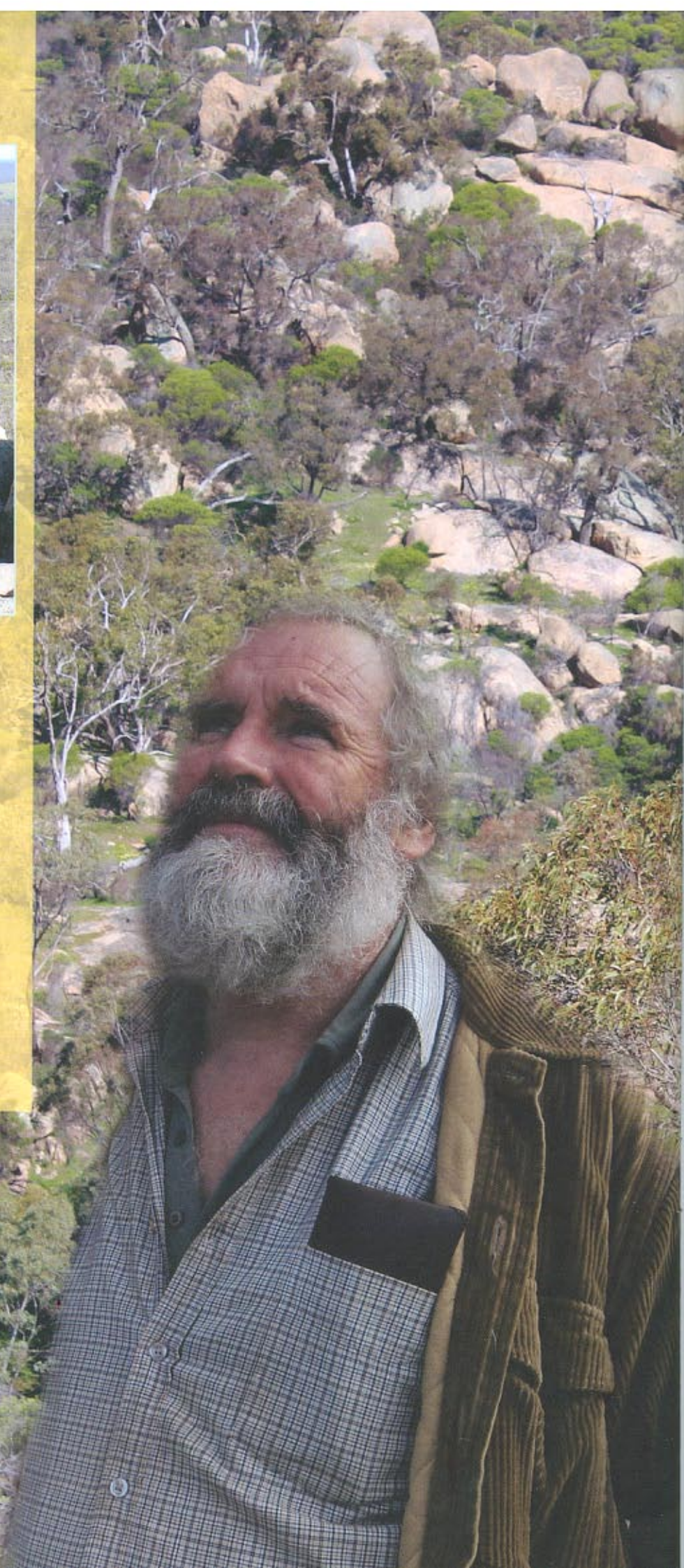


Doug was born and bred in the Castlemaine district and is the 5th generation of his family to live there.

He has worked at a variety of jobs and been a self employed carpenter for around 35 years. He has a lifelong interest in the natural environment and has been involved in campaigns to get better protection for the forests in central Victoria. History is a subject he has been interested in for much of his life and he has a good knowledge of the goldfields and further afield.



# VOICE FOR THE VOICELESS

Sasha Shtargot interviews Doug Ralph

INTERVIEW

**B**OX-IRONBARK country, in the foothills north of the Great Dividing Range, stretches in a belt across central Victoria and into the north-east of the state. Doug Ralph was born in this country at Castlemaine and has lived there nearly all of his 66 years. His descendants came to the area in 1851 during the gold rush. He stood for the Greens in the seat of Bendigo in the 1996 federal election and was a founding member of the Friends of the Box Ironbark Forests in 1997. Passionate about the environment and local history, he leads bushwalks and is something of an elder and mentor to young artists and environmentalists. He spoke with Sasha Shtargot.

*Doug, there seems to be a flowering of environmental awareness and alternative lifestyles at the moment in the Castlemaine area. How do you explain it?*

Well, there's been a huge change in attitude towards the forests around here, mainly in the last 20 years. People used to be far more interested in the (gold mining) heritage of the area than the natural environment. We started the Friends of Box Ironbark Forests to gain recognition for the forests – we thought they needed a political voice. One of our victories was in the early 2000s when a section of the Calder Freeway was planned through a beautiful forest at Malmsbury. We campaigned against that and the authorities ended up changing the route of the freeway. They put a bend in the freeway away from the forest, put wildlife underpasses for animals, made changes to the designs of the freeway. I'm proud to say that I helped save a forest.

Something special is happening in central Victoria. There are now 2000 people in environment and Landcare groups in the Mount Alexander Shire, which is probably more than any other comparable area anywhere in Australia. There's a spiritual element to it in that people are feeling a

strong connection to place, a sense of belonging, and like-minded people are being attracted here. Really great people are coming all the time and I love being around them.

*What do you think is special about the land here?*

There's something about the light here. I don't know how to describe it – you just have to experience it. Once people learn to see it, the light has a big influence on them. You notice it especially when it's wet, in the morning until about 10 or 11, and before it gets dark. In winter there's a kind of horizontal light as the sun is going down and you get amazing light shows – the whole landscape sparkles with light.

I was deeply moved by a book about the Yarra River written by Maya Ward (*The Comfort of Water*, Transit Lounge 2012). In that she mentioned a story of some monks at a monastery who drew their water from one river all the time. They experienced the river, in a way they became the river. If you are drinking water from a particular area you are that water, you are the food of the area. Aboriginal people understand that – you just become part of the land.

I go for walks in the bush. It's my way of meditating and sometimes afterwards I don't know where I've been, I just blend with the landscape. One day I was walking in this way in a trance and all of a sudden I stopped – three wallabies were sitting nearby, eating calmly. Normally wallabies run away when a human is near, but these just sat there. I stopped and looked at them and they looked at me. It was a special moment.

*Doug, the land in central Victoria was deeply scarred by mining and logging. Then cattle and sheep farms had their impacts. How has the land regenerated after all that?*

In the last few decades, farming became unviable around here. Once the farming stopped, the trees started to come back. It's been like a resurrection – something that was dead coming back to life. Historically, the early white settlers described the land as "park-like" – the forests

had big trees with space in between. That's what (British explorer) Major Mitchell described when he came through this area. But they cut down the big trees and when you do that you get a denser, coppiced, multi-stemmed growth. After all those years the forest is opening out again.

There's a lot of regeneration going on and you are getting trees coming up in some places that haven't been seen since the days of the gold rush. Once grazing stops, life comes back from nowhere. Where I live there were cattle for over 100 years, but the land is repairing itself. Even where you've had the worst impacts of mining, like where the land has been sluiced, it's regenerating. You can strip the land bare but a seed will still germinate, a blade of grass will still come up.

*People talk about active "revegetation" of the land, for instance planting trees to mitigate climate change, but you're not really a supporter of that, are you?*

The Government has this idea of a "green army" of people planting trees, but they need to get their head around changing the way the land is managed. We don't have to plant 20 million trees – if we leave the land alone and let it regenerate we'll get 100 million trees coming back. Bob Brown said that if you want to tackle greenhouse gas emissions, take all the cattle out of central Australia. If you did that, all the regrowth would be a huge carbon sink.

In America where they have stopped farming, they've seen the land go back to forest, and in Europe people are talking about "re-wilding". Regeneration is happening in a big way all over Australia, especially in the southern states. After all the rain that we had (in 2010-2011) there's been massive growth and that has been huge for storing carbon. Changing the way you manage the land is about changing your attitude to it. It comes down to respecting the land – the earth is capable of repairing itself ■