

Story of Change

Birch's Creek, Smeaton

The Rowlands family



The Rowlands' 60-hectare property on Birch's Creek downstream of Smeaton has been many things over the years.

"There was actually a gold mining township (called Clementson) on the property, including a state school and cricket pitch," Claire Rowlands said.

"There were three pubs in the front paddock with maybe 100 tiny titles".

Today, it is a small mixed farm, where the Rowlands run sheep and cattle together with share cropping.

"There was comparatively little vegetation on the place. There were pine trees left from the school and a few gum trees scattered around the place," John Rowlands said.



Claire and John Rowlands amongst recent successful revegetation

"There were a handful of natives down the creek, but it was predominantly choked with willows and over the time we've been here, it had deteriorated.

"We had some early attempts to try to do something about it. We cleared out a hole for swimming but over time the creek just kept moving and eroding around the willows. With the widening and willows falling over the swimming hole disappeared.

"In the end the creek almost stopped. Pools were stagnating, the creek bed was widened with fallen willows. You could see, even in the time we have been here, how quickly it had deteriorated."

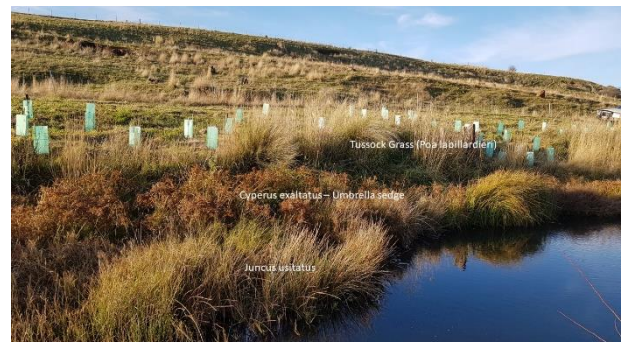
In 2019, the Rowlands worked with the North Central CMA to remove the willows, fence off the creek to livestock, and revegetate the banks with native plants.

"A key concern about removing the willows and other invasive species was increasing the temperatures of the water in the creek in the short term and potentially destroying the platypus habitat," John said.

"So, we've spent a lot of time on tree re-establishment along the creek.

"It was on my birthday last year that I happened to walk down to the creek and a platypus goes paddling by. I was just blown away - a 'tell everyone' moment. Our new neighbour also saw a platypus nearby about a week later."

"The native grasses are re-establishing on the banks and in the water which is great. It's exciting to see leptospermum and callistemons naturally regenerating along the creek where we previously only had a few original plants."



A diversity of native understorey grows where once only willows choked the creek

The Rowlands acknowledged there was some local opposition to removing the willows, which are classed federally as a Weed of National Significance.

“It is another reason we are quite determined to make it work,” Claire said.

“Apart from the fact that we believe that it should have been done, we want to leave something better for the future.



John captured drone footage post willow removal, fencing and revegetation

“The CMA has performed some passes on hawthorn and willow regrowth and plans to return. It will need regular follow up. We’ve made a pass right through on gorse but of course more is appearing”.

“There’s been a lot of fennel and thistle that’s grown because it’s able to now. In the first summer we pulled out a lot of Bathurst Burr by hand along our kilometre of Birch’s Creek frontage.”

“You need to be prepared to follow up and not rely fully on the CMA. We’ve replanted failed trees, guarded against wallabies, brush-cut, replaced guards and slashed to give the new trees their best chance.”

The Rowlands understand these projects are all about long-term benefits.



Birch’s Creek on a trajectory of improving health

“Yes, it’s a long-term project and we’ll keep planting down the creek. We report back to our local Landcare group and share the photos and I think they’re quite pleased,” Claire said.

“Going from a view that was choked with willows and hawthorn to an area where the earthmovers had piled everything up was a bit like ‘scorched earth’. We thought, ‘what have we done?’”



Lay down flood resilient fencing installed across the creek aids stock management while protecting the creek

“That reinforced our determination to succeed,” John said.

“We’ll keep working with the CMA whenever we can. We’ll reach some other spots that weren’t planted and get them planted as well.

“A plus that we hadn’t really considered, but has become quite important to us, was that because of the fencing we have considerably more control over where sheep and cattle move now, protecting the creek at the same time.

“It’s now much easier to strategically graze the creek paddocks and manage sections as a result of the fencing that’s gone in. In the past, if you let stock into the creek zone they roamed the whole creek.”

“We realise that it is important to get a balance of flow and water penetration. The larger dead willow trunks lying in the creek bed have allowed many pools to establish and to control the flow. The revegetation will enhance that.”