

Growing sustainable communities: Landcare's evolving roles and relationships

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Introduction

This conference recognises and celebrates 25 years of rural and urban communities working together to care for the natural resources of our precious continent and planet.

The Landcare movement has achieved a great deal since 1986. The biophysical and environmental achievements have begun to repair the damage, to stabilise the situation, heal the wounds, and treat the symptoms.

Equally as impressive are the social achievements. The strength of Australian Landcare is that community groups and networks, with government and corporate support, conceive their own visions and set goals for local and in some instances regional environmental action. Working from the ground up to achieve these goals creates freedom and flexibility, giving communities a great sense of purpose.

At the end of the International Landcare Conference in 2001, I said that Landcare must shift focus from awareness and symptom management towards treating the causes of landscape degradation. I could see then that it would not be so easy, and while there has been much innovation, it has been more difficult than I had imagined.

The challenge to treat the causes remains. In addition to the innovation and good work at the local and paddock-scales, we need to be coordinating these efforts towards shared goals at a region or system-wide scale. We need collective interventions at a scale that can start to match the scale of the problems.

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Where have we come from?

Compared to the rest of the world, the Australian continent is ancient, flat, highly weathered and dry, and the soils are thin and nutrient poor. On such a fragile landscape, any mismanagement of the land and water resources has significant and long-lasting consequences for society.

Since about 1985 Australian society has decided that management that risks permanent degradation of the landscape will no longer be tolerated and has allocated considerable resources to fix the problem. The emergence of Landcare was one of the signs that our communities wanted to do things differently.

In the first 15 years, and acting on the advice of natural scientists, the Landcare institution produced significant changes in the attitudes of land managers. We saw increasing numbers of farms and small catchments where the condition of the land and water had stabilised or improved.

The 'Decade of Landcare' ended in 2000, and over the following 10 years Landcare continued to evolve and respond to significant challenges and changing circumstances.

The form and delivery of government support transitioned through four major funding programs: the National Landcare Program (1993-2008); The National Heritage Trust (1997-2008); National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (2000-2008) and now Caring for Our Country.

The land, water and biodiversity issues faced by Landcare were compounded by continuing decline in terms of trade for agriculture, nine years of severe drought, population increases and movement to coastal Australia. Add to this the emerging insights about managing our landscapes in a changing climate.

Awareness of Landcare greatly increased so that most Australians know about Landcare, and thousands have demonstrated their solid support for its ethic. Marketing has ensured that the Landcare movement is well respected by the media, and corporate support through Landcare Australia Limited has been building. National corporations from Coles to Westpac now see the Landcare logo as a very attractive sign of their commitment to sustainable management of land water and biodiversity.

Indigenous communities have also increased their engagement with Landcare, particularly in northern Australia and in estuary and river management in eastern coastal communities.

The last decade also saw the establishment of regional natural resource management bodies (known as catchment management authorities in NSW) to facilitate regional strategic planning and priority setting for natural resource management across Australia. Aligning the actions of Landcare to deliver solutions at a bigger scale, amidst changing roles and responsibilities, has been a major challenge and in some cases caused some tension between Landcare and regional bodies. Nevertheless, most Landcarers and regional bodies have developed cooperative

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arrangements and many Landcare groups are increasingly positive about the rapidly evolving regional resource management arrangements.

During this period of shifting roles, serious drought and declining economic conditions, many traditional Landcare communities have seen a decline in membership (which some call 'burnout'). However in urban and coastal regions, there has been an increase in Landcare and Coastcare groups and a large number of other diverse community groups committed to working on natural resources issues in the local landscape.

The challenge remains

At the close of the International Landcare Conference in 2001 I said the next challenge for Landcare was to shift focus from awareness and symptom management to treating the causes of the degradation of our land, water and biodiversity.

However, despite the gains made by Landcare since then, the shift from treating symptoms to causes remains a challenge.

Given the history of our traditional European farming practices, we have tried to impose a fundamentally new order and uniformity on our complex and diverse natural systems. However in Australian landscapes which are water, nutrient and carbon constrained, traditional European farming systems 'leak' these elements when they desperately need to be recycled.

If we are to address the immense landscape problems that we are faced with in Australian agriculture, innovation on a grand scale is needed. New rural enterprises will be required as in many parts of Australia, current annual farming systems may no longer be viable for the landscape. Therefore, as a society we may need to find different types of enterprises that work in harmony with the hydrological and biogeochemical cycles that operate and drive the functionality of the landscape.

For many of our current agricultural zones in Australia we do not have the farming or forestry practices that can treat the causes of degradation and create sufficient farm income to support viable rural communities. We need new and better solutions than we currently have. Developing new options is essential.

To create this future we will need to move beyond the familiar commodities to new sustainable products for new green markets. We need new approaches to revegetation using our native species which have the potential for farmers to earn additional income at the same time as conserving biodiversity and the local environment.

The challenge for Landcare is to move from rejigging old farming systems and traditional ways of doing business, to developing and designing new farming systems and communities that are more compatible with ecosystems, landscape processes and functions.

We need to intervene at the right scale - one that better matches the scale of the challenges.

The next decade – 2011 to 2021

Landcare emerged from rural communities and it has now taken root and flourished in urban and coastal Australia. The *Australian Framework for Landcare* builds on this evolution to outline a vision for the next decade where Australians from all communities and cultures can actively take responsibility for the health of Australia's natural resources and environmental assets.

With the ultimate aim of a sustainable future for all Australians, the Landcare philosophy will involve learning about landscape function and adopting actions that are more suitable for managing the way we live, work and play in our landscapes. The Landcare community will continue to raise awareness of landscape function and the impact of inappropriate land management practices and planning. In doing so, it will encourage more suitable management methods to enhance the health of Australia's land, water and biodiversity.

The *Australian Framework for Landcare* also recognises that for landcarers to more effectively achieve their aims they must collaborate with regional natural resource bodies, government agencies and non-government organisations for both sharing knowledge and resources, and collaborating for on-ground delivery of improved natural resource conditions and trends. Therefore, the Landcare community in Australia must extend beyond just landcarers, to their wide range of partners.

Getting the scale right - Landcare in partnership with regional natural resource management bodies

The big challenge is for us to make sure our interventions at local and farm scales are all adding up to contribute to a shared set of goals. We need to build interventions across sectors and geographic areas so that our interventions start to match the scale of the problems.

Landcare has been a stable presence at the local level throughout several decades of institutional churn at the regional, state and national scales. Now, after several different incarnations of catchment management organisations, NSWs' 13 catchment management authorities have been in place for nearly eight years. This continuity has helped government and communities learn and improve the way we manage our landscapes. I believe that we now have the maturity, experience and right institutions in place to truly manage our catchments in an integrated way – that is, to manage all components of the landscape together at the catchment-scale, in partnership with the community. This has been a policy aspiration of governments, and a personal interest of mine, for several decades.

This continuity and experience also means that the catchment management authorities, Landcarers and communities have a wealth of new knowledge and understanding about their regions that must be used to inform upgraded strategic plans.

Every region across NSW has a government-approved, strategic catchment action plan that guides investments in natural resource management for that catchment. All catchment

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management authorities are now beginning to upgrade these plans. This gives us all the opportunity to learn from the experiences of the last seven years, use the best available information to update our understanding of the landscape, and have a fresh think about what the priorities should be for the next 10 years and beyond.

Landcare will continue to exist only if it continues to deliver sustainable rural, coastal and urban land management. We have some very demanding biophysical questions emerging requiring us to work together at highly complex landscape scales. In a dynamic social and technological environment, the critical choice for Landcare is to once again rise to the challenge and embrace the ethos of 'landcare' and either continue to be part of the solution, or by failing to evolve, to become part of the problem.

The challenges of climate change, water availability, food security, demographic shifts, energy demand and mining all interact to shape our landscapes. The decisions we all make today will open or close the opportunities that may be available to us in the future. We need to make sure that individual decisions on properties, as well as the decisions that are made by local, state and national governments, are all coordinated towards a shared vision of what local communities want their landscapes to be like for the future.

As Peter Ellyard wrote at the conference in 2001, "The future is not some place we are going to. It is a place we are creating. The path to the future is not found. It is made." This continues to be true and to my mind is more important than ever in the decade ahead. The path to the future is not found. It is made.

Further reading:

Youl, R, Marriott, S, Nabben, T (2006) *Landcare in Australia: founded on local action*.

http://www.daff.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/29141/landcare_in_australiaJune08.pdf

Australian Framework for Landcare Reference Group (2011) *Australian Framework for Landcare*.

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