

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage

INQUIRY INTO CATCHMENT MANAGEMENT

SUBMISSION BY UPPER BARWON LANDCARE
NETWORK 31 July 1999

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SUMMARY

The Upper Barwon Landcare Network, representing landowners in our sub- catchment, are pleased to present the following submission to the current Inquiry into Catchment Management. Our submission is set out according to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference.

In summary, our submission makes the following main points:

- Victoria's Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) are a useful initiative for improving priority-setting, and landowner motivation towards catchment care and management;
- A catchment approach to management of the environment is the best alternative we can see;
- The cooperation and motivation of landowners are critical to the care and management of freehold land in rural catchments, but in our experience, landowners need more assistance in the following areas:
- Access is required to information on best practice methods of environmental care;
- More flexibility is required in fund-sharing arrangements to reflect differing levels of public benefit;
- Access is required to funds for administration, in particular for monitoring the progress of works and condition of the environment.

As landowners, we are generally keen to amend the mistakes of the past, but we need the guidance and assistance of professional and public resources to achieve common goals for catchment care and protection.

1 Upper Barwon Landcare Network

The Upper Barwon Landcare Network comprises ten local Landcare groups covering the catchment of the Barwon River upstream of the town of Winchelsea, famous as the point of introduction of the rabbit in Australia. The catchment supplies much of the water for the provincial city of Geelong and surrounding districts, and supports dairy, beef, sheep, cropping, and timber industries. It forms part of the Corangamite Catchment Management Authority.

The Network's groups have been successful in tackling a range of land degradation problems on freehold section services. In this case, the Landcare groups (as well as public land managers) are the "providers", while the CMA acts as "purchaser", thus minimising the incentive for funding priorities to be self-serving of the bureaucracy.

2 Development of Catchment Management in Australia

The UBLN is in principle in favour of the recent development of CMAs in Victoria, judging by our experience with the Corangamite CMA. Although the CMA process is still in its infancy, we believe its advisory committee structure allows regional priorities to be determined more appropriately than the previous arrangements, which were dominated by central planning tendencies under various Government agencies.

Also, the CMA has its own funding source (including a fixed “water levy” charged on all properties in the region), and this gives it further autonomy from Government priority-setting. A large proportion of its funds is ear-marked for on-ground works, rather than administration.

A further advantage we see in the CMA model is the separation of between “purchaser” and “provider” of catchment protey seems to be the inclusion of landowners and public land managers in the advisory committee structures which guide spending priorities within the region.

The proof of the pudding is yet to be seen of course, but we are optimistic at this stage. Also, we are aware of some potential deficiencies in the outworkings of the CMA and Landcare models, but we deal with these under other headings below.

3 Value of a Catchment Approach to Environmental Management

Because most of the local and regional effects of environmental degradation are reflected in a catchment’s waterways, we endorse the notion of adopting a catchment approach to the management and prevention of environmental degradation. At the community level, most landowners and householders can relate geographically to sub-catchment areas, and will accept the administration of environmental management on that basis.

No other approach seems as satisfactory.

4 Best Practice Methods for Managing Environmental Care and Sustainability

On the matter of best practice, our submission reflects the UBLN membership’s collective role as mainly rural landowners. From that perspective, we readily acknowledge that most environmental problems have arisen from earlier poor practices executed unwittingly on freehold farmland.

That said, however, we maintain strongly that solutions cannot effectively be imposed, without the cooperation of local landowners. In our experience, those landowners are, for the most part, aware of many of the problems, and keen to tackle them, for their own and the public’s future benefit. What is also sadly clear is that landowners are unable to tackle these problems alone. Even had they sufficient resources (which they don’t), there

is a huge deficiency in knowledge and information on what is justifiable and feasible by way of environmental care. The question of “best practice” is something the landowners, would regard as the province of technical experts. Locally, the need is for workable solutions.

Experience shows that landowners keen to ameliorate an environmental problem on their land will sometimes adopt ineffective practices, for the want of access to better information. Information extension is currently a critical short-coming, partly because funding tends to be allocated for on-ground works in preference to information dispersal. Actions to make practical information accessible to landowners would be a useful priority right now.

5 Role of Government and Private Sector

As cooperation of local landowners is critical to the management of environmental problems in catchments, we submit here some of the factors that we believe will lead to improved catchment care and management.

Demonstrably, for most resident landowners, cash-flow is either irregular or barely positive, so that resources of labour, machinery or supervision are usually not readily available for works that produce no cash-flow in the short term.

This sad reality is acknowledged by the offering of Government grants for landcare works, which typically are provided on a dollar-for-dollar basis (or some equal sharing arrangement). An equal sharing of the load is undoubtedly a good start, as shown by the works already achieved. Our simple and obvious point is that more could be achieved if the ratio of Government to private inputs was more than one-for-one. We submit as a principle that the ratio could be adjusted to reflect the balance of public versus private benefit achieved by the works in question.

Another improvement would be to relax constraints on the types of works that can be funded by Government agencies. For instance, CMA funding is largely restricted to riparian zone works, whereas often the problems are more widely spread.

6 Planning, Resourcing, Implementation, Coordination and Cooperation in Catchment Management

We reiterate that Victoria’s CMA and Landcare models offer a useful framework for achieving the items listed under this Term of Reference. The key seems to be farmland, using a mix of landowner funds and resources, and grants from State and Federal Government sources(including NHT funding), and the Corangamite CMA.

We note, cautiously, that appointments to the Corangamite CMA’s advisory committees tend to reflect conservative elements, and this is probably both understandable and

appropriate in this early stage. Longer term, however, there would be merit in including some of the community's more radical representatives, as a means of enfranchising their valid viewpoints, but also because today's radicals often end up being tomorrow's leaders, and the earlier they gain a shared understanding of the practical realities of catchment management, the more fruitful will their later leadership be.

7 Monitoring, Evaluating, and Reporting on Catchment Management

A major deficiency in current Landcare funding structures is that funds are usually unavailable for administration, including the critical requirements for monitoring, evaluating and reporting on catchment management. As a consequence, neither catchment-wide nor local information tends to be available on the rate of progress (or decline) in environmental care.

We know that GIS and SIS data are available in some catchments from remote sensing devices such as satellites and aerial photos, but we understand that much of the data are restricted on intellectual property grounds, and available only on a user-pays basis.

Those data are essential for regional and local catchment environmental management, so funding should be made accessible for such data, and prioritised according to regional needs. We understand that Woody Yaloack Landcare Network have successfully applied for a grant to make such GIS data available locally, and we endorse that initiative as being more generally applicable.