers, who are now more supportive of works and likely to continue excluding stock until after trees have established.

There has also been additional investment secured from external organisations such as the Victorian Fisheries Authority to continue habitat improvement works within Livingstone Creek. These continued works connect and compliment the Maccas project by removing invasive willows, installing fish habitat and increasing recreational access to key fishing areas.

The Omeo Angling Club have been successful in their own VFA grant and are currently completing similar works outside their clubhouse on the creek in consultation with CMA staff. Club members have reported their excitement to see the changes in the waterway and are keen to report on fishing successes and failures.

CMA staff are engaging with landholders neighbouring the revegetation site to discuss controlling ongoing stock access to revegetation areas.

Conclusion

While the ATF was not involved in the initial planning, they were intimately involved in the riparian recovery efforts. Unaware initially of the delays that compounded the challenges of the ambitious project scale, they entered into the project as a partner to NECMA with great enthusiasm.

Approximately 40 volunteers, all from the ATF, undertook the bulk of the planting over 10 days. A great camaraderie developed amongst the planting crew. All volunteers said they enjoyed the experience and felt they were contributing to a healthier environment.

This enthusiasm was tempered by the realization of the long hot summer having an impact on plant mortality. Information post planting further dampening spirits included cattle being turned onto the newly planted areas and failure to follow up the planting with a regular watering regime, probably due to land manager scepticism regarding the project benefits.

However, all was not lost, and the ATF were helped in understanding that environmental projects come with inherent risk. These risks can be out of our control, including the vagaries of the weather. Others can be managed with greater insight and learning from challenges. While appearing to be one step forward and several back, persistence over a period with an eye on the long-term goals may render the work ultimately beneficial. The May 2026 update to the project indicates longer-term success can be anticipated.

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References

Lawrence, S., Davies, P. (2019), *Sludge Disaster on Victoria's Goldfields*, Latrobe University Press, Melbourne.