When one looks at what Landcare groups and the people involved are doing, one cannot help but be inspired by their enthusiasm and commitment. But is this enough? What is Landcare really achieving? Is it merely salving the collective conscience of a sector of the farming community, or adding lustre to the 'warm inner glow' of rural environmentalists? Or is it paving the way for profound change in Australian agriculture and systems of land use and management?

This chapter draws on a flurry of recent studies analysing Landcare in Australia or particular aspects of it, including national surveys based on mail questionnaires; quantitative and qualitative national studies involving structured and semi-structured face to face interviews; statewide evaluations using action research, telephone interviews and workshops and analysing annual reports compiled by groups; national and statewide assessments and ‘informed insider’ reviews by program managers; quantitative sociological research at a regional level examining changes in attitudes, beliefs and behaviour over time; action research in the form of Rapid Rural Appraisals involving Landcare groups in assessing their own achievements, directions and priorities; and detailed case studies of particular groups and projects.

WHO IS INVOLVED IN LANDCARE?

While the gross number of Landcare groups is at best a crude indicator of progress, the rate of growth of the program has meant that just keeping up with the number of groups is difficult. Systematic
collection of more useful information, such as what Landcare groups are actually doing, has been beyond the administrative resources of state land conservation agencies to date.

Despite severe economic constraints in rural communities, the explosive growth of the Landcare movement has continued. Figure 8.1 shows the number of groups in each state in October 1993, compiled by the respective state Landcare coordinators.

It is difficult to get a precise figure in each state, as there is no single blueprint as to what constitutes a Landcare group, and they go by a variety of names and vary in emphasis in different legislative and physical environments. But it does seem safe to say that, in 1994, Australia has almost 2000 local groups of people, whose primary aims are to tackle land degradation and develop more sustainable land management practices.

Figure 8.1 suggests that the number of Landcare groups still appears to be increasing exponentially. Certainly the number of groups almost doubled each year in 1988, 1989 and 1990, but it is likely that the graph understates the rate of growth in the number of groups in 1989 and 1990, and overstates the number of new groups since 1990. To a significant extent, the increases in 1991 and 1992 can be explained by state agencies compiling more accurate data on the actual number of groups. Landcare coordinators are starting to see substitutions, consolidations and subdivisions of groups, which seems likely to be an increasing trend as groups evolve, come to grips with their relevant area of concern, and move beyond the initial burst of enthusiasm into a longer-term course of action. However, if we started to look carefully at urban conservation groups which identify with a particular piece of land, and ‘friends of’ groups, we would find that these groups share many characteristics with Landcare groups. If they were counted, the total number of groups would be substantially higher.

Unfortunately we do not have a profile of group membership (or leadership) in any state—indicating, for example, what proportion of group members rely solely on the land for their income, what proportion are women, what proportion of group members are responsible for group direction, vigour and so on. So at this stage the analysis is confined to bald numbers, which must be interpreted with caution.

The map opposite page 24 gives an appreciation of the distribution of Landcare groups in Australia. The national picture was compiled in June 1992 by Sarah Ewing, from maps provided by the Landcare coordinators in each state.233 Landcare membership is patchy. In some regions of Victoria and south-west Western Aus-
Involvement, Impacts, Influences, Impediments

Involvement, Impacts, Influences, Impediments

Figure 8.1  Landcare groups in Australia

Australia and some pastoral zones more than half the farmers are involved, but fewer than fifteen per cent of land users in significant areas of Queensland, western New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania are active in Landcare groups.²³⁴

A desk calculation based on the number of groups and the number of people per group would suggest that the range in Landcare group membership extends from at the very least 10,000 people to possibly 50,000 people. Twenty-five thousand reasonably active Landcare group members regularly contributing to meetings and group activities would be a conservative estimate based on experience and observation in all states during the National Landcare Facilitator project. Depending on the definition of a farmer, and the proportion of Landcare members who are farmers, these calculations suggest that between twenty and twenty-five per cent of broadacre farmers are involved in or with Landcare groups. This estimate is consistent with the findings of national surveys carried out by the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics in 1991.
So one in every four or five broadacre farmers is involved in Landcare to some extent. That is an extremely significant penetration of Landcare into rural communities, which has occurred during a period when many people could have been expected to be preoccupied with pressing short-term financial difficulties. It is heartening that there are so many people working towards the long-term health of their land, their business and their livelihood. Their success or otherwise will ultimately influence livelihoods throughout Australian society.

What are the characteristics of people involved in Landcare?

The studies to date do shed light on the characteristics of farmers who are in Landcare groups or who receive advice from Landcare groups. On average they are younger, earn higher levels of cash income, have higher levels of debt, are more active seekers of information from a wider range of sources; they are more concerned about the future, more positive about and receptive to government advice and involvement, and they undertake more land conservation practices than other farmers.

These characteristics could have been predicted by anybody experienced in agricultural extension. But it is not correct to assume that Landcare groups consist only of innovative, progressive farmers with a conservation bent—in other words that Landcare is preaching only to the converted. Landcare groups typically are based on a neighbourhood or catchment. As long as the group is reasonably active, participation of people within that catchment tends to be very high. It is common to hear extension officers and researchers comment that they are meeting and talking to farmers in Landcare groups who have never had any previous contact with advisory or technical services. It is also common to hear group leaders express considerable satisfaction 'that so-and-so is now coming to our meetings and field days—we didn’t dream that he/she would be interested!' While the average age of Landcare farmers may be slightly less than for farmers overall (in the early fifties rather than the late fifties), there is a wide distribution of ages within most Landcare groups.

The information summarised here should be interpreted with caution, as these studies do not distinguish between cause and effect. Farmers may be adopting recommended land conservation practices because of contact with Landcare groups, or they may
have contact with Landcare groups because they are interested in land conservation. Either way, the proportion of farmers receiving information from Landcare groups is extremely significant, albeit geographically patchy. Landcare has already wrought profound changes in the style of land conservation activity in Australia, and in the relationships between the various institutions of government and the community.

**WHY DO PEOPLE GET INVOLVED IN LANDCARE?**

When people are asked ‘Why are you in the Landcare group?’ their answers usually fall into three main categories: to gain personal benefits on their own farm in terms of knowledge or support; to influence others or to work cooperatively on district problems with others in their community; or to counter perceived external regulatory threats by demonstrating that farmers are responsible managers of natural resources.

A considerable diversity of perceptions of what Landcare is about emerges when people in Landcare groups are asked what they hope their group will achieve and about their personal criteria for assessing the success of their group. Some people are focused on a particular task, such as fixing land degradation or implementing land rehabilitation works; others are concerned to increase awareness of landcare issues, and the involvement, commitment and ownership of local people with respect to land conservation activity; others are focused on improving farming systems and generating new knowledge; and others are more concerned simply with the development and survival of their Landcare group *per se*, rather than with the impacts of the group.

Despite the diversity of perceptions of what Landcare is all about, it is possible to discern some consistent threads. The perception of Landcare as being government-initiated hype, bureaucratic and a forum for do-gooders and ‘disoriented public servants’ seems to be mainly associated with people who are not members of groups, who are rationalising their non-involvement. But the perception that Landcare is a defensive move for rural communities in the face of perceived threats from urban-based conservationists is real and is held by some Landcare group members as well as non-members. There are many people in Landcare groups (often the leaders) who have strong local community motives for being involved and who gain great satisfaction from stimulating cooperative action. There is probably an even greater number who are in Landcare
because they want to learn and to improve their own farms, preferably with some form of external support.

**WHAT INFLUENCE IS LANDCARE HAVING?**

There are two key domains of influence of Landcare groups—their immediate impact on the people involved, and their subsequent impact on land management practices, which is presumably eventually reflected in the landscape itself. First, let us examine the impact of Landcare on the people involved.²³⁸

The tendency for Landcare members to be younger, better educated, active information seekers with higher turnover and higher debt, is probably most true of Landcare group leaders, many of whom are outstanding individuals within their districts who play an active role in a range of community activities. Among the leaders of Landcare groups there is often a desire to influence other farmers through Landcare, and to raise the general standard of land management in their district. Leaders of Landcare groups tend to be more focused on the district or community level, and to be more concerned with the cooperative, as opposed to individual aspects of Landcare, than other members of Landcare groups.

Interviews during the National Landcare Facilitator project reveal a common suite of feelings among Landcare group leaders—satisfaction, learning, and frustration that things are not happening more quickly. Landcare group leaders are often sick of meetings; they know they are necessary, but are impatient with paperwork and bureaucracy and keen to see things happening on the ground. Landcare is attracting many leading farmers who are not at all interested in agripolitics, but are very interested in farming and they enjoy the intellectual stimulation of their leadership role in Landcare.

For the farmers in Landcare groups who are not leaders, their involvement in Landcare is not so demanding as for the leaders, mentions of frustration are far less frequent, and their priorities are directed far more towards the potential influence of landcare for their own farm than for the district as a whole, although many enjoy the constructive interaction with other farmers through the Landcare group.

There are also likely to be those farmers who are involved in Landcare because it is now seen as ‘the done thing’, particularly in areas such as central Victoria, where Landcare membership is now more than 70 per cent of the farming community.²³⁹ This is consistent with the normative influence of their social situation. Such
Landcare members are often the 'sleepers' within groups, who turn up to field days and major events, but rarely attend regular meetings or contribute to the running of the group. Sometimes their involvement enhances their enthusiasm for landcare and they become gradually more active. Research by John Cary and Roger Wilkinson at the University of Melbourne suggests that farmers' attitudes are influenced by their behaviour, rather than the other way around, as is more commonly assumed. In other cases they gradually drift away, albeit with a better idea of landcare and the sources of technical and financial assistance available to them. The interventions of a facilitator or coordinator can often make the difference between having a significant number of people only marginally involved in group activities, or having a majority of members making genuine contributions to the group and in turn being influenced by this involvement. Even inactive members of Landcare groups usually have greater contact with extension and research workers than would otherwise be the case.

There are many members of Landcare groups who are not farmers, particularly around the coast where most Australians live. Landcare groups in these areas tend to have a more diverse membership, drawing from the ranks of hobby farmers and 'alternative lifestylers' who have chosen to live in rural areas and who are often environmentally aware and committed. Traditionally, relations between the full-time farmer and his/her hobby farming neighbour are often strained, as each fails to understand the world view of the other. A myriad of issues such as goats, dogs, cats, horses, fire protection, mishaps with borrowed equipment, boundary fences, and control of pests and weeds, conspire to foment conflict and misunderstanding. A Landcare group can often provide the bridge to cross this understanding gap.

In general, Landcare groups with diverse membership tend to be more active, more self-reliant and also less dependent on the energies of a few, than groups in traditional farming districts suffering from all the pressures of rural decline. For non-farmers, membership of the local Landcare group is often the first constructive opportunity they have had to mix with conventional farmers from their district to talk about farming and land management. Many find it a terrific learning experience, and a useful forum to seek advice or to borrow or hire equipment from conventional farmers. From the group's perspective, hobby farmers and rural lifestylers do have some desirable characteristics. They have often had professional training of some sort, are more comfortable with paperwork, writing submissions; dealing with the media etc, and thus
have a lot to offer the group. They usually have more time to put in to the group than conventional farmers, and the tax deductibility of all their inputs is much more of an incentive to them (it can be off-set against off-farm income) than it is to conventional farmers. For these people, Landcare is a great opportunity both to improve their own land and to become more involved in their local community, to break down some of the feelings of isolation common to people making their first move from the city to the bush.

For people in rural areas who are not members of Landcare groups, there appear to be three dominant perspectives on Landcare. People are either indifferent to Landcare and/or say they have not heard of it; they have heard about it and are positive about it (in which case they are often already involved); or they have an openly sceptical or antagonistic perception of Landcare. Not everyone in the bush thinks Landcare is wonderful. We still have a long way to go before a land stewardship ethic supersedes attitudes which condone systems of land use which deplete and degrade land, water and biodiversity.

But great strides have been made, particularly in areas where Landcare is already involving a majority of land users. These areas tend to have a common focus of concern, such as salinity, drainage, pests or weeds, where a cooperative approach is obviously more effective. One of the consequences of the rural crisis of the 1990s is that now all of rural Australia has a common concern—financial and social survival: While not as clear cut as salinity, these issues also seem to demand a concerted, coordinated effort from rural communities to act in a strategic manner, and to confront challenging questions about their future and the changes required if they are to become active agents in shaping their future, rather than passive victims of it.

Summing up the impact of Landcare on the people involved, the dominant themes which emerge are satisfaction, learning and frustration. Many people involved in Landcare are learning a lot about their own property, about the land in their district and about issues they may have rarely considered in the past. Group leaders in particular have gained great satisfaction from seeing other people get involved, from their interaction as a group and occasionally from group projects. But this learning and satisfaction is often accompanied by growing frustration: about the level of knowledge and resources available to seriously tackle problems; about the few people who really understand what needs to be done and the amount of poor land management still occurring; and about the bureaucracy, paperwork and politics of Landcare, particularly project funding.
The wider influence of Landcare groups

When people involved in Landcare and others are asked about the impact of Landcare groups in their local area, their answers tend to fall into four categories: Landcare has increased awareness of land degradation problems (bringing them into the open so that people are less reluctant to discuss them) and some of the potential solutions; people involved are learning a great deal about their land and options for improving its management; Landcare has dramatically increased the involvement of some people in land conservation who previously seemed uninterested; and Landcare has influenced increased adoption of improved farming methods. Landcare groups may also have influenced land management practices through creating a more favourable climate for the trying of new practices, but it is common to hear that 'it's too early yet', or 'we would do it all, if only we had some money!'

Allan Curtis and colleagues at the Johnstone Centre of Parks, Recreation and Heritage at Charles Sturt University in Wagga have been analysing annual reports submitted by Landcare groups in Victoria since 1988–89. In these reports, Landcare groups summarise details of their membership, their direction and priorities, their activities and their achievements. For the 1991–92 year, 117 Victorian Landcare groups submitted annual reports, which provided a 'strong sense of the scale of action and public participation facilitated through Landcare groups and suggested that almost all of these voluntary groups had been successful in assisting the move towards more sustainable resource use'. According to the Curtis et al sample, in the areas of Victoria where Landcare groups exist, they are mobilising an average of 55 per cent of rural landholders.

Extrapolating from the sample of 117 groups to the 1993 total of 407 Victorian Landcare groups, the analysis of Curtis et al suggests that Victorian Landcare groups in 1993 comprised about 14,800 people, with an incredible 17,000 people visiting to assist or study Landcare work. Similar extrapolations suggest that in 1991–92, Victorian groups planted 3.2 million trees and constructed 7,700 kilometres of fencing. Such extrapolations are dubious, as it is likely that those groups submitting reports are the more active and effective groups. Nevertheless, Allan Curtis used conservative assumptions, and the figures do suggest a high level of practical action and participation. We need to analyse practices and activities in the field to test the accuracy of such extrapolations. We also need similar reporting systems in other states to get a handle on the
overall scale of Landcare group activity, which seems to offer tremendous ‘bang for the buck’ in terms of government funding.

Another impact of Landcare which seems evident to an outsider is the extent to which it has widened communication networks within rural communities. Enhanced contact between some farmers and resource management professionals has been mentioned already. But possibly even more important are the personal networks, particularly between like-minded younger farmers from different districts, and more formalised networks in some regions where Landcare groups have formed regional associations. These networks in turn bring a number of benefits, including sociopsychological support in times of crisis; more effective information management; wider participation in local and regional policy decisions; and increased synergy and cost-effectiveness of service provision for government agencies.

But before examining the constraints to Landcare in a wider context, we will focus again on the achievements of a particular group, seen through the eyes of a pioneer who has had the opportunity to move well beyond his own territory in fostering the growth of Landcare.

**CASE STUDY**

**WARRENBAYNE BOHO**

Angus Howell is a sheep farmer and full-time coordinator of the Warrenbayne Boho Land Protection Group. The Warrenbayne Boho Landcare Group was one of the first. It involves 150 landholders in the foothills of the Strathbogie Ranges less than two hours north-east of Melbourne. The Shire of Violet Town convened a meeting in 1982 after a few landholders began talking about the spread of salinity on their properties. More than one hundred people turned up. Clearly they had hit a raw nerve. The landholders realised that the time had come to stop blaming others or waiting for someone else to fix the problem. They would have to take responsibility for themselves.

Since then the Warrenbayne Boho Landcare Group has planted over 150 000 trees, it has fenced twenty kilometres of remnant vegetation and planted 600 hectares of perennial pasture. It has prepared a wildlife corridor plan for the whole
area, initiated a status report on its rivers and streams, and has assisted with the development of a Roadside Management Plan for the Shire of Violet Town. It is now conducting a comprehensive investigation of the prospects for commercial on-farm timber production in the area.

Several thousand of the trees the group plants every year are grown in Melbourne backyards. Farmers gather the seed from local trees. Their 'Tree Project' city friends grow them on and return one-year-old seedlings at a cost of about twenty cents per seedling. They often come up to help plant them. The group hosts two to three thousand visitors every year. These range from unemployed Melbourne youngsters helping to plant trees to bus loads of schoolchildren to international experts. Because the group has adopted a positive, self-help approach, it has received excellent support from government, tertiary institutions, corporate and philanthropic bodies and many others.

As an inspiring speaker to emerging Landcare groups in several states and in New Zealand, and a founding board member of Landcare Australia Limited, Angus Howell has been one of the Landcare movement’s more prominent members. In an interview with Helen Alexander, Angus described the early days with the Warrenbayne Boho group and the wider ramifications of Landcare for rural communities:

> It all started with a few landholders and government people, including Pam Robinson, Darrel Brewin and myself, talking together about dryland salinity. When huge numbers turned up to the meeting convened by the Shire, we realised the level of interest. Until then, salinity hadn’t been a priority for us or the Department [now DCNR], and at that stage we didn’t have a good technical understanding of it.

> We decided to put together a small report on the size of the problem. There was a post-graduate student who wanted to do some work on salinity, so we mounted a campaign to raise some funds for him. A few people just drove around the countryside and banged on people’s doors explaining what we were trying to do. It was amazing how many people were prepared to put in.

> When we got the group up and running we didn’t
really have any idea what was happening. We didn’t have any concept that we were setting up something that might go on for a long period of time. We were much more interested in getting a group of people together to deal with an immediate problem. But it did become obvious to us in the early 80s that groups of landholders working together, taking responsibility, was going to be the most efficient way of using government services.

It feels very exciting to see this thing go national. It’s important though that we don’t lay claim to starting Landcare, because there were a number of initiatives around the country and many people feel responsible for the beginnings of this movement.

I don’t know why Landcare works, but I think it’s because people get some enjoyment out of working together and out of the opportunity to achieve something together.

The best thing to come out of Landcare for the community is a positive attitude towards land degradation. The majority of people feel that there is something they can do about it. There has been a marked change in attitudes about our farming resource and a very significant increase in the number of people that actively want to do something about land degradation problems.

This is not necessarily combined with a positive attitude towards the future of the rural economy generally. This has been exacerbated in the last couple of years since the bottom fell out of the wool market. Currently there is a fair amount of doom and gloom, but I believe our Landcare group will survive. I guess we will see some changes in land use, but that won’t kill the Landcare movement.

People are very frightened about the future. The rural community has been frightened for a long time. They are frightened about the rest of the world going past and they don’t know what to do about that. They are frightened because their standard of living has significantly changed. They don’t even quite know why they are frightened. In some places Landcare is helping to allay those fears.
Most farmers have no concept that they have the ability to influence things beyond their farm gate. Landcare has some potential to change that, but it has much more potential to change what is happening within our property boundaries and in our catchment ...

I get quite pessimistic about the future for agriculture in Australia. I can't see where the leadership is coming from.

My personal rewards for being involved in Landcare are a great sense of achievement and an enormous thrill out of having been able to work amongst the landholders locally and see this develop into something in which people have great pride, and something that has achieved something significant. I have had the opportunity to assist other groups to get established, and it is a real thrill to have been asked to come and talk to others and to realise twelve months later that something has really fired up there.

One of the group's significant achievements is real changes to the landscape. It is rewarding to drive around and see previously bare hills with trees on them. Another is the improved management of creeks and streams with the removal of grazing animals and the revegetation of eroded banks. It feels good to have stopped that erosion which had been going on for years.

The role of women has been very significant in Landcare because it has tended to involve a section of the community who have a real understanding of the farming situation, but with a different attitude to caring for the land and the people.

I don't know if the wider community has a perception of what we are doing. I suspect not. I think that matters ... I don't think the farming community is going to be able to afford to turn things around to protect land and water resources on their own. It's going to need to be a national effort.

At the moment I don't think this country is trying to look long-term at properly managing its land. We are at a significant time in our history when we actually know that many of our land use practices are not sustainable, and that we can actually make some
choices. We have to decide either we are going to do something about that or recognise that we are only going to make token attempts. I think it is a real test for the nation to take some of those decisions.

In terms of wider community attitudes, I don’t think it’s going to change the world, but it’s going to change some of the world.

Peter Cock provides a useful summary of the main influences and potential of Landcare groups:

Landcare groups are significant in that they draw upon social values and networks of support that constituted a more prominent aspect of rural life in the past. They provide an opportunity for community redevelopment focused on a group approach to care of the land, while at the same time empowering the individual’s capacity to act. They offer a structure for more efficient use of departmental, private and community resources, and a social context for moral support and the development of a new ethic of land management. Farmers who participate in cooperative groups exert a collective social pressure upon non-members who are either ignorant of land degradation issues or reluctant to become involved in land repair, as well as exerting a continuing supporting pressure upon fellow members.242

The international significance of Landcare

With a quarter of the farming community involved in voluntary conservation groups, supported by a national partnership between government, farmers and the conservation movement, Landcare in Australia is a large-scale non-coercive approach to improving land management in a climate of great stress on human, financial and land resources. There are no comparable programs elsewhere, but there are many countries suffering rural crises in the face of environmental degradation and declining returns to farmers.

The 1992 United Nations Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro saw most countries sign up to Agenda 21, committing their governments to a range of environmental initiatives. Chapter 14 of
Agenda 21 deals with ‘Promoting Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development’, major elements of which are: ensuring people’s participation and promoting human resource development for sustainable agriculture; fostering rural people’s organisations; decentralising decision making; providing support services and training; the optimal use of resources; and the establishment of networks for information exchange. Chapter 32 is called ‘Strengthening the Role of Farmers’, based on the premise that a farmer-centred approach is the key to nearing sustainability in both developed and developing countries.

Most governments have thus made a commitment to involve farmers in the development and promotion of sustainable agricultural techniques and to decentralise decision-making processes. It will be fascinating to see the extent to which the Rio rhetoric is translated into practical action. Australia is one country in which land management research and extension activities and decision-making processes are evolving along the lines of the principles laid out in Agenda 21. As we have seen, there are a number of forces driving this evolution, not least of which are the demands of Landcare groups. There is no grand strategic blueprint—plans are evolving through experience and through the participation of local people. The Australian experience certainly suggests that the devolution of control ensures greater commitment to change and consequently much greater return on public investments.

Is all this awareness, learning, involvement and peer pressure enough? We’ll take that up in the next chapter, which attempts to place Landcare in the context of Australia’s overall quest for sustainable farming systems. But we can hardly discuss where Landcare groups fit in without first drawing a few conclusions about some of the constraints and fundamental forces they are up against.

**SHACKLES**

This section is more difficult to write than most because it works over old ground which has been tilled many times before. Constraints are recurrent, tenacious and oft-lamented.

Ken Keith and Max Roberts, of the Queensland Department of Primary Industries, reflecting on constraints to soil conservation catchment groups concerned with improving production and preventing erosion on the Darling Downs by improving the adoption of measures such as strip cropping, note that at a group leaders workshop in 1963, the following difficulties were identified:
• inexperience in leadership;
• keeping members interested beyond personal problems;
• overcoming the fear of coercion;
• overcoming the tendency to make decisions for people;
• organising meetings of sufficient interest;
• a lack of evidence of immediate benefits of soil conservation;
• encouraging respected but disinterested farmers to get involved.

External factors contributing to the decline of these informal groups may have been:

• financial constraints as cost/price squeeze pressures and drought took effect after 1965;
• pressures on [DPI] staff to use more formal project planning approaches through legislative means where coordination of soil conservation works was essential;
• the departure of a key facilitator who had worked with technical officers to help the groups analyse problems and develop a whole-property approach.

These issues of 30 years ago are unfortunately all too familiar to most Landcare groups and the people working with them in Australia today. But they do not tell the full story, so at the risk of descending into melancholy, we will explore some of the challenges for Landcare in more depth.

**People, people skills and ‘burnout’**

Landcare group leaders, along with coordinators and facilitators, are key actors at the interface between government agencies and Landcare groups. They usually find that their involvement in Landcare increases the frequency and intensity of their contact with bureaucracy, in particular with their local land conservation extension and research staff. However, being progressive farmers in the main, they have often had some contact with government prior to their involvement in Landcare.

There are two sides to this increased exposure to government: Landcare group leaders often become quite close to individual extension workers and research staff in districts where the latter are competent and responsive, enhancing technical learning and empathy on both sides. But increased contact with bureaucracy often also increases the level of frustration of Landcare group leaders, who spend valuable time in meetings of dubious immediate value, coping with
the seemingly endless paperwork of the project-funding process, and who see apparently large amounts of money being spent in ways which to a farmer seem extravagantly inefficient. This is a classic 'interface discontinuity', between the life world of the practical farmer and the massive inertia and appetite for minutiae of the bureaucracy. Landcare group leaders are often very supportive of certain individuals within government agencies, but cynical about the agency as a whole, and scathing about the way in which technical resources and money are allocated and managed.

The leaders of Landcare groups are pivotal in the effectiveness of the whole movement. Their ability to lead, to delegate, to involve people, to communicate; their understanding of group processes for dealing with apathy, conflict, making decisions and translating them into action; and their ability to organise and run interesting meetings with a clear purpose, are all critical factors influencing the effectiveness of Landcare groups. The limited number of people in rural areas with these skills or the capacity to develop them is a fundamental constraint to Landcare. One keen individual can be the difference between a dynamic group and a dormant group. Many existing group leaders are already the busiest people in their community and as their Landcare workload increases they face the prospect of burnout. These people need support if Landcare is to be effective in the medium term.

At a macro level, a major constraint to Landcare group effectiveness is simply the number of people in rural communities who have the talent and the inclination to be Landcare leaders. The demography of rural communities, the age and education profile of farmers, levels of debt and stress, the vitality and provision of facilities and services in country towns—all of these factors have a bearing on Landcare groups and ultimately on the quality of land management. Social issues are a critical but often-overlooked element in the sustainability debate.

One possibility for developing the human resources available to Landcare groups is simply to bring outside people into rural communities to work on landcare issues. Many pressing environmental issues require labour and human resources which simply do not exist in rural areas; while there are many underemployed and unemployed people in urban and semi-urban areas, particularly young people. There is an obvious symmetry here. There is great scope for a multi-faceted national initiative linking training with employment in environmental restoration. The importance of the training component is hard to overestimate; if people feel they are merely a cheap source of labour then the amount and quality of work done is likely to be poor.
Providing resources to enable existing agencies and community organisations, including Landcare groups, to train and employ young people on worthwhile projects would be a tremendous fillip to groups overawed by the scale of the problems they are trying to beat. But in the short term, we have to work with existing human resources. Most Landcare groups in Australia are still running on the energy of the people who established the group. The prospect of ‘burnout’ among these key individuals is frightening. If it is not recognised and treated, the energy of many Landcare groups will dissipate.

Burnout also applies to Landcare group facilitators, coordinators and state agency extension staff dedicated to Landcare groups. Most of the solutions require a knowledge of group processes, the analytical skills to stand back for a moment to see what is happening and the facilitation skills to intervene to alleviate burnout without creating further problems for the group. Ideally, group members should be able to recognise such problems and deal with them themselves, which underlines once again the importance of training programs for group members as well as professional facilitators.

Where the victim of burnout is a facilitator or coordinator, they usually have to fix it themselves. This requires higher-order facilitation skills, to wean groups of support (often away from the long, boring night meetings which are a significant cause of fatigue, disruptions to personal life and stress), and to negotiate better working arrangements.

Natural resource management agencies do not have sufficient people trained in group processes, community consultation or participatory planning. Investment in training programs (both in technical aspects of land management and in ‘people skills’) combining land users, Landcare group leaders, local government, agribusiness, community groups and state agency staff, across institutional and discipline boundaries, is essential.

It is critical to realise that Landcare groups are only a part of the land conservation picture. They will not achieve sustainable land management on their own, but they have a critical role to play within an overall strategy.

‘The system’

Much of the framework within which Landcare groups operate is not within the groups’ control, but within the dominion of governments. Redressing some of the mistakes of the last century or more will require governments to change, just as they are asking farmers to change. Government policies over many decades have encouraged land degradation. For example:
• tax concessions for clearing native vegetation, which lasted until the 1980s;
• drought assistance schemes, which discriminated against conservation-minded managers; encouraged exploitation of resources, were open to rorting,243 and lasted until the 1990s;
• closer settlement schemes, which settled returned soldiers and others on blocks of land which were often too small, forcing land users to flog the land merely to survive. There are still areas, particularly in leasehold country, where block sizes are too small for sustained viability given current farming systems;
• irrigation schemes, in which water has been delivered to extensive areas, often on inappropriate soil types, and almost always with inadequate drainage, under pricing structures which do not reflect the true cost of delivery and maintenance and which have encouraged inefficient irrigation practices;
• lease covenants which for a century or so made exploitation of land compulsory, for example by insisting on land being at least 90 per cent cleared (SA), or establishing minimum stocking rates (NT);
• departments of agriculture, accountants, stock firms and banks which urged farmers to ‘get big or get out’, encouraging higher levels of debt and lower levels of equity.

Government management of its own land at all levels, commonwealth, state and local, has not always set an enlightened example to other land users. Improving land management is not simply a matter of improving the attitudes and practices of farmers.

There are encouraging signs (eg in the Decade of Landcare Plans, the Ecologically Sustainable Development Reports and various parliamentary inquiries) that governments are at least recognising these issues. However, John Bradsen of the University of Adelaide249 has pointed out that this has been so for at least half a century, without being reflected in legislation, nor in enforcement of existing legislation.

Institutional structures and policies at all levels of government are intricately related to institutional cultures, which are like a glass ceiling, preventing Landcare groups from reaching their potential. Rhetoric including terms such as ‘bottom-up’, ‘community driven’, ‘grassroots’ and ‘community based’, flows freely from government agencies. Yet these same organisations tend to be hierarchical and paternalistic, in which top-down modes of decision making are the norm.

While many staff within these agencies are attracted to the ideal of empowerment, the organisations within which they work rarely foster such an approach. Seen through the prism of their institutional cultures, empowerment is a threat. Empire building and
the expert syndrome militate against shifting resources from government to community control. This issue stems not from malice, but from the scarcity of people with social skills in natural resource agencies. Few managers realise that empowerment can increase the power of both parties, nor do they have the skills, confidence or support to operate in other than a technocratic mode.

State agriculture and natural resources agencies are admittedly operating in a very difficult climate at present, characterised by constant change—renaming, restructuring, reorganising, relocating, regionalising. The motives for current reforms are mostly sound, and in theory many of the changes could improve institutional cultures. But, in practice, budget imperatives tend to preclude the long view, limiting staff consultation on more fundamental issues such as the mission of the organisation. Structural reform tends to take precedence over staff training, morale sinks with increasing uncertainty and stress, and human resource development becomes very difficult.

From a landcare perspective, it certainly seems that government agency structures are less important than the organisational cultures within these agencies, which need to change markedly if communities are ever to take responsibility for improving land management.

**Social and cultural hurdles**

Farmers are a small sector of the community, declining in number and influence. Many feel this keenly, and are acutely aware of the way they may be perceived by the rest of society. Landcare group members and other land users often still feel that they are being blamed for land degradation, which triggers a defensive reaction and tends to reinforce the status quo, frustrating considerations of alternative systems of land use and management. Such defensiveness is fomented by the tendency of the media to paint green issues black and white, to sensationalise and polarise complex environmental issues.

Certainly there are miscreant land managers (including government agencies) who knowingly overstock, overclear, or neglect to control pests such as rabbits and weeds, just as there are individuals, companies and government agencies in urban areas who cause pollution. But the causes of land degradation in Australia are complex and longstanding. To simply blame farmers has never been accurate or useful.

The social and cultural factors which have compounded European impacts on the Australian landscape include:

- faith in the combination of man's ingenuity and hard work to get production from any land;
• failure to understand or appreciate the Australian climate, landscape, soils, flora and fauna—how Australia differs from elsewhere in the world and the constraints and opportunities which arise from these differences;
• inability to appreciate that land is a finite resource—an historic belief that Australia has more than enough land for all demands on it and when a piece of land is worn out, you just move on;
• belief that private property rights are inviolate, and confer a right to exploitation;
• short-sighted, narrow-minded self-interest which cannot begin to take seriously the time scales or interrelationships implicit in sustainability.

In the prevailing institutional and cultural environment in which land managers operated for at least the first 150 years of European settlement in Australia, land degradation was rarely mentioned and sustainability was not a word in the lexicon. Attitudes towards the land which we have only recently regarded as contributing to unwise land use, were (and still are among many people) shared by farmers, staff in departments of agriculture and lands, stock and pastoral inspectors, stock agents and rural merchandisers, municipal engineers and shire councillors, rural financial advisers including bankers, accountants and solicitors, and land administrators and politicians.

Turning around such deeply and widely held attitudes will not happen quickly and it will require technological, institutional and structural change; not just awareness campaigns focusing on farmers. Lia Bryant, discussing the personal crisis experienced by those 'inefficient' producers forced out of agriculture, notes that their own deeply held and socially reinforced ideologies—of independence, individualism and expectation of reward for years of hard work and sacrifice, and respect for the 'self-made' person—actually serve to compound the crises experienced by those leaving agriculture. It also helps to explain why farmers tend to hang on long past the 'economically rational' point of departure from the land. These farmers tend to blame themselves and see themselves as having failed. Bryant suggests that 'the notion of individualism discerningly masks economic and political realities and is tied to the concept of the free market. It translates into a discourse that neatly overrides the reality that markets are shaped by political forces.' The myth of the resourceful, independent farm family producing for a free market masks the influence of macro-economic policies in Australia and elsewhere, the lending policies of financial institutions and the market manipulation of transnational corpor-
This leads in turn to an overwhelming emphasis on developing technocratic solutions to the symptoms of environmental problems, conveniently overlooking or ignoring the underlying causes of these problems, which are first and foremost social and political. We must get it into our collective heads that land degradation and other environmental issues are above all social issues. Solutions, and processes to develop solutions, will only be effective if they reflect an awareness of the socio-economic and political context of farming families, communities and the Australian food and fibre sector as a whole.

The continued, widespread failure throughout the populace to understand or appreciate the Australian climate, landscape, soils, flora and fauna is not just an education issue or a conservation issue. It also limits our appreciation of the economic opportunities which arise from Australia's location on the planet and its uniqueness. The narrow primary production base, dominated by the same products that Captain Phillip landed with, supports an economic paradigm which assumes that resources are substitutable and that technology will extract production from any land, correcting any mistakes along the way. This is reinforced by the belief in private property rights and by the dogma of economic fundamentalism which deifies economic growth and insists that the main justification for government intervention is to alleviate 'market failures'. As Ted Lefroy and Richard Hobbs note dryly: 'The implications of the discovery that the earth is a finite sphere, and not infinitely flat, are taking a very long time to enter the human consciousness.'

According to Neil Barr and John Cary, many farmers are not insensitive to community attitudes to environmental issues. Based on recent research over four years in central Victoria, they conclude that farmers' beliefs can be divided into 'symbolic' environmental beliefs, which influence farmers' expressed attitudes but are insignificant in explaining farmer behaviour, and salient or 'substantive' beliefs in the real value of environmental work such as tree planting, which do influence farmer behaviour. There are two points arising from this research which are relevant to any debate about environmental commitment and actual behaviour.

First, the notion of symbolic beliefs is instructive and is undoubtedly applicable to sectors of the community other than farmers. For example, urban wage or salary earners may be members of the Australian Conservation Foundation or Greenpeace; pay annual subscriptions to Habitat (at a total cash cost of less than $100 per year); display environmental bumper stickers; and take an
active interest in nature documentaries. Yet these same people are likely to use non-renewable energy sources for heating, cooling, lighting, cooking and transport; use processes and appliances which emit ozone-depleting substances; use cars rather than bicycles or public transport; live on large blocks with lush, green, energy-intensive lawns; recycle only a small proportion of waste—yet still call themselves conservationists. Quite justifiably, these people could claim that ‘the system’—the design of cities and buildings, the transport and energy sectors, waste management infrastructure, the accessibility of recycling schemes etc, does not foster sustainable lifestyles.

So can farmers.

Second, even ‘symbolic’ land conservation activities on farms can cost farmers money. The 50 per cent of sheep farmers in the upper Loddon and Avoca catchments who plant one hundred trees or more per year, probably spend at least $500 per year including labour, rabbit control and fencing, and the sixteen per cent of farmers who plant an average of 500 trees per year would spend over $2000 each per year. Barr, Wilkinson and Cary suspect that most owners of large and medium-sized properties in the upper Loddon and Avoca catchments do not believe extensive tree planting to be in their own economic interest—yet half of them are planting trees in very tight times. Few urban dwellers have to confront the cash costs of conservation in such a direct way, and few would spend as much money on conservation measures each year. Of course farmers have a responsibility commensurate with the area of land they occupy. Someone with 1000 hectares should spend more than someone with one-tenth of a hectare (the traditional quarter-acre urban block in Australia). Furthermore, urban people contribute to conservation through their taxes. But the point remains that farmers confront the tension between conservation and exploitation in decisions they make every day, whereas the vast majority of the population is insulated from these realities.

It may well be simplistic and inaccurate to blame farmers for land degradation, but how is this a constraint to landcare?

Blame hinders constructive dialogue about how to do things better. In this case, blame is also a product of ignorance. Where farmers perceive criticism to be ill-founded, unjustified or too narrow in its focus, it can be seen (along with the continued existence of some of the institutional constraints discussed above) to indicate that governments and others are not yet fully committed to sustainability. ‘They haven’t thought it through, they haven’t got their own house in order.’
If we had the money, would we know what to do with it?

A fundamental constraint to Landcare group effectiveness is the lack of practical and profitable sustainable farming technologies and land management systems. Sure, Landcare groups can be effective up to a point in generating commitment to sustainability among land users, and in providing a more fertile environment for the propagation of new ideas. But for even medium-term effectiveness, groups need to know what sustainable farming in their district entails.

Extension and research institutions in Australia are undergoing significant reform. At the same time, the relationship between farmers and scientists is undergoing profound change. However, institutional reform appears to have been driven more by budget cuts and current buzz-words such as 'accountability', 'user pays' and 'market driven', than by a re-evaluation of the fundamental nature of Australian farming systems in the light of a long-term economic, environmental and social outlook.

Competition for scarce resources between government agencies has tended to lead to accommodations with conventional technology transfer services, with their massive inertia invested in the status quo. Given the way research priorities are established and funding is channelled, most technology transfer projects, even those tagged with the now trendy label of 'sustainable agriculture', are directed to fiddling with the margins of existing farming systems, leaving scant intellectual space or resources for considering new systems of land use. Change is directed far more by the market than as a result of any critical re-examination of farming systems according to the ecological, economic and social principles of sustainability.

Consequently, in the name of efficiency and competitiveness, farmers' terms of trade continue to decline, the number of farmers also, and agriculture is able to externalise the social and environmental costs of this myopia.

Rural decline

While rural decline is not disputed, the links between the social and economic well-being of rural communities and the quality of land management are not recognised (apart from generalities about 'socioeconomic environments' and 'institutional frameworks') in recent government documents.256

It may seem paradoxical that the number of Landcare groups has grown rapidly over a period when rural communities have been
under great stress. Certainly the influence of the funding available for Landcare is significant. National Landcare Program funding has been a tremendous catalyst for land conservation in Australia over the last decade, and for Landcare groups in particular since 1988. Landcare groups now find it relatively straightforward, albeit time-consuming, to apply for and receive funding for demonstration projects, planning and training activities and so on. It must be said, though, that the amount of money involved ($16.3 million in national grants to community groups for 1993–94) is trifling compared with the task confronting Australian society to put systems of land use and management on a more sustainable footing.

The proliferation of groups cannot be accounted for solely by the funding available. Many land users are deeply concerned about the condition of the land and feel a need to do something positive. Landcare groups also provide a social outlet, enabling people to feel that they are all in the same boat, that their individual problems are not unique, in a constructive forum which is focused on longer-term issues. For group leaders at least, Landcare also provides a stimulating intellectual challenge, and the satisfaction of imparting knowledge or stimulus to others.

But when Landcare groups are three to five years old, when the first flush of enthusiasm is gone and the initial group leaders are tired, the problems of farmers and rural communities become the problems of Landcare groups. The extent to which local voluntary groups can generate commitment and contribute to developing new systems of land use and management, is inextricably entwined with the social and economic vitality of rural communities.

The links between farm profitability and improved land management seem obvious. When farmers are under extreme financial pressure, they tighten their belts and are unlikely to spend money on land conservation, although desperation may lead to innovations to find cheaper ways of doing things. But the impact of social decline is more insidious. Where rural communities are losing human resources, they are losing intellectual horsepower—often the people who provide the spark to initiate community activities and ideas for change. In districts where the population is declining and services are being withdrawn, Landcare groups are likely to struggle and their lifespan may be limited. Where there are no technical breakthroughs and farmers have no financial room to move other than out of farming, Landcare groups will tire of raising awareness of land degradation problems and chasing land management solutions.

Of course, the converse is also true, and apparent in many districts where hobby farms have proliferated. Along the eastern seaboard and the great divide, in dormitory ‘feral suburbs’ around
capital cities and around major regional centres, population has increased, rural communities are more diverse in terms of the backgrounds, attitudes, spare time, disposable income and education levels of the people, and Landcare and Dunecare groups consequently seem to be more vigorous and likely to persist. In such communities, Landcare groups can be a focus for constructive interaction between traditional farmers and the rural lifestyleers who now outnumber them, especially with the help of a facilitator.

At a broader level, the linkages between pressure on land, water and biodiversity, and rural social and economic decline, appear to be poorly understood by policy and decision makers. These linkages should be the subject of systematic rural social research, so that governments become more aware of the wider implications of rural decline and of the environmental consequences of laissez-faire economic and social policies in the bush, and so that more constructive, creative policies can be developed and implemented. Landcare and its associated land literacy programs provide a basis for community involvement in this process of investigation and policy development, which could help to ensure that subsequent government interventions are informed with a rich sense of local context.