Community Participation in Landcare Policy in Australia: The Victorian Experience with Regional Landcare Plans

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An estimated 30% of the Australian farming community is currently participating in the on-ground work of more than 1,900 landcare groups. The landcare program is grounded in the community participation approach to rural development and has renewed optimism about reversing land and water degradation in rural Australia. Until recently, landcare groups had not participated in any real sense in landcare policy development, and it is in this context that we discuss recent experience in the state of Victoria where more than 130 community representatives contributed to the development of nine regional landcare plans. These plans will form the basis of Victoria’s response to the commonwealth landcare initiative. Indeed, much of the forthcoming legislation for integrated catchment management in Victoria is based on the regional landcare action plan (RLAP) experience. Analysis of participant observation and survey responses revealed a generally positive view of agency/community relationships, that landcare groups were adequately represented in RLAP, and that community representatives perceived they had an important impact on planning processes and outcomes. However, survey analysis revealed inadequate representation of key stakeholders and that planning outcomes were likely to entrench inequities in stakeholder representation. There was evidence that important elements of the participation process had been inadequately prescribed. This research also provided evidence of the benefits of adopting a community-as-decision-maker model of community participation and the important role of regional contexts in contributing to major differences in public participation processes and outcomes.

Keywords community participation, landcare, public involvement, resource management, sustainable resource use, voluntary groups

The landcare program emerged in the state of Victoria during 1986 (Campbell, 1991a) and has been embraced by governments, farmer organizations, and conservation groups throughout Australia as a model for effective community action to assist the move to more sustainable resource use. With more than 1,900 landcare-type groups operating across Australia involving almost 30% of the farming community (Mues et al., 1994), there is evidence to support Campbell’s earlier statement (1991a) that “the landcare

Received 18 October 1993; accepted 24 August 1994.
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movement is undoubtedly the most exciting and significant development in land conservation in Australia" (p. 4). Victorian government policy stated that "the landcare program will be Victoria's major focus for achieving sustainable land management" (Department of Conservation and Environment, 1992b, p. 18), and by July 1993 there were 407 landcare groups (two new groups formed each week for the past 2 years) in Victoria with an estimated 14,000 members and an additional 17,000 people assisting or studying the work of groups (Curtis et al., 1993c). As a result of lobbying by major farmer and conservation groups, the commonwealth government committed spending of $360 million in the Decade of Landcare program announced as part of a major environmental statement by the prime minister (Hawke, 1989). Although governments espouse "landcare programs" that embrace all facets of sustainable resource use, it is the emergence, growth, and activities of voluntary groups that have captured public attention and distinguished landcare from previous efforts to achieve sustainable resource use.

During the second half of 1992 and early 1993 representatives of regional communities and government agencies throughout Victoria participated in the regional landcare action plan (RLAP) process. The RLAP initiative was part of Victoria's response to requests by the commonwealth government that each state develop and update Decade of Landcare plans. As the brief document Decade of Landcare Guidelines Regional Landcare Action Plans (Department of Conservation and Environment, 1992a) stated, "The main way landcare goals will be achieved in Victoria is through the implementation of regional landcare action plans" (p. 1). Community reference groups (CRGs) were established as the cornerstone of this process. More than 130 agency and community representatives contributed to the work of the nine regional action plans, which identified and prioritized landcare issues, nominated strategies to manage issues, and suggested structures for future community participation in regional landcare planning.

From the outset, RLAP presented a unique opportunity for assessing the influence of landcare participants and the wider community on landcare policy in Victoria. An independent analysis of RLAP could contribute to community debate about the introduction of integrated catchment management in Victoria; to the wider debate about community participation in landcare policy making throughout Australia; and to our understanding of public participation in natural resource management. As Sewell and Phillips (1979) explained, independent evaluations of community participation processes can overcome problems inherent in agency evaluations, which often ignore participants' views and objectives. The authors focused on participants' perceptions of the RLAP process to assess:

- The extent to which landcare groups were represented in the RLAP process
- The relative impact of landcare participants on RLAP processes and outcomes
- The nature of the agency–community relationship within RLAP
- The extent to which regional differences emerged in the RLAP process and the impact of these differences on participants' perceptions of the RLAP process and outcomes

Background

Most landcare groups have developed in rural areas and group membership is voluntary and open to any member of the local community. Groups frequently operate at catchment or subcatchment scales and are involved in a variety of activities related to the management of issues such as water quality decline, soil erosion, ground water salinity, soil acidity, vegetation decline, and introduced pest animals and weeds. Reports by Campbell (1991b, 1992) and Curtis et al. (1993b, 1993c) revealed that landcare groups hold meet-
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ings to discuss issues and identify priorities, conduct field days and farm walks, plant trees, construct salinity and erosion control structures, coordinate pest animal and weed control activities, erect fencing to control stock access to creeks and streams, establish wildlife corridors, initiate whole farm and catchment planning processes, involve other community groups in landcare activities, organize conferences, write newsletters and prepare media releases, prepare submissions for government funding, coordinate landcare education projects, debate government resource management policies, and so forth. Group activities allow members to share problems and ideas and gain support and encouragement; to develop greater skills and understanding of human and natural resource management; to plan at the property and catchment level so that resource management is based on a shared understanding of important physical, social, and economic processes operating within and beyond the farm gate; and to secure additional resources from government, community groups, and private enterprise to assist landcare.

Landcare in Australia is also a partnership between government and local communities; it is a partnership that attempts to combine the technical expertise, access to funding sources, and commitment of agency staff with the indigenous knowledge, skills, and on-ground work of enthusiastic local landcare group participants. Campbell (1991a) emphasized that "the degree of group autonomy . . . is quite distinct from past group approaches to soil conservation" (p. 4). However, as Edgar and Patterson (1992) explained, although groups "are free to define their own objectives and program activities . . . they are also dependent on government for technical advice and . . . state-wide coordination including conferences and the development of communication networks" (pp. 200–201). Although landcare groups have not developed spontaneously or autonomously, they are not organs of the state nor purely social associations. They are best described as local organizations (Eisman & Uphoff, 1984), "which act on behalf of and are accountable to their membership and which are involved in development activities" (p. 18).

To a large extent, enthusiasm for landcare can be attributed to widespread acceptance of the view that land degradation is Australia's most serious environmental problem (Farley & Toyn, 1989) and that traditional approaches to extension involving the transfer of technology from government officers to individual land managers have failed to satisfactorily affect landholder perceptions of issues or result in widespread adoption of more sustainable practices. Whereas sustainable resource use goes beyond the farm gate, it is clear that landcare is intended to achieve more sustainable use of Australia's farming lands. Hartley et al. (1992) suggested agency support for landcare represented the adoption of a new participatory model for agricultural extension where agency staff empower or assist farmers to manage change and solve problems through group action. Woodhill et al. (1992, p. 263) suggested landcare involved "community development," which is the prerequisite for "participative approaches to land conservation to be effective" and explained that "by community development we mean building within local communities the understanding, commitment, knowledge, skills and resources to effectively engage in a long term process of developing sustainable land use practices." Roling (1990) indicated "the systematic use of groups can effect major changes in the deep-seated attitudes of people and in the mobilisation of people for development" (p. 12). The landcare approach would appear to fit Roling's (1990) requirements for effective agricultural information systems in that it attempts to work with all landholders, rather than only expert farmers, to develop strong user constituencies, and it has a strong focus on human resource development. The key assumptions underlying the landcare program are that with limited government funding, landcare group action will facilitate a process of community development that will produce more aware, informed, skilled, and adaptive resource managers.
and thereby result in the adoption of more sustainable natural resource management practices and assist the move to more sustainable resource use.

Although there is widespread community support for landcare, there is some debate about the validity of assumptions implicit in this approach. To the extent landcare represented an attempt to do more with less, the assessment of Martin et al. (1992) that “landcare can be seen to reinforce the ideology of economic rationalism and contribute to the legitimisation of the governments’ rationalisation measures” (p. 201) may be pertinent. Indeed, Campbell (1992) concluded that “the total amount of funding available in grants directly to landcare groups through all state and commonwealth programs in 1991–1992 was less than 10 million dollars” (p. 46). As Reeve (1992), Cameron and Elix (1991), and Barr and Cary (1992) explained, no one can claim with certainty they can prescribe the conditions for sustainable agriculture in Australia, and the move toward sustainable resource use involves considerable experimentation with what are aptly described as best practice. Given that few Australian farms are operating profitably as well as the vast scale and intractable nature of key resource management problems in rural Australia, it is unrealistic to expect voluntary groups operating with limited funding to make a significant impact in a short period. Indeed, the assumption that a community participation process can act as the catalyst to redirect agricultural and other resource inputs during a prolonged rural recession is problematic.

Woodhill et al. (1992) emphasized the involvement of individuals in democratic processes where they share decision-making power in areas that directly affect them is a prerequisite for participative approaches to land conservation, such as landcare, to be effective. Woodhill (1990, cited in Woodhill et al., 1992, p. 268) had earlier reported that an “important issue to emerge from the New South Wales review of landcare was the need for local leaders to participate in decision making forums at these broader scales” and had concluded that “appropriate institutional arrangements did not exist to facilitate this.” Until recently, there were limited opportunities in Australia for landcare groups to participate in landcare policy making at regional, state, or national levels.

To some extent RLAP was an extension of previous Victorian experiences of public participation in resource management, principally through the salinity program (Stone, 1992; Wilkinson & Barr, 1993) and existing regional client advisory boards established by agencies. However, the RLAP process can be viewed as a bold and ambitious development. Bold in terms of the thrust toward integrated catchment management (ICM) and the model of community participation articulated, and ambitious in terms of the limited time allocated to accomplish the task and uncertainty about key elements of methodology and how regional plans would be implemented. All of the key state natural resource management agencies in Victoria participated in RLAP; the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (CNR) [previously the Department of Conservation and Environment (DCE)] was the lead agency, and the Department of Agriculture (DAV) and the Rural Water Corporation (RWC) participated in the process through interagency planning teams (IAG) and the regional CRGs.

It was not until late 1992, after the election of the new Liberal government, that the wider significance of RLAP to resource management in Victoria became apparent. In its election platform the Liberal party committed an incoming Liberal government to reform of existing land protection legislation and the introduction of ICM. The enabling land protection and catchment management bill was introduced in the Victorian parliament in the latter part of 1994. The Victorian government released a discussion paper (Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, 1993) seeking community comment on draft recommendations for this legislation. This paper (Department of Conservation and
Natural Resources, 1993) affirmed the critical role of landcare and informed the public that the proposed legislation provided "a mechanism for public accountability through regional and state catchment management boards" (p. 12), which would "coordinate the management of natural resources in each region throughout Victoria" (pp. 16–17).

Contrary to accepted principles of desirable public participation practices (Syme & Eaton, 1989), the RLAP process was imposed on regional communities, with the first exposure to RLAP for most occurring with the arrival of the Guidelines document (Department of Conservation and Environment, 1992a). This document explained that the purpose of RLAP was to provide "a regional overview of land resource problems and solutions, a framework for co-ordinated action to address priority landcare issues, rational basis for assessing landcare programs within a region and recommending the appropriate distribution of resources" (Department of Conservation and Environment, 1992a, p. 2). RLAP clearly reflected the emerging bureaucratic definition of landcare (Campbell, 1992; Curtis, 1993) as applying to all facets of sustainable resource use rather than focusing on the work of landcare groups. Guidelines committed the RLAP process to extensive community participation and specified that "community and industry groups with landcare related interests will need to be identified to enable participation during preparation of the plan" and that "core consultative reference groups" (CRGs) (Department of Conservation and Environment, 1992a, pp. 6–7) were to be established in each region. Guidelines stated "the role of the core consultative group will be to consult with the wider community and to work in partnership with the inter-agency planning team to identify issues, develop and evaluate options and prepare draft and final plans" (Department of Conservation and Environment, 1992a, p. 7). These statements clearly reflected agency commitment to a model of public participation that Sandercock (1986) described as "participation decision making," in which community representatives were to have a key role in decision making. The RLAP process closely resembled the charrette (Fagence, 1977) as a means of public participation in that a group of interested citizens were to work cooperatively for a limited period of time to develop a community plan for natural resources management in their region, with technical assistance from agency staff and a project officer and some commitment from government that their plan would be adopted and resourced.

Methodology

As Cuthbertson (1983) explained, "Public participation means different things to different people" (p. 102). Creighton (1981) defined community participation as "a process, or processes, by which interested and affected individuals, organisations, agencies, and government entities are consulted and included in the decision making of a government agency or corporate entity" (p. 3). As Perlmutt (1986) stated, there are equity and pragmatic reasons for adopting public participation in the planning processes. Daneke (1983), Griffa (1983), and Lyden et al. (1990) also discussed the benefits of public participation and suggested public participation can legitimize planning outcomes, reduce conflict, give meaning to legislation, build support for agency programs, tap local knowledge, provide feedback of program outcomes, contribute to community education, and enhance democratic processes by increasing government accountability. Creighton (1983) believed community participation has an important role in ascertaining community values: "Feelings and emotions are indicators of values, and differences in values are what citizen participation is all about" (p. 143). Sewell and Phillips (1979) explained that community and agency perceptions of the pur-
pose and benefits of public participation vary. In their discussion, Kweit and Kweit (1981) articulated the fundamental contradiction of public participation seeking to provide the public with direct input into policy development within a representative democracy, suggesting that citizen participation can result in "increased conflict in the political system, increased problems of government policy making, and ironically enough, decreased equality in society" (p. 96). For Daneke (1983), Cuthbertson (1983), and Priscoll (1983), this contradiction is resolved by embracing the important role of public participation in identifying issues and informing policy development, but also accepting that public participation is voluntary, is not expected to be representative, and should not determine policy.

Sewell and Phillips (1979) discussed a number of frameworks for the evaluation of public participation and concluded there was no universally acceptable model. In his review of evaluation of public involvement in the United States, Daneke (1983) expressed reservations about the trend to assess the performance of involvement that was intended to inform, not dictate, public policy in terms of policy impact and concluded that "many objective observers still concentrate on process rather than products" (p. 24). As with other recent evaluations of community participation (Landre & Knuth, 1992; Lyden et al., 1990; Potter & Norville, 1983; Wilkinson & Barr, 1993), we have focused on participants' perceptions of the participation process.

A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was employed in this research. Participant observation in the northeast RLAP process was combined with a state-wide survey of RLAP participants in all (9) Victorian regions. Allan Curtis was a CRG participant in the northeast RLAP process and over a 9-month period he made verbatim records of what participants said at all CRG meetings. These notes were analyzed to identify themes relevant to the research focus. An important element in this process was the use of informal discussions and questions during meetings to test the validity of generalizations derived from content analysis of meeting notes. Understanding derived from this author's participation in the northeast RLAP process proved invaluable when designing the state-wide survey and in obtaining the cooperation of RLAP participants in other regions of the state. Given that a combination of qualitative and quantitative data was being sought, a mix of open- and closed-ended questions was adopted for the six-page survey booklet. Surveys were mailed to the 132 participants in RLAP CRGs, and with 91 usable survey returns, a response rate of 71% was achieved. No information was available for the nonrespondents. However, Allan Curtis participated in a state-wide review of the RLAP process, and discussions with community representatives and agency staff confirmed major survey findings. Because of space limitations, it is not possible to present much of the qualitative information obtained through participant observation or open-ended survey questions. A detailed analysis of this information was published in a report to the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (Curtis et al., 1993a).

Findings

Stakeholder Representation

The importance of identifying and including major stakeholders in public participation programs is featured among most criteria in the extensive literature on public participation. In his manual on public involvement, Creighton (1981) distinguished between the general public and the public for the purpose of public involvement. Creighton (1981) introduced the concept of stakeholders when he explained that "realistically a consensus among those interests that see themselves as affected will serve as a political consensus
for the public at large" (p. 45). If major stakeholders are not represented, achievement of important benefits attributed to participation processes becomes problematic.

Each community representative in the sample responded to the following open-ended question: "Provide a brief description of your background in terms of experience or qualifications that would have been relevant to your selection on the CRG." Table 1 presents a summary of this information. Background descriptions revealed a wealth of experience and expertise in natural resource management among RLAP community representatives. It is possible this depth of experience and expertise supported claims (Martin et al., 1992; Sandercock, 1986) that participation processes favor advantaged groups in the community and do not lead to more widespread community involvement in the political process. However, it is also vital (Perlmut, 1986) that CRGs contain people of outstanding leadership, sound organization skills, and knowledge of the "corridors of power" to offset "the power of government agencies through both perception of expertise and their control of information" (Martin et al., 1992, p. 197).

**Adequate Landcare Group Representation**

Table 1 shows that a number of key landcare stakeholders were not adequately represented on RLAP CRGs. River management authorities (RMAs) have legislative responsibilities for stream management and are important players in natural resource management in all regions of Victoria. Table 1 shows that only nine (14%) of all community respondents reported only RMA experience. Furthermore, only 19% of community representatives returning surveys were women. Indeed, only two regions had more than one female respondent. At least two women were CRG chairpersons, and the depth of experience and expertise of female respondents suggested they would make an important contribution to the RLAP process. Given what appears to be an obvious case of underrepresentation of women, it was disturbing to note that no respondent referred to this issue when replying to the question about the representativeness of CRGs. Table 1 reveals strong landcare group representation in the RLAP process, with 42% of community respondents reporting landcare group membership. Indeed, in six of nine regions more than 40% of community representatives reported landcare group membership. This level of landcare representation is consistent with findings by Mues et al. (1994) that 40% of broad acre farmers in Victoria are landcare members, and those of Curtis et al. (1993c) that 55% of properties in areas where landcare groups operate have a landcare participant. Survey analysis indicated a trend for landcare group CRG representatives to bring "fresh blood" to landcare decision making; landcare group participants were less likely (55%) than non-landcare participants (78%) ($\chi^2 = 3.784; 1 > p > .05$) to report previous agency advisory board experience and more likely (30%) to be women than non-landcare participants (11%) ($\chi^2 = 3.4201; 1 > p > .05$; Yates correction applied). Table 1 shows 78% of community respondents were farmers and that in five of the nine regions farmers comprised all but one of the community representatives among survey respondents. Clearly, nonfarm or urban interests were underrepresented in a process purporting to be about landcare in its wider meaning as pertaining to all facets of sustainable resource use. Examination of Table 1 also reveals that 70% of community representatives returning a survey reported agency advisory board experience.

It is possible that in some regions groups underrepresented in RLAP were invited to participate. Some major stakeholders may have simply underestimated the significance of RLAP. Some agency staff claimed time constraints restricted their capacity to maximize the participation of major stakeholders in RLAP. It is also clear that in many instances
Table 1
Representation of stakeholders in RLAP CRGs (N = 91)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholders</th>
<th>Avoca</th>
<th>Corangamite</th>
<th>Glenelg</th>
<th>Gippsland</th>
<th>Goulburn</th>
<th>Northeast</th>
<th>Mallee</th>
<th>Port Phillip</th>
<th>Wimmera</th>
<th>Totals n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of responses</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of CRG</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency reps.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27 (30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community reps.*</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>64 (70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>49 (78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm leader</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13 (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonfarm business</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12 (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisory board</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>44 (70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landcare group</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>27 (42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>River authority</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9 (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local government</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13 (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12 (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12 (19)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Community representative categories are not mutually exclusive.
RLAP planners relied heavily, even exclusively, on existing agency advisory boards as the source of CRG participants. Responses to a question about how CRG participants were selected revealed that in five of the nine regions agency staff played a critical role in CRG selection and that they had relied heavily on agency advisory boards as a source of CRG participants. Obviously there are capable people on these boards and their experience and knowledge would benefit RLAP. However, the agency boards are largely client groups (mainly farmers) and are not representative of the wider community likely to be affected by the implementation of regional landcare plans. Strong farmer representation on CRGs also reflects the power of the Victorian Farmers Federation and the determination of that organization to keep control of landcare and ensure that urban and conservation interests did not prevail within the enlarged concept of landcare adopted for the RLAP process. In some regions the capacity to include representatives from a variety of stakeholders was restricted by the small size of their CRG. A large part of the problem of underrepresentation of key stakeholders stemmed from what appear to be contradictory statements in Guidelines (Department of Conservation and Environment, 1992a). This document clearly committed the RLAP process to establishing CRGs that would share decision-making power in the preparation of plans. However, Guidelines (Department of Conservation and Environment, 1992a) contained contradictory messages about how stakeholders should be identified and selected. In one section, it stated that “community and industry groups with landcare related interests will need to be identified” (Department of Conservation and Environment, 1992a, p. 6) and later identified a wide range of potential stakeholders. However, in the same paragraph it stated that “The consultative group (of approx 10 people) is to be based on existing advisory networks (supplemented as required to get interest group coverage)” (Department of Conservation and Environment, 1992a, p. 7).

How the Community Reference Groups Operated

An Important Role for Community Reference Groups in RLAP Decision Making. By coding open-ended responses to questions about the respective roles of the CRG and the IAG, we were able to draw conclusions about participants' perceptions of the impact of CRGs on decision-making processes within RLAP. Almost all (94%) respondents believed their CRG had at least an important role in RLAP decision making. Indeed, 49% believed their CRG had the major role. Only in two regions did any respondents (two in each) believe their CRG had only a minor role in RLAP decision making.

All Survey Respondents Assess the Impact of Community Representatives on RLAP Outcomes. Examination of Guidelines (Department of Conservation and Environment, 1992a) and contact with regional convenors indicated that the main topics for discussion and decision by CRGs were the identification and description of land types and their landcare issues; prioritization of landcare issues; identification of strategies to manage priorities; and development of future arrangements for community consultation and monitoring of achievements. Using Likert-type response categories, survey respondents indicated their view of the impact of community representatives on these RLAP decision-making topics. Table 2 reveals a positive view of the impact of community representatives on RLAP outcomes, with a majority of participants believing community representatives had a very important or important influence on RLAP outcomes for each topic. As might be expected, the more technical task of identifying land units was perceived as the topic on which community representatives had the
Table 2
Community representatives' impact on RLAP outcomes as assessed by respondents (N = 91)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Frequency of response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 No importance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Identifying/describing land units (n = 87)</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Prioritizing landcare issues (n = 89)</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Identifying strategies to manage priorities (n = 88)</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Developing future community consulting and monitoring arrangements (n = 86)</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

least impact. Respondents indicated community representatives had relatively the greatest impact on the important CRG task of prioritizing landcare issues. Indeed, with 49% of respondents indicating they believed community representatives had a very important impact on prioritizing landcare issues and 31% a very important impact on developing future arrangements for community consultation and monitoring of landcare, there is evidence to suggest an important role for community representatives in RLAP decision making.

Stakeholder Perceptions of Their Impact on RLAP Outcomes: Statistical analysis of responses on Likert-type response categories revealed no significant differences ($\chi^2 = p > .05$) in the levels of perceived impact for landcare and non-landcare respondents on the RLAP outcomes listed above. For example, 65% of landcare participants reported they had an important impact on the identification of landcare issues compared with 39% of non-landcare participants ($\chi^2 = 1.2626; p > .05$), and 40% of landcare participants, compared with 43% of non-landcare participants, reported an important impact on developing future regional consultative and monitoring arrangements ($\chi^2 = 0.04; p > .05$). Further analysis revealed a trend by community representatives with advisory board experience to report greater impact on some RLAP outcomes. For example, 49% of those with previous agency experience reported an important impact on outcomes related to developing future structures, compared with 25% ($\chi^2 = 3.3259; .1 > p > .05$; Yates correction applied) of those without agency board experience. The reported disparity in impact was greatest for those topics for which it would appear previous knowledge of agency decision-making processes and structures would be an advantage. Analysis revealed a significantly greater reported impact on RLAP outcomes for farmers compared with nonfarmers; 68% of farmers reported having an important impact on the discussion of landcare issues, compared with 32% ($\chi^2 = 5.565; p < .05$; Yates correction applied) of nonfarmers, and 46% of farmers reported having an important impact on developing future regional consultative and monitoring arrangements for landcare, compared with 17% of nonfarmers ($\chi^2 = 4.6588; p < .05$; Yates correction applied). Given the definition of landcare stated in Guidelines (Department of Conservation and Environment, 1992a), farmer interests were overrepresented in the RLAP process and farmers may have had a greater im-
pact on RLAP outcomes, particularly on recommendations for developing future regional consultative and monitoring structures.

**Extent to Which Landcare Group Issues Were Covered in RLAP.** Survey respondents were asked to assess the extent to which the work and concerns of landcare groups were addressed by the RLAP, using three broad topic areas: key resource management issues in landcare areas; processes for enhancing landcare group effectiveness; and representation of landcare groups in any future regional community consultative or monitoring body. Analysis of responses on Likert-type response categories revealed almost all (94%) respondents indicated key issues in landcare areas were at least adequately covered (69%, thoroughly/completely). A large majority (78%) of respondents (28%, thoroughly/completely, and 49%, adequately) believed landcare groups would be at least adequately represented in any future regional community consultative or monitoring body. Although a majority (68%) of respondents indicated processes for enhancing landcare group effectiveness were at least adequately covered, 32% reported that these processes were either ignored or inadequately covered.

**Models of Community Participation and Their Regional Context**

Syne and Eaton (1989) and Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) highlighted the importance of context to the nature and outcomes of public participation. Content analysis of responses to open-ended survey questions about the operation of CRGs highlighted important regional variations in community participation in the RLAP process. From respondents' comments it was possible to place the community participation process adopted in each CRG along a continuum, with the community-as-decision-maker model at one end and the market research (Sandercock, 1986) or consultative model at the other end. The market research model is described by Sandercock (1986) as emphasizing "the responsibility and power of the bureaucracy, and the participant is seen as a consumer or customer" (p. 10). In this model the objective of participation is to obtain feedback about agency programs rather than involve participants in policy formulation. Statements in Guidelines (Department of Conservation and Environment, 1992a) and the choice of CRGs as the method of public participation implied that RLAP planners had adopted the community-as-decision-maker model of public participation.

In the Goulburn and Northeast regions, operation of the CRGs most closely approximated the community-as-decision-maker model. CRGs in both regions contained representatives of most major stakeholders, and a number of representatives were not selected by agency staff and did not have advisory board experience. The CRGs were clearly more important than the IAG as the decision-making forum within RLAP, and a collaborative approach to CRG decision making was adopted. A feature of this collaborative approach was the participation of agency representatives as equal partners in the consensus-building process. Although agency representatives appeared to be conscious of not dominating discussions, they were generally forthcoming with their positions and did not pretend to adopt the hands-off approach implicit in providing technical input only. Positive descriptions of the relationship between agency and community representatives in these regions attested to the success of this model in these regions.

The community participation process adopted in the Avoca/Loddon/Campus region approximated the community-as-decision-maker model for most of its operation. Most major stakeholders were represented; however, most community representatives were selected by agency staff. Content analysis of respondents' statements indicated the
CRG was more important as a decision-making forum than the IAG, and a collaborative approach to decision making was adopted. Comments by CRG participants revealed a close, effective relationship between community and agency representatives. Confirmation of CRG operation within the community-as-decision-maker model was provided by the severe condemnation by CRG representatives of perceived interference from a regional agency manager who attempted to alter the CRG's draft RLAP.

The Gippsland and Wimmera regions adopted a "technocratic" version of the community-as-decision-maker model. The CRG was more important than the IAG as the RLAP decision-making forum in both regions. Most agency representatives adopted the role of support staff, providing background and technical information to help community representatives reach consensus. Comments by community and agency representatives in the Wimmera region attested to the effectiveness of relationships established under this process. In both regions, agency staff played a critical role in CRG selection, and most representatives had advisory board experience. Whereas in Gippsland stakeholder representation appeared adequate, this was not the case in the Wimmera region.

The RLAP process in the Mallee was driven by agency representatives on the CRG and resembled the consultative or market research model of participation. The six community representatives had advisory board experience, and a number of key stakeholders were not represented. One respondent commented that an agency staffer had chaired CRG meetings. The Mallee CRG was an important decision-making body, but decision-making power mostly resided with agency staff. Given the background of community representatives as agency advisory board members, it would seem reasonable to expect a relatively harmonious relationship between agency and community representatives. Comments provided by participants confirmed this expectation.

Glenelg and Corangamite also fit the consultative or market research model of community participation. In both regions local conditions appeared to have contributed to the adoption of this model. In Glenelg most community representatives were selected by agency staff and had advisory board experience, and a number of key stakeholders were not represented. Glenelg CRG participants indicated the RLAP project officer adopted the leading role in developing their plan, with the CRG providing feedback on drafts prepared by a small project team. Comments that described interagency factionalism and revealed the IAG had only met twice provided some insight as to how a small planning team had assumed such a significant role. Participant descriptions of the relationship between community and agency representatives revealed a general lack of enthusiasm about the operation of the Glenelg CRG. Most major stakeholders were represented in the Corangamite CRG; however, many representatives were selected by agency staff and had previous advisory board experience. Although the CRG had an important decision-making role, agency staff had the major input into decision making. Comments by participants revealed a positive relationship between community and agency representatives. However, the factionalism among community representatives had inhibited consensus decision making and detracted from the effectiveness of community representatives within the CRG.

Likert-type response categories were employed to measure respondents' perceptions of the impact of community representatives on key RLAP outcomes: the identification and description of land types and their landcare issues; prioritization of landcare issues; identification of strategies to manage priorities; and development of future arrangements for community consultation and monitoring of achievements. "Important" and "very important" responses were combined to provide a measure of community representatives' impact on particular topics. The perceived impact of community representatives in regions operating under the community-as-decision-maker model of community participa-
tion was then compared with that of regions operating under the consultative or market research model. Statistical analysis revealed a significantly greater ($\chi^2 = 4.3633, p < .05$) impact for community representatives on the RLAP outcome—identification of strategies to manage priority issues—in the regions operating under the community-as-decision-maker model compared with regions operating under the consultative or market research model. For the remaining RLAP outcomes, respondents' scores were higher in those regions where the community-as-decision-maker model applied; however, these differences were not statistically significant.

Conclusion

The RLAP process was a bold and ambitious attempt at community participation in natural resource planning in Victoria. If the RLAP experience in Victoria is to provide a model for greater community participation in landcare policy development, the RLAP process as well as the outcomes must be examined carefully. The article discussed key aspects of our analysis of that process. Survey analysis revealed a majority of respondents believed they made strong contributions to CRG debates, and almost all (90%) believed that their views were heard. A majority of respondents also believed community representatives had an important impact on key RLAP outcomes, particularly for topics related to the clarification of community values, and that the impact of community and agency representatives was relatively similar. Landcare groups were well represented in the RLAP process, and CRG participants believed the work and concerns of landcare groups were adequately covered in RLAP. We have argued that the involvement of individuals in democratic processes in which they share decision-making power regarding topics that directly affect them is a prerequisite for participative approaches to land conservation, such as landcare, to be effective. This research indicates that institutional arrangements are emerging to facilitate landcare member participation in landcare-related policy development and that landcare participants are prepared to accept this challenge, but that desirable outcomes in terms of a more effective and equitable planning process cannot be assumed.

A major flaw in the RLAP process was that CRG stakeholder representation did not reflect the wider definition of landcare. Key stakeholders such as urban residents and businesses, RMAs, and women were underrepresented. To a large extent this situation can be explained by the contradictory statements in Guidelines (Department of Conservation and Environment, 1992a) contributing to the selection of many CRG participants by agency staff from within advisory board networks and the determined efforts of the Victoria Farmers Federation to maintain control of landcare. However, this issue will need to be addressed in the forthcoming land protection and catchment management legislation, which proposes to establish regional boards of community representatives who will prepare natural resource management plans and establish priorities for the allocation of funds between competing issues. If key stakeholders are not represented, the legitimacy of planning decisions will be open to question and the potential for conflict increased.

Statements in Guidelines (Department of Conservation and Environment, 1992a) and the use of core consultative reference groups implied adoption of a community-as-decision-maker model for the RLAP process. Given that this model of decision making was not explicitly prescribed and that regional planners were operating under considerable time constraints, regional contexts had an important impact on RLAP processes. Content analysis of responses to open-ended questions and, to a lesser extent, statistical analysis of responses on Likert-type response categories, established that regions in which the community-as-decision-maker model of public participation was adopted were where
CRGs had the greatest impact on RLAP decision making and where community representatives were perceived to have the greatest impact on RLAP outcomes. The community-as-decision-maker model appears most likely to facilitate citizen participation, empowerment, and social learning, which are the key themes of the community development process fundamental to landcare. Although planners should allow community participation programs to adapt to regional contexts, the experience of RLAP suggested that when program guidelines inadequately prescribe stakeholder representation or the power of CRGs, community participation programs are vulnerable to manipulation by agency staff, which will likely entrench existing power structures within regions and diminish the capacity of participants to act in a cooperative, constructive, and respectful manner.

Implementation of regional catchment and land protection boards as part of the forthcoming ICM package provides Victorian planners with an opportunity to facilitate the regional organization of landcare groups and assist the process of community development. To a large extent the strength of the landcare group-agency relationship, which is a fundamental element of landcare, has constrained the development of regional linkages between landcare groups. Most landcare groups focus on the tasks of community development and on-ground work in their local area and rely on agency staff for technical support and information about landcare issues and funding opportunities. Landcare group representation on regional policy making forums will require some mechanism for the regional linkage of groups (Curtis, 1993). Interaction among landcare participants facilitated by such a mechanism could be expected to enhance social learning and the development of leadership skills vital to the success of landcare groups. Community development facilitated by the linkage of landcare groups would appear to offer part of the answer to the problem of limited government funds attempting to resource the rapidly expanding number of landcare groups. Regional community boards should provide landcare groups with greater political leverage and a mechanism of providing greater accountability for the expenditure of the additional government funds required for on-ground works with a demonstrated community benefit.

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 resource management with limited resources. They realize this task may not be accomplished in their lifetimes, but they appear fortified by the belief that if they work hard enough they can make a difference. Recent reports of landcare group activity (Campbell, 1991b, 1992; Curtis et al., 1993c) revealed the extent of the remarkable accomplishments of these voluntary groups. The authors have argued that citizen participation in landcare decision making is a fundamental element of the process of community development that distinguishes landcare from previous rural extension programs in Australia. The RLAP experience of community participation also suggests that landcare participants can make an important contribution to regional landcare policy development but that community participation is affected by regional contexts and institutional arrangements.

References


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