

**W**OULD this be your reaction if you were notified that you have got rare flora on your property? It shouldn't be. This article discusses some of the issues surrounding rare flora and its protection, and explains why rare flora is not the impediment that some land managers perceive it to be.

Western Australia has some 12000 to 13000 species of flora, and the south west is one of the megadiverse flora hotspots of the world. Unfortunately, this area of great floral diversity is also the region of greatest development, and hence land clearing and loss of habitat. The end result is that Western Australia has a large number of rare flora species, either due to natural rarity because of the diversity of species, or because of the destruction of much of the habitat in which they once occurred.

One of the results of the correlation between the floral diversity of the south west, and the agricultural and urban development that has occurred in this area, is that a large number of rare flora populations occur on private land. In fact, 20% of them do. Private land owners thus have an important role to play in ensuring that our flora is conserved.

There are many reasons to protect these rare plant species, from economic to aesthetic, and maintenance of biological processes to philosophical. Suffice to say that our flora is a valuable asset that we should not let slip away so that future generations cannot have the benefits that our flora brings.

Our flora is protected through a number of different pieces of legislation that approach the issue from different perspectives:

- ▶ the Soil and Land Conservation Act (administered by the Department of Agriculture) recognises the role that vegetation plays in preventing soil and land degradation, and hence provides for vegetation protection for this purpose;
- ▶ the Country Areas Water Supply Act (administered by the Water

# FLORA

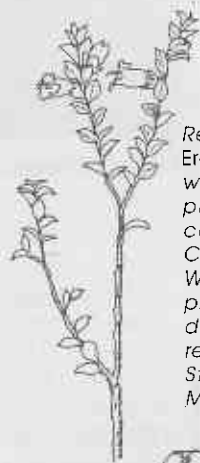
## OH NO!! RARE FLORA!!

Ken Atkins



The Mogumber Bell, *Darwinia carnea*, exists only on private property at Mogumber and Narrogin.

Margaret Pleroni



Resinous poverty bush, *Eremphila vermicosa* ms, was known only from a pressed specimen collected in 1934 by Charles Gardner and William Blackall and was presumed extinct until discovered in a bush remnant on Kathie & Jack Stone's farm near Marchagee in 1998.

Sue Patrick



and Rivers Commission) protects vegetation to protect our drinking water; and

- ▶ the Environmental Protection Act (administered by the Department of Environmental Protection) provides for overall vegetation protection and prevents significant environmental impacts.

But it is the Wildlife Conservation Act that provides specific protection to rare flora. This Act is administered by the Department of Conservation and Land Management.

The Wildlife Conservation Act allows the Minister for the Environment to declare a species of native flora to be 'rare flora' if it is either likely to become extinct, is rare, or is otherwise in need of special protection. This term 'rare

flora' is the equivalent to 'threatened flora' in international terminology. There are currently 364 species of flora declared as rare (16 of these being presumed to be extinct).

When a species is declared as rare, the Act provides special protection to the flora, in that it may only be 'taken' with the permission of the Minister. 'Taking' includes any act that may affect the plant, including destroying it, picking a piece, burning the plant, or allowing stock to graze them. This applies equally to Crown land and private land; to government employees and private landowners; and to land developers and research scientists.

So on the face of it, having rare flora on your property may appear to be an encumbrance – but is it really?

If you own rural land in the south west, it is probable that your property has now been cleared to the extent that it is going to be. This may be because that is the way you want it, or because you are aware that any further clearing will result in increased land degradation (and hence ultimately lost production) on your property, or because of the increased restrictions being imposed on land clearing due to regional land degradation problems. There are many reasons to preserve the vegetation remaining on your property, not only because it provides your land with shelter and protection from land degradation (salinity, waterlogging and erosion), but also because it enhances the aesthetic appeal of the land and provides a link to the natural environment in which you live.

As if there are not enough reasons to protect vegetation, the presence of rare flora enhances the special character of the area, and provides an added justification for having retained that 'bit of bush'. In many situations, it becomes a reason to keep an area of bushland that you were going to retain anyhow!

But what impositions are placed on a landowner with rare flora? Essentially the legislation states that you cannot take it without permission. This does not impose a great burden, as it does not require

the land manager to go out and undertake any particular management actions. The land remains the owner's, and the owner cannot be forced to do any action, other than protect the rare flora. This may require fencing the bush to stop the flora being grazed, but assistance can be provided to help with the fencing. The protection of the bush will also have the added advantage of keeping it healthy and functioning to provide the many benefits to the rest of the property.

Of course we know that bushland sometimes needs management, such as weed control, or regeneration burning to keep it healthy – but how can this be done if the rare flora cannot be 'taken'? In situations such as this, the land manager may apply to the Minister, through the Department of Conservation and Land Management, for a permit to take rare flora. The application is assessed and if the rare flora will

not be damaged, or will regenerate, especially if this will benefit the conservation of the rare flora, then a permit may be issued. The objective of rare flora conservation is not to lock these populations up, but to have them managed in such a way that they remain healthy, and hopefully increase in size.

The Department will provide advice on the appropriate management of rare flora (and its bushland habitat), and if requested, may also assist landowners in this management through recovery teams that are established to coordinate the management of rare flora in the regions of the south west. Contact your LFW Officer or local Departmental office for further information.

In most situations, therefore, the presence of rare flora does not pose an encumbrance to a property owner, but may help the owner in obtaining advice or assistance in managing

the bush. By knowing where these populations are, the Department can gain further information on the ecology and management needs of the species, and be able to better manage the species as a whole to ensure its conservation. Landowners are thus encouraged to report to the Department any suspected (or known) occurrences of rare flora on their property, so that the appropriate protection and management of the flora can be arranged, and our floral heritage preserved.

---

*Ken Atkins is Principal Botanist at the Department of Conservation and Land Management, Kensington. Besides rare flora, he is also responsible for overseeing a wide variety of off-reserve conservation programmes, including Land for Wildlife. He can be contacted on 9334 0425. Rare flora queries to Mike O'Donoghue, 9334 0422.*