ASSESSING AND MANAGING BURNOUT IN LANDCARE

findings from studies in Victoria

Ian Byron, Allan Curtis*  
Johnstone Centre for Research in Natural Resources and Society  
Charles Sturt University  
P.O. Box 789, Albury  
NSW 2640  
Phone: 02 6051 9945  
email: acurtis@csu.edu.au

*Corresponding author

ABSTRACT

Landscape is an important mechanism for delivering large government programs to conserve biodiversity. Despite its successes, environmental conditions continue to deteriorate and there are concerns about sustaining volunteer support. Survey data on burnout affecting Landscape participants indicates reduced personal accomplishment and although most respondents were not experiencing high overall

burnout, historical evidence suggests a considerable potential for its rapid development. The management of burnout requires a more coherent and adequately resourced approach to managing Landscape groups based on a realistic expectation of the capacity of these groups to contribute to improved environmental conditions.

KEY WORDS

Landscape, burnout, volunteers, public participation

INTRODUCTION

Since its introduction in 1986 the Landscape program has become one of the most heralded examples of volunteer community groups working in cooperation with government to achieve improved environmental outcomes. Landscape membership is extensive: over 4000 groups, more than 120 000 members; approximately 30% of the farming community nationwide (Curtis 1998).

Landscape is responsible for some impressive achievements:
- enhancing social cohesion;
- increasing the capacity of rural communities to attract government resources;
- increasing landholder awareness, knowledge, and adoption of best management practices; and

These successes have been facilitated by productive partnerships between community groups and State agency staff, and through hands-on learning experiences (Chamala 1995, Curtis 1998).

Landscape is important for delivering government programs (e.g., Natural Heritage Trust [NHT] programs) and has clearly made some important contributions towards more sustainable land management. However environmental conditions continue to deteriorate (Commonwealth of Australia 1996). Other research (Curtis 1999) has highlighted critical Landscape management issues that threaten to undermine capacity to contribute to improved environmental outcomes.

Many Landscape groups are operating at historically high levels of activity (Curtis 2000). This paper presents findings from two regional studies in Victoria that assessed the extent of burnout in Landscape participants and explored the effect of some ongoing group management issues in relation to burnout. These studies confirm previously identified qualitative evidence of burnout in Landscape members (Curtis 1999).
BURNOUT

Burnout is a syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach et al. 1996). Emotional exhaustion occurs when an individual is operating beyond their psychological and emotional limits. Depersonalization is a tendency to view others as objects and to distance self from others. Reduced personal accomplishment occurs when an individual perceives that they are performing poorly and achieving little (Golembiewski et al. 1998).

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) is the most widely used and accepted burnout measurement tool (Schaufler et al. 1993). It consists of 22 statements (nine for the emotional exhaustion sub-scale, five for the depersonalization sub-scale and eight for the personal accomplishment sub-scale) with a seven-point frequency response (Maslach et al. 1990).

The phase model of burnout (Golembiewski et al. 1986) represents the most commonly used adaptation/extension of the MBI. It was designed to enable the three separate MBI sub-scales to be reduced to a single measure comprising eight progressive phases of burnout. Phase I represents the least advanced level of burnout; phase VIII the most advanced. Phases are generated by using universal norms or cut-off points to assign scores on the three MBI sub-scales as high or low. This process generates eight possible combinations of high/low assignments (Table 1). Of the three sub-scales, emotional exhaustion is considered to be the most important contributor to burnout followed by reduced personal accomplishment and then depersonalization (Golembiewski et al. 1998).

The main strength of the phase model lies in its ability to measure burnout on a single scale at aggregate and individual levels, while retaining the three distinct components identified in the MBI. The ability to distinguish high scores on each sub-scale is crucial. Strategies to reduce burnout should be tailored to the sub-scales where high burnout is experienced (Golembiewski et al. 1998).

While burnout levels increase progressively from phase I through to phase VIII, an individual need not pass through each phase when moving from the lowest to highest stage. Indeed, such a progression is highly improbable (Golembiewski et al. 1998). Under the phase model two possible forms of onset are proposed—chronic and acute—reflecting the number of phase moves required to move from low to high burnout. Typically, acute onset would require only two phase moves (e.g. from phase I to V to VIII) while chronic onset would require three phase moves (e.g. from phase I to II to IV to VIII) (Golembiewski et al. 1998).

METHODS

Surveys, that included a modified version of the MBI and a range of questions relating to factors hypothesized as contributing to burnout, were sent to two regions of Victoria:

- a random sample of 375 Landcare members from 32 of the 47 groups in the Shepparton Irrigation Region (SIR) received surveys; a response rate of 71% was achieved;
- a random sample of 158 Landcare members from 15 of the 22 groups in the Western Port region (WFR) in 2000; response rate was 75%.

Work setting or organizational factors are widely regarded as the major contributor to burnout. Interventions are therefore most likely to have an impact at the organizational level (Cohen 1980, Maslach & Leiter 1997, Golembiewski 1998). Survey questions focused primarily on organizational variables such as group activity levels; goals, plans and expectations; monitoring and feedback processes; and leadership/support (Fraedinger 1982, Maslach & Leiter 1997).

Table 1. The phase model (Golembiewski et al. 1998).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
<th>IV</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>VI</th>
<th>VII</th>
<th>VIII</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Depersonalization</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced personal accomplishment</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional exhaustion</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Stepwise multiple regression analysis was used to identify variables that were significantly associated with higher burnout on the MBI sub-scales. Analyses used the raw MBI sub-scale scores to improve the power of statistical tests (Maslach et al. 1996).

Confirmatory factor analysis (Boles et al. 2000) using AMOS (Arbuckle 1997) demonstrated the validity of the three-factor structure of burnout as defined by the MBI and the phase model in the Landcare context. The modified MBI also demonstrated internal consistency with alpha reliability values comparable to those outlined in the MBI test manual (Maslach et al. 1996) with the exception of the depersonalisation sub-scale in the SIR, which was just below the 0.7 level deemed acceptable (de Vaus 1991).

The phase model of burnout was applied to the data using cut-off points of 26, 23 and 18 for reduced personal accomplishment, emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation respectively (Golembiewski et al. 1998).

The definition of an unacceptable level of burnout is a point of some contention. Most estimates of the acceptable level fall within the 5–10% range of individuals in the three most advanced phases (VI, VII and VIII) (Golembiewski et al. 1998).

Despite the finding of generally low burnout, there is considerable potential for rapid increase. The phase model suggests that current high levels of reduced personal accomplishment will lead to advanced stages of burnout in many Landcare participants since:

- reduced personal accomplishment is not likely to be reversed without major changes in the ideology and operation of the Landcare program; and
- given the stressful organisational setting experienced by many Landcare participants (described below) emotional exhaustion is also likely to increase over time.

Many Landcare groups are operating at historically high levels of activity: 53% of WPR and 36% of SIR respondents indicated the past year was at least as active as their most active year in terms of time and effort committed to Landcare. Comparisons of Landcare group activity levels pre- and post-NHT provided additional support suggesting that Landcare activity had increased post-NHT (e.g. 63% of WPR respondents and 52% in the SIR indicated their most active year was post-NHT compared with 17% of WPR and 25% in the SIR for years prior to the NHT).

**Table 2. Phase assignments of burnout (%)**:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
<th>IV</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>VI</th>
<th>VII</th>
<th>VIII</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Western Port Region</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shepparton Irrigation Region</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n: number of people answering the question relating to the phase model.
Survey data confirm earlier concerns (Curtis 2000) about the capacity to sustain current high levels of Landcare group activity. Higher activity was the most important contributor to high levels of emotional exhaustion (WPR = 2.46, p = 0.023 and SIR = 3.91, p = 0.001). Using the universal cut-off points even the most active respondents were classified as having high burnout in terms of reduced personal accomplishment. Some of the most active survey respondents had decided to reduce their level of involvement in Landcare. Respondents who indicated that they had made a conscious decision to decrease their involvement in Landcare had significantly higher levels of burnout on the emotional exhaustion sub-scale (t = 2.34, p = 0.025). These individuals appear to have been amongst the most active and committed members: there was no significant difference in current levels of activity between those who had consciously decreased their involvement and all other respondents (t = 0.687, p = 0.493).

The association of higher burnout on emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment with the presence of ongoing Landcare group management issues, further highlights concerns about the potential for burnout to increase. Higher emotional exhaustion was significantly associated with respondents who considered that their group leaders had been ineffective (t = 3.14, p = 0.002), felt pressured to take on leadership roles (t = 2.20, p = 0.038), and reported that their group did not acknowledge the contribution of individual members (t = -2.41, p = 0.025). Reduced personal accomplishment was associated with respondents who reported that their group did not have established priorities for group activity (t = -2.47, p = 0.014).

Burnout can be expected to increase with continued and/or increased exposure to these management issues. These factors have been reported for some time as critical management issues with the potential to undermine the effectiveness of Landcare (Curtis et al. 2000). Findings from this research reinforce calls for a more coherent approach to the management of Landcare (Curtis 2000). While Landcare activity has been geared up, there has been a reduction in State agency extension support for groups that has further increased already high workloads for participants, and affected their capacity to address these management issues.

Strong social relationships are an important buffer against burnout (Pines & Aronson 1988). The strong sense of community and shared purpose fostered through Landcare (Campbell 1997) is likely to be an important factor explaining low levels of depersonalisation in Landcare participants. Depersonalisation therefore seems less likely to increase as a result of the ongoing Landcare group management issues highlighted above. However, high depersonalisation may accompany increased burnout on the other sub-scales. Individuals are more likely to treat others in an impersonal manner when attempting to cope with high emotional exhaustion and/or reduced personal accomplishment.

Most respondents are currently occupying phase III of the phase model (Table 1). The logic of the phase model suggests that many of the respondents in phase III will move to phase VII or to phase VIII (high burnout phases) (Table 2), confirming the potential of burnout to advance rapidly since:

- burnout will continue to increase while factors associated with high burnout persist; and
- as burnout increases it is unreasonable to expect a move from high to low on the same sub-scale (e.g. it is improbable for a move from phase III where reduced personal accomplishment is high to phase V or VI where reduced personal accomplishment is low).

Phase IV is considered a transitional stage and individuals generally only occupy the central phases (IV and V) for brief periods, and phase VIII is the only logical progression for individuals in phase IV (Goleman 1998).

It seems probable that even the least burnt out Landcare participants surveyed will progress from low burnout to high burnout with a single phase move.
CONCLUSIONS

The incidence of advanced cases of burnout was within the commonly accepted range in the WPR and just over in the SIR. However, high burnout in terms of reduced personal accomplishment was endemic in both regions surveyed. Given the generally low sense of personal accomplishment and the relationship of higher activity and ongoing management issues with increased emotional exhaustion, the logic of the phase model indicates there is considerable potential for rapid movement to high burnout among a substantial proportion of respondents.

Management strategies to reduce burnout should:
- prevent high levels of emotional exhaustion and subsequently advanced cases of burnout from increasing; and
- reduce the potential for burnout to increase rapidly by increasing participants sense of accomplishment.

A more coherent and better resourced approach to the management of volunteer Landcare groups is required and should provide assistance for groups to:
- undertake regular priority setting;
- establish monitoring and feedback processes to reinforce the accomplishments of volunteer Landcare participants; and
- implement leadership training and succession planning.

The lack of personal accomplishment felt by Landcare participants suggests there is also a need to revise expectations of Landcare groups, particularly the expectation that they can deliver on-ground outcomes for large programs. Landcare groups should not be expected to reverse environmental degradation (Campbell 1997). Rather their role is to act as a catalyst and create demand for change and without complementary policy changes in the wider political and economic environment, the good will and commitment fostered by Landcare groups is likely to wane’ (Campbell 1997).

Realistic expectations of Landcare groups and their volunteer participants need to be articulated. The most important roles for local groups are to:
- mobilise participation;
- initiate and support learning;
- pull down resources to support local efforts; and
- undertake on-ground work to the extent that resources are available (Curtis & Lockwood 2000).

Individual land managers could be expected to:
- participate in group activities;
- establish community priorities; and
- undertake work on their properties or those of others as time permits.

On the other hand individual land managers should not be expected to take leading roles in administering or implementing government funded projects.

In an era of two-income families and considerable off-farm work they simply do not have the time.

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