

It's Time to Renew Landcare

by Andrew Campbell



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Andrew Campbell is the Managing Director of Triple Helix Consulting and, for the foreseeable future, its sole employee. Andrew has been at the cutting edge of natural resource management in Australia for 25 years. He has played influential roles in research, in policy as a senior executive in the Australian Government, and in extension with the Victorian Government. Specifically, he was Australia's first National Landcare Facilitator from 1989-92, a senior executive in the Commonwealth environment portfolio from 1995-99 and Executive Director of Land & Water Australia from 2000-2006, an independent director of the CRC for Future Farm Industries and a member of the Editorial Advisory Committee of ECOS – Australia's magazine on sustainability.

Andrew was instrumental in the development of Landcare, working with Rick Farley from the National Farmers' Federation and Phillip Toyne from the Australian Conservation Foundation to develop the proposal to then Prime Minister Bob Hawke that catalysed the Decade of Landcare. He also pioneered the concept of Whole Farm Planning as Manager of the privately-funded Potter Farmland Plan initiative in western Victoria in the 1980s.

Andrew's family has been farming in western Victoria since the 1860s. He has managed the family farm near Cavendish (farm forestry, prime lambs and wool) from a distance since 1987, with the help of a neighbour.

Introduction

In July 1989, Prime Minister Bob Hawke stood at the junction of the Murray and Darling Rivers and announced that the 1990s would be the Decade of Landcare. He did so accompanied and supported by the National Farmers' Federation (NFF), the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF), and the Coalition opposition. With bipartisan support, he announced a thirty-fold increase in Commonwealth funding for Landcare and nature conservation to \$340 million over ten years. This may not seem so much now, but at the time the then National Soil Conservation Program had a total budget less than the landscaping budget for the sparkling new Parliament House.

The current federal government came to power in November 2007 promising new leadership, an education revolution, cooperative federalism, a positive approach to climate change and a re-investment in innovation, infrastructure and productive capacity. More recently, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd suggested in a lecture at Westminster Abbey in the lead up to the G20 Leaders' Summit that:

"To these [traditional] values of security, liberty and prosperity must also be grafted the values of equity, of sustainability and community."

This big picture agenda: new leadership, an education revolution, taking climate change seriously and tackling it vigorously, making the federation work better, and reinvesting in skills and infrastructure to build productive capacity, underpinned by values of equity, sustainability and community, is appropriate and timely. It is a great framework for a contemporary approach to the environment that recognises that people are central to environmental problems and solutions, not a malign externality.

I was involved in the early days of Landcare, helping Rick Farley of the NFF and Phillip Toyne of the ACF to draft the joint proposal that went to Bob Hawke in early 1989, and subsequently become the first National Landcare Facilitator, reporting to Primary Industries Ministers John Kerin and then Simon Crean. They were heady days, infused with optimism underpinned by the

solid foundations of community enthusiasm, bipartisan support, the NFF-ACF partnership and a decade-long funding commitment.

Reflections on Landcare

As the twenty year anniversary of the Hawke announcement approaches, it is worth reflecting on how far we have come, where we are now, and where to next.

Over the last twenty years of environmental and natural resource management programs in Australia, there have been three key developments: voluntary, community-based Landcare; the evolution of a regional-scale delivery model based on catchment management organisations; and a more recent push for more evidence-based investment and reporting.

These are highly complementary — at best synergistic — approaches to more sustainable management of the environment and land and water resources, and to public investment. Each is essential, but insufficient on its own, to bring about more sustainable management of Australia's natural resources and more resilient rural and regional communities.

Ideally, these three approaches should proceed in parallel, each reinforcing the others. But, there has been an increasing tendency to see these as sequential developments; that we have 'been there and done that' with Landcare, and to a lesser extent the regional delivery model.

In my view this is a grave error. There is much to be gained from taking the best elements of the Landcare approaches of the Hawke-Keating era and rejuvenating them for the next decade and beyond, as part of a more comprehensive re-think of agriculture, environment and natural resource management in this country.

So, what has Landcare achieved?

Allan Curtis and colleagues have just completed a major review¹ of Landcare impacts based on fifteen years extensive empirical data, mainly from south-eastern Australia. This review documents significant on-ground benefits and value, and illustrates that Landcare remains a very effective approach if it is managed and resourced appropriately. Moreover, Curtis et al show how Landcare networks in Victoria are operating at a landscape scale, and providing a direct link between regional planning and local community engagement.

For me, Landcare has always been primarily about social objectives of changing community norms in favour of more sustainable systems and practices, changing the notion of what it means to be a 'good farmer', building social capital and helping community leaders trying to bring about more sustainable approaches in their neighbourhood, and providing

an efficient framework for sharing information and resources. Measured against such objectives, on the whole it has been influential in many regions to varying degrees over the last twenty years.

Let's not be starry-eyed; Landcare does not work everywhere. We don't want or need a 'one size fits all' approach. Landcare groups go through a natural evolution and some die a natural death; there is no point trying to exhume them.

However, while it is struggling in many districts, it is worth noting that Landcare in Australia has had no strategic attention for more than a decade. Some of Landcare's problems and loss of momentum are symptomatic of policy neglect. The regional model for natural resource management program delivery has undermined voluntary community Landcare in many regions, and governments have failed to articulate how the regional framework relates to voluntarism. The network of Landcare facilitators has suffered from cumbersome, stop-start funding arrangements and insufficient strategic support or direction.

Community commitment is an important condition, but not a sufficient condition, to progress sustainable agriculture and resource management at a landscape scale. In the absence of technically and economically viable and adoptable land use and farming systems, no amount of community goodwill will deliver sustainable land, water and biodiversity management. Similarly, in the absence of sensible, integrative regional planning frameworks, there is an increased risk of wasting public and private investment.

To underline the earlier contention, the three key developments of the last twenty years: voluntary, community-based Landcare; the evolution of a regional-scale delivery model based on catchment management organisations, and a more recent push for more evidence-based investment and reporting, are complementary elements of a more effective approach to bring about more sustainable management of Australia's natural resources and more resilient rural and regional communities.

Social capital and natural capital are interdependent; you cannot sustain one for long without the other. The challenges of raising awareness, building social capital and facilitating community engagement in rural communities are perennial. Issues and technologies change, as do the people. We are facing massive changes in land ownership in many regions over the next decade, and Landcare is at its most vibrant in some of the 'tree change' and 'sea change' regions.

If Landcare did not exist, we would have to invent it.

If you asked the environment or agriculture ministers from any OECD country with a reasonable farm sector how much they would be prepared to invest annually to have a national network of voluntary neighbourhood groups of people, focused on environmental repair and



¹ Forthcoming paper submitted to the *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning*, 23 April, 2009.



sustainable agriculture, comprising 20-50% of their farming/rural community, no doubt the answer would be in the billions.

The Way Forward

Our great opportunity in environmental and natural resource management is to build and energise a framework for partnership between government, and the community and private sectors that leads the world. This will help us to target and get the best possible return on the large public and private investments that are needed to sustain our natural capital: our water and energy supplies, the soils that underpin our food system, and our unique biodiversity and landscapes.

Such a platform would encourage and support the efforts of grassroots volunteers across the country, and involve hundreds of thousands of people and students in activities that help them to both better understand their local environments and the processes affecting them, and to take local actions that make a practical difference.

We have made big strides over the last decade in building the 'regional model' for natural resource management that seeks to take a more strategic approach at a landscape or catchment scale, and a more integrated approach across different issues, while maintaining a community base. Australia (especially in the Intensive Land Use Zone where most of us live) desperately needs environmentally literate organisations at a scale larger than local governments but smaller than states, that can be instrumental in land use planning, in directing landscape-scale restoration projects, in supporting and guiding community efforts, and as the 'keeper of the long view' as custodians of community and scientific knowledge.

We need to build capacity, and to devolve resources and authority, down to the levels where the vast majority of land, water and vegetation management decisions are made. This regional framework is crucial, and we need to take the time to get it right, not undermine it before it has had a real chance to deliver.

Another essential precondition, in my view, is the development of farming and land-use systems that are far better suited to a carbon-, water-, energy- and nutrient-constrained world.

The drivers are compelling. We are already in an incredibly difficult climatic situation, in southern Australia in particular. Whether we like it or not, we are in a period of rapid, multifaceted, even bewildering change. That change is likely to intensify. This is not a blip.

Let's take the food system as an example. Healthy environments, healthy farming systems, healthy foods and healthy people are intricately intertwined. If current trends in human population and consumption patterns continue, the world will need to produce almost twice

as much food by 2050, in a rapidly changing climate, with declining production of oil, and rising prices for energy, water, fertilisers, and soon, carbon. The era of abundant, cheap fossil fuels is over. Traditional avenues of expanding production through clearing, irrigating and cultivating more land are narrowing, and food is now competing with energy for land and water resources. Moreover, consumers in developed countries are increasingly concerned about the quality, safety, environmental impact, human health and animal welfare aspects of their food.

Food systems are a crunch point where the climate, water, energy and health agendas collide; often with collateral damage for rural communities, rivers and biodiversity.

We need food and farming systems to be much more efficient (in terms of water, carbon, energy and nutrients), productive, resilient and healthy. This imperative has huge implications for the environment and natural resources, in urban and peri-urban areas as well as in traditional agricultural landscapes.

One of the key implications is that we need to re-invest in ways of keeping people at a grassroots community level involved, informed and inspired to develop and implement new (and maybe old) ways of producing healthy food, efficiently and humanely while looking after the environment. This will be technically challenging, so there needs to be a strong underpinning platform of knowledge, and it will require policy frameworks that are comprehensive, cohesive, powerful and durable.

Taking these threads of People, Knowledge and Policy, a new platform for reforming environment and natural resource management in Australia could be built on seven planks:

- Rejuvenating Landcare, respecting local knowledge and re-engaging the community;
- Reinforcing the regional delivery model for managing natural resources;
- Rewiring environmental information systems;
- Revolutionising agricultural research, extension and education;
- Reforming drought policy & rural & regional services;
- Re-unifying the carbon, water, energy, food, farming and fire policy agendas; and
- Redesigning the institutional architecture around cooperative environmental federalism.

The knowledge agenda is fundamental to better resource and environmental management in Australia. Better management and use of what we already know, much greater engagement of Australian citizens in gathering environmental information, a genuine

revolution in environmental education using latest technologies, much better tracking of our progress, and much smarter ways of managing our research efforts in generating new knowledge for changing times, are all essential elements of an agenda that supports innovation and engagement, and that helps us to make best use of limited public and private investment.

The Prime Minister is rightly committed to evidence-based policy. Evidence-based policy obviously requires an evidence base. Yet our most recent State of the Environment Report concluded that our environmental evidence base is so poor that it is difficult to tell if we are going forwards or backwards on most measures of environmental health. We are taking big strides with water accounting (finally) and also carbon accounting, but these are not as well integrated as they should be, and the terrestrial land and biodiversity legs of the stool are largely missing. New technologies mean that we can get a comprehensive picture of trends in our environment faster and cheaper than ever before. Linkages with the new broadband roll-out, and the community engagement and environmental education efforts promoted here, would enable Australia to build the world's best 'environmental dashboard'. This would help us see where we are headed, how fast, with how much petrol left in the tank, and a decent set of warning lights and stress indicators.

We won't be able to deliver innovation on the scale and at the speed necessary without top people and exceptional leadership. **Agricultural education in Australia is a basket case, with declining enrolments and entry scores at tertiary level and a fragmented approach at vocational level.** We need to be attracting the best and brightest people of all ages to work in this area and we need to be providing world-class education and training opportunities. Moreover, we need to be investing in leadership at all levels to develop leaders prepared to think and act outside the square, and able to bring people with them in developing new approaches.

Finally, the policy agenda is where it all comes together and where the new leadership is clearly articulated. We are seeing rapid and unprecedented convergence in the policy imperatives for water, energy and food systems in a drying, warming climate. We know we need radical reform to drought policy to reward preparedness and to build resilience, rather than propping up unviable and unsustainable practices. The Victorian fires are a terrible marker of the need to rethink the very basis of where and how we live in this tough old continent, and of the nature of resilience and how to reinforce it. The abysmal levels of community understanding (environmental literacy if you like) about a factor as fundamental as the Fire Danger Index, show how far we have yet to go.

The big picture issues and commitments that Mr Rudd took into the 2007 election were well chosen, and the more recently enunciated values of equity, sustainability and community provide an important ethical base for an environmental agenda.

A new approach to managing Australia's natural capital needs to be developed against a challenging backdrop: rapid environmental change, increasingly difficult climatic conditions, struggling food systems, a rural sector under pressure, frustrations within the environment movement and wider community seeking more emphasis on sustainability, and a seismic shift in the relationship between the state and the market in western liberal democracies.

Right now, a time of flux, of rapid change and of re-thinking accepted norms, is exactly the time to be implementing a new approach to managing our natural capital based on the seven planks outlined here. A bipartisan commitment to rejuvenate the Landcare movement, building on the local and regional community base for environmental action over the next decade, would be an apt way to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Hawke government's launch of the Decade of Landcare. It would also give tangible effect to the Prime Minister's values of equity, community and sustainability. ▶

