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Burrumbuttock's Wirraminna Environmental Education Centre volunteers honoured with new book

ABC Goulburn Murray / By Allison Jess Posted Thu 5 May 2022 at 3:21pm



Volunteers and guests at the Wirraminna book launch. (ABC Goulburn Murray: Allison Jess)

Wirraminna, the book, celebrates the story of how a group of community-minded volunteers from a small town in rural NSW turned a neglected dam into an award-winning bush reserve.

The book celebrates the history of the Wirraminna Environmental Educational Centre on Wiradjuri land in Burrumbuttock in southern NSW.

In 2019, author Megan Graham was asked by the Wirraminna committee to write a book to coincide with the centre's 25th anniversary in 2020.

Key points:

- Wirraminna is an award-winning environmental education centre that is open to the public
- The four-hectare site includes a dam, wetlands and natural woodland
- Author Megan Graham hopes readers will be inspired by the story that shows what can be achieved when good people come together

Ms Graham, who is now based in Melbourne, grew up in Wagga in the NSW Riverina.

The book's release date was delayed a couple of years due to COVID 19-related restrictions, but it was finally launched at the Burrumbuttock site this week by NSW Member for Albury Justin Clancy, with Ms Graham and Wirraminna volunteers in attendance.



Author Megan Graham says the world needs more Wirraminna's. (ABC Goulburn Murray: Allison Jess)

Ms Graham, who did about 100 hours of interviews with volunteers for the book, said the book pays tribute to the members of the Burrumbuttock community who developed an environment centre out of unused land.

The book tells the stories of the volunteers and celebrates what is possible when good people come together and create something special for their community.

Ms Graham said the book was also a part memoir. "I grew up in Wagga and have since moved to the city, and my own story is weaved into the book of returning to my rural roots and my experience," she said.

Ms Graham said the book acknowledged the traditional owners of the land and their knowledge.

She also hoped the book would remind people how important it was to get off screens and reconnect with nature.

"Be reminded of the importance of being out in the scrub with wildlife and plant life and being reminded of the benefits that have on your mental health," Ms Graham said.

When good people come together

Petaurus Education Group chair Adrian Wells is a long-time supporter of Wirraminna.

The group delivers free education programs to schools and community groups in south-east Australia.

He said Wirraminna as an environmental education site had its beginnings in 1983 when a small group of locals came together and discussed the idea of turning a neglected area in Burrumbuttock into a community facility.

"The idea was to create a space that would be a good example of the bushland that was here before farming arrived – that was the main aim from the start," Mr Wells said.

Mr Wells said the dam at the existing site was dug out in 1902 by a group of Chinese labourers and became a watering point for stock passing through the area on their way to market.

"When that need disappeared with the advent of rail and better transport, it then became a waterhole for the township of Burrumbuttock," he said.

"So people used to bring their water buckets here and fill them up with water, so it became a community place where many people met and stories were shared," he said.

"In about 1980, when a proper water supply was put onto the town, this place fell into disrepair — people still went swimming and yabbing in the dam, but it became a bit of a rubbish dump as well."

A sign at the entrance of the Wirraminna Environmental Education Centre with a vine with leaves drawn saying look, listen.

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The Wirraminna Environmental Education Centre has won various awards over the years, including two national Landcare awards. (ABC Goulburn Murray: Allison Jess)

Mr Wells said volunteers had today made the four-hectare public site — that included a dam, wetlands and natural woodland, an attraction place for visitors far and wide.

He said paying a visit included school and community groups, government agencies, nature lovers and tourists.

He said Wirraminna was home to critically endangered and vulnerable species, including the southern corroboree frog and the squirrel glider.

He said the Petaurus Education Group was formed from Wirraminna in 2014 to expand on the centre's environmental education values.

As good as your volunteers

Wirraminna Environmental Education Centre chair Darryl Jacob said he was proud of how the centre had developed since he and a small group of locals first discussed possible ideas for the neglected bushland in 1993.



Wirraminna chair Darryl Jacob is part of initial group who were keen to turn the neglected dam into a bush reserve. (ABC Goulburn Murray: Allison Jess)

Mr Jacob estimated community members had put in about one million volunteer hours at the centre over the years. "Success rests on volunteers," he said.

"You have to have the volunteers to put the hard yards in, and I'm very lucky to have had those over the years."

Mr Jacob said many groups across Australia had emulated what was done by volunteers at Wirraminna to create their own public spaces.

Posted 5 May 2022 ABC News