

# COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN LAND RESTORATION

DEIRDRE SLATTERY

Faculty of Education, La Trobe University, Bendigo, 11 Saint Street,  
Castlemaine, Victoria 3450, Australia

SLATTERY, D., 2010. Community participation in land restoration. *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria* 122(2): 123-129. ISSN 0035-9211.

New or evolving policy directions in land restoration in Australia lead to new issues and questions. This case study of community participation in a landscape restoration program explores some implications of the Federal Government's *Caring for Our Country Program* (CFOC) in Mount Alexander Shire in North Central Victoria. It briefly describes the process of establishing a community-based wide-ranging program of landscape restoration, *Connecting Country*, from its inception in 2007 to its current stage: implementation of a detailed program. As a member of the *Connecting Country* group, I used participant observation techniques to examine issues and concerns worked through in this process by community members. Background literature about community participation in Landcare programs since 1989 provides the setting for this analysis and for reflection on the development and conduct of land stewardship programs in the changing context of government policy in land restoration funding.

*Key words:* community participation, Landcare, land restoration, policy, Mount Alexander Shire

## POLICY APPROACHES TO LAND RESTORATION

*THE CARING FOR OUR COUNTRY PROGRAM* (CFOC) was launched in October 2007 by Ministers Burke (Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry) and Garrett (Environment, Heritage and the Arts). Offering \$2.25 billion over 5 years, the policy for funding land stewardship programs breaks new ground in several ways. It requires projects to satisfy broad ecological objectives: often these cross land tenures and boundaries. In doing so projects need to blend private and public land cultures, purposes and groups: these traditionally operate in different ways. The program offers the opportunity to enlarge the Landcare concept to a sub-regional and regional scale. This was part of the Ministers' intention:

It (CFOC) recognises that the previous system was not working efficiently, with funding scattered across the country to individual projects, often working in isolation from each other. ([www.nrm.gov.au/about/caring/index/html2007](http://www.nrm.gov.au/about/caring/index/html2007))

However, the chair of Landcare NSW, David Walker, quickly criticised the approach for achieving the opposite effect. Far from empowering community groups, it pitted them against powerful CMAs and other government natural resource manage-

ment agencies with skills in driving the bureaucratic machinery that justified funding bids ([www.murumbidgeelandcare.asn.au/files/MR24-11-08.pdf](http://www.murumbidgeelandcare.asn.au/files/MR24-11-08.pdf)).

Such arguments are currently being played out across Australia: this case study explores some of the emerging issues encountered by one community, aspects of whose approach to land restoration is being shaped by the new policy direction.

## ABOUT MOUNT ALEXANDER SHIRE

Mount Alexander Shire, of 152,895 ha, is the setting for this case study in North Central Victoria. Castlemaine is the largest town in this former goldfield area, which in the 1850s and 1860s was the site of the largest alluvial gold rush the world has seen. Many former miners subsequently settled in the district, occupying many small land parcels: these are in part a product of past policy attempts at providing land to miners for farming.

Today both mining and agriculture in the Shire have declined. The Shire is now a mosaic of a few large farm holdings and many hobby or recreational blocks, some occupied part time and managed for recreational use or as remnant bushland. These are often in rural settings, tend to be smaller than tradi-

tionally productive landholdings and to be on more marginal land. Much former marginal farming land in the Shire is returning to bushland: patches of coffee bush *Cassinia arcuata* and young eucalypts cluster thickly in many former paddocks.

An important component of local land use is public land - 17% of the Shire, of which 7540 ha is the Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park. Most of this land was devastated by impacts from the gold rush and aftermath: its waterways and forests have been radically altered. Nevertheless the bush has amazing resilience and is valued for its diversity, as well as for its cultural artefacts, recreation and tourism. Public land is vegetated mainly by the Heathy Dry Forest and Box-Ironbark woodland vegetation communities, as it tends to be on ridges. Yellow Box *Eucalyptus melliodora* grassy woodlands occur more commonly on lower slopes and are therefore more likely to be on private land and to have been radically altered by farming.

Part of the Murray Darling Basin, the Shire contains the middle to upper catchment of the Loddon River. Some 22% of the Shire is devoted to agricultural activity at 294 separate establishments. Grazing (beef cattle and fine wool sheep) is the major land use and accounts for 38% of all land devoted to agricultural activity, with 7% under crop. There are many other agricultural businesses including vineyards, plant nurseries, fruit and tomato growing, honey production, alpacas, goats, deer, organic herbs, olives and chestnuts. Softwood plantation forestry is also a significant land use. Agriculture accounts for nearly 10% of employment and also provides a tourist attraction, particularly in the Harcourt fruit growing area (ABS 2005-6).

Although agriculture is important, the Shire is not predominantly an agricultural landscape: rather, it reflects the recent migratory trend in Victoria from the city to rural areas that are readily accessible and aesthetically or culturally desirable. Neil Barr describes this as an 'amenity landscape' (Barr 2005; Curtis 2005). Barr's classification of rural land use change in Victoria has four types: Rural Production, Transitional, Amenity and Irrigation landscapes. Amenity land purchases can include 'statement' housing sites, hobby farms, rural residential properties, weekenders or bush retreats. Mount Alexander Shire rates as moderate to high on two of Barr's measures for this category: the ratio of non-local purchasers to local ones for farm land, and the ratio of land value per ha to rural production value. Both measures indicate the

growth in new types of landowner, and in new kinds of value for land.

Such blocks of land are often the scene of recovering native vegetation, reflecting a new aesthetic and land use choice. Native vegetation is the designated land use of 15% of the Shire, but its actual extent is 51%, much of which is former grazing land (Sustainability in Mind 2010). Mount Alexander Shire's rural land therefore tends towards what is being referred to as a 'post-production landscape', one that is valued by citizens for ecological and aesthetic benefits rather than mainly for agricultural productivity (Argent 2002; Wilson 2005).

Land management issues in the Shire include:

- Protection of productive agricultural land and encouragement of sustainable land management;
- Conflict between agricultural and residential land use, particularly management of the growth in rural living;
- Poor condition of the catchments and stream water quality;
- Protection and enhancement of Box-Ironbark remnant bush land on private land;
- Weeds, especially gorse, broom, bridal creeper and blackberry, a product of past land use and neglect.

Land restoration programs on private land over the last 30 years have aimed to improve the management of significant remnants, through fencing and grazing management, pest plant and animal control, enhancing stream-sides and understorey and fostering natural regeneration. Groups with a naturalist focus such as field naturalists, Friends of Box Ironbark Forests and Friends of Kalimna have been involved with public land, observing, educating about and documenting the diverse flora and fauna and campaigning for its protection.

#### ABOUT CONNECTING COUNTRY

*Connecting Country* is the land restoration program that is the subject of this case study. It is a Landcare network that originated in early 2007 as the outcome of several coffee shop and backyard gatherings. The network's aim is to increase, enhance and restore biodiversity across the Mount Alexander Shire. The network was formed out of the combined initiative of three main sources: a local nature conservation group, Friends of Box Ironbark Forests (FOBIF), the Norman Wettenhall Foundation, an environmental philanthropic trust, which was taking a new direction

by supporting establishment of long-term broad scale programs, and the North Central Catchment Management Authority's (NCCMA) knowledge broker who was keen to encourage practical applications of the CMA's biodiversity work. The background driver for the approach was the impending Federal Government's new funding initiative for private land restoration, *Caring for Our Country*, which was launched later that year.

From tentative beginnings between these three parties, *Connecting Country* connected the many environment groups in the area. These included 30 Landcare groups; NGO's: Trust for Nature, Greening Australia and Victoria Naturally Alliance; agencies: Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE), Parks Victoria, Department of Primary Industry (DPI), NCCMA and Mount Alexander Shire Council. Representatives of these groups formed a Reference Group in May 2007. Instrumental in this foundational move was funding from the Norman Wettenhall Foundation of \$50,000. This enabled employment of a project officer part time for six months, whose main role was to research the past and present status of land restoration and protection measures across the Shire, through the network of groups engaged in the project, and to produce a '*Biodiversity Blueprint*' (2008). An interactive website was also developed to present and expand this and future data from local sources (Connecting Country 2008). Many hours of volunteer time were involved in this process.

The *Biodiversity Blueprint* was mainly a series of maps derived from collecting and presenting the record of biophysical information, past conservation works and land tenure. It also presented a land use and biodiversity overview of the Shire and Guidelines for land restoration works. This was a time consuming process because much of the information had to be researched from primary sources (mainly asking people). It had not been recorded previously or mapped at this local scale and had certainly never been collated.

The *Blueprint* highlighted areas of high significance or where connectivity could be established most readily, either because of previous work or positive landholder attitudes, as shown through covenants and other protection measures, or connection to public land. The process of developing the *Blueprint* in turn enabled a more coherent understanding of the state of landscape restoration in the Shire and a more authoritative approach, culminating in a

funding application to CFOC, in early 2009. In line with CFOC national priorities, the proposal concentrated on funding for the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* listed Box Gum Grassy Woodlands in the Shire, under the flagship of habitat restoration for the Brush-tailed Phascogale *Phascogale tapoatafa*, a threatened hollow-dwelling dasyurid. The proposed program had several components: stewardship funding for private land holders for habitat connectivity and improvement, evaluation and monitoring of ecological processes involved in this program, and community awareness and education.

The decision to make a major funding bid resulted in establishment of an incorporated body to manage a large program. Funding was confirmed in 2009, and programs are now being developed in Bush Tender, community ecological and land management education and habitat restoration and monitoring, managed by a full time project manager and part time assistant.

#### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND PURPOSE

The rest of this paper explores my experience as a participant researcher (Holliday 2002) in the new program, developed at first on a small exploratory budget, but after its initial stages, made significantly larger and more complex by the CFOC funding. My personal participation in *Connecting Country* has been as a member of some of the original discussions; as a member of the Reference Group; and as an occasional volunteer for tasks such as editing and advising on educational aspects of the CFOC funding bid. My background in natural resource management has been as a concerned and active citizen in nature conservation on public land, mainly National Parks, and I had no previous participation in Landcare. Nevertheless I was keen to support the trend towards whole of landscape stewardship through establishment, restoration and protection of connectivity corridors and through engagement with private land owners.

From this perspective and experience, I observed several issues, successes and difficulties in participant processes at a neighbourhood level. My observations were shared and validated by informal but regular conversations with the Network Chair, the Project Officer and other Reference Group members, two of whom commented on earlier drafts of this paper (Denzin and Lincoln 2008). The findings were

also set in the context of a brief review of the voluminous literature about the Landcare movement, which confirmed that several of the issues encountered in this case study have been recurring features of the land restoration scene over the last 25 years. Others are emerging as a result of the new policy approach.

## THE CONNECTING COUNTRY EXPERIENCE: LEARNING ALONG THE WAY

### 1. *Questions of knowledge and analysis*

Who has knowledge, what kind of knowledge do they have, and how is it transferred? Participants have different kinds of knowledge and see their role and value differently. People tend to take for granted the value and meaning of their own knowledge and to assume that the knowledge base of others is similar (O'Toole et al. 2006; Curtis 2009). Yet valid knowledge ranges from local, specific knowledge to general scientific or technical knowledge. Because of the personal commitment we all have to our own knowledge, difficulties of communication between people at either end of this spectrum are inherent.

At an early meeting some of us realised that a couple of important assumptions were being made. Community members thought the NCCMA, with its numerous strategies and technical capacity for data collection, analysis and presentation, would be able to tell us what had been done, how that had contributed to the 'big picture' and therefore what should be done next. It emerged, after some confusion, that there *was* no collated, formal record of the previous 20 years work, and that there was no master plan, as an integrated overview, of what had already been done. Further, we found that the CMA's strategies didn't apply at a local level: 'strategic', it seemed, applied at a greater level of generality than the Shire. There was no specific guide as to what would be valid on-the-ground work priorities from a biodiversity point of view. Finding out who had done what became a major task for the new project officer, in uncovering and mapping the history of previous Landcare works, and the location of Trust for Nature covenanted or Land for Wildlife properties.

Further, we found that the CMA view was that 'local knowledge' underpinned and supported catchment-wide general strategies. This was news to the local members of the group: although we all had localised ideas about the state of the land based

on personal experience of particular places, we did not have this at a landscape level, or in a scientific way, one that related to priority EVCs, for example. A common situation, maybe. The *Biodiversity Blueprint*, a series of overlay maps of Shire attributes, was a painstaking step towards recording and circulating such knowledge and overview. For *Connecting Country*, the *Biodiversity Blueprint* was a useful tool. It engaged and presented knowledge at both a local and a catchment or regional scale through the interactive website, and was valuable in establishing understanding and ownership of both personal and technical information at a landscape scale and for illustrating the different ways in which the landscape can be seen with differing knowledge systems. The full value of this novel tool has yet to be evaluated.

### 2. *What is the place of volunteers?*

Some authors have described Landcare as a product of a convenient neo-liberal ideological setting over the last 25 years, whereby government is freed from its traditional lead role in encouraging settlement, clearance and use of private land (Lockie 2001; Kingwell et al. 2008). Technically skilled, professional extension and scientific officers working from established branches with like expertise in large government organisations have to a large extent been replaced with community members or project officers. This reliance on the work being done by volunteer effort and/or with short term professional support has led to a range of problems for participants: a steep learning curve and associated errors, burn out, internal conflict, inappropriate use of time in administration or other time consuming accountability tasks, or time spent on poorly conceived projects (Lockie 2001).

Further, an emphasis on volunteerism as a tool for change may not have been the most effective mechanism through which to deal with many land degradation problems. Some research has argued that too much reliance on community education and participatory processes can be a poor substitute for investment in development of technical understanding that opens up management options (Kingwell et al. 2008). They suggest that there can be over emphasis and investment in voluntary participation projects when actually it may be that better research and development of techniques are needed in support of this scale of works.

Understandably, most community-based groups have neither had the research infrastructure nor con-

venient access to a critical mass of technical staff required to find, create or develop alternative viable land use options to combat salinity for example. Such research and development processes were beyond the budgets or capabilities of any individual local community group. There were no requirements, nor adequate incentives, for any community group to undertake such investments. Typically these investments are very expensive and require long lead times (Kingwell et al. 2008).

Landscape scale funding such as *Connecting Country* may now alleviate some of these problems as there is money to employ expertise and the network includes members of land management agencies. But the projects still depend heavily on a few people who do a great deal for personal satisfaction only.

### 3. Community management capacity for landscape scale organisations

As Federal and State government funding increasingly supports landscape scale programs these necessarily engage larger networks such as *Connecting Country*. How does such an expansion in scale and complexity play out in reality, building on the Landcare foundation?

Historically, land management in Australia has worked with traditional and well accepted top-down processes for some decisions and bottom up for others (Martin et al. 1992). Since Landcare, the rhetoric of success and the actual process of managing projects both depend on strong participatory frameworks developed at a neighbourhood level with very local outcomes (Lockie 2001). Landcare has built on and nurtured community attitudes and expectations about self-sufficiency, neighbourly co-operation, stewardship and sense of pride in place. It has also developed a strong skill base amongst participants. The practices and knowledge required in propagating, planting, weeding, fencing out and habitat restoration are now relatively established in most rural communities. At a local landholder level this process has enhanced a new culture of neighbourly co-operation, involving a lowering of barriers of privacy between separate holdings (Youl 2006). In a network, this culture will need to extend to an inter-group level as well as an intra-group one. Landscape scale projects raise the issue of how to prioritise resourcing between groups, places, and landscape qualities at a variety of scales; O'Toole points to differing views and understanding

of needs and issues between stakeholders within and between sub-catchments. (O'Toole et al. 2006)

Another issue for networks is the need to access and make use of scientific information that might inform such decisions. In the absence of scientific objectivity, there is no easy way of deciding whose view of a particular patch is important (Martin & Ritchie 1999). But unless the State supplies the information in accessible forms, there is little way that local groups can understand or determine priorities between themselves at a local or wider scale. Atyeo and Thackway (2009) suggest that the capacity to monitor revegetation projects and processes at a core attributes scale will be a useful outcome of CFOC, but it is unclear how this might be applied at a local level.

Although, as described above, mastery of new skills has been part of the Landcare process, historically, the community does not possess the technical and planning expertise required for landscape scale programs. Former extension branches of career trained long-term experts have been replaced by short-term part time project officers. Already *Connecting Country* is up to its third program co-ordinator, and although its employees have been hardworking capable people, it may be that candidates for such work are likely to be short-term for various reasons. Some of the conditions that may be endemic and difficult for employees of community based networks are: the high level of diverse skills that are needed; working in a one-off work place; being answerable to Boards composed of volunteers with little experience as employers; working in temporary or unsuitable work places; lack of career prospects within small localised organisations (Dibden et al. 2005).

In turn this leads to problems for the network: uncertainty, repetition, loss of continuity, expertise and knowledge.

### 4. Who is involved, who could be involved in Connecting Country?

As Lockie (2009) points out, there is a false assumption that everyone in rural areas is involved in Landcare. In an amenity landscape such as Mount Alexander Shire, the process of network formation and development of projects has been initiated and led to a large extent by relative newcomers, urban professional people with strong self esteem and a 'green' philosophy. In most cases they are not farmers in the traditional sense, and hence the project has

not engaged with many 'real' farmers. Maybe long-term professional farmers have their own networks and concerns and it would take a long time or effort for these established networks and points of view to interact with those of new lifestyle landholders, as Curtis (2009) suggests for Corangamite, Goulburn/Broken, Wimmera and Ovens Catchments.

It is self evident for economies of scale and effort that one farmer holding 400 ha of land is better placed to make a difference to land condition than 10 landholders with 40 ha each, so from a practical point of view this is a serious limitation on the effectiveness of the network. It also means that the network may not engage with significant sources of long-term knowledge, skills and commitment. Both Lockie (2001) and Curtis (2009) show that farming techniques for sustainability are the main focus of landholder interest in most Landcare programs, but this appears not to be the case for *Connecting Country*, whose educational program is shaped around ecological processes in regenerating bushland. The focus on this version of conservation has been a strength for *Connecting Country* to date, but a vision for biodiversity at a landscape scale must include both the traditional naturalists' regard for the biodiversity safeguarded by relatively intact ecosystems and the growing recognition of the role of biodiversity in healthy farming areas.

However, *Connecting Country* is only one network, and in an amenity district like Mount Alexander Shire, it may have drawn from new land use patterns and owners, whilst long-term farmers are involved in other ways. Maybe a 'one size fits all' approach to Landcare is inappropriate, even at a local scale.

## CONCLUSION

The experience of *Connecting Country* confirms findings of other research with regard to pressures of volunteerism and problems of management capacity in land restoration programs. However, it goes further in suggesting that these pressures may be exacerbated rather than alleviated by the stepping up the scale and intensity of funding available. The social capital and skills needed to develop and manage major programs may not be easily available, either in volunteer members of steering groups or in their employees, project officers and the like. Research on such socio-cultural issues has been limited (Lovett et al. 2008).

My observations confirm research that points out that scientific forms of data and knowledge are not an easy fit with local knowledge and concerns, and suggest that this problem will be more important, not less, as the scale and focus of programs expands (Lovett et al. 2008). The limited scientific basis for determining programs, monitoring change and evaluating success becomes more of an issue and may also take on new dimensions for bigger projects where the degree of personal satisfaction is not such a central motivation for involvement.

This account of the program suggests the importance of local context in development of landscape scale land restoration programs. Community groups reflect the background and interests of community members, which vary from place to place. Participants from both public and private land backgrounds may need time and nurturing to form common understanding and goals from their differing experiences and concerns. It is difficult anywhere to strike a balance between a productive landscape and one managed for protection of nature. In amenity landscapes such as Mount Alexander Shire there is a disparity between the numbers, skills, interests and goals of 'real' farmers and 'tree changers' who are involved in cross-tenure programs. Closer partnerships are required, rather than previous parallel but separate efforts (Lovett et al. 2008:5, 63). How can both be involved?

All of these changes suggest that existing Landcare practice, learning and literature needs to be reviewed within the new policy direction. This paper is a tentative step towards that.

## REFERENCES

- AUSTRALIAN BUREAU OF STATISTICS, 2005-06. 71250DO009\_200506 *Agricultural Commodities: Small Area Data, Australia*. (Reissue).
- ARGENT, N., 2002. From pillar to post? In search of the post-productivist countryside in Australia. *Australian Geographer* 33(1): 97.
- ATYEO, C. & THACKWAY R., 2009. Mapping and monitoring revegetation activities in Australia-towards national core attributes. *Australasian Journal of Environmental Management* 16(3): 140-149.
- BARR, N., WILKINSON, R., & KARUNARATNE, K., 2005. *Understanding Rural Victoria*. Department of Primary Industries, Victoria.

- CONNECTING COUNTRY, 2008. *A Biodiversity Blueprint*. Friends of Box-Ironbark Forests, Mount Alexander Shire, Victoria.
- CURTIS, A., 2009. Understanding implementation of conservation practices by rural landholders. [www.landscapelogic.org.au](http://www.landscapelogic.org.au). Retrieved 3 Feb., 2010.
- DENZIN, N. & LINCOLN, Y., eds, 2008. *The Landscape of Qualitative Research*. Sage Publications, Los Angeles.
- DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES, AND FORESTRY, AUSTRALIA, 2007. [www.nrm.gov.au/about/caring/index.html](http://www.nrm.gov.au/about/caring/index.html).
- DIBDEN, J., MAUTNER, N. & COCKLIN, C., 2005. Land stewardship. *Australasian Journal of Environmental Management* 12(4): 190.
- HOLLIDAY, A., 2002. *Doing and Writing Qualitative Research*. Sage Publications, London.
- KINGWELL, R., JOHN, M., & ROBERTSON, M., 2008. A review of a community-based approach to combating land degradation: dryland salinity management in Australia. *Environment, Development and Sustainability* 10(6): 899-913.
- LOCKIE, S., 2001. Agriculture and environment. In *Rurality Bites. The social and environmental transformation of Australia*, S. Lockie & L. Bourke, eds, Pluto Press Australia, Annandale, NSW, 229-242.
- LOCKIE, S., 2001. Community environmental management? Landcare in Australia *Rurality Bites. The social and environmental transformation of Australia*. S. Lockie & L. Bourke, eds, Pluto Press Australia, Annandale, NSW, 243-256.
- LOCKIE, S., 2009. Agricultural Biodiversity and Neoliberal Regimes of Agri-Environmental Governance in Australia. *Current Sociology* 57(3): 407-426.
- LOVETT, S., LAMBERT, J., WILLIAMS, J.E. & PRICE, P., 2008. *Restoring Landscapes With Confidence: An Evaluation of the Science, the Methods and their Onground Application*. Project Code SIW004795. Final Report, Land and Water Australia, Canberra.
- MARTIN, P. & RITCHIE, H., 1999. Logics of participation: Rural environmental governance under neo-liberalism in Australia. *Environmental Politics* 8(2): 117-136.
- MARTIN, P. & TARR, S., 1992. Participatory Environmental Management in NSW: Policy and Practice. *Agriculture, Environment and Society*. G. Lawrence, F. Vanclay & B. Furze, eds. Macmillan, South Melbourne, 184-207.
- MURRUMBIDGEE LANDCARE INC., 2008. [www.murrumbidgeelandcare.asn.au/files/MR24-11-08.pdf](http://www.murrumbidgeelandcare.asn.au/files/MR24-11-08.pdf). Press Release retrieved 20 March 2010.
- O'TOOLE, K., WALLIS, A. & MITCHELL, B., 2006. Local perceptions of sustainability indicators: issues of scale and implications for management. *Rural Society* 16(1): 25.
- SUSTAINABILITY IN MIND., 2010. *State of the Environment Report 2010* (Draft). Mount Alexander Shire, Castlemaine, Victoria.
- WILSON, G.A., 2005. The Australian "Landcare" Movement: Towards "Post-Productivist" Rural Governance? *Journal of Rural Studies* 21(1): 39-53.
- YOUL, R., 2006. *Landcare in Victoria : how Landcare helped people, government and business work together in Victoria : a collection*. R. Youl, South Melbourne.