
Landcare in Australia: talking local sustainability in policy, practice and place

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Although there have been a few significant initiatives to maintain land fertility since European settlement, landcare is a recent and uniquely Australian event. In the 1980s the degradation of Australia's natural resource base reached crisis point. In 1989, the then prime minister, Bob Hawke, announced funding for a Decade of Landcare. By 1995, over a third of all Australian farming families were voluntarily working in more than 2,200 landcare groups. There are also urban landcare groups in most of the 14 cities. A national workforce of about 1,000 people supports these groups.

The work of landcare now covers the whole continent, and has widespread support amongst the Australian population. Landcare links country and town, conservation and development, local land ownership and national land policy. It provides an arena in which often strongly dissenting groups can meet to solve one overriding and shared problem – the future productivity of the land.

The National Landcare Program is administered by the Department of Primary Industries and Energy. Now in its seventh year of the ten year funding period, the program is beginning to show both the dramatic effect and the real size of the problem. The States are reorganising their rural extension services to take account of landcare initiatives. Local councils are commissioning landcare groups to carry out local land management. Universities and other educational establishments are offering landcare-based educational programs. Landcare has become part of the fabric of governance of the country.

The results of landcare programs are demonstrable: farmers now walk over each other's farms, once socially unthinkable. City councils team with rural towns, and learn from one another. Economists, bee-keepers and foresters each have a value for ghost gum (*Eucalyptus papuana*) flowers, a different value that each had not previously appreciated. Women farmers find that they have a voice in local agricultural meetings for the first time.

However, the very success of landcare is placing stresses and strains on the participants. Local landcare groups protest that they are being left to do the work on behalf of the whole country. Groups are linking in regional networks, asking for more commitment from all three levels of government (local, State and federal). Specialist advisers disagree on what sustainable land management means in their different areas of practice. Government agencies are now beginning to ask if they are getting value for money.

Box 1

Working Definitions of Landcare

Community landcare: members of the informal network of community landcare groups and their representatives

Landcare support services: the formal system of government and non-government landcare support agencies and services

Landcare advisers: the wide range of special interests contributing to better understanding of sustainable land management practices

Sustainable land management practices: practices which promote the long-term capacity for self-renewal of the natural resource cycles of water, air and soil

Landcare: any policy, strategy or practice furthering sustainable land management practices

Landcare practitioners: land managers who are pursuing sustainable land management practices

Landcare participants: all landcare and non-landcare members involved in promoting sustainable land use

In order to begin to address these concerns, a study was commissioned from the author to investigate mechanisms to improve communication between the different landcare stakeholder groups. In the first instance, despite some concerns, a clear message emerged from landcare participants that landcare is about 'local action to renew the land'. It was considered by many to be an ethic, a source of values about how to live in the world and a practical means by which to develop more effective land management practices.

A large proportion of those involved in the landcare movement did not consider it to be solely about planting trees, but rather that it was about changing the way things are done. The change was identified by almost half of the respondents as primarily a change in land management orientation, from ownership to stewardship. For others it was primarily a cultural change, a social movement towards local community responsibility for the future of a local area. The two views were regarded as complementary, and not in opposition to one another.

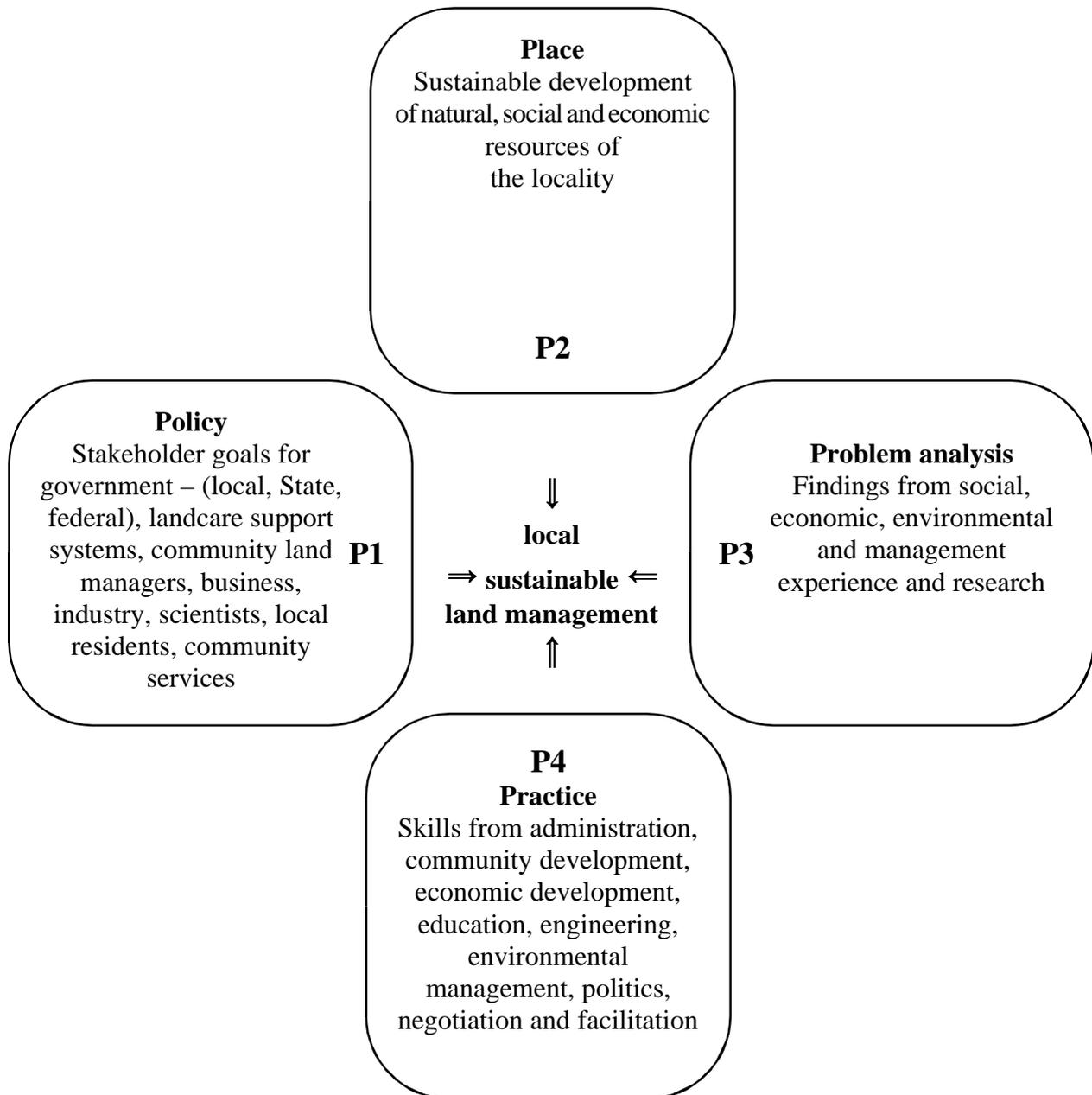
To achieve the stipulated ends, there need to be effective, interactive communication systems from the national level down to the community groups effecting change. Communication in an effective decision-making system for landcare passes continuously through a set of four interdependent activities: developing policies and strategies; gaining knowledge of their implementation in particular places; analysing the potential problems; and applying practical solutions (see Figure 1, overleaf). The system for land use change begins with policy development for sustainable land use (P1 in Figure 1). Policies are national, regional and local, and are by no means confined to government. Non-government agencies such as Greening Australia Limited and the Australian Conservation Foundation are also policy-making bodies. Policies will be implemented according to the condition of a given place (P2). Problem analysis of that condition will provide potential solutions (P3). The action will usually include changes in existing practice (P4). The changing practices will in turn inform new policies.

For example, members of a landcare group might wish to act on the rising salinity in their valley. To do this, they would need information about existing federal, State and local government policies and advice from farmers' organisations and conservation consultants with respect to salinity (P1). Using this information, they would identify to the best of their ability the local conditions causing the salinity and the solutions available for their particular place (P2). Knowledge about policies and place would allow them to diagnose their local situation and identify specific solutions and priorities for action within a local sustainable development framework (P3). The actions which follow could include changes in farming practice, council regulations or national taxation policy, or they could involve education or research (P4). The results of the changes in practice will eventually lead to fresh knowledge of the situation and new policy (P1). The key elements of this approach are presented in Box 2 (overleaf).

In growing from a zero base to over 2,200 groups working on sustainable land management, the people involved in community landcare have created a complex informal organisation whose very success depends on it continuing to operate in conjunction with, but to a large extent outside, pre-existing mainstream administrative channels. As yet, however, there is almost a total absence of any coherent system of communication channels dedicated to supporting the networking and cooperation which are integral to the work of community landcare. All current

national, State and local channels for landcare communication report to government or non-government sponsors other than community landcare.

Figure 1: Details of the landcare decision-making system



Box 2 Towards a strategy for effective landcare communication

P1 Policy

What are the requirements for an effective communication policy for landcare?

A set of principles linking national and local sustainable development policies

A national community landcare forum

Regional policies for landcare support services

A landcare communication cycle linking community landcare, landcare support services and landcare advice

P2 Place

What are the information priorities for landcare, and how is that information most efficiently transferred to and from practitioners?

Local community monitoring

Regional information nodes

Measuring local sustainability

A landcare information exchange

P3 Problem analysis

What methods of problem analysis best help landcare participants to identify shared solutions?

Cost-benefit analysis based on landcare principles

Integrated Local Area Planning

Local Agenda 21 plans and programs

A landcare education network

A landcare institute for research and development

P4 Practice

What aspects of communication are essential to good landcare practice?

Community-agency consultation

Negotiating strategic alliances

Learning organisations and change agency

Economic analysis and whole-farm management

Information management

Media and public relations

Implications of the answers

This lack of a dedicated community landcare communication system in turn inhibits the effectiveness of landcare support services and the capacity of policy-making bodies to identify and to further community landcare priorities. The lack also puts immense strain on the capacity of either community landcare or landcare support services to meet their individual objectives, or the objectives of the Decade of Landcare. This critical strain is most apparent in the morale of those groups who

are now recognising that sustainable resource management requires a strategic direction and regional coordination.

The principal communication barriers between the landcare partners are erected by the very structure of society. Administrators, economists, scientists, conservation groups, industry, farmers and graziers are all key stakeholders in landcare. Each has their own well-developed set of skills and knowledge base. Each has their own standardised communication channels and meeting grounds where they speak in their own specialised terms – virtually in their own languages. Landcare activities provide almost the only place where the speakers of these languages come together to arrive at a common understanding. For most of the participants in sustainable land management, the landcare movement provides the only common ground. The fact that the landcare movement is a newcomer with a different message – one which the specialised areas find hard, or often even impossible, to hear – increases the translation difficulties between stakeholders. Landcare practitioners (land managers and their support agencies) are consequently required to interpret and speak a whole series of different languages, without much help.

The strength and range of landcare group membership means that it is now an organisation as well as a movement, with communication patterns of its own.

The assessment of where landcare is going and the identified need for enhanced communication structures led to the definition of the following five principles to ensure sustained development of landcare approaches:

1) Principle of local sustainability

Ensuring that all communications about natural resource management further the core theme of landcare. Local action towards the sustainability of the nation's natural resources through combining stewardship of the land; community responsibility and accountability; and government responsibility and accountability.

2) Principle of mutual advantage

Recognising that all landcare communication channels will require resources for translation and negotiation between:

- ! different specialist interests
- ! different value positions
- ! community groups and agency services.

3) Principle of informed collaboration

Incorporating the landcare message into existing community, government and specialist communications systems through:

- ! landcare-based education
- ! research and development
- ! information exchange.

4) Principle of mutual respect and cooperation

Respecting the integrity of the communication systems of all contributors to landcare, particularly:

- ! the independence of the community landcare network
- ! the formal reporting requirements of government agencies
- ! the intellectual frameworks of specialist advisers.

5) Principle of perseverance towards long-term goals

Combining action towards long-term sustainable land use and immediate problem-solving, through building on:

- ! local and national scales of problem-solving
- ! social, economic and environmental resources
- ! best and worst case scenarios and projections.

The integration of each of these five principles and putting them into practice will require that all communications on landcare matters, including funding priorities, regulatory systems, economic analyses, and the design of educational and research programmes observe the landcare policy principles. This, in turn, will demand a comprehensive landcare strategy.

Landcare as a citizens' movement has cooperation as its driving force. There are serious difficulties in developing these active communication channels due to the following issues:

- ! lack of interaction between the hierarchical, structured government information flows, and the networked, informal community information exchanges;
- ! lack of recognition of landcare groups as a lead client by many of the communication services essential to landcare, for example, State extension services, research, education and economic planners;

- ! the view of supporting agencies that landcare members are victims and recipients of assistance rather than primary actors making their own decisions;
- ! a culture of blaming each other for land management issues that blocks the necessary strategic alliances between the various landcare partners;
- ! tensions between those involved in the small picture, direct-action components of landcare and those working on the big picture, strategic directions;
- ! conflicts of interests between community landcare, and landcare support agencies, for example, catchment committees, competitive funding programmes.

Based on consultation with different landcare stakeholders, a structural model, based on a bicycle, has been proposed to provide the necessary linkages between the different groups and levels. This is shown in Figure 2.

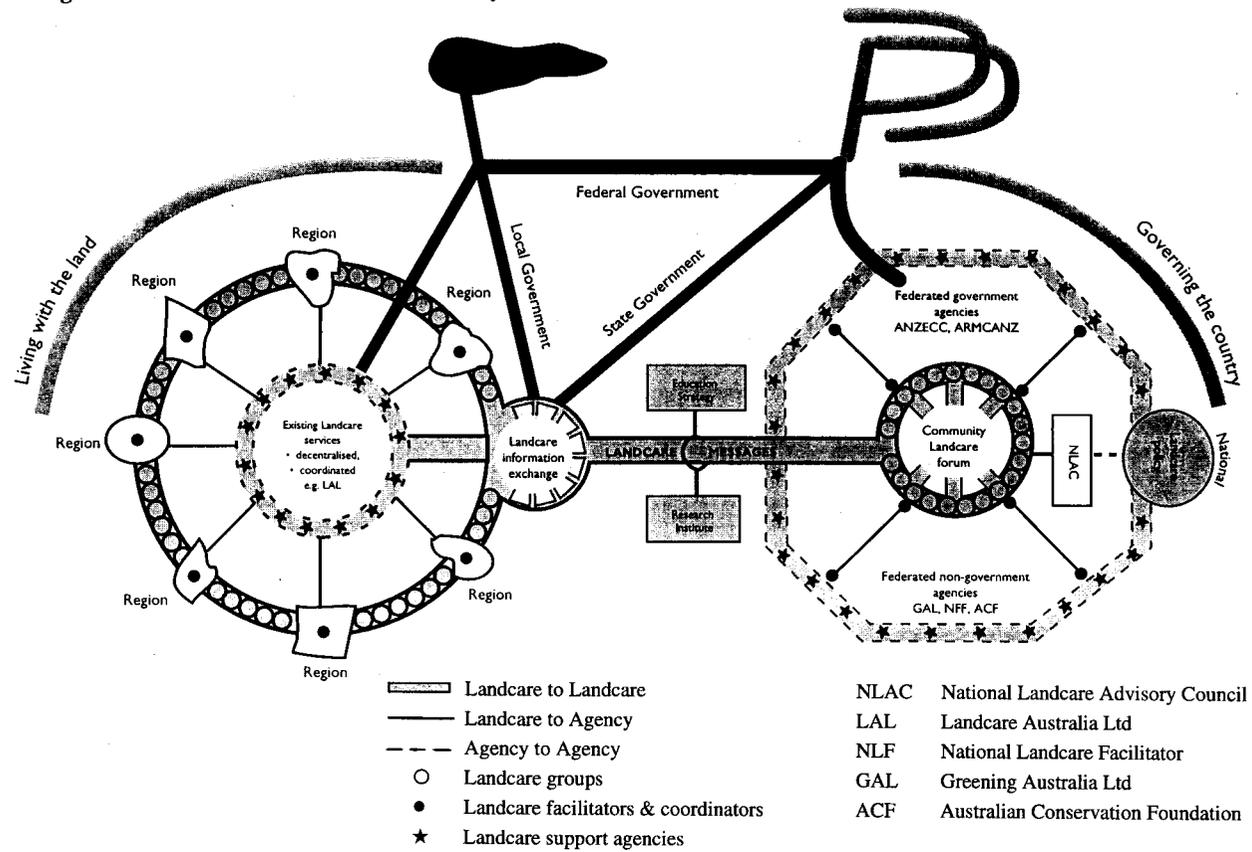
An ideal communication system for landcare would link community landcare groups in different regions, with each region building its own network from existing information services, particularly local landcare facilitators. At the centre of these groups might be an office providing telephone, fax, desktop publishing and email services, and skills to operate these. This would be managed by the community members responsible for the regional landcare strategy. Media and public relations skills at regional levels would facilitate local fund-raising and community support.

Local, State and federal government and non-government agencies would be responsible for delivering coordinated landcare services directly to the region. Other services should be negotiated with the local landcare interests to ensure that the messages remain consistent with the landcare ethic and are directly applicable to local land managers.

Community groups would be jointly responsible for supervising the communication resource centre and for documenting local priorities and views to contribute to a national landcare forum. They would be accountable to other community members. The forum would collaborate with the existing National Landcare Advisory Council to advise on national and State landcare policies.

The landcare communication bicycle (Figure 2) shows how the two major sub-systems involved in landcare should communicate to make the landcare movement more effective.

Figure 2: The landcare communication bicycle



The wheels of the bicycle show how community landcare groups and landcare support services communicate with each other. The wheels turn within the framework of government policies and regulations. They work to different rules, use different languages and have different perspectives. One wheel communicates in an informal network, the other through a set of organised channels.

Although community landcare groups and landcare support services work in different ways and have different perspectives, they do have some elements in common. The hub of each wheel of the bicycle is made up of the information and resources of the other. Community landcare groups talk to each other and as a group pass their messages to governments through the National Landcare Advisory Council and the landcare facilitators. The support services coordinate and distribute their work through these same channels to regional centres throughout the country. The oiling points, gears and pedals help the two wheels work together. The oiling points are the landcare facilitators and coordinators. Their roles are advocacy, communication and negotiation. The gears are supplied by a national landcare information exchange, based on the existing National Landcare Facilitator Project, which transfers information between the two wheels.

The whole system needs pedals to drive it. These should take the form of education and research and development programs dedicated to landcare. Research has found that in all aspects of landcare, conflicting and incomplete knowledge is reducing the power of landcare participants.

The mudguards are where the landcare movement meets the rest of society. The rear mudguard protects community landcare while it tries to act as a model for all the activities that involve living with the land – in the country and in the city. The front mudguard covers all support services as they translate landcare messages for their own use and for other governmental services.

The bicycle frame represents existing local, State and federal government policies and regulations. Local government is already the principal support and regulatory body for landcare. These frameworks are being strengthened through regional development programs such as Integrated Local Area Planning and Local Agenda 21.

Where is the landcare bicycle going? The road, which should be the passage of a century, not just a decade, is the path to responsible custodianship of the land. It leads to sustainable natural resources and systems. Who are the riders? They are the Australian people living in rural and urban Australia.

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