

THE CONVERSATION

Roadside trees stitch the ecosystems of our nation together. Here's why they're in danger

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You may know of marvellous tree-lined roads that lead into your favourite rural and regional towns. Sometimes they have an arched, church-like canopy, while others have narrow ribbons of remnant vegetation.

But have you noticed they've changed over the past decade? Some have gone, some have thinned and others are now declining. This is because in general, roads are not safe places for plants and their ecosystems.

There are the obvious dangers from collisions with cars. But there are also more subtle dangers from road construction and maintenance that increase the chances of plant (and animal) deaths, such as by altering the chemical and physical environment, which introduces weeds and segregates wildlife.

This network of vegetation reserves and corridors along Australian roads must be properly valued and better protected. They stitch the landscapes and ecosystems of our nation together and, as they diminish and disappear, will become an unrecognised part of road toll. We will all be the poorer for it.

Ecosystems found on the roadside

Roadside vegetation are often important corridors connecting wildlife to their habitats. In some cases, they are the last bastions of rare and endangered plant species. Indeed, some of the grass and smaller flowering species of Australia's once extensive grassy plains only persist on roadside refuges in parts of Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia.

These corridors are also important habitats for smaller birds, mammals, insects and reptiles. They not only provide access to food and water sources, but allow breeding with a broader animal population.

Roads also increase water run-off and carry nutrients, which can allow a diversity of species to flourish on verges (nature strips). Plants that may not survive elsewhere get a toehold on edge of the bitumen using the precious extra resources it provides.

Australian road authorities often acknowledge the importance of these habitat corridors when roads are set to be upgraded or widened. But when it comes to the crunch, it's the engineering and bottom line demands that generally win out – and plants invariably suffer.

This has an impact to cultural heritage, too. We saw this all too clearly in 2020 when a Djab Wurrung directions tree was bulldozed in Victoria for a new highway, despite valiant protest efforts.

Likewise, people rallied in Hong Kong to protect a significant banyan tree from removal from railway works. And the 300-year-old Bulleen river red gum, which won the National Trust's Victorian Tree of the Year in 2019, awaits its fate in a major freeway project

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