Abstract

Data from the 1998 state-wide survey of Victorian Landcare groups confirmed the capacity of groups to mobilize rural communities and accomplish important community education and onground work. At the same time, there were significant declines in onground work despite increased funding per group. The impact of drought is part of the explanation of these changes. Respondents were concerned about burnout as Landcare volunteers worked to deliver Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) outcomes. Survey data also highlighted program management deficiencies, including delays with the arrival of NHT funds, inadequate training for group leaders, insufficient numbers of group coordinators and the absence of priority setting and catchment planning by many groups. These are ongoing issues and reflect a failure to act on the lessons from recent experience with Landcare. We need to move beyond the current preoccupation with onground work: a focus that undervalues important Landcare work and obscures the need for improved support for groups.

Key words

Landcare, Australia, community participation, rural development, sustainable agriculture

INTRODUCTION

Landcare groups are widely acclaimed as an important Australian success story. Landcare has mobilised a large cross-section of the rural population and there is considerable evidence that Landcare groups are effective local organisations. With strong agency commitment to participatory processes, agency staff and Landcare members have established robust, productive partnerships and avoided many of the perils of co-option (Curtis 1998). Groups provide opportunities to learn by doing and through interaction with peers (Chamala 1995, Millar & Curtis 1997). Group processes enable participants to discuss conflicting views in a reasonable fashion and have generally enhanced social cohesion, increased the capacity of rural communities to attract resources from governments and better equipped them to respond to change (Alexander 1995, Curtis & De Lacy 1995). Landcare participation has also increased awareness of issues and enhanced landholder skills and knowledge and contributed to increased adoption of best management practices (Mues et al. 1994, Curtis & De Lacy 1996). There are also examples where group activity has had substantial impacts on land and water degradation at the local or subcatchment scale (Campbell 1994, Commonwealth of Australia 1997). Landcare participants are represented on regional catchment management committees (CMCs) and other important fora and are making important contributions to natural resource management decision-making (Curtis et al. 1995). By enhancing citizen competency, providing continuity of community representation and acting as a place of retained knowledge, Landcare groups and their emerging networks, appear likely to bridge the gap between the demands of adaptive management and the limitations of stakeholder participation (Curtis et al. 1999).

Despite these impressive achievements, there have been concerns about Landcare and Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) program logic and implementation. Landcare has been criticised as an exercise in shifting responsibility for action from government to local communities (Martin et al. 1992). Efforts to develop a Landcare or stewardship ethic as a lever to effect behavioural change appear to have been misguided in that most farmers have a strong stewardship ethic and stewardship is not strongly linked to adoption of best-practice (Curtis & De Lacy 1998). There have also been concerns that Landcare and the NHT are a case of 'too little too late' and would not effect improvements at the landscape scale.

Conservationists are alarmed by continued loss of critical habitats, and Dr Bob Brown, Tasmanian Greens Party Senator, suggested Landcare was overly preoccupied with increasing agricultural productivity and had not adequately addressed biodiversity conservation (Grose 1994). Curtis & Lockwood (1998) suggested that limited stakeholder representation on CMCs and NHT Regional Assessment Panels had constrained the capacity of the NLP/NHT to deliver biodiversity con-
randomly from lists held within each regional CMC (Catchment Management Authority in Victoria) office. Landcare group officials completed the surveys. With 223 surveys returned, a response rate of 51% was achieved (Curtis & Van Nouthuys 1999). With very similar questions used in recent Victorian surveys there was opportunity to compare trends over time.

The Landcare group survey process employed has been widely accepted (Campbell 1992, Alexander 1995). It is a cost effective method of gathering data that contributes to increased understanding of what groups do and how they operate; assessing group needs; monitoring the extent of group activity; identifying factors affecting group performance; and understanding key issues such as the agency-group relationship.

As part of data analysis, an index was constructed combining measures of group activity for community education and onground work. Group performance on the index was used as a surrogate measure of group effectiveness. Using activity levels as a surrogate for effectiveness has its limitations. For example, this approach does not take into account the situation where a group has low level of activity in a particular year but has a track record of substantial achievements. Nevertheless, the index is a useful tool for exploring factors affecting group performance and for identifying the characteristics of more and less active groups.

**FINDINGS**

**Community education and onground work**

Survey information provided considerable evidence that Landcare continues to mobilise a wide cross-section of the community. For example, in Victoria in 1997/98:

- In areas where a group operated, 46% of properties had a Landcare member.
- Extrapolation suggested the 890 Victorian groups operating in June 1998 had 27 500 members.
- Eighty-five per cent of respondents considered member participation was the same or a little higher than the previous year.
- A majority of groups (58%) reported involving others to assist or study the work of Landcare in their area.
- Seventy-five per cent of groups reported new members.

Victorian Landcare groups continued to undertake a range of community education work likely to increase awareness of issues, enhance landholder skills and knowledge and contribute to the adoption of best-practice land management.

Almost all groups conducted meetings with most groups holding four meetings. On average, 53% of members attended meetings.

- A majority of groups (68%) reported establishing annual priorities.
- Conducting field days/farm walks (66% of groups) and establishing demonstration sites (30% of groups) continued to be a feature of group activity. There was a significant positive relationship between groups undertaking field days/farm walks and the extent of onground work accomplished.
- Most groups (66%) published a newsletter, for a mean of five issues per group. Newsletters circulated exceeded mean group membership and indicated groups were attempting to inform the wider community of their activities.

A majority of groups (58%) were involved in monitoring changes in the physical environment in their area.

A majority of groups (56%) reported attracting support from non-government organisations such as other Landcare groups, businesses, conservation groups and farmers.

Despite the impact of drought, groups had undertaken important onground landcare work. However, there had been significant declines in most types of work since 1994/95 (Curtis 1996).

Extrapolation suggested the 890 groups operating at June 1998 had established three million trees/shrubs. The proportion of groups establishing trees/shrubs and the mean planting per group fell significantly compared to 1994/95. More groups were involved in direct seeding but the mean area direct seeded had also declined.

Thirty-four per cent of groups reported fencing remnants. Remnants fenced represented three times the number of trees/shrubs established.

Extrapolation suggested 4500 km of fencing had been erected by groups for landcare work in 1997/98. The mean length of fencing erected per group was similar to 1994/95 but significantly fewer groups had erected fencing.

A large majority (85%) of group had completed onground work to control at least one of rabbits, weeds, erosion or salinity. Work on rabbits and weeds was similar to 1994/95, but activity on erosion and salinity control had fallen significantly.

The role of government and the agency/community partnership

Landcare developed as a government program: agency staff play a critical role in facilitating and coordinating many groups; agency contact staff and local Landcare participants have generally developed
robust, positive relationships and government funding has underpinned considerable Landcare group activities (Curtis 1998). The 1998 survey data supports these assessments.

A large proportion of groups reported government assistance

- Eighty-four per cent of groups reported receiving assistance with money or materials.
- The mean value of reported assistance with money and materials was $13,966 per group, up significantly from $8,232 in 1994-95.

Group performance related to government funding

- There was a significant positive relationship between government funding received and trees planted, fencing erected, and group ranking on the activity index.
- Thirty-eight per cent of groups reported they had a paid coordinator (trending up from 29% in 1994-95); government funded most coordinator positions. Most coordinators worked with other groups and this had important advantages for inter-group communication and developing funding applications. There was a significant positive relationship between groups having a paid coordinator and group ranking on the activity index.

Groups satisfied with key aspects of government support

- Respondents indicated a high degree of satisfaction with the adequacy of information and advice relating to land management (84%), assistance with the NHT application process (72%) (as opposed to the complexity of NHT application forms and delays in announcing successful applicants), and coordination of on-ground group activities (82%).
- Considerable contact between groups and agency staff and contact makes a difference.
- Eighty-five per cent of groups reported regular contact (at least every three months) with agency staff and 63% reported contact at least monthly.
- More than half of the respondents said their contact staff had considerable influence on group decision-making.
- There was a significant positive relationship between the extent of contact by agency staff and group ranking on the activity index.

Strong affirmation for the role of agency staff

- A large majority of respondents said that their contact staff showed respect for the skills and knowledge of most members (86%), had good technical knowledge (86%), and possessed good communication skills (85%).

Landcare group management issues

Survey data, highlighting widespread participation in Landcare and the extent of community education and on-ground work, masks some important Landcare group management issues. Some of those issues have significant influences on organisational effectiveness (Selin & Chavez 1995, Williams & Elieffson 1997). They include the importance of having clear goals, objectives and plans; access to a funded group coordinator; facilitation by an outside agency; and resource availability.

Their importance was evident in respondent's comments about the main constraints affecting their groups in the next 12 months. Farm finances (37% of groups) was most frequently listed, followed by time constraints facing volunteer members (32%), declining political support for Landcare (22%), problems with the NHT funding process and the difficulties of enthusing volunteer members (both 14%).

Limited involvement in planning

In the 1998 survey over 30% of respondents indicated their group had not established annual priorities and 60% had not established or were not establishing a catchment plan. There was a significant association between catchment planning and group ranking on the activity index. Problems with planning were also evident in low levels of Landcare group involvement in property planning.

Requests for support with group administration

Almost half of the respondents (46%) said assistance with group administration was inadequate. In 1997/98 most groups didn't have access to a paid coordinator and concerns about managing increased administrative workloads were reflected in numerous comments requesting coordinators. For example:

'Seasonal and economic conditions are such that landholders in Landcare groups are fully committed to farms also work off-farm. Facilitation of on-ground work is left to office bearers. Required work is not done despite willingness, desperately need facilitator for project success.'

'Before coordinator group moved slowly, problems with funding applications, communication between groups, no resource sharing, funding not spent on time due to other commitments. Now motivation has increased, communication and contacts with network lead to new project ideas. Coordinator needed for efficiency and productivity.'

These concerns were also reflected in the importance given to funding coordinators when respondents were asked their priorities for the allocation of government Landcare funds over the next three years.

The largest proportion of resources (44%) was allocated as money or materials to manage land and water degradation. The next priority was for coordinators for group activities (23% of resources), and funds for labour to perform on-ground work (18%) and to provide technical information and advice to groups (15%).

Until now, the assumption has been that groups could be "kick-started" by government funding, but over time they would become largely independent of funding for group coordination. This approach fails to acknowledge the growing weight of Australian (Campbell 1992, Rush & Associates 1992) and overseas (Bradney 1990, Pearce 1993) evidence highlighting the critical role of group coordination in volunteer programs. Some groups have members with the skills, commitment and time to undertake group coordination, but many groups want ongoing funding of a coordinator (usually part-time and often in partnership with other groups).

Concerns about adequacy of leadership and management training

A majority of 1998 survey respondents (55%) said support with leadership and management training for group leaders was inadequate. Efforts to address this issue through workshop activities and short courses have generally been poorly supported by group leaders. A "Technology of Participation" project established recently in southwest Victoria may provide some ideas of how to proceed with this important task.

Concerns about reduced support from the State Government

Many respondents were concerned about the contraction of state agency support for Landcare and the expectation that community groups would fill the breach. Respondent comments included:

'There is poor morale due to targeting of Landcare groups to take on government responsibilities.'

'State government support staff cuts and constant NRE staff changes are major constraints.'

'Many active members strongly resent the push for Landcare groups to take on government responsibilities. For example, management of public land, promotion of Landcare and community education, coordination of noxious weeds control and provision of equipment. We are volunteers with limited time and have other commitments.'

These concerns were supported by the finding that the proportion of groups reporting no/fair contact with agency staff had increased significantly from 8% in
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1994/95 to 15% in 1997/98.

Limited material support from the private sector:
The total value of non-government support in terms of money and materials represented only 7.5% of reported government funding in 1997/98. This was a significant decline from 15% of government funds in 1994/95. At the same time, there was a significant decline in the proportion of groups reporting money or material support from non-government sources (from 55% in 1994/95 to 31% in 1997/98). This information suggests there is much work to be done if Landcare groups are to become independent of government support.

Greater inequity in government funding:
Whilst most groups reported government support in money or materials and there had been a significant increase in mean funding per group, 30% of groups received less than $2000 in 1997/98 (33% in 1995). At the other end of the scale, one group reported more than $2,500,000, up significantly from 6% in 1993. The funds obtained by this group of groups represented 62% of total funds received (up significantly from 37% in 1994/95). Increased funding inequity may have contributed to claims by 50% of groups that support with money and material was inadequate. These findings are probably consistent with the intent of the NHT that emphasises the achievement of long-term on-ground conservation outcomes by funding large integrated projects (Commonwealth of Australia 1998). The complexity of NHT application processes is likely to entrench these inequities since it will become difficult for groups without funds, or presumably a coordinator, to access the NHT regardless of the relative merit of undertaking work in their area.

Evidence of burnout:
Ketsch & Jackson (1981) defined it as a syndrome with three core dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment—that can occur among individuals who do ‘people work’ of some kind. Comments by survey respondents about declining group morale, office bearers not coping and specific references to burnout provided considerable qualitative evidence of this affecting members and groups. These comments included:

‘After talking to other Landcare groups it is obvious that many people are disillusioned and are suffering burnout. It is left to a few to do all the work. This must be addressed if Landcare is to be long term.’

‘Office bearers not coping with their responsibilities.’

‘Difficult to get a wider participation by members in group activities, some people in group doing most of the work.’

‘Volunteer participation reaching its limit, i.e. burnout.’

Analysis of survey data yielded limited quantitative evidence of burnout affecting member participation or the performance of many groups. For example:

• Attendance at group meetings and participation across the range of group activities were similar to those reported in 1994/95.

• Groups operating for longer (years) ranked significantly higher on the activity index.

• Scrutiny of group profiles suggested that about 90% of groups had made a worthwhile contribution to program goals.

Problems with NHT processes affect on-ground work:
Evidence that most types of on-ground work had declined despite significantly increased funding appeared to provide some quantitative evidence of burnout affecting group work. Drought conditions undoubtedly contributed to reduced on-ground work, particularly tree planting. There was also a drought, albeit less severe, during the time of the previous survey. In 1994/95 government funding appeared to underpin on-ground work, particularly fencing (Curtis 1996). In 1997/98, significantly fewer groups erected fencing than in 1994/95 suggesting that factors other than the drought were at work. Long delays in notifying community groups of their success in the 1997/98 NHT process—up to nine months for some programs—meant that it was impossible for many groups to complete the planting required to implement their on-ground work. Comments by survey respondents about major constraints affecting their groups highlighted the impact of this issue.

‘NHT bids are an annual nightmare. Timing of NHT bids makes planning another nightmare.’

‘Late notification of success or failure of funding applications makes timeliness of preparation and on-ground work difficult.’

‘Difficulty in preparing bids for funding. Inappropriate timing of application rounds and extended periods of time before notification of success or failure.’

Respondents’ concerns go beyond the normal ‘teething problems’ that might accompany the start-up of a large program. The Australian National Audit Office (ANAO 1997) reported that excessive emphasis had been given to the assessment of project proposals and there was no need for separate regional, State and Commonwealth assessment of projects. At the very least a simplified NHT project application form is needed and State and Commonwealth assessments should occur simultaneously. In the longer term it may be possible for each CMC to be given an NHT budget allocation to manage and accomplish outcomes identified in their regional catchment plan.

Gender and group leadership issues:
Previous Victorian Landcare surveys suggested that gender was an issue affecting Landcare participation and experience (Curtis et al. 1997). There was also some evidence that lack of leadership turnover might be a concern amongst some groups (Curtis 1996). The 1998 survey data confirmed earlier findings that women com-
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prised around a third of all Landcare members and held about the same proportion of group leadership positions. As in the past, women were undertaking a disproportionate share of the demanding secretarial support for groups (50% of Secretary positions compared to 14% of President/Chairperson positions). The 1998 survey data suggested lack of turnover of leaders was unlikely to be a problem for most groups. The mean length of office was 2.3 years for incumbent Presidents/Chairpersons and 2.6 years for Secretaries. However, there was a small number of groups operating for >6 years where each of the Secretary and President/Chairperson positions had been held by one person since the group began. This information reinforces the need for professional management of groups and that this should involve plans for leadership succession and should address issues of gender.

CONCLUSIONS

Landcare groups are widely acclaimed as an Australian success story. Data from the 1998 state-wide survey of Victorian Landcare groups confirmed the capacity of groups to mobilise rural communities and accomplish important community education and on-ground work. Notwithstanding these achievements, there were significant declines in on-ground work despite increased funding per group. A severe drought was part of the explanation for these changes. Long delays in the announcement of successful community group bids for NHT funds meant that many groups were unable to complete planning required to undertake on-ground work. As the Australian National Audit Office (1997) reported, these delays reflected program management deficiencies that went beyond the normal ‘teething’ problems expected with a new program.

Survey data highlighted other program management problems. There was a significant increase in the proportion of groups with no contact with agency staff. This is a concern given that there was a significant positive relationship between agency contact and the level of group activity. A majority of respondents indicated there was inadequate leadership and management skills training for group leaders. Respondents also highlighted the excessive administrative workloads facing voluntary leaders attempting to deliver NHT outcomes in an era of reduced agency support. Analysis of survey data established a significant positive relationship between groups having a paid coordinator and the level of group activity. Most groups did not have access to a paid coordinator. Having clear goals, objectives and plans is also linked to greater organisational effectiveness. Survey data revealed there was only limited group involvement in property management planning and subcatchment planning and that 40% of groups had not established annual priorities. Despite increased funding available through the NHT, half the respondents said government support with money and material was inadequate. Survey data indicating that in 1997/98 a third of all groups received less than $2000 suggested these concerns were legitimate. At the same time, there had been a significant increase in the proportion of groups receiving more than $20,000 a year, and this small set of groups had accessed a majority of NHT funds.

Most of these issues are not new but there is little evidence that they are being addressed. Part of the explanation for this inaction is a current preoccupation with on-ground work. Increased focus on on-ground work arose from concerns about the pace that landscape scale improvements in environmental conditions are being effected. There were also concerns about the limitations of the old Landcare program with its focus on capacity building and many Landcare participants also felt the time had arrived to implement plans they had developed. The NHT incorporated changes that addressed many of these concerns and there is evidence that considerable group effort is focussed on on-ground work. For example, 1998 survey data showed that despite the impact of drought, more Victorian groups reported they spent more time and effort on on-ground work than on community education. Perhaps it is time to again reassess the balance between on-ground work and community education. Community education is fundamental to efforts to effect environmental change. Local groups are one of the best ways of accomplishing this work and it is a large part of the work of most groups. Indeed, analysis of 1998 survey data revealed significant positive relationships between community education (including field days/farm walks, catchment planning, publishing newsletters, other promotional activities) and levels of on-ground work or group activity. The importance of this Landcare work needs to be reaffirmed.

These ongoing management issues also reflect our failure to act on the lessons from recent experience with Landcare, CMCs and the NHT. This experience has suggested some of the key elements of a practical model of state-sponsored citizen participation in resource management (Curtis 1998, Curtis & Lockwood 1998). An important facet of this model is the clear articulation of the roles of individuals, community groups and regional planning bodies. Individual landholders should not be expected to take leading roles in administering government projects. In an era of two-income families and considerable off-farm work most landholders simply do not have the time. It is also unreasonable to expect individuals to have continuous or sustained high levels of involvement in groups. We must accept that participation will vary between communities, individuals, and over time. People should be encouraged to ‘come when they are ready’.

Volunteer organisations are not self-managing and cannot operate without considerable investment of resources. By contrast, Landcare Landcare has been supported by limited personnel operating very small budgets; has few senior staff directly involved in program management; and a limited number of staff with specific knowledge of volunteer management. There simply is not a systematic, professional approach to the management of the issues highlighted above. In Victoria, this situation is likely to be exacerbated as Landcare group support is divested from NRE to regional CMCs. On a positive note, there are highly competent and dedicated Landcare and extension professionals who could provide much of the expertise required to implement improved support and management of Landcare groups.

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Irrigation Association of Australia

Tim Hodgkins, National Chairman

The Irrigation Association of Australia (IAA) welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the AARMN Journal.

The IAA is a professional association whose membership comes from across the irrigation industry, both rural and urban. Water users, consultants, agency staff, local government, retailers of equipment, contractors, installers and manufacturers are all represented in our membership. This unique feature of the association, that it does have representation from all sectors of the irrigation industry, gives members an opportunity to be part of an extensive network providing access to a large range of information and contacts.

One of the aims of the IAA is to promote technologies and techniques that contribute to improving irrigation practice in Australia. It is also involved in developing the professional standing of those who work in the industry.

These aims underlay the major activities of the Irrigation Association of Australia:

- organisering regional information seminars;
- coordinating the biggest irrigation conference and expo in the Southern Hemisphere, Irrigation Australia Conference and Expo; The next conference and expo is being held in Melbourne next year 23-25 May.

The association looks forward to developing a continuing relationship with AARMN. Through exchanging information I am sure that we can both add value to each other's activities.

For more information about the association and the irrigation industry in general you can find us on the internet at www.irrigation.org.au.

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