

The Review of Caring for Our Country – Australia's natural resource management investment initiative.

Victorian Landcare Council

Submission

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National priorities in Caring for our Country

The long term objective of the Caring for Our Country initiative as stated is to “*achieve an environment that is healthy, better protected, well managed, resilient, and provides essential ecosystem services in a changing climate*”(1). The VLC believe that this statement should actually read... “**support a community** which can achieve a **productive environment** that is healthy, better protected, well managed, resilient, and provides essential ecosystem services in a changing climate”. The reasons are as follows.

“Support a community”

In Victoria, 63% of the rural land is in private ownership(3). Ignoring these stakeholders in any initiative will impede success.

There are many examples where a centralised approach to priority setting has stalled. Take for example the launch of the Murray Darling Basin Strategy plan. Although the community were committed to the need for change, they were marginalised by what was seen as a process which took little notice of the local impacts of the plan and disregarded well documented local solutions. Professor Campbell of Charles Darwin University (4) puts this succinctly...

“My central concern is that, no matter how many extra people are employed at the Federal level to work on water policy, or how committed and technically proficient they are, the majority of the relevant knowledge for making wise long-term water allocation decisions and translating those into fine-grained, workable local solutions resides in regional communities, industry, NGOs, state agencies and scientific institutions. A process that fails to engage meaningfully — and in many cases disenfranchises — the people with most of the relevant knowledge, is fundamentally unsound”

He adds that “*durable, adoptable, locally responsive solutions are unlikely to emerge through centralised, command and control planning*”.

In Victoria each regional NRM agency has a legislated responsibility to develop and

implement a five year catchment plan which has long term strategic outcomes. These plans, in the main, mirror community and government aspirations and are effectively owned by these stakeholders. The Caring for Our Country initiative, in developing its own set of priorities in isolation, has basically ignored these plans, and in the process disenfranchised the regional and local communities.

The “whole-of-landscape” approach aspired to by the Caring for Our Country initiative has in fact ignored the community, which is a key component of the landscape.

Sustained improvements in NRM will founder without establishing firm and trusting partnerships with these key stakeholders.

“A productive environment”

One of the key challenges faced by the Australian community in the future is the need to increase agricultural production to meet food security challenges. Data presented at the World Food Summit on Food Security in 2009 predicted that over the next 40 years there will be a 15%-30% decrease in food produced in Australia due to climate change. A recent report from an expert panel of the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council (5), found that land degradation was a key factor impacting on the availability of arable land in Australia, stating that

“We need to produce more food from the same or reduced land area without damaging the environment”.

The report continues:

“Farming in the Australian environment, therefore, involves significant challenges in juggling these climate risks as well as price risk. One response to this has been to establish effective networks of farmers such as Landcare groups to share information, technologies and experiences. This has enabled more effective and innovative approaches for sustainable production across the food value chain.”

and concludes by saying there is a need in Australia to

“build human capacity to meet challenges and opportunities” and “recruit and nurture generations of innovative and adaptive farmers to meet food security challenges”.

In summary therefore, the VLC believe it is imperative that the Caring for Our Country initiative addresses the need to find a balance between production and conservation in partnership with the community and, this needs to be its key objective.

Setting annual priorities and ways of investing

The funding model that supports the Caring for our Country initiative has a number of flaws. Firstly there is no provision for long term nurturing of community capacity. NRM priorities are sporadic, they come and go, depending on climatic conditions, funding availability or even government policy! In most instances this results in physical hiccups. A bio link is interrupted, a remnant remains unprotected. In contrast once the capacity of a community is fractured, trust is lost and it can take many years for it to be reestablished. This means that when a community is called on again.... whether it be address sustainable agricultural production, managing drought or flood or wild fire or re-prioritised NRM projects..... a vacuum exists.

Secondly the concept of encouraging new partnerships, imbued by the initiative, tends to favor the well resourced stakeholders in a region, not necessarily those with complementary or required skill sets. Even the best intentioned community group finds it difficult to attend multiple planning meetings within a say 200 km radius from their home base. The outcome is that the partnerships are often not enduring and an element of competition tarnishes future long term collaborations. These long term collaborations are essential to achieve measurable changes in environmental indicators. It will take decades to correct the balance in the Australian bio-system.

True long term partnerships which are based on trust can not be prescribed.

Community engagement and landcare support.

Landcare means many things to many people. To some it is a symbol of the Australian Landcare movement – a partnership forged 25 years ago between the environment movement and farmers. To others it represents good sense. Caring for the environment we are caretakers of, whether we are here for the view, or to make ends meet, or both!

The VLC strongly endorses the statement that “community capacity, engagement and participation are important elements of natural resource management”. Our experience however is that the approach fostered by the Caring for Our Country initiative to engage the “program delivery agents” has taken on more of the form of “prescriptive volunteerism”. Landcare is successful because its roots are in the community. The activities of individual groups reflect the aspirations of the members, and there is “no one size that fits all” landcare model.

A recent analysis of the capacity of the farm forestry industry in Victoria and its development needs (7) highlights a community initiated peer mentoring program in the Otway Agroforestry Network which is successfully delivering practice change to achieve productive landcare in south western Victoria. This concept of “assisted self reliance”, is also the basis of many successful development programmes and is discussed further by Sobels *et al* in 2001. (6).

Unfortunately there is no single centralised program which can achieve this. No community is the same. Engagement with indigenous communities for example requires many hours of cultural exchange and understanding. This is why regional NRM agencies, such as the CMA's in Victoria, are important links in garnering community support.

These organisations have strong ties to their communities and know what mechanisms work to engage them. Some regional organisations have a formal Memorandum of Understanding(MOU) with community groups, covering such things as consultation processes and responsibilities. Corangamite CMA, for example, has an MOU with the three local indigenous organisations within its area.

If the Caring for Our Country initiative is to be successful in improving the rate of change, it needs to foster a process which supports the independence of a group and its capacity to initiate and commit to long term NRM programmes .

Working effectively with state and territory governments, engaging with local government.

At the outset the VLC stated that its key focus is “to encourage cooperation and partnerships across all government and non government organisations”. It is imperative that there is open and constructive interaction between all stakeholders, from individual land managers through to federal and state government departments. Priorities should not be developed in isolation but rather by a process of enhancement, not competition.

In view of the fact that the policies needed to achieve sustainable improvements in the natural environment transcend political ideology, the VLC believe that ideally there should be a national independent authority appointed with responsibility for developing a priority framework from the ground up, across all stakeholders, and then monitoring the outcomes of investment in terms of nationally approved key environmental indicators.

This concept is not new . In the 2010 Senate Hearing of the Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee, entitled, Natural Resource Management and Conservation Challenges, the committee concluded that the current model of NRM delivery “*would benefit from some national coordination to enable better integration of regional, state and national priorities*”. One submission to the committee suggested that this should take the form of “*a National Environmental Accord that creates a national, integrated environment program.*”

Similarly, the Australian Landcare Council (2011) discuss the need for a single body “*to achieve a better-aligned and more cohesive approach to addressing new environmental risks*” (8).

We see the development of priorities for NRM as an inverted pyramid, with the on

ground outcome at the apex, the result of an integrated application of federal, state, regional and local aspirations.

Regional base-level funding.

As already stated the VLC believe that the CMA's provide a key link between the community and government and non government stakeholders. They are viewed as service providers on behalf of the community and often act as "bridge builders".

The 2006 Keogh report to the Federal government found that "*the regional delivery approach had resulted in a greater level of professionalism and strategic thinking*". This was reinforced in the report of the recent Senate Hearing (8) which also concluded that:

"Given the size of the Australian continent, it is clear that no single NRM initiative is likely to be capable of effectively addressing issues across the diversity of landscapes. The regional delivery model offers a means of ensuring initiatives are capable of practical implementation at the regional and local level."

Regional NRM organisations need to have an ongoing capacity, that is a level of base funding, to maintain continuous engagement with the community, and support the development of regional strategies. There also needs to be provision for discretionary resources so that the region can respond to emergency situations. All CMAs in Victoria have audited governance procedures in place, so they can shoulder a significant amount of the red tape associated with MERI requirements for community run programmes. This is an important role and needs to be resourced.

Conclusion

The Caring for Our Country initiative is a wonderful opportunity to harness the aspirations of the Australian landcare community to achieve sustainable changes in the landscape.

The VLC believe that the Caring for Our Country Initiative, which in itself is a collaboration between the Ministries of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, and Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, is also an excellent opportunity to deliver a true integration of these disciplines into the Australian landscape.

It is an opportunity to foster an educated and capable community which has the initiative to balance the need to establish food security with sustainable management of

carbon, and, environmental outcomes such as biodiversity, water quality and soil health, for the long haul, well past any political term.

References

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