**Doug Ralph**

I first met Doug Ralph in 1995. I was brand new in Castlemaine, but one day found myself at the kitchen table of a local household. Doug was sitting opposite me at that table: a very large, ruddy faced man with little to say. I really didn’t know what to make of him, but he seemed to want to talk more.

A conversation grew over the next few years, largely around the subject of the Castlemaine region’s mining heritage, and the health of central Victoria’s forests and woodlands.

A small but lively group of people coalesced around those talks, often held in places like the Screaming Carrot Café. There was concern that the region’s natural areas needed help, and it was decided to officially form the Friends of the Box Ironbark Forests of Mount Alexander Region to advocate for woodland protection. It was a timely thing to do, because the Victorian government had just set up an inquiry into the future of all public land in the region.

Making Doug the first President of the new group was an obvious and unanimous decision. For a start he was a long-time local, and anyway, every-one seemed to like him. That organisation now has around 140 members and it’s still growing. If you don’t know it, the website is definitely worth checking.

As a seasoned campaigner myself, I was intrigued by Doug’s preferred method of spreading the message. Indeed it was a while before I realised just how much he was doing. He wasn’t too impressed with brochures and the like. Doug just spent time in the street, the supermarket, or wherever he happened to be, talking over issues with anyone he knew – and he seemed to know pretty much everyone.

There are many stories that could be told about Doug’s endeavours, but I’d like to tell just one. When the Calder freeway’s Taradale bypass was being planned, Doug got wind that it would plough through a small but valuable native woodland on private land. He quickly got a few people together to speak at the planners’ public hearings.

Now, as you drive towards Melbourne, you’ll come to a point where the freeway flies over the Taradale Metcalfe road. Shortly after that, as it starts to bend to the left, you can see eucalypts poking up between the two sides of the freeway. They mark a wildlife corridor between that private land on the western side and another woodland to the east. The freeway then follows a long swooping curve, leaving the threatened woodland very much intact.

Whenever I go that way, I think of it as Doug’s bend.

Doug listened to people and learned from them, and he spent a lot of time, a lifetime perhaps, learning from the bush itself. He made up his own mind about things, and was happy to take any amount of time over that process.

He was a kind man, and careful with what he said.

Importantly, Doug saw the famous gold-mining history of the region as not just a heroic story, though, of course, in many ways it was. But it was also an activity that caused great damage to the native woodlands and forests of central Victoria, an impact that is still felt by these natural areas today. Essentially, we are living in a recovering but still wounded landscape.

Doug wanted that story to be told. He wanted people to understand how the woodlands were slowly healing themselves, and how best we might help that happen.

I live in Melbourne now, but Doug has remained a good friend, a most reliable adviser, and a wise counselor. I will miss him greatly.

Phil Ingamells

March 2015