

1 *Introduction*

In the twilight of the twentieth century, the need for humans to re-think the way we use the land, water, air and biodiversity which supports us has become pretty obvious.

The imperatives are economic, social and environmental. They are characterised by huge scale and technical uncertainty and the need for action is often urgent. It is easy to be overwhelmed by the size and complexity of the questions and we do not have neat, off-the-shelf answers.

One of the most pressing issues facing society over the next generation is how we produce food and fibre. Farming systems will need to support twice as many people by the year 2025 as they do today, hopefully with a much more equitable distribution of food. Yet, all around the world, farmers are under financial and social stress which, together with inappropriate technologies, have accelerated depletion and degradation of natural resources—soil, water, air and biodiversity. Farming communities all over the world are in decline.

But this book is not about the problems, although they are mentioned in setting the scene. Rather, we want to introduce an exciting Australian phenomenon which shows how local communities, particularly but not exclusively rural communities, can get together to tackle their own problems. It is called 'Landcare', a unique national program which is a partnership of government, farmers, conservationists and community groups, and which has quickly grown to involve about one quarter of the farming community in local voluntary conservation groups.

Imagine a country in which one person out of every four belongs to a conservation group, actively seeking ways of improving their

local environment. Think about the possibilities of this scenario for issues such as waste management, water quality, transport, urban design, food and fibre production, and wilderness management. In rural Australia this is already happening. Among the ten per cent of Australians who do not live in cities, being a member of a community conservation group is no longer a cause of raised eyebrows and suspicion, but a sign of a progressive attitude to the land and of a belief in working for the future of life on the land.

Landcare is much more than just an innovative, participatory land conservation program on a large scale. It encompasses environmental education in schools and in local communities, community-based land use planning, community-based monitoring of the status of land and water resources, farmer-driven and farmer-managed research and development, and community involvement in the allocation of public funds to land conservation activities. But, above all, Landcare shows what can be achieved when rural people are directly involved in cooperatively thinking about the future of their communities and the land which supports them.

This book documents constructive, long term, practical action at a community level for tackling environmental (and increasingly social and economic) problems. It shows how people can operate effectively at a level which is bigger than their own backyard, but not as remote, diffuse and intangible as national or international politics. It shows how communities can learn much more about their physical environment, and how to question creatively their long term directions. Taking the long view means moving outside personal and social comfort zones, often confronting difficult issues. If this occurs at a community level in an appropriate context, then people can learn a great deal and exert greater conscious influence over their own direction.

If there is a word which emerges after four years immersed in Landcare it is *potential*. Landcare, by involving, encouraging and providing resources to committed people closest to the land, has the potential to underpin the evolution of new land use systems and new relationships between people and land, which build upon human resources instead of discounting them or seeing them as part of the problem. Landcare is not yet secure in the Australian landscape; however it is continuing to grow in an extremely hostile economic environment and a stressed rural society. It is still vulnerable, but Landcare is exhibiting many of the characteristics of indigenous Australian flora and fauna—extraordinary tenacity, resilience and innovative responses to seemingly unfavourable circumstances. Rural communities are demonstrating that they are far

from indifferent to environmental issues and that, with appropriate support (not necessarily financial), they can create some of the building blocks of more sustainable systems of land use and management. Whether Landcare becomes a permanent feature of the landscape or not, valuable lessons are there to be learned.

We want to tell the Landcare story through the experiences of some Landcare groups and some of the individuals in Landcare. This is not a technical text. But there are many lessons emerging from Landcare about the way in which modern industrialised democracies learn, about how we do research and extension and land use planning, about how we make decisions on land use and management, about environmental education and about some of the blockages to wiser use of natural resources. We hope these lessons crystallise as the story of Landcare unfolds.

The most exciting aspect of Landcare is the people involved—people with energy, enthusiasm and commitment who are prepared to work hard within their community to improve the relationship between the land and human use of it. This book is primarily about these people. It is not a book about land degradation or rural decline, although these profoundly disturbing issues are catalysts for Landcare. Rather, we intend to bring to a wider audience the circumstances and the efforts of many rural Australians within the Landcare movement.

After 200 years, Europeans in Australia are starting to understand the characteristics of this ancient land, and some are starting to develop some humility in attempting to live with the land, rather than from the land. The issues Landcare is tackling are of vast scale and complexity and it is easy to be overwhelmed by the enormity of the task. But one cannot experience at first hand the excitement and the commitment of the people actively involved in Landcare without becoming infused with hope. This book is about sharing that hope.