

# **A view from the mountain**

**L**andcare groups have already been influential in catalysing participation in and commitment to land conservation among rural communities and a substantial proportion of individual land users in Australia. However, Landcare can potentially catalyse much wider changes.

Let us sketch a vision of a preferred future for landcare. Andrew Campbell first drafted these ideas in a twelfth-floor student flat in Holland—a country which has almost as many people as Australia in two-thirds the area of Tasmania and yet which is the world's third largest agricultural exporter (albeit not known for its mountains). From there the natural advantages of Australia and of being Australian seem remarkable, and the tenor of most political and economic debate in Australia seems all the more pessimistic, diffident and myopic. While the following is a personal view on the potential of Landcare, this view was developed through contact with many Landcare people all over Australia during the National Landcare Facilitator project.

By the end of the century Landcare could be accepted as a major plank of rural, environmental and social policy by the entire political spectrum. No government would want to reduce allocations to Landcare because so many Australians each year are involved in monitoring the condition of their local environment and thousands of rural and urban Landcare groups draw support from throughout the population. Active exchange programs and 'friends of' relationships between rural and urban Landcare groups could further enhance the political potency of Landcare.

A revolution in environmental education (both 'top-down' and 'bottom-up') and innovative land literacy programs through schools,

adult education and the mass media, could ensure that the community is as well informed about Landcare as it is of the 'Life, be in it', anti-smoking or anti-drink driving campaigns, with similar results in changing human behaviour. Ecology and 'people skills' could be a core element of all post-secondary agricultural and natural resources education and training.

Widespread recognition of the links between the condition of land and water resources and the quality of human life could ensure ready acceptance that substantial funding for land conservation is an essential investment in helping to maintain Australia's natural capital. This will be supported by reformed national accounts which more accurately reflect the costs of resource depletion and environmental degradation, which shed light on the environmental and social costs of rural decline, and which provide some guidance in establishing some social and environmental boundary conditions within which markets can operate.

Farmers must accept the need for the farming community to set and maintain standards of land management, to establish a few 'speed limits'. The focus of Landcare groups need no longer be on patching past mistakes, but could be directed much more towards developing more sustainable systems of land use, encompassing economic and social issues, exploring preferred futures for rural communities. Landcare groups could be key agents in environmental monitoring (licensed and paid by government to collect and collate information on land status, using their own information systems, including GIS) and in land use planning processes at farm, catchment and regional scales.

Local government, with extra resources and appropriately trained staff, has the potential to be the key level of government servicing Landcare. Local government councillors and staff would participate in Landcare training, environmental monitoring activities, community-based regional planning, environmental employment initiatives and land literacy programs. This involvement would do much to change the conservative, reactionary culture of many local governments, enabling them to play a much more positive and responsive role in developing new systems of land use.

Regional planning processes which examine land resources, identify constraints and opportunities and establish a framework for evaluating the sustainability of farming systems could be in place in all agricultural areas. Linked with these planning processes (which are continuous, not just the one-off production of maps), community-based monitoring activities and regular national assess-

ments of land status would be carried out according to commonly accepted methodologies. The information generated would be accessible by personal computer.

Landcare groups can play a key role in design, implementation and interpretation of research and extension projects, as the extension, research and development (R&D) system becomes much less linear, putting scientists in more direct contact with the community, dissolving the boundary between extension and research and making greater use of practical experience and local knowledge. Widespread use of interactive, lateral communication networks between Landcare groups, people working with them and R&D providers can further break down isolation and provide more open access to technical information. Natural resource management and land conservation R&D offers major economic opportunities for Australia.

Landcare groups could also be active participants in programs introduced to alleviate structural unemployment, whereby school leavers or university graduates can opt for a year of environmental service during which they would receive training and practical experience in land management, nature conservation, mapping and inventory skills, waste management and rehabilitation techniques. These programs would tackle major land conservation projects within Australia, with local and export spin-offs through consultancies and specialist firms in environmental rehabilitation products, as many participants move on to full-time employment in this international growth industry.

The flourishing environmental literacy of the Australian community could underpin a cohesive, long-range national plan for the use of rural land, encompassing social, environmental and economic issues. This plan would be predicated on the assumption that Australia's future lies not in trying to compete on distorted world markets with undifferentiated raw products, but in helping rural communities:

- to make the most of Australia's position on the globe and its uniqueness, marketing products and technologies which are sustainable, innovative, unmistakably Australian and of the highest quality;
- to act cooperatively for themselves, to consider possible new enterprises and to access the best technology available;
- to get in touch with processors and consumers of their products and perhaps become off-farm or off-shore investors in joint ventures with processors, wholesalers and retailers.

We could easily replace our current reliance on producing high volumes of low value products at the expense of the land (with accompanying media images of dust storms, sheep being shot and algal blooms), with a distinctive image for Australian produce of 'clean and green', associated with blue skies, wide open spaces, low energy inputs and unique, high value products.

However, let us not kid ourselves that Australian products can be clean and green in image alone, or that this is enough to succeed on world markets. Many other countries can argue that their produce is similarly 'clean and green'. But none can match the landscape, the native flora and fauna, the sunlight, the seasons, or the ancient immensity of this mythical Great South Land. We need to differentiate our produce, to emphasise our uniqueness.

The entire culture of Australian agriculture needs to broaden from economic efficiency to embrace environmental and cultural integrity. Achieving this demands a much clearer sense of who we are, where we are going and what is important to us. Many of the necessary ingredients (community participation, institutional reform, external threats, recognition of the need for change) are already there, but we have yet to establish a clear vision and strategic framework for action. This is needed if all the crew in this boat called Australian agriculture are to paddle in the same direction, and to have the persistence to be patient and keep paddling.

## **CONCLUSION**

Landcare in Australia is a working example of a community-based response to the challenge of sustainability during a period of severe resource constraints. The key ingredients of Landcare are its lack of structure, the primacy of land users in determining group directions and activities, the integration of conservation and production issues, the involvement of people other than farmers in groups and the extent to which groups assume responsibility for their own problems and resources. Landcare group activity often involves, and is complemented by, innovative approaches to monitoring land status (land literacy) and by participatory approaches to planning better systems of land management at farm and catchment scales.

Landcare has been a national initiative only since 1988. At this early stage in its development it is an outstanding success in terms of its penetration into rural and coastal communities and the enthusiasm with which the voluntary land conservation group concept has been embraced in very tough times. Comparing the level of involvement and activity with the money directed to Landcare

groups, it is clear that the Landcare program has been a bargain for Australia.

Landcare groups have enormous potential to generate commitment to, and to play a key role in generating, exchanging and applying the knowledge necessary for, the development of more sustainable systems of land use and management in Australia. However, commitment is only one ingredient for developing sustainable systems of land use and management, the others being resources, knowledge and processes for planning and managing change over large areas and long time frames. In other words, Landcare groups have no hope of achieving sustainability, or even the much more limited goal of fixing land degradation, on their own. Other complementary initiatives and reforms are essential.

The problems and constraints limiting Landcare groups are also those of rural communities—lack of time, people, knowledge and resources. Economic and social decline in rural areas is inextricably linked to environmental issues. While National Landcare Program funding and other government initiatives have been extremely important in fostering landcare activity, a substantial increase in funding for land conservation in Australia is essential, to provide the people involved in landcare with support, training, knowledge and skills, and to assist communities to implement projects of substantial community benefit. Attracting additional resources will not just require better figures to justify expenditure; it means involving a much greater proportion of the Australian community in activities such as urban landcare, land and water monitoring, education programs and employment initiatives.

While it is reasonable to expect good land management to prevent land degradation, it is simply unrealistic to expect farmers to pay for rehabilitating degraded land and water resources unless it will be profitable for them to do so, which is rarely the case. So more and better research into profitable and sustainable land management systems is essential, research which involves land users as key players from the start of the research and extension process. This may well require joint involvement in participatory training from researchers, farmers and extension staff to erode some of the institutional and disciplinary boundaries which limit possibilities under existing systems.

The problems of rural Australia will never be overcome by remote control; they must be tackled with conviction by the people of rural Australia. The first step in this process is community awareness and participation. The fact that there are almost two thousand Landcare groups scattered all over the country, compris-

ing perhaps one in four land users, and that the number continues to increase in tough economic conditions, is cause for great optimism.

Landcare is uniquely Australian. The combination of relatively unstructured community participation at a district level, tackling a broad range of environmental and production issues, supported by government funding and major non-government organisations including farmers and conservationists, is without parallel in other industrialised countries.

While flying and driving around Australia, talking to individual land users and attending Landcare group activities in all states, two impressions are overwhelming. The first is the awesome scale of the task to develop better systems of land use and management. The challenge is economic, ecological and social. The second dominating impression is the time, energy and thought being put into landcare by thousands of very committed land users and dedicated people working with them. The community participation platform is being built and consolidated in very testing times.

If we can back up the initial commitment and enthusiasm which has spawned landcare with sustained support, Landcare groups will have a profound influence on prevailing attitudes and cultures within rural communities, creating the potential for lasting improvements in management of land and water resources.

We will also have set an example of how governments and communities can work together to evolve a more sustainable balance between human activity and nature. This is truly one of the most important issues facing the world over the next generation.