

Institute for Land Water and Society
Report No. 5

Learning from each other to support landcare in North East Victoria

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Unpublished report for the North East CMA Advisory Committee

November 2005

Publication details

This report is the summary of work from the NE Participatory Action Research Team.

The Institute for Land Water and Society, Charles Sturt University, Albury NSW has printed this report on behalf of that team.

A draft report circulated in November 2005, and only minor typographical changes have been made for the printed document.

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to everyone who devoted their time and mental energy to this research. Thanks also to the North East Catchment Management Authority for their support, especially Tom Croft for organising venues, lunches and mailing, and Luke Bailey. Special thanks to Jennie Hermiston, who made it all happen.

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North East Landcare PAR report for NE CMA Advisory Committee

Introduction

Landcare groups in the North East of Victoria have a long history of self reliance, as well as a proven track record of achieving lasting improvement on the ground. In late 2004 members of the North East landcare network asked CSU for assistance with undertaking some Action Research, focused on landcare survival. The landcare group considered this was necessary as a time of administrative upheaval was approaching, including a significant change in the way landcare support was delivered by the North East Catchment Management Authority.

This report discusses some of the method used in the Participatory Action Research which developed, and presents the key findings of that research.

Aim

Participants were initially drawn to the project through their commitment to the continuation of landcare in North East Victoria. The aim of the research was negotiated during the first meeting to be:

1. What has been successful (with particular interest in co-ord/support)
2. How can this understanding be transferred
 - a. To other groups
 - b. To wider community
 - c. CMA/government/bureaucracies?

Method

The learning approach employed was based on a model of Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR is distinguishable from more traditional research by **who** does the research, and **what** is considered worth researching. PAR is carried out by people in the thick of what is being studied; they study that in which they are involved. The anticipated outcomes of using PAR include:

- The results of the research are of immediate relevance and applicability to the studied community, and can be used to initiate or support social change (Bawden 1991; Lincoln 2001)
- Local and/or experiential knowledge is privileged, sometimes to complement other forms of knowledge, sometimes to stand alone (Greenwood & Levin 2000)
- Inquiry/research skills are developed within the studied community (Denzin & Lincoln 2005)
- Mutually beneficial relationships may be developed between research institutions and the broader community (Lincoln 2001).

The research team

Approximately 15 participants from the North East region were involved, including landcare and landcare network facilitators, landcare group members, interested individuals, DPI staff members and a NE CMA staff member, who provided predominantly administrative support. There were various reasons for wanting to take part in the research, including:

- Where are we going?
- Interest in new Landcare co-ordination
- Concerned about Landcare
- Anxious that Landcare is dying

- Where the hell is Landcare going?
- Want to improve things
- How people relate to the land
- Insight into bureaucrats
- To find out more
- Curious: not enough research
- Interested in evaluation process
- Interested to see what this process will achieve
- Interested in process
- Like to trial as part of evaluation

The research project was facilitated by Catherine Allan from Charles Sturt University, Albury, who also undertook to prepare the final reports.

The North East PAR experience

There was no financial support sought for this project. Hall hire was donated, lunches, photocopying and postage were supplied by the NE CMA, and all participants including the CSU facilitator, donated their (or their employer's) time and expertise. Three meetings were held: an initial all day planning meeting, followed by two half day meetings to reflect on the research undertaken and determine what to do with the new knowledge/understanding gained. The voluntary nature of the project placed some constraints on what could be

<p>Q1 What has this landcare group done in the past [x] years?</p>
<p>Q2 What can this landcare group be proud of? Prompts: Any successful projects? Any successful activities What have been our highlights?</p>
<p>Q3 What types of support have helped us achieve these things that we are proud of? Prompts: What are the features of good support? What makes a good co-ordinator for this group?</p>
<p>Q4 Are there things which are irritating us, as a Landcare group, at the moment? If so, what are they?</p>

attempted and achieved; for example, within the group there was initially strong support for undertaking some form of quantitative, paper based survey, but this was agreed to be neither feasible nor necessarily appropriate to the research aims.

After much discussion the research involved each PAR participant conducting an informal, semi-structured interview with members from their own group. Semi-structured interviews are simply purposeful conversations, focused on

the topic about which more learning or understanding is desired (Wengraf 2001). The interview conversations were loosely based on an interview guide (see Box 1):

In the words of the PAR team members the interviews involved:

- An hour talking
- Recorded conversation
- Conversation flowed
- Followed guidelines
- Social occasion
- Constantly speaking to people, rather than a single 'interview'

The people who were interviewed in these ways included:

- two active members of the group

- past secretary and president together
- active people in landcare (part of landcare group)
- select group of active people
- part of ongoing reflections as people come in and out
- older and younger members of landcare

Data analysis

The data from this research approach was the stories told by NE landcare people and captured in written notes by the research participants. The data was thus words, phrases and summaries of responses to the interview questions. These were analysed using thematic content analysis (Nagy Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2004). Each participant who had conducted an interview sorted the data from their interview notes into thematic categories, with headings which had been developed during the first meeting. Other headings were added as new themes emerged from the data.

At the second meeting participants shared their sorted interview data with each other. The pooled, categorised responses are presented below. Some themes had so many responses that they were sorted into-sub themes, others are unsorted lists.

Findings

Theme 1 – Administration

Complexity and amount of paperwork

- Bureaucratic nightmare. We are here to facilitate government spending their money
- Don't like bureaucratic language eg "The War on Weeds"
- Appears to be top heavy. Too many resources going on bureaucratic processes, too much paper / form filling
- The ability to sift information – getting rid of irrelevant info
- Complexity of necessary form filling scares participation
- Need coordinator support to initiate & drive programs, attend to paperwork & communications
- Not enough money gets to projects (apart from ?Heritage? Funds ex ???)
- Groups reluctant to be involved in administration
- Nightmare – we are here to facilitate govt spending their money
- Need for coordinator to have time to fulfil group needs
- Complexity of necessary form filling – scared of participation
- There are no new people taking up jobs – if you volunteer you have a job for life.
- Don't like bureaucratic language eg "The War on Weeds"

Doing the government's work for them

- Bureaucracy taken over Landcare, groups have become part of it, acting as agents for spending government money – is seen as a negative – major irritation for groups.
- Bureaucratic outlook of co-coordinator. CMA rep to answer to each group at least annually- exchange of understanding
- Landcare become top down rather than bottom up
- Too much goal driven. Should be more community based

Transparency

- Many are unaware of Landcare structure
- Lack of trust in our society

Instability

- Uncertainty in future role of coordinators

- Positions change every 2 years

Other

- Saddest story – he is a wonderful bloke – he has been president for 20 years

Theme 2 – Money

Uses for money

- Need for money for successful newsletter
- Financial support is not everything
- Envirofund helped to get new members – conduit to access landholders

Availability

- Funding is available but programs need to be redefined
- Need for ongoing funding to maintain projects such as weed control
- Diversification – markets (new sources of money)
- Combined programs a success
- Funding sources changing or disappearing, too much documentation. Time taken up with applications, delays in starting projects
- Begging for support/ money

Flexibility

- Project scope not flexible, one size does not fit all. Projects of relevance to one area not necessarily appropriate to another.
- Need to allow more discretion to groups to spend allocated funds on projects relevant to them.

Who decides?

- Too much lost to administration / planning processes which go nowhere. Not enough input from landcare groups (particularly those who own and work the land) on resource allocation
- Lack of direction and help from funding bodies

Management

- No funds paid until works completed – helps manage \$

Theme 3 – Information

Newsletters

- Group newsletters
- Newsletters of interest to local groups.
- Sharing of other groups' newsletters & info
- Access to gov. bodies' office equipment
- Maintenance of support for newsletter eg photocopying

Demos and field days

- Pasture demo practical and pass on information. Field days
- How exciting to use diversity

Innovations

- Group's library with Librarian
- Involve schools

Issues

- Much information available but people relevant to access
- European issues of plants and weeds

- Glossy brochures out and a waste of money

Theme 4 – Group Coordination

Source

- Co-ordinators work with and for government funding- not the community. They want to answer for government money
- Co-ordinator funded through weed program
- Never had a paid co-ordinator

Value

- Coordinator essential to initiate & drive programs, access funds etc.
- Need for paid local independent co-ordinator to work with all region
- Help with education and funding issues
- Co-ordinators have made a big difference. (I don't think co-ordinators have made a difference. They could be a big help but are too sporadic)
- Individuals (eg 1 woman) crucial
- Dedicated co-ordinator essential to initiate & drive programs. And access resources, eg financial, scientific support
- Disappointed. Loss of co-ordinator = loss of drive and initiative

Problems

- Again bureaucracy came into the discussions. The phrase good and difficult communication was fairly prominent
- Group never knows what co-ordinator is doing- we need to link community and bring back to committee. This helps volunteers do the job. Should relieve volunteers of tasks- photocopying etc

Theme 5 – Project Management

- Having a person dedicated to a task has really helped eg rabbit co-coordinator
- Showing the [??] that money has been well spent
- Need a good driver and communicator
- Shared activities with other groups
- Greenhouse Action 2000 worked well

Theme 6 – Planning

Successful group planning

- Trick to achievements get more goals before you finish others
- Need to focus on priority need of local region
- Need to focus on individual needs of respective communities
- Group's library with librarian
- Agreement on Environmental problems
- Don't leave it all to the coordinator. Have a long term goal to strive for
- Liked working with a set program
- Coordinating works eg trees/ripping has been successful
- Weed program has given us a focus

Problems

- Spent lots of time putting input into Vic Landcare Plan with no outcome or purpose
- Planning- difficult to do when you don't know what resources you have and can secure.
- Time delay between application (CMA) and approval too long- lose interest. (refer CMA budget planning process).

- Groups lose interest after not succeeding in applications
- Diverse community with diverse kit. Acceptance of people are physically culpable

Theme 7 – On ground physical activities

Successful Activities

Hands on

- Tree planting/ revegetation
- Road spraying program with shire; horehound, St John's Wort
- Erosion control
- Salt
- Rabbit free program in Springhurst – getting RF status
- Seed collecting enjoyable
- Revegetation/ repair region
- Revegetation
- Tree planting
- Controlling weeds and blackberries
- Weed and pest control focus
- Stubble management coming up
- Made unused area of land into picnic area and park
- Successful landcare award nominations
- Looking for funds for seedbanks for native veg
- Annual programs

Learning/ new understanding

- Species trials
- Trial on efficiency of tree guards
- Carried out studies such as lerps on redgums

Planning

- Mapped whole valley
- Catchment plan for valley
- Whole Farm/ local area planning

Sharing Information

- Seminars – soil health, whole farm plan
- Successful farm walks
- Newsletters
- Speakers
- Successful newsletters right from start
- Field days worthwhile community involvement

Community

- Community friendship
- Group activities most enjoyable
- Sense of belonging
- Tidy town awards
- On-going weed program gave group and community focus
- Involve community benefits – weed and pest control, tree planting, seed collection. Visible benefits & social contact
- Community benefits from information shelter
- Work with shire

Issues/problems

- Disappointed Whole Farm Planning – no follow-up
- Target, use benefit to community not individuals

- Declining interest in Landcare, landholders
- Weeds programs disservice to Landcare (picking up chemical)
- Lucerne subsidy program was good. Feel that it has died
- Continuation of projects such as weed pest control that will reappear
- Noxious weed program involving chemical subsidised- disappointed with withdrawal \$ and support

Theme 8 – Social Activities

Building community

- Landcare has helped community concept
- “I reckon we have built the community. Introducing people to each other- facilitating neighbours working together – have met people I would never have met otherwise”

What works

- Informal dinner meetings with guest speaker (at local hotel) has been successful
- Combined annual dinner with VFF
- Making new people feel welcome
- Group BBQs, Christmas talk and other events
- Lots of working Bs. Work with other community groups, Fire Brigade etc.
- We do like doing a big BBQ- big bonfire. A good time makes more people come & then talk to each other, answer questions from older farmers. Have lost a sense of fun – need to get people together & have fun
- Social BBQs very important, meeting people you don't have contact with
- Gathering of wider community as much as possible, to simply socialise AGM
- Social activities, field days, farm walks bird watching, seed collection BBQ– opportunities in group actions
- Volunteers do things. It couldn't happen without volunteers- no matter how much money. We got no money for our newsletter, one of our most successful efforts

Issues

- Important, but needs to be relevant to projects.
- Hard to find time on weekends

Theme 9 – Education Activities

School education

- Involve local schools in planting days
- Work with local schools all levels

Group education

- Education best if related to a relevant (relevant to area/activity) ongoing project, eg soil health, stubble management, weed control
- Educational targets critical - programs provide insufficient scope
- Subsidised education activities important to gain participation
- Many interesting speakers at meetings
- Demonstrations, newsletters, field days
- Salinity site
- Helpful awareness in projects- gully erosion, remnant bush, aware of funding, applications for funding
- Lots of awareness activity- pest plants, pasture walk (lucerne), wildlife walks (birds, bats) local fauna/flora

Theme 10 – Learning Activities

- 57 people at recent pasture field day
- Group's library with librarian
- Demonstrations, pasture and soil information, farm walks
- Work with shire officers to spread info to whole shire

Theme 11 – CMA

Disconnection

- Huge improvement to involve more farmers
- Is the CMA the main controller today?
- Still a wide gap between CMA & general public
- Don't really understand what the CMA has to do with it all
- Coordinator of Landcare needs to meet groups & introduce himself
- CMA" just don't understand it, despite trying really hard" "it doesn't touch me", "Nothing it does comes into my life"

Value

- CMA makes the plans, but we are the one who need to implement. CMA have done good work in small specific areas, but is it a good use of money – doubtful
- Can't understand Catchment Management Plan– it just meets government requirements, it means nothing to the community. It is targeted to govt, not the community.
- "The Plan is not for us-it is for the Government- just to get money for the CMA". CMA needs to do much more outreach – not a good communicator. Maybe we don't need to know.

Theme 12 – DPI/State Government

- Govt programs keep changing, staff changes etc
- Good help with biological control, Blackberries, Patterson's Curse, St John's Wort
- Once there was good DPI support in making plans and help in identifying priorities. Used to have access to specialists
- We got good value when DPI gave up spray plant and we bought it

Theme 13 – Local government

- Recently Council very supportive
- Councils must be on-side to help Landcare prosper
- Helpful with weed assistance, however roadsides still a problem with fallen timber, hazards fire and pest

Theme 14 – Time

- Members willing to help where they can
- Meetings need to be relevant to the role of group- don't waste time, good speakers
- Time delay in funding arrival often precludes people having time to carry out projects. Change in climate

Theme 15 – Demographics

- Some of the most successful groups have only had one focus
- The priority of landcare is to appeal and attract all people- urban and rural to care for their land
- Think this is not taken enough into action. People, areas even nearby, think differently
- Need to focus on needs and interests of specific areas, eg agriculture,
- Greenie and [???] image still about. Need to focus on needs of and interests of specific areas eg agriculture vs forests and parks
- Getting young people involved is a challenge, making activity relevant.

Theme 16 – Record Keeping

- Monitoring on ground achievements, eg location of works
- Lack of ability to link achievements on one property to whole catchment
- Photo records to show change do help
- Who keeps records for long term?
- Keep box small to hand to new office bearers.

Using the learning

Two broad audience groups were identified for the learning generated through this research; current landcare groups, and the NE CMA

Current groups

It was considered very important that landcare groups within the NE CMA continue and strengthen their communication ties with each other. Good inter-group communication was seen to provide opportunities for groups to share their success stories, thereby giving themselves a pat on the back, and providing positive reinforcement to other groups.

Information to landcare groups about this PAR therefore needed to include:

- Elaboration of the information the PAR has gathered
 - Stories
 - Examples
- Enhance the sharing of information between groups
 - Group contact positive
 - Work on partnerships
 - Foster relationships
 - Message to welcome newcomers and amenity landscapers
- Share the process of PAR

A summary of the PAR findings will be prepared for landcare groups. This will be sent to them with a letter containing some suggestions about learning and sharing, including

- This group could support others wanting to listen and learn from each other, building on techniques learned through this PAR
- Sharing of ideas between groups
- Newsletter swapping
- Guest speakers
- Working with schools

Responsibility for this action needs to rest with someone, and it was agreed that this was a role for the CMA Landcare Coordinators.

NE CMA

The current relationship between the NE CMA and 'landcare' was considered to be unstable and there were concerns about the nature of on-going support from the North East CMA. The PAR participants emphasised that landcare groups were not government lackies, but did want support and assistance from government. They were concerned that power imbalances, bureaucracy and unnecessary administration were sapping the energy of landcare group members. One participant even suggested that some groups are sick of what they have become.

The group concluded that the NE CMA should also be advised of (and pay some attention to) the outcomes of this research, which resulted in the compilation and presentation of this report.

As one PAR team member, a long time member of a well respected landcare group wrote at the conclusion of the PAR:

It has been disappointing in recent times to see the landcare movement seem to 'run out of steam' with it becoming more difficult to get people involved in continuing all the group works carried out and seeking new challenges.

*When the opportunity arose to participate at grass roots level in sharing other groups' experiences I was keen to be involved. As it transpired our group is not alone in the decline of the movement, as came through in the open and honest discussion of the participants. It is hoped that the forthcoming release of a summary of the forum to **all** parties involved with landcare it will act as a stimulus in restoring the goodwill and the good works that the landcare movement is respected for in both rural and urban communities.*

Reflection on PAR as a process

Undertaking research, and using a process such as PAR was challenging for many of the PAR team. Interviewing people already known to them, about a topic of shared interest was described by members of the PAR team as 'enlightening', 'confrontational', 'surprising' and 'illuminating'. Although one member heard comments that were 'much the same as mine', most participants appear to have learned much from having a chance to listen to people in their community.

PAR team members varied in how they actually experienced the interviews. Some found it 'easy' and 'pleasant' others mentioned that it was 'difficult', 'difficult not to lead', and at least one team member admitted to being 'nervous'. Categorisation of the data also proved to be 'difficult', but in the end everyone found that they had something to contribute, and to reflect on.

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