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Bring biodiversity along for the ride

Sunday Mail Adelaide, Adelaide



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CLARE PEDDIE

HALFWAY between McLaren Vale and Strathalbyn, Neale Dyster tends his patch of bush on the 40ha property called Echidna Ridge.

The semi-retired filmmaker and photographer is motivated by “a general love of the bush” and a recognition of the “huge loss of habitat and biodiversity in Australia since white settlement”.

He runs tours to share the experience and inspire others.

Through the Prospect Hill Bushland Goup, he’s working with neighbours to protect and restore 800ha of bushland in the Mount Lofty Ranges.

“There’s about eight of us that have adjoining properties – all like-minded people – and we have monthly working bees where we get into the bush and pull out weeds and do a bit of revegetation when necessary,” Mr Dyster said.

“We also got involved with the state seed bank, where we collect seeds from plants that would have been widespread once upon a time and are much more limited now.

“We’re collecting seeds and putting them into the seed bank, so if there happens to be a bushfire or some sort of major disaster we can revegetate from there.”

Fearless Conversations panellists made clear that the biodiversity crisis was every bit as

dire as the climate-change challenge. And they said the two were inextricably linked.

Flinders University’s global ecology expert, Professor Corey Bradshaw, was deeply concerned about the continual loss of habitat from land-clearing. He said the practice was unacceptably being allowed by loop-holes in the Native Vegetation Act and through illegal activity.

He was also critical of any attempts to make up for land-clearing by planting elsewhere through offset schemes.

“Biodiversity offsets don’t work,” Professor Bradshaw said. “Unfortunately, most of the forests in Australia would take between 300 and 1000 years to gain the similar function from nothing.

“So, even if you could plant all the different species – the major tree species, all the shrubs and everything else on the forest floor – you wouldn’t get a fully functioning system for centuries.”

Professor Bradshaw said most people failed to appreciate

the full range of “services” provided by a fully functioning, biodiverse ecosystem to both the

water cycle and the atmosphere – including the air we breathe.

“All of these elements of what we call ecosystem functioning don’t come back, and sometimes never come back, once you raze a forest,” Professor Bradshaw said.

“Biodiversity offsets don’t work, no matter how good your system is set up.

“So, we have to get away from this concept that we can build and develop and destroy here, and then just do a bit of planting over there and ‘She’ll be right’. That’s a complete fallacy.

“So, instead, yes, we need to continue to restore; yes, we need to do that on a massive scale.

“But we also have to think about our development and putting it into the places that are (already) previously disturbed and unlikely to come into any sort of natural state.

“And get smarter (about using cleared land) through the intensification of agriculture as opposed to expansion.”

Frazer-Nash Consultancy energy analyst Dr Ben Heard preferred nuclear power to renewable projects that required land-clearing or disturbing ocean environments.

“That’s one reason why I’m quite passionate about nuclear technologies, because they are dense (developments),” he said. “It is a small footprint.”

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Neale Dyster in native bushland on his property at Echidna Ridge. Picture: Naomi Jellicoe