

Heather and Jim are passionate about preserving nature for future generations. **FACING PAGE** Volunteers are welcome to stay in a cosy, riverside glamping tent when working at EcoGipps.



# tree change

JIM AND HEATHER PHILLIPSON'S COMMITMENT TO REGENERATING A BEEF CATTLE FARM IN GIPPSLAND, VIC, HAS BLOSSOMED INTO AN INSPIRATIONAL CONSERVATION MISSION.

WORDS PENNY CARROLL PHOTOGRAPHY MARNIE HAWSON





“JUST START.” THIS SIMPLE mantra is the seed that has grown into a literal forest for conservationists Jim and Heather Phillipson. When the couple bought a 36-hectare beef cattle farm in Upper Maffra West in the early '80s, they didn't know exactly how they would go about regenerating the degraded landscape. But they didn't let that stop them. “It's like having children,” says Jim, 69, with a smile. “You just have to start.”

Back then, the property in Victoria's Gippsland region was “a desert”, says Heather, 67. “There was not a tree in sight,” she recalls. But Jim and Heather, who both grew up on family farms in nearby Sale, wanted to give their kids, David, now 38, and Kate, 33, the kind of childhood they'd enjoyed – one immersed in nature. So, they got to work. “We cleared all the blackberry and boxthorn, stopped the erosion in the gullies and then started planting trees,” explains Heather.

Today, the property, which sits on the traditional land of the Gunaikurnai people, is thick with native vegetation that provides a home for wombats, kangaroos, wallabies and platypus. It's also the foundation of something far bigger: the Phillipsons' ambitious conservation mission, which has seen them establish a not-for-profit organisation, EcoGipps, and an environment-focused philanthropic trust, Rendre Trust, to preserve the landscape for the future.

“I think for both of us, it's always been there,” says Jim of the couple's passion for the unique Gippsland region, which stretches from the coast all the way to the snowy peaks of the Alps. “We were born in this area in the country, so it's never not been part of us.”

Heather and Jim both had parents who regularly took them bushwalking and camping, laying the groundwork for a lifetime of nature appreciation. But it was their years travelling overseas as a young married couple that

crystallised their perspective. “Coming back from that, it just hits you between the eyes how important our environment is,” says Jim. “Through our 20s and 30s and 40s, we could see that what we valued when we were young was steadily being eroded, not just in itself, but also, [the land's] connections to people have been lost. For us with kids, and now a grandson, it's been about restoring as much of that as we can, but doing it in a broader sense, so that it's community based.”

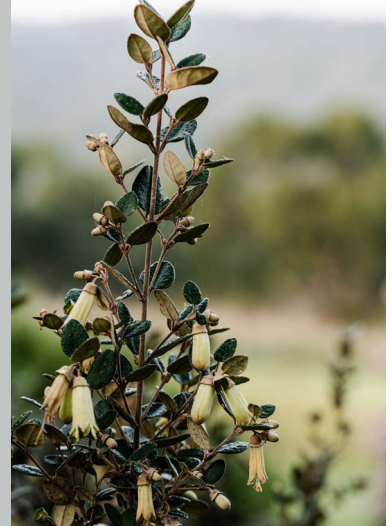
After doing Trust for Nature covenant planning for their home farm a decade ago, the Phillipsons' opportunity to double-down on their vision came in 2019. “Conservation is all about having a long-term view but being ready to move tomorrow,” says Jim. He was poised to pounce when the property adjacent to their farm, which had been in the same family for generations, came onto the market. “It was largely remnant bush and fortunately hadn't been farmed or cleared,” Jim says. “We'd always enjoyed the environment as neighbours and as soon as I saw it for sale, I spoke to the agent, made an offer and we signed the next day.”

Within six months, two more connecting properties stretching north into the Avon Wilderness Park also became available – the Phillipsons snapped those up, too. Together, the four properties now make up a diverse 404-hectare biolink corridor stewarded by EcoGipps. “That's the foundation [of EcoGipps],” explains Jim. “Since then, we've been either directly purchasing or helping others to purchase conservation-quality properties for the community.” This includes coastal saltmarsh in the south and 51 hectares of core habitat for the Strzelecki koala in the Eastern Strzelecki Ranges.

Jim draws on his long career in business management to lead EcoGipps and their philanthropic work through the Rendre Trust, which provides vital funding and >



**CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT** Heather and Jim enjoy exploring with grandson Arlo; once stripped bare from cattle grazing, EcoGipps now includes grassland plains and riparian woodland – vital habitats for the Gippsland water dragon and platypus; attractive varieties fill Heather and Jim's garden; delicate kangaroo grass; a wildlife monitoring device; untamed terrain. **FACING PAGE** Misty clouds create a veil over the treetops.





A thriving environment for wildlife, the Phillipsons' land sits on the banks of the Macalister River and is home to many native species, including 134 different types of birds... and counting!

“Conservation is all about having a long-term view but being ready to move tomorrow.”





**CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT** Lanigans Bridge crosses the Macalister River; the pool house sits at the eastern end of the home; beautiful garden varieties attract birds; Heather at work; from left: Jim and Heather's son David, his wife Nitya, Heather, Arlo and Jim; the restoration of the EcoGipps properties is an ongoing job. **FACING PAGE** Enthusiastic Arlo is the Phillipsons' youngest volunteer.



strategic advice to eco start-ups and environmental organisations. Meanwhile, Heather, who also works part-time as a practice nurse, runs the day-to-day conservation work at EcoGipps, coordinating volunteers, doing general maintenance and continuing the battle against invasive weeds. “‘Environment’ isn’t something that’s going to be finished on a certain date when you’ve put in a certain amount of trees,” she explains. “It’s working with nature, seeing what happens and replicating it in other areas.”

It’s endlessly gratifying work, she adds: “Every hour that you’re out there, you’re feeling marvellous about what you’re doing and the impact it’s having.”

At an age where they could be expected to step back and put their feet up, Jim and Heather have no plans to slow down. “We’ve got huge environmental missions, and we’re part of big networks, so you just constantly re-energise,” Jim says. “We employ half a dozen people through EcoGipps, all primarily young. Their energy becomes our energy.”

Heather and Jim’s five-year-old grandson, Arlo, is a constant source of motivation, as they are determined to create a better future for the next generation. “We [Australia] are world leaders in land clearing and species loss,” Jim points out. “We’re also the leaders in depriving our children of healthy environmental experiences.”

That’s why they’re focusing on protecting and restoring wild spaces for the wider community through private

land conservation. One such project is Little Dog Island near Port Albert, an important wetland and habitat for critically endangered birds such as the orange-bellied parrot. Previously owned by a developer, it’s been purchased by EcoGipps’ new not-for-profit venture Biodiversity Legacy, which invites individuals, families and organisations to donate or bequest funds to purchase high-value conservation properties and support their ongoing stewardship.

“Little Dog Island will be community-owned and community-managed, whether that community is international birdlife, the local Gunaikurnai people or the schoolkids from down the road,” says Jim. “It’s not hard – we just set up the structure and people come out of the woodwork to be part of it, either funding or volunteering or giving guidance.”

It’s this ripple effect of public support that keeps the couple hopeful in the face of dire eco news and sombre climate-change warnings. “The only option is being positive,” says Jim. “But we’re extremely pragmatic as well that this is humankind-created, and it’s up to humankind to solve it. We’ve all been part of the cause. We can all be part of the solution.”

So, how can the rest of us play our part? That’s easy... “Join nature-based organisations, volunteer, reach out – it’s all there,” says Jim. “Just start.” *CS*

For more information, visit [ecogipps.com.au](http://ecogipps.com.au) and [rendere.org.au](http://rendere.org.au)

