

Green corridors vital for sustainable growth

Our beautiful natural environment is under threat, says Brian Purdue.

THE Lower Hunter faces unprecedented development over the next 30 years. Big plans are afoot and if we are not diligent as a community, we will see the reasons why we enjoy living here disappear.

Sustainable and balanced growth was the aim of the State Government's two most recent planning studies for the Lower Hunter. In practice, though, we continue to slide towards unsustainable development; a fact that our decision-makers have, thus far, chosen to ignore.

It's our wonderful natural surroundings that give us our enviable lifestyle. We must, therefore, protect our environment by keeping it and development apart. To achieve this, we must put key areas of the environment into designated ecological "corridors" that are development no-go zones.

The Government must recognise the long-term ecological imperative and future social benefits of establishing and maintaining these biodiversity and green space corridors.

Their creation will help balance and soften the impact of the built environment on our natural environment. These corridors will provide clean air and water, as well as crucial habitat for ever-decreasing species and numbers of wildlife. They will also enrich the quality of life of present and future communities so, at this critical planning stage, foresight is essential.

It is now universally recognised that nature corridors promote biodiversity. In the past, badly planned development created "islands" of high-conservation-value land. But, over time, biodiversity within these isolated pockets died and their values were lost, so this plainly unsustainable approach failed.

Given that sustainability is at its heart, government planning must quickly and firmly cement these corridors into its regional strategy documents. Failure to do so would result in the remaining conservation lands being subjected to future development pressures as their



SOCIAL BENEFITS: Green Corridor Coalition member Brian Purdue, left, and Dennis Hirst at Pambalong Reserve.

environmental values degrade. History would again repeat itself.

These forest and wetland corridors have been painstakingly identified by local council and State Planning but they are still under threat from many quarters, including land speculation.

In the past, rural, urban and industrial development and associated infrastructure required clearing of vegetation, including ironbark and spotted gum forests. This clearing, along with massive coalmining, is causing serious erosion, sediment and pollution problems for the Hunter River.

These facts were highlighted by the Healthy Rivers Commission's inquiry into the Hunter River. The Government's strategies must properly address the inquiry's findings or they will fail. The effects of "climate change" will impact on us all, so it must be a prime consideration in the planning process.

Large areas of the Lower Hunter are already, or are about to be,

committed to irreversible urban and industrial development and related infrastructure. Government planning accepts as its basis that there will be continuing growth of the greater metropolitan region, which includes the Lower Hunter, by 1000 people a week for the next 30 years.

The Green Corridor Coalition that represents over 40 community and conservation groups is focused on securing protection for the biodiversity corridor that runs through the centre of the Lower Hunter region.

This is a major regional corridor! Areas within it have very high conservation value. The federal, state and local governments recognise this fact, and are spending substantial amounts of public money buying and protecting these areas. The environment it contains gives this region its uniqueness.

The Green Corridor begins in the largest sand dune system in NSW at Stockton Bight then sweeps through the coastal estuary wetlands and

climbs up the Tank Paddock spur to Mount Sugarloaf and on to the Watagans. Its passage provides a green edge and scenic backdrop to Newcastle, Lake Macquarie, Port Stephens, Maitland and Cessnock. It is essential that this corridor is robustly maintained.

The corridor will play a very important social function in this increasingly densely populated area of the Hunter. This importance will increase as the population increases.

This is a practical proposal because most of the green corridor is government owned.

Local councils cannot secure the green corridor on their own. We must, therefore, gain a guarantee from the state and federal governments to create and protect this nationally and internationally important biodiversity and green space corridor - this region's and our balanced future depends on it.

Brian Purdue is a representative of the Green Corridor Coalition.