LANDCARE IN THE MURRAY-DARLING BASIN — GROUPS MUST SHARE IN DECISION-MAKING

Making the case for Landcare groups in the MDB having a stronger say in regional land management decisions.

ALLAN CURTIS — Lecturer in Resource Management, Charles Sturt University, Albury, New South Wales.

Abstract
Despite recent federal government initiatives on brown issues, evidence of increased awareness of landcare in Australian cities and a general perception that landcare is a success, landcare funding remains inadequate. If landcare is to work, the brown issues must receive a bigger slice of the cake. Community members and landcare group participants in particular, should seek to influence public policy through established political parties and interest groups. They must also claim representation on resource management forums such as regional, state and national landcare committees and the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council’s community advisory committee. Group members can provide an injection of new blood, grass roots representation and hands-on experience. In time, landcare groups must develop an organisation independent of their state agencies. For the present, groups must ensure that efforts to broaden the definition of landcare to cover all facets of sustainable resource management do not result in the capture of landcare by agency or other interests. The focus of landcare must remain upon the groups who are getting the job done.

Key Words: Landcare, landcare groups, community participation, Murray-Darling Basin, sustainable resource use, resource management.

Australians have embraced landcare group action and the participatory extension model they represent. Landcare group action is increasingly perceived as an effective way of mobilising communities to implement actions to assist the move to sustainable resource use. Despite recent federal government initiatives, landcare funding remains inadequate. The key issues in the Murray-Darling Basin cannot be effectively tackled. crumbling resource infrastructure cannot be maintained and rapidly expanding numbers of landcare-type groups cannot be effectively facilitated or resourced. To a large extent, responsibility for pursuit of the big picture in which there is sustainable land use in the Murray-Darling Basin rests with landcare group participants. To achieve their vision of sustainable land use at the local level, landcare group participants must influence policies and strategies at regional and national levels. If landcare in the Murray-Darling Basin is to work, the brown issues must receive a bigger slice of the cake. Efforts by government, agencies and interest groups to redefine landcare to cover all facets of sustainable resource use may lead to less emphasis upon the role of the community groups responsible for this emerging Australian success story, and must therefore be resisted.
affect policy development and emerging landcare group participants should join political parties and interest groups. They can now contribute to the work of regional catchment landcare committees such as the Total and Integrated Catchment Committees in NSW (TMC) and Queensland (ICM) or the Regional Landcare Action Plan process in Victoria (RLAP) and the Community Advisory Committee (CAC) of the Murray-Darling Basin (MDB) Ministerial Council. At present, landcare groups are only loosely co-ordinated by state agencies or catchment committees, and the reality is, if landcare participants are to maximise their impact on policy they will need to develop an independent organisational structure. Some group members will be concerned that this would water down the strong focus within landcare upon accomplishing work on the ground. Others involved in natural resource management may respond to this suggestion along the lines that the last thing we need is another structure. It is my view that the emergence of an independent and democratic landcare group organisation is a fundamental element of the community development occurring through landcare. Local groups must coordinate their activities at the regional level and existing state and national landcare bodies need to be revitalised. For landcare to work in the Murray-Darling Basin, those doing the work on the ground must have a share in decision making about the big picture of sustainable resource use.

"Government funding is critical to the work of landcare groups."

FUNDING OF THE BROWN ISSUES

In the recent Statement on the Environment (Keating, 1992), the federal government focussed national attention on the brown issues related to land and water degradation of inland Australia, particularly the Murray-Darling Basin. In this statement, the government explained that:

The Murray-Darling is Australia’s greatest river system, a basic source of our wealth, a real and symbolic artery of the nation’s economic health, and a place where Australian legends were born. Nowhere is the link between the Australian environment, the Australian economy and the Australian culture better described.

The statement briefly focussed national attention on these issues, affirmed the importance of work being undertaken by those committed to ‘reviving a great national asset’ and committed additional resources to important projects. However, this funding is inadequate. Publicity of landcare successes and of government support for landcare has masked the truth. The public is not seeing the real picture.

The complete picture about government funding of the brown issues within the basin cannot be obtained. However, on a number of criteria it is obvious that funding of efforts to manage the brown issues within the basin is inadequate. Government funding can be compared with calculations of the value of agricultural production, estimates of lost production due to resource degradation and the costs of renewing decaying infrastructure. The federal government contributes over $18 million annually to the Murray-Darling initiative and will contribute $426 million over the next 4 years to the National Landcare Program throughout Australia, (Keating, 1992). The states also contribute to the funding of resource management in the basin. The total value of production based upon renewable natural resources within the basin is estimated at $10 billion per year, which is between 30 and 40 per cent of the total value of Australia’s production from natural resources (MDBC cited in NSW DWR, 1992). These costings make no attempt to quantify the value of tourism within the basin or of a variety of non-market environmental values. Murray-Darling Basin Commission (MDBC) staff have calculated the value of lost production in the basin for 1992 from salinity at $44m and from algal blooms at $20m. MDBC staff have estimated that renewal of irrigation infrastructure within the basin will cost $561m over the next 15 years. As Campbell (1992) explains, the ‘overall level of state and commonwealth expenditure on land conservation is about $200 m – $300 m annually’ which he believes ‘would be equivalent to perhaps 0.5 per cent of gross value of agricultural production’. It also seems likely that many recent federal government initiatives have done little more than offset state government cuts in funding and so, for all the publicity, there would appear to have been little real increase in funding for the brown issues.

In the case of the much-publicised LEAP (Landcare Education Action Program) initiative, the federal government would appear to be claiming that a short term job creation program is also spending on landcare. Regional newspapers herald the likely impact of LEAP funds upon local economies and the environment, and the public is left with the impression of massive funding for landcare. The reality is that in many instances landcare groups are not accessing LEAP funds. LEAP is a large scale program that is difficult for most landcare groups to participate in. Organisations seeking to access labour available under LEAP must undertake to provide supervision, materials to be used and on the job and TAFE training over a six-month period. Landcare group dependency upon the administrative and organisational support of state agencies, which, at least in Victoria, apparently lack the resources to tap LEAP funds, would appear a critical factor in the limited participation of landcare groups in LEAP.

"If landcare in the Murray-Darling Basin is to work, the brown issues must receive a bigger slice of the cake."

Many farmers in the basin have low or negative farm incomes and have little capacity to undertake actions to manage land degradation or accept the risks inherent in adopting new management practices. In a recent newspaper report (Pastoral Times, 1993) the chairperson of the Boorowa, and Rye Park landcare groups near Yass, which are battling a dryland salinity problem, explained that farmers in his area ‘will never be able to afford the $250 000 per farm for revegetation’ and if the broader community wants lower salt levels in the Lachlan River, then governments will need to make a substantial contribution to the necessary revegetation works.’ As Don Chipp, former Democrat leader, emphasised in his opening address at the 1992 Ballarat landcare conference, “government funding is critical to the work of landcare groups”. He urged those present to join political parties and work to influence government policy. This theme has been addressed by others. At the first meeting of the revamped Murray-Darling Basin (MDB) Ministerial Council’s Community Advisory Committee (CAC), December 15-16, 1992 a Queensland representative responding to an address by Don Blackmore, Australian Journal of Soil and Water Conservation, Vol. 6 No. 3, August, 1993
Chief Executive of the MDB Commission, expressed the view that "the bottom line is that there is not enough money." This representative then asked Don, "How do we get enough resources?" Don Blackmore responded that "it is in your hands".

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF LANDCARE GROUPS

In the past, most authors and community members would have accepted a definition of landcare as being primarily about the activities of landcare groups. As Campbell (1991) explained, these groups are local groups of people, autonomous and self-reliant, mainly comprised of land users in rural areas, whose primary aims are to tackle land degradation and develop more sustainable land management practices. It is the role of this large number of voluntary groups that distinguishes landcare from previous efforts to manage land degradation and achieve sustainable resource use.

As Hartley et al. (1992) explain, agency support for landcare represents the adoption of a new model for agricultural extension where agency staff, assist farmers to manage change and solve their own problems. Much of the explanation of renewed optimism about the future of resource management in Australia rests on the activities of landcare groups. Landcare groups have mobilised large numbers of people to undertake important work to tackle land degradation (Campbell, 1992; Curtis et al., 1992) and, it is possible that community development facilitated through the group processes (Woodhill et al., 1992) may be capable of creating the conditions under which more sustainable resource management practices are adopted.

REDEFINING LANDCARE

In his third National Landcare Facilitator report, Campbell (1992) states that landcare is a term which "has taken a life of its own, meaning many things to many people". In his discussion of this broadening of the meaning of landcare, Campbell informs us that "the most common answers from landcare group members can be simplified to caring for the land, controlling land degradation, working cooperatively." He later explains that a different perspective is emerging amongst administrators and policy makers:

However when talking to administrators and policy makers around the states and in Canberra, reading Decade of Landcare Plans and ... it is clear that the term 'landcare' has been extended to embrace what was known as 'soil conservation', 'conservation farming', 'farm planning', 'revegetation', 'land protection' and to a lesser extent vermin and weed control and river management.

In other words, governments and agencies have broadened the definition of landcare to include all facets of sustainable resource use.

Part of the explanation for this broadening of the definition of landcare relates to attempts by government and agencies to broaden community support for landcare. This explanation is also offered to explain agency attempts to establish urban landcare groups. Existing groups should be wary of these moves if they lead to a diminishing of the fundamental role of groups or divert the focus of landcare from the brown issues that threaten the viability of many communities in the Murray-Darling Basin.

LARGE OR SMALL SCALE PROJECTS?

In a variety of forums there is discussion of the relative merits of large and small projects to manage land degradation. In many ways this debate reflects the different interests and world views of the participants. On the one hand there are those who believe in large scale projects where resources are concentrated upon tackling a single issue in a relatively confined area. This approach is seen as being a way of making an impact that is both effective and obvious and therefore builds public and government support for future actions.

Other people advocate funding of large numbers of smaller projects that operate over time. This approach is seen as being a way of fostering a diversity of approaches, empowering local communities, and ensuring equity in community access to government funds. Given the limited nature of government funding of landcare, if greater priority is given to large scale projects, the net effect may be less funding to the small scale projects undertaken by most landcare groups.

Discussion of these approaches occurred at the first meeting of the revamped CAC. In his opening remarks Don Blackmore, Chief Executive of the Commission referred to this debate when he asked the CAC members, "do we spread resources fairly, or pick winners and solve a few difficult ones and focus upon these?" In the ensuing debate, some members advocated that the allocation of Natural Resource Management Strategy (NRMS) funds between small and large scale projects be altered to provide increased funding of large projects. To some extent the debate polarised along state lines, with NSW Total Catchment Management (TCM) representatives, who are experienced in operating at the regional scale, supporting increased funding for larger projects, and Victorian landcare group

- A silt trap constructed by a landcare group from steel droppers and chicken wire. Almost fifty centimetres of sediment was trapped in six weeks.
representatives, experienced in operating at the local scale, supporting the status quo. There must be a regional basis to landcare planning. However, if there is to be increased funding of large scale projects it should be through groups with a strong community representation, such as regional TCM committees in NSW, which would then coordinate the participation and funding of local landcare groups within projects. Efforts must also be made to ensure that funding for large scale projects is not a ruse by which agencies maintain their infrastructure or for expensive engineering-type projects to access large proportions of landcare funding.

**URBAN LANDCARE GROUPS**

It would appear that there is potential for large numbers of urban landcare groups to emerge and that agencies support this development (Edgar and Patterson, 1992). This issue was canvassed during the recent north-east Regional Landcare Action Plan process (RLAP) undertaken as part of the process of implementing the Victorian Decade of Landcare Plan. One community representative expressed the view that “if large numbers of urban landcare groups emerge they have the potential to change the direction of landcare”. Another member expressed the view that large numbers of urban landcare groups would compete with rural groups for limited funds. Agency staff supported the emergence of urban landcare groups as a way of widening the support for landcare. Bill Bodman, President of the VFF commented on this issue at the annual general meeting of the Soil and Water Conservation Association of Australia (Weekly Times, 1992). Mr Bodman was reported as saying “Certainly, landcare can be for everyone and certainly we must gain and maintain urban awareness and political support, but... on National Landcare Day, all I read or saw seemed to be about suburban gardens or advice on what to put down the kitchen sink.”

**AGENCY SUPPORT MUST CONTINUE**

Perpetuation of the myth that most landcare groups emerge and operate independent of agency support threatens the long term viability of what can best be described as local organisations (Lockie, 1992). If we assume that landcare groups operate successfully, independent of agency support, then we can also conclude that there is no need to fund agency support for groups. My experience suggests that an important ingredient in the success of landcare groups is an effective partnership between state agencies and local landcare groups. A partnership combining the technical expertise, knowledge of funding sources and commitment to the processes of community participation of many dedicated and hard working agency staff with the indigenous knowledge, skills and on-ground work of enthusiastic local participants in landcare groups. This is a complex, subtle and dynamic relationship. Sure, as groups mature they can become more independent of agency stuff and can be directly funded. However, there continues to be a rapid expansion of groups (Campbell, 1992) and most groups require some support. My experience suggests that the energy of agency personnel is often critical in the formation of groups. Research by Rush et al. (1992) suggests that groups believe they benefit from the facilitation and coordination provided by government funding.

*‘Landcare groups must push for a larger slice of the funds.’*

**HOW MUCH FUNDING DO GROUPS RECEIVE?**

Landcare groups should also be aware that contrary to popular belief, relatively small proportions of government funding on landcare is received by groups. Campbell (1992) explained that at the national level: the total amount of funding available in grants directly to landcare groups through all state and commonwealth programs in 1991-1992 was less than ten million dollars. Given that there are now more than one thousand landcare groups comprising more than 20 per cent of the farming community operating in a difficult economic climate, the landcare program can indeed be described as ‘dirt cheap’.

It is also true that some communities access large amounts of landcare funding. An example is the funding received by some irrigation areas under salinity management projects. In Victoria, the Goulburn Broken Salinity Program Advisory Council (SPAC) received $11m in government funding in 1991/92, with most of this money allocated to irrigation districts near Shepparton (SPAC, 1992). The new Victorian government has recently pledged $12m to the Sunraysia Salinity Management Plan (Sunraysia Daily, 1992) and again, most of this money will be allocated to irrigation areas. In the Swan Hill-Kerang district the Kerang Lakes Area Working Group has a proposal before the Victorian government for a $41m project over 8 years (The Guardian, 1993). This scale of funding compares with the mean level of direct government funding received by a sample of 56 (out of the then 94) registered Victorian landcare groups, for the period 1989-1991, of $23 648 (Curtis et al. 1992). This research also revealed that the total of government funding received for the latest year by this sample of landcare groups was $1.26m. It can be argued that some communities and some groups have simply worked harder than others to win government support and that all groups should work to increase budget allocations rather than fight over limited funds. Both of these arguments are valid. It is also correct that most landcare groups are not receiving large amounts of government funding, that funding to groups is cost effective in that money provided is more than matched by the contributions of individuals (Curtis et al., 1992), and that groups require more funds to accomplish their work. Landcare groups must push for a larger slice of the funds.

**LANDCARE DECISION-MAKING**

I would argue that landcare group representatives can make an important, and to some extent, a unique contribution to the development of resource management policy in the Murray-Darling Basin. In his address to CAC members at their meeting of December 16, Simon Crean, Minister for Primary Industries and Energy emphasised his view that the CAC should adopt a broad, holistic approach to issues when he said, “don’t focus upon one issue, take an integrated approach” and “you can get agreement on issues” (if you adopt this approach but) “if you take one issue you polarise views.” Landcare group participants are exposed to a range of resource management issues and most groups have adopted the holistic catchment management approach. Experienced landcare group participants are perhaps more able than some single-interest group representatives to contribute effectively to the management of the complex resource management issues of the Murray-Darling system.

Landcare group participants will also be able to contribute much as a result of their hands-on experience in the management of issues, and of the
group processes fundamental to landcare and critical to successful resource management in the Murray-Darling Basin. Landcare groups have mobilised large numbers of people to participate in landcare activities. Many of these participants are not members of existing conservation or farmer groups or influential within local government. The opportunity therefore exists, for policy and strategy planners to enhance the representative nature of community advisory bodies by injecting new blood from the membership of landcare groups.

THE NEXT STEP

Important resource management issues in the Murray-Darling Basin, such as dryland salinity and nutrient management, require regional rather than local responses. State and federal governments have recognised this and are increasingly adopting a regional basis to planning and funding of resource management. The TCM structure in NSW, ICM in Queensland, and the RLAP process in Victoria are the latest manifestations of this approach. Effective participation in regional forums will require cooperation amongst landcare groups. With increased maturity, groups may provide leaders who have the expertise and vision to take this next step and coordinate a regional organisation and voice for landcare groups.

If independent regional landcare group organisations do not emerge, groups will have to rely upon agency or catchment coordinating committee staff to promote their interests and organise their representation. This would simply allow other interest groups to make the running in landcare decision-making. Edgar and Patterson (1992) revealed considerable understanding of this issue and an enlightened agency perspective when they suggested The autonomy of the groups would be enhanced if they were less dependent on government for the facilitation of inter-group communications. One way of achieving such autonomy would be by the establishment of an association for landcare groups.

Many landcare groups believe that state landcare councils and Landcare Australia have been established to represent their interests and to coordinate landcare group activities. In Victoria at least, this has not happened. Composition of the Victorian Landcare Council reflects the view that landcare is about all facets of sustainable resource use and it is therefore composed of government appointees from a variety of interest groups, with only a few having landcare group experience. It would appear that Landcare Australia was primarily established to promote landcare amongst the wider community.

Government and agencies have embraced landcare groups and the participatory model for extension which these groups represent. Many of the concerns I have outlined illustrate the tensions that occur when rhetoric is not matched by deeds. Government and agencies have failed to implement essential elements of the participatory model. I would argue that until recently, landcare groups have not participated in any real sense in decision-making about landcare policy at regional, state and national levels.

OPPORTUNITIES ARE EMERGING

Opportunities for landcare groups to participate in resource management policy development within the MDB are emerging. Groups must grasp these opportunities. At the regional level there are opportunities for group representatives to gain positions on the regional TCM committees in New South Wales and Queensland, and in Victoria, on what could emerge as regional landcare advisory boards. It is possible that participants in these forums will be democratically elected, will share real decision-making power in terms of determining priorities, allocating funding and monitoring agency performance. If these bodies are to be effective they will need the participation of able and experienced community members. The credibility and effectiveness of these groups will also depend upon the extent to which they are representative of regional communities and not simply another opportunity for local elites to exercise control over resource allocation (Gray, 1992). It is simply not good enough for the membership of important regional bodies such as catchment committees to be appointed by agency staff.

The CAC has been revamped with greater regional representation, including some landcare group representatives. In the executive summary of her report to the Ministerial Council summarising the review of the previous CAC, Susan Lenehan (1992), South Australian Minister of Water Resources and Minister of Lands, stated that ‘Effective community consultation and participation is vital to the success of the Murray-Darling Basin initiative’. She continued to explain that ‘Following a careful examination of a number of options, a recommended framework for strengthening the CAC and community consultation within the basin has been developed … of particular importance is the recommendation that the CAC become a regionally-based reference group.’ Those responsible for implementing these recommendations in the various states adopted different approaches. In some states local government representatives were nominated. In NSW, TCM regional chairpersons were nominated. In Victoria, representatives were selected from the RLAP community reference groups. In his opening address at the CAC Meeting of December 15-16, 1992, Bob Junor CAC chairperson, spoke of his belief that this CAC was more able than previous CACs to ‘reflect the views, aspirations and priorities of people who have a direct and personal interest in the way the resources of the basin are managed for the long term benefit all Australians.’ Whilst the CAC is purely an advisory body, it may become an influential forum. In his opening address to CAC members, at the same meeting, Simon Crean, Minister for Primary Industries and Energy stated that “your view will be listened to and responded to, my commitment to involve you is genuine.” Unfortunately, the implications of an election campaign meant that the elements of the recent Statement on the Environment relating to the MDB were not considered by the CAC.

Participation in the CAC offers landcare group representatives an important opportunity to develop the personal networks and leadership skills they will require to create an
independent and effective organisational structure capable of wresting a share of resource management decision-making. Even at the first CAC meeting, the contrast between the landcare group representatives and those of other interest groups or regional TCM committees in NSW was obvious. Landcare group representatives were younger and appeared to have more localised personal networks but less experience in local government or regional decision-making forums.

CONCLUSION

The brown issues of the Murray-Darling Basin are not yet a high priority with voters generally and governments are not doing enough where it counts by putting resources in the hands of community groups working on the ground. Government has not provided sufficient opportunities or support for landcare groups to participate in landcare policy making. Indeed, attempts to broaden the definition of landcare to include all facets of sustainable resource use may result in less emphasis upon the work of landcare groups. The composition and roles of state landcare councils and Landcare Australia reflect this wider definition of landcare. The perception amongst landcare groups that these bodies were to represent landcare groups has retarded the development of an independent landcare group organisation and thereby prevented the emergence of what should have been an important catalyst for development of within landcare groups and an avenue of feedback to agencies and government.

Much of the on-ground support for landcare groups in the basin is provided by state government agencies. In recent years some state governments have imposed severe cuts in the budgets of the agencies that support landcare groups. This funding imperative is part of the explanation for agencies embracing the group approach to extension. Agency staff are a vital element in the success of landcare groups but agencies must also facilitate the participation of groups in decision-making, not just in getting the job done on the ground.

The ACF and the NFF, the peak conservation and farmer groups, are powerful participants in resource management decision-making in Australia and have been influential in the formulation of government policy on landcare. It is essential that these groups continue to support landcare groups and fight for increased funding of the brown issues. Both groups should support the emergence of an independent regional voice for landcare groups as an opportunity to add to the pressure for adequate funding of the brown issues.

Landcare groups are increasingly seen—as the key element of an emerging Australian success story. Participants have embarked upon the daunting and uncertain task of achieving sustainable landcare management with limited resources. Most would appear to know that this task may not be accomplished in their lifetime, but appears fortified by the belief that if they work hard enough at the local scale, they can make a difference, and the big picture will look after itself. I have argued that this big picture of sustainable resource use in the Murray-Darling Basin will not look after itself. The perceived success of landcare can be attributed to the fact that landcare groups represent a new, participative approach to resource management. A vital element in this approach is citizen participation in decision-making about the issues that affect them. As governments adopt regional planning for the management and funding of environmental issues, opportunities are emerging for landcare groups to participate in regional decision-making forums. Landcare groups must grasp these opportunities. Efforts to redefine landcare to include all aspects of sustainable resource use and to broaden landcare to urban groups have the potential to redirect resources from rural landcare groups and must be resisted. Landcare groups must also add their support to the fight for increased allocation of resources to management of the brown issues. Perhaps the first step in securing a role for landcare groups in decision-making processes is for local landcare groups to work together to form regional associations independent of agency and catchment coordinating committees. These associations could then work in a real partnership with agency and catchment coordinating committees to run regional conferences, coordinate participation in programs such as LEAP and the Murray Valley Corridor of Green and establish and monitor regional landcare plans. They could also begin the task of restructuring existing peak state and national landcare organisations, and eventually, elect representatives to these bodies.

REFERENCES


