

Victorian Landcare Council

Briefing Note 28



The VLC's Forum at Dookie saw 60+ Landcarers convene for 3 days to discuss what we're developing and learning in partnerships and to visit local farming enterprises. On Saturday afternoon, in a Q&A session with experienced landcarers, we explored the future of Landcare. This note draws together views from that session.

VLC CHAIRMAN, Terry Hubbard, terjan.hubbard@gmail.com
SECRETARY, Kaye Rodden, nidgee@reachnet.com.au
Editor, Ross Colliver, ross.colliver@bigpond.com

Landcare and agriculture - What's Landcare's niche?

Angus Hume¹ moderator of the session, began with Landcare's future role in agriculture:

Most agricultural industries seem to have absorbed the land management issues raised in the early years of Landcare, and land management practices are part of their best practice programs. Has agricultural practice in fact shifted, and if so, what is left for Landcare to do over the next 20 years? What's Landcare's niche in relation to sustainable agriculture?

Andrew Campbell² thinks that the biggest problem in Australian agriculture is the gap between the best and the average, and then the gap between the average and the tail:

In every commodity, in every industry, the best are operating much smarter and much greener than they were 20 years ago. Best practice is pretty good. But there's usually a fair distance between the best and the average, and then unfortunately, there's generally a pretty long tail. And the problem is when you map that out on a landscape, 80% of the degradation comes from 20% of the area, roughly, and that's the 20% managed by the tail.

There's still a big role for extension. The professionalising of the Australian farming community is taking a long time. We've still got not enough people who are able to apply the latest technologies: robotics, photonics, guidance systems, genetics, soil microbiology.....It's not a technical problem, because the best operators are very, very good. The problem is they're at one end of the bell-curve, not in the middle of the bell-curve....

Landcare is still relevant as an educator. With the turnover in landholders, you've got to keep at the education task - "it's like painting the Sydney Harbour Bridge". And there's a role for Landcare as an opinion leader, putting pressure on governments to take action on damaging land management practices.

In Andrew's view, the failure to enforce compliance in agriculture and the minerals and energy sector is having a major impact. With governments disinvesting from the compliance

¹ Angus Hume is Chair of the Victorian Catchment Management Council, Chair of the West Gippsland CMA, long time participant in the diary industry and inaugural Chair of Stony Creek Landcare Group

² Professor Andrew Campbell is Director of the Research School for the Environment and Livelihoods, Charles Darwin University, and Patron of VLC

effort, gains in land management are being lost by practices like clearing of marginal land. Governments could do more at the point at which land changes hands, so that properties can't be sold covered in weeds or with active gully erosion without financial provision for their being made good.

Victoria Marles³ agreed on the need for strong enforcement:

If you are going to have a regulatory system, that system really needs to have some enforcement, or you're better off not having it ...

In Victoria, people do not have a presumed right to clear, but the failure to take compliance action with people who *are* clearing makes it harder to encourage and reward those who want to retain native vegetation. And the point where people transfer land is a good point to apply levies for conservation or other forms of land management.

Engaging the new mix of landholders - How do we get their attention?

New landholders in areas close to urban centres are often new to rural living and new to land management. They have capital and cash-flow to invest, but they are often time-poor and they aren't interested in joining committees. What are the best ways to grab the attention of these new settlers?

Kate Hawkins⁴, has seen success in the Yea area with new landholder forums, which put Landcare people and local technical people in front of new landholders. Their event planned for 50 people, but they got 70, and then another 70 and 60 for two repeat forums, with some people coming twice so they could absorb the material presented. They wanted to learn how to care for their land.



Andrew Campbell, Kate Hawkins and Angus Hume

³ Victoria Marles CEO, Trust for Nature, a solicitor by training, has had roles as the Legal Services Commissioner, the Communications Law Centre, and is currently Chair of the Abbotsford Convent Foundation and a board member of the Consumer Action Law Centre.

⁴ Kate Hawkins, a science editor, is on the committees of a management of Strath Creek Landcare, the Upper Goulburn Landcare Network and the Yea Wetlands Centre. She makes a big contribution to environmental education.

Another approach is to set up planting events that are primarily social events, identify new people and invite them along. But how to get those new people onto committees? Offer them something:

If they're just coming into the area, it's often about finding a bunch of people who they can connect with, and they will get you into the other networks. Committee work gives some people another tick on their CV, for some it's the feeling of making a contribution, and for others, it's a way to keep active. But it's a real hard question, and our age on committees is getting older.

Pam Robinson⁵ added that new people also needed an opportunity to speak about themselves, not just hear what the group is doing. That gives a wider way of thinking about their talents, and their contacts.

We all learn a lot from walks and visits to other properties, so ask new people if they would like to show people around their place. And at meetings, don't start with the correspondence. Choose times at the start where a speaker comes along, and make the business part the second part of the meeting. There's no way that someone walking into a hectic committee meeting is going to jump onto the committee.

A starting point is to ask new people for a specific and limited contribution, let them build up their confidence and commitment. And give them praise for what they do!

The area around Dookie, says Richard Tallis,⁶ is a bit different - his family has been there 60 years and they're considered newcomers!

We were very active in Landcare when I first came home in '86. My father quickly put me onto the Landcare committee and bailed out! Back then the focus was all salinity, now we've dried up all our groundwater and that's probably our biggest problem now. For the people who were doing it back then, I suppose the fire's gone out a bit, and the younger farming community haven't taken it on. We struggled with that for years, thinking these young fellas have got to take it up one day. We tried lots of things to get them involved and interested, but nothing seemed to work. They were coming back to farm, they wanted to sit on a tractor, and anything beyond that was not of any interest.

Landcare's new partners - What are the options for funding through new partnerships?

Landcare has been forming partnerships since the mid-1990s when Landcare Networks started to emerge. However, finding sustained flows of funding in those partnerships is difficult. What are the options? Where are the new partnerships that might open up to Landcare? In Victoria Marles' view, we should not take the heat of government:

I don't think we should back away from expecting that for a public benefit, there should be a public input. Governments will want to retreat from funding, but the principle is that public benefit warrants government support.

⁵ Pam Robinson is the founding Chairman-Life Member of Warrenbayne-Boho Land Protection Group. She has been a local councillor and Mayor, and in 1990 was awarded OAM for Local Government and Conservation.

⁶ Richard Tallis is owner and manager, Tallis Winery.

Andrew Campbell pointed out that Australia has never been wealthier than it is today:

We are one of the richest countries in the world, at the richest moment of our history. So this notion that we can't afford this or that - if we could afford it in the past, we can absolutely afford it now. It's simply a matter of how we are divvying up the cake.



Naomi Edwards, Victoria Marley, Andrew Campbell and Kate Hawkins

Vic Marles observed that there is an intersection between public agencies (including infrastructure and essential services) and private land, and that anyone contributing private funds to a public benefit project would expect there to be public money on the table as well, as leverage.

Philanthropists are looking for collaborations. They're not looking these days for just the individual organisation. I think they are interested in the complexity of the collaboration and the partnership as well.

Pam Robinson added that corporate sponsors were looking for collaboration in volunteer activity, not just doing something once, but building a relationship where they go back. That builds their brand presence and their staff well-being. Vic Marles pointed out that conservation organisations can give corporates credibility for their conservation work.

We have things that they need. We've just recently signed off on some work that National Australia Bank has done, with a mob from the UK measuring natural capital. They don't have Neds Corner, but Trust For Nature does - they have to have those partnerships with us if they want to do that kind of work.

Closer to urban areas, Naomi Edwards⁷ said that the patch of bush she first worked on as a volunteer 10 years ago, Federation Walk Coastal Reserve, is now listed in the top ten things to do on the Gold Coast. The Reserve management now has agreements with bird tourism operators and with Dreamworld in partnership with the local Surf Club offering a bush-to-beach experience. The fees from those users will filter down to the Reserve volunteer group, and they will have funds that complement their government funding.

⁷ Naomi Edwards is co-founder of Intrepid Landcare, a key player in the Gold Coast Catchment Association, and an inspiring community mobiliser.

Landcare and the cities - *What can Landcare offer to urban dwellers?*

There's talk now of "nature deficit disorder". People below the age of 30 expect their experience to be digitally enhanced at every moment. What can Landcare offer to urban dwellers? Naomi Edwards spoke to the value of direct experience of nature:

Never before have some many young people wanted to get connected to nature. The average child at 12 years old has up to 48 hours of screen time a week. It's great to have the environment accessible through your phone, but you can't build a connection to nature through your phone. You can get the message through with digital media, but people have to have the actual experience.



Richard Tallis, Pam Robinson and Naomi Edwards

Pam Robinson said there's value in inviting people to maintain a long term relationship with rural places where they volunteered:

Young people up to a certain age are keen, and then there's a drop off, but actually some of them who go on to University then find that it's quite alright to talk about these things, and some have come back to look at where they have planted, and they've brought their families.

Naomi thinks that Landcare is good at communicating ideas

...promoting the innovators with these new ideas. There are so many good ideas out there, it's crazy. The Landcare Share Centre you're doing here in Victoria - we've done that in SE Queensland, and now the rest of Queensland is going to roll it out. All these resources and ideas are there. Perhaps there's a role for the National Landcare Network here.

Vic Marles said that Trust for Nature has been thinking about its role in urban areas, because philanthropic funders want to be part of improving systems, not just fixing symptoms. Systems that start in rural areas (like food security, water, food supply chains and so on) mostly end up in urban centres. There's going to be a lot more innovation in the redesign of cities for sustainability:

In American cities that have really done it tough, like Chicago, we see local land trusts buying up land and taking down some of the structures and houses, and creating community gardens and parks and so on, and being relevant to people that way. I can't say what Landcare should be doing, but we at Trust for Nature are certainly looking at those developments.

For Andrew Campbell, Landcare is about building a body of opinion at community level that means that political and agency leaders and their staff have support for using the land more wisely:

You can't expect a bunch of volunteers working part-time to do the job that we've set up proper institutions to do, but they can have that groundswell there that makes it easier for people to say "Well, no, we're going to protect this catchment, and that means we're not going to do this anymore, and what not going to allow that to happen".

Having a constructive blue heeler nipping at the heels of the institutions to remind them about some essential truths in something like a post-fire response - I thought that what Andrea's group has identified [Leigh Catchment Groups in the Fire Recovery session, Saturday afternoon] is absolutely fantastic.

That's the sort of contribution that local community leaders that are deeply grounded in a sense of place and connected to the community can pop a flag up so that some bureaucrat who's been in their job 18 months or 3 years, transferred from somewhere else can see, wow, I can get on board this, because there's a mother-load of local knowledge and wisdom here that will accelerate my learning curve enormously. And any smart politician would appreciate that what Andrea is offering is a direct connection to punters on the ground

Kate Hawkins spoke to town-based activities in her area, where groups like Flowerdale Landcare, Yea Catchment CoM and the Yea Wetlands CoM are working not just with adults but with little kids:

Bugger the screens! They were wandering around with bat detectors, looking for bats! This was helping people understand the value of that wetland on the edge of town, that it's not just the town dump, that it is a very important ecosystem, and the importance of looking after the King Parrot Creek through the Hazeldean area, and not just pumping it all out so we can water our lawns.

This raises awareness in those little villages and towns to care for the environment in their backyards. We're doing that on a project by project basis. We've got kids-teaching-kids projects, where kids teach their peers about landcare subjects. It's wonderful to watch. I reckon there's a huge opportunity for Landcare to get into those preschool age group and get out next generation of Landcarers.



And as well as engaging adults in rural areas, said Pam Robinson, let's engage their kids. She gave the example of the son of couple visited that morning as part of the Forum (young Leigh is there in the middle).

Helen, Leigh and Craig Reynolds

Pam reminded the Forum that the coming eight weeks prior to the Federal election was an opportunity to speak out to the candidates about what Landcare is doing and what it needs, and to never forget local government:

Local government is us. We've got an opportunity to engage with councillors. Make sure that they know what you're doing, invite them out over time, not only to show them what you are doing, but how it's progressed and how it's enhanced the rateable value of what they're looking at.

Jim Adams, National Landcare Network, said that conservation peak bodies each had their election platform (NLN's to Landcare member bodies in the next week), and national NRM organisations will work together on a common agenda to go to the next federal government.



Participants, VLC Dookie Forum (Credit: Malacy Tarpey; all other photos, Ross Colliver)