

# A man of heart determined to make a difference

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Brendan Condon reflects on climate-change issues. Photo: Joe Armao JAA

**BRENDAN** Condon's father, Brian, was a butcher with six sons. Brian Condon played in the ruck for Wangaratta Rovers in the 1950s and his sons are of a similar build to their father. More than 190 centimetres in height, more than 100 kilograms in weight. Brendan, 40, says he's the quiet one.

As a kid, growing up in Corryong, he could spend hours utterly absorbed watching an ants' nest. When he was eight, he arrived home to find a reed pond of several hectares being drained. He watched the bulldozer,

knowing the nest of which creatures lay in its way.

He went to Assumption College and credits a Marist brother, Mark O'Connor, with having a big effect on him. "Brother Mark could simultaneously conduct debates with six different kids at once." O'Connor introduced him to subjects like the plight of street kids in Brazil and political conditions under Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines.

Condon had gone to Assumption as a boarder in year 11. Boarding school was fine for older kids like him, but he saw that the younger ones were struggling and tried to help. The brothers marked him for a religious vocation and he thought about that, ultimately deciding it was the humanist ethic of Christianity that attracted him and not the Christian mythology.

As a teenager, he became involved in the battle to save the Franklin River. He has since paddled the Franklin six times and in April this year will be part of a team paddling a Hawaiian outrigger across Bass Strait to raise money for cancer research in memory of Chris Robinson, a mate of his from earlier adventures, who died of cancer last year.

After leaving school, Condon was an environmental activist, his special interest being South-East Asian forests. Then he decided to use the capitalist system to make money, buying into the property boom of the late '80s and early '90s. To fund this he worked as a concreter on a city building site but before long was the union shop steward. The politics of the building industry can be notoriously brutal. "I insisted on doing things in a civil way," he says.

By now the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi had influenced him, not just his creed of non-violence, but also the belief that it is not enough to just criticise. "If you want change, you must present an alternative that's functional and meets human needs." In 1997, with a friend, he set up Australian Ecosystems which now employs 70 people. The company seeds, plants and maintains over 3 million locally indigenous plants across Victoria each year.

Meanwhile, at Cape Paterson near Wonthaggi, he is seeking to develop Australia's first climate-safe housing development in a restored habitat. "The key thing I am aiming is to do with this project is to set a positive example to the housing industry around global warming."

He says the project will be "benchmarked" against zero carbon housing projects now appearing in Europe, the UK and the US.

Condon believes climate change is the issue of our time. He says lots of other issues — obesity — are wrapped up in it. How? "In the future, we're going to have to walk more. We're going to have to use our bodies to do what they're designed for," he says.

Condon sees Victoria's recent bushfires as an example of global warming.

"Climate is moving further south. Melbourne had a week of Swan Hill weather."

Three of his brothers — one policeman and two firefighters — have been out fighting them. He quotes one as saying the message from emergency service workers is there's an emergency. He predicts major climate upheavals if the Arctic ice cap disappears.

"Combating climate is not an issue of technology. We've got that. It's about politics," he says.

Referring to the recent carbon emission measures adopted by the Rudd Government, he says: "We need a Churchill now, not a Chamberlain".