

# Landcare; facilitation and other issues<sup>i</sup>

## Introduction

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The current questioning of landcare, its achievements and its directions is necessary and potentially useful. However it is also becoming quite murky, as it ranges across the whole gamut of rural sustainability issues: local/regional/state/federal roles and responsibilities; social/private and market/non market benefits and costs; profound and seemingly intractable rural decline; reconciliation of social, ecological and economic goals; competing views of the roles of the state and the market; and much rhetoric about the value of community participation amidst confusion over what landcare is about and what it can achieve. This contribution to the debate does not pretend to academic rigour, but is an attempt to think through some of these issues from the perspective of one who believes that voluntary local land conservation groups still have much to offer.

### Elements of the landcare dilemma

If landcare is to make a lasting contribution to improving rural sustainability it must come to grips with some thorny issues, including:

**Unrealistic expectations**— “land is still degrading and farmers are still going broke, therefore landcare has failed!”

**Confusion over who should pay for what**— the size of the total funding cake and its allocation, both at local/regional/state/federal levels, and for what purposes; on-ground works, planning, land resource inventory and monitoring, skills enhancement, research and development, awareness raising etc. In philosophical and political terms, it has been suggested (Vanclay and Lockie 1994, Martin and Woodhill in press) that the language of community participation and bottom up has provided a convenient cover under which an economic rationalist state has transferred responsibility for land degradation, without commensurate resources, from government to the community level.

**Preoccupation with funding**— as tough economic conditions and drought have severely constrained land users’ capacity to fund capital works, and state agencies have cut back ‘traditional extension’, National Landcare Program (NLP) funding has become ever more important for landcare groups and the staff working with them. It could be argued that the energy and paper expended in seeking, obtaining and accounting for funds and complying with the funding timetable has detracted from more imaginative, catalytic activities using local resources; leading to a formularisation of landcare and a perception that if you don’t have an NLP grant you can’t do anything.

**Implementation—what’s that?**— much is spoken of the need to move beyond awareness raising and planning, and into implementation. But few districts seem to be clear on just what are practical, profitable and more sustainable farming systems for their area. Where they do exist, we need better ways of identifying and evaluating

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<sup>i</sup> This paper was written in about 1995, when questions were already being asked about Landcare. It was a contribution to policy discussions at the time, later re-worked into two different book chapters: ‘Issues in Landcare’. In *Critical Landcare*. F. Vanclay and S. Lockie (Eds) University of Central Queensland Press 1998.  
and  
‘Fomenting Synergy—Experiences Facilitating Landcare in Australia’ In Niels G. Röling and Anne-Marie Wagemakers (eds) *Sustainable Agriculture: participatory learning and action* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK 1998.

the public good to justify investment of public funds on individual properties, and to work out equitable cost sharing arrangements.

**Groups versus catchments/regions**— natural resource management at the catchment scale has become the flavour of the month (soon to be superseded by integrated regional development). There is a natural progression in thinking from voluntary local groups concerned with fixing land degradation, to scaling up to look at sustainable land management at the catchment level, to realising that environmental issues are intricately entwined with regional economic and social development. For a landcare group leader with energy and talent, it is stimulating to consider these wider issues, and a natural move to become involved at a catchment or regional level, which can potentially provide an improved framework for local group action. Yet paradoxically, this process can also accelerate burnout and disillusionment among the limited number of committed leaders in a given district, and can rob the local landcare group (seen by many to be the implementation level, the natural engine of the movement) of much of its direction and momentum.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to outline a comprehensive, integrated response to all of these issues. But it is perhaps worth working through some key questions: What is landcare about? What can governments realistically expect of landcare groups and vice versa? Where are we headed with landcare leadership, facilitation and coordination roles? How could we streamline the resourcing of landcare? and; What are some of the key choices and possible directions for the rest of the nineties? Feedback on these issues is welcome.

## **What is landcare about and what can we expect of it?**

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There are many ways of looking at landcare, many perspectives from many angles. It can be seen as: local community action to repair land degradation; a grassroots voluntary movement at the brown end of the green spectrum; a group extension program; a framework for delivery of government funds and technical advice; a way for the state to shift responsibility for land degradation to the community level; a strategic approach to land conservation issues demanding cooperation at scales greater than the individual property; an awareness-raising organisation; a means of enhancing farmer to farmer communication; a forum for local people to discuss, learn about and act upon issues of common concern; an outlet for land users keen to improve land management; a social focus for sharing the stresses of rural decline; and a way of changing (sub)cultural norms.

Of course many of these views of landcare overlap, and they are far from mutually exclusive. However any discussion about what landcare has achieved and where it is headed should be based on a clear position on the role and objectives of landcare. Much of the current debate about landcare is characterised by confusion over these key issues.

Landcare in this paper refers to the network of 2200 or so voluntary local landcare groups and the institutions which have evolved to support them. This is a more narrow definition than most. "Landcare" has come to refer to almost anything done about land degradation or towards sustainability, whether by individual land users, corporations or governments. The attractiveness of the word has led to its wide appropriation, which has become a problem. For example, the name change from the National Soil Conservation Program to the National Landcare Program fuelled expectations that NLP funds should go mainly to landcare groups, underpinning cries that "only 14% of the money hits the ground, the rest is tied up in bureaucracy!" The fact that the NSCP/NLP has always been about fostering national (ie state and commonwealth) approaches to land conservation and was never intended to be a bank for landcare groups, has become obscured, which is understandable given the name of the program. With hindsight, it would have been better to call it the National Land Conservation Program, or even the Sustainable Natural Resource Management Program, with a substantial Community Landcare sub-program.

This paper is based on the view that the principal role of landcare groups is to generate commitment to sustainability at a rural community level, to change social norms in favour of developing more sustainable systems of land use and management. The ultimate objective of landcare is rural sustainability, but the role of the voluntary local landcare groups and their support system is to create a demand for this, to change local notions about what is 'good land management' and to establish a supportive context for land users attempting to develop more sustainable systems. In many areas it also means developing cooperative approaches to tackle particular issues such as biodiversity, catchment hydrology or pest and weed management, which demand coordinated

collective action. Of course groups also do many other things, but I believe these are their core functions, certainly in terms of the rationale for public support for landcare, the focus of this paper.

Note that none of this says “works on the ground”. The extent to which land degradation problems are fixed and land management changes implemented depends on the everyday decisions of individual land users, decisions which are only influenced at the margins by landcare groups. It is unrealistic to judge the success or otherwise of landcare by the extent to which changes occur on the ground. Other more important factors include the availability of profitable, practical, technically sound land management options and the financial and life-cycle situation of the land user. People frustrated at the slowness of change in Australian farming systems might focus more fruitfully on research and development (funding levels and mechanisms, priorities, and delivery processes); on Australian trade policy; on structural issues in Australian and global agriculture (see Vanclay and Lawrence in press); on land management regulations and their enforcement; on market imperfections; and on Australian rural development policy (or lack of it).

Criticism of the NLP because it “does not fund works” or because “none of the money reaches the ground” risks throwing the baby out with the bath water. Would land management be substantially improved even if governments gave all the NLP funds in grants to landcare groups? I doubt it. Our tools for evaluating public versus private benefits and costs are crude indeed, but some back of the envelope calculations suggest that public investment on a scale several orders of magnitude greater than the current NLP is required to tackle effectively issues such as water quality in the Murray Darling Basin, protection and management of farm bushland and riparian zones, establishment and resourcing of a national reserves system and regional forest industries, management of feral animals and plants, upgrading infrastructure and financing structural adjustment in irrigation country, and so on.

The key points here are that landcare groups are about generating local commitment to sustainability and developing cooperative approaches where appropriate; this is a valid and appropriate thing for governments to support; but it should not be the only thing they support nor even necessarily the main focus of funding; community will and conducive social norms are a necessary but insufficient condition for on-ground changes of the scale required; and much criticism of landcare would be better directed at bringing about complementary policy changes. Nevertheless it is appropriate to think about how landcare is supported and how this can be improved.

## Supporting landcare

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The NLP sponsors (at least partially) about one thousand staff positions, of which about ninety are in (mainly full-time) facilitation roles and 142 are involved in (often part-time) landcare group coordination (Alexander, in press). The way in which these positions are managed over the next few years will be a key factor determining the ultimate influence of landcare. It is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on landcare facilitation and coordination roles, which are discussed in more depth in Campbell (1998, 1995, 1994) and Carr (1994).

Several points stand out however. Landcare facilitation is not some warm, fuzzy, value free, “I’m just here to respond to the community” neutral, independent exercise. Governments, or any other sponsors, will fund staff to the extent that they contribute to sponsors’ goals. The rationale for public funding of landcare group facilitation has not been well articulated, but it would probably be something like: *“traditional one-to-one extension has not delivered; we need the community to own both land degradation problems and their solutions; voluntary local land conservation groups have emerged and should be encouraged; and these groups need assistance from people with skills in group dynamics and group process to understand their natural resource management issues, to develop integrated cooperative approaches to dealing with them, to set directions and define priorities, to handle apathy and conflict, in short to make the most of human resources at a community level.”* From a landcare group perspective, the job of a facilitator is unlikely to be as narrowly defined, and could be summarised as “someone to help us work out where we are going and to help us get there”. Of course these two perspectives may substantially overlap.

We need to be clear on the difference between facilitation and leadership, and between processes and outcomes. As discussed in Campbell (1998, 1994), landcare group facilitation is about fomenting group synergy, about

helping groups to make best use of the human resources available, about helping to develop a shared sense of direction among the relevant actors (within and beyond the landcare group), about skilled listening, asking the right questions of the right people at the right time, providing occasions, organising encounters and stimulating interaction among target stakeholders.

The word ‘target’ may jar in a discussion about something as apparently non-threatening as facilitation, but facilitation should be seen for what it is—a strategic intervention for a more or less well-defined purpose. However around Australia at present, landcare facilitation often looks anything but strategic, and its purpose often seems lost. The growth in the number of landcare groups and cutbacks in state agency extension resources has meant that many regional ‘Facilitators’ rarely do any group facilitation at all, they have become paper shufflers, photocopiers, interpreters of funding guidelines. They are submerged under demands from many groups over large areas, are on short-term contracts with minimal perceived security, are expected to provide technical advice in areas in which they are barely qualified and/or experienced, and rarely find the time to think and act strategically. Sadly, many of these people finish their contracts burnt out and move on, taking their contacts, insight and experience with them.

## **Revealing agendas**

In any situation where natural resource management is seen to be problematic there are likely to be a range of stakeholders with multiple, partial perspectives. Clashes of values and interests between stakeholders with a vested interest in the status quo and those agitating for change are inevitable. Furthermore, in situations where would-be facilitators are employed and/or funded by institutions, there are potential conflicts between that institution and other stakeholders.

One of the first challenges for facilitators is to be clear, firstly to themselves and then to other stakeholders, about for whom they are working, and why. It should then be possible to carry out an initial stakeholder analysis, to identify those social actors who need to be involved (whether in landcare groups, catchment management committees or planning processes) if they are to be successful in improving natural resource management. This process is never finished, but in its initial phase it should start to scratch the surface of conflicting values and interests, which leads to the next thorny question.

What do you do when you realise that one of the powerful vested interests in a resource use conflict is the agency which is employing/funding you? The reason it is funding you is to work towards its own ends under the rubric of “bottom-up”, “community-based”, or “grass-roots driven” approaches—more sophisticated, less heavy-handed intervention than traditional methods which have proven to be ineffective—but intervention nevertheless. The interests of other stakeholders, part-time farmers or non-agricultural land users for example, may be inimical to those perceived by the ministry or NGO hosting the facilitator, yet the rhetoric of the contract/project may glibly refer to “community empowerment” as a goal. When push comes to shove, whose views prevail? Whose interests does the facilitator take up? Who gets to sit around the table?

There is no such thing as a neutral, detached, value-free facilitator. It is ridiculous to pretend otherwise. One must make one’s values explicit. Anything less undermines the chances of facilitating meaningful interaction. Most stakeholders accept and expect that everyone has an agenda of some sort. If an actor is willing to be a facilitator, or to sponsor a facilitator, it is always for a reason. Some landcare facilitators describe themselves as ‘the voice of the catchment’, speaking and acting explicitly in the public good interests of sustainable use of land, water and biodiversity, while accepting that the farmers in the catchment will be acting in the interests firstly of their individual farms and their families, before considering other people, other species or future generations. Where these interests clash, or where knowledge is clearly inadequate, facilitators are likely to be more credible if everyone is clear where they stand. For facilitators who are ‘insiders’ rather than people imposed from an external institution, it is even less feasible to try to act in a neutral, value-free way.

## **Technical competence and/or people skills**

By ‘facilitators’, I mean people acting (even if only temporarily) in a facilitation role, whether at the landcare group level, the catchment level or more widely. But is it realistic to think of people whose main role is facilitation, who can afford to concentrate solely on group process, on resource use negotiation and conflict

resolution processes, without any technical background in natural resource management? In other words, can one survive on facilitation process skills alone, or is some content expertise necessary? With a shortage of people with appropriate technical knowledge and experience, wouldn't we be better off just ensuring that technical specialists are trained to improve their 'people skills'?

It is very difficult for facilitators to conceive or create occasions or encounters during which interaction, learning or synergy among stakeholders might occur, if the facilitator's technical appreciation of context is not sufficiently fine to recognise or contrive opportunities. Similarly, a stagnant or stalemated situation can often be overcome with the introduction of information, expertise or assistance from outside, and it helps if the facilitator has sufficient technical nous to know what to ask for, where to look for it, and how to distinguish between useful information/people and clever packaging.

It is feasible to develop facilitation competencies among people trained in natural resource management, just as it is possible for people trained in the social sciences and community development to become ecologically literate in a particular context, as long as facilitators are humble about their expertise, aware of gaps in their knowledge and keen to learn. Within the one job description however, it can be difficult to maintain a balance. Anna Carr notes from her case studies that where facilitators were expected to provide technical support as well as facilitating community groups, the former role tended to take over. The facilitator was drawn by their technical role into giving one-to-one advice to individual group members, thus losing sight of the quality of relationships **among** group members. When the facilitator moved on, so did group cohesion (Carr 1994).

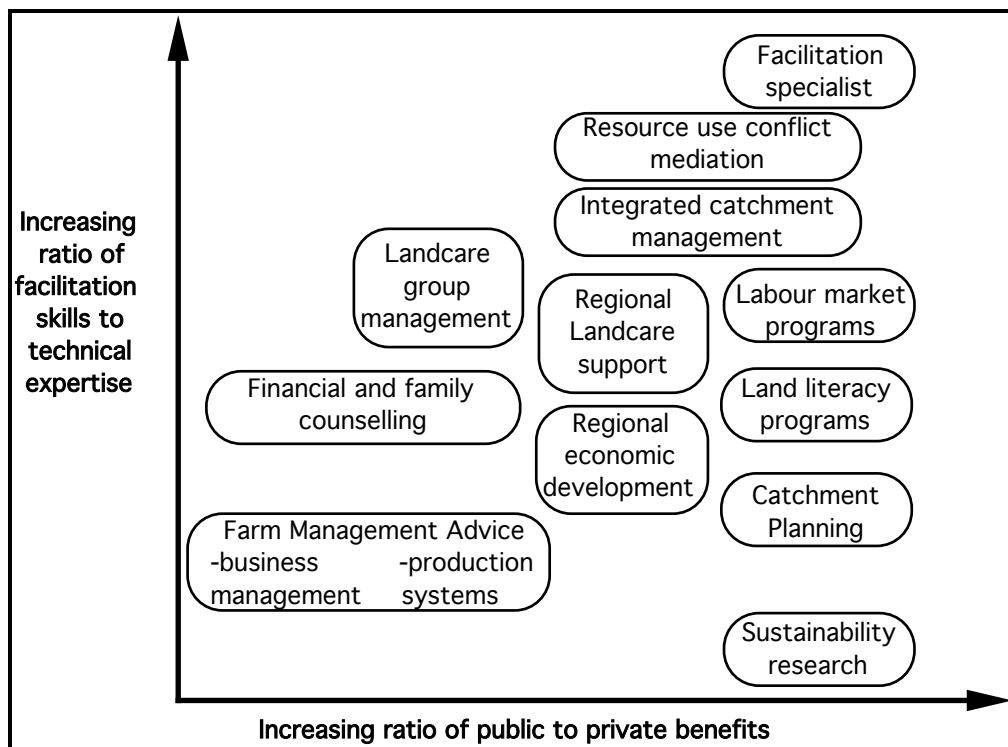
There is a place for specialist full-time facilitators in the landcare movement, providing training for practitioners who work in more varied roles, facilitating interaction among key stakeholders from time to time, troubleshooting in problematic situations and providing higher level process expertise. There are undoubtedly many situations which could be improved just with the injection of some facilitation skills. But facilitation alone, in the absence of appropriate technical expertise, is rarely sufficient to further rural sustainability.

## **Facilitation in context**

There are many roles emerging within the broader landcare movement which involve facilitation and thus facilitation skills to a greater or lesser degree, from traditional on-farm advisory work at one end of the spectrum to resource use conflict mediation at a regional scale at the other. Figure 1 below attempts to portray such a spectrum, including people working in land literacy and labour market programs and the various roles emerging in sustainable natural resource management at the regional level—including planning, management, economic development and conflict mediation. This spectrum is presented in two dimensions according to the relative weighting given to facilitation **process** skills as opposed to technical subject matter **content** expertise, and according to the relative ratio of public to private benefits.

These are broad categories of course, and other roles and subcategories could have been included. The main point to emerge from this is the need to look broadly at roles in sustainable natural resource management at all levels, moving beyond the generic terms 'facilitator' and 'coordinator', taking a whole of government approach and working out cost sharing arrangements accordingly. Much of the energy currently directed to attacking the Commonwealth about money not reaching the ground might be more properly focused on changing political priorities at state level, exposing instances where states have propped up weakened technical infrastructure with NLP projects, in competition for resources with community groups. Facilitating landcare group activity assumes different dimensions in regions where there are no clear technical solutions to resource management issues, and/or where state cutbacks have drained the pool of available technical expertise.

**Figure 1. A spectrum of roles in sustainable natural resource management**



The skills required of a land literacy person are different from those needed for catchment planning or regional economic development, even though each role requires ‘people skills’ and occasional use of facilitation processes. So let’s be clearer about what we want people to do, why (and which) governments are investing in these positions, and where these positions fit in the overall picture. It is important that people working in landcare at whatever level are clear about what their core business is. When this is clear, it is then more straightforward to resolve issues such as whether the person should be a local or otherwise, what sort of background and training is appropriate, how long contracts should run for with what sort of security, and who should pay for what.

### **Beyond ‘the project’**

Project funding is a critical issue which is a key to many of the dilemmas for landcare listed in the introduction. Most of the money which goes directly to landcare groups is for discrete projects, funded according to submissions which must clearly state project objectives, the methods to be used, the resources required, the sources of funds and a clearly defined timeline, usually three years. The guidelines distributed to landcare groups are all project guidelines. These guidelines have, by default, tended to become a steering mechanism outlining ‘what landcare groups do’. For example, the fact that NLP funds are generally not to be used for works, whereas groups can access One Billion Trees and Save the Bush funds for on-ground works, means that the only activities for which groups can easily get funds are tree planting, which reinforces the image that landcare means tree planting. An unintended consequence of NLP project funding has thus been the tendency to circumscribe landcare group activity. While landcare group projects are intended to be catalytic, in fact they often become an end in themselves, conversely leading to an impression among landcare groups that if you do not have a ‘project’ or any NLP funds you are not a ‘good group’ and cannot do anything.

The vast majority of administrative effort and paperwork associated with the landcare program is absorbed in processing project applications. I have spoken to landcare ‘facilitators’ recently who say they spend most of their time dealing with funding applications, helping groups with submissions, photocopying and mailing—essentially administrative tasks—and who feel that the sheer numbers of groups they are expected to ‘service’ preclude any strategic facilitation. This situation often reflects resource allocation priorities of state institutions at the regional level, leaving the ‘facilitator’ as the meat in the sandwich between actors with only partly overlapping agendas—landcare groups and state agencies.

Nevertheless, landcare interventions are dominated by projects. The main way groups are seen to progress is through obtaining funding and implementing projects, and there is an element of competition between landcare groups to come up with the best project, to attract the most funds, to be the most active. Groups sometimes even list the amount of money they have received as a performance indicator. Applying for and using project funding has become the key interface between landcare groups and 'the system'. While there have been some evaluations of individual landcare group projects, the whole concept of 'the project' has yet to be evaluated, yet it remains almost the only form of state funding for landcare groups, especially as state extension resources have been withdrawn and remaining state extension staff have tended to be employed on short term contracts, project funded.

While examining the factors which influence the effectiveness of landcare groups from 1989-92, it became very clear to me that it is undesirable for landcare groups to get project funding too early in their development. When a landcare group receives government funds before it has achieved anything with its own resources, and before it has a clear idea of its direction and priorities, it is easy for a cargo cult mentality to develop, which means that when the funds dry up, so does the initiative and activity of the group. Unless groups are well led, or have access to skilled facilitation supported by sound technical advice, projects (especially for the trifling amounts for which landcare groups are eligible) can be more trouble than they are worth, and can actually preclude the possibility of real empowerment.

### **Landcare facilitation is no substitute for more fundamental reform**

Without complementary changes in the wider political and economic environment, the goodwill and commitment fostered by landcare groups is likely to wither. More fundamental constraints to rural sustainability are discussed in more detail in Vanclay and Lawrence (in press) and Campbell (1994). None of these constraints can be effectively resolved simply by giving lots of small grants to voluntary groups of farmers to implement demonstration projects or to prepare catchment plans. That is not to say that the notion of the 'landcare group project' is inherently flawed—projects can be extremely important in providing groups with tangible resources and experiences which potentially enhance their self-reliance and effectiveness. However projects can divert energy away from considering the more fundamental changes necessary to make Australian land use more sustainable.

A sentiment that was very evident in interviews with landcare people throughout Australia in the early 1990s (Campbell 1992) and which unfortunately seems to be even stronger now, is that rural people no longer feel valued or needed by the rest of the Australian population. Outpourings of sympathy and support during droughts and floods may even exacerbate this sense of marginalisation as rural people find themselves the recipients of welfare and the subjects of charitable appeals. Across the broader landcare movement, one sees a range of policy initiatives, from rural adjustment and financial counselling through labour market programs, education and training, rural economic development, property management planning, regional forestry agreements, the various elements of the NLP and strategies for Ecologically Sustainable Development, Biodiversity and Greenhouse among others, and a general clamour to focus on implementation at the regional level. Yet there is little sense that these disparate elements form a coherent, integrated package with a clear long term direction based on an explicit preferred future for rural Australia.

Landcare groups have a fundamental role to play in fomenting commitment to sustainability at a community level, and in acting cooperatively to improve natural resource management. Both of these foci demand local leadership, skilled facilitation and, particularly in those regions where human resources are already scarce and/or stressed, some injection of financial and organisational support. Stakeholder participation is a necessary but insufficient condition for rural sustainability and effective facilitation is an important but not necessarily sufficient condition for stakeholder participation. Facilitation is not a neutral intervention independent of any political context or preconceived preferred outcomes. The state, or any other institution, will support facilitation to the extent that facilitation furthers its aims. For the consolidation of landcare in Australia, it is important that these aims, and the future of landcare facilitation, coordination and technical advisory roles, are clarified and related to complementary policies for rural sustainability.

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