

Green WARRIORS

With headlines full of dire warnings about climate change, pollution and logging, people are becoming overwhelmed with a feeling that the problem is just too big.

All many want to know is how can they get their hands dirty to clean up the planet.

Environment groups are the ultimate in grassroots activism, with volunteers dedicating their time and energy, working together to protect, restore and develop nature in their own backyard. MEG SOBEY and JESSICA FOULDS talk to a few of them.

Daryl Akers had always been interested in wildlife and, as concrete replaced greenery, it was obvious that many native species were missing around his home.

"I realised I should do something. You can't neglect your own local habitat," the Melton Environment Group president said.

"There seems to be a rush to develop as much land as possible. But it's not just weedy real estate.

"It needs to be protected for its own sake. And people need wild places around them. It's good to be in nature, rather than soulless suburbia."

Mr Akers is now a member of several other "friends" collectives around the town with the common aim of saving creeks and grasslands.

"It is hard to get the environmental message across. We would like to get more volunteers, especially younger people. Little kids especially are very receptive."

His son Richard, 25, grew up planting saplings and being on the lookout for frogs, lizards and eagles alongside his dad, inspiring him to study environmental science.

"Some of the best memories of being a kid were going to the bush around Melton.

"There is a lot of talk and not so much action. But there is so much still living out here. It just needs the will to help it survive."

The Friends of Werribee Gorge and Long Forest Mallee has been showing the strength of people power since forming in Moorabool in 1984.

That was partly in response to the push to urbanise what were previously rural areas, according to group historian Bob Reid.

"It is part of a series of conservation groups that were [initially] sponsored by the Victorian National Parks Association."

The volunteers were needed to fill in the gaps park rangers were too busy to get round to and to form lobby groups.

The group was recently successful in joining residents lobbying the Moorabool council to stop the sale of three blocks of land at Long Forest reserve.

Today the group has 27 members and a mailing list of 70, with members giving up to 50 hours of their time a week. Partnerships have also been developed with local landowners who create corridors of vegetation on their farms for wildlife.

Mr Reid says people who are unwilling or unable to commit themselves could volunteer at "project days" to help with a variety of tasks including maintaining walking tracks, removing weeds, and trimming vegetation.

"You can't make a difference to the big global issues, but you can make a difference in your own neighbourhood. That's the thing that motivates us."

Westmeadows resident Julie Law attended a community meeting for the Friends of Upper Moonee Ponds Creek.

"All I remember saying is, how can I help? The group came about because the environment needed support."

One community day held on Clean Up Australia Day involved a huge clean-up of the area. Boats were used to pull a double dumper bin full of rubbish out of one small section of the creek.

"There's still a lot more to do," Ms Law says. "But the involvement and engagement of the community has brought the sense of the area being a special little place people locally can go to and enjoy."

The Woodend and Five Mile Creek Landcare Group is focused on

returning the local waterway and surrounds to a near natural state, president Jo Clancy says.

"We'll never have it back the way it was before the first settlers arrived and we know that.

"I want to see it as a healthy creek, with healthy water, plants and animals — a creek that will enhance the lives of all people in Woodend."

Work by the Quarry Road group, dedicated to clearing the railway reserve, is starting to show signs of success.

"It just looks beautiful," Ms Clancy says. "There is a whole heap of wildflowers there.

"They've been there all these years, but struggling. Now they're getting along without all the weeds.

"I think a lot of people care about the environment. In a country area, looking after your own town is a big part of it. Keeping fire hazards down is also a big factor for some people."

Friends of Emu Bottom Wetlands has achieved much in its 15 years. Until 1991 the area was a sparse piece of land rented out for horse agistment, and in 1994 a flood covered the wetlands all the way up to the car park on Racecourse Road.

Now, thanks to the group's dedication, revegetated areas are frequently used by people enjoying the great outdoors.

In the last year alone the group has planted 960 plants on four planting days, president Ian Sutherland says.

One of the priorities has been establishing an indigenous ecology, restoring the wetlands to what they would have been like before Sunbury was developed.

"Native birds come to native plants. We've been putting in the ones that used to be here, trying to match the remnant vegetation."

While many groups struggle to find more people willing to roll up their sleeves, volunteers donning snorkels, flippers and wetsuits have more than doubled in the Marine Care Point Cook group's first year. Its 15 members meet once a month on a tranquil stretch of sand, then plunge into the colourful underwater world that is the Point Cook Marine Sanctuary.

President Jacqueline Flynn was among those who responded to a call for volunteers for Point Cook's first community conservation group.

"Being new to Point Cook, it was great to meet other like-minded people. It's made me feel more part of the community."

In its first year, the group has been busy helping fight off a red algae pest by conducting surveys of the plant along Point Cook's coastline. If not contained, the algae threatens to kill off native algae, a food source for local marine life.

The group also has activity days during warmer months, when it encourages people to look below the surface. "It helps if people see what's under the water," Ms Flynn says. "Then they're more inclined to want to protect species from potential threats. A lot of what we do is raising awareness about this environmental asset."

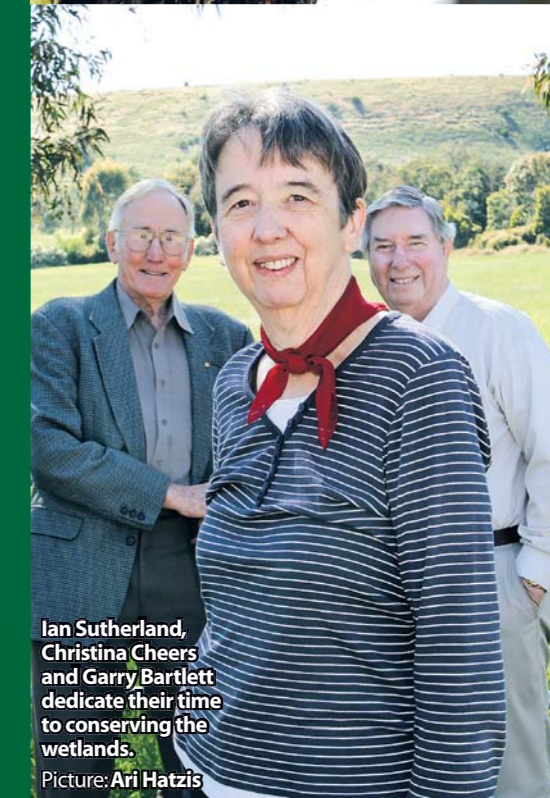
While governments can announce projects and funding, it's really people who can sow the seeds for a greener future.

After all, it's in our best interests. We are as much part of the ecosystem as koalas and eucalyptus, and by caring for our environment we essentially care for our way of life. You do not need to be a tree hugger — you just need to be a tree planter.

Young warrior:
Three-year-old Thomas
gets back to nature.
Picture: Shawn Smits



Julie Law at the site
of her favourite tree
Picture: Darren Howe



Ian Sutherland,
Christina Cheers
and Garry Bartlett
dedicate their time
to conserving the
wetlands.
Picture: Ari Hatzis