

Response to the Senate inquiry into NRM and Conservation Challenges  
August 2008

Having been involved in Landcare as a community member on several levels for the last 4 years (the local Landcare group, the Network Board/Employment Committee [YYLN] and other discussion groups on regional/state-wide planning), this is an attempt to present the issues and concerns that have been identified by myself and other Landcare members, relating most directly to staff roles impacting on community/volunteer engagement within the perimeters of this inquiry.

i. **The lessons learned from the successes and failures of three decades of Commonwealth investment in resource management including Landcare, the National Heritage Trust, The National Action Plan on Salinity and Water Quality, and other national programs,**

From a community perspective, we have learned that the role of staff is crucial to the success and to accountability. The “C&Fs” (coordinators and facilitators) provide much more than just “group facilitation”. While there is an expectation that the staff are involved in “group facilitation”, the reality on the ground is that staff are involved in many levels of community engagement, education and natural resource management. This positive relationship between staff and the community has led to many successes.

Successes:

- Over the last 5 years, Landcare groups in our area have expanded in their view of their “environments” with a new and far reaching emphasis on “landscape” projects. We need to encourage groups to further develop new kinds of approaches to their activities, not the least of which is considering river health, wildlife corridors, etc,
- Landcare has focused on the need to develop alternative funding sources and has been successful in securing additional grants with the assistance of the staff. One local example is funding from the WWF to monitor Quoll habitats.
- Grants, such as Envirofunds and from philanthropic organisations, include a community responsibility component which has become the responsibility of the Landcare Network staff. Some of the philanthropic organisations require that professional component before granting the funds.
- Financial management when taken on as a Network function, rather than by the individual group, has ensured accountability for funds.
- The reality on the ground is that, in order to ensure success of projects, the work continues after the one year of funding ceases, and the supporting work of the staff (C&Fs) has provided this ongoing process, even though there was no funding provided. Landcare knew that the projects needed it and did it.
- The sciences related to NRM have advanced greatly and the needed skills and information is often out of reach of the average (though educated and successful farmers and business people) community

member. Staff resources have effectively provided that knowledge to Landcare groups and members.

- C & Fs provide many functions to more than just the individual Landcare groups which lead to the successes including:
  - i. Coordination with diverse partners including corporate neighbours, who are often reluctant to deal directly with the community groups
  - ii. Financial management of grants and funds, increasing accountability and Monitoring and Evaluation.
  - iii. Strategic planning in order to align group/network projects and planning with the various levels of government planning and funding
  - iv. Liaison with various levels of government and government agencies re: funding resources, special projects etc.
  - v. Teaching new “tree-change” landowners about the value and importance and diversity of their vegetation, etc. with Landcare offices (and staff) as “the place” to call to find out how to handle various problems on the land. Regionally, DSE has reduced their Pest Plants and Weed staff to zero. Landcare has picked up this important ingredient of land management.

Landcare, volunteers and staff, are acutely aware of some of our failings and others are just beginning to gain our recognition. Some are within our control and others we must work around.

Failures include:

- the lack of clarity by government about what Landcare does. We have not been successful in showing “investors” the successes that we have achieved in NRM areas.
- the lack of clarity by government about who Landcare members are. We seem to have failed in making government aware of the significant diversity among Landcare members, from traditional farmers to non-traditional farmers, from rural families who have lived on the land for generations to tree changers who are only on the land for weekends. We come from all political leanings and have an intense love of the environment, though have the full range of views on how to handle these issues.
- the non-existent voice of the community as related to Landcare at the highest levels of government and at times, in regional planning. There is no infrastructure for Landcare on a regional, state or federal level.
- Non-continuous funding of staff leaving holes and stops and starts in planning and activities... three steps forward and one or two steps back. Leaving community members frustrated and ready to “quit”....

Lessons are that we need to put the resources in place to allow for the connection of grassroots landcare with the state and federal governments. This is one role that the staff do not do well and should not be the main proponents.

**ii. How we can best build on the knowledge and experience gained from these programs to capitalise on existing networks and projects, and maintain commitment and momentum among land-holders,**

If the goal is to maintain land-holder involvement, then it's crucial to keep staff who as part of their job description:

- develop and maintain ongoing contact with landholders, not just with groups
- provide the "best practice" knowledge, with their ongoing training and educational prowess,
- support groups/individuals with new ideas about projects and
- connect landholders with grant opportunities
- assist with the coordination of large projects often including many Landcare groups and agencies
- have the knowledge of next steps in environmental restoration to keep groups finding new and challenging activities.
- manage the "paperwork/accountability" for grants, including the financial management.

**iii. the overall costs and benefits of a regional approach to planning and management of Australia's catchments, coasts and other natural resources,**

I am unable to directly discuss the cost/benefit issues as those of us at the "lower levels" of the structure are not included in those deliberations. However, regional planning will not effectively involve Landcare unless there are

- staff with expertise to sit at the table, representing Landcare/land owners and then interpreting the planning to the local Landcare groups and members
- opportunities for grass roots Landcare members to voice their needs

**iv. the need for a long-term strategic approach to natural resource management (NRM) at the national level,**

From a landowner perspective, long term strategic approach would allow those of us working at the grass roots level to plan over a period of time. Smarter Planning, Smarter Action is an excellent tool. In order to effect any change, projects need more than one month for preparation and one year to complete. The ability to provide ongoing monitoring, assessment and flexibility that is often needed when environmental factors are the determining issues rather than grant cycles.

The knowledge that funding for staff would be continuous, or at least for 6 or 7 years, would encourage more young people to work in NRM, providing them with the security to buy a house in regional areas where they work and

Continuous funding which would hopefully flow from a long-term plan is critical to create the large scale environmental changes that are required, instead of the current model where project based funding with changes every one to three years.

- v. **the capacity of regional NRM groups, catchment management organisations and other national conservation networks to engage land managers, resource users and the wider community to deliver on-the-ground NRM outcomes as a result of the recent changes to funding arrangements under the Caring for our Country program,**

While it is the government's prerogative to change priorities, to do so without a transition period is severely crippling the capacity of Landcare and in our region, Landcare is one of the successful "producers" of NRM outcomes.

The immediate implementation of Caring for Our Country (Cfoc) will see the reduction of funding for the Landcare staff (coordinators and facilitators) in our Network from 2.5 FTEs (3 staff members) to a 0.5 FTE. These immediate changes in funding will have a critical impact on all Landcare Networks.

We currently have 8 Network board members who donate many hours of their time and who are ready to walk away if all the Network responsibilities are dropped on them. As a board with the staff, we have effected many changes in our Network, building it to one with a highly positive reputation for quality of projects, forward thinking and accountable operations. With the loss of 80% of our staff, most planning falls back on the volunteers, who are well respected in their various occupations, but who rely on the scientific expertise and coordination efforts of the staff to produce the best possible outcomes.

In addition, the associated loss of staff will create a vacuum of local knowledge so crucial in implementing Landcare goals and those set by regional and state authorities. When (if) new funding is available, projects and programs and thus the environment will be starting over, having lost years of experience and knowledge. And again, the volunteers begin to say... "Why bother????"

Our projects have become collaborative in nature with several Landcare groups, corporate landholders and various government agencies. One example is Yarram Yarram Landcare Network's JARR (Jack Albert River Restoration) Project which includes 4 Landcare groups, HVP, DSE, DPI, Water Watch, Parks Victoria and WGCMA, and is a landscape scale monitoring initiative that involves the latest in scientific knowledge, and focuses on a RAMSAR wetlands in the Nooramunga Marine and Coastal Park connecting Corner Inlet. The role of the facilitators has been to assist with the coordination of the various partners, enhancing the capacity to effect change in a critical wetlands area, obviously far beyond the scope of an individual Landcare group. In their wisdom, after 9 months of negotiations with the Norman Wettenhall Foundation, they have seen the importance of this project and granted YYLN \$30,000 for a biodiversity blueprint. We had hoped to supplement a facilitator's position with this grant, providing a

“blueprint” officer who knew the area and who had relationships with the landowners. This will no longer be possible. So a purely “technical” person will come in to do the mapping, negating the opportunity to “engage” the community and secure the community’s involvement for the next steps of this project.

Another major loss with the current funding changes will be the lack of time for outreach. Our community has many new “tree-change” landowners. They often arrive in our Landcare to “chat”, asking about the value and importance of their vegetation, etc. with Landcare staff. We have become to be known as the place to call to find out how to handle various problems on the land.

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